The Problem with Purity

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Prologue

Andrew Stebbins was having a very exciting day. He worked in the Auror Department for the Ministry of Magic, but he was not a field agent; no, he was in charge of all correspondence that came into the department. He had been doing his job for nigh on thirty years, and the quiet and studious man acknowledged that he did it well.

He didn't mind confessing that before he had assumed the position, the place had been in shambles. Aurors might be brilliant at capturing evil-doers, but they couldn't file paperwork to save their lives; it was as if they hadn't heard of the alphabet or file cabinets. Within ten weeks of his being on the job, the horrendous backlog was put to rights. All memos, pardons, praise, complaints, Howlers (which he knew how to deactivate while preserving the words themselves), requests, logs, reports, advisements, copies of motions—and all other types of correspondence—were properly filed.

He had done away with the daft system that separated each piece of parchment into one category and had instead tinkered with the storage cabinets until they accepted multiple categories for the same material, allowing it to be called up under any appropriate heading. It had been he, too, who had put the simple Space Charm on the parchments so that they were all flat and uniformly shaped and sized when filed, but originally shaped and sized outside of the cabinet.

He put the correspondence away by date of arrival and then by name of sender, and this assured that it was called forth smoothly; one had only to tap on the cabinet with one's wand and request memos sent by Rufus Scrimgeour between January and March 1994, for example, and they would appear when the drawer was opened. Any that were complaints would also respond to a request for such, and now no one had to stand at the cabinet guessing whether a letter that lauded the department but deplored a recent arrest was filed under praise or complaint.

Andrew was inordinately pleased with his handiwork, especially since more than one Auror had noted the efficiency over the years. Of course, the newer employees didn't even know there had ever been another system, but he still felt a glow of pride whenever a needed material was speedily found. It was a darn good thing he'd been able to whip the office into shape, too, because ever since You Know Who had returned, there had been an exponential increase in the amount of material that went through the Auror Department.

When he'd first been hired, it had been implied that he would sort out the veritable snarl of paperwork in the Auror office and then move on to other departments; to his not inconsiderable satisfaction, once they had actually seen what he was capable of, such a move had never been mentioned again. In fact, he'd even heard a rumour that Auror Scrimgeour, when he had been Head of the Department, had quashed attempts from several other departments to acquire Andrew.

He could still remember with fondness when Alastor Moody had requested a similar cabinet for the field files because it was the job of the Auror in charge of the case to seal and file those reports. Andrew had made certain ever since that each of the Aurors knew how to properly return those files to their cabinet, and he was always available to help sort out any filing mishaps.

But today wasn't even one of those days, when he could feel a bit as though he was rescuing an Auror from a filing nightmare. No, it was even better: for the second time in his life, he'd received a grade one, orange-proof scroll (so called because it was the most top security scroll in the world, its distinctive orange colour made from a dye that couldn't be used for anything else). Just the thought of holding this indestructible parchment made him almost bubbly with happiness—and bubbly, he acknowledged, was normally one of the last adjectives that could be used to describe Andrew Stebbins.

Feeling unusually exuberant or not, Andrew made sure to follow the methodology he had set up for himself, opening, categorizing, sorting, and logging all the morning mail before gathering it up to file, with the precious grade one scroll in pride of place on top, since it was virtually in a category of its own.

Emerging from his office, he greeted Kingsley Shacklebolt as he passed by. The man returned the salutation with a respectful nod before turning the corner, and Andrew guessed he was heading towards Auror Tonks's office. He liked both these Aurors because they treated him respectfully, unlike some of the high-and-mighty new recruits who thought he was worthless. When Kingsley had become the Head of the Aurors, Andrew had received a pay raise and an invitation to call the man by his given name; he had appreciated the latter sign of respect even more than the money.

He hadn't made it two steps further down the corridor before he was stopped by an abrupt, "What do you think you are doing?"

Turning round, he found a red-faced Rufus Scrimgeour, who seemed to be bearing down on him. Confused, he turned his head to left and right and verified that he really was the only one there; the Head of Magical Law Enforcement must have been addressing him, although he was at a loss to explain such a tone.

"I'm about to file these correspondences, Auror Scrimgeour," he therefore answered politely. He realized Scrimgeour was a busy man with many responsibilities, but surely he remembered an employee with whom he had worked for years before moving to the even more esteemed position he now held?

"I don't care about the rest of that twaddle. I mean this." The man strode forward and snatched up the orange-proof scroll, demanding angrily, "Why didn't you report it to me immediately?"

Andrew frowned. "There was no tag on it indicating that the Head of Magical Law Enforcement was to be informed when it arrived in the office. I was just about to file it with the other one—"

"There's another one?" the man hissed explosively. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Of course I do," Andrew replied, a trace impatiently, because this was his job, after all. "It's a scroll attesting to Pu—"

"Not here, you fool!" the other man snapped. "Come with me."

Growing more confused by the minute, Andrew nevertheless hastened to obey. Whatever was going on, it was clearly a misunderstanding of some sort because he was quite certain that he'd followed all the proper procedures. In his long career, he had not once misfiled a paper, and he was certain that continued to hold true, especially for parchment as important as this.

Once they were in the Head of Magical Law Enforcement's office, the secretary told to hold all Floo calls and keep everyone out, the door sealed, Scrimgeour turned towards him.

"Have you told anyone else about the scroll? Does anyone else know about it?"

"Of course I haven't," Andrew exclaimed indignantly. Of all the accusations for the Head of his branch of the Ministry to make! As though he, an employee of nearly three decades' good standing, would jeopardize his position with a loose tongue.

He was so outraged that it took him a moment to process the second question and realize that it was possible Auror Shacklebolt had seen the scroll, although he had not given the slightest indication that he found any of what Andrew was holding noteworthy. He had just started to conscientiously open his mouth to advise Scrimgeour of this possibility when the man interrupted him.

"Excellent." He smiled a grim little smile, and Andrew suddenly found himself faced with a man wielding a wand like he meant business.

"Obliviate!"

# Chapter One: The Problem

Most of the Order members had already left Grimmauld Place and those remaining, now seated around the sturdy wooden kitchen table, made up what Ron had termed—accurately, if unoriginally—Harry's group: as many Weasleys as were able at a given time, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Remus Lupin, Severus Snape, Nymphadora Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Harry might not like them all, per se, but he interacted with them on a regular basis and trusted them with his life, having been taught, trained, rescued, or befriended by each of them—or in most cases, some combination of the four.

The curtains had been drawn against the darkness outside and candles lit so that the kitchen, still easily the cheeriest room in the house, seemed warm and welcoming, even at ten o'clock at night. They'd all been served fresh tea, and now that Albus had discussed everything on his agenda, he had opened the floor to other concerns.

"There is one last issue that I need to bring to the Order's attention," Kingsley declared in his deep voice, although his tone suggested that he was reluctant to bring up the topic in question. It sounded as though he was doing his duty rather than following an inclination.

Everyone's attention went to him following this announcement, but rather than continuing, Kingsley's eyes cut to Arthur, who was across the table and down one seat from the Auror. The eldest Weasley looked doubtful, blue eyes troubled as his gaze strayed to his wife on his left, who managed to glower simultaneously at the two Ministry men despite their seating positions before casting a baleful look at the other end of the table where the three newest members of the Order of the Phoenix sat: Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, and Harry Potter.

On August 31, 1997, the date of this meeting, Hermione Granger was indisputably seventeen years old; she had legally celebrated her seventeenth birthday on the nineteenth of September of the previous year. Ron had been seventeen since March of the current year, and even Harry had joined the mass of wizarding adults a month ago.

He had promptly left the Dursleys forever and joined her at Grimmauld Place. Ron had made sure to shift his belongings from the Burrow to the Most Ancient House of Black soon after, and since that time, the three of them had been a conspicuous and insistent presence at Order meetings because no one had a legal leg to stand on when they mentioned that nonsense about children.

What none of the other Order members knew was that Hermione had been privy to the contents of these meetings since the summer following her fifth year. Counting the same months everyone else had experienced only once, she was sixteen years and nine months old at the end of June in 1996.

As far as well-meaning but overly mothering members like Molly Weasley were concerned, that might as well have been three years shy of the necessary age. Albus, too, had maintained his stance that admittance was only at seventeen for very good reason, despite the fact that the three of them were right in the middle of this war.

The fact of the matter, however, was that Hermione had been an adult for longer than most of them understood. For in the ten months of her third year at Hogwarts, she had been the clandestine owner of a Time-Turner. Despite what Harry and Ron suspected by the end of the year, she had not doubled up on her days. She had, in fact, tripled up on an average of sixteen hours of the day, six days out of seven. This had been necessary to keep up with all her school work, study groups, and bizarre extracurriculars, like helping Hagrid with Buckbeak, saving Sirius, and watching her friendship with Ron fall apart. She didn't think that either Minerva or Albus was aware of the extent of her usage.

This extra time of hers didn't seem like so much at first, but it worked out to 192 extra hours per week and therefore 7680 extra hours in the school year, or 320 days. Even subtracting the twenty-two days she had been Petrified in her second year (and most people didn't consider being incapacitated in real time as a detriment to counting it towards one's total age), that left her 298 days older than everyone thought. As far as her physical and mental development was concerned, she was thus actually seventeen and seven months old at the end of June in 1996. [2]

Her use of the Time-Turner was not common knowledge, however, and she knew it was not meant to be shared even with all the members of the Order. One look at Molly and Albus had made it clear to her that they were going to be intractable. Having just come out of a battle that had lost them Sirius and nearly killed her, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, she even understood their point of view, to a certain degree. But now more than ever, she also understood Harry's need to know what was going on.

The situation was not ideal; if it could have been put to a vote, all of them would no doubt have agreed to have peace and childhoods. The war against Voldemort was happening whether they liked it or not, however, and they were an inextricable part of it, as they had proven for five years running. It did no one any good to pretend that Harry was not at the war's centre.

Fortunately, Albus had a familiar. Fawkes was not human, and he was not constrained by human understanding, failings, or foibles. The phoenix appeared to be entirely certain that she was of age, and he was, as it turned out, rather irritated by the stubborn stance of the humans in the face of what he saw as a simple fact. He couldn't overrule Albus, per se, but he could and did include her in the meetings in his own way.

This was her first introduction to MindSpeech; up until that time, the closest she had come to Fawkes had been through his interaction with Harry. The phoenix had been invaluable to Harry and had demonstrated amazing abilities, but he had remained, for all that, decidedly bird-like. The summer before sixth year, however, Hermione had discovered that Fawkes was only as avian as he wished to be.

With her, at least, he was entirely capable not just of singing, but of speaking right inside her head. Gifted with this communication, the Gryffindor girl found that she was the recipient of the information discussed in the meetings nearly in real time, or even better, the bird would share his senses with her so that she was actually seeing and hearing the meeting as it was unfolding.

The researcher in her baulked at how little she understood this phenomenon, but Fawkes had not wished to discuss it, and after a short but ferocious argument with herself, she had had the sense to respect his wishes. What little documented research had been available in the Hogwarts Library—in the Restricted Section, of course—suggested that this was a gift that could be bestowed between familiars and their humans; she had come across no reason why the ability should have been extended to her.

Whatever the reason, the benefits were readily apparent. Despite the fact that her body was dutifully in bed up the stairs and separated from the Order meeting by various spells and wards, most of Hermione's mind seemed to be visiting Fawkes's and watching the meeting through bird eyes and hearing it through bird ears. After that first meeting, she even got the hang of not trying to speak in response to what was going on around her.

Knowing how badly Harry had taken it after fourth year, Hermione had made no attempt to hide the information from him. She had only two requirements: he was not to ask how she got the information and he was to learn how to properly Occlude his mind. Given the disastrous events in the Department of Mysteries, he desired this last already, but he dreaded the possibility of resuming lessons with Professor Snape.

Since he now both wanted to learn and was willing to speak to her of the difficulties he'd been having previously, he found the entirety of the Hogwarts and Black libraries and all the information that could be gleaned from them about Occlumency, Legilimency, meditation, mental shields, and MindMagic at his fingertips in the condensed Hermione version.

Ever since Occlumency and Legilimency had come to her attention in fifth year, Hermione had been determined to learn everything she could. Her mind was her greatest asset, and she wanted it as fortified and protected as it could possibly be. They didn't have an accomplished Legilimens to test it with yet, but by the time Hermione was done with him, Harry was never without mental shields, crucial thoughts and memories locked deep inside his mind, and mind clear as glass before he went to sleep at night.

It was in one of her initial forays at Legilimency, when he was still completely hopeless at any sort of shield, that she had stumbled across his memory of the prophecy. The glimpse that she had got had been enough for him to confess the whole truth. It had only made her more determined to protect his mind from outside forces and to see him through this daft war so that he could live his own life.

In this, at least, both she and Ron had been unwavering in their support, and Harry had been quietly relieved and pleased. As Ron had put it at the time, they hadn't had it spelled out in prophecy form before now, but it had been pretty clear that You Know Who was always after Harry and that Harry was always going to stop the bloody wanker.

Hermione thus felt that she had been doing her part in this war in myriad ways, and once she legally turned seventeen, she had insisted that she be allowed to instantly join the Order, and she'd watched with glee as their arguments worked against Molly and Albus. Upon reaching the age of majority, which was eighteen in the Muggle world, she could vote, legally drink, live on her own, and be tried as an adult in a court of law. The wizarding world took coming of age even more seriously, with certain societal customs remaining rather formal and old-fashioned. At seventeen, she had become an adult witch, and adult witches and wizards could therefore accept her as their peer.

Whether she felt equal to the headmaster or his deputy was not at issue; if they wished to, they could acknowledge her as such, as this came in the form of an invitation to address them by their given name. Since she was still in a school setting and this invitation was by no means extended to all of the seventeen-year-old students, she had to use her regular allotment of common sense, but the consideration meant a lot to her.

Throughout her sixth year, as she was asking an extra question or ran into one of her professors in the hallway, each extended the invitation, which she had reciprocated. Even Severus, evidently in a fit of insanity, had done so, although he had waited until the summer. He frequently seemed to regret his decision, though, his expression making plain that referring to him as Severus, even in the presence of just Harry and Ron, was strongly inadvisable. Rescinding the invitation was considered extremely rude, however, and even the snarky bat of the dungeons seemed to hesitate before doing that to her.

A similar invitation had not been offered to either Harry or Ron.

The Order members were stuck, then, when she'd come of age. Legally, she was as adult as any of them. She'd had no trouble shooting down the argument that she would tell her friends, since none of the elder Weasleys were barred from joining despite having younger family members who weren't of age, wished to join, and would do their best to ferret information out of them. She had the phoenix of the Order of on her side, so she wasn't terribly concerned about any accusation they could throw at her.

She suspected that Albus was not the only one to suspect that she told Harry and Ron virtually everything, but so long as no one made an official complaint, she wasn't going to worry because she could argue semantics with the best of them; when asked, she had very carefully told them that she knew how to keep a secret, especially from those two boys, not that she intended to do so.

Since she had already effectively been to several months of the meetings and knew perfectly well what they tended to be like, who sided with whom, who listened to whom, and how the youngest and most inexperienced members were treated, she had worked this advantage to its fullest, along with any extra tidbits which Fawkes had been kind enough to share. As a result, she hadn't seemed like a rookie and had caught several members out in attempts to goad her into an ill-considered reaction.

Given that she had made it through the protections on the Philosopher's Stone, survived an encounter with a Basilisk, lived through a night with Peter Pettigrew, a werewolf, and a dozen or so Dementors, and kept a crucial prophecy away from Voldemort with the help of five other school children, her curriculum vitae was hardly empty, either.

Once Harry knew how to Occlude, he was much better at hiding his emotions and quite able to prevent others from knowing what he did or didn't know. Hermione coached Ron ruthlessly so that he could join calmly for the Easter meeting in sixth year, to the surprise of his family. All she and Ron had needed to do was ignore the twins' suggestions about Ron's "whipped" state. Ron still remained one of the least even-keeled members of the Order, but by the time he displayed a show of temper in a meeting, it was accepted as a Weasley trait rather than one of youth and inexperience.

By the time Harry joined, even Molly had welcomed him with relatively genuine acceptance, and the three of them had agreed that there was nothing to be gained from bringing up old grievances. By the same token, however, there was no way that they were going to allow themselves to be run out of the room now that they were members. Harry crossed his arms and glared back at Molly, and after sharing an amused glance, Hermione and Ron did the same, presenting a united front.

"What did you need to tell us, Kingsley?" Albus asked, his familiar perched, ever watchful, on a cabinet behind his head. Molly opened her mouth, and Albus cast a stern glance at her from his position at the head of the table. "Now, now, Molly, everyone here is a full Order member."

She didn't look happy, but given that it was the headmaster speaking, she subsided without subjecting them to the impassioned but misguided plea that they had known was imminent. Ron let out an audible sigh of relief—he was only two seats away from his mother—and Harry's lips tipped up slightly as his stance relaxed to wary rather than adversarial.

Kingsley did not stand, but he projected forcefully from his seat so that they could all hear him clearly: "A week ago, on a visit to the Auror Department, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement encountered the wizard in charge of correspondence and paperwork for the Department, Andrew Stebbins. I was out of sight but stopped at Scrimgeour's tone. He demanded to know what Stebbins was doing with a particular parchment and dragged him away as he was about to reveal what the parchment was rather than staying for his meeting with me.

"Curious at this suspect behaviour, I took the opportunity to duck into Stebbins's office and copy as much of his records as I could; the man is meticulous about noting every single piece of parchment that he receives, and I knew that whatever had caught Scrimgeour's attention had to be there.

"I sent the record I had made off to Arthur as a private memo and then made sure I was promptly elsewhere and occupied. I didn't see Stebbins until the next day, and by then, he had no memory of his meeting with the Head of M.L.E. or the parchment. His log had been expertly modified, and all traces of the parchment in question were gone.

"Comparing the copy I'd made to the original that had been doctored, I discovered what had caused such a strong reaction in Scrimgeour: two grade one, orange-proof scrolls declaring Pure Age of Majority."

From the awed but comprehending looks on most people's faces, this made more sense to the rest of them than it did to Hermione and Harry.

"I thought that was a myth!" Ron gasped, and Hermione saw that Arthur, Molly, and Tonks were nodding in agreement.

"Thought what was a myth?" Hermione demanded impatiently, glaring across the table at him.

The redhead's look of incredulity had faded to that annoyingly superior one he got whenever he knew something that she didn't.

"Wizards come of age at seventeen," Ron began.

"I am aware of that, Ronald." She stretched his name out into two long syllables, just the way she knew he hated. As though he had not just spouted off that totally commonplace fact, he had the nerve to shoot her a look of annoyance. Albus interceded.

"I believe what Ron was attempting to elucidate, Hermione, was that there are two seventeen-year-olds who have reached their majority and remain in a Pure state."

Hermione had gathered something of that nature from what Kingsley had said, and Albus's explanation was about as helpful as Ron's.

"Headmaster, they are hardly infants." Severus's sneering voice interrupted from his position at Albus's right hand, for which Hermione was grateful, as it meant she was about to get an unambiguous answer. "These two adult wizards are still virgins, Miss Granger."

On balance, this cleared the matter up rather less than she had hoped, and she noted sourly that she still hadn't managed to convince the man that an Order meeting was private enough for her given name.

"And why does this warrant the highest security, most indestructible scrolls that the wizarding world has to offer?" she asked when no more explanation was immediately forthcoming.

Albus smiled faintly. "You see, Hermione, not only is the age of majority different for wizards than for Muggles, there are more effects for wizards as well."

Hermione watched curiously as pink cheeks tinged the faces of the headmaster, the deputy headmistress, the Weasley parents, and Remus. Severus, although she thought he looked tired, had no outward reaction to Albus's words, but Hermione could see that Tonks—who'd smiled when she first saw the seventeen-year-old Hermione, recognized her as an adult, and told her she'd kill her if she called her Nymphadora—looked quite amused.

Albus resumed: "In the years leading up to a witch or wizard's majority, she or he will experience an increased … libido, more so than a Muggle. Coupled with the regular hormones in any teenager, this generally results in the … usual result."

Hermione's lip curled, and she noticed with amusement that Severus, on the other side of Kingsley and Tonks, wore an almost identical expression.

"Normally wizarding teenagers have sex before they reach their majority," she summarized.

Albus's slight expression of unease cleared. "Exactly so, Hermione. It has become a traditional part of a wizarding upbringing. " This did begin to explain what had been, for the Muggle-born Hermione, the very bizarre sex-ed class they had had in third year. "Young people these days tend to take it as a matter of course. It's not as though wizards and Muggles assess what they are feeling and compare it to others' feelings. The last time that a Pure Adult was recorded, I was only a boy."

"So that's over a century ago, then?" Harry asked with a grin.

Severus glared the glare he seemed to reserve especially for Harry, but Albus only smiled.

"Quite right, Harry."

"And now we have two such cases occurring at the same time?" Hermione asked skeptically.

Kingsley took over. "The first scroll appeared in January, but we are not sure how long a delay there is between the attainment of Pure Adulthood and the arrival of the scroll."

"Why don't you ask whoever sent them?" Harry said.

Severus opened his mouth, scathing diatribe clearly imminent, and Hermione hastened to speak first, which earned her a glare of her own, but she just rolled her eyes at him.

"They're automatically generated scrolls, Harry, and from what Kingsley is saying, they were spelled to arrive at an interval after the magical occurrence that generated them. That prevents unscrupulous individuals from figuring out who the scroll pertains to by their birthday; obviously it was set up some time ago when somebody at the Ministry had morals."

She offered the current head of the Auror Department an apologetic look, since she doubted the institution in general, not him personally.

Kingsley nodded, his slight smile indicating both his acceptance of the accurate words and the lack of personal attack in them. "Stebbins made a notation that the interval was random, so the two likely do not even have the same gap between real date and arrival in the Ministry."

"Okay, I get that they're rare and that we don't know who these two people are," Harry said with a nod to Hermione, "but what does that matter? Why does the Ministry care?"

"How you have managed to survive six years in the wizarding world, Mr. Potter, without a modicum of—"

"Severus." The tone was one of clear warning, and the Potions master subsided, although he looked disgruntled. Albus actually answered the question: "Upon a young witch or wizard's arrival into adulthood, her or his full power becomes available. This increase is noticeable but not extraordinary. In the case of Pure Adults, however, they not only receive this regular increase, but what could be considered a large bonus."

Fawkes trilled, and Hermione sensed both excitement at the mention, finally, of the Pure Adults and amusement at his familiar's delicacy.

You might have mentioned it earlier, she thought irritably.

And spoil the surprise? Certainly not, he replied smugly.

"So the Ministry wants to keep tabs on the wizards who get more power?" Harry asked.

"Not exactly, Harry. You see, this extra increase in power does not come about at the Age of Majority but when …." Albus trailed off, looking to his right and his left as though for assistance.

With a long-suffering sigh, the Potions master took over, since Minerva looked nearly as uncomfortable as Albus. "The power increases during coitus, and the Ministry cares," Severus glared, "because whoever takes the Pure Adult's virginity experiences an increase in power as well."

"Severus!" Minerva protested from her position opposite the Potions master.

Hermione blinked, digesting this. "If that's true, why hasn't Voldemort incarcerated a horde of wizarding children until their seventeenth birthdays?"

Severus's piercing gaze met hers for a moment, and she made sure she was Occluding fully. The headmaster accorded her a nod for the question.

"As Ron here has proven, some considerable effort has been made to relegate the truth to myth for the vast majority of wizardkind. An attempt such as you suggest was made several centuries ago; all of the witches and wizards died before they reached their seventeenth birthdays."

"How?"

"It is not known," he answered slowly. "Given the wizard's increased obsession with keeping the children safe, it seems unlikely it could have been a traitor in his midst, nor were these final children in a fit state to accomplish the deed consciously."

"But you think their magic did it for them," she said flatly.

"Preventing the children from being horribly abused," Albus said with a gentle nod of his head. "I wouldn't say it was out of the question. But his actions decimated a generation, and thus the forced relegation to myth; the wizarding world, as a general rule, is very protective of its children."

Hermione thought she finally grasped the point. "But now that we have two people who are already seventeen, all such protections are gone, and they're available to the highest bidder."

"That is our fear," he agreed. "If Voldemort hears of this, he will wish to claim these two adults for his own. There is currently no data on the exact results of having relations with two Pure Adults, but the evidence strongly suggests that he would experience an exponential increase in power."

"Scrimgeour, too, is evidently eager to dictate this choice, whether or not he thinks he can get away with claiming the power for his own use," Severus was quick to point out, as if they hadn't grasped that both men were going to be ruthless about this. "He has been looking for ways to regain power for months now. If for no other reason, I'm sure he imagines he could … engage your cooperation with the Ministry, Mr. Potter, and that would be a coup indeed."

Wisely, Harry ignored this, perhaps recognizing that Severus hadn't actually suggested that Harry would succumb. Instead, Harry asked, "Can the scrolls be opened? I mean, there has to be a way to undo them, right, or what would be the point?"

Albus explained: "These particular scrolls will be keyed to the individual in question. The Ministry insisted that they needed to be aware of these occurrences because of the magical power generated. The Wizengamot ultimately ruled in favour of the notion but with the caveat that it would be the right of the individuals to reveal the specific information as they saw fit. Having great power, after all, does not automatically denote the misuse of it." His eyes seemed to linger on Harry for a moment. "The Ministry will thus be aware of the potential danger and can monitor for any particular outbursts, but there is no single person for them to pinpoint."

Minerva continued: "There is no record of such scrolls being broken by anyone other than the intended person."

Severus added his own sardonic comment: "And wiser and better men than the likes of Scrimgeour and the Dark Lord have tried. They will, however, employ other methods."

"This is why I have brought the news to your attention," Kingsley took back the floor. "The two Pure Adults need to be found."

Hermione's voice was dry. "What a boon it would be for our side—"

"—to secure them."

For an instant, Hermione had a weird sense of what it must be like to be the Weasley twins, with someone else thinking what you were thinking and able to finish your sentences. Ron's entire side of the table looked upset, although Ron seemed to be focused on the fact that she and Severus had expressed the same opinion, whereas Remus, Molly, and Arthur looked more upset by the idea itself.

"I'm sure we all agree that these people need to be protected, not exploited."

Interestingly, it was Harry who'd spoken, not Albus.

"No one will be forced to do anything against their will," the headmaster assured everyone.

Hermione couldn't seem to help her cynicism as she imagined what would no doubt be strongly encouraged for the good of the Light if they did find the two Pure Adults.

"I'm sure we can agree," the headmaster continued with a stern look at everyone, "that the witches or wizards in question would be far safer if found by us prior to being found by Voldemort."

That, Hermione conceded, was definitely true.

"How long before Voldemort knows?" Harry directed this question towards Severus, who didn't look pleased with this demand for information but responded nevertheless.

"The identity of all the Ministry moles is known only to the Dark Lord. I suspect, given some of the information to which we are privy, that there is someone high up in administration. One way or the other, crucial information like this tends to get out."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared a grin that probably seemed out of place to the others, but she was pretty sure they were all remembering the similar sentiment Dumbledore had expressed to Harry in their first year after he had battled Quirrell and Voldemort for the Philosopher's Stone.

"Okay, but theoretically," Ron pointed out with a good show of logic, "especially since we don't know how long a delay there was between the, er, occurrence and the scroll getting to the Ministry, isn't it possible that the two people in question aren't even students anymore? Or aren't at least, you know," he fumbled awkwardly, "Pure anymore?"

Severus smirked at Ron's embarrassment. "The scrolls will likely be spelled, either to disappear when their function is fulfilled, or to indicate the change in status in some way."

Kingsley nodded. "Stebbins's notes didn't indicate either way, meaning it wasn't readily apparent from his examination of the scrolls. Wherever they are now, I doubt we can get our hands on the originals. Your question is a valid one, Ron, but given Scrimgeour's reaction, it seems likely he, at least, has high hopes that the individuals in question will still be Pure when he finds them."

"From what I've read," Remus, next to Ron, spoke for the first time since the discussion had started, "it seems unlikely these two people would be able to resist their … libido for too long. Certainly not for years."

No one attempted to gainsay this.

"Seventh-year students it is," Ron said cheerfully. "You want us to question our year-mates?"

"It would be useful if you could keep your eyes open for any unusual behaviour," Albus said diplomatically.

"Lest it be all over school in moments," Severus finished snidely but not, Hermione confessed to herself, inaccurately.

Ron bristled, but Harry laid a hand on his arm.

"We'll try to subtly suss out the virgins," he promised dutifully, his tone droll enough that Ron subsided and Severus looked riled at the flippancy.

Albus averted any possible argument. "I will have other Order members checking up on our graduate students just in case." Kingsley nodded. "As many of them have gone on to get married, I'm sure we will be able to make short work of the task. You three and Severus, Minerva, and myself will monitor the situation at the school. Severus will do his best to ascertain what Voldemort knows of the subject. If the news comes to the attention of the general public, we will formulate a plan of action at that time. Until then, we will all keep one another informed."

Knowing a dismissal when they heard one, the remaining Order members rose.

So, Hermione asked Fawkes as she pushed her chair in, has he admitted to knowing more than he's told us?

He has not discussed it with me, no.

What good are you if you don't ferret out the information for me?

He gave her the mental equivalent of a stuck-out tongue, and she returned with a mental smile. Severus, Albus, and Minerva took their leave with Hermione only able to give them all a general farewell; they were the only ones returning immediately to Hogwarts, as everyone else would form part of the escort to King's Cross the next morning. Ginny, no doubt extremely irritated that she was only sixteen and would remain so until next August, was already upstairs.

Those who were staying trooped up the stairs until eventually the trio was on their own, marching up to the fifth floor where they resided alone. When Hermione had begun to live in the house during the summer after fifth year, she'd taken over the entire upper floor, refusing to continue living on the first floor with people frequently trooping above her to get to their rooms.

When Harry and Ron had joined her, it had seemed only logical to host them up there as well given the amount of time they spent in one another's company. Since several weeks of the arrangement had passed before anyone had become the wiser, it was allowed to stand.

"Two virgins, eh? Who do you reckon?" Ron asked gleefully.

"I hardly think that's a question to be answered here and now," Hermione said dryly.

Ron ignored her. "How about Susan Bones? When Seamus went out with her, he said she didn't put—"

Hermione stopped abruptly, causing Harry to nearly plough into her before he neatly sidestepped and left Ron to her mercy. Whirling around to face him, she glared at him, hands on her hips.

"Just because Susan had the good sense not to take up with that oversexed lout does not mean that she's a virgin. It suggests that she has some form of discrimination."

Ron made a face, clearly displeased with both her ire and her commentary. Like Harry, he finally ducked round her, and they continued down the hall.

"What about that Ravenclaw girl, then, what's her name, Mindy? Mandy?" Ron proposed, blind to her fury. "Or Bulstrode." He made a face. "Definitely her. Surely no one would—"

"Is there a particular reason only women are on your list?" Hermione asked coolly.

Ron looked at her as though she'd sprouted tentacles. "Are you batty, 'Mione? No bloke in his right mind would let himself be a virgin at seventeen."

Harry looked nearly as annoyed as she was at this point, but it was she who once again snapped at Ron. "I have more respect for a thoughtful boy who's a virgin at seventeen than for a boy who lost his virginity at fourteen to the first girl to twitch her hips at him."

Ron went red up to the tips of his ears, and she knew that he was about to blast her, first with anger, and then with awkward questions.

"But what about Crabbe, 'Mione?" Harry asked with seeming earnestness. "And Goyle? Do you really think someone was willing to shag them?"

The redhead's attention was instantly diverted. "Ooh, it's definitely them, I'm sure of it. We can totally trick them into admitting something tomorrow, I know we can…."

Shaking her head at the master strategist at work, Hermione bid the other two goodnight. Her room was at the head of the stairs with Harry's next and Ron's after that. Hers was the only room with a private bath on this floor, the two boys sharing the one at the end of the hall past Ron's room.

She changed into her pyjamas, flannel bottoms and a cotton camisole. Hermione wasn't certain if it was the aura of the house or if genuine spells had been cast, but even in the height of summer the house remained cool and gloomy despite the improvements which had been made since Sirius had first gifted it to the Order.

Not only was it now always clean, but Harry had finally removed Mrs. Black's portrait, although he wouldn't say how, and it was she who had laid the elf heads to rest with an obscure potions formula she had found in one of the even more obscure books that was squirrelled away in the library.

She didn't think anyone else was aware of just how many of the books she had appropriated and tucked away in her room. At any rate, there had been tomes down there that she was pretty sure most of the Order would not want her, Harry, or Ron to get their hands on, and she had avoided that potential argument in the most expedient manner.

Finished with her nightly ablutions, she climbed into bed, the old wooden frame creaking slightly, but didn't bother to douse the lights. Sure enough, despite the fact that they had not made an official assignation, a few minutes later there was the barest of knocks on the door, which was opened immediately to reveal the messy, dark-haired head of the Saviour of the wizarding world. She motioned him in and patted the spot on the dark blue quilt next to her.

Soon they were seated side by side, shoulders and legs touching, backs against the cool outer wall. She was closer to the head of the bed and he to the foot, and they were facing the now-closed door that led into the hallway. Once she'd warded the room against interruption and eavesdropping, she turned to him with a smile.

"I think we had a lovely first time."

# Chapter Two: The Plan

Harry blinked, looking horribly confused, but suddenly his expression cleared, green eyes sparkling brilliantly as he grinned at her.

"It was very memorable. Er, beginning of sixth year, was it?"

"End of fifth," she corrected. "My birthday's in September, remember."

"And you didn't want to give yourself a spectacular early birthday present?" he asked, batting long dark lashes as he looked at her with huge guileless eyes.

She laughed outright. "I was more concerned with the beginning of the school year than even your nigh-irresistible charm."

He offered her a mock pout, but it dissolved as he said, suddenly serious, "I wasn't at my best at the end of fifth year."

Laying a hand on his arm, she said softly, "But you were very much in need of comfort."

His forehead wrinkled. "A pity shag? That's low, 'Mione."

She shook her head. "One thing led to another. We got carried away once I was out of hospital."

He shrugged. "Okay. Just the one time?"

She smirked. "Or did we go at it like rabbits all summer once you were here?"

He couldn't seem to help grinning again. "Perhaps not. But maybe—"

"Your foot slipped from time to time?" she suggested dryly.

"But we're not official in school … because I want to protect you from my enemies and—"

"From all the rabid fan-girls? And boys?" she asked pointedly.

Pink washed up his cheeks. "From anyone who might try to do you harm," he compromised.

"It'll do, I suppose," she agreed, adding philosophically, "especially since I had plenty of practice in fourth year."

Harry eyed her doubtfully. "So we should expect the Prophet to feature an article on the lurid and heartless way in which I stole you from Victor Krum this time around?"

She laughed. "No doubt."

He sighed. "We're not telling Ron?"

It wasn't really a question. Ron had plenty of talents, but acting believably in this situation was not one of them, and they both knew it.

"Nothing comes out until it has to," she answered, meaning both to Ron and to the public at large. Harry nodded. "So … first time in the Room of Requirement after our O.W.L.s, and occasionally since?"

"In the privacy of the summer months or with the aid of the Map during the school year. That makes the most sense. What are we going to do about hunting for those virgins?"

"I'd say leave it up to Ron, and we wouldn't have to worry about it again." Harry's lips twitched in appreciation of this sally. "But someone might wonder why you or I hadn't come up with useful information. I suppose we'll appear to be investigating but do our best not to make too much progress."

Harry gave her a short nod of acquiescence but lamented, "Why is it that these things always happen to me?"

"I'll do some research," Hermione offered promptly.

Harry snorted at this very prompt and typical response before asking, "Do you think anyone else has guessed? Albus?"

Fawkes hadn't said so, and she hoped that he would have given her that much, no matter how cagey he was being otherwise.

"Although one can never be certain about the headmaster," she answered aloud, "my guess is that he would want the situation controlled quite quickly to prevent Voldemort from getting the upper hand."

"I don't like to think of him forcing us."

It had been several years since Harry had had blind faith in the headmaster, but she could see that this idea disturbed him.

"I don't think he would have put us under Imperius and locked us in a bedroom together, but I suspect a massive guilt trip would have come our way; our scruples are apparently all that's standing in the way of Voldemort getting exponentially stronger magically."

Another frown puckered Harry's forehead. "What are the chances that it's the two of us? The last one Pure Adult was a century ago and now the two of us, who happen to be best friends?"

"It does seem rather fortuitous." She shrugged. "But I've found that the wizarding world tends to work in mysterious ways." Harry made a moue of distaste, and she continued, "I don't like that answer, either, but I don't have a lot more to give you right now, given that I didn't know anything about it until tonight. I've said I'll research, and I shall."

A grin broke across his face. "That rankles, I take it?"

She shoved his shoulder irritably, but he took the movement without protest before sliding back so that they were upright and touching once more.

"I don't like being ignorant about much of anything," she confessed reluctantly, "but in this case, it's yet another fact that all the wizard-born seem to know automatically, even if they don't have all the details."

"While we're left in the dark, waiting for someone to clue us in." Harry's voice had darkened considerably, and she knew he was thinking about his childhood and how literal the case had been for him.

"So," she immediately sought for a subject change, "regardless of any uber-libido that we don't appear to have experienced, why is it that you and I are here?"

He blushed again, and it really did make him look lovely. Or hot—however one was supposed to describe the sex appeal of a best friend. She knew herself well enough to be quite aware of why she hadn't got that many offers, but she had to wonder about the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor.

"Well, with Tom always after me," he said defensively, "there doesn't seem to have been much time for that sort of thing."

"I daresay you could have made some."

"So could have you!" he snapped.

She regarded him steadily. "Yes, I could have. Given that you're speaking to the wizarding world's other adult virgin, I think we've established that."

His nose wrinkled, and he began apologetically, "Ron—"

"Is a prat," she finished flatly. "You know that. Things come out of his mouth weeks before he censors them."

"You?" Harry asked politely.

"To start," she answered, "I'm Muggle-born, and while my parents hardly raised me to believe that I couldn't have sex before I was married, they did share their belief that the act itself should be meaningful, and I should be having it for a reason. I didn't experience that uber-libido, and I … didn't get a lot of offers, and the person I am interested in would die if I said anything."

"Me, too," Harry said with relief.

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Well, okay, not that bit about your parents, 'cause obviously Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would've been relieved if I'd contracted an STD and died a horrible death, and yeah, I got a fair few offers, but the rest … the rest was true," he trailed off lamely.

"So you didn't have out-of-control urges that threw you at someone you didn't really want rather than allowing you to wait for the emotional iceberg you do desire?"

"I wouldn't say h—" the Gryffindor boy cut off abruptly, studiously staring at his lap rather than her.

Hermione lifted his chin with her fingers so that he was forced to meet her gaze. "You're a little too easy to bait sometimes, Harry. I knew it was a 'he'."

Harry's eyes were huge. How he'd managed to go through so much and yet retain such surprising edges of innocence and guilelessness was beyond her.

"How?"

"I'm one of your best friends. I'm with you all the time. I know which way your eye strays."

"Ron—" Harry began frantically.

"Is a boy and remarkably clueless about things like that. I'm sure he thinks you're straight as an arrow. Although, really," she laughed softly, "after Cho Chang and 'wet', I think he might have bought a clue."

A reluctant grin was pulled from Harry. "That was a total disaster, wasn't it? We won't talk about how long it took me to get there?"

She smiled. "Of course not. Since, apparently," she cleared her throat, "you moved on to me, it would do just as well to not make too much out of the disaster that was Cho Chang."

One corner of his mouth tipped up, but he looked lost in thought, saying sadly, "I wish I knew…."

"He has to make his own decisions, Harry. He hasn't intimated that help would be welcome."

"You really do know everything, don't you?" He sounded more awed than angry.

"Your eyes tended to be more specific than general, but don't worry about it," she hastened to add when he began to look alarmed. "I know you really well, and you certainly look conflicted, if not downright angry half the time. I think your secret's safe."

After a moment, he let out the breath he'd been holding and nodded. "What about you? Who's this mystery bloke who's got your attention? Or girl," he corrected hurriedly, "because it could be a girl, and that would be totally fine."

She smiled at his flustered attempt to be open-minded. "Not a girl. Although, that does make me wonder just how this loss of virginity is assessed. Surely two girls must be able to lose their virginity just like a boy and a girl or two boys?"

She began to mentally flip through the books she had here and the ones she thought it likely she should take with her to Hogwarts for further research.

It was several moments before she realized that Harry was waving a hand in front of her face. Her gaze focused abruptly on him. He was grinning.

"Earth to Hermione, Earth to Hermione."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I have a lot to research. Now go away and let me finish packing."

"I thought you were done already," he accused, chin jutting out slightly in his belligerence. "You pestered Ron and me all day."

"Of course I was done," she said impatiently, "but that was before I had an entirely new subject to research. You think I can research this in my school texts or the extra Defence or Potions books I packed? Of course not—I'll need more books now."

He rolled his eyes, but obediently slid off the bed, his bare feet barely making a sound on the hardwood floor. With his hand on the brass knob of the door, he turned back.

"Hey! You haven't said who you like."

She just stared at him. Sometimes the wheels turned pretty slowly for Harry.

His eyes narrowed, and a determined look crossed his face. "All right, then. I'll figure it out."

"And I might even confirm it if ever you do," she offered with wry humour.

Waving an absent goodbye, Harry let himself out. She was pleased that she'd given him something non-Voldemort related about which to concentrate so carefully, although she was going to have to monitor where her own stare rested, apparently, so it wasn't too easy for him.

It took her almost two hours to go through the books she had in her room, slip into the library to select some from there, and finally select and shrink the dozen or so books she thought would be most useful. She added them to her trunk, no longer able to fathom how she'd survived the first eleven years of her life packing without magic.

Finally, she waved off the lights and buried herself under the covers of her bed. She cleared her mind, ensuring that she didn't dwell overly long on the non-existent relationship that seemed as unlikely to come about for her as for Harry, and was soon asleep.

The trip to King's Cross was happily completed with no cause for alarm. For three years running, they had discussed the merit of having Harry's reassuring presence on the train versus his presence making the train a larger target for Voldemort. As always, Harry had reluctantly remained a symbol for the masses if it meant parents were willing to part with their children and let them get their much-needed education.

Hermione always pointed out that unless she, Ron, Ginny, and handfuls of Harry's other friends were removed as well, the train would hardly be an untempting target. Giving Harry's friends permission to Portkey or Floo while everyone else had to go the long way was not a battle that even the headmaster had decided to engage in, and the argument had settled, as per usual, with all of them on the train.

This was not to say that they were left to their own devices; security had been visibly and invisibly increased, although it left Hermione wondering whether there had been more going on than she realized in her first years, when the only adults she had seen were the lady with the trolley, the conductor, and the driver.

Kingsley and Tonks had been officially dispatched by the Ministry to accompany the Express, and Hermione knew that there were a handful of Disillusioned Order members who were aboard and keeping an eye on things as well with two pairs dedicated solely to vanguard and rearguard. Several professors also accompanied them, word of their presence designed to help keep the students in line.

As for the students, the Prefects took it in two-person turns to patrol the corridors quite stringently, complete with examinations of the compartments at random intervals, while the Head Boy and Head Girl roamed the corridors in order to oversee the other students.

Many parents were greatly reassured by these measures, but the students tended more towards annoyed. The Ravenclaws felt that they couldn't get effective reading or studying done with all the interruptions while the Slytherins felt there were a biassed number of checks done on them. The Hufflepuffs, meanwhile, were embarrassed to be caught snogging their significant others, and the Gryffindors hated having their first pranks caught and stopped before they'd even reached the school. Logically, everyone knew these measures were for their protection, but unless an attack occurred, they were going to gripe.

"Why can't Draco visit our compartment?" Tracey Davis demanded petulantly. In Pansy Parkinson's absence, she had evidently decided that it went to her to heckle the Gryffindors. She was in a compartment with Daphne Greengrass—the third member of Pansy's clique—as well as Crabbe and Goyle; this was where Draco spent his time when he wasn't patrolling. "We know he'd be fair about it."

"We're taking turns," Hermione explained as patiently as she could, given that this was the third time in as many rounds that the girl had asked. "Sometimes it's going to be Harry and me; the fewer questions you ask, the quicker we'll be gone."

This, fortunately, seemed to make sense to the girl, and they were able to make their cursory inspection—no Dark Artefacts or malefactors in sight—and leave.

Hermione resumed the discussion they'd been having before they interrupted the Slytherin compartment.

"I still can't believe that Ron can be so dedicated to Quidditch and yet barely manage to pull together a single paper for class." After each inspection they had completed, she and Harry had found Ron deep in discussion of his revolutionary plan to bring the Gryffindor team to glory, complete with diagrams and play-by-play descriptions of a year's worth of new strategies.

"And yet if you were in his place—" Harry stopped at her pointed glare. "All right, yes, you'd probably read every Quidditch manual ever written and come up with an adequate plan. But honestly, we can't all be like you, 'Mione."

"I suppose that would be a daunting prospect." She briefly envisioned a class full of twenty Hermiones and was sufficiently disturbed. "It's good that he's passionate about something."

"Even if it is Quidditch," Harry completed her unspoken thought.

"Even then." She smiled.

She knew it had come as a blow last year to the Weasley matriarch when Ron had chosen the Quidditch Captaincy rather than remaining a Prefect. What Molly didn't know (but would be as proud of him as Hermione was, she hoped) was that Ron had had the opportunity to choose to remain both.

The Ministry had chosen not to strike down Umbridge's lifetime ban on Quidditch that had been imposed upon Harry, Fred, and George. Given the political climate in wake of news of Voldemort's return and Fudge's cover-up, however, it was likely that Albus and Harry could have swayed the decision. Much as Harry loved Quidditch, though, he had recognized in that horrible summer post-Department of Mysteries that he needed to devote himself to preparing for the Final Battle against Voldemort. Quidditch, let alone captaining the Gryffindor team, would only interfere with that.

Ron had therefore been offered the Captaincy in Harry's stead, although that fact had never been formally stated. Whether or not Ron had known that, he had suggested that Harry be given his position as Prefect, leaving them both school leaders. It was true that Ron had gone for the position that Hermione was certain he was more qualified for, but she was touched that he had chosen to help Harry gain a position of honour rather than hoarding both of them to himself; she still remembered the personal glory he had seen in the Mirror of Erised in first year.

As far as upholding the Prefect duties went, Harry was somewhere between Ron and Hermione. The position put him on equal footing with Malfoy, which made life easier on everyone. Hermione and Pansy Parkinson, the other Slytherin Prefect, had finally joined forces of necessity and convinced the two boys that gratuitous point loss between the two of them only evened out and made it likely that Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff would win the House Cup. For the sake of their Houses, Harry and Malfoy had declared an unofficial ceasefire.

Ron had evinced no surprise when she and Harry were named Head Girl and Head Boy this summer and had even gone so far as to say that he had anticipated it since first year. Both she and Harry were deeply relieved by this show of maturity and intended to run with it for as long as they could.

Just as Harry's status as Prefect last year had made it easier for him to get about the castle and do whatever he needed to do to prepare for the fight against Voldemort, his position as Head Boy would function in that capacity as well. In fact, it was better-suited in many ways, as it afforded Harry his own quarters and gave him the autonomy to be almost anywhere in the school at almost any time without having to answer to any student. It also gave him a ready excuse for any professors who might question him.

Hermione intended to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn't get into too much mischief, and otherwise they would be able to complete their extra training sessions without resorting to detentions or elaborate excuses—which meant no more Remedial Potions to make everyone cross.

They arrived in Hogsmeade, and the fifth- and sixth-year Prefects went off with Hagrid, Tonks, and the first-years, ready to defend them in the unlikely event that they were attacked while on the lake. This left the seventh-year Prefects, Harry and Hermione, the Aurors, and the professors to see the rest of the students into the carriages and up to the safety of the castle.

Neither Harry nor Hermione ventured an opinion when the second-year students gawked at the seemingly horseless carriages, just climbed in and let the Thestrals pull them up to the castle.

Hermione had been able to see the winged, horse-like creatures since the beginning of sixth year. The summer after fifth year, Voldemort, either annoyed at his inability to access her parents or hoping to flush them out, had sent Death Eaters to attack her neighbourhood, and the Aurors and the Order had not been able to arrive quickly enough even with warning wards in place.

The Brophys, the lovely old couple who lived right next door, had been some of the first to be attacked, and Jim Brophy had died in her arms crying out for his wife who lay dead beside him. Hermione now knew why Harry didn't much want to talk about Cedric Diggory. They both knew that what had happened was because of Voldemort, but that couldn't alleviate all their guilt.

It didn't help that Hermione was desperately grateful that it wasn't her parents who had been attacked that night. Unfortunately, as everyone had taken the time to point out to her, it was impossible to put the Fidelius Charm on an entire neighbourhood who didn't know about the charm; the Muggles wouldn't have been able to get home without being told where to find their houses by the Secret Keeper, postmen wouldn't have been able to deliver the mail because they wouldn't have been able to find an entire neighbourhood, and it would have been a complete disaster.

What many people didn't know, however, was that Hermione's parents hadn't actually lived in that neighbourhood since the summer after fourth year. Whatever anyone else had thought, Hermione had immediately believed Harry's tale of what had taken place in the graveyard. She believed Voldemort was back, and that meant he would start killing Muggles again.

She had marched home and told her parents that they had to change their names and move.

They hadn't liked the necessity, although they had come to believe it when she had elaborated further. What had really rankled with them was the fact that Hermione intended to stay.

"This is my fight," she had told them. "You Know Who is threatening my world and everything I stand for. I can't leave."

"We could take you," her father had threatened with, she knew, desperate concern for the safety of his baby girl.

She had squared off with him and spoken with dead certainty: "I could make you forget that you even have a daughter."

She would have done, too, if they had forced her to it. She refused to lose her parents because Voldemort wanted to hurt her or Harry. Retrospect had led her to understand full well why Harry had always tried to push her and Ron away at the dangerous moments; he wanted to protect them from danger even if it meant alienating them because at least they would be alive.

When it came to her parents, if she hadn't been their daughter, they would have run the risk of being randomly hit like other Muggles, but her existence in their lives increased the danger exponentially. That meant she had a duty to get them away from the war that wasn't theirs and the danger that she represented.

They had acquiesced, finally, and she had relocated them with Sirius's help. He had been the only Order member she had been certain would help her without informing anyone else, and she was unwilling jeopardize her parents' lives in any way; ever since third year, her naïve faith in the absolute trustworthiness of institutions like the Order had been shaken. She didn't personally know every member, and she wasn't risking her family on another Peter Pettigrew.

With Sirius's guidance, she had become the Secret Keeper of her parent's old house and cut off all communication with them in the new location after having spelled them so that owls and other messenger birds could not find them. This way, a cursory inspection would show nothing suspicious or worthy of deeper investigation in England.

Closer inspection would reveal that her parents were no longer practising in the UK, but she had rightly assumed that Voldemort would be too dismissive to investigate the details of their Muggle lives, and as soon as their old house was conspicuously absent from the neighbourhood, Voldemort assumed he knew approximately where they were hidden.

By Easter of fifth year, her research into Occlumency and Legilimency had allowed her to safeguard the secret in her mind such that were it ever in danger from a Legilimency attack, it would be wiped from her mind. Once Fawkes had discovered the quandary this placed her in because it could mean her parents were left forever wondering, he had promised to retrieve them once the war was resolved should she be unable to do so.

Fawkes had also taken Crookshanks to them during the summer after fifth year, as Hermione had not wanted her parents to be completely defenceless. Although they could work no magic, she now had the relief of knowing that they were living with an excellent judge of character; Crooks wouldn't be fooled by an Animagus transformation or someone who looked innocent but wasn't.

She'd sent an explanatory letter, swore up and down that her half-Kneazle pet could save their lives, and made them promise to pay attention to him. She'd explained it all to Crookshanks, too, and he seemed to understand and be willing to go where he would be the most helpful. She missed him, especially when she was alone in bed at night and could have used a warm bundle of fur curled up at her feet, but that loneliness was a small price to pay to increase her parents' safety.

Their arrival at the castle shook Hermione out of her introspection, and she and Harry made sure that they were the last of the students to enter the castle; as soon as Hagrid had finished ferrying the first-years across the lake, he would come to feed and release the Thestrals.

She and Harry seated themselves at the foot of the Gryffindor table, as close to the doors and the back of the Great Hall as they could get. This was not where Hermione would normally elect to sit, but it afforded the greatest opportunity of keeping an eye on as many students as possible given that all the professors were on the opposite end of the room.

Although this was the last time that Hermione would ever be in the brightly lit hall with all these chattering students for the Welcoming Feast, she paid only half a mind to the Sorting, Albus's opening remarks, and dinner, focussing instead on the students she and Harry were supposed to be investigating.

They would need to be able to make periodic progress reports to Albus, and she and Harry, if it became necessary, would need to be able to obscure the truth. Until the truth was leaked from the Ministry, they were fortunately hampered by not revealing their object themselves: if three famous Gryffindors suddenly started questioning everyone in their year on their sexual habits, someone would get suspicious.

There were thirty-two seventh-year students: nine Slytherins, eight Gryffindors, eight Ravenclaws, and seven Hufflepuffs. Hermione found it rather odd to sit there and know that every single one of them had had sex before they had turned seventeen. All the pure-bloods and wizard-raised children had likely known and accepted this from an early age, but she wondered how other Muggle-borns had reconciled the wizarding world norms with their non-wizard upbringing.

Still, it was hardly out of the common way for Muggle teenagers to have sex before they were seventeen, and learning to adapt was a large part of the Muggle-born's life at Hogwarts.

Now, at least she knew why Madam Pomfrey had put such an emphasis on "natural urges" and the fact that having sex once didn't mean immediate repeat performances were necessary. To a Muggle-born witch such as Hermione, a recommendation of "do it once and then stop" made far less sense than arguing either abstinence or safe sex. The nurse hadn't really been interested in the sorts of questions Hermione had, and while the Gryffindor girl had intended to do further research, she had thought it amounted to only idle curiosity, and she had never got around to it.

Here was yet another situation that proved that the more one researched, the better life was, but she supposed that there was no use now in wondering about what would have happened if she'd already been aware of the state that she and Harry were in. She hadn't known, and now they had to deal with the situation as it was, meaning that she and Harry had to come up with plausible alternatives to the two of them.

Thankfully, if all else failed, there was the uncertainty of age to fall back upon; despite what Remus thought, there was no guarantee that the Pure Adults weren't graduates; had her birthday been three weeks earlier, she would be an excellent case in point. But most attention would be focussed on her year-mates, and that meant learning more about them than Hermione really wanted to know.

Working in their favour was the teenager's propensity to lie, fabricate, and exaggerate when it came to his or her sexual exploits. They'd heard more stories than could be easily verified, and she strongly doubted that all of them were true. That being said, her house was pretty straightforward. The only member she wasn't sure about was Neville, and Harry or Ron might have a better idea there. Whether Ron wanted to know or not, Dean and Ginny had had sex by the latter's confession to Hermione.

Seamus and Lavender were a verifiable fact, as Hermione had walked in on them once. He was rumoured to have slept with the entire seventh year of Hufflepuff for a bet, but Hermione was sure that was nonsense, especially since Ron had revealed that Susan had turned the Irishman down. She had heard all about Ron and that girl from Beauxbatons from Victor, who had heard it from Fleur, and Ron's behaviour had confirmed it. In the doubtful case that that rumour was false, Lavender had taken the time to advise Hermione that she had had a go with the redhead. It was rumoured that Lavender had bedded the entire seventh-year dorm, but in the case of Harry, Hermione knew it to be a lie, and she suspected the same of Neville.

Parvati, Padma, and Lavender had all been linked to Jacob Sinclair at the same time, and Hermione strongly suspected the truth of it based on the nauseating amount of details she couldn't help but overhear when Lavender and Parvati had giggled about it late at night for several weeks on end. Parvati and Lavender had enjoyed it so much that they had subsequently skipped the Ravenclaws entirely, and Hermione had once again heard far more than she wanted to. She had become exceedingly skilled at Silencing Charms, but she was very much looking forward to Head Girl rooms of her own.

Hermione focussed her attention on the headmaster as he announced the appointment of the new DADA professor: Nymphadora Tonks. The Golden Trio had known since mid-summer and were rather excited about having in the post not only someone they knew wasn't going to try to kill them but a friend and a skilled Auror. The Ministry had agreed to loan her out since she would double as more security for the school, the Order benefitted by the addition of one more of its members to the faculty, and Hogwarts received a competent professor. There were definite benefits to having Kingsley as the Head of the Aurors.

Tonks, in all her violet-haired glory, rose and managed to knock her full goblet of pumpkin juice into Severus's lap. Of all the people in the Hall, Severus was one of the few who knew how genuinely clumsy the woman was. Hermione smirked to herself. It would be interesting to see how many students underestimated her as a result and had their arses handed to them in class.

As the burst of noise died down from this untoward occurrence, Hermione turned her attention back to her appointed task. Once her examination reached the other Houses, the situation became murkier. Such details were not ones that Hermione cared much about. Her friendship with Ginny kept her apprised of some of it, but Hermione had always tried to block out what her roommates had been nattering on about when it came to relationships.

From what she had seen, the Ravenclaws tended to date in-House, and she didn't hear many unfounded rumours about them; they tended to date people openly or not at all—or they were very good at hiding it. Hufflepuffs tended to date other Hufflepuffs as well as Ravenclaws and Gryffindors but avoided Slytherins. Slytherins avoided Hufflepuffs as well as Gryffindors.

The Slytherins were likely to be the real problem as what they did in their own House tended not to be shared, and their inter-House liaisons were similarly discreet. It would be very difficult for Hermione and Harry to separate the truth from the rumour. Which, in this case, was all to the good. It wasn't as though she and Harry couldn't be faulted for not chatting up Draco Malfoy and working out whom he had slept with.

Hermione couldn't quite believe that she was sitting in the Great Hall actively contemplating this subject. She desperately hoped that it didn't occur to Ron at some point that they could sneak around in Harry's Invisibility Cloak and try to catch people in the act. She'd make use of a Skiving Snackbox before she submitted to that ignominy.

Thankfully, the Feast was coming to an end, so she was able to put the topic out of her mind for a little while longer. She took care to smile at the newest members of Gryffindor. Ginny and Andrew Kirke, the two sixth-year Prefects, were ensuring that the students got up to the dorms safely, allowing Hermione and Harry to stay behind and wait for Minerva; unlike everyone else, they did not know where they would be living for the year.

The Head of Gryffindor made her way over to them once the Hall was empty of students, her fierce pride evident in her expression. She had known of their appointment before, of course, but their new capacities were now official.

Although Minerva might be very proud, her words were no-nonsense as she reached them: "I'll show you to your quarters."

They followed her out of the Great Hall and surprisingly, down the stairs into the dungeons. The older witch answered their unspoken question.

"While there are several Head Girl and Boy quarters spread throughout the castle, Albus informed me yesterday that these were the only ones not currently ... out of commission."

They both nodded, Hermione wondering if the headmaster had actually done damage to the other rooms. This location would facilitate their training sessions with Severus because trekking very obviously up and down more than seven levels had always been the most risky part of their lessons last year; it was Severus's life if Voldemort found out what the Potions master was teaching them.

They turned in the opposite direction from the Slytherin dorms and made their way through a handful of corridors until Hermione was pretty sure they were in the vicinity of Severus's own quarters and his private laboratory. She wondered how much grief he had given the headmaster over the choice or if the wily old man had managed to keep it from him thus far.

A gargoyle that most nearly resembled a grizzled and enraged dragon guarded the entrance to the rooms, and Hermione began to approve the headmaster's choice in earnest. Putting them in rooms that were normally given to Slytherins meant that they benefitted from all the Slytherin paranoia and safeguards including no chatty portrait to tell tales either in the corridor or at the door. Harry would have to get the Marauders' Map out later so they could explore. [3]

The gargoyle didn't do anything so uncouth or potentially noisy as jump out of the way of the door; instead, it simply melted away, allowing them to pass through the unobstructed doorway. Once they were inside, it instantly reformed.

"At the moment, you need only touch it or cast the standard Opening Charm to get through from this side," their Head of House informed them. "You may set a password of your choice once I leave."

They nodded again and looked about their new quarters. This room was only slightly smaller than the Gryffindor common room and managed to avoid being unbearably Slytherin because it was done in tones of earthy brown as well as forest green. There was no hint of red or gold anywhere, but that was to be expected.

The room featured a large fireplace crackling with a cheery flame in front of which was a thick area rug, two comfortable-looking armchairs with small tables at their sides and ottomans at their feet, and a large couch with a low table in front of it. There were two desks and chairs on the wall opposite, accompanied by several bookshelves and cabinets for storage. The ceiling was high, but frequent wall sconces in regular intervals around the room chased the shadows away. Several beautiful seascapes—nary a painted person in sight—decorated the walls. Their luggage was currently piled in the middle of the floor. Doors punctuated each wall in the room: one straight ahead of them and one on either side.

"The facilities," Minerva said, gesturing them to the room opposite.

The bathtub put the Prefects' to shame; Hermione was certain that it would be possible to do laps in it. The room appeared to have two of everything else: showers, commodes, sinks, cabinets, mirrors.

"Those doors," there were two more, again on either side of the bathroom, and Minerva gestured to them, "lead to each of your bedrooms. The bathroom partitions itself off if you try to enter at the same time. The main door," she gestured back the way they had come, "is charmed to lead to whichever half of the bathroom is unoccupied or remain locked if they both are."

Hermione and Harry grinned at one another. Leave it to Slytherins to come up with such a clever room. Minerva led them back to the common room.

"I will leave it to the two of you to choose your bedrooms. I feel it incumbent upon me to point out that any untoward altercations with other students, especially Slytherins, would be detrimental to your standing as Head Boy and Head Girl."

"We realize that unity is one of the most important goals that we can have this year," Hermione spoke up for both of them, not certain Harry's response would be as appropriate. "And we're both very proud of our positions."

Minerva's stern expression softened, and she allowed a rare smile to grace her features. "You have certainly been a pride to your House, Hermione, Harry. Now," she turned brusque once more, "make sure you get a good night's sleep, and remember that you receive your timetables tomorrow morning at breakfast."

They both wished her farewell and watched as the gargoyle disappeared at her touch and reformed behind her.

"I can't believe they put my mum and dad in a place like this. It was practically an invitation to shag all the time."

Hermione stared blankly at Harry, stunned that this was the first comment to come out of his mouth, and then she dissolved into laughter. Harry soon joined her, and they managed to collapse on the couch in front of the fire.

"Not the first thought to cross my mind," Hermione confessed when she'd finally drawn adequate breath to speak. "Although I guess it will only further our plan when we need it to. Good to know the school isn't against such liaisons."

"You mean, you didn't read about it in Hogwarts: A History?" Harry demanded with mock shock.

Hermione's lips tipped up. "There was remarkably little on the sexual exploits of the Head Boys and Girls."

He almost achieved the deadpan delivery he was going for as he said, "Have you considered writing to the publishers and asking for an updated copy?"

She subdued the urge to clear her throat, saying evenly, "The very negative response I received surrounding the absence of house-elves suggests that such an attempt now would be equally useless."

Harry gaped at her, clearly caught between laughing and wondering if she was serious. There was no need for him to know that she was in deadly earnest. Their rudeness had been quite unwarranted. She rose from the couch.

"Shall we see what we're offered for bedrooms?"

The two of them traipsed into first one bedroom and then the other; they were virtually identical and both quite lovely. There was a large four-poster in dark wood, at least twice the size of the ones they had used in the Gryffindor dorms, another fireplace, several woven rugs, wardrobes, shelves, and cabinets.

The nicest feature, and totally unexpected, were the gloriously large windows that took up almost the entire wall opposite the door. They were evidently enchanted like the ones used at the Ministry, perfect for underground locations. They made their decision arbitrarily, given the nature of enchanted windows: Harry took the bedroom with the window that looked towards the Pitch, leaving Hermione with the room featuring the window that looked east to the Forbidden Forest.

They levitated their trunks into their bedrooms, Harry laughing at her expression when he suggested summoning Dobby and having him do it for them. Hermione got him back with a jibe about his using his superhero status to get out of the manual labour the rest of them had to perform.

Once Harry had finished with his own belongings, he came to help her with her books. Hermione was blissful about all the space she had to properly shelve her collection. Despite the numerous times she'd been in the boys' dorm, she couldn't quite fathom how they had all lived out of their trunks for six years. She, Lavender, and Parvati had promptly unpacked, their trunks had disappeared into storage, and chests of drawers—larger and infinitely more orderly than the trunks—had appeared at the ends of each of their beds. They each had a wardrobe, as well.

When Hermione had first been to the boys' dorms after being befriended by Harry and Ron, she had gone so far as to quiz Minerva on the apparent inequality. The professor had replied that the boy's dorms used to contain both chests of drawers and wardrobes, but as these tended to remain empty while the trunks were used instead, they'd done away with the superfluous furniture. Considering Ron, Harry, Seamus, Dean, and Neville for a moment, Hermione had withdrawn her complaint.

Back in their common room afterwards, the two of them examined the wards that were already in place. As anticipated, it would be difficult for even the headmaster to eavesdrop, and they reinforced the permanent privacy wards that would ensure that no hint of what they were doing reached the rest of the dungeons or anywhere else in the castle, blocking out all of the insidious eavesdropping spells that Severus favoured.

Blocking portrait-people was their next task; this was rather difficult to do if a portrait normally had a person in it, but empty seascapes and landscapes would generally accept the restriction easily, as people did not belong in their scenes. Nosy headmasters were thereby thwarted once again, and they didn't have to worry that he would get curious enough to send some poor painted person through in a little boat.

Rather than using a traditional password for the entrance, Hermione wove name runes into the wards. This was safer than an actual word, because it couldn't be guessed; when she was finished, she and Harry were the only two people who could get through the wards or give others permission to enter.

It took an excellent understanding of runes and a fair amount of power and finesse to properly modify a spell in this manner. If it was done improperly and no name was correctly recognized, not even the caster could break the spell. Or if the runes and the magic expended were too weak, anyone who identified themselves as the name in question would be accepted. Needless to say, Hermione made sure that neither of these potential disasters occurred, and to make it even more difficult for anyone to break through the wards, she'd combined several different kinds of runes.

Harry liked the added security and didn't seem to mind that it came at the price of Hermione being the one who would have to add anyone they subsequently wanted to be able to enter the rooms without their direct permission.

"Are you sure that won't bother you?" she asked again.

"Who exactly do you think I'm going to be inviting to our rooms that I don't want you to know about, 'Mione?" He laughed at her concern. He affected an overly contemplative expression. "Hmm. Admit that I'm friends with Ron or study Ancient Runes in my spare time…. That's a tough one."

She already knew his big secret crush, too. She let the matter go.

After a short discussion, they disabled the professor-override that was on the door. If Albus thought he really needed to see them, he was going to have to do so the old-fashioned way: knock or break in. Breaking in, they'd done their best to ensure, would take a small army a considerable amount of time.

Since no one in their right mind would make such alterations to the House common room door and doing so was beyond the ability of all but the most talented upper-year students, there was actually nothing officially written prohibiting such action, although Hermione wondered if that would change by the end of the year. Of course, that would necessitate Albus admitting that they'd locked him out.

After another moment's consideration, she compromised slightly.

Fawkes?

No, I am really a figment of your imagination and you are cuckoo.

Bird, don't get fresh with me, she said as sternly as she was able, narrowing her eyes as she said with false sweetness, You could have been conversing with your … master.

He squawked indignantly, and she smiled.

Who cast a Bad Temper Charm on you? he demanded grumpily.

My current state is a direct result of your charming mental presence, love. I've a favour to request.

He snorted. Mentally, birds could snort quite well.

And you've done such a lovely job of buttering me up. What do you want, impertinent child?

Oh, come now. Pure Adult. I think we went to a lot of trouble to establish that. Sensing the mental eye-roll, tinged with amusement, she got to the point. Harry and I have disabled the professor-override on our door. In an actual emergency, you'd give Albus, Severus, or Minerva access, right?

There was full-fledged amusement now. I can't wait to see the look on his face. It shall be as you wish, Pure One.

She mentally scrunched her nose at him. Perhaps impertinent child wasn't so bad a moniker after all. Always a pleasure.

When she focussed on the room again, she found Harry looking at her oddly.

"I was having an intense mental discussion with myself?" she proposed hopefully.

He shook his head at her, but didn't pursue the topic.

They blocked the possibility of all incoming Floos and warded their bedroom doors against intrusion, making it possible for them to lock each other out, along with everyone else, if they wished. Hermione had refused to let Harry put up a Silencing Charm around his bedroom, insisting that she be aware when he was having a nightmare.

She suspected that if she double-checked tonight, she would find the charm in place. She knew he didn't like to be a bother, but she had grown up in a household where she was welcome in her parents' bed if she woke from a bad dream, and she couldn't fathom anyone being forced to suffer through nightly horrors alone.

He was underestimating her if he thought that she would just give up; she could be more stubborn than he was if the situation warranted it, and she would get through to him eventually if she had to dismantle the charm every night once he'd gone to sleep; with her course load, she'd frequently be up later than he was, and she didn't have to sleep nearly as much as she used to.

Once their bedrooms were done, they finished with the complex ward Severus had taught them which hid the use of magic; this would prevent anyone from becoming aware of large surges, unusual disturbances, or any use of Dark Magic, which could be a necessary part of learning defence against it.

They performed their nightly ablutions in a bathroom that had obligingly split into two, said their goodnights, and crawled into their respective beds.

She considered all the tasks that she would need to perform in the upcoming days. At the end of the week, perhaps, she would write the quarterly letter to her parents which the phoenix obligingly made impossible to track. This was the only communication they were allowing themselves while the war was ongoing. She wanted them to know that she was alive and well but didn't want to burden them with details that they would be helpless to do anything about; she could talk copiously about school but was hardly going to mention attacks, battles, and hours upon hours of special training for a Final Battle that they wouldn't want her to fight. Her first week of classes would therefore make useful filler for the letter.

Hermione spared a fleeting thought to wonder what Ron would think of their rooms, but her last thought as she surrendered to sleep was one of certainty that Severus would surely prefer this new location to the Gryffindor dorms.

Chapter Three: The Classes

They met Ron for breakfast the next morning.

"I thought the two of you might at least say goodnight," he complained as he piled food onto his plate as though he hadn't eaten in several weeks.

Hermione and Harry exchanged amused glances and served themselves at a more sedate pace. Harry raised an eyebrow at her, indicating that she got to field this one.

"Our quarters are … a little further away from the Gryffindor dorms than we'd anticipated. By the time we finished unpacking, it was pretty late. You didn't really think I'd not get a good night's sleep before my first day of school, did you?"

Ron instantly dropped the topic, years of experience having taught him not to get between Hermione and her schoolwork unless he wanted to get into a fight.

A few minutes later, Minerva came round with the timetables, giving Hermione hers before the rest were distributed alphabetically.

"Why does she always—?" Ron unwisely began to complain, showing that perhaps she'd been too generous in according him an allotment of common sense.

Hermione glared at him. "Because it takes me longer to read than it takes you, as I have roughly twice as many classes."

This was the simple truth. All of the N.E.W.T. classes were double periods, running for three hours from nine to noon or one to four. Hermione's schedule was quite full:

Monday: 9am, Potions and 1pm, Charms

Tuesday: 9am, Runes and 1pm, Muggle Studies

Wednesday: 9am, Transfiguration and 1pm, Arithmancy

Thursday: 9am, History of Magic and 1pm, Herbology

Friday: 9am, DADA

Harry and Ron's schedule, by contrast, had a great many more blank spaces:

Monday: 9am, Potions and 1pm, Charms

Tuesday:

Wednesday: 9am, Transfiguration

Thursday: 1pm, Herbology

Friday: 9am, DADA

They had theoretically agreed to disagree about their course loads, as Harry and Ron thought Hermione was insane to be trying for nine N.E.W.T.s, and she thought the two of them were wasting their education in only going for five. Since the Ministry required a minimum of five N.E.W.T.s to qualify for Auror training, she thought it would be wise to take at least six. Harry and Ron had argued for taking the minimum but doing really well in them, which she thought was a fine argument but unlikely to be the real reason for their decision.

To give them their due, it was mildly ludicrous to think that the Department might not seriously consider Harry and Ron after all they'd been through from ages eleven through seventeen. Their childhoods had been quite effective pre-training, and it would be impractical not to take that into account. On the other hand, Harry hated to be judged by his Boy Who Lived status, so if he was really looking at his future career as though he had the same background as everyone else, it would surely make more sense to have an excellent education….

Realizing that she was having the argument she'd agreed not to have out loud in her own head, Hermione forced it out of her mind. The choices were made.

Since the first had been a Monday this year, Harry and Ron were jubilant about two things: they had no classes today, and they didn't have to suffer through Potions until next week.

Hermione thought they should be bloody grateful they were in Potions at all but barely refrained from saying so. She knew that deep down, they were grateful, but that didn't mean they weren't excited about a random free day.

When they had received their O.W.L. results in the middle of July after fifth year, both Ron and Harry had received Exceeds Expectations in Potions.[4] Realistically, this was an extraordinary achievement given their day-to-day work in the class, but Severus had been adamant about only accepting students who had received Outstanding O.W.L.s to his N.E.W.T-level classes. Exceeds Expectations had therefore dashed the boys' hopes of becoming Aurors and solidified their dislike of Severus into something resembling glittering hatred.

It was like that moment when Umbridge had declared that Harry was unsuitable to be an Auror or when she had banned Harry from Quidditch for life; being a horrible teacher was bad enough, but actively trying to quash the life goals and dreams of students was outrageous.

When Hermione had broached the subject with the Potions master, he had cut her off, stating that if Minerva hadn't convinced him to admit the two boys, a fifth-year Gryffindor student had no chance whatsoever. Hermione understood standing by principles, but she suspected that this particular decision owed itself more to vindictiveness than righteousness. Given the number of Harry's potions that had been sabotaged—usually by Slytherin students and occasionally by the Potions master himself—she didn't think this was about making an exception for the Gryffindor Golden Boy, either.

She could still remember the conversation that had ensued word for word. It had taken place in the Grimmauld Place library two days before Harry's sixteenth birthday. Severus hadn't looked as though he wanted to be disturbed, but she had been determined.

"In the entirety of your almost twenty-year career, you've never admitted a Slytherin student who had less than an Outstanding?" she asked sceptically.

His expression sharpened. "I hardly see how that relates to the current discussion."

She knew he understood quite well. "You've made exceptions in the past."

"With good reason," he said coldly.

The pleading of Minerva, Albus, and herself did not even approach a good reason, apparently.

"If the reason were good enough in this case?" she pursued doggedly.

"I sincerely doubt that possibility."

It sounded dismissive, but she could tell that he was listening to her.

She threw caution to the wind. "Here's my offer: re-test Harry and Ron at the end of the summer. If they achieve the equivalent of an Outstanding, accept them in N.E.W.T. Potions."

"And if they fail?" he demanded imperiously, eyebrow raised, clearly doubting that she could come up with anything even remotely tempting.

She swallowed but forged ahead, keeping her voice even: "Then you'll have three fewer Gryffindor students in your sixth-year Potions class."

Black eyes narrowed to veriest slits, he regarded her for several long moments, and she actually checked to make sure that her Occlumency shields were still in place.

"You would truly risk your place on their Potions acumen?" he asked doubtfully.

She regarded him steadily. "I would do what is in my power to help my friends towards the career of their choice."

He continued to regard her intently and then declared abruptly, "They will be tested on the twenty-ninth of August. You will pay the price for their failure."

Convincing Harry and Ron to spend the month studying Potions had been no easy task, especially as she had not wished to divulge how her own scholastic career now hung in the balance.

The beginning of August had not been pleasant. She had dragged them to the basement of Grimmauld Place day after day, bought them ingredients, given them detailed notes, and done her best to bully them into learning properly, but despite the brilliant second chance they were being offered, they were squandering it with complaints against Severus's unfairness and sneaking out for impromptu Quidditch matches.

She had suffered through a week of this grudging compliance before their attitudes had undergone an abrupt about-face. They had become positively studious, with the result of their actually learning and soon completing their work on the first or second attempt. This, in turn, meant that they often finished earlier in the day and could then have their fun. Hermione could have wept for joy.

She did cry in earnest when Severus informed her on the thirtieth that, to his horror, he would be accepting three Gryffindors into his N.E.W.T.-level class. Harry had needed to pry her out of Severus's arms when she'd lost all common sense and flung herself at the man. She'd sobbed on Harry's shoulder instead. Once Severus had left in a flurry of ruffled robes, Harry had confessed that three weeks earlier, the Potions master had made a snide comment about how lovely it would be to have no Gryffindors in his sixth-year class. Harry's immediate leap to Hermione's defence had resulted in the revelation as to why she wouldn't be there. Suddenly, they had a reason to take this chance seriously.

Severus had informed Minerva and Albus after the Order meeting the next day that he was accepting Harry and Ron, and Fawkes's bird's-eye view had allowed her to see the utter shock on Minerva's face. Albus had looked pleased, but Hermione was pretty sure he had been taken aback as well.

Minerva had demanded to know why, and Severus's response, "Because Miss Granger offered me something I wanted," still saddened her. She knew she'd seemed a bit of a pill those first few years, but she'd improved, hadn't she? And it wasn't her fault that she had been a Muggle-born tossed into the wizarding pool; she had been desperately determined to swim rather than sink and that had meant knowing everything that wizards knew. That gap was still there, but at least she had learnt to be less ostentatious when trying to catch up.

As breakfast finished this morning, Harry and Ron were deep in discussion about what they could do with their newfound Tuesday freedom when a shadow fell over them. They looked up to find the Potions master staring down at them with a glint in his eyes. Uh oh.

"Mr Potter. Mr Weasley. Minerva was kind enough to inform me that you are at liberty today. I am in need of assistance, and she recommended you."

Hermione had to hide a smile at their instantly woebegone expressions, but they knew better than to argue with the Head of Slytherin, especially when he was backed up by their own Head of House. Garnering sympathetic expressions from the rest of their housemates, they trailed disconsolately after the Potions master.

Smiling to herself, Hermione headed off to Ancient Runes. She was both deeply excited and mildly terrified by the fact that she was in her final year at Hogwarts. N.E.W.T.s had never loomed so close and that was alarming, and yet it was the culmination of what she had worked so hard to accomplish in the previous six years of schooling. It was her chance to prove her worth—scholastically at least—with finality.

The bigotry that pure-blood families like the Malfoys expressed bothered her. She didn't believe any of their "Mudblood" nonsense for a moment, but the fact that they could honestly hold such beliefs was disturbing on a fundamental level. She knew her doing exceptionally well on her N.E.W.T.s wouldn't likely change their minds, but it would become one more fact that proved their reasoning was invalid.

Today's classes showed that the professors and most of the students were quite serious about this year's course load; they were only months away from N.E.W.T.s and the results that would impact their futures. This attitude fit Hermione's frame of mind quite well.

With the exception of Tonks, all of the professors had taught Hermione before, and she and her fellow students had all taken the sixth-year N.E.W.T. classes together, so after just one class this year, it pretty much felt as though they'd never left. Bathsheba and Charity had both started with the lectures they had promised at the end of last year: the added security of warding with runes and glyphs worked into the spells versus the dangers of doing so, and a debate on the reaction of the Muggle population were the wizarding world to be revealed to it in the present day and age.

Harry and Ron hadn't been at lunch, and they were late for dinner. When they finally arrived, they positively slunk in, dusty, dishevelled, and looking thoroughly disgusted with their day. They sat down on the bench next to her with two heavy thumps, and she smiled.

"Look what the cat dragged in."

They glared at her, but having survived six years of death glares from a master, this didn't faze her.

"There's no need for unholy glee," Harry grumbled. "You'd feel the same way if you'd been tortured like we had."

Ron was already inhaling an unholy amount of food.

"I'd hardly call it unholy," she responded dryly, eyeing them critically. "I'd have been happy to help sort the Potions stores, but I had class."

She was subjected to a mouthful of half-chewed food as Ron sputtered to a halt and then complained, "Would you not do that?"

"Use a process of deduction to establish with reasonable certainty what was occupying your time and include such gleaned knowledge in my everyday conversation?"

He swallowed, seemed to take a stab in the dark: "Yeah, that."

She made a face and then addressed the two of them. "The two of you have realized you're wizards?"

They looked at her cluelessly. With a sigh she took out her wand and cast Cleaning and Neatening Charms which left them looking perfectly presentable.

"Huh," was Harry's comment.

Ron sort of gestured at her with his fork before continuing on with his meal. With a shake of her head, she gave up and went back to her own dinner.

Afterwards, they invited Ron down to see their rooms. It was difficult to gauge what he found the most upsetting, because he became speechless somewhere around their initial descent down the stairs. He gawked at the gargoyle, gaped at the common room, goggled at their bedrooms, and glared at the bathroom. From the look of him, he hadn't quite grasped that they would be living as together as they were living, but both she and Harry refused to address that issue unless he explicitly brought it up.

The Slytherin colours probably didn't help.

When he finally found his voice, Hermione was hugely impressed that what came out was a strangled, "It's lovely."

"We like it," they answered in unison.

This, to Hermione's surprise, seemed to snap Ron out of it.

"Oy," he protested. "I get enough of that at home with the twins."

They smiled, and Ron flopped onto the couch and pronounced his final verdict: "Location's the pits, but it's not half bad otherwise."

The next morning, they met for breakfast before heading off to Transfiguration together. Minerva's extremely high standards continued to rule in her classroom where they were moving on to increasingly difficult transfigurations. In both the sixth- and seventh-year classes, Hermione had noticed a marked increase in what could be termed "defensive transfiguration": transfiguring common objects into physical shields for protection, dirt into mud to slow down an opponent, water into ice to trip someone up, and so on. Since these spells were self-sustaining and couldn't be quickly stopped by an opponent with a simple finite, they could be very useful in battle.[5]

At its most advanced, this could even mean objects that actively defended someone, as Albus had done for Harry during the battle in the Department of Mysteries. Most wizards either weren't strong enough or couldn't react quickly enough to make this useful in a battle situation, but Hermione believed strongly in her magical and cognitive abilities, and she would use every advantage that the Hogwarts staff was offering.

To Hermione's amusement, Harry and Ron refused to come to lunch, worried that Severus would find them and draft them for work that afternoon. They made a quick kitchen run and then escaped outside with their brooms. Severus, Hermione was amused to see, did note the boys' absence from lunch and fleetingly met her smile with a smirk of his own.

In Arithmancy, Septima continued with the plan she had instituted the previous year. In sixth year, they had concentrated on Arithmancy in its pure form. All their work was theoretical. This year, they would be putting the theory they had worked so hard on into practice, using it with complex potions, advanced transfigurations, and upper-level charms.

They wouldn't necessarily be performing all of these potions and spells—her classroom was not a laboratory—but their work on paper would be applicable in the real world. There would be a certain quantity of testing to ensure that their results were accurate, and other projects would offer bonuses for theories that they actually tested.

Hermione was definitely looking forward to the advanced potions portion of the course and was hoping that Severus wasn't going to be too difficult about letting her use the lab to work on them. At worst, hopefully Harry wouldn't mind if she built a mini-lab in a corner of their common room. Or really, she grinned at the thought, that bathroom was huge, and it had a source of running water and everything... It would have the added benefit of aggravating Severus, were he ever to hear of it, and perhaps he'd be offended enough to let her use the lab after that.

On Thursday, Harry and Ron continued their mission of "Avoid the Snape" and took breakfast in her and Harry's quarters. She left them to it and went off to History of Magic, ignoring their opinions of the subject and her for taking it.

What many students never appreciated because they dropped History as soon as they could was that sixth- and seventh-year History of Magic finally got beyond the witch burnings and Goblin Rebellions of the 1600s and the Giant Wars of the 1700s of which Binns was so fond—or at least as fond as he was of anything, since he managed to make everything from the founding of the Ministry to the institution of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy sound as dull as possible.[6]

In sixth year, they had learned about the 1800s and the continued changes to the Ministry and the wizarding world through the Romantic and Victorian era, and this year, they would be looking at the 1900s; although the delivery still left much to be desired, the subject matter was fascinating. They would be learning about Albus's defeat of Grindelwald and the Years of Terror, wizarding involvement in the World Wars, and much more.

She was going to have to make sure Harry never knew that he was covered in History of Magic. Of course, since both boys tuned her out as soon as they heard the word "History", she probably didn't have much to worry about. Perhaps it was just as well that Binns strayed so rarely from his lectures, or he might have realized that there was a source for many cold hard facts right in his school.

Harry and Ron reappeared for lunch and didn't once look at the High Table as though that would keep them safe from Severus's potential wrath. Personally, Hermione thought that they had afforded him enough amusement for the day to keep them quite safe, but she refrained from saying so.

After lunch, they trekked outside with Neville and Seamus, and Pomona reminded them straight off that if they wished to submit a bonus project in Herbology, she was only considering hybridized plants with particular consideration to their ultimate use. The latest she would accept a proposal was the beginning of November.

For their final year at the school, they were encouraged to show their creativity and ingenuity with bonus projects. These projects were not required—although students were strongly encouraged to submit at least one—but would supplement their grades in whichever subject they chose to do one for, assuming that the project was a success.

Both Hermione and Neville had taken Pomona up on her offer of having their choice pre-approved at the end of last year so that they could begin the process in a timely manner this year. From the look on Ron's and Harry's faces, they hadn't given it much thought at all. She had the feeling that the two of them weren't going to be submitting a bonus project in this class. Pomona did not belabour the point any further but took them out to greenhouse number three and the most dangerous plant life on the premises.

Friday's arrival and its morning class were heralded with especial enthusiasm by the seventh-year students. As happened every year, there was a furor surrounding Defence Against the Dark Arts that didn't occur with any other subject. Hermione wasn't sure what Tonks had done, but no whisper of what had occurred in the six other years of classes reached the seventh-years, who, being in one of the last time slots of the week, would normally have expected some sort of advance notice of what to expect.

Since no one was supposed to know that Tonks worked for the Order as well as for the Ministry, the vast majority of the trio's interaction with her could not be revealed, so they were spared being pumped for information, answering only to having seen her a time or two at the Ministry and interacting with her very little there.

The Defence classroom this year was in the dungeons. Hermione wasn't sure if this was to facilitate Tonks's coordination with Kingsley, Severus, and Remus or because of her House affiliation. The room was closer to the Hufflepuff common room than the Slytherin one, a fact which lightened the mood of the students who were hurrying down to meet her for the first time.

Speculation was rife, however, many students recalling their previous professor and hoping that an Auror would be a vast improvement. Professor Judex had been another Ministry pick. He hadn't been working for Voldemort like Quirrell or Barty Crouch Jr. He hadn't been a charlatan like Lockhart. He hadn't been a Ministry toady like Umbridge.

He'd known his material well enough, although not brilliantly, but unfortunately, he hadn't been enough like Remus. No, he'd been firmly convinced that Harry was going to be the next Dark Lord. Oh, he believed everything Harry had said about Voldemort being back, but nothing they'd been able to say had convinced him that the Parseltongue-speaking, Dark Lord-defeating Boy Who Lived wasn't going to take over the world the first chance he got.

To be fair to the Ministry, Hermione didn't think that the man had betrayed his prejudices before he got the job. Given the current political climate, it hadn't been a sound idea to have someone who strongly disliked Harry as a Defence teacher for the second year running.

It had been almost amusing at first, since they all found the idea of evil Harry so ludicrous—even those who had been uncertain in fifth year were completely won over by now—and Judex didn't have the clout or the vindictiveness of Umbridge, but by the end of November, Hermione had found herself having to remind the man nearly ever class that Harry couldn't be excluded from practical demonstrations just because the professor didn't think the Gryffindor needed any more practice defeating other wizards. She'd had to just as frequently remind Harry to keep his temper, and she was pretty sure that Albus had had to step in and make sure that the Gryffindor Golden Boy was graded fairly.

The students had got over the Parseltongue revelation several years ago, and since DADA included a great many students who were part of the DA—which had been instituted as an official club with Ginny running it and Filius supervising—the class had been almost universally united in their dislike of their professor.

He might not have owned any blood quills or made them read the textbook every class, but he had been messing with their Saviour at a time when everyone knew that Voldemort was back, and they had resented that. The man's practical experience had been adequate but not extraordinary, and this had meant that he was teaching students who'd battled Dark Arts he'd never had to face; the upper-year students had found this gap frustrating.

Judex had seemed to think it his duty to protect the rest of them from Harry's evil influence, making most everyone delight in being especially friendly with Harry instead.

It was never made explicit whether he had refused to come back for another year or whether he had been dismissed, but there had been no complaint from the Ministry when it had become plain that another professor would be required this year.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron couldn't have been more pleased that it was Tonks who'd been chosen. Since Ron already knew Tonks, he wasn't engaged in the gossip with the other students but had slipped up to talk to Neville, questioning him, it seemed, about hybridization options. The two boys made it through the door with the rest of the class before Harry and Hermione had the chance to stop them. They were at the back of the queue of students, and the magical buzz of wards around the doorframe stopped them in their tracks.

Hogwarts was one of the most heavily warded buildings in all of Britain. A huge portion of these wards, however, surrounded the outer perimeter of the grounds. It was these which protected the school from attack, barred Death Eaters from the grounds, prevented Apparition and airborne arrivals, and so on. There were wards around the Quidditch pitch and some of the greenhouses, as well, and there was a whole set of wards that kept away Muggles and changed the appearance of the castle for them. Other wards guarded the castle proper, fortifying the ancient building.

There were also many personal wards within the building. Severus warded his private stores, office, and quarters with his own wards, and many of the other professors did the same; it was a common practice, especially these days. Warding around open doors, however, was far more unusual, and Harry and Hermione found it immediately suspicious. They took out their wands and attempted to discern just what they were up against.

Tonks smiled from her position inside the classroom. Her hair was bubblegum pink today, matching the colour of the Weird Sisters t-shirt she was wearing with dark blue jeans. If she'd been wearing robes at some point that morning, they weren't in evidence right now.

"Are you going to join me or remain in the hall?" she called cheerfully.

By then, they'd a pretty good idea of what the wards entailed.

"We'd be pleased to join you," Harry said with a grin.

Hermione smiled back. "But we'd prefer to be able to speak about it later."

"And we'd rather not have blue hair all weekend."

Together, they disabled the wards around the door, and as they were crossing the threshold, Hermione followed this up with a discreet shielding charm about their persons. Tonks saw, but none of the students appeared to notice, as they were all focussed on their smirking professor. Hermione and Harry took their seats at the front of the room; Tonks was an unknown element, and the rest of the class had apparently left a safety buffer.

Hermione saw that Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass were still here; ever since they'd joined the class last year, she'd wondered how much of their choice was motivated politically. Were they keeping an eye on what the other students were learning, or did they want to learn it as well?

The door closed, although not with the slam Severus was known to employ.

"I trust that many of you remember Professor Moody?"

Almost en masse, the students nodded nervously, since as far as an opening salvo went, it was not the most reassuring ever. Hermione, Harry, and Ron wore smirks that matched their professor's.

"He was my mentor. And while I'm less likely to bark 'Constant Vigilance!'," there was a gratifyingly large number of starts, "than he was, you should all note that it's a tenet I enforce to the fullest." Tonks's hair went bright blue as she smirked at them. "Those of you who are not as paranoid as Mr Potter and Miss Granger will have cause to be practically reminded of this advice. Although this school is meant to be a safe-haven, as several of your younger peers thought to point out to me earlier, nothing that has occurred to you since entering my classroom today is in any way life-threatening."

The nervousness amongst the students seemed to grow, as most of them had thought that nothing had yet occurred in the classroom.

Tonks settled back against her desk, standing in front of it with arms and legs crossed casually. "Defending against the Dark Arts is more than fighting in pitched battles or skirmishes in dark corridors. Defending yourself against the Dark Arts means always being aware of your surroundings, keeping your eye out for unusual behaviour, and not letting your guard down.

"I won't make it a habit of warding the door but," she smiled cheerfully at them, "that only leaves you with no idea what I will do. There'll be no indiscriminate cursing in my classroom, but learning to defend yourselves both subtly and substantially will form part of your weekly Friday morning agenda.

"My name is Tonks. I will answer to Tonks, Professor, or Auror Tonks. Now who can tell me what classifies a spell as Dark?

In between all her class prep and the homework that had already been heaped upon them, Hermione had also been researching Coming of Age and Pure Adults, and she put her free Friday afternoon to good use. After she, Harry, and Ron went out to have tea with Hagrid—who was in fine form because he had several new and interesting creatures for his classes this year—she speedily researched and wrote two papers before moving on to personal research.

Harry had taken one look at the multitude of books that Hermione had spread out over an armchair, most of the couch, and a fair portion of the floor and blanched, but he had gamely pulled out his own books and took a stab at his work. Ron, Hermione knew, would have run for the hills. Getting the work out of the way now, however, meant that it didn't loom over the rest of the weekend, and Harry knew that they'd be starting training, needed to discuss her research, and would begin their Head Boy and Girl duties in earnest.

The research on Pure Adults was not going as well as she had hoped. The recent stuff was complete nonsense, but some of the older Black tomes and Restricted Section offerings had interesting information, although it was limited in many ways. None of the accounts she read seemed to have been written by Pure Adults themselves, so a lot of it was hearsay, and none of the answers were as definite as she wanted.

After Albus's explanation of the Child Massacre, this ambiguity began to make sense, but that wasn't very helpful when it was her life and Harry's life that she was trying to understand right now. She'd take anything she could get, of course, but that didn't mean she was happy with it.

By dinner time that evening, Hermione saw that the hair of fifteen of the seventeen members of the seventh-year DADA class had turned bright blue. Each student had discovered when they tried to tell anyone why their hair was blue that they couldn't speak about the class they had had that morning. The blue was particularly clear on the once-blond locks of Draco Malfoy and Hannah Abbott, and the former was hiding the fact that he was fuming mad with little success.

Hermione thought it was well-reasoned of Tonks to spell the other years not to speak about it but only to make the oldest students wander around with their hair dyed. The surprise was priceless, and they were currently supposed to be the most highly educated students in the building. Lesson learnt, Hermione would wager.

She and Harry finally took pity on Ron's desperate pouting and explained to the nearby Gryffindors what had happened. The news rapidly spread throughout the Great Hall, and Tonks's reputation was made. Hermione wondered how many students were now convinced that she had been a Slytherin and would be surprised to learn the truth.

Tonks raised her glass to Hermione and Harry in toast, and Hermione noticed Severus eying the woman warily. Fortunately, no second beverage mishap occurred to risk the health and safety of their second competent and non-evil DADA professor. Hermione wondered how Albus had forced the seating arrangements, because although Tonks was an infinitely more pleasing conversationalist than Quirrell, Lockhart, Judex, or Umbridge, there was a certain hazard associated with such close proximity to the Metamorphmagus. Severus might be one of the bravest people Hermione knew, but he didn't take foolish risks for no reason.

On Friday evening, after realizing that they'd assembled in front of the fire to do their homework for the fourth day running, just as they'd done for the last six years in the Gryffindor common room, she and Harry jointly decided that the desks in their common room were a waste of space. They moved them into their bedrooms where they fit under the window. If they needed some private time to work quietly and effectively on a flat surface, the desk was there; otherwise, they'd be on the couch or on the floor in front of the fire.

This left a wide open space in the room which they turned into a sparring area complete with the clever padding spell Hermione had discovered over the summer. Casting it over the walls and floors would minimize injury without detracting from the decor; walk across the floor or lean against the wall and they both still felt like the hard stone that they were; impact either at an accelerated pace and they gave as though they were cushioned. Picking oneself up off the cold hard stones of the dungeons had become rather tiresomely frequent in their early training with Severus, and Harry was as relieved as she was that this would be minimized in their own home.

They shielded the rest of the room against inadvertent spell fire, projectiles, and other likely destructive forces coming from this area, as well as shielding the area they were in, spelling rugs to the floor and casting anti-flame spells on them and anything else that looked capable of catching fire. They cast protective spells that prevented water and freezing damage and put a Skin Deep spell on the walls so that damage would not penetrate more than a couple of inches into the stone. By now, they were very familiar with how their instructors worked.

When they were done, they had a place to keep in shape and work on the hand-to-hand combat that Remus had been teaching them as well as the duelling they were learning from Severus and Kingsley. The room would pass a cursory inspection as the same as when they had first entered it, and it continued to look pleasant and homey.

They tested their spellwork's efficacy with a fast and furious duel that ended in a draw and left the room unscathed and the two of them gasping for breath as they moved across the room and tumbled onto the couch to survey the room.

"It's kind of an inverted home decoration." Hermione observed the final results. "We could put a new series on the telly: 'How to protect your home and leave it looking exactly how it did before you started in ten easy steps…'."

Harry laughed. "You could publish a self-help book for wizards. You said you'd worked out a spell for the gargoyle?"

After contemplating their needs, Hermione had worked out a complex bit of transfiguration and charms that would make the gargoyle guarding the door announce anyone who wanted to get in. As the Marauders had discovered, the inherently magical castle made it possible for its inhabitants to be tracked. In this particular case, she and Harry were only concerned with the several feet surrounding their door, and they wanted the results to be reproduced orally rather than visually. With this method, their potentially clandestine visitors wouldn't have to announce themselves in the corridor, but she and Harry would know for certain who was out there, as the gargoyle, like the Map, would in essence "see" right past any disguises to the real individual.

A voice-displacement charm would throw the voice from the gargoyle to right beside their ears, making the announcement discreet inside their quarters. They could either finite the announcement, indicating that they'd heard and would either answer or ignore the caller, or, unless they'd specifically shielded against it beforehand, it would get progressively louder at fifteen second intervals until they noticed or were woken, like a polite knock turning into insistent pounding.

She, like Harry, was capable of wandless magic, though she had learnt this much less dramatically than he had, the ability increasing as she had approached and then passed her seventeenth birthday. As a result, the gargoyle would respond to either of their desires for the door to be opened if they did not wish to physically answer it. By the time she'd finished working out exactly what would be most efficient and practical for them, she thought she understood at least one of the mysteries of the headmaster's office.

"Brilliant," Harry declared cheerfully.

Pleased, Hermione set to work to put her theoretical spell into practice. With parts of the castle that were integral to Hogwarts, as the stone gargoyle was, it was a little more like "convincing" than spelling, but the gargoyle correctly announced both her and Harry when they each took a turn testing it, and they'd have to wait for more visitors to be one hundred percent certain of its effectiveness.

She then made the two of them override the gargoyle's announcement so that they wouldn't constantly be announced to one another. They could decide on a case-by-case basis if they gave anyone else unfettered access whether or not that person would also be announced to them.

"Would you like me to limit the effective distance of the announcement?" she asked Harry.

He looked at her blankly.

"Do you want to know in DADA that Luna's at the door to our rooms?"

A slow grin spread over his face. "Do I ever!"

She had rather suspected that would be his response, and since it was easy enough to modify later if it drove them bonkers, she let the spell dissipate naturally without any predefined boundaries, suspecting it would fizzle round about the wards surrounding the grounds.

Now that they lived in their own room rather than a shared dorm, they could do more than simply make a fancy door. The Map didn't have to be hidden away from roommates any more, and Hermione now felt able to admit to its brilliance and usefulness. She hoped it meant that she'd grown a bit as a person but suspected that it was really just because she understood it now and thought she had a fighting chance of duplicating their work if she wished.

Harry stuck it to the wall outside his bedroom with a temporary Sticking Charm; against the wall, it could be coaxed into lying out completely flat and unfolded, making a fair-sized wall decoration. She cast a Glamour on it so that it would appear to anyone else as an ink-on-parchment seascape, thus blending it in with the established décor.

When she, Harry, or Ron were looking at it, they would continue to see the Map and everyone in Hogwarts. At the end of last year, she had discovered that the Map had different modes, or different ways of displaying its information; rather than showing the location of each resident in Hogwarts, it could display lists of people, such as all the Slytherins, seventh-year students, professors—or non-students and non-professors. With this display ability, they could periodically check to ensure that no one untoward ended up on the list of current occupants, such as B. Crouch in place of A. Moody.

Thanks to a Protean Charm, every time a new person appeared on the list of "others" on the Map, the name was replicated on the bracelets that she and Harry each wore. The bracelets—which were also word-activated Portkeys that would bring them to the headmaster's office—were made of two plain bands of gold and silver which had been twined together, and the metal would heat to advise them when they needed to take a look. She had given Harry's to him for his birthday that summer, and he had been pleased but bemused until she explained what it did. They would have to look at the Map before they knew where this person was, but they would at least be made immediately aware if any rogue Animagi or other potential malefactors were on the grounds.

Last year, she had figured out how to disguise their presence on the Map, a secret she had shared with no one but Harry, given the possible abuses to which the ability could be put. They had removed Ron from the Map as well, but she had not explained to him how to do it. This had been only a half-conscious decision, as he had blown her off mid-revelation, apparently desperately in need of discussing some dire Quidditch move with someone; he hadn't brought the conversation back up and neither had she. Both she and Harry knew how to see one another in emergencies, but they were both pleased with one more way in which they could not be spied upon.

By the time they had finished with all these alterations, it was late, and the long week had caught up with them.

"Since I doubt either of us is at our best at the moment, shall we bump research revelations to Sunday morning?" Hermione suggested hopefully.

Harry grinned. "I was sure you were going to sit me down just now and reveal these really important truths that I couldn't take in for the life of me."

She smiled back. "I'm much more aware of your retention skills than that, Harry. Ron'll be sleeping, I trust?"

Harry shook his head. "He's gone officially Quidditch-mad. He's already scheduling pre-tryouts or some such, as actual tryouts aren't until next weekend. He's determined to have the world's most stellar team come hell or high water. After last year…." Harry shrugged.

Last year, Gryffindor had lost to Slytherin in the Final. It hadn't had anything to do with Ron's leadership abilities, and it hadn't even been Ginny's fault. Both she and Draco had flown extremely well, both teams had played extremely well, but in the end, Draco had caught the Snitch. Gryffindor had still won the House Cup, so it had hardly been a complete wash, but Ron had been inclined to take the loss personally. Very personally.

"I admire his dedication to something," she tried to remind herself.

Harry dragged her up off the couch. "To bed, then. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day, too."

Saturday morning, the Prefects were supposed to present her and Harry with a list of the rounds they had established for themselves as well as a schedule for their meetings. When the Prefects were doing their jobs, the Head Boy and Girl rarely had to interfere with them, but it was up to her and Harry to keep an eye on them just in case. They tried to resolve any conflicts before they had to be escalated to a member of faculty and similarly tried to help any students whom the Prefects couldn't help.

They had to perform their own rounds, independent of the others, with emphasis on unpredictability so that if any students worked out the Prefect schedule, there was still a chance of their being caught by the Head Boy or Head Girl. They also liaised with the faculty, meeting with them as needed and disseminating information to the Prefects.

She and Harry had agreed that their rounds would take place as insomnia, homework, and extra training dictated, supplemented by necessity based on what the Map was telling them. Harry had reconciled himself to the Marauders' creation being used in such a way with the intention of being lenient where leniency was permissible. As she had pointed out, they were also in the middle of a war where foolish antics could have unexpected side-effects; being out on the grounds, in the Forbidden Forest, or sneaking around the dungeons could truly put students in danger.

Both she and Harry wondered a little about their early years at Hogwarts sometimes, and they had agreed that Albus must have had a very great hand in much that went on. There was no way, for example, that Charlie's friends on broomsticks could have made it to the top of the tower to rescue Norbert without the headmaster's intervention. Of course, the man must have wanted Hagrid's dragon disposed of nearly as badly as they did, although using eleven-year-olds to accomplish this still seemed a little cavalier. Then again, that whole year had been a "forged in flame" sort of experience, and Hermione suspected that this year was going to be much the same.

Unfortunately, she didn't think anything really prepared one for suddenly becoming a desperately sought after Pure Adult who was capable of bestowing great power on the first person one had sex with, but she was going to do her best to see that she and Harry made it through one way or the other.

# Chapter Four: The Research

Wanting to stay on top of the day, both Hermione and Harry rose early, mock-sparred physically to warm themselves up, discovered that the cushioning charms were brilliant, and were at breakfast promptly at eight. The blue-haired seventh-years were keeping themselves scarce. Hermione and Harry settled at the sparsely populated Gryffindor table and served themselves.

"Mr Potter. Miss Granger." They stopped eating and looked up at the glowering man who had materialized behind them. Hermione could have sworn he'd waited until they had food but couldn't possibly have eaten more than two mouthfuls yet. "The headmaster has seen fit to designate me this year's child-minder."

Hermione raised an eyebrow and thought quite loudly, And how could this possibly pertain to me?

From his compressed lips, her shields had "slipped" by just the right degree. It wasn't as though there were rules against thinking snarky comebacks. It wasn't proper MindSpeech, but between two Legilimens, it amounted to the same thing.

"I am the faculty member liaising with this year's Head Boy and Head Girl," he said tersely.

Ruthlessly, Hermione suppressed the urge to giggle. The headmaster really was a master manipulator, and she suspected that he had a bit of a sadistic streak. It was true, however, that while Kingsley could come to Hogwarts periodically in the guise of checking in with Tonks, too frequent visits ran the risk of coming to the Ministry's attention and generating awkward questions.

Similarly, although Remus was by no means barred from the grounds of the school, his presence risked public censure for the headmaster at a time when such divisiveness could be most damaging. He was also continuing to parlay with the wild werewolves, which kept him away for long stretches of time, so his visits were restricted as well.

Tonks had agreed to pick up the slack wherever she could, but this was her first year teaching, and realistically, Hermione and Harry were going to have a lot of training with Severus. Albus had just given them a cover for a certain percentage of their meetings, an easy way to arrange clandestine meetings, and the perfect vehicle for exchanging all necessary messages.

"And I suppose you think now is the perfect time for our first meeting, sir?" Hermione asked with every ounce of politeness she possessed, as though she would not dream of disagreeing with him.

"Yes," he bit out.

Harry had wisely chosen to remain silent since it was already plain that this exchange was not going quite the way Severus had intended.

"Then we'd be happy to go along with you, Professor, wouldn't we, Harry?"

Harry nodded obediently, and the two of them rose, leaving their full plates of food without a backward glance.

Fawkes, do you think you could ask Dobby if he would mind bringing us our food once we get settled?

Showing up the Potions master before the first class, are we? Fawkes's tone made it clear that he was amused but uncertain that this was the smartest course of action she'd ever taken.

What could our food appearing have to do with me? she inquired with mock innocence.

Have it your way. I've asked Winky, though; the poor man can only take so much at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning.

Ta.

They made their way to Severus's office. A good gander at the lower levels on the Map yesterday had shown her that the Potions master's office was only slightly further away from their quarters than his quarters and private laboratory were. She was pretty sure that all his rooms were, in fact, attached in some manner, but there were some secrets that even the Map didn't betray.

The Potions master barely gave them time to seat themselves on the uncomfortable wooden chairs in front of his desk before he began, standing across the desk from them, arms crossed.

"The headmaster has evidently been hard at work coming up with ways to make my life more miserable than it already is. Needless to say, unless you're dying and need to appoint Draco and Pansy as your successors, you will keep your Head Boy and Girl duties to yourselves."

She translated this in her head to mean that he was available for emergencies.

"Any necessary correspondence will relate to those duties."

Meaning, she supposed, that they needed to have their decoder rings in proper working order because any missives would need to be couched in terms of their duties.

"Meetings will be similarly structured."

He'd be awfully annoyed, then, if they were ever caught without a perfectly plausible fake agenda.

He then dropped all pretext and got to the real reason for their meeting, which was just as well, as this sort of Slytherin-speak in this context amused her more than anything else, and being flippant to the most severe professor at Hogwarts was never a terribly wise plan.

"Your primary training will once again fall to me. Other Order members will be joining us only when they can find time out of their busy schedules." Hermione winced, wondering how much Albus's ears had blistered. "Our schedule will shift from week to week to help prevent suspicion or complacency. Training will be primarily in the evening to facilitate your descent to and egress from the dungeons. I hope—"

Harry cleared his throat loudly, cutting Severus off mid-word, but then the Gryffindor looked to her. The head of Slytherin followed Harry's gaze.

"I would have let him finish his sentence, at least," she grumbled before addressing the older man across the desk. "You may want to see our quarters before you make any more decisions."

"I don't see how that could possibly—"

"They're not far." She ignored Harry's look now that she had also interrupted the man. But really, if she was supposed to be offering this explanation, she could do so as she chose.

Severus's eyes narrowed, suddenly suspicious.

"Show me."

Fortunately, Harry seemed to be too grateful that she didn't get them lost to wonder why she knew the way from Severus's office to their quarters. By the time they were standing in front of the gargoyle, the Slytherin was positively glowering. It probably hadn't helped that they'd both grinned simultaneously. It had had nothing to do with his mood, however, and everything to do with the "Severus Snape" that had been announced in their ears as the man arrived at their door. They wandlessly and wordlessly stopped the spell.

The gargoyle dissolved as they desired it to, and the man brushed past them to enter the rooms first.

He stopped all of five steps into the room, and his simmering anger seemed to be nudging right up to full boil.

"These are Slytherin rooms. They can't just be given to Gryffindors," he spat the words.

She wasn't sure he'd meant to speak the words aloud. That particular tone, as though they were the essence of all evil, had recently been absent from his arsenal, at least when he referred to them specifically.

"There aren't any Gryffindor colours," she said placatingly, "not even in the bedrooms." He whirled on her, nostrils flaring, looking poised for attack, and she suddenly hoped that Harry hadn't changed the colour scheme in his room when she wasn't looking. She offered hopefully, "We warded the door so not even Albus can get in."

The tension eased as suddenly as it had appeared, amusement expressed in the sardonic twist of his lip. "At least your behaviour is marginally reminiscent of Slytherins. The training will still tend towards evenings, as not all of us have several weekdays off." They both glared at Harry, but he shrugged their looks off with a smile. "Also on weekend mornings before the others are up and about."

Harry wisely said nothing to object to this, either. There went their chance of ever having a lie-in, but Severus wasn't getting one either, and if it was down to a little more sleep or successfully learning the tools necessary to defeat Voldemort, they all knew the correct choice.

The Slytherin opened his mouth to speak again but was interrupted by the soft "pop" that heralded the arrival of a house-elf. Winky was dressed in a neatly pressed and well-fitting towel toga, the tray of food she was carrying obscuring the discreet Black and Potter family crests that adorned it.

Of all the occurrences Hermione had expected last summer, dealing with the hysterical and drunken elf being reunited with her cousin Kreacher was not one of them. Hermione had been reluctantly forced to concede that Winky needed to be bound to be happy, and the change in both creatures since then had been astonishing. The two tended to split their time between the now-immaculate House of Black and Hogwarts, preferring to work together whenever possible.

"Master Harry, Mistress Hermione, I is bringing you your breakfasts, and I is bringing more in case the professor is hungry also."

"Thank you, Winky," Harry said cheerfully, not having expected this boon.

"That was very thoughtful," Hermione added, smiling.

She could have sworn that the diminutive creature winked at her before putting the tray down on the table in front of the fire and disappearing once they nodded to her. Hermione hoped Winky was more perceptive than Dobby—or that had just been a nervous tick of some kind—because Hermione was doomed, otherwise.

Harry had already sat down on the couch and was helping himself to his food.

"Would you care to join us, sir?" Hermione invited.

Severus took tea and a croissant and settled into one of the armchairs. Hermione sat down next to Harry and gathered her own plate.

"In my experience," Severus said dryly, "no matter how obliging house-elves are, they don't tend to track down students who haven't managed to finish their breakfasts in order to bring the food to them."

Harry looked at Hermione and Hermione looked at Harry. She shrugged, and the Gryffindor boy spoke.

"Personal elves tend to see after the needs of those they take care of."

Hermione smiled faintly at his avoidance of the word "master". She knew she'd given Winky a good home, and it was that thought which had really reconciled her to researching and performing the Binding Spell for the so piteously hopeful-looking elf.

"Returning to your former glory, I see; I seem to recall a time when the Potters owned several house-elves."

Harry's hand clenched white-knuckled around his fork. Hermione eased it out of his grasp, coaxing his fingers apart so that she could clasp his hand and squeeze reassuringly.

Her tone was acid when she responded, "Then you're the only one here who does, because they and any tales they might tell were murdered when Harry was a baby. As you know, Harry inherited one elf whether he willed it or no, and he rescued the other from a slow death." She met his glare head on and snapped out a heartless, "Sir."

Harry now seemed to be clenching her hand back, and he looked poised for an explosion.

"You would think that six years at this institution would have taught you manners, Miss Granger." Severus's tone was inscrutable.

"I don't recall a lesson on etiquette," she replied with equal calm. "Unless you intend for me to have one in detention?"

"Administered to the Head Girl in her first week? Albus would kill me."

She nodded, realizing this was as close to an apology as she was likely to get. He knew better than to bait Harry about his family without cause. "It would be an ironic way to go, given all your options."

"I would come back and haunt you for the rest of your life," he said conversationally.

Harry was staring between the two of them incredulously, clearly not able to comprehend yet another abrupt mood change.

"But I, despite the painful thought of following in Olive Hornby's footsteps, would have you Banished back to Hogwarts. Surely you don't want to end up like Myrtle?"

"It would take an event a great deal more earth-shattering than death to turn me into Myrtle," he said distastefully.

"The Bloody Baron, then?" she proposed sweetly.

"That would be entirely more likely." His tone was dry. "Have you quite finished?"

She nodded, well satisfied. Keeping the two of them happy—or at least not desperately angry—at the same time felt like a full-time job.

Severus resumed the topic he had started when they were interrupted by Winky's arrival. "Your sessions will concentrate on whatever I deem your most pressing needs. You must be prepared to do whatever I tell you."

They both just looked at him.

He rolled his eyes, but she thought there was a faint showing of amusement in the set of his mouth. "Within reason, as pertains to the lesson."

They nodded. Similar rules had been imposed on the lessons in sixth year, although these had not begun until after Christmas when Harry and Severus had been prevailed upon to behave—both she and Albus had been working flat-out to achieve this— and resume Occlumency lessons.

Ron's attendance then, like now, was sporadic. He was by no means a weak wizard, but he couldn't match Harry or Hermione for raw power, and he'd never really understood their desire for Muggle defence lessons. As with the DA, he was happy to come once a week or when there was something specific and useful to learn, but daily training held no appeal for him. Several times, Hermione had to sternly restrain herself from asking him what he thought he'd be doing in Auror training next year.

Ron's very serious commitment to the Gryffindor Quidditch team also meant that he was frequently unavailable during the evenings and on weekends, if not for training then because he was conspiring with the rest of the team or planning strategies on his own. He didn't seem to have a lot of focus to spare, and Hermione supposed that it was useful to have at least one third of the trio acting as though business was as usual to help deflect attention from the other two.

From the way Severus was talking about it now, Hermione assumed that the frequency and intensity of their sessions was about to be stepped-up.

"Just tell us when and where, sir, and we'll be there," Harry said seriously.

"Tomorrow morning at seven in Room One."

They nodded again, Hermione mentally bidding farewell to yet another research-sharing time. Room One was located, conveniently or thanks the headmaster's manipulations, about halfway between Severus's quarters and their own. It was large and empty, allowing them to conjure whatever they needed for that day's lesson, be it mats, dummies, or tree-like obstructions to simulate an outdoor battle. At the first opportunity, Hermione would be sneaking in there to pad the floors and walls.

The Potions master rose. "If you will excuse me, I have a meeting with the headmaster."

More like about-to-be-scheduled rant time, she imagined. Since there was no time like the present, Hermione spoke up.

"Sir, I have a request."

"Is it related to the subject at hand?"

"No, sir."

"Then I sincerely doubt you wish to disturb my Saturday morning with it, Miss Granger," Severus said coolly.

Really, the possibility of chewing the headmaster out should have put him in a better mood.

"Harry," Hermione said flatly.

Harry made a great show of looking at his watch. "Oh, is that the time? Will you excuse me, Professor?"

Severus gave the barest inclination of his head, and Harry showed himself out.

"He has the subtlety of an Unforgivable."

"But did you really want me to come back and bother another part of your Saturday?" she asked pointedly.

"What do you want, Hermione?" he asked with resignation mixed with amusement.

Suppressing a smile of triumph, she answered, "Lab time. Practicals. I have a very important project."

Severus was one of the few at the school who might appreciate what she could do with that sort of trial. And he did, apparently.

"You'll be working around my schedule and using your own stores or clearing usage with me first. The headmaster, naturally, makes many allowances for his star Gryffindors."

She knew full well that this had nothing to do with the headmaster.

"Thank you, Severus," she said sincerely.

He offered her an almost smile before stalking out.

Looking at the time, Hermione realized that, exaggerated as Harry's gesture had been, they were supposed to have met the Prefects twenty minutes ago. She hurried off to the Prefects' lounge, where she found the twenty-two Prefects clustered around Harry. Given the sympathetic expressions on sixteen and the smirks on six, Harry had already explained the official reason why they were late.

Terry, Morag, Hannah, and Draco were easily recognizable thanks to their still garishly blue hair.

"Nice of you to join us, Granger," Draco drawled.

It wasn't quite snide enough that it could be positively considered facetious.

"Thank you, Malfoy," she replied, voice carefully even. "I do have a very busy schedule, but I can always make time for you."

His lips twitched infinitesimally. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Harry smiled. "And with the pleasantries out of the way, how about showing us the schedule you came up with?"

They spent the next forty minutes checking the schedule and the rounds themselves. First they double-checked that everyone was equally represented, that the desired times were covered, and that no one felt particularly ill-used. Between the Friday and Saturday night rounds and the Hogsmeade weekends, there were plenty of undesirable shifts for everyone, and the Sunday through Thursday shifts could generally be worked out based on everyone's school schedules.

"If you're sick or can't perform one of your shifts because you suddenly realize a super important essay is due the next day," Harry proposed to several grins, "switching with someone else is fine, but you need to clear it with Hermione or me first so that we always know who's out there. In a real emergency, we can take over for you, but we will make you pay with your firstborn child, so use that option sparingly."

Ginny's hand went up. "So once we've used that option once, we're free to get you to substitute whenever we want?"

He rolled his eyes but answered the question as though it were serious. "After that, we move on to limbs, and when they're gone," he continued, seeing the glint in her eyes, "we'll come up with something really gruesome, but it's a surprise, yeah? I wouldn't want to spoil it."

Ginny snickered. "Got it."

Hermione took over to get them back on track. "Harry and I will have the master list, but I'll get duplicates to each of you for Monday morning. They'll automatically update, so if we make a change to ours, it'll show up on yours—but not the other way round, in case anyone's wondering. We are aware that your housemates will often know when you've actually gone out to patrol, but we ask that you don't divulge the schedule beforehand to others or at least don't do so indiscriminately, as we know you sometimes need to make plans with friends. The schedule itself will be spelled to show up to anyone else as notes from Hogwarts: A History."

Harry and Ginny smothered laughter with very unconvincing coughs.

Hermione cleared her throat pointedly and continued, "Don't forget that you're patrolling in pairs for a reason. We know it's tempting to finish more quickly by splitting up, but there's safety in numbers, and we don't want to see anything happen to any of you because you were taking shortcuts."

They continued with "Proper Prefect Procedures", as Harry had insisted on calling them, reminding everyone that gratuitous point loss or gain on the part of Prefects was unacceptable behaviour, as points were tracked, and Minerva would be bringing any discrepancies to Harry and Hermione, who would deal with the Prefects in question. Students from all houses were to be treated respectfully, but by the same token, Prefects should expect tolerable behaviour from all students in return. Issues either way were to be brought to Harry and Hermione's attention.

"And of course, we're accountable as well," Hermione reminded them. "If anyone has any problems with us, including any of you, that you don't feel you can resolve with us personally, just take your complaints to Professor Snape."

Harry's muttering was heard by most of the table. "Because I desperately need to be in detention until I'm twenty."

There was a general chuckle, and Hermione was pleased to see that the Slytherins didn't immediately look as though they were scheming ways to make that happen. Of course, they were the people most likely to be discreet about that sort of thing, but she and Harry would take their chances.

"If any of you need to find us, we have private quarters. What many of you may not have anticipated is that they can be located in the midst of the dungeons."

There were numerous looks of surprise.

Harry continued, "We're in the middle of a war, and Hogwarts needs be united. It's past time to do away with stupid prejudices."

"We don't expect you all to forget your previous years and the problems you might have had," Hermione added, "but we are hoping that you can move beyond them and act like the mature, responsible people we know you are. Questions?"

Nobody ventured any, and the meeting broke up. Hermione asked the four blue-haired Prefects to stay behind, pausing to allow all of them to throw their counterparts off. Ginny had stayed behind as well, waving Andrew on.

"I'm not waiting 'til I'm ready to give up my firstborn—let's see the dungeon digs!"

Harry and Hermione laughed, and she suggested that the two of them go down ahead of her, which they did, although they didn't attempt to hide their curiosity, which the four remaining Prefects echoed.

"You want a picture for posterity, Granger?" Draco asked impatiently once everyone else had finally cleared out.

"Rather the opposite, actually," she answered, amused. "Professor Tonks was kind enough not to say that we couldn't undo what she'd done, and since you're all Prefects and under my charge, I'm taking it upon myself to make us look good. Professor Tonks's spell will wear off on Monday, and I'd prefer you keep the cachet to us, but the choice is yours."

"You're really going to leave the Weasel with blue hair when you can fix it?" Draco asked sceptically.

"Have I fixed Ron's hair yet?" she asked pointedly. "If clever Prefects worked it out on their own, what does that have to do with me?" Draco's lip curled. "Now, as many of you have no doubt discovered, the spell can't be prematurely terminated, and traditional dye spells have no effect." They nodded. "I therefore can't return your hair to its original colour as such; that won't happen until Professor Tonks's spell self-terminates on Monday. However, the same spell cast a second time will layer overtop of the current blue. With your permission, I'll cast the same spell but for your natural colour, and you'll look right as rain. I'll set it to terminate shortly after the professor's spell, and no one will know the difference."

"Is there a reason you can't simply teach us this spell?" Draco asked suspiciously.

"It will layer more completely the more closely it mimics Professor Tonks's original, which means a separate caster, and you'll be walking through that doorway." She pointed at the entrance. "You don't think I'd do anything untoward to you, do you, Malfoy?"

Smirking a little at his uncertain expression, Hermione warded the doorway wordlessly. "Anyone feeling brave?" There were no immediate volunteers. "Hannah?"

The Hufflepuff started but nodded after a moment, squared her shoulders, and marched through the doorway. When no immediate change was seen, they all looked at Hermione doubtfully.

"Mimicking Professor Tonks's original," she repeated. "Give it a couple of hours. Terry? Morag?"

They followed Hannah, and with a last look at her and Draco, thanked her and headed off.

Hermione looked at Draco, who just stood there.

"I can take it down before you leave," she offered. She wanted to force him to make a choice, so he had to have a viable alternative.

"Fuck, I'm going to end up with red and gold hair," Draco muttered before striding purposely through the door.

Hermione disabled her wards and met him on the other side. He opened his mouth.

"We could skip both threats and thanks and call it even," she proposed.

His expression changed to a smirk before he inclined his head slightly in her direction and took off. Shaking her head, she headed down to the dungeons, glad when she and Draco didn't meet up.

She found Harry and Ginny talking over the bath, Harry at the end of his recitation of Ron's reaction. Laughing, Ginny turned to Hermione. "So I won't be seeing the two of you in the Gryffindor common room ever?"

Hermione smiled. "Not when I can take over half the room with my homework."

Harry cleared his throat loudly.

"Nine tenths of the room?"

He smiled, tilting his head in concession.

"Tea?" Hermione invited Ginny.

She shook her head. "Are you kidding? I have to go report to everyone in Gryffindor before they send out a rescue party."

"You'll be all right getting back upstairs?" Hermione asked.

Pausing at the door, Ginny nodded. "Harry showed me all the landmarks on the way down."

She passed through the doorway, and the gargoyle reappeared.

"What did you need to see those four for?" Harry asked immediately.

"Hmm?" Hermione asked absently, not fooling Harry for a second as she went into her bedroom and began to gather up her books.

She looked up at his continued silence to find him leaning against her doorframe, spoiling his mock glare with the hint of smile. "I'll find out eventually."

She shrugged, going back to her schoolwork.

"I'm about to lose you to the thrall of books?"

She nodded.

"I'll go see how Ron's doing, then, and catch you up later."

She nodded again and was soon working on the last of her homework.

Shortly after eight, Harry came bouncing into the common room looking inordinately chipper.

"Good news!"

She raised an eyebrow to indicate she was listening.

"Ron and Lavender are on again."

It wouldn't even be right to call their relationship stormy, although Ron was hot-tempered and Lavender could be highly emotional; it was closer to a matter of convenience revolving around when they both felt like dating simultaneously. Hermione generally didn't give it a lot of thought, and Harry didn't usually, either.

"I'm at a loss to see why this pleases you so much," she said dryly.

"They're on again currently. As in, right now. As in, we could be shagging like rabbits, and he wouldn't know or care. So spill with the research!"

Hermione smiled at his enthusiasm and packed all her school books and parchments away without bothering to get out her notes on Pure Adults; she remembered it all, and six years of close association with Harry had proven that he would take her at her word when it came to what she had researched.

He insisted on a brief tea interlude, correctly judging that she hadn't eaten in hours and wanting to be certain, in his words, that she didn't expire from hunger just as she got to the good stuff. He noted, seemingly offhand, that the four afflicted Prefects no longer had blue hair but only shook his head with wry amusement when she affected no knowledge of how that could possibly have occurred.

Once she'd got through a selection of the fruit Winky had brought and the two of them were comfortably settled on either end of the couch, fortified with mugs of tea, he let her start.

She grimaced slightly. "Let me preface this by saying that I'm not happy with the uncertainty surrounding much of the information I've gathered."

"'Mione, you wouldn't be happy if you were quizzing the Founders themselves."

Hermione shrugged, grinning a little. "Perhaps not. But the facts really have been obscured, and it all seems to be second-hand information at best."

"Well, can you tell me why it was the two of us?"

"In general and gigantically iffy terms?" she warned once more. He nodded gamely, so she continued, "Human beings are immensely complex. In wizards, this complexity is only magnified by our magic. It permeates us, interacts with our non-magical systems, and allows us to do extraordinary things. One of the ways in which our magic interacts with our biology is to increase our libido. As young witches and wizards progress through their teen years, their magic is still growing and mutating towards its final form. This form won't be reached until they turn seventeen, when witches and wizards have full access to all of their power. Until they turn seventeen, this growing magic interacts more and more strongly with their hormones. Sooner or later, this leads the young people to have sex."

Harry made a face. "You make it sound like they have no choice."

She frowned. "I wouldn't say 'no choice', precisely, but I admit that I found it a bit disturbing, too. It's not an outside force, anyway, and I know that there are plenty of Muggles who would argue that they'd experienced similar urges without any magical assistance."

His lips tipped up.

"After this first time," she continued, "the fervour of the impulse fortunately dies down; we aren't forced to try to have sex as frequently as possible from our first time to our seventeenth birthdays. It seems as though once our magic has successfully … engaged our sexual drives, its attention is then focussed elsewhere. At any rate, the fact remains that that is how the vast majority of witches and wizard experience puberty."

"But we don't form part of that majority," he said, and she thought from the frown on his face that he was probably remembering Cho Chang.

"No," she agreed. "And from what I've discovered, there's no absolute answer as to why not. If there were, power-hungry people would have worked out a clear method and would have been exploiting it ever since." She sighed and embarked into the land of theory. "As near as I can figure, the balance between the magical and non-magical parts of ourselves is a crucial one. Timing is crucial. We each receive our adult-level power at the moment that we turn seventeen—not at midnight on our birthday but precisely seventeen years after we were born. Until then, we don't have all our power. Until then, our bodies are ticking down the years or the minutes or the seconds until we're fully developed and become wizarding adults."

She could see Harry's confusion, so she switched over to a concrete example.

"Do you know when I turned seventeen?"

He hesitated briefly, the unexpected demand that he prove he know her birthday resulting in a mild panic, but he managed after a moment, "September nineteenth, 1996."

"Legally," she agreed, trying not to smirk too much at his look of relief at having got it right. "But my Time-Turner usage makes it a little different. Biologically, by my count, it was December nineteenth of the previous year, and magically it might have been twenty-two days earlier than that because of the May that I spent Petrified."

Harry was staring at her wide-eyed.

"I found an unconfirmed study in one of the Black books suggesting that Time-Turners should never be used by children. The effects were not elaborated upon, but I wonder if I wouldn't be a case in point. Temporally, biologically, and magically, my age was off, and that impulse that everyone goes on about didn't engage, or I didn't feel its effects as direly as everyone else did, because I was easily able to master any early urges I might have had."

From his expression, he'd definitely heard her silent, "Thank God!"

"But what about me?" he questioned. "I didn't use the Time-Turner like that."

"But you did use it. Even for a few hours, that would skew your magic and the temporal seventeen year countdown by at least a little bit. I think your difficulties were exacerbated by also being possessed by Voldemort."

Harry made a face and mumbled, "Knew this was his fault somehow."

She smiled. "While under seventeen, you were possessed by an adult. At those times when he was in your mind and when he was controlling you, it may well have short-circuited the normal links between your magic and your hormones. While he was in possession, you were an adult who wasn't limited in that way. It might even be possible that the link was made when you were just a baby and whatever exchange occurred between the adult Voldemort and you as an infant permanently disrupted the normal wizarding development. I don't really know."

"Okay, but what about Ginny?" he protested. "She was possessed by Voldemort."

She was glad that he was following this so well. "I'm not saying that everyone who has had these impulses interrupted will end up a Pure Adult. Ultimately, it always remains the person's choice to have sex or not. I'm not entirely certain whether the sixteen-year-old Riddle would have affected Ginny in that way or not, although it seems likely that he wasn't a virgin at that point, so it may well have. But the point is moot in her case, however, because she did choose to have sex before she turned seventeen.

"The same goes for Colin and Justin if just Petrification is enough. Maybe it's a cumulative effect, and you and I have been through a lot more than normal. On the other hand, we are the only two who used the Time-Turner at such a young age, so maybe that's the effect that's really debilitating. Either way, we, like Ginny, Colin, and Justin, still have the free will to decide whether or not we are going to have sex. We chose not to, while they chose otherwise."

"As simple as that?" he asked doubtfully.

She shrugged. "Muggle-raised wizards might be less predisposed to choose to have sex at a young age than those raised in wizarding households. Traditionally, witches and wizards are expected to have sex at a relatively young age. Many marry and start families much younger that they do in the Muggle world. Whether or not they are feeling any extra impulses, plenty of witches and wizards would likely carry out longstanding traditions. And remember how everyone reacted when Kingsley brought up the topic at the meeting—those urges are apparently really quite strong."

Harry smirked slightly.

"You and I, on the other hand, had those urges interrupted through some sort of temporal, mental, or physical mishap, don't have the traditional background that they do, and were in the middle of fighting a war against a madman. Maybe it could have been only one of those events, but in our case, it seems like all these events conspired against us and have landed us where we are. Much as I want to insist that Divination is a load of utter rot, you and I both know that there is a vast array of prophecies in the Department of Mysteries, and I wouldn't be willing to wager any bets on their being no such thing as Fate. We make our own choices, but we work with the hand which we are dealt."

Harry's lip curled and he teased, "Do I need to check you over for signs of Imperius? See if Trelawney got you in a dark corner somewhere and cursed you?"

"Don't worry," she reassured him, "I still think she's a charlatan ninety-nine point nine percent of the time. And I'm sure you don't want me to get into the whole 'self-fulfilling prophecies' kettle of fish. Shall we move on?"

He gestured expansively with his hands, indicating that she was free to continue.

"That's actually all I've got for that bit, really. We both also appear to have fallen for people that we weren't able to comfortably have our first time with earlier." Harry nodded, a faint trace of pink on his cheeks. "I'm not sure if that also speaks to our Muggle upbringing and a desire to make that first time 'special'. In that case, at least some of the other Muggle-borns likely felt the same way, and either their hormones overrode them, or they found their special someone early."

"Which goes back to your comment about witches and wizards marrying early, right out of school. And we've still got pure-bloods who are betrothed from birth."

She nodded.

He rolled his eyes. "At least we're not being married off at fourteen."

"But it does explain why the secret of Pure Adults wasn't well known," she pointed out. "Early marriages would have negated the issue for whole sets of witches and wizards for years. Those who remained unmarried might not have remained chaste, or they might have been Pure and we just don't know about the numbers because it was before it was logged at the Ministry. Unfortunately, at this point it's just idle speculation."

Harry grinned at her. "So basically we'll talk ourselves in circles all night unless we just accept that circumstances conspired, then and now?"

She half-shrugged, half-nodded. "There was nothing published that I could find about the last Pure Adult that Albus spoke of that indicated why she remained Pure. It's either been lost, or she had the sense not to say. Much as I laud the publishing of detailed information, even I won't be publishing my theories once this whole fiasco is over."

He nodded. "No giving anyone else any bright ideas."

"Exactly. One of the very old Black books gives more details about the Child Massacre that Albus referred to. It was over seven hundred years ago, and the wizard's name wasn't stated. The author wrote that he wouldn't give the man the satisfaction of being mentioned for posterity. It was the convoy of children going to Hogwarts that he attacked, and he took all the first-, second-, and third-year students: almost one hundred of them. He … disposed of those that weren't still virgins and as Albus said, ended up slowly killing off the rest."

Harry looked horrified. "He intended to keep all of them for years?"

"I guess getting them that young was the only way to ensure that many of them had the potential to become Pure Adults." She shook her head, trying to shake the mental images away. "The wizarding world was determined not to allow such a tragedy to occur again, and the information was obscured. I found only vague references in other books, with the Child Massacre described as a mass slaughter of the Hogwarts convoy without the real reason as to why. Pure Adults became a myth, and young witches and wizards were encouraged to follow their bodies' natural urges, further protecting them.

"Did you notice that it wasn't just Ron who thought Pure Adults were just a myth? Arthur, Molly, and Tonks thought so, too. Kingsley may well have done until he found out about that scroll. Albus knew about the last time it occurred, and at one time the Wizengamot made their ruling about it, but it's been successfully relegated to legend."

Harry was staring off into space, jaw tense. His voice was hard as he said, "So we would be responsible for Tom finding out, for the world finding out again."

She shook her head, pointing out gently, "It's already been logged at the Ministry, Harry. It's only a matter of time. Any furor that there might have been died down last time, and it will do so again." This had no impact, so Hermione continued, tone sharper, "Personally, I don't intend to let anyone, least of all Voldemort, tell me when to have sex, but if you want to go off and get it out of the way now, be my guest."

Green eyes snapped back to hers and creased suddenly with laughter. "You think I could use that explanation on Draco?"

Her expression softened. "Better?"

"Much. More tea?"

"More tea," she agreed.

They refortified themselves. Harry was staring at the mug in his hands when he said, "You said the evil bloke had a way to test the children."

She nodded. "The charm requires blood from the person being tested. There's no known way to test without the blood, which I would venture is our magic protecting us."

He sighed. "So at some point, someone's going to be after our blood."

"Unfortunately, yes. But I think I can work out a way to get our blood to give a false negative for virginity. Sort of like an internal Glamour. I would rather no one get our blood at all, but as a last resort, it might do. Totally illegal, of course."

"Let me know when you want to test it, and my blood is yours," Harry said with a grin.

She smiled back. "I think we'll also have to worry about Truth Serums. Not the minor ones, because if we can shake Imperius, those won't force us to say anything we don't want to, but I'm more worried about Veritaserum. Between Scrimgeour and Voldemort, I'd say they can acquire the potion with relative ease, and if it's slipped to us unawares, there's a good possibility we'd reveal important information before we could catch ourselves."

"But you have a solution," Harry said leadingly when she paused.

"I have a plan. First off, continuing to monitor food and drink whenever possible. There's an antidote, but there's no guaranteeing we'd have access to it in time." She got the rest of the words out there in a rush. "Isuggestwebuildupatolerance."

He blinked at her. "Sorry?"

"I think we should build up a tolerance," she repeated with a few more pauses between words.

"To Veritaserum," he said flatly, sitting up so that he was facing her fully.

She nodded.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you build up a tolerance by consuming increasingly large quantities over a period of time?" He sounded as though he knew quite well he wasn't wrong in his definition but couldn't understand how that could be right.

She nodded again.

His eyebrows rose towards his hairline. "You want me to voluntarily frequently consume Veritaserum?"

"I want you to become immune with me," she corrected. "Building up a tolerance is a very Muggle thing to do, apparently. Wizards have concentrated on the idea of an antidote, and they all know how strictly controlled Veritaserum is."

"So how would we get any?" he questioned.

She shot him a look.

"You've made some." His lip curled up, and he leaned back against the cushions again. "Of course you have."

"Professor Snape wrote a paper on the effects of its use over time. I made sure it would be safe," she hastened to assure him.

He sighed. "I'll probably regret asking this, but explain it to me."

She tucked her legs under herself on the couch and tried to arrange her thoughts to best get her point across to him. "Okay. When a dosage of Veritaserum is administered, it interacts with your body and your magic, compelling you to answer the questions you are asked, lowering your inhibitions and instincts of self-preservation, and forcing you to answer truthfully."

She paused to get a nod of understanding, and then continued, "If you're given too low a dosage, you can successfully fight the potion. The magical urge to tell the truth will still be there but in lessened form, so you may be able to resist it, especially in order to retain information that is important to you. In either case, once the potion breaks down, you no longer have to speak the truth.

"If the dosage you're given is too high, if you're lucky, you'll be comatose until the potion breaks down and is flushed from your system. If you're unlucky, it will poison you, and you'll die." Harry nodded again, face dark, and she remembered that Severus had threatened him with Veritaserum once upon a time. "When it comes to Veritaserum, dosage is standardized. It interacts with you and your magic, with factors like body weight not affecting the necessary amount of potion. A three-drop dosage is standard for wizarding adults. The two-drop dosage works for children from eleven through seventeen. Veritaserum is not to be administered to children under that age; their magic tends to be undeveloped enough to prevent a reaction, plus it's too easy to overdose them."[7]

He looked understandably worried as he asked, "But you're sure you won't make us overdose?"

She nodded. "What I'm proposing is that we force our body to require a higher-than-normal dosage to be effective; we'll consume small portions of the potion day after day, slowly increasing the dosage as we find that we can tolerate it without adverse reaction. Eventually, we'll have the equivalent of a regular full dosage in us, but we've been nudging up our threshold, teaching our body and magic to interact normally even with a three-drop dosage of the potion in our system, so we'll still be able to lie."

"That sounds like it means that we'd still have to speak the truth at a higher dosage."

"Theoretically, someone could work out the correct dosage to use on us, yes," she conceded, "but they'd have to realize there was a problem. Everyone knows," she added with a grin, "that dosage for Veritaserum is standard and an overdose could cause death. Even in the unlikely event they worked out what we'd done, there'd be an extended period of trial and error to work out the correct dosage. I don't think anyone's going to do that. It'll work for many future situations, not just this one."

"And if it doesn't work like that?" he demanded.

"We'll abandon the plan," she assured him. "But I really think it'll work." Or so her Arithmancy calculations had suggested. Looking over at him, she shrugged. "I can do it myself, first."

He shook his head, a mischievous grin creeping up. "I think we'd better embark on this stupid plan together, 'Mione." He sighed. "We'll up the dosage only once we're in for the evening, then?" His eyes widened comically large. "After any training with Snape."

She laughed outright. "I'm not suicidal, Harry. Definitely after. And I'll have the antidote on hand in case we are called upon afterwards. Once we get the dosage figured out, I think we'll be fine."

"Famous last words, those," Harry grumbled. He shooed at her. "Go on, then. Get the bottle."

"What?" she asked, startled.

"Once we're in for the evening. Here we are. No time like the present, right?"

"Uh, right," she agreed and hastened to get the bottle.

They agreed to keep questions limited to their first year, to keep it non-threatening for both of them, and each consumed a quarter of a drop.

Hermione found that she could declare that her favourite professor was Binns, and Harry told her that he hated Quidditch and was mad for Potions. They giggled a bit wildly over this, and Hermione wondered if the relaxed inhibitions were going to be a bit more of problem than she'd anticipated in this friendly atmosphere. But they'd been able to lie, and that was the important aspect. They'd have to see if they reacted in the same manner tomorrow.

Since it was now quite late and they were meeting Severus at seven, they called it a night. They changed into their pyjamas and got ready for bed, and when they met a last time in the common room, Harry kissed her on the cheek and thanked her for all the research she had done on his behalf. She blinked in surprise but hastened to reassure him that it was no problem.

Climbing into bed, she reflected that maybe her worry about inhibitions had been premature. If it could get Harry to relax a little, it would be all to the good.

It didn't take her terribly long to fall asleep, but she was up by four. She felt the urge to visit the Forest, an incurable itch beneath her skin. It felt like much longer than two months since she'd last stood beneath its eaves, and she could wait no longer.

Chapter Five: The First Move

Hermione rose, performed her morning ablutions, and then dressed in jeans, a jumper, warm socks, and trainers. Her wand was tucked into its sheath on her right arm, where a practiced slight wrist movement would release it into her hand. Harry had given her the sheath as an early birthday present the summer after sixth year. Their training had been intense, and the sheath had proven very useful.

Sneaking out of the castle was a lot easier than it had been when she and the boys were first-years. Like Albus, she had discovered that she didn't need a cloak to appear invisible. In the magically saturated Hogwarts, it was especially easy to do, but she could manage it elsewhere as well.

Over the last couple of years, she had become increasingly aware of both her own magic and other people's. She and Harry could both sense the presence of magical people, no matter their strength, because the two of them could feel the presence of other magical cores.

Being aware of her own core and how it was detectable by others meant that she could learn how to Mask it; this made her seem like a Muggle and dropped her straight off the radar of many witches and wizards. After that, her magic obliged her wandlessly and wordlessly; without a particular spell she was rendered invisible, soundless, and without smell.[8]

The wandless component, she suspected, was why most people couldn't Mask themselves effectively or at least didn't learn it until later years; wandless magic was not a terribly frequent ability, and it almost always manifested in those of larger-than-average power. Although it was theoretically possible to Disillusion oneself, cast a Silencing Charm, and work out a charm that removed one's smell, most apparently couldn't be bothered to go to that much trouble—and it wouldn't be totally effective without a Masked core anyway.

Masked, it was easy for Hermione to make her way to one of the secret exits from the castle. These heavily warded exits were in the dungeons; Salazar had apparently not been one for having his movements tracked through the main doors. Between her own abilities and Fawkes's assistance, she had been able to make periodic use of these exits without anyone being the wiser. Not tripping any of the wards on the grounds was comparatively easy, and then she sneaked all the way across the lawn and made it into the Forest.

Walking for several minutes, she was soon well within its boundaries and out of sight of spying eyes. She unMasked herself and didn't have long to wait. A flicker of white and Castina was before Hermione, white so bright it almost hurt human eyes. The Gryffindor had taken to thinking of this colour as real white with the regular colour relegated to some form of grey.

Castina , I've missed you.

The mare approached Hermione and nuzzled the girl's chin softly. Hermione threw her arms around as much of the neck as she could reach and pressed her face into the amazingly soft coat. Every time she touched it, she found that the reality vastly exceeded her memory of the silky texture.

Berit, the mare returned, using the name that she and the rest of the herd always used for Hermione. It is a pleasure to see you again. Run with me?

Hermione nodded in answer and moved away so that she had adequate space. The moment she had transformed, Castina took off like a shot, and with a joyful whinny, Hermione followed, the ground eaten up by her four golden hooves.

The first time she had felt summoned to the Forest, she had been concerned. It had been the beginning of sixth year, and she'd never felt anything like this pull, this need to go to the Forest. It hadn't seemed like any spell she knew, and her instincts had told her that there was no danger, but that in itself had seemed worrisome at the time; surely a sudden strange, strong impulse to go into the Forbidden Forest was not a good thing.

She had resisted for days before it occurred to her to ask Fawkes. He had laughed.

It's about time. Go on, love; there's nothing for you to fear there.

With the phoenix on the side of her instincts, she had listened to them and found herself drawn past sight of the open air into the Forest. The wait was long enough that she had just begun to forget Fawkes's reassuring words and seriously wonder if she wasn't out here waiting to be eaten by something big and scary when all her worries were laid to rest by the appearance of the most beautiful, most majestic, and largest unicorn she had ever seen.

She had discovered that Castina, like Fawkes, was capable of MindSpeech and happy to use it with Hermione.

Hello, little one. The tone was laced with warmth and humour. I wondered how long you would resist my call. It is wise to be cautious, but you have nothing to fear from me.

I know, she answered, because she did know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, though she had no idea why she knew. Why did you call me?

It was time for you to enter the Forest. You must meet our herd. Come.

And Hermione had gone, climbing onto the back of the gracefully kneeling mare without hesitation or thought to when she would return to the castle. At the time, back in sixth year, she had only understood that the mare had known she was a virgin and had deemed her worthy to join them. Now she realized that Castina had understood Hermione's nature better than she herself had, and she had been keeping her eye on the current Pure Adult at Hogwarts.

In those initial visits, Castina had given Hermione numerous assurances that she was more than happy to answer any and all questions the Gryffindor might have, and Hermione had finally taken the mare at her word and asked questions to her heart's content.

Castina, she had learnt, was the herd mare for the unicorns who dwelled in the Forbidden Forest. They obeyed her and were protected by her in turn. She and her herd guarded the Forest, although it was to their own specifications rather than those of humans. Humans, after all, did not live in the Forest, so while Harry and Ron might argue that Acromantula had no place there, the unicorns saw it differently. Those creatures had their area of the Forest and rarely ventured from it; they and the unicorns lived peaceably, as the unicorns did with several other species which might not get along so well with humans.

With Castina as her guide, Hermione was reintroduced to the centaurs under much more pleasant circumstances than the first time. Being two of the most sentient and good—or at least neutral—presences in the Forest, as well as both somewhat equine, unicorns and centaurs got on rather well.

They didn't converse a great deal, as centaurs tended to be rather laconic, but they were civil and would render aid if it was requested. Hermione had even got what came close to an apology from Magorian and the centaurs who had attacked her and Harry in fifth year when she led Umbridge to them; they had not realized when she asked for help that she was herd.

The centaur's exact meaning had not become clear to her until later in sixth year, when Harry's core group of DA members had tried to become Animagi. They—she—had been researching the possibility in earnest since the summer after fifth year, after Ron had offhandedly noted how useful it could have been in the battle for Neville, say, once his nose was broken, to be able to transform into an animal form that would have allowed him to continue to fight effectively.

In September, she had told Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna what to read, and over the term, whenever they could cobble together the time, they had studied the theory, learnt the necessary meditation techniques, and practiced the necessary spells until they had mastered the wand movement and intonation.

It was after Christmas that she thought they could actually begin the transformation process. Ginny and Luna had O.W.L.s looming, Ron was obsessing over the coming Quidditch season, and it seemed that if they didn't start then, they'd have to put it off indefinitely.

To Hermione's surprise and chagrin, the moment they had first sat down to meditate to find their animal, she had known that she wasn't to try. She had recently learned to listen to her instincts, so she had obeyed, although the appearance of failure in front of her peers had been extraordinarily galling.

It had only been out in the Forest with Castina afterwards that she had finally connected all the dots: she was herd. Her Animagus form was a unicorn, and all hell would have broken loose if she'd transformed in the presence of a group of witches and wizards. She had known at the time that transformation into magical forms was extremely rare, and now she suspected she knew why. Pure Adults, apparently, had the necessary magical power—and perhaps purity—to accomplish it. She couldn't say with absolute certainty that no one else could manage it, but that would be her guess.

This hypothesis, she now realized, would also give an adequate explanation as to why she had not been the only one unable to get a hint of an animal form. As far as she had observed, Harry had followed the procedure exactly. He had been one of the most magically powerful people in the room, but he had made no progress. Now, though, she could see that he would have been blocked while he was in a liminal state.

He could be a Pure Adult, but until he actually turned seventeen, the status was not definite. This suggested that it was only non-virgins or Pure Adults who were able to become Animagi, and she supposed that both her and Harry's forms would have been non-magical had they had sex before their seventeenth birthdays. At some point this year, she would have to make sure she convinced him to try again.

Harry had been at least as embarrassed as she by the failure, her agony over inadequate scholastic achievement matched by his torture over his inability to achieve the transformation his father had managed in fifth year. She and Harry had become closer as a result, bonding in adversity—or perhaps it had been misery—while the other four trained and explored in their new forms.

The others had all managed to transform despite their hectic school schedules, extracurricular activities, and social lives. Hermione had had to bite her tongue from the moment Ron had finally succeeded in order to prevent some of the comments she wanted to let fly when the redheaded idiot attempted to comfort her. He was a good friend, but his ability to perform a piece of magic that she couldn't had gone straight to his head, and the condescension had made her want to rip his head off.

It had helped a little—a very little, in those moments—that he was the last to achieve the transformation and that he was the same yappy little terrier his Patronus was. It wasn't exactly the proud and impressive animal he'd wanted, although it did blend in well.

Neville's form had taken them all by surprise, as had the fact that he had achieved the transformation first, managing it at the end of February. But he had had neither Quidditch nor O.W.L.s to worry about, and getting his own wand after the battle of the Department of Mysteries had only increased his abilities. The Gryffindor boy's form was useless for stealth, but being a giant brown bear certainly put him in a position to protect his friends. It was because of him that Luna and Ron had little to fear on the occasions when they roamed the grounds; few predators would come into the open to go after a little hare or a tiny terrier when they were strolling along with a ruddy huge bear.

Luna had been the one to achieve the transformation in the middle of March. Like Ron, Luna's transformation had taken the same form as her Patronus, the dreamy girl somehow translating into the energetic hare; it seemed somewhat incongruous, but she explored as though she were now certain she would find all those amazing creatures that she firmly believed in but hadn't seen in human form. When they had first started exploring the possibility of becoming Animagi, it had been a running joke that they would all learn the error of their ways when she turned into a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

Surprising no one, Ginny's form had been avian. The brown Gyrefalcon could not blend in quite as ably as a barn owl would in their school setting, but the falcon who took to the skies on April Fool's Day did not look out of place. The other Animagi had made her promise to restrict her flight range to the wards of Hogwarts knowing how tempting it would be for her to stretch her wings a little more thoroughly than that. Despite her desire to fly free, Ginny knew that would be an unacceptable risk; they had all been injured in the Department of Mysteries, and there was no doubt in any of their minds what the snake-faced maniac would do if he got his hands on any of them now.

Given the political climate, the Animagi were not often able to sneak out for long, but they would manage it every once in a while. Otherwise, they spent their time in the Room of Requirement. Hermione's cautions that wandering outside was dangerous because they could be caught by someone who intended to do them harm or someone who would turn them in for being unregistered had been frequently dismissed as jealousy that she could not join them.

She was primarily concerned for their safety, although she did feel mildly hypocritical; whenever it had become too much, when she had been tempted to march into the Great Hall and transform just so that she could wipe the smirk right off Ron's face, she had escaped out into the Forest to change into her own Animagus form and explore.

In her defence, however, very few beasts even in the depths of the Forest would attack unicorns without provocation; their horns were deadly, and their hooves could be fierce weapons as well. Since unicorns only attacked when provoked, this basically left Hermione free to roam the Forest at will.

Plus, she was herd now, so if ever she did get into trouble that she couldn't get herself out of, she could call for help, and whatever threat she was up against would soon be facing more than three-dozen horned, magical opponents ready to defend their herd member. Neville, Ron, Luna, and Ginny could hardly make a similar claim.

Generally at these times, Castina or another herd member would join her, amused to see her galloping as though a pack of rabid, mutated uber-werewolves was at her tail. She would work off her frustrations in this manner and be able to return to the castle feeling stable and at peace with herself.

Since she had first successfully made her transformation under Castina's guidance, she had learnt that not only did she need to transform periodically but aspects of her animal self bled back to her human one. This did not occur in non-magical transformations; Minerva would never hunt for mice while in human form. As far as Hermione had read up and discovered from the other Animagi of her acquaintance, while many of them transformed from time to time to relax without any real purpose, they never felt as though they had to transform.

Dating from her first transformation in February of sixth year—and she really wanted to be able to tell the others that she'd been the one to transform first, petty as the desire was—she had discovered that, back in her human form, she could both eat less and sleep less with no deleterious effects.

Only four or so hours a night would keep her just as functional as eight had in the past, and if she forgot to eat for hours upon hours when she got lost in her research, no harm was done. This was a fact which she took full advantage of, but it came at the cost of periodically recharging in unicorn form. Since Hermione wanted to visit Castina and her herd anyway, this was not a hardship.

Unicorns did not eat in the traditional sense of the word but absorbed sunlight, moonlight, and starlight to sustain themselves; imprisoning them where they didn't have access to any of these sources would kill them eventually. They drank water that they purified first by dipping their horns in it, thus giving rise to the belief amongst wizards—and some Muggles—that a unicorn horn offered protection from poison; unfortunately for such believers, its ability to purify in such a manner ceased when it was shed, which happened once every decade or so for adult unicorns.

Throughout the summer, while Hermione had been away from Hogwarts and stuck fairly effectively at Grimmauld Place, she had tried—with limited success—to sleep and eat more like a regular person. This had not prevented her need to periodically transform and feed as a unicorn did. She hadn't been willing to risk going back to the Forbidden Forest at a time when it would be awkward to explain her presence. She couldn't Apparate straight into the Forest itself, which would have been ideal, because it was a natural dead zone; it was impossible to Apparate, Portkey, Floo, or fly a broom anywhere in the Forest. It was one of the reasons for the castle's location, as this feature protected the school from easy attack from that direction.

Unfortunately, it made it impossible for people with innocent intentions to get there as well, so Hermione had settled for Apparating to remote locations with no significance to her, Masking herself as a horse as Castina had taught her—a process that was very similar to Masking her core to become undetectable as a human—and basking for a little while.

It was a great relief, however, to be back in the Forest and the domain of her herd. Castina took her for a looping run around the perimeter of the Forest, allowing Hermione to really stretch her legs in a way she had not done in what felt like forever.

She enjoyed herself so thoroughly, in fact, that she lost track of the time entirely, and it was only the nudging of her internal alarm clock which made her realize that it was nearly seven o'clock in the morning. She bid a hurried farewell to Castina, promised to come out to see the rest of the herd soon, and set off at a mad gallop for the castle. She didn't even see the trees go by. Just before the edge of the Forest, she transformed back into human form and then set off at a jog for the main doors. Leaving through a secret door and entering through the main one was a sloppiness which she normally tried to avoid, but she didn't like to use the secret doors this late.

She slipped through the main entrance just as the clock in the Hall began to chime the hour.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?"

Letting her breath out slowly, she released the grasp she had on her wand. They were the only two in sight, but she wasn't going to take any chances given the mood he was evidently already in.

"Professor Snape," she greeted the man who was glaring down at her from his impressive height. "Good morning."

"Where have you been off to so early in the morning?" he inquired silkily, never a good sign.

"I was going for a run, Professor." One hundred percent truthful, if a bit misleading.

"Before seven o'clock in the morning on a Sunday," he said flatly.

"Yes, sir," she confirmed calmly, trying really hard not to even think the "obviously" that was floating around in her mind somewhere.

"You will come down to my office and explain this to me more thoroughly," he ordered brusquely.

"Yes, sir," she agreed, hoping that he was just saying that to get her legitimately down to the dungeons with him but suspecting that was not the case.

Down to the dungeons they went and straight to Severus's office.

"Sit."

She sat.

"Get that infernal elf to inform Mister Potter as to our whereabouts."

Hermione did so.

"Explain to me where you were."

The discussion stalled.

Severus had made the tactical error of seating himself behind his desk and adopting an entirely Snape-ish expression to go with the forbidding arm-crossed, black-clad chest. There had been a very small chance that she would have told Severus at least an edited version of what she had been doing; Professor Snape, on the other hand, didn't have a chance in hell of intimidating it out of her. When the glaring approached supernova levels, she spoke.

"I was out running, Professor, as I believe I mentioned." Her tone was practically docile, but she knew that he knew that she meant it as anything but.

"And just where were you running, Miss Granger?"

"On the Hogwarts grounds, sir." For a small portion of the time, anyway.

"For what reason?"

"It benefits my health, sir."

She heard the loud exhalation of air through his nose and didn't think her careful answers were pleasing him very much.

"Hermione, what is it you're not telling me?" This was asked in a much more reasonable tone.

Points for effort on that one, but she wasn't willing to risk it.

"More things than could possibly be discussed in the next month of Sundays, Severus," she responded gently. "The Head Girl is allowed to be anywhere within the Hogwarts environs at any time."

"Within reason," he corrected sternly. "You should know better than to be outside on your own at imprudent hours."

"I was not at any unusual risk, I assure you."

"A Gryffindor's sense of risk does not reassure me in the smallest measure," he responded waspishly. "I could go to the headmaster."

"And I could not stop you," she agreed. Nor would either of them stop her, and she trusted she didn't have to say so.

"I do not wish to catch you out of doors at this hour again. "

That was hearteningly ambiguous.

"Understood, sir." She tried to appear properly chastised.

He rose, dark eyes making clear that he wasn't going to forget this. "Come. We have a training session which you are late for."

She followed, wondering bemusedly how she could be the only one late for the meeting they were both supposed to be attending.

She and Harry continued with their extracurricular Veritaserum usage. They'd tried increasing by a half drop after only three days, but that had led to an inadvertent confession on Harry's part about how much he couldn't stand her at the beginning of first year. From the stricken look on his face, it had been perfectly clear that this was the truth and equally clear that he hadn't meant to confess it.

They were still well under the adult dosage limit, but the relaxed atmosphere between friends made it a very different venue from an interrogation, and the Veritaserum only relaxed them further.

Harry had been horrified.

"I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to say that!" he explained too loudly, looking panic-stricken.

"It's all right," she said softly, glad that she was still managing to lie because it had actually stung a little. "I did come on a little strong, and that was a long time ago."

He shook his head mutinously. "You were thrown into a magical setting with little preparation. It's only natural you wanted to prove yourself."

"So were you," she observed.

He waved this aside. "I was automatically accepted no matter what my upbringing."

"So was Dean, then."

"But he didn't have Lavender and Parvati as roommates." Hermione wasn't quite clear how this connected, but Harry thankfully continued, "He became fast friends with Seamus and was able to connect to the wizarding world that way, same as me and Ron. You were isolated from your roommates, and the rest of us shut you out as well. You had to adapt with the methods that were open to you."

He was being very earnest, and she smiled.

"Besides," he continued, "you don't see Dean top of virtually every class, do you? You got everything sorted so that you could excel."

"Thank you, Harry," she said sincerely.

He beamed at her. "And you know I love you now, right? You're my best friend."

Okay, she was definitely recalculating their dosage schedule. She'd never heard him declare his love for anyone. She'd use his numbers and make sure she found a scale that worked for both of them.

"I love you, too," she answered, since he deserved honesty in this.

They hugged, and he grinned goofily at her, so she sent him off to bed.

Inspired by Harry's reaction, she realized that they would both need to make sure they could react as though they were under the influence if they were ever interrogated by hostile forces. They therefore took turns spending an evening under a full dose and subsequently practiced speaking flatly and without a hint of embarrassment no matter what the question was and addressing remarks directly to whoever was interrogating them.

It took her another couple of days to work out the new dosage, but she finally calculated that they should minimize adverse reactions if they had a dose every eight hours starting at eight in the morning, held the same dosage for five days, and then increased the dosage by quarter drop increments. The increase would always be done at midnight when they were back in their quarters and unlikely to be disturbed in case either of them had another untoward reaction.

This made for a much smoother transition at midnight on the fourteenth when they went up to half a drop; Harry was able to assure her that Quirrell was his favourite DADA professor and that he wished the man could have taught them every year. They could both still lie with ease and behave normally, although Hermione noticed that Harry continued to be more physically affectionate, which pleased her to no end. If she could in some small measure erase the effects of his time at the Dursleys, she would happily do so.

A few hours later, after she'd seen Harry to bed and slept for a few hours herself, she was finally able to get out to the Forest to see her whole herd. She'd barely made it into the Forest before Castina informed her with a great deal of amusement that Isaura, so excited to see Hermione that she simply couldn't wait a moment longer, had been given permission to meet Hermione halfway towards the unicorn's valley.

Hermione knew that the other unicorns would be keeping a close eye on their youngest member, and as Hermione headed deeper into the Forest, she thought of the first time that she had met the young unicorn.

In the early days when she had met the herd but not yet achieved her Animagus form, it was almost always Castina who arrived to teach and guide her. Hermione was able to converse with the entire herd, however; she did not find it difficult to employ MindSpeech face-to-face, but it generally took strong familiarity before she could use it over larger distances.

She was somewhat surprised, therefore, when she found herself rushing out of the castle in the middle of the night at the end of November in sixth year in answer to a call for help from a mind that she did not immediately recognize. It was definitely herd, though, and the overwhelming impression she got was one of terror too incoherent for actual words. The Gryffindor was propelled into action without further thought, letting her heightened senses guide her.

What she had found in a portion of the Forest where she had never been was a tiny foal being strangled by Devil's Snare, so covered in the weaving strands that Hermione almost couldn't make out the gold of coat or hoof. Unicorns didn't grow horns until they were at least four, and this little one was not yet two, so she had no way to defend herself. How she'd gotten so far from the herd, whose members assiduously protected their young, Hermione had no idea.

Hold still, little one , Hermione instructed. I'll get you out of there.

The foal continued to thrash, only tightening her bonds.

Hey! Hermione exclaimed loudly, startling her into paying attention. Look right at me. Don't move, and I will rescue you.

Golden eyes that showed scared whites around the edges latched onto Hermione's brown ones, and the frantic body finally stilled, ensuring that Hermione could get off a clean shot without risking further injury to the unicorn.

Her bluebell flame was just as effective against this Devil's Snare as the one that had been guarding the Philosopher's Stone, and Hermione was fleetingly pleased that she hadn't had so much as a passing thought about wood or matches when coming up with a solution this time around.

Then the little quadruped was in Hermione's arms, trembling like a leaf, and the Gryffindor was holding her tightly and reassuring her that she was all right. There were weals leaking trails of silver all across the little body from where she had writhed so strongly to get out of the vine's grasp that it had cut into her skin. Hermione stroked the unmarred bits of gold that she could see.

It was perhaps thirty seconds later that something giant crashed through the underbrush nearby, and Hermione pulled her wand with alarm, not entirely certain of her ability to immediately defend them against a big predator when she had an injured baby unicorn in her arms.

To her surprise, what appeared through the brush a moment later was a unicorn. She had never heard one be so noisy, for they were normally light on their feet, rarely disturbing the foliage around them or leaving any trace that they had passed by, making them almost impossible to track. She had also never seen one so incensed.

It took Hermione a moment to even recognize that it was Castina who was standing before them, and she could have sworn that the unicorn was at least twice her normal height and looked freaking scary.

The MindSpeech that passed between Castina and Isaura was too rapid for Hermione to follow, blurred impressions and images that she couldn't make sense of. Abruptly, Castina's entire demeanour changed, and only in its absence did Hermione realize that it had been attack mode. Looking down at herself, it belatedly dawned on her how it must have looked to the mare when she'd found Hermione tightly holding the foal and covered in silvery blood.

My apologies, Castina said formally, making no attempt to deny what had happened.

Hermione shook her head. None are needed. It was not the best of first impressions, but you listened to this little one's explanation. Hermione brushed her fingers through the silvery mane and received an affectionate head-butt in return.

You saved her life.

As you would have done were it me in need of aid, Hermione responded.

The Debt stands.

This was said with finality, and the Gryffindor knew better than to argue, so she changed the subject slightly instead.

You were far away, I take it, when she called for help?

Near the outer limits of the Forest to the east, yes, with most of the herd. We were driving away Dementors that thought to make our Forest their home. Isaura was supposed to stay with those who remained in the valley. There was deep affection and exasperation evident in her voice. But she snuck away. And learnt her lesson, I trust?

Isaura made a face, both physically and mentally, but made a fairly good showing of sounding suitably chastised, Yes, momma.

Ah. Hermione knew that Castina protected her herd with her life but could see why it would be especially personal in this case.

I hope you now know what Devil's Snare is and not to play with it, Hermione added.

This head-butt was one of annoyance. Yes, Berit.

You are not to wander the Forest alone for any reason, her mother instructed sternly.

I understand! Isaura insisted. I'm very, very sorry and it was very, very scary, and I'll be better now, I promise.

The mare softened, whickering lightly and brushing her head against her foal's. They made sure that Isaura could stand on her own four feet, and Hermione saw that her injuries were already beginning to fade, the unicorn's superior healing power already at work.

You would do well to clean yourself, Berit, Castina advised gently.

Right. Hard to explain why she was covered in unicorn blood to everyone back at the castle, and it would be really unfortunate to inadvertently ingest some. She cast the strongest Scourgify she could and was deeply relieved to see all the silvery liquid disappear.

A week later, Castina had formally requested Hermione's presence in the Forest, and Hermione learnt one more fact that was not recorded in any books she knew of: it was only unicorn blood that was taken by force which was cursed. Unicorns could freely offer their blood, although they did so extremely rarely, and this substance gave the gift of life with none of the drawbacks.

Since that day, Hermione had carried an invisible and magically shrunk vial on a necklace around her neck, waiting for the emergency that would warrant the use of such a treasure.

Once she had achieved her Animagus transformation, Castina had warned Hermione that her blood, even in unicorn form, would not work quite like theirs. In her veins, especially when she was transformed, it assisted her own accelerated healing. Spilt, however, although it might retain its silver colour, it had no more potency than the human blood from which it had been derived. She could therefore be a source of blood for neither Severus nor Voldemort, and although she wished she could volunteer it for the former, she was pleased as punch not to be at risk of having it taken by force by the latter.

Isaura arrived in the flesh now, coat turned as white as her mother's. She had not yet learnt any of the sedateness that came with the age of the other herd members, and she gambolled around Hermione with bright flashes of her golden hooves.

She wanted to tell Hermione all about the many things she had done and seen since the two had last encountered one another, and Hermione listened avidly as they passed deeper into the Forest until they arrived at the unicorn's valley. This was where the unicorns dwelled most frequently.

The valley was far outside the Hogwarts boundaries, which encompassed only a small portion of the Forest. While a couple unicorns were often near the western edge of the Forest in order to keep an eye on the castle, they retreated to their own land when they could. They were not in any way under the headmaster's control; depending on the herd leader and the headmaster at any given time, there would be more or less interaction between these magical beings and the wizards who dwelled in the castle.

The tree cover within the valley itself was sparse, allowing the unicorns a clear view of the sky, and a crystal-clear stream meandered through the grass to provide them with water. Like the centaurs, unicorns didn't view the passing of time the way humans did, and they could easily while away the time contemplating the beauty around them, in quiet mental discussion—for all their long history was passed down orally—or in movement throughout the Forest they loved.

Hermione joyfully greeted everyone, watching indulgently with Castina as Isaura galloped over to her father, Ashwin, to tell him all about meeting up with Hermione, as though he did not know very well what she had just been doing in the few minutes of her absence.

This afforded Hermione the opportunity to greet Castina properly and move around to converse with a number of the other unicorns before Isaura was back and desirous of being played with. Since Hermione was the next-youngest herd member by a considerable number of years, she found herself engaging in a very silly two-unicorn game of hide and seek while still trying to carry on several mental conversations.

It made all the unicorns smile indulgent mental smiles, and by the time Hermione headed back to the castle, she was feeling quite relaxed and rather pleased with life.

She was in the common room with her school books by shortly after six in the morning, Harry emerging in his red with gold Snitches pyjamas at a quarter to seven. Last night made the ninth or tenth time that she'd removed the Silencing Charm he'd put up when he went to bed.

"Do you never sleep?" he demanded, coming to perch on the arm of the couch.

"Of course I do," she said, still looking at her parchment as she tried to finish the sentence she was composing on the problems of imprecise nomenclature when it came to advanced Charms work.

"Do you lurk outside my room just waiting for me to nod off, then?" he asked, sounding a cross between amused and annoyed.

She looked up at that, laughing as she shook her head in the negative. "I just don't sleep as much as you do, so I'm often up later and awake earlier. I've got a lot of homework, you know."

"And you're going to keep disabling my charms all year?"

"You could stop putting them up," she proposed as though it were a new and novel concept.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Or I could work out how to do that warding thing with the name runes and keep you out."

"And then I could work out how to get round that." It would be an interesting challenge, actually.

"Why are you being so difficult about this?" he asked agitatedly, running a hand through his hair in that nervous gesture he had.

"Because you're being so difficult about it," she answered gently. "Because I want to know when you're in distress. Because I will never be bothered if I wake up because your sleep is disrupted at night."

"Never?" He latched onto this. "What if it's the night before your Transfiguration and Potions N.E.W.T.s?"

She shook her head and declared with absolute conviction, "Not even then."

He let out a short exhalation of breath and spoke almost too low for her to hear: "It's not … not always Voldemort. Sometimes it's just nightmares."

She made a soft noise of chiding with her tongue. "Oh, Harry, they're not just nightmares. That's the only nightly disturbance most people have got, and they don't have to go through it alone: neither should you."

He still looked doubtful.

She continued, "So you want me to put up a Silencing Charm for when I have nightmares? So that if I wake up screaming and can't get back to sleep for hours because I'm scared to close my eyes, you won't be bothered by me?"

The transformation was instantaneous, a light of righteous indignation kindling in his eyes as he exclaimed, "Of course not! 'Mione, you'll do no such thing—it's not a bother if you're upset."

She just stared at him until the Knut dropped. He flushed.

"Okay, I walked right into that one. So you're … you're not having nightmares?"

"Those particular ones date to the summer after fifth year," she admitted with some reluctance, finally giving in with a shrug. "Mostly that first month when I was on my own a lot. I put up Silencing Charms and didn't get a lot of sleep."

Since that had dated to before her first Animagus transformation, she had still been in need of the regular human allotment of sleep. Fawkes had been able to help sometimes, soothing her from a distance or just sitting in her mind so she didn't feel so alone, but much of that time had still been miserable.

Harry's distress was plain to see on his face. "You shouldn't have had to go through that on your own."

"Nor should you," she said, pushing her point home.

He had an awful set of double standards when it came to what he could suffer in silence while his friends shouldn't, but he was usually pretty good about correcting when it was brought directly to his attention like this.

"But you'll put a charm up if it ever starts to bother you?" he asked anxiously.

It didn't surprise her that that detail was his real trouble. She wondered if Severus would let her borrow an untraceable poison to take care of the Dursleys. No child should ever be made to feel worthless and a nuisance, and these instances of Harry's low self-esteem made her blood boil.

There was no way he'd ever bother her, but she reassured him anyway. "Of course."

"No Silencing Charm on your room, either," he added.

"Agreed."

He smiled suddenly, gratitude evident. She wished that genuine happiness was an emotion she saw more frequently on his face.

"Do you think it's breakfast time?"

Since a Tempus would have told him, she took this to be his version of "Thank you, but I'm embarrassed so could we change the subject now, please". His acquiescence this early in the year had already impressed her, as she'd had visions of playing this game until Christmas, so she let him off the hook.

"I'm sure it is."

On Tuesday, Albus wanted a progress report on their search for the Pure Adults, and Hermione, Harry, and Ron found themselves in his office nursing cups of tea which Harry and Hermione had neutralized of their ever-present Calming Draughts.

"Honestly, sir," Hermione said, "we've been in school for barely two weeks, and the first week was a complete wash as far as noticing anything outside of classes is concerned. We're doing the best we can, but it's a little early to be demanding to know our year-mates' sex lives."

Albus's bright blue eyes were assessing. "You do realize the severity of the situation, I trust?"

"Of course she does. We all do, sir," Harry cut in for her. "But if we sound as though we're harping on about this so early and so insistently, they'll figure out something is wrong."

"You might make inquiries as to their summer occupations," the headmaster suggested mildly.

"And we have," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "If I have to hear one more story about the triplets Seamus supposedly hooked up with in Liverpool, I'll toss myself off the Astronomy Tower."

"The people most likely to volunteer that sort of information are the people we least need it from," Hermione clarified. "We know all about Seamus and Lavender and Parvati and Dean, and they're not what we're looking for."

"I notice you don't mention Mr Longbottom," Albus observed.

"We're looking into him," Hermione answered coolly. "Not everyone likes to kiss and tell."

Albus took her chastisement in a stride. "Are there others you can cross off the list of possibilities?"

"With relatively high certainty: Padma and Jacob. Terry and Justin. And there's a strong rumour about Ernie and Susan."

She was actually positive about Terry and Justin, but saying so would bring up an evening of Prefect rounds last February that she was still trying to forget. Honestly, if anyone was going to shag in the Prefects' bath, it behoved them to ensure they had closed the door, warded it, and cast the appropriate Silencing Charms.

"We haven't exactly worked out a way to, er, infiltrate the Slytherin ranks," Ron pointed out with discomfort.

"We'll keep investigating," Harry promised. "But we can't push too hard."

Unless he wanted to administer the Veritaserum himself, Albus had no choice but to accept that, and he let them go after admonishing them to continue to do their best.

On Monday, the twenty-ninth of September, they learned beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were not the only ones who were attempting to get answers. Hermione and Harry knew from their Map-linked bracelets that Scrimgeour had come to visit Albus the night before, but it was only as they sat down to breakfast this morning that they knew why and understood that the Head of Magical Law Enforcement had wisely waited until the last minute to ensure that there was nothing Albus could do. Splashed across the front page of the Prophet was the startling news:

Ministry Uncovers Plot to Poison Children!

By Special Correspondent Rita Skeeter

In an official press release today, Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has revealed the details of a heinous plot perpetrated by He Who Must Not Be Named. Not content with the terror of his night-time attacks on innocent wizarding and Muggle folk in their homes, he has gone so far as to threaten the future of our society: he has attacked our children.

Ron, reading over Hermione's shoulder, demanded disparagingly, "And this would be different from other years how?"

"I'm a special case," Harry said cynically.

Fast-acting Ministry officials were able to take decisive action, discovering and removing a large quantity of spiked pumpkin juice that was to be served throughout the voyage on the Hogwarts Express on first September. The unnamed poison that laced the juice was both slow-acting and lethal.

"And unless they labelled the pumpkin juice 'For supporters of the Light', that was singularly stupid," Ron noted.

"Hmm," Hermione agreed. "He could probably have got the news to all the Slytherins not to drink it, but pure-bloods in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff would have been in trouble. Amazing we didn't notice this miraculous rescue. "

Harry laughed outright. "Yeah, amazing."

Although Ministry officials are quite certain that no possible contaminants reached your children, they understand a parent's need to ensure that their offspring are safe and unharmed, especially in these troubled times. The Ministry has therefore graciously offered to fund a screening for all current Hogwarts children. This straightforward and painless test will quickly determine that your children remain in perfect health.

For details on the testing, turn to page 7.

For details on what else the Ministry is doing against You Know Who, turn to page 11.

For details on how you can keep yourself and your family protected, turn to page 13.

For details on M.L.E. Head Scrimgeour's career, turn to page 15.

A quick look at page seven told Hermione and Harry exactly what they expected: all that was required of each Hogwarts student for this test was a small vial of blood.

Chapter Six: The Response

It was clear that other students had received and read their newspapers, for there was a marked increase in the noise level in the Hall, both the rustling of many sheets of paper as the Prophet was passed round and of human voices as the students discussed this latest attempt by Voldemort to harm them.

Those younger students who had drunk the pumpkin juice on the train were looking a little green around the edges as they worried that perhaps the Ministry was exaggerating the case when they claimed that there was no chance they'd been exposed.

Hermione tried not to roll her eyes as she saw Scrimgeour's plan succeeding. He'd said the poison was slow-acting, after all, and she wouldn't be surprised if students convinced themselves that they had mysterious symptoms by the end of the day. They'd be only too happy to get screened.

She and Harry shared a brief glance, and she knew that he was as happy as she that she'd chosen sooner rather than later to work out the details of the Glamour for their blood. She'd used Arithmancy and a bit of trial and error to calculate what changed within their blood chemistry and magic to indicate that they weren't virgins, and then she'd created a spell to mimic that effect. She'd had to personalise it for herself and for Harry, then cast it over each of them and tie it in with her name rune so that no one but she could easily terminate it. It was a low-level Glamour, making no visible changes and only tweaking something most people gave no thought to; it was subtle enough that it was unlikely to be detected, the slight magic of the spell mixing with the inherent magic in magical people's blood.

The two of them had tested their blood with the illegal charm and both come up as non-virgins, so it seemed to be working just as it ought, suggesting that they'd be fine if they allowed themselves to be tested today. They were Gryffindors, however, and could be quite as stubborn as popular opinion would have them; neither of them had the slightest intention of volunteering their blood for any purpose of the Ministry's.

Five hours later, their class was escorted out of Charms and into the Infirmary because the testing had made it round to them. Hermione was the first to stall the line with a flat-out refusal to give blood.

"I don't need a screening done, Madam Pomfrey," she explained easily. "I didn't drink any pumpkin juice on the train."

Not true, as it happened, but she had tested her drink before she drank it, just as she tested everything before she ingested it, and surprise, surprise, no made-up poisons had been present.

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger, my instructions are to get a vial of blood from everyone," Poppy explained with what seemed forced patience. If she'd been doing this all day, Hermione sympathized.

"I don't see why the Ministry would want to waste taxpayers' Galleons in that manner," Hermione replied with seeming earnestness. "As I'm legally an adult and have no parents anxiously awaiting the results, no one could possibly benefit from the wasted effort."

Except exploitative heads of M.L.E., but best not to mention that.

Poppy frowned before conceding with reluctance, "You'll have to take it up with the headmaster. Mr Weasley, you're next."

"I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey, but my family has a mediwizard who does any blood testing for the lot of us."

Poppy huffed indignantly, and it took Hermione a moment to realize who this mediwizard must be. She forced a smile off her lips and thought she saw the hints of an answering one on Poppy's face.

"If you're determined to be difficult, Mr Weasley. Mr Potter, then," she said impatiently.

Harry looked at her for a long moment and then stated very flatly and clearly, "The last time someone took blood from me, it was used to resurrect Voldemort."

The mediwitch gave up.

They were, as it turned out, not the only ones to refuse. By the upper years at Hogwarts, everyone knew the sorts of nasty things that could be done with a vial of blood. Yes, the vast majority of it qualified as Blood Magic and was illegal, but since everyone knew of a long list of people to whom that would not matter, they let blood out of their sight with extreme reluctance. Not one of the sixth- or seventh-year Slytherins agreed to put their blood under Ministry control. It went about half and half for the Ravenclaws (who apparently didn't read enough esoteric and illegal books to know what they were getting themselves into) and the Hufflepuffs (who might have a larger-than-average faith in the Ministry or who might have felt they were stuck between a rock and a hard place because Susan Bones's aunt was the Minister for Magic). The Gryffindors all followed the trio's lead.

Albus had to make an announcement at dinner.

"It has been brought to my attention that not all of our students chose to participate in the Ministry's screening process today. Allow me to remind you all that death by poisoning can be a very gruesome way to die."

"Blood Magic is worse," Harry leaned over to whisper in her ear, and she nodded.

The headmaster continued, "The Head of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Scrimgeour, wishes me to encourage you to reassure your parents. He has assured me that the Ministry only has your best interests at heart."

Neither Ron nor Harry dignified this with more than a snort.

She noticed that the headmaster wasn't making much of an effort; had he put his support behind the plan, he would likely have been able to sway many of the students, but it seemed that he didn't think that the Ministry should get an answer to the question of who the Pure Adults were, either.

"Should any of you change your minds, the screening will be available until the end of the week."

Those who had refused earlier looked at him with polite incredulity.

That evening, they managed a rare few hours with Ron, Harry, and Hermione all in their common room; no one had training or practice, and she was willing to put off her homework for a little while.

"I'd give him points for sheer bollocks in going through with it," Ron declared later, shaking his head, "but even I know it's completely daft to blame You-Kn-Voldemort for a plot that you trumped up."

"If I were Voldemort, I'd certainly be wondering what was really going on," Harry agreed. "And Scrimgeour didn't even get the information he wanted."

She nodded. "It was definitely a miscalculation on his part. Given his position in the Ministry, the idea of a Dark plot of some kind does make the most logical sense, but he'd have done better to have chosen something we'd 'definitely' been exposed to, like a disease of some sort, so he'd have a good reason to force us all to be screened."

"Hard to explain why Poppy couldn't just check in the hospital wing, though," Harry pointed out. "She's more than qualified to handle any of the likely diseases. I guess esoteric poison gives them a leg to stand on for external testing."

"Wonder if they've asked the only Potions master in Britain for assistance in identifying this strange poison?" Hermione said, lips quirking up.

They all laughed at the idea of Scrimgeour asking Severus for help.

The problem with Scrimgeour dated back to last year when Voldemort had attacked Azkaban prison. Harry had collapsed screaming in the middle of Potions class, an event that had not occurred since the alarmingly similar occurrence in fifth year. Hermione had to wait until Severus had cleared everyone out of the room before she could get the pain-relieving potions down Harry's throat.

Once he could speak, he had informed them that Voldemort was at Azkaban but had cautioned them that the vision was very clear; he suspected that Voldemort wanted them to see it. They had speculated that the large number of prisoners would require a large number of Aurors rushing to the prison, leaving the Ministry relatively unprotected, and it was this piece of intelligence which they had brought to Albus.

It had nearly caused a coup in the Auror Department. Kingsley had listened to them and kept most of his forces in the building. Scrimgeour had overridden him and ordered the Aurors to Azkaban. This had left all of the Aurors caught between the Head of Magical Law Enforcement and the head of their division.

A combination of events saved them that day: Albus had had the foresight to send the non-Auror Order members who could fight to Azkaban, Voldemort had been distracted by Harry, Kingsley was quick-thinking and had sent Tonks to Minister Bones the moment he got the Patronus from Albus, and the delay caused by Scrimgeour and Kingsley had prevented the Aurors from leaving in the timely manner Voldemort had anticipated. Before anyone had to declare their loyalties in a potentially disastrous way, the Ministry was under attack, and there was no question of anyone leaving the building.

Tonks had received an Order of Merlin, first class, for her defence of the Minister. She had been in hospital for almost three months afterwards, but she had kept Amelia Bones alive and relatively unscathed until reinforcements had fought their way to her side. Voldemort, whether or not he had had visions of being Minister, had at least intended to decimate the Ministry ranks; killing the current Minister would have been a victory indeed. Tonks had kept that from happening, even when it meant going up against her very insane aunt.

The young Auror mightn't have been so lucky if she'd gone up against Voldemort directly, but for the second time, the man had Apparated into the Ministry and not found what he expected. Instead of cowering Ministry employees and mass confusion, he had found Albus, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and half the DA. They'd taken out the Death Eaters they'd found in the Atrium, and they all had their wands pointed directly at Voldemort, who decided rather quickly that this was not the fight he wanted, although he hadn't been able to resist a parting shot.

"We will meet again, Harry Potter," Voldemort had hissed, "for the last time."

"Then you just decide the day you want to die, and I'll see you then," Harry had replied calmly.

Voldemort had tried to bring the ceiling down on them as he Disapparated, but she and Albus had dissipated the spell and the rest of them had shielded, and suddenly it had been over.

The debacle had proven to have the fortunate side effect of making Voldemort less suspicious of Severus. It seemed that Bellatrix had suggested that it was the Potions master's awareness of Voldemort's previous plans that had impaired their success. When this plan, too, had failed, Severus's credibility had risen, especially when he pointed out that had he been aware of the Dark Lord's plan, he might have been able to incapacitate Harry when it became apparent that the boy was not going to rush everyone off to Azkaban as Voldemort wished. Uninformed as Severus was, he had been forced to assume that events were unfolding as the Dark Lord desired, and he had thus let Harry report to Albus undisturbed.

It had also helped that Bellatrix had fallen to her niece's wand. The craziest of the Black sisters was no longer there to cast doubt on Severus's allegiances, and although Voldemort was angry to lose her, he couldn't reasonably blame it on Severus; it was other Death Eaters who'd escaped from the debacle who had born the brunt of that punishment.

As for official repercussions, the Minister had let it come to a draw between Scrimgeour and Kingsley. Kingsley should have obeyed his immediate superior, but he had been proven right. Scrimgeour had been acting with the most accurate information he possessed—although Hermione thought he might have listened to Kingsley—but he had been proven wrong. The rest of the Aurors had been officially reminded of the chain of command, but no one had actually come out and told them that they ought to have obeyed Scrimgeour over Kingsley in this particular instance.

Scrimgeour was not considered to be in official disgrace—most people didn't even know what had happened—but the man had made it clear that he felt as though his authority had been questioned and his position weakened. To be fair to him, if it came down to the Aurors' choice between Scrimgeour and Kingsley for a second time, it was probably the latter who would be obeyed. Unfortunately, this was likely to make Scrimgeour dangerously determined about the Pure Adults, and that put her and Harry—and everyone else who got in the man's way—in danger.

There was not a single additional donation of blood over the week, but Harry and Hermione were pleased that it meant a week longer before Scrimgeour got definite negative results and decided to move on to a new plan. Most of the information would come from the younger students, making it totally useless for the head of M.L.E.'s actual purpose, and Kingsley had assured Albus that he would do his best to ensure that the vials were properly disposed of so that they didn't have to worry about the blood being otherwise misused.

Voldemort had grown ominously silent since the newspaper article. Along with regular nightmares, Harry had twice suffered visions which necessitated her climbing in bed with him to help calm him. Although he was properly Occluding his mind and Voldemort therefore couldn't get information out of Harry, the snake-faced prat was broadcasting what he was doing; when emotions were strong enough, Harry felt what was going on whether he wanted to or not. They hadn't yet come up with a way to effectively block these visions; the connection between Harry and Voldemort was unique, and traditional techniques simply didn't work.

Fortunately, as far as they could work out—as it wasn't something that Voldemort discussed the details of, even with his Death Eaters—in order to capitalize on this connection, Voldemort wasn't fully Occluding his mind, and he had to be feeling particularly emotional to draw Harry in. Not fully protecting his mind was a calculated risk on the other man's part, and he had—sensibly, for once—therefore chosen to be selective about when he tried to torture Harry this way, not wanting to risk that Harry find out important information or be able to get the Order or the Aurors there in time to stop the Death Eaters.

There had been a handful of more minor attacks, too, ones at which Voldemort had not been present or which had not warranted an attempt to get at Harry, but since the end of September and that daft article not a single attack had occurred, and they were left wondering what Voldemort was waiting for. The possibility of his having suddenly decided to reform after being accused of a crime he hadn't committed was only good for a snort now and then; they wanted to know what he was up to, and Severus had nothing new to report.

The second Saturday of October brought their first Hogsmeade visit. Everyone was on tenterhooks; Aurors, professors, and Prefects were out in force to ensure everyone's safety. There wasn't so much as a sighting of a suspicious-looking rat to cause them alarm. The third-years were too excited about their first visit to the village to be overly concerned with phantom threats, and they managed to be enthusiastic enough that the life wasn't sucked entirely out of the visit.

Overall, the students spent the weekend hyped up on too much sugar, but Hermione supposed that was a small price to pay for a safe visit that let the lower years pretend that their lives weren't being dictated by the war being waged around them.

The days were slipping away at the especially frantic pace they seemed to acquire during the academic year, and Hermione didn't know how she'd be coping if she couldn't function with only four hours of sleep. They were training with Severus as often as four times a week, with Ron or Tonks joining them at least once, and she and Harry were patrolling as often as five. Tonks liked to stop by a minimum of once a week in order to get their feedback about her teaching.

New students were dealing with homesickness, returning students were dealing with the drama of school life, and they were all going to their Prefects. Prefects were trying to cope with their own increasing workload and were coming to Harry or Hermione, and it already felt as though the summer break had been years ago.

Hermione found herself trying to slip out to see her herd at least once a week. She suspected that Harry was becoming as curious as Severus about where she went, often in the wee hours of the morning, but since that first instance, she had not been caught either on the grounds or entering or exiting the building.

She was therefore disinclined to make any unnecessary confessions, and she certainly wasn't going to discontinue the practice, because she needed to visit the herd as much to acquire a dosage of calm as to actually nourish herself. Castina and the other unicorns found the students' flurry over academia quite amusing, and this perspective—so different from Hermione's own—came as a welcome relief in overstressed moments.

In their seventh year at Hogwarts, additional emphasis was put on the importance of original thought. They still had plenty of preparatory homework, such as learning how to perform a spell for Transfiguration or memorizing the proper ingredients and methodology for Potions. They also had to write papers expounding their views on any number of theories and subjects. But they had to be original in practice as well.

They were thus not only learning about plants in Herbology and putting forth their theories in essays, they were also creating their own hybrids. They were doing similar work in all their classes that had practical components, including Potions, Charms, DADA, and Transfiguration. There was still a lot of emphasis on what amounted to book learning and its practical components for the standardized N.E.W.T.s, but the wizarding world wanted creative thinkers heading out into its workforce.

The seventh-year bonus projects were an extension of this, as only examples of original thought would be accepted. They were strongly encouraged to run their ideas by their professor in order to ascertain that they were suitable, but it was not a necessity, and Hermione hadn't breathed a word of hers to anyone at the school. Because somehow, Hermione's group of little projects—for she had intended to do them for most of her subjects—had turned into one massive project: she was attempting to cure lycanthropy.

Numerous attempts had been unsuccessful over the years, and Hermione wished to publish her triumph not her lack thereof. Fortunately, since her professors had faith in her abilities, they were letting her get away with keeping it a secret. They had also assured her that as long as it was as large-scale as she had hinted, one multi-disciplinary project could count for several classes.

Hermione was fairly certain that this was about as large-scale as it got, and many people would think she was insane for even considering it. Remus was the only person who actually knew about the project, and that was because he had agreed to be her guinea pig.

While she knew that Harry's group could generally be relied upon for its discretion, she also knew that, strategically, it would be a great asset for the Order if they could offer the werewolves a cure. There was no way Hermione was risking letting word of the possibility slip out when it wasn't a cold hard fact. Besides, she wasn't doing this for the Order, she was doing it for the werewolves. She refused categorically to offer them what might turn out to be false hope because it gave the Order a political advantage. She had a great deal of respect for Albus, but he was a master manipulator, and she wasn't going to put her untried theory into his hands.

As a result of the project, Hermione now needed to stop by the greenhouse several times per day to check on her hybrids, which would be germinating in the next couple of weeks. She had been tinkering with the seeds all summer, running through huge series of Arithmantic equations, and her testing showed that these new modifications should finally produce the plants with the proper characteristics. Unfortunately, their growth couldn't be magically enhanced, and they wouldn't be mature until the middle of November; then, she would be able to have Remus over to test his reaction to the plant. Assuming that went smoothly, her trial could go ahead.

Mid-month, a week and a half after the screening period had ended, Kingsley reported to Albus. Although he had been there to see the blood destroyed, the vials were only about half as full as they should have been after the necessary test; it was highly likely that Voldemort now had the same results as the Ministry. Kingsley also gave them the list of the students who had submitted their blood, allowing them to cross more seventh-year students off the list as potential Pure Adults: Jacob (which they'd already known), Simon, Mandy (thus quashing Ron's idle speculation), Ernie, Susan (and again with the disproving of Ron's so-stellar deductions on the subject), Hannah, and Sally-Anne.

This left a little fewer than half of the students as possibly Pure Adults—at least as far as everyone who wasn't Hermione or Harry was concerned—with just under two thirds of these Slytherins. Grinning to herself, Hermione wondered if Albus had tried asking Severus to look into it yet.

The Potions master had been true to his word and had given up a corner of his private lab to her. Despite his attitude about giving her the time and space, it was entirely to his benefit to do so, as she had taken over the brewing of the Wolfsbane this summer. She continued it into the school year now that she had somewhere where she could brew it; she had finished this month's Wolfsbane for Remus a week and a half ago, and in her spare time—although the idea that she had any was at bit laughable—she was brewing most of the potions Poppy needed for the Infirmary.

On this second-last Friday of October, she was brewing a bruise salve. Severus insisted that the evenings that he sat in the lab grading while she was working on potions was to ensure that she didn't blow up his private space while unsupervised, but she cheerfully chose not to believe him. At moments when her potions were sitting, simmering, breathing, or otherwise taking care of themselves, he didn't seem unwilling to engage her in conversation, and they would often discuss the latest Ars Alchemica or Potions or Defence theories that had come their way from other sources.[9]

She was always the one to make the conversation more personal, adding in anecdotes about her time at home, talking about her summers, or explaining some crazy stunt that she, Harry, and Ron had pulled. For the most part, Severus was receptive. It was not all that frequently that he reciprocated with a story of his own, but she relished the moments when he did.

Every once in a while, she would miscalculate his mood and ask a question that slammed up every shield he possessed, but these moments were growing fewer and further in between; she liked to think that it was both because he was opening up and because she was getting better at reading him.

She wished he understood absolutely that she just wanted to get to know him better and wasn't about to judge him or mock him or tell everyone she knew what he had divulged to her, but she supposed she couldn't really cast stones given the current secrets she was keeping from him. He didn't yet have enough reason to trust her, and the only way to earn that was to take the time to have moments like these and be patient. She was doing her best.

No innocent conversations would occur if others were present, even if it was someone as innocuous as Albus or Kingsley, and if she was really unlucky, she'd be relegated back to "Miss Granger" before she could blink. But for now, she was content that he would open up a little just to her. Little steps, she reminded herself, still made progress over time.

Even if he didn't feel the same way as she did about their time together, he appeared to have noticed that it differed from the time they spent elsewhere; it was here that he was most likely to make requests that strayed from the regular persona he had established. If he'd dragged her into his office, for example, she would likely never have agreed to give him access to her and Harry's quarters.

Since he had asked in the relaxed atmosphere of the lab in the context of his being the nearest professor and Order member to be able to render assistance should it be needed, she had added him to the wards. She and Harry would still be advised that he had arrived, as she didn't think Harry would stand it any other way, but the Potions master wouldn't have to stand out in the hallway waiting for them to answer the door. She hadn't quite gotten around to mentioning this fact to Harry yet, as she was still waiting for an … opportune moment.

"Do you ever eat?"

Startled, she looked up from extinguishing the flame under the bruise salve to find Severus watching her intensely from the other side of the room where he had set up all his grading on one of the long counters. She hadn't noticed the cessation of the sound of quill on parchment, and she was disconcerted to realize that she had no idea how long he'd been watching her.

"I'm sorry?" she said as she finally processed what he'd asked and was confused by the nonsensical-sounding question.

"I found you in here after your Defence class and it's now almost nine o'clock in the evening. Do you ever eat?" he repeated, enunciating the question clearly enough to show that he was getting irritated.

Bugger. When there were people who were likely to observe her, she tried to behave a little more normally.

"Of course I do." She smiled self-consciously. "I'm also prone to lose myself in my work, however."

He rose abruptly, making no move to collect the parchment that was scattered across the counter. "Come."

She went, following the swirl of his dark robes and wondering why no one else's robes moved quite as fantastically as his. She was pleasantly surprised to discover that he was leading her to his quarters and further astonished to find that when they arrived, he summoned a house-elf and procured them a meal. She evidently failed to keep her expression entirely neutral.

"Mr Potter would be a nuisance if I let you expire from hunger."

She snorted. "I suppose the paperwork would be a drawback, as well?"

He gave a noncommittal hum of noise that she took to be agreement.

Shortly thereafter, they were both seated in armchairs in front of the fire, each with plates of food. She was amused to note that while Severus's plate was positively piled with steak, potatoes and gravy, string beans and carrots, and two rolls, hers was a much more regular-sized portion of vegetables, fruit, and a roll. In fact, it was positively miniscule by house-elf standards, but it was perfectly suited to her needs. Her diet had become awfully peculiar since she'd achieved her Animagus form, but the house-elves seemed to be taking it in a stride.

Severus was eyeing their disparate portion sizes critically.

"You're either greatly in their favour or greatly out of it; I've never seen an elf do that before." He arched an eyebrow. "Or you're dying. I believe patients get special diets."

"I'm not dying—no more than every mortal is, anyway—but Winky may have been telling tales." It had taken her some time to work out what she wanted to eat while in human form, and she'd really only got it sorted over the summer when she'd had plenty of opportunity to feed herself and really contemplate her choices. Winky and Kreacher had been very accommodating. "It's as much as I'm likely to eat; this way, they don't waste food."

"You get along remarkably well with Potter's house-elves." His tone could hardly be called neutral, but at least it wasn't out-and-out rude.

"I've spent twice as much time in Grimmauld Place as he has since he's only come after his birthday the last two summers. Since I was the one always there, Winky came to me for direction, and we got to know one another quite well. And," she drew a deep breath and confessed, "I suspect she will always care for me because I was the one who bound her to Harry."

Severus's eyebrows rose towards his hairline. "I feel certain I must have misheard you."

Hermione sighed. "From the first moment I saw her during the Quidditch World Cup, all I was able to associate with her were negative emotions. She was terrified of being up in the stands, she was heartbroken when Mr Crouch dismissed her, and she spent her time in the Hogwarts kitchen inconsolable, utterly miserable, and drinking herself to death."

Hermione still couldn't really comprehend how someone could be that horrified by freedom, but a year-and-a-half's acquaintance with the elf had begun to blunt even Hermione's optimism that Winky would realize how fortunate she was.

"When Albus sent Winky to Grimmauld Place and she encountered Kreacher, it was like meeting a new elf. Two new elves, actually, as they were both happy for the first time in my memory."

That had been particularly disconcerting because she'd only just learnt from Harry the role Kreacher had played in getting Sirius to the Department of Mysteries. Her sympathy for the elf—although still greater than most people's—was at an all-time low, and then she'd been struck by this incongruous image.

"They're cousins, you see," she continued, "and Winky knew Kreacher in her youth, but when she was acquired by the Crouches, she was no longer allowed to associate with a creature who worked for the Blacks." She made a face, expressing her distaste for such high-handedness and intolerance. "Kreacher hadn't been out of Grimmauld Place in over a decade before the Order took over the house, and even other house-elves didn't know he was still alive."

She stared into the fire and refused to look at Severus as she finished, "They were overjoyed, and the prospect of Winky going back to Hogwarts and being miserable and Kreacher sinking back into depression at Grimmauld Place was grim indeed. They wanted to be together, and Harry was just as anxious for happy elves as I was, at least as far as these two went, so he consented to the binding. He's basically rubbish at research, as you know, so I'm the one who did it."

"It still seems a long way from SPEW," Severus said archly.

Given how unsuccessful her campaign had been, it still amazed her how many people had heard about it … and couldn't pronounce it like the acronym it was. She turned to face him once more.

"You sound like Harry and Ron when you call it that." She smirked at his moue of distaste and knew she'd cured him, at least, of the habit. She supposed she should be impressed that that was all he had to say about the matter. "And the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare stands; I've just become a little more open-minded about what that means. At the very least, I believe there have to be much clearer standards of behaviour for the humans who bond with elves, rights for the elves who are bound, and less stigmatization for those who desire pay, like Dobby."

"You certainly sound like a witch with a mission. Do you intend to advocate elf rights in the future?"

This was asked with only mild mockery.

"Well," she said with a smile, "I'll always advocate elf rights, but if you mean do I intend to make a career out of it, I don't have an answer for you. There are so many options and so many interests that appeal strongly to me; I'm undecided."

Severus's tone was off-hand. "You realize that Minerva will kill you if you end up minding a pub somewhere."

She laughed. "I don't suppose that would quite fulfill her expectations, but," she admitted with a shrug, "a lot's up in the air right now. I will stand with Harry until Voldemort is defeated, and then I'll figure out how I can make a difference with the rest of my life."

"I have no doubt that patrons would come out of your pub with enlightened notions on everything from elf rights to Muggle cinema."

That was, quite probably, the nicest compliment he had ever paid her, and this was fast turning into one of her favourite encounters with the man.

The two of them had occasionally run into one another in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place when no one else was around, largely because brewing at strange hours was involved on the odd nights that he stayed over in the House of Black. But that wasn't quite the same as their choosing to have a meal together, just the two of them. They'd had snacks, sometimes, if a training session went particularly long, but that was her and Harry and Severus and occasionally even Ron.

She wasn't delusional; she knew they were hardly sharing a romantic dinner for two. But it was quiet and companionable moments like these that convinced her that perhaps one day they could…. At least it gave her hope that he didn't think of her anymore as a twelve-year-old know-it-all attached at the hip to Harry and Ron.

With twin "pops", their empty plates suddenly disappeared and were replaced with two tall fluted glasses of—

"Demon elf!" she yelled into the air.

There was no response from Winky, but Severus gave her a pointed look of inquiry.

She pointed at the dessert now sitting beside her. "Chocolate mousse."

He only raised an eyebrow.

Hermione sighed. "Winky knows I love it but try not to eat it terribly often. If she brings it, I try to make her take it back again. She's apparently figured out how to get around that."

"But if you didn't eat it, she would never know."

"True." She eyed the decadent confection, and it was as though it had a Compulsion Charm on it. "But that would involve, er, not eating it."

He smirked openly at her. "Where has all that famous Gryffindor willpower gone?"

She gave in to temptation and scooped out a spoonful of chocolate bliss. "I'm afraid you're about to witness a moment of pure Gryffindor self-gratification."

The chocolate flavour exploded in her mouth, and she let out a small noise that she really hoped hadn't sounded like a moan of pleasure.

She spent the next several moments with very single-minded focus, savouring each spoonful of mousse until she was finally scraping the last bit out of the bottom of the glass and staring at the emptiness of the container with some disappointment.

It was only the particularly loud noise of a log cracking in the fire that recalled her to the room … and the man she was with. Raising startled eyes to his, she found that he was regarding her with a glittering gaze that was almost alarming in its intensity. She swallowed, licked her lips, and watched as he held out…. Her eyes widened.

"You wouldn't," she said helplessly.

His lips tipped up. "I couldn't possibly enjoy it as much as you."

She bit her lip, spent ten solid seconds trying to resist, and snatched up the second dessert as though Severus were going to change his mind and take it back from her.

The second one was just as good as the first had been, and Hermione found herself wondering if unicorns would be willing to give chocolate mousse a try. Light and mousse…. That didn't sound unreasonable, did it? She felt certain that she, at least, could exist on the two alone.

Severus's expression had turned mocking. "Now I know why she gave you so little dinner."

"She does appear to have conceived of and implemented her plan quite well," Hermione agreed, now struggling not to be embarrassed by the spectacle that she had just made of herself. "She and Kreacher probably ganged up on me again."

"Oh?"

"It's how they got away with cleaning and cooking at Grimmauld Place. I'd eat a lunch I made myself and would be about to do the dishes when Kreacher would have an important question about cleaning something in the library. By the time I got back from the library, Winky would have the dishes done. Or Winky would want my opinion on the drapes in the sitting room just before lunch, and by the time I made it to the kitchen, Kreacher had already had the chance to make the meal. It took me almost a week to work out that it wasn't coincidence."

"The consequence of elf rights," he observed dryly.

She smiled, suddenly cheered. "I do seem to have given them decided notions, don't I?"

"We'll see if Mr Potter thanks you for your part in the bonding in a few years, shall we?" There was dark amusement in his voice.

"Harry likes people who think for themselves or he would not have the group of friends that he does," she said with certainty; she could count herself amongst that number.

He inclined his head and then rose. "It's late."

She followed his lead, standing up and suddenly feeling awkward.

"I—" Thanking him outright for dinner seemed brazen and rather unwise. "Thank you. Harry will be pleased I've returned safe and full."

"I would so hate to disappoint Mr Potter."

There was some bite to this, and Hermione immediately regretted the loss of the earlier ease. She offered him a wan smile.

"I'll just decant the bruise salve." She gestured back towards the lab.

His voice was cool and dismissive. "You wouldn't want to keep Mr Potter waiting."

"Actually, if it's past half nine, it's too late for that," she suddenly remembered. "I'm supposed to meet him to work on our Charms papers."

Severus cast Tempus, and his expression softened slightly even as she winced; it was a quarter to eleven. Trust the man to be pleased that Harry had been forgotten.

"You had better go and make your apologies. I'll decant your potion."

"You're sure?" she asked uncertainly, pleased at the improved tone and not wanting to presume now and make things worse.

"I would not have offered otherwise," he said with a trace of impatience. "Go away, Hermione."

She smiled. "I'm going, I'm going." At the door she paused. "Thank you again, Severus, for everything."

Before she could see if he had a response to this, she forced herself out of the door, following the short hallway that linked his quarters to his lab, and then let herself out of the laboratory and into the rest of the school. It wouldn't do to have anyone seeing the Gryffindor Head Girl coming out of the Head of Slytherin's quarters, after all, even if he was her liaison to the faculty, and even if nothing untoward had occurred.

Still, she set off towards her own quarters feeling inordinately cheerful; Severus likely didn't dine with the majority of his students, and that meant he'd singled her out in some manner, even if it wasn't quite the way she wanted.

Harry was sprawled on the couch writing on a long piece of parchment when she entered, and he looked up at her arrival, an expectant look on his face.

"There was this Hippogriff which had an injured wing," she began, making her eyes wide and her tone earnestness personified, "and it was being chased by a Blast-Ended Screwt that had been doused with a particularly strong love potion. They ran riot all round the grounds and then burst into the castle. They were making a giant ruckus in the Great Hall, where a gaggle of helpless first-years got between them and were in danger of their lives, and I was the only person who could sort it out."

He rolled his eyes, a grin breaking out at the utter absurdity she had just spouted. "All right, idiot. At least we know the Veritaserum dosage isn't too high. Come over here and help me sort this out."

On Wednesday, Septima announced that they would be doing a project in assigned pairs, as the woman wanted a demonstration of their ability to work together and make their complex calculations understood by others. Hermione found herself partnered with Draco Malfoy, much to the evident displeasure of Tracey Davis, who was normally the one to pair with him in this class for any shared work.

Draco moved to sit next to Hermione without indicating whether he was pleased or displeased, which she was sure was what had made his father such an excellent politician. It was he, after all, rather than Tracey Davis, who had to put up with Hermione's presence, and she knew that once upon a time, Draco would have been making no bones about his disgust. He had grown up, however, and his pale, aristocratic face wore an expression of polite neutrality.

She gestured him into a chair when he actually had the manners to wait for her to indicate that he could join her. She didn't have a lot of experience with pure-bloods and such old-fashioned manners, and she hoped that this was his attempt to be genuinely polite rather than disconcert her.

"Should I be concerned about the death glares I'm receiving?" she asked mildly.

He regarded her with faint surprise, swivelled slightly so that he could take in the expression of his fellow Slytherin, and looked back at her with a faint smile.

"I imagine you are more than a match for her, Granger."

Cordiality it was; that had been decidedly complimentary.

Although they had survived all their classes together last year—and Muggle Studies was the only class she didn't have with him—he had always kept his distance from her, or at least from the golden trio.

Harry's raw grief brought about by the death of Sirius—which had turned into incoherent anger in the presence of just about anyone—had been assuaged by the time Harry started his sixth year, and the last thing he had wanted to do was make the mistake of blaming a child for his father's failings. Still, Draco Malfoy's father was in Azkaban and Sirius Black was dead, and putting Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy in a room together had seemed like a foolish plan; since they were both Prefects for the first time ever, they needed to be in a room together with even more frequency than previously.

Hermione and Pansy had ensured that the two boys were properly insulated whenever possible, and to pretty much everyone's relief, months gradually passed with the growing understanding that peaceful coexistence was possible.

Since they were no longer arguing, fighting, and plotting one another's downfall, Harry had had time to notice Draco's good qualities—or perhaps it was his potential good qualities—and Hermione had watched as her best friend's gaze morphed until he was looking at Draco with something that wasn't loathing at all.

As she and the Slytherin settled down to a half-hour planning session that involved setting up three after-class meetings, Hermione, smirking to herself, wondered if Harry would have considered taking Arithmancy if he'd known of this particular benefit.

Chapter Seven: The Consequences

The morning of Friday, October the thirty-first dawned clear and bright. Less than thirty-six hours earlier, Hermione and Harry had taken the first dosage that brought them up to two and three quarter drops of Veritaserum. They agreed that they felt no more than a cursory inclination to tell the truth about something they had rather not, and point-blank questions about fourth year resulted in Harry confirming that yes, he knew Ron was in love with Krum because they'd gotten along so well that year, while she averred a heretofore unknown passion for Fleur which had resulted in her dancing with the part-Veela for the entire night of the Yule Ball. Their ability to lie through their teeth, then, was unimpaired.

Having rapidly grown tired of popping to the loo and going for the eye-dropper to dose herself—besides being worried that Harry mightn't measure right—Hermione had created little gel capsules that dissolved once they hit the tongue and dispersed the correct dosage of Veritaserum. Once they had ensured that the dosage held after midnight on the first night, she injected the capsules for the other fourteen doses each that they would need over the subsequent five days.

She put a mild Notice-Me-Not Charm on them and followed it up with a slight Aversion Charm; the majority of people wouldn't notice at all when she and Harry popped them into their mouths, and for those few who did, they would tend to regard it with a wariness equivalent to that which they accorded Albus's lemon drops; they weren't about to ask if they could have one.

In DADA that morning, they were working in pairs to practice combined offence and defence. Much to their amusement, Tonks still didn't seem to have gotten the hang of "dressing like a professor" as Minerva had now admonished her to do several times. She almost always remembered to wear a robe, but it was still often open to reveal a Weird Sisters t-shirt and jeans. When news about her being a Metamorphmagus had leaked out, she'd gratified everyone's curiosity with a quarter of an hour of changing appearances. Her general standard was her own face and short, bubblegum pink hair.

Despite the fact that she had once somehow tripped and taken out an entire row of desks like they were dominoes, she had not been dismissed by the students as incompetent; everyone listened immediately when she began to speak.

"Although strong Shielding Spells are effective against most attacks barring the Unforgivables, it is effectively impossible to both shield yourself and attack your opponent. You can drop the shield to cast your offensive spell, but there's a lag before you can cast your new spell and then get your shield up again, and this is assuming you can think all those processes through quickly.

"Working in pairs this morning, you have one purpose. The person who is casting the Shield Charm does so until the offensive speller begins to speak. The second the words are out of their mouth, the shielder puts the shield back up again. It takes timing, and you need to get used to your partners in order to anticipate their moves.

"Remember that it can be very noisy in a battle environment, so the shielder needs to be paying attention to both the external cues—you have to know what you're shielding against—and the person you're shielding. The offensive speller needs to be paying attention to the rest of the battle, planning where an attack will do the most good. Remember that it's draining on the person who's casting the shield to constantly take it down and put it back up, so you'll need to make your hits count.

"Everybody pair up. One person will shield, and the other person will fire spells at the 'enemy'; right now, that means a mild Stinging Charm at the wall, but we'll build up towards mock fights once you've got the hang of it. For now, your own Stinging Charm will bounce back at you, as I've cast a Reflection Charm on the wall, so that will help you get the hang of a standard back-and-forth duel. Stand about two metres from the wall to start, and we'll see if you can't narrow that distance by the end of class. You three together will be fine."

Tonks added this last bit for Hermione, Harry, and Ron. There were seventeen students in the class, so they were always an odd person out when they paired up for practical work. Since they were three of the strongest students in the class, it wasn't terribly detrimental for them to have slightly less practice time than everyone else. If the lesson was going well, Tonks would sometimes pair with one of them, but she had the good sense to monitor everyone's progress first.

They paired off predictably. Daphne and Draco, as the only two Slytherins, automatically went together, and most of the others followed suit with in-House pairs: Lavender and Parvati, Seamus and Dean, Susan and Hannah, and Morag and Padma. Terry and Justin formed a team in bedroom as well as out, apparently, leaving Neville and Vera Moon as the only other inter-House pair, but they were more by default than any other factor.

For the first several minutes, there was a fair amount of good-natured swearing as the Stinging Charm slipped through the gap before the Shield Charm was re-cast. The loudest yelps occurred when the shield wasn't taken down quickly enough, as this resulted in the spell being blasted back at the two of them from point-blank range.

As a general rule, Ron and Harry worked well together, as did Ron and Hermione. They'd had several years in the DA and a number of sessions with various members of the Order to ensure that this was the case. Since the entire class had paired in a friendly manner, they all knew how to work with one another more or less effectively.

Harry and Hermione, though, worked together exceptionally well. They'd found that they were even more in tune this year, and she attributed that to their shared Pure Adult status. Severus often set them up as opponents so that he could watch and criticize, and when they practiced on their own it was similarly as opponents, but there were plenty of times when the Slytherin pit his skills against theirs to see what they could come up with in order to defend themselves. Overall, the two of them probably had more training together than the rest of the pairings combined.

By the time it was their turn to work together this morning, most of the other pairs were leaving only a very minimal gap around the offensive wizard's spell-casting; nine times out of ten, they got their shields back up quickly enough that neither of them was stung by the rebounding charm.

Rather than moving closer to the wall, however, most of them seemed to be peeking at Harry and Hermione to see how they'd do since they'd had less time to practice together than everyone else; there was nothing like seeing one's friends get stung by their own spells, apparently. She quirked her eyebrows at Harry in question, and his lips twitched in answer. It looked as though they'd be showing off a bit.

Last year, Judex's competency had left them all with the feeling that if they asked a question beyond the scope of the text they were learning from, he'd be at sea. He had not given the impression that he'd like to have his own knowledge boundaries pushed, and the upper-year students had felt the lack of someone who'd regularly performed the spells they were learning and could probably write four books in place of the text they were studying. On top of this had been the man's reluctance to teach anything that he thought might help Harry take over the world. As a result, they'd not exactly learnt a whole array of new and fascinating spells and techniques.

It was Severus who'd formally taught them how to cast wordlessly in their training sessions at the end of last year, and it was a skill that had not yet been taught to the DA or to this class—which amounted to the same thing, given that fourteen of the class's seventeen members were part of the association. It was down on the curriculum for this year, though, and anyone who'd paid attention to Harry and Hermione when they duelled recently knew that they already knew how to do it.

Hermione was currently better than Harry at "feeling" when he was about to cast, so she took the position of shielder. They began. Even as the spell was emerging from Harry's wandtip, Hermione was casting the Shield Charm. The spell bounced off the wall and dissipated harmlessly against her barrier. As she felt the swell of magic that preceded his casting again, she released the shield, snapping it back into place a second later. And repeat. Several times. Since either had yet to feel the sting of Harry's charm, they moved closer to the wall. And then closer still, until her shield was flickering in and out like someone was flicking a light switch, and Harry was coming close to casting without pause. It felt extremely natural.

The fact that all this was happening without a word being spoken finally made her aware of how silent it was throughout the entire classroom. She yielded her wand slightly, and Harry immediately desisted. They turned back to the classroom to find that everyone was watching them as though they were a particularly interesting exhibit at the circus. They smiled self-consciously.

"I'd say the two of you have the hang of that one," Tonks said cheerfully. "Ten points to Gryffindor. You've done it before?"

"Not as such," Harry admitted.

Ron was staring at them very intensely.

"But we've worked with Shield Charms before," Hermione added quickly. "And we often get the chance to practice together now that we're sharing quarters."

"Very well done, regardless. Care to see how your spellwork holds up against a real opponent?"

They consented, and the rest of the class cleared to the perimeter of the room to watch. Hermione and Harry were now facing off with Tonks herself, a position which they had heretofore encountered only in training sessions. Now, as then, Tonks's spells were packing more punch than simple Stinging Hexes, and Harry reciprocated.

Tonks was aiming for that moment when Hermione had to take her shield down to let Harry cast a spell, but Harry was doing everything in his power to send spells in their professor's direction that sent her aim off or prevented her from firing because she needed to shield herself. It was much more difficult to keep an eye on both Tonks and Harry than it was to anticipate the rebound from Harry's own spell, and Hermione found herself relying almost entirely on her sense of Harry's magic to anticipate all of his actions, focussing the majority of her energy on the witch on the offensive in front of her.

The fight wound on for several long minutes until their pink-haired professor finally threw out a nasty burning spell that she and Harry were a little too slow to counter. It happened very quickly. Despite the fact that it meant the Freezing Charm Harry was even now casting would hit the two of them when it rebounded, Hermione threw up her shield; she'd rather be hit by the cold than the Burning Hex. A fraction of a second later, Tonks's hex bounced off the Gryffindor's shield and rebounded on the Auror. It was extinguished by Harry's charm, which hit her at almost the same moment.

Harry disarmed her, and the class exploded into applause. Harry and Hermione looked at one another, both clearly wondering the same thing: had anyone else seen how his spell had gone through Hermione's shield at almost the same moment that Tonks's spell had failed to penetrate it?

From the sharp gaze they were receiving from the Auror, she, at least, hadn't missed it. She granted Gryffindor another fifteen points.

"Let's see if the rest of you can give these two a run for their money, shall we? A metre from the wall, if you please. Ron, why don't you join Neville and Vera, and we'll give Harry and Hermione a chance to catch their breath."

Ron obeyed and with a last piercing look at her and Harry, Tonks set about to monitor the class again. Hermione was feeling slightly winded and was glad to sit down, and Harry looked as though he could use the rest as well.

Speculative glances continued to be shot their way from time to time, but for the most part, the rest of the class settled into trying quite diligently to improve. Draco and Ron both looked particularly fierce.

That didn't go exactly how you anticipated, Girlicorne?[10]

This was Fawkes's nickname for her, a particularly apt running joke, as it turned out, although she hadn't understood until she became a unicorn Animagus. She'd just thought he knew that the herd was fond of her.

You know you're supposed to make your presence known before you haunt my mind like that, right? she reminded him.

Must I apologize before I get my answer?

He didn't allow himself to be chastised as a general rule.

If I say yes, will you actually say you're sorry? she asked curiously.

If you really want me to do so. He sounded as though the prospect pained him. You were focussed very intensely. It drew my notice.

She had, in fact, felt his lightest of brushes against her mind, but as she'd needed her concentration here in the room, she hadn't acknowledged him properly. It was relatively comforting to know that if she seemed to be in distress, he'd check in on her.

Well, it might not have been exactly what I was imagining, but, she gave a mental shrug, it's not as though any of them don't know what Harry's up against and what he's training for. And it's given them plenty of motivation.

Draco had switched to wordlessly casting his shield, but he couldn't anticipate Daphne if she stayed silent as well. They now seemed to be experimenting with her whispering the words.

So that was all in the name of improving your classmates' scholastic prowess? Fawkes demanded archly.

The trio of which Ron was part was having some success mimicking the battle that had just occurred, with the odd person out actually casting spells at the shielding team.

She dignified that with mentally sticking out her tongue. You know I was showing off, bird. But it was fun.

Harry had been watching Draco and Daphne intently for several moments, so she gave him a discreet nudge with her foot to remind him of where he was.

Fawkes laughed. There is that. Hmm … I'd better go. Albus is making last minute garish additions to the Halloween Feast. Oh, for all that's good and magical in the world, not the lime green—!

She snorted, suspected he was thoroughly preoccupied, but added, Best of luck with that.

The bell rang shortly thereafter, and Tonks held the two of them back. She cast privacy charms and looked at them seriously.

"I've never seen that before. Your magic has to be incredibly compatible. There're only two Aurors I've heard could do it." They looked at her curiously. "Frank and Alice Longbottom."

Hermione swallowed. "They must have made an amazing team."

"So Moody told me. Just watch yourselves, yeah?"

They both nodded, and Tonks let them go. They headed down to lunch, not really feeling like going but figuring it would be better for them to be there in case a big deal was made out of what had happened. They wouldn't want to look as though they were avoiding everyone.

The news spread down the Gryffindor table as their classmates gushed about what a good showing they'd made. If their classmates from other Houses were sharing it with their tables, it at least wasn't such stunning news that it immediately became apparent to Harry and Hermione. It seemed, therefore, as though no one else had noticed what Tonks had.

Ron didn't look precisely disgruntled, but he did seem a trifle out of sorts, so they invited him down to their quarters for an afternoon of studying, training, or wherever the mood took them. He acquiesced readily.

Hermione had thought that her homework time would suffer as a result, but it soon became apparent that Ron felt his best friend status had become endangered. What he really wanted was to spend time with Harry, and after a token protest, he was very happy to let Hermione retire to the sofa with her books while the two boys duelled in the spelled area of the room.

The Gryffindor girl did her best to tune them out completely, knowing that she'd otherwise have to constantly fight the impulse to "backseat fight". Since it was likely to be Ron she was shouting directions to, she had the sense to block her ears and let them go at it on their own.

She even waved them on to dinner without her, insisting that she had a great deal of homework to do. As this was never a lie, given the number of classes she was taking, she was easily able to deflect Harry's look of concern. She knew that he didn't always have an easy time being between the two of them. Since she didn't feel her position was jeopardized by Ron, she didn't at all mind letting him have an afternoon alone with Harry if it made the redhead feel better.

It was mornings like this one, she knew, that suddenly made Ron realize how much he wasn't there for, and if he could only accept that that was all right, they would be fine. They'd all chosen their life paths, and none of them could walk perfectly identical ones; if his diverged a little while hers and Harry's were more similar right now, that wasn't the end of the world; there'd been plenty of times in years past where the two boys' interests had dovetailed and hers had been the odd ones out. Now they were just leaning a bit the other way. She smiled slightly to herself. So she thought, anyway. There was no saying what was going through Ron's mind.

You know, I didn't tell you about Albus's plans just so you could skip out on the Feast.

She grinned. Of course you did. How bad is it?

Fawkes let her see for herself. Albus had gone overboard on the decorations again, as though he'd discovered Muggle decorations for the first time and therefore had to be horrendously enthusiastic about their use. First, there were the standard floating jack-o-lanterns, although these were positively thick in the air. Bats had been enchanted to flutter round them, causing more than one excitable student to shriek. Then there were the cardboard cut-outs of pumpkins, ghosts, and even Muggle renditions of green-skinned, warty witches that covered the walls. Streamers of crepe paper in black and several shades of orange festooned the ceiling and walls, nearly obscuring the enchanted sky above. If it were a Muggle room, it would be a serious fire hazard. Fortunately, Fawkes seemed to have talked the headmaster out of whatever had been lime green.

Have you ever tried to teach Albus that 'Less is more'?

He never seems receptive to that tenet when it comes to decorations. Or clothing.

She laughed. That's our esteemed headmaster. Now, hush, I'm trying to finish this paper before the boys come back.

The Muggle Studies paper went well, and it was indeed completed by the time Harry returned. Ron, it transpired, had Quidditch practice.

"And Tonks looks to be supervising detention. A bunch of second-year boys kept glaring at her, anyway. So I guess it's just you, me, and Professor Snape tonight."

Their training session started at nine that evening, but they were barely an hour into it before their numbers were reduced again: in the middle of their duel, Severus clutched suddenly at his left arm, and Hermione cast a shield to deflect the curse Harry had already let fly.

Severus's eyes glittered as they met hers, pain pinching his features.

"I might have been looking for just that show of weakness, Hermione."

She Summoned his mask and cloak, surprised that he had forgotten himself enough to call her by her given name in Harry's presence. It seemed too much to hope that his relationship with the Gryffindor boy had improved so much that he was finally relaxing his standards.

"I assure you that real Death Eaters pained by their Dark Marks would not move me," she said brusquely, before adding with a bright smile, "but it's reassuring to know you think we're good enough that you need to resort to cheap tricks to get the better of us."

Harry unsuccessfully smothered a laugh with a cough, and Severus scoffed as he donned the cloak. The mask he held, waiting until he crossed the grounds.

"That is an entirely unfounded supposition, I assure you."

This almost managed to keep the situation light despite the garb the Potions master now wore.

"You will inform the headmaster?" Severus asked.

"Of course," she answered.

He took out his wand.

"Severus." His wand arm checked. "Allow me?"

His eyes narrowed, but he gave a curt nod.

She Disillusioned him so he could get to the dungeon exit unseen.

"Be safe," she said softly.

She and Harry watched the door open and close, seemingly of its own accord, and it was as though all the cheer had gone out of the evening with the man's departure, which was a little ridiculous given the man in question. She informed Albus of the Slytherin's departure but couldn't seem to concentrate well enough to do any subsequent training.

Whenever Hermione knew that Severus had been Summoned, she was always horribly worried. If she were ever to inform the Slytherin of the depth of her concern, he would no doubt be incredibly insulted at what he considered her complete lack of faith. She knew that he would do everything in his power to come back to them, and she also knew that he was extremely skilled at what he did; balanced between Voldemort and Albus, he had to be. But she cared about Severus, and that meant she was deeply concerned with what happened to him. No matter how clever he was, the chances of her never seeing him again because he was being tortured to death in some horribly gruesome way were dramatically increased when he was at Voldemort's side.

Harry, while he would not now be so callous as to say that he didn't care whether Severus lived or died, was hardly overwhelmed with concern over what the man was going through. His primary concern whenever Severus was Summoned was what others were going through. Since it was extremely unlikely that Voldemort had Summoned all his Death Eaters for tea, an attack was imminent. Knowing that but being powerless to stop it felt worse than not knowing at all.

It didn't help that all they could seem to dwell on if they got off the "attack we're powerless to prevent" topic was the death of Harry's parents. But it was Halloween, and they were now focussed on Voldemort, and no other topics stuck.

In the past, Halloween had always represented failure to Voldemort; All Hallow's Eve at Godric's Hollow had robbed him of his corporeal body and effectively banished him for eleven years, and up until this point, even after his return, it hadn't looked as though he were anxious to reclaim the day.

Today, it seemed, he was pretty sure of himself, and both of them knew that that boded ill for someone—or more likely several someones—in the wizarding or Muggle world. If Voldemort was really making a move today, especially after such silence, he would want it to be a rousing success, and that thought was horrifying.

She fed Harry tea and read their Defence text to him for over an hour, knowing it was the only subject that had the slightest chance of occupying his attention. It seemed better than the two of them simply sitting in their common room staring at one another. Periodically, Harry would even rouse himself from his deep introspection, offer her a half smile for her effort, look as though he were concentrating for all of thirty seconds, and then lapse back into inattention.

At half eleven it was late enough that she could force him to bed without his making too much of a fuss.

"You don't want to stay up all night, mad with worry. Just lie down; if you don't fall asleep, you can always get up again," she soothed.

Of course, the mild Sleeping Draught she'd slipped into the last mug of tea rather precluded that possibility, but he wasn't to know that.

Once he was asleep, she sat down again on the sofa and closed the textbook that she knew she wasn't going to read now that he was gone. She could keep herself together for Harry's sake but couldn't make nearly as rousing an effort only for herself. Tucking her legs up against her chest, she wrapped her arms around them.

If nothing else occurred, the Map would tell her when Severus was back, so she would just have to constantly refer to it. It was the beginning of the weekend, but Voldemort knew he couldn't keep the Potions master for too long without it causing issues with Albus and others on the side of the Light—or Ministry officials, which could jeopardize Severus's position as a spy for Voldemort, which the man obviously didn't desire.

The last time she had felt this worried about Severus was in a sadly similar situation. It had been the end of April in sixth year. A Saturday evening. She and Harry had been training sporadically with Severus since Christmas, yet this was somehow the first time that the man had been Summoned in their presence. She hadn't immediately recognized the signs at the time, as she did now….

Professor Snape stopped mid-sentence with an abruptness that was unusual, even for him.

"That will be all for the night. You may go." He seemed to force his arms to his side with deliberation, long fingers splayed against his thighs.

Hermione and Harry exchange surprised glances. They'd been training for little more than half an hour and hadn't covered a fraction of the topics that the man had told them less than thirty minutes ago they would be exploring this evening.

"Sir—?" she began hesitantly. "Is there anything—?"

"Did you fail to hear me, Miss Granger?" he snarled. "I told you to go."

Knowing that another repetition of the instruction would almost surely result in point loss, if not detention, she and Harry hastened to obey. She looked back as they reached the threshold, and it was then that she saw him with his left arm curled round his abdomen, the right hand clutching at the skin below the elbow.

It was such a completely unnatural pose for the man that she stopped in her tracks, and a moment later, the import of what she was seeing fully registered in her brain. With difficulty, she bit back the sudden gush of concern that she knew he would find grating, asking instead, "Would you like me to inform the headmaster, sir?"

His head snapped up, black gaze spitting fire. "What?"

She swallowed but forged on bravely. "If it would save you time, I could tell Albus that you're leaving." The reminder that the headmaster had enough respect for her to have already granted her the privilege of the use of his name was deliberate.

She knew that Professor Snape was a spy. He knew that she knew that he was a spy. But since she had only officially joined the Order in September, there hadn't been many official moments where she needed to acknowledge him as such. He seemed to be finding it disconcerting, if the long pause before he answered her question was any indication.

"Then do so, Miss Granger. I must go."

He swept past her in a flurry of robes and disappeared down the hall. Harry, who'd made it all the way into the hall before she spoke, popped his head back round the doorframe.

"What just happened?"

She dragged him back into the room and threw up privacy charms.

"He was just Summoned. I volunteered to let Albus know so that he could get out of the building more quickly."

"I guess that explains it, then. Did you want me to come with?"

His dismissive attitude did not help her nerves. "No, that's all right. But if you think you can get back to the dorm without the Map, it would help me sneak to and from the headmaster's office with no one the wiser."

Harry consented, and they sneaked up to the ground floor together and then went their separate ways. She was thankful that Harry hadn't questioned her further about why she wanted the Map; she wasn't normally one to take it away from him for her own use, especially when it put him at a disadvantage in his own hallway wanderings.

She had, as it happened, little doubt that she could get back to the Gryffindor dorm from the headmaster's office without much trouble. Unlike being found in the dungeons, it wasn't the slightest bit problematic to explain her presence should she be stopped by anyone anywhere in the circuit from Albus's office to Gryffindor tower.

What she really wanted the Map for was to check and make sure that Professor Snape came back. She knew theoretically that he left and returned frequently without her knowledge, but having physically seen him leave tonight, she didn't think she could sleep until she knew that he was safe.

And this wasn't really totally bizarre on her part. Despite how much they didn't speak about it in the infrequent Order meetings during the school year, it had become increasingly obvious to all of them that Voldemort was growing more and more suspicious of his Potions master, and nothing Professor Snape did seemed to reassure the paranoid bastard.

The chance that he wouldn't come back seemed to be growing, therefore, and Hermione couldn't stomach the idea that she might simply be sleeping the night away while this traumatic event was occurring.

So she informed Albus that his Potions master had been Summoned, and then she sneaked as unobtrusively as possible back into the Gryffindor common room. It was with great relief that she discovered that Ron had dragged Harry off for something Quidditch related.

Hermione therefore felt no compunction about going up to her dorm with the Map. Wherever Harry was, he clearly had no expectation of using it right now, and it wouldn't really be polite for her to just wander into the boy's dorm to return it while they were gone.

She settled onto her bed with several school books and the Map. It was only just past eight in the evening. It was likely to be several hours before her roommates returned.

Time passed inordinately slowly. A permanent-until-countered Tempus prevented her from casting the same spell over again every three minutes, which the stupid spell insisted was the trend otherwise.

Eight became nine, nine became ten, ten became eleven, and finally, midnight was imminent. Hermione could have sworn that someone had cast some sort of Time-Slowing Charm. Or maybe an Unproductive Charm. The hours couldn't possibly have taken so ungodly long to pass and yet left her with so little to show for it. Four hours that had felt like twenty-four should surely have yielded more than half a paper on the current British Royals and their interaction with wizards, shouldn't it have? She'd changed into her pyjamas before ten in the hope that the evening would start progressing at a normal rate thereafter, but she'd had no such luck.

Parvati and Lavender swept in just before midnight, and there was a flurry of activity as they prepared for bed. Hermione resolutely shut her curtains, charmed to prevent any light from showing through them, and stared at the Map. She shook her head and set it aside. She would be productive.

Half twelve. She could hear the deeper breathing that indicated her roommates were asleep. She was starting to feel more than a little antsy. What good would it do her, after all, if she saw on the Map that Professor Snape had returned? He would be way down in the dungeons, and there would be no way the little dot on the parchment could tell her if he was in good health. What if he was in need of medical assistance? It would be thoughtless, cruel even, for her to remain sitting up here in the safety of her bed and only watching on the Map to get an update on his situation. Sitting in bed didn't help either of them.

There was nothing for it. Masking herself, she went back into the Gryffindor common room, out the portrait hole, down the stairs, and down, and down, until she'd snuck into the dungeons and made her way to the side exit that she presumed Professor Snape favoured. It was closest to his office and quarters, anyway.

Seating herself on the floor, she unMasked but cast a strong Notice-Me-Not, got out the Map, and settled in for what she sincerely hoped was not as long a wait as the last four hours had been.

By half one, the homework she had chosen not to bring as a useless endeavour was starting to look pretty appealing. It seemed a much better investment of her time than concentrating on not thinking about all the ways that Professor Snape could be horribly cursed to death. There simply shouldn't be so many options, she shouldn't be able to think about it for so long. What was wrong with everybody, thinking up such stupid and destructive spells? It was outrageous.

It was almost two in the morning before she was startled out of her worried stupor by movement in her vicinity. She looked down at the Map. Yes, it was Professor Snape, he was finally back, and what on Earth had taken them the entire night?

As he stumbled into her field of vision, not even Disillusioned, she had at least part of her answer. Making sport with the Potions professor had apparently featured prominently. She leapt to her feet, causing him to start badly as he finally noticed her in the dim light of the corridor, but she positioned herself under his shoulder, and his body let her take some of his weight even as his mouth was forming words of protest.

"I'm fine. Return to your dorm immediately."

She ignored the words. "Let's get you back to your rooms and lying down. You can yell at me then."

The fight went out of him, and she felt a moment's alarm that his capitulation had been so swift.

Together, they hobbled through the dungeon corridors. Even through the thick layers of clothing that separated them, she could feel the tremors that wracked his too-thin frame, sporadic ones of particular violence throwing off his balance and making the two of them lurch in an ungainly manner as she struggled to keep them on their feet.

After what seemed like an unreasonably long amount of time given the short number of corridors that separated their point of origin from their destination—time was behaving very strangely tonight—they reached his private quarters. He rasped out the password, and they stumbled inside.

She couldn't spare any concentration to actually process what the sitting room they were in looked like; she was more concerned about getting them across the seemingly vast space, around the many obstacles that were in their path, and through the door on the wall opposite, which from his terse "bed" and inclination of the head, she took to mean led to the bedroom.

The lights had sprung up to about a quarter lit when they entered, so it wasn't impossible to see. It was Severus's increasing lack of coordination—which told her he was nearing the end of his energy reserves—which made it difficult for them to get round the footstool, the pile of books, the coffee table, the second pile of books, and the desk. When he could walk without difficulty and unsupported, she was certain that he wove around all of them unconsciously. It was extremely unlikely that he had them arranged to make it as difficult as possible to get from one side of the room to the other, but that was what it felt like right now.

Goal finally reached, they stood rather unsteadily just inside the door and caught their breath for a moment; he might be underweight, but he was still far heavier than she was. The violence of his shudders continued unabated, and she mentally cursed whoever had invented the Cruciatus.

The light in the bedroom was perhaps half the regular strength. It was more than enough for her to see that his normally sallow complexion had gone positively ashen, even his lips colourless, making him look horribly unhealthy. Sort of like a walking corpse, but she wouldn't allow her thoughts to go there.

"Bed," he repeated.

She couldn't just put him into bed in the state he was in, so she turned to face him and struggled to remove the heavy cloak that he was wearing. Her fingers didn't seem to work properly, but she finally managed it, and the black fabric fell to the floor with a heavy thump, unnaturally loud in the quiet room. Her eyes followed its descent, and that's when she noticed that she was covered in blood, the crimson stain garishly noticeable on her light blue pyjamas, whereas it had blended into the dark wool of the Death Eater garb. Now that she knew it was there, she could smell the cloying copper tang. It was strong enough that she couldn't fathom how she'd missed it before.

"Oh, my God," she said somewhat blankly.

He pulled away from her, although she had to reach out and grab his upper arms as he nearly overbalanced. He immediately disentangled himself again, taking care to do so more slowly this time so that he could stay up on his own. Or rather, back up slowly to the bed and prop himself up against the nearest post so that he didn't collapse in front of her.

"I told you to go," he snarled, the effectiveness diminished by the weakness of his voice.

"You need help!" she yelped, his attempt at harshness finally compelling her to action. "You need Poppy." She latched onto the concept. "I'll get Poppy."

"I'm fine," he said flatly.

She looked down at herself and then up at him with disbelief.

The words were gritted out through clenched teeth: "It is not my blood."

Not his…. Oh. She was at once immensely relieved that he wasn't more injured and rather disturbed that she was covered in the blood of a complete stranger—probably a stranger whom she could never meet because he or she had recently died a horrible death.

The Slytherin facing her was eyeing her defiantly, clearly expecting a meltdown. "I told you," he ground out.

He was expecting to be judged, she realized suddenly. He expected her to condemn him. She faced him squarely.

"Since I became involved in this war at the age of twelve, I have been covered in my own blood as well as that of a number of my classmates, various Order members, my dying neighbours, and people I don't know. My primary feeling right now, I assure you, is relief that this blood is not yours."

He stared at her for a long moment, gauging her sincerity, she supposed, and she relaxed her mental shields to help quash his lingering doubts.

He gave a curt nod.

"So," she said in as business-like a manner as she could manage, "would a shower help or hinder?"

His look made it instantly clear that a shower with her in the room was not going to happen.

"Then we need to get you cleaned up and into bed," she said with an authority she didn't really feel.

His look was very wary.

She gave him her most cheerful and blithe Gryffindor smile. "A Scourgify, and then I'll show you this really neat spell I learnt that undoes lots of buttons." She knew there had been a good reason for her to memorize that random bit of knowledge.

He had to be feeling awful because he acquiesced with no more than a scathing look that eloquently expressed what he thought of her manner.

The spells she had listed did exactly what they were supposed to, Vanishing the blood on both of them and then making quick work of the myriad buttons on his school robes. She had to help him take them off, his first two attempts ending unsuccessfully and his reluctant resignation finally making her assistance possible.

It was with something akin to shock that she realized she had never once seen him without his robes on. Even during his time at Grimmauld Place, he had always appeared "properly" garbed, at least in the presence of his students.

Underneath all those buttons was a white button-down and black trousers. It made him look very human, and his malnourishment became evident. Both these pieces of clothing were immaculate, and her surprise must have shown.

"Low-level Repelling Charm. No one looks under the robe."

Clever. Which shouldn't really come as a surprise, she realized, given who she was dealing with. It also meant they didn't have to deal with any awkwardness over the removal of any other articles of clothing, and that was brilliant.

Their combined effort to get him into bed wouldn't have won any awards for style, but the deed was accomplished. He tried to sit up again to get to his shoes, but she shoved him gently but firmly back onto the bed and did it for him. The seizing muscles seemed more pronounced when he was lying in the bed. He was letting out little distressed breaths and pained exhalations out of his nose, at the worst moments, and it was painful just to watch.

"How do you usually manage this on your own?" she demanded, appalled.

"S'not usually this bad," he slurred, wariness returning as he realized what he had just admitted to her.

"Do you have anything that helps?"

"Blue vial. Cabinet in the bathroom."

She found the bathroom, the cabinet, and the vial, and tried not to think too hard about why there were almost a dozen little blue bottles lined up in there.

His hands were shaking so hard that she knew he'd only spill the dose that he needed, so she unscrewed the lid and held it up to his lips. He gulped it down, and even in the serious situation, her lips twitched in wry humour at the grimace that crossed his face.

"I didn't make it for its taste."

She schooled her expression, nodding with what she hoped was due seriousness. His lips tipped up ever so slightly, and she felt as though she'd received a full-fledged grin. Setting the now-empty vial aside, she pulled the bedcovers up around him, hoping this would make him seem slightly less sickly or at least make her feel as though she'd done more to help him.

Several minutes passed, and it was a "no" on both counts.

"Your potion's going to kick in any minute, right?" she finally asked and knew she sounded as worried as she felt.

"'Ll knock me out."

Not soon enough, apparently, because he was still lying there in horrible pain after another handful of minutes had passed.

"Isn't there anything else that will help?"

He was in the uncommon position of being one of the only people to suffer repeated exposure to the Cruciatus over an extended period of time. Well, the other Death Eaters were probably in the same boat, but she cared very little for them. As far as it went for victims, the lucky ones experienced a brief bout that was over and not repeated—as Harry had done—while the unlucky ones were usually tortured to death or madness. There wasn't a lot of research on that middle ground, and the dearth of palliatives and the hole in her knowledge was especially galling right now.

His speech was even more slurred, and she thought that perhaps the potion was starting to take effect. "'Nother person."

Unfortunately, she didn't understand his response. "Another person what?"

"To touch," he whispered.

Huh. Not an answer that she had been anticipating. Likely not one that he would have given in his right mind, either. But it was brutal to be here and helpless, so Hermione would happily try this, even if it was a little … outlandish.

Hoping skin on skin contact was not the crucial feature, she circled the bed and climbed in from the other side, sliding under the crisp sheets and telling herself sternly that this was not awkward, it was healing.

"'Cha doin'?" he mumbled.

"Touching you," she whispered back since no terribly wonderful and rational answer to that question sprang to mind.

He was lying on his back, and after a moment's awkward consideration, she moved so that she was pressed against his side. This way, most of her weight was still on the bed, but she was providing a fair bit of contact without actually climbing on top of him or anything like that. Her head rested on his shoulder in this position, and her right arm lay across his chest, hand resting over his thankfully steadily beating heart.

Each of his convulsions now shivered through her as well, but she could feel the material between them warming against her and trusted that his cool skin would soon be doing the same. This was something, at least, some concrete contribution that she could make to help him heal.

If Harry or Ron could see her now, she knew they wouldn't react well, but she found the prospect of her best friends' displeasure curiously unimportant. It was a little difficult to argue that she was simply doing what had to be done because the thought of Ron or Harry doing this for their Potions professor was completely ludicrous. But the thought of not having come down and waited for him, the thought of the grim man being forced to stumble to his quarters himself and try to crawl into bed…. He wouldn't have made it, she was sure, and the image of him in agony on the floor of his sitting room was jagged and hurtful.

An arm settled softly across her shoulder, long fingers curling into her hair, and she wondered how altered his consciousness had to be for him to be quasi-embracing her. Despite the cleaning charm and the obviously harrowing night he had been through, he still smelled faintly of potions. Spicy and herbal. Quite pleasant, really. She had to suppress an urge to nuzzle closer to his neck and try to positively identify the elusive scent. Probably that would be considered unprofessional.

It mattered a great deal to her what happened to him, she realized. She had always respected him, first as a professor and then as an Order member, but she wouldn't be doing this for Mundungus Fletcher. She'd do it for Harry … and for Ron, she supposed, but she was sure she wouldn't feel so … cozy, snuggled up to either of them as she did next to Severus. This was definitely Severus, she decided firmly. Even if he never invited her to use the name aloud, he couldn't stop her from using it in her head.

It was warm and comfortable now in the bed, and his inadvertent movements had dropped off sharply, now just an occasional twitch. His deep breathing told her that his potion had finally had the correct effect. Or perhaps it was the cocoon of warmth they had created, the rhythmic rise and fall of their chests.

She had not discerned any actual magic taking place, but there was a tickle in her mind, a feeling she couldn't quite identify … almost like what she felt when she was in unicorn form, as though magic that couldn't be seen by human eyes was floating around them, and now it had settled against both of them. Or maybe their magic had coalesced and merged a little around them. Somehow, it felt as though they had been rendered into one unit, and that felt indescribably right.

This sense of rightness was her last impression before she fell asleep.

Hermione blinked back to the present, distancing herself a bit from the memory. She had woken up just after five in the morning and scared herself silly, not by being surprised by her surroundings or alarmed by being in the Potions master's arms but because it still felt incredibly right to be there. Her first, half-conscious thought on waking had been that she could happily wake up like that every morning, and an alarmingly strong part of her had wanted to just close her eyes again and go back to sleep, basking in the heat and sense of safety Severus generated.

It was this thought that had finally jolted her into complete wakefulness and helped her regain what was left of her obviously mentally incapacitated mind. She wouldn't be safe if she went back to sleep and he woke and found her there. No, she'd be a little smudge on the floor, and Harry and Ron would never find her body.

So she'd inched her way painstakingly out of his embrace, praying to all the gods she'd ever heard of that whatever potion she'd helped dose him with would keep him sleeping soundly until she was all the way out of his quarters.

At the door to his bedroom, she'd risked a last look back. He had been sleeping peacefully, his face more relaxed in slumber than she saw it at any other time. It had seemed to be wiped of worry and not in that artificial "stone face" that he so often employed. This had been natural and … and charming. He wasn't beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, but he was vastly appealing. She'd still felt a strong urge to climb back into bed with him or at least kiss him on the cheek or….

She'd high-tailed it out of there at that moment, pursued by her distinctly less-than-platonic thoughts. And the thoughts had simply refused to be banished. In fact, they had spawned more thoughts, had forced her to examine past behaviour, and had quite loudly declared to her that she was very interested in this man in a way that she hadn't really ever been interested in anyone before.

She was a student and a Gryffindor and best friends with Harry Potter. If Severus was employing a "three strikes, you're out" policy, she was doomed. He'd probably been barely conscious when he wrapped his arm around her, and he probably hadn't had the slightest idea whom he was holding…. But she couldn't seem to totally shake the insane hope that grew tenaciously within her. He didn't usually seem to loathe her, and there were moments where he was really quite decent to her…. Maybe once she graduated, she could sound him out on the idea of getting to know her better? And casually drop into the conversation the fact that she was a Pure Adult, and she'd really like it if he were her first? She grimaced. She was doomed.

Frowning at the room around her, she realized that it had to be getting rather late. If the Death Eaters were having the "entertainment" in, then maybe it was nearly over and they could all be put out of their misery. If, on the other hand, they were going out—Oh, bugger.

She'd left Harry's door open, not even pretending she wasn't listening for sounds of disturbance, and here they were. She hurried into his room. He was moving erratically, seemingly alarmed that he was tangled in his sheets. Whimpers of distress were clearly audible. Without hesitation, she climbed into the bed and cuddled up to him, holding him close.

He gripped her tightly as though she were a lifeline. After the first time Harry had woken up to find her in bed with him, he had confessed himself worried that he would react badly to her presence, taking her for one of the Dark figures in his dream and lashing out accordingly. The truth of the matter, as it turned out, was exactly the opposite. Touch-deprived and ignored as he had been as a child, the unconscious Harry craved contact and concern and wasn't afraid to take what was on offer.

Getting out of the bed again once Harry-vine had attached himself was what proved to be a challenge; if she did manage to wriggle out of his grasp, it tended to reduce him to whimpering at the loss of contact, and there was absolutely no way she could leave him in such a state. Thus the reason why she sometimes spent the entire night in his bed.

There were other times when his nightmares seemed to be of a milder variety and resting her hand on his back or brushing the hair out of his face was enough to soothe him adequately so that he fell into a deeper slumber, and she was able to return to her room.

At first, it seemed as though her physical presence was going to have a useful impact. Snuggling up against her warm body had brought about a discernable decrease in the noises he was making; maybe she'd been wrong, and this was just a run-of-the-mill nightmare, nothing extra for her to worry about.

She sighed. Or maybe he'd start thrashing more wildly, sweat suddenly soaking his skin, whimpers of distress emerging furiously, and she'd know he was trapped in a vision.

Hoping she was wrong, she tried to shake him awake, loudly calling his name. This had no discernible effect. No one had successfully woken him from one of these episodes before, and they were never, ever pleasant.

Spurred on by her memory of helping Severus in an unconventional way, a fresh idea sprang into Hermione's mind. Maybe she couldn't get him out of the vision, but perhaps she could join him in it?

Fawkes? she requested. A little help, if you please.

I don't think this is a good idea, Berit. He sounded, in fact, extremely doubtful, and the use of the herd's name for her indicated his seriousness.

No, she agreed. But he suffers so much alone; I'm going to help in any way that I can.

Very well.

She felt the pull as Fawkes connected their two minds, and then suddenly she was sucked out of sight of the phoenix, rushed along a mental connection that was dark and tunnel-like, and slammed to a sudden halt. She felt winded despite knowing that she had no breath here.

What the hell was that?

What are you doing here?

She turned the mental projection of her head and found that the mentally projected Harry was at her side.

I couldn't wake you. I thought you could use some company.

You shouldn't be here, he whispered, horrified.

Neither should you, she said softly. If you can suffer through it, so can I. Where is 'here', anyway?

Harry shook his head. We were already here when I arrived. How did you get here?

Followed you. It's a long story.

He regarded her through slightly narrowed eyes. I think you have a lot of long stories these days. He seemed to let go of most of his annoyance at the fact, however, when he asked much more mildly, Sooner or later you'll catch me up?

I think we all have a lot of secrets these days. I—Movement in front of them caught her attention, and she turned back to survey the scene in front of her. What are they doing?

Harry shook his head. There were a couple of blokes, night watchmen I guess, that they were killing when I first got here. But he's ordered the others out to do whatever, and this is the first of them back.

Voldemort had been standing alone in the lobby of an impossible-to-identify building. It looked to have been built a couple of decades ago and wasn't terribly well lit. Attempting to move closer and examine the details further, Hermione discovered that such movement wasn't an option. Their minds had provided them with the constructs of physical selves, but it apparently didn't afford them correspondent free rein to move about the scene at will. Hermione wanted to rail at that ill luck but realized that the only other position Harry had had in such visions was in Voldemort's mind, and she'd take this third-person position any day of the week over that option.

She wondered if it was Harry's increased Occlumency abilities that had allowed him to distance himself a little from the scene or if this view was for another reason entirely.

It was Wormtail who had joined his master, shuffling into view and appearing obsequious. If they couldn't recognize his mannerisms and voice, the gleaming silver hand was a dead giveaway, making the mask quite useless at hiding who he was.

"Everything is prepared, my Lord," he said, an annoying mixture of excited and anxious.

"Splendid." The 's' was an extended sibilant, the cold pleasure disturbing to hear. "Bring them in."

Hermione's blood ran cold when she saw who was being brought in, and Harry clutched painfully at her arm. A row of little children, seven in all, still in their nightclothes and clearly terrified, ranging in age from what looked to be about six to thirteen. Their movements were stiff and jerky, suggesting that one of the Death Eaters had spelled their compliance. They were followed by two adults who were being held at wandpoint by two Death Eaters. Hermione assumed that these were the workers at what she now guessed was an orphanage.

"Severus."

The masked but recognizable man stepped to the head of the little line at Voldemort's command and pulled out a small green glass bottle from which he removed the stopper. An inkling of what was about to occur made Hermione's gut clench.

A second Death Eater, who had the bearing of Lucius Malfoy, not to mention his white-blond hair, pried open the jaws of the child at the front of the line, and Severus let two drops fall into the child's mouth. Without so much as a sound, she dropped to the ground and didn't move again.

Two hulking Death Eaters picked the tiny form up and rearranged it in the middle of the lobby according to Rodolphus Lestrange's direction. The second child followed in the wake of the first, and then the third.

Harry and Hermione were holding onto one another now, helpless to do anything but watch. The young blonde woman who looked to be in her late twenties pleaded for the lives of the children and offered herself in their stead. She was tortured with the Cruciatus until Voldemort finally seemed to tire of the screams of the remaining children and ended it with the Killing Curse. A shudder rippled through Harry at the flash of green light.

Severus resumed. Four. Five. The second adult, a burly moustachioed man who looked to be in his late forties, burst out of his captor's grasp and dove for Severus. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Six. Seven. The last body hit the ground and was dragged over to join the grotesque pile Rodolphus Lestrange had made, lifeless faces staring blankly towards the door, arms and legs all askew, piled there like so much garbage.

He produced a long knife and at Voldemort's nod, slit the throat of the man who had tried to interrupt them. He proceeded to dip his fingers in the blood repeatedly, laughing a little as he wrote on the wall. Hermione had to wonder if he'd gone more than a little crazy since the death of his wife, or maybe it was noticeable now because she wasn't there to be even more outrageous.

The two workers and the two guards were moved to new positions as well, all four propped into seated positions against the wall, a parody of them keeping watch over the children. Thin trails of blood oozed down the wall to reach them.

Finally, they were done, five of the six Death Eaters Apparating away at the instruction of their master. Rodolphus Lestrange opened the main door and made sure that the carnage was clearly visible. Then he raised his wand and pointed it at the sky.

"Morsmordre!"

A green glow painted the sky, and the last thing Harry and Hermione heard were twin peals of cruel laughter as Lestrange and Voldemort Disapparated.

A vertigo-inducing tug and Hermione and Harry were out of the vision and peripherally aware that they were capable of consciousness back in his bed. All they could see behind their closed eyelids were the letters daubed across the wall, reminding them so clearly of a young Tom Riddle and another monstrosity:

THIS is the result when I poison children.

She and Harry clung to one another. The tears that she had been mentally crying continued to wend their way down her physical face, soaking into the sheets and wetting Harry's hair.

Still quasi-connected, Hermione succumbed to Harry's exhaustion and the influence of the sleeping potion she had given him earlier, and there was blessed unconsciousness.

Chapter Eight: The Reports

Hermione opened her eyes, uncertain what had woken her. Harry slept on, his head pillowed against her chest, his hands clutching at her waist in his standard post-nightmare desire to have human contact and know he was not alone.

She did not sense danger, didn't feel a mental connection to Fawkes or Castina, but there was a lingering certainty that something specific had woken her.

The whisper was right next to her ear. "Severus."

The volume was louder than it would have been for the first iteration, so the word had been repeated at least once. Since Hermione's hearing was more acute than Harry's and he the one who had actually ingested the Sleeping Draught, it had woken her and not him, and she stopped the spell before that could change. Now she just had to get out of Harry's grasp so she could answer the doo— Oh, bugger.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, it honestly had. Severus was the nearest professor, the nearest Order member, and someone she trusted implicitly now, despite how crazy Ron and Harry might think that made her. It had meant that Fawkes wouldn't have to monitor them quite so carefully.

Sending up a silent prayer, she twisted her head around so that she could see the door that she had, naturally, left open when she leapt up to come to Harry's aid. Silhouetted against the banked fire of the common room was a tall human shape.

He had evidently seen or heard her movement and grasped the completely wrong end of the stick, because he whirled away.

Without considering what she was doing, she thought a Muscle-Relaxing Charm at Harry and was able to slither out of his grasp. She bolted through the door, threw up a Silencing Charm behind her, and caught Severus with his hand reaching for the gargoyle.

"Severus!"

He turned back, his carriage stiff, his entire body radiating tension. His clothing revealed that he had come here before even stopping off in his own quarters, although the mask was not in evidence.

His voice was utterly devoid of emotion, the words chillingly formal: "I beg your pardon; I had no intention of interrupting you."

"You weren't interrupting anything," she explained hurriedly. "I was just there bec—"

"Spare me the details," he cut in impatiently. "I was under the impression that Mr Potter might be in distress. I was clearly mistaken."

"He was," she protested. "That's why I—"

"I won't trouble you further." He turned back towards the door.

"Will you let me finish a goddamned sentence!" she snarled. Warily, he turned back. "I was there because Harry was in distress."

Severus's voice was acid. "You will have to forgive me if I do not sympathize with the trials of a spoiled teenager."

Her tone was equally biting. "But will you sympathise with those who had to watch firsthand the results when Voldemort poisons children?"

His face drained of what little colour it had. "You saw—?"

"Yes. So you will have to forgive me if I offered Harry what comfort I could. Now, is there a good reason for me to wake Harry so that he can go speak to Albus with you, or is it likely that you saw everything of import?"

His voice was clipped. "You must be fully aware of the position I occupied in the night's events. That rather covers the important parts, don't you think?"

Sometimes the man absolutely infuriated her. She offered a show of support, and look where it got her.

"As you say," she therefore agreed, switching to a business-like manner. "I will let Harry sleep off the draught I gave him, and he can speak to Albus later if necessary."

"Fine," Severus agreed tersely.

He whirled for the door again, and this time she didn't try to stop him. Instead, she went back to Harry's bed and found the Gryffindor boy shifting restlessly around. With a sigh, she climbed back into bed, although this time she sat up against the headboard, knowing that sleep would be elusive for her for the rest of the night. She shifted over until she was in Harry's half of the bed and watched with a slightly pained smile as he homed right in on her body heat and settled into a more restful slumber with his head pressed against her thigh and an arm thrown across her legs.

She wished the idiot man wasn't so difficult sometimes. She hadn't even had the chance to make sure that he was all right. It had been all she could do not to offer to be there herself when he told Albus, but Severus's temper had made it clear that she'd be flayed alive even for suggesting it.

Instead, she was stuck here playing security blanket for Harry. If anybody deserved one, it was him, but this was really not the way she wanted to spend the rest of her night. If helping Severus was out, she could really have used the calm of the unicorns, and soaking up some light would surely burn away some of the sludge that she felt had seeped into her soul.

Carding her fingers gently through Harry's messy hair, she wished uselessly that she could be doing this for Severus instead. She somehow doubted that Severus's hair was as silky as Harry's, but she would put up with all the grease in the world if only that were an option to her. No matter how much he was likely to deny it, she was sure that the Slytherin needed comfort that he wasn't getting from anyone. The fact that he was clearly uninterested in getting that comfort from her was unfortunate, but it didn't change her desire to offer it.

It was almost beyond her comprehension how he could keep going back to Voldemort time after time knowing what he would have to face. He was without a doubt the bravest person she knew because Harry and Albus and the other Order members simply didn't have to put up with the horror that Severus withstood on a daily basis. She and the others were permitted to squarely align themselves with the Light, to proudly deny Voldemort, to engage in periodic pitched battles but to be able to retreat, to turn off, to take a break.

It affected them everyday, but they didn't have to spend every moment knowing that a slip could mean their lives, knowing that most of the people they were trying to save thought them cold-blooded killers and no better than the monster they pretended to serve. Severus had to do a crucial and desperately important job that forced him to participate in events like the one that she and Harry had just witnessed, and it broke her heart to think about him having to go back again and again.

She desperately wished that they knew how to kill Voldemort, that they had enough training, that they could just march out there and end this today. She was tired of Voldemort calling the shots, of Severus being at his beck and call, of the pinched faces of her classmates when friends and relatives were killed. They all carried on as best they could, but there was only so much they could take before they cracked. Severus was out there on the front lines all the time, and the thought of losing him to this war absolutely terrified her.

It was almost enough, in fact, to convince her to tell him of her feelings now; what if one of them didn't make it? Could she really live with herself if he died without knowing? Or if she passed on to that next great adventure first? Would she not want him to know the truth before it became impossible for her to impart it?

But everything had gotten so complicated since she had learnt about Pure Adults. "Just" telling him about her feelings was no longer possible. Plus she had a pretty good idea of how he'd feel about a student confessing her affection, and being laughed out of the room didn't feature terribly high on the list of things she wanted to put herself through. She didn't want him to know if all he was going to do was mock her with the knowledge.

No, she decided, her feelings would have to be one more reason for her to see that both of them came out of this war in one piece. She could … she could tell him at the victory celebration. They'd both be free then. Since it was sadly unlikely that the war was just going to up and end tomorrow, she'd probably even have graduated by then, which meant that if the situation went completely pear-shaped—as there was a good chance that a declaration of feelings to Severus Snape would do—then she wouldn't have to face him every day. But she wouldn't be a coward. She'd have told the truth.

Somehow, indefinitely dated as it was, this resolution made her feel better. She snorted at herself. Probably the indefinite future date was what was improving her mood. So much for bravery and seizing the moment. But self-preservation was important, too, and she really thought she shouldn't maximise her chances of having her heart broken in the middle of a war.

Harry woke before six, a sudden deep intake of breath indicating full wakefulness and full memories.

"Hey," she said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," he answered, pushing himself off her and upright. He hastily corrected himself with a grimace, "I mean, horrible about what happened, but normally my head feels like it's about to explode after one of those trips, and right now it's just a bit achy."

"Hmm." Her head didn't hurt at all. "I always thought that was a direct result of your link to Voldemort, but maybe it's actually because you're being forced to make a type of mental connection that you're not used to and have had no practice forging willingly."

He eyed her speculatively, and his words weren't really a question: "And yet tonight I was with you, and you do have such practice."

She nodded and confirmed, "I've been in other minds, yes."

"Perhaps now would be a good time to discuss that," he suggested firmly.

What say you, bird?

Do you think he's old enough? Fawkes asked, feigning doubt.

She gave him a mental grin. I'll take that as a yes. You'll be ready to pipe in at the appropriate moment?

And the phoenix is relegated to the chorus. Sigh.

With that theatricality, I don't see why you're surprised.

He laughed. As you wish.

She adjusted her focus outward and smiled at Harry. "Now appears to be an excellent time. But perhaps showers and clothes first?"

He acquiesced, and they met twenty minutes later on the couch, where she filled him in on the details she'd heretofore left out about the summer after fifth year.

"You've been talking to Fawkes since the end of fifth year," Harry repeated.

"MindSpeaking, but yes."

"And you didn't think to mention it?"

"Has it occurred to you that it is not only my secret to share? Fawkes waited until I was seventeen, and he's done the same for you."

"I've been seventeen since the end of July."

As though she didn't know that.

"And there wasn't a pressing need for him to butt in then. You had a lot to deal with as it was."

Butt in? Excuse me, annoying girl, but I think you should stop explaining this so poorly.

From the look on Harry's face, the comment was addressed to both of them, so she reciprocated.

I had to say something that would precipitate a response, didn't I? she asked archly.

And asking nicely wasn't an option?

She shook her head, mentally as well as physically. Not nearly as fun.

"This is…." Harry cleared his throat and tried again: This is crazy.

This is MindSpeech, Hermione corrected. Magical familiars often employ this method of communication with their human companions. They can choose to communicate with other humans at need, but those humans cannot speak with them whenever they wish. You and I, on the other hand, may bother Fawkes at our leisure.

I'm so pleased you phrased it like that, Girlicorne, Fawkes contributed with mock sourness.

Girlicorne?

Fawkes doesn't tend to use real names. You'll no doubt acquire a charming one soon enough.

If he's nice to me, he'll get a good one, unlike some people.

She laughed but added seriously, All joking aside, Fawkes is here when we need him and brilliant about rendering assistance.

She explained to Harry how the phoenix had been responsible for connecting the two of their minds since humans couldn't usually do that.

It was not difficult with the two of you, Fawkes said complacently. You are very … sympathetic to one another. Compatible.

Hermione made a face. If this is the part where you tell us that we belong together, I'm never speaking to you again.

Tempting as that possibility is, he teased, the two of you know as well as I that you are not compatible in that regard. Your fates lie elsewhere.

Thank goodness, she said with a smile, and Harry grinned in clear agreement.

If it were possible, Fawkes added, I would have suggested it on first August and avoided this ordeal.

He knows—Harry muddled to a stop and redirected his query. You know about that?

And didn't even tip me off before the Order meeting, so don't feel bad, Hermione put in before Fawkes could respond.

We take Pure Adults very seriously. Hermione received an impression of long-lived magical creatures, not just phoenixes, when he said "we". We do not speak of it before you are Adults; we would not tempt Fate. In this case, I felt you would not be alone, Berit, but there was nothing to be said before he was born. As a Pure Adult, she assumed, else that made no sense. The Order meeting served well enough to inform you of the general concept. And I know both of you well enough to trust that you weren't about to suddenly announce your status to the rest of the Order. Besides, you humans are rather touchy about the issue of virginity. Could I have casually dropped it into a conversation?

She and Harry sighed, and she admitted, I guess there wasn't much else we could have done, even if we had known.

I suppose breaking into the Ministry and stealing my scroll before it crossed Stebbins's desk and caused this whole mess wasn't really an option?

They laughed.

So, Harry asked suddenly, does this mean Hermione and I will be able to communicate like this whenever we want?

Fawkes offered a mental nod.

Harry grinned. Cool. He managed a brilliant mental image of himself with the biggest puppy dog eyes and a hopeful expression. Does this mean I can ask questions during the next Potions test?

She replied sweetly, Of course. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, and she continued, But there's no saying what grade you'd get as a result of any answers I might give you during that time.

You would consider lying to me? I'm shocked, 'Mione, absolutely appalled.

They smiled at one another, but although Harry's comment had been spoken in jest, it reminded her of the events that had actually left them appalled, the topic that could not be far from any of their minds right now.

How did Albus take the news? she asked Fawkes.

Seven children and four adults. Hermione could hear Fawkes's sadness. We lost a name from the Book.

One Muggle-born, then, and ten Muggles. All worthless in Voldemort's eyes, and all sacrificed in this instance to show up Rufus Scrimgeour.

It will be in the morning's paper.

I didn't really feel like going to breakfast, anyway, Hermione said. Harry?

Count me out, he agreed quickly. The last thing I want to do is talk about this.

Thanks for the heads up. We'll be in if Albus needs us, yeah?

As you say, Berit. Boy-bird, it has been a pleasure.

Er…. Harry didn't seem to know what to make of his name. Thanks.

Hermione suspected she now had a good idea of Harry's Animagus form.

Since neither of them was yet ready to further discuss what had occurred last night, they agreed to practice instead. The privacy of their quarters seemed to be the perfect place to explore the sympathetic magic that allowed Harry's magic to pass through her shields. This was definitely a skill that could come in handy if it was reliable, so they needed to ensure that it wasn't a fluke.

A couple of hours of hard work later, they felt as though they had a pretty good understanding of it. Harry's spells could go right through her Shielding Charm as though it weren't even there, but it was a smart shield: his spell couldn't get through the shield from the other side, so no one could use Harry's spells against them. That was why they hadn't noticed anything amiss during the beginning of class.

It seemed like the most brilliant advantage ever, but Hermione thought of Neville's parents' fate, and realized that, given who they were up against, the regular limitations of the shield continued to hinder them.

Hedwig had dropped off their copy of the Prophet and reluctantly, they unrolled it, needing to know what it said. They winced. Hermione was uncertain if any attempt had been made to suppress the truth or if this had been deliberately leaked, but sprayed across the front page was a photo of Rodolphus Lestrange's handiwork, including the inflammatory sentence. Rita Skeeter had immediately linked it to the poisoning attempt that Scrimgeour had accused Voldemort of, and she had promised to get to the bottom of the mystery, already hinting at misconduct on Scrimgeour's part.

Hermione and Harry didn't bother to do more than skim the details of what was suspected to have happened; they knew better than the paper ever would. It was indeed an orphanage which had been hit. None of the names of the children had been released, but she and Harry pushed aside the horrible picture and took the time to remember the lives that had been cut so horribly short.

It was too little and sort of pitiful, but it was all they could do for these people they didn't even know. But they had to do everything they could.

Hermione drew a deep breath. "The little redhead. With pigtails and more freckles than Ron. She had dimples and looked like she smiled a lot."

Harry swallowed. "The tall boy who looked to be oldest. Who moved to the front of the line after the woman died to protect the others as long as possible."

"The girl with long blonde hair. She covered the eyes and ears of the youngest child when Voldemort used the Cruciatus."

"The little boy who had bright blue eyes that should have twinkled like Albus's."

"The girl with short black hair who stomped on Lucius Malfoy's foot even though it wouldn't stop him."

"The brown-haired girl who opened her mouth without complaint so that he wouldn't touch her."

"The brown-haired boy who clenched his jaw so tightly that Malfoy had to use a spell to get his mouth open."

"And the woman and three men who died protecting their charges."

None of them had tried to save themselves.

"We're going to stop him," Harry swore.

"Yes," Hermione agreed.

They might not know how, but they were determined to do it. They owed it to every person who had been lost to this war. These poor people hadn't even known that a war was being waged.

Despite wishing they could stay in their room and avoid this painful subject forever, Hermione and Harry pulled themselves together and emerged for lunch. They were Head Girl and Head Boy, after all; having mourned in private, they needed to appear strong for the rest of the student population. And the entirety of the wizarding world, in Harry's case. No pressure there. She often wondered how many people ever stopped and really thought about what they asked of him.

The Great Hall was crowded with more students than usual for a weekend, few having chosen to skip the meal now that the news had hit. All the professors were present, including Severus, who looked pale and tight-jawed, but Hermione supposed that this was normal for him. She wished that he'd been able to get more rest.

Harry and Hermione confirmed with everyone who asked that they knew what had happened and deplored the tragedy.

After lunch, they narrowly broke up what looked to become a giant fight just outside of the Great Hall when Terry Boot tried to attack Theodore Nott after he loudly said that he didn't see what the big deal was, it was just a bunch of dumb Muggles and useless Muggle kids who'd died. A crowd of angry students instantly formed.

Harry had the good sense to grab onto Terry and hold him back. From the white-knuckled grasp he had on Terry's arms, it was all that was preventing Harry from going for his own wand.

"Ten points from Slytherin for your lack of sympathy for fellow human beings and for making inflammatory remarks, Nott," Hermione said coolly. "Those eleven people didn't just die, they were murdered; they had done nothing, and they were marched off to death, utterly defenceless. No one deserves that."

"Except You Know Who and the Death Eaters," somebody muttered loudly from the anonymity of the crowd.

"Not the Death Eaters, and not even Voldemort," she denied. "I will always fight against them. I will defend myself and those around me. But if I were given a choice, I would imprison the Death Eaters and Voldemort and hold them accountable for their crimes."

"And then they'd break out and kill again! You don't really think they'll stop, do you?" Another anonymous question.

"So long as they do not, I shall be there to fight them."

"And she will not be alone," Harry added, and a murmur of agreement went up from the crowd, along with some mutterings that Hermione knew were not agreement.

Her response had turned into an impromptu political platform which people were accepting, rejecting, and debating for the rest of the day. Half the members of the DA dragged her and Harry off for an argument-cum-training session. Everyone wanted to know if Harry agreed with Hermione's argument or if he just wanted to kill off Voldemort and all the Death Eaters who'd personally hurt him or his family. Many people seemed content to vouchsafe the response they were certain would be his without reference to his actual opinion.

"I want peace," Harry finally declared loudly. The argument had raged back and forth with no sign of abating by dinner time. "Like Hermione said, those who have committed crimes must answer for them, but I'm not demanding that people die."

The discussion checked for a moment and then roared on louder than before.

I'm so sorry, Hermione apologized. I was just trying to prevent a fight and show them that there's a world view out there that doesn't have a brutal pecking order.

He mentally shook his head, basically having the hang of it now so that the habitual physical movement was only slight. It's what they want right now. Theories to debate means they don't have to think too hard about the bodies in the ground.

Shall we make a break for it?

Let's, he agreed promptly.

They looked around for Ron and saw that he was engrossed in a discussion with Michael Corner that involved loud words and violent hand motions. Neither was willing to step into that one. They caught Ginny's eye instead, and she nodded as they discreetly edged for the door and made good their escape. They breathed twin sighs of relief when they reached the safety of their common room.

"I probably don't want to think about how badly that's going to be garbled in the Prophet tomorrow, do I?" Harry asked.

Hermione considered briefly. "You'll be declared a pacifist."

"Hmm," Harry agreed. "I've abandoned Britain to its fate, and it's all because of my trouble-making, secretly Voldemort-supporting girlfriend…."

"I've broken your tender heart again, haven't I?"

Harry nodded with mock seriousness. "I'm afraid so, remorseless monster."

They grinned at one another. That paper really was absurd, and like Harry, Hermione didn't want to think too hard about how much their absurd statements would likely resemble the Prophet's spin on events.

Because of the disruptive events of Friday and Saturday and the continued need to show their presence at mealtimes, it wasn't until Sunday evening that Harry dug Hermione out of her pile of school texts and parchments, and she realized they had barely seen Severus and hadn't heard anything about resuming their interrupted training. But if anyone deserved a break right now, it was Severus, and their training was one of his commitments that he could forego without threat to his life.

Besides, she would be able to keep an eye on him for three hours in Potions tomorrow, and she'd scheduled some lab time for Monday evening, so that would give her a chance to talk to him privately and see how he was holding up—without, of course, couching her worry in terms that could be remotely construed as concern, because that would only offend him.

On Monday morning, Harry's pacifist leanings—which were, of course, actually all-too-transparent attempts to hide his cowardice—were blown out of the water. Someone had dug deep enough, and the secret of Pure Adults had been uncovered. It was couched in terms of incredulity, however, those "sober minds" at the Prophet unable to fathom that Scrimgeour had jeopardized his career for a myth. The newspaper, with Skeeter at the head of the pack, was quite willing to very firmly lay Friday's eleven deaths on Scrimgeour's head, and there were calls for his immediate resignation and an official inquiry.

Hermione and Harry felt as though they'd been caught in a very disconcerting eye of the storm; after the first moment of shock and relief that the secret was finally out, they'd realized that everyone appeared to have missed the crucial detail. People had followed the Prophet's lead and focussed single-mindedly not on the supposed reason why he'd done it, but on Scrimgeour's actions.

The two of them were staying well out of that debate, Harry certain that any opinion he offered would be used as a rallying point to support or condemn Scrimgeour. Given what they knew of the situation, they were privately of the opinion that Scrimgeour did hold some of the blame, but it wasn't as though he had told Voldemort to attack the orphanage or actually assisted in any way, nor was Voldemort an upstanding citizen who'd suddenly been turned to a life of crime because of one stupid statement made by the head of the M.L.E.

Potions on Monday proved to be troubling. Severus was present, obviously, but he ignored their part of the room entirely, not checking up on their progress and not making a single snide remark. She couldn't even try to catch his eye because he did not glance in Harry and Hermione's direction even once.

Normally, he sniped at them worse than ever when he was cross, so this avoidance was difficult for her to interpret. In the lab tonight, at least, it would be impossible for him to ignore her, so she would get her answers then.

That, at least, was her firm intention. When she got to the lab at eight o'clock that evening, her thoughts were immediately derailed by the fact that her area had been completely dismantled; there was not a single trace of her equipment, supplies, or ingredients. Even the potions she had been working on appeared to be gone. They'd had an arrangement and he'd just … just been a total bastard, really, and she hadn't anticipated his doing that, not in the private lab, where he could be counted on to be reliable, if not always cordial.

She stood there, stunned and fuming, until he appeared. The fact that this had taken thirty minutes had done nothing to improve her mood.

"How dare you!" she yelled the second she saw him, too angry to consider what she was doing. "Do you have any idea what I was even working on? Why would you do this?"

He pulled himself up to his full height and positively loomed, his expression one of utter disdain. After a moment of disconcerting déjà vu, she recognized it as full Death Eater mode.

"If you fail to remember the terms of our agreement, Miss Granger, then allow me to remind you: you work around my schedule, and I find that it no longer admits for you."

"While I fail to see that anything spectacular has varied in your schedule between last week and this one," she gritted out with forced politeness, "I will concede your right to use your lab as you see fit. Since I do not, however, see that you have suddenly needed to use the entire lab since I was last here, I believe it was uncalled for to dispose of my work."

"It was in the way," he declared flatly, not giving an inch.

She bit back her immediate urge to accuse him of lying to her; she was angry, not suicidal.

"When will I be able to resume my work?" she asked as calmly as she was able.

"Not in the foreseeable future," he responded promptly.

Reciting the Elder Futhark rune alphabet in her head prevented her from getting detention for the rest of her stay at Hogwarts.

"Where would you recommend that I now brew potions?"

"You appear to have a spare bedroom in your quarters; convert that into a lab."

All thoughts of not getting detention flew out of her head. "Is that what this is about?" she said incredulously. "You won't let me use the lab because you found me and Harry in bed together?"

He sneered. "Miss Granger, the sexual exploits of my students are of absolutely no concern to me."

"I'd like to think that was the case," she spat back, not even bothered by the fact that she was not being completely truthful, "but for someone who doesn't give a damn, you're making a bloody big deal out of it!"

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for your language and tone, Miss Granger. I suggest you return to your rooms before you make it fifty."

He had never taken points from her privately before, and now that he'd done so, she realized that she had thought that he never would. Her ability to speak freely—or at least much more freely than she normally would—was a mark of their equality, of his letting her call him Severus, of their being Order members and not just teacher and student.

Rather than making her angrier, it cut the wind right out of her sails. She had been yelling at him, and she didn't suppose that was likely to get her any of the answers that she sought.

"Severus—" she began tentatively.

He lashed out instantly. "Thirty points from Gryffindor for unwarranted familiarity, Miss Granger."

She swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. And there it was. He had revoked the invitation to use his given name. It was a resounding slap to the face, and it told her quite clearly what he thought of her and what an idiot she was for getting her hopes up. She struggled to wipe the emotions off her face but doubted she had managed it quickly enough to prevent him from catching at least a glimpse of how stricken she was.

"I apologize, sir," she said in a voice that, to her shame, trembled slightly. She firmed it out by sheer force of will. "I won't disturb you any longer, Professor."

Clenching her jaw tightly, she told herself that she would not cry in front of him. Not looking at him again helped, and since she no longer appeared to have any possessions here, all that remained was to square her shoulders, straighten her spine, and force herself to walk at a measured pace out of the room.

She started running once she hit the corridor and didn't pause until she was in the Forbidden Forest and transformed. Castina appeared almost immediately.

Berit, what has happened? she asked in alarm. What has hurt you so?

Focussing on her inner turmoil, she tried to calm down; broadcasting her emotions in a forest full of telepathic creatures was rather rude, not to mention that it made public very personal issues.

I can't be inside right now, but I would rather not talk about it. May I run with you?

The mare regarded her intently, dark eyes seeming to see into the innermost reaches of Hermione's mind despite her Occlumency shields. Hermione braced herself for the worst.

All the herd mare pronounced after that measured moment, however, was, Of course.

They ran. Part of Hermione wanted to pick a direction and simply not stop. She'd never experimented to see how long she could stay in equine form before she felt the need to be human again and eat solid food. For all she knew, she'd be able to stay as a unicorn forever if she wished it. She had always been one to face her problems, however, not run from them, and N.E.W.T.s were coming. The thought of not taking them because she was running around as a unicorn to get away from Severus was so ludicrous, it seemed humorous to her even now.

Bit by bit, therefore, she regained her equilibrium until she didn't feel like howling, screaming, or pulling her wand and cursing Severus to kingdom come. Castina began to lead her back in a loop through the Forest so that she could meet up with the rest of the herd now that she was calmer and felt able to converse with others.

She wished that she could feel as at home in the castle as she did here in the Forest right now. She knew that was largely the disappointment of tonight talking and that usually she was happy at Hogwarts, but the thought lingered. She sighed. What she needed to do was return to the castle and remind herself of the many things that she loved about it. There would just have to be a big, gaping avoidance of all things Severus and potion-related. She'd say dungeon-related as well, but since her rooms and Harry were down there, that didn't work so well.

She thanked Castina and the rest of the herd, who were pleased that she felt better yet again after coming here to run off her human frustrations. A number of them had begun to wonder how the regular humans managed, and this made Hermione laugh and truthfully respond that at this point, she had absolutely no idea.

Despite the lateness of the hour, she carefully Masked herself. The last thing she needed was another confrontation with Severus who, despite his rudeness and horrible behaviour, remained "Severus" rather than "Professor Snape" in her head. He could force verbal compliance out of her, but her mind was her own.

She scared the hell out of Harry when she reappeared in their common room. Since the gargoyle was silent when it disappeared and reappeared, and since it gave no notice of their arrival to one another, he had no indication that she was in the room with him until he looked up and she was standing right next to him.

"Bloody buggering hell!" he exclaimed, hand clutching at his chest. "Where did you come from?"

She laughed. Harry was exactly what she needed right now.

"Sorry about that," she apologized. "I thought it would be easier to reappear in here in case anyone was lurking outside."

"But how did you just appear like that?" he demanded, frowning as he worked out his feelings. "Normally I feel when you're in the room. This time it was like you didn't come into the room at all, you were all of a sudden just here."

She nodded. "Those of above-average power can easily sense when other wizards are around. It's an instinctive knowledge and functions about the same as a Muggle catching sight of someone out of their peripheral vision or hearing slight sounds from another room, say, and therefore knowing that someone is around.

"Wizards who have enough power and sensitivity to detect their own magical cores possess the ability to prevent others from seeing it. It doesn't render you invisible, but you 'read' like a Muggle. Otherwise, even when a wizard is Disillusioned, powerful wizards know that someone is around, and really powerful or sensitive ones can learn to pinpoint the location of the core."

Harry brightened suddenly. "That's why Albus can see through Invisibility Cloaks!"

She smiled. "Exactly."

"And any minute now you're going to share this skill with me?" he prompted hopefully.

"Nah," she scoffed. "I brought it up so that I could taunt you with the knowledge which I have and you don't."

He blinked, appearing uncertain for a moment, and then he cracked a wide grin. "You sounded so serious."

"You walked right into it." She smirked. "I promised back in first year that I'd use my powers for good, not evil, so you're in luck."

He rolled his eyes but listened intently as she explained how to Mask his core. He still couldn't quite prevent himself from goggling as she practiced for him and he felt her flicker in and out of his ability to sense magically.

He was powerful enough that it didn't take him long to get the hang of it, and he amused himself for several moments with moving around the room Masked and trying to startle her with abrupt unMaskings at surprising locations.

Midnight arrived, and they were both reminded of the need to take the next dose of Veritaserum by the cold tingle of the bracelets they wore; it had been easy enough for Hermione to charm the piece of jewellery to do that on top of advising them of visitors to the school.

Harry came to perch on the couch, and Hermione went to retrieve the Veritaserum. Tonight was direct from the bottle, as they were upping the dosage. The next few minutes were of particular interest to them because this adjustment would bring them from two and three quarter drops up to three. They were about to find out if the last two months' effort had actually had the desired results.

Harry immediately opened his mouth, indicating he was prepared to go first. For a disconcerting moment, all she could see were the little children who had done this on Halloween, and her hand shook so badly that she nearly lost the whole bottle. Harry, thankfully, caught on quickly, and he offered her a reassuring smile.

"We're going to get him," he reminded her.

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Right. This was one of the ways they were going to keep themselves safe to help them accomplish that goal. She nodded and measured out the dosage, dropping it onto Harry's tongue and then repeating the procedure on herself.

They gave it a couple minutes to be absolutely certain it had taken full effect. Since direct questions that required a yes or no answer were typically the most difficult to evade, she started there. They started on fifth year for questioning tonight, and she made sure to pick something as harmless as possible.

"Harry, did you hate Umbridge when she was teaching here?"

"Y—" His face twisted, and he succeeded in cutting his answer off and starting again. "No. I loved her. She was my favourite professor." He grinned at her, clearly pleased. "Hermione, was Defence Against the Dark Arts your favourite class in fifth year?"

Now that she had been asked a question, she understood his struggle. The pull to tell the truth was much stronger now, and she had to clench her jaw to prevent words from coming out without thought. But she found to her delight that the urge to tell the truth was not insurmountable; when she focussed carefully, she could control exactly what she said. "Of course it was," she answered with growing confidence. "Umbridge was such a spectacular professor, how could it not be?"

Although they could lie, they agreed that they wouldn't pass muster if they were actually being interrogated; it was too clear that they were struggling against the serum. Their tolerance wouldn't be useful until it allowed them to completely feign being under the influence of the potion.

That was why Hermione had scheduled their efforts on into December, not planning to let them stop until they were up to withstanding five drops, because by then, three should be a breeze. It would also mean that they would be covered against anyone who was a bit heavy-handed and didn't care much for their health, such as any and all Death Eaters. But unless Voldemort seriously didn't mind if they were inadvertently and abruptly killed instead of carefully tortured, it was unlikely anyone would try to give them two thirds again the correct dosage.

"You all right?" Harry asked as they finally prepared to call it a night.

She offered him a soft, sad smile. "No, but I'll manage. A good night's sleep will help."

"If you do want to talk," he offered.

She nodded. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

She retired to her bedroom but not, as it turned out, to her bed. Entering the room for the first time this evening, she discovered that there was a new door on the far wall. The window had become a little smaller to accommodate it. Curious, she went over to investigate.

What she found brought tears to her eyes. Her research had informed her that Hogwarts wasn't precisely sentient, but it was imbued with a great deal of magic, and it had been taking care of its residents for nearly a millennium. It could be especially influenced by its headmasters and also, apparently, by their familiars.

A potions lab now led off her bedroom. Perched on one of the lab stools and propped up by the marble countertop, the first thing she did was have a good cry, both extremely touched and painfully reminded of her horrible altercation with the Potions master.

When her tears stopped, she felt mildly better and resolutely wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and set out to examine her new domain more carefully. It looked to have roughly the same amount of workspace as Severus's private lab, although this room was more rectangular than square. After a moment's attempt to work out the logistics, she accepted that the room had to be bigger on the inside than the outside because, so far as she could tell, it was otherwise taking up part of the bathroom. It was a little hard for her to wrap her brain around the fact that this room now existed behind the wall in her bedroom that housed the lovely large windows that showed the view of Hogwarts. She'd always known they were enchanted, but actually being behind them was a little odd.

The windows in this room were on the long south wall—still showing a view of the Forbidden Forest in the east—and there was a set of drawers and cupboards under them for storing equipment. They were well-stocked with cauldrons, beakers, stirring rods, and all sorts of crucial tools of the trade. Most of them didn't look new, but they all looked well cared for and in good working condition.

The short west wall had a set of empty shelves and cupboards which she assumed were for her completed potions. The main area of the room was transected by three long countertops running east to west, one each of hardwood, stainless steel, and marble. She was now assured of being able to work on the optimal surface for each potion that she prepared, thus minimizing accidents and imperfect results. The length of the counters would enable her to work on several potions at once without fear of contamination.

Running most of the length of the north wall was a fourth counter which had three large sinks and drying racks. On the right-hand side of the wall was a door which led, she discovered, to her own little storeroom. Wall-to-wall shelves were stocked with vials, bottles, bags, and boxes of neatly labelled potions ingredients. This meant the house-elves had also been involved in this gift, and she had to sniff for a couple of minutes to get herself under control once more.

She began to gather up the ingredients and equipment she would need to remake the potions she had lost through Severus's temper tantrum.

You know I love you all, right?

I don't know what you are talking about. The phoenix had adopted a very lofty tone, but he sounded quite smug, so she knew he'd been in on it.

Thank you, she said sincerely. I was having a bit of a rough day.

Berit, every magical creature with any sort of perception knew that you were having a rough day.

But I never stopped Occluding, she protested. She'd realized when she saw Castina that there'd been some emotional leakage, but surely it hadn't been that bad?

She could sense his search for the proper words before he began, Think of it like a light spectrum, Girlicorne. There is a whole upper and lower range that is not part of the visible spectrum to humans, like x-rays and infrared light.

She nodded, deciding that there was no point in asking why he knew about Muggle physics. He was an immortal creature. Why not?

It is the same with the mind, Fawkes continued. Most humans have no access to one another's minds; their range is nil. Humans who know how to perform Legilimency 'see' within a limited range; those who learn to Occlude learn how to block off those ranges from others' sight. Magical creatures have varying access to a wider range. That's why Crookshanks is such a good judge of character; your emotions register within the range we can see. Your ability to speak to me and hear me is in that upper range, which is why you can still do so even while Occluding. Your … Purity is in that upper range.

She stopped short halfway between the storeroom and the countertop, a jar of dittany clutched in her hands.

What? she demanded. I have something that you recognize as Pure magic that is visible to everyone and you haven't said?

Not visible to everyone, he protested. Only to magical creatures like me. I told you I knew you were a Pure Adult.

But you're absolutely one hundred percent certain that no human could ever work out a way to see it? You're certain Harry and I aren't in any danger?

He was silent a moment too long.

You'll teach me how to Mask it. She didn't put it in the form of a question.

He sighed. When you Mask your core, you Mask everything across my range of sight as well as any human's. I will help you refine that so your basic core will still be visible but the rest won't.

She realized why he was reluctant.

You won't be able to see me as easily.

It is useful to be able to keep an eye on you. But I would not put either of you in danger. Finish your potions tonight and you and Boy-bird can begin practicing with me tomorrow evening.

She consented to this plan and got to work on her brewing. It was nearly four in the morning before she had everything cleaned up again. She managed a couple of hours' sleep before she and Harry got up at six for their morning sparring session.

Harry was going to be spending the rest of the day in homework catch up, or so he told her, as he had not been as diligent as she over the weekend. If Ron got a hold of him, she doubted this would actually happen, but that was on his head; she would be in Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies.

That evening, Harry made the mistake of asking if she'd heard anything about their next training session with Severus, but he backed right off at the look on her face. From the expression that followed on his, he'd worked out a partially accurate reason for why she had been so upset yesterday.

There was no way she was going to approach the man with a non-academic topic. If he wanted to train them, he would have to come tell them so himself.

She was relieved to see that the fifty-point loss she had accrued on Monday evening was made up on Tuesday. She had no idea who had pleased which professor, but she was grateful that it was now unlikely anyone would be trying to work out who had blundered the day before. This wasn't a topic she wanted to speak about with Harry, let alone air before Gryffindor House in general.

Three days passed with complete silence from Severus, suggesting that her new resolution of not initiating contact was going to result in no more sessions for them. She told herself that she didn't care. She and Harry continued their own training, and Fawkes had kept up his end of the bargain, allowing them to better protect themselves from a mental and magical standpoint.

By Friday's edition, someone at the Prophet had done their homework or greased the right palms properly. The news of Scrimgeour's suspension pending a full investigation was overshadowed. The existence of the orange-proof scrolls had been revealed to the world at large; the Prophet had become an official believer, and the hunt for the Pure Adults was about to begin in earnest.

Chapter Nine: The Bets

Hermione had known that once news about Pure Adults reached the general populace the reaction would be strong, but nothing had quite prepared her for the reality.

The speculation in the paper was annoying on principle. The Prophet had hit an all-time low, printing an edition with little pictures of each seventh-year student and inviting everyone's rampant speculation about their sex lives. All kinds of people whom they had never met were making rash and uninformed guesses, and the Prophet was tallying the results. Hermione tried not to dwell on these conclusions, which fluctuated wildly with each new crackpot theory.

Worse by far was the speculation at school. Not even the school's first Quidditch match of the year—which Hufflepuff won against Ravenclaw—shook people's new preoccupation. Rumours were rife, and the students here weren't just tallying, they were betting. A pool had sprung up overnight and she, Neville Longbottom, Millicent Bulstrode, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Vera Moon, and Morag MacDougal were labelled the most likely virgins.

There didn't seem to be a student in the school who wasn't trying to work out who had slept with whom, and Hermione found it extremely disturbing that she had eleven-year-olds asking her about her sexual partners. Since she was amongst those judged most likely to be Pure, she was harassed constantly and finally had to start taking away house points instead of simply threatening to do so in order to get people to leave her alone. There were plenty of sour comments about how her bad temper obviously indicated that she wasn't getting any, and she clenched her jaw and thought of all the curses she wasn't going to use on the annoying brats surrounding her.

Rumours had sprung up about every student in every house, and while it was virtually impossible to actually tell the truth from the lie, people were establishing what they thought were more or less reliable facts.

Tracey Davis had proved to be the gossip in Slytherin house, and if she were to be believed—although her veracity was by no means taken as a given—then Pansy and Draco were off the hook, as were Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey herself with Theodore Nott.

Theodore Nott, it seemed, wasn't overly picky about his choice of partners and had spent time with half of the Slytherin girls, half of the Ravenclaws girls—which would eliminate Lisa Turpin and Bronwyn Tyne from the Order's list—and even Lavender Brown, or so the rumour ran. Christopher Dempster had bashfully confessed to nights with Lisa Turpin as well as Susan Bones.

Blushing a fiery red, Seamus had been the one to reveal the news that Crabbe and Goyle were definitely not virgins. There had been copious amounts of Firewhiskey involved in an escapade in sixth year, and that was as much as Hermione had listened to.

Ginny, with that look in her eyes that said that a Bat Bogey Hex was imminent if anyone challenged or mocked her, had vouched for Neville's sexual history. Hermione didn't believe her, as it happened, but wanted to congratulate Neville on getting someone to cover for him. Whomever he had slept with was not for public consumption, evidently, and a reliable alternative was really the only way to get people to back off. Simon Slade and Morag MacDougal had dually confessed that she was not a virgin, either.

By Monday morning, Hermione, Millicent, and Vera were left in a renewed maelstrom of speculation, and Hermione was annoyed on principle that the choice had somehow been whittled down to three plain and quiet girls who didn't bloody well want to gossip about this. The three of them—all equally stubborn, apparently—were left repeating that no, they were not virgins, but it was no one's business whom they had slept with.

They repeated these words over and over again, but people kept hearing a confession of some sort, as though it was impossible that they simply wanted to retain their privacy. However, even the rabidly curious with their spotty logic recognized that it couldn't be all three of them, so everyone kept pushing.

Hermione had no idea whom Millicent had slept with, and no one else seemed to have any real idea, either. Idle gossip had linked the Slytherin with Crabbe and Goyle, but the latter two took the time on Monday to deny all involvement with her; being the people standing between the public and their desire to find the Pure Adults was not a pleasant position right now.

As for Vera, Hermione had her own suspicions which no one else seemed to share. She would never willingly be responsible for exposing a relationship when those involved in it evidently wished to keep it private, so she kept her supposition to herself.

It had been a few days after the winter term started last year. Library attendance hadn't picked up to its normal levels yet, and even Hermione had left several hours earlier. She had to go back, however, for a book she had forgotten, and in a quiet corner of the seemingly deserted library, she had glimpsed Vera and Daphne Greengrass.

They hadn't seen her, engrossed as they were in what they were reading, but Hermione had found it difficult to classify their pose as anything short of intimate. It wasn't explicit or inappropriate, but the way they were pressed together to read the shared material, Daphne's chin resting on Vera's shoulder, had spoken of great familiarity. It was possible that they were simply good friends, but Hermione had never seen them so much as acknowledge each other in the last five and a half years, so she strongly suspected a hidden romance.

Given the stigma against Slytherins consorting with Hufflepuffs or Gryffindors, Hermione didn't blame them for keeping quiet. She would have liked to show her support for their making it work against all odds, but she had known such interference was unlikely to be well-received.

Instead, she'd quietly gathered up her book and hexed the door on the way out so that a loud creaking would herald anyone else's arrival and give the two girls plenty of time to separate and act appropriately.

If Daphne was the only person whom Vera had slept with at Hogwarts, there was no safe answer that she could give now that would make people back off. Millicent likely had the same problem. Of course, maybe they just genuinely didn't think it was anyone's business like Hermione did. If only that were an option.

The three girls were also not the only ones receiving attention. There was growing query as to who had been Harry's first. No one seemed to believe he could be a virgin, but they wanted a name and were having trouble coming up with one. Parvati had nixed any rumour about their involvement during the Yule Ball. Several Ravenclaws had Owled Cho Chang, and she had been happy to share how inadequate a boyfriend he had been. That missive, charmingly, had been leaked to the Prophet and shown up in the morning's edition.

There were a fair few people who were betting on Ginny, but when she had followed Harry's lead and refused to say either way, the consensus finally seemed to be that given her brazenness about Neville, if she'd really slept with Harry, she'd already have declared it.

Hermione knew that she and Harry should confess their involvement sooner rather than later, but she found herself reluctant to take that last step. It wasn't even because of the mess that would follow. She really did believe that it was no one's business whom she'd slept with. She hated being stared at and assessed and questioned, and she didn't want to look as though she were giving in. If there wasn't a great deal more at stake, she would have had no qualms about telling them all to stuff it and never speaking another word about the subject.

Harry, like Hermione, was left telling everyone to mind their own business; people were almost as aggressive with him as they were with her, seeming to believe that since he was a public icon, they had some sort of right to knowledge of his love life.

The two of them stubbornly tried to retain some semblance of normalcy amidst the chaos, and it helped that their training with Severus had resumed over the weekend, fit in before the Quidditch match on Saturday morning. Hermione had made sure to remain polite and respectfully distant the entire time. She thought Severus seemed distant as well, but since they made it out of the meeting without anyone losing points or screaming at one another, she thought they were doing pretty well. Harry occasionally gave them odd looks but otherwise acted as though he hadn't noticed anything amiss, and it was almost the way that it was supposed to be.

By Monday afternoon, it had occurred to Ron that he didn't know the answer that the others were seeking so assiduously. And he seemed to feel quite firmly that their standard response that it wasn't anyone else's business couldn't possibly apply to him.

"C'mon mate, you can tell me." It was now four o'clock, and they were on the third floor, heading down to dinner following Charms. He was still trying to get them to spill their secrets—and acting as though their reticence was completely unreasonable.

"I'm not saying, Ron," Harry said roughly.

He'd been cajoled this way for hours and was thoroughly annoyed; her feelings were identical.

"'Mione." He turned to her as though her answer would be different than it had been two minutes ago. "It was Krum, right? You can tell me."

Not even a recitation of the Elder Futhark helped.

"What part of 'It's none of your business' do you fail to understand?" she snapped. "I'm not going to tell you whom I've slept with no matter how many times you ask! Can you not get that through your thick skull?"

They'd passed the second floor and were nearing the ground level.

He looked wounded. The only saving grace, given their situation, was that it really never seemed to occur to him that she could, in fact, be one of the virgins; if she was, she'd've evidently said straightaway in the Order meeting like the obedient little follower he appeared to be certain she was.

Suddenly, he smirked. "It was Neville, wasn't it? That's embarrassing, but—"

If she had high blood pressure, Ronald Weasley was the sole reason. She was certain she didn't want to hear how he finished that sentence. She didn't want anybody else to hear it, either, and they were arriving in a high-traffic area now, with lots of other students arriving for dinner.

"If it was Neville, it would not be embarrassing," she ground out, wondering how hard she could clench her jaw before teeth broke. "It would continue, however, to be None Of Your Business!"

He actually had the gall to roll his eyes at her. "You're impossible." He sounded annoyed and turned away from her. "So, Harry, was it Fleur?"

Who's marrying his brother! Harry exclaimed, needing to vent but appearing to have realized that saying it aloud to Ron would still have no useful effect.

You'd understand if I killed him, right? she asked hopefully, the desperate edge to her voice only mostly feigned.

I'll bloody help, he said viciously.

"It's none of your business, Ron," Harry answered firmly.

The redhead threw up his hands. "Listen to the two of you! Anyone would think you'd shagged."

They remained silent.

Damn, she swore softly. It had needed to happen, but this was not her choice as far as method and place went. Here it comes.

Three. Harry started the countdown. Two. One.

Ron stopped in his tracks, whirling to face them. "Tell me you two haven't slept together."

They exchanged looks, and Hermione gave it her best effort: "Ron, this is not the best place to discuss this."

She might as well not have spoken. His next question was considerably louder and garnered the attention of everyone in the vicinity: "Have the two of you shagged?"

"Ron," Hermione hissed.

"Bloody fucking hell! How could the two of you have sex?"

"In the usual way, I'm sure," Harry replied stiffly.

"But how could you not have said?" Ron demanded.

"I'm not in the habit of kissing and telling."

"Oh no?" Ron's face was clashing horribly with his hair. "I seem to recall learning about Cho's kiss right after it happened!"

"It's an expression, Ron." Harry's annoyance over the entire conversation came out with a great deal of condescension. "Just because I mentioned my first kiss doesn't mean I intended to share my first time with everyone. What's got you so angry? It's not like you ever showed any interest in Hermione."

"Well, if I'd realized that I could get the milk without buying the cow—!" Ron snarled.

There was a collective intake of breath amongst those who were making no effort to hide the fact that they were listening shamelessly.

Hermione latched onto Harry's arm and dug in until her nails had surely pierced skin. Tension radiated off of him almost visibly.

Don't you dare make this worse. Are you going to explain to Albus or Minerva why the two of you were brawling like hooligans?

He relaxed marginally, and she eased her grip.

She lifted her chin and regarded Ron icily, although she could feel the heat of her blush clear up to her forehead. "My 'milk' isn't available to just anyone." He managed, somehow, to get redder, quite obviously fully cognizant of her slur. She turned to the Gryffindor at her side and smiled. "Harry, I'd like to go to dinner now."

Since she was already clutching at him, albeit for a different purpose, it was quite easy for him to draw her arm through his and obediently lead her into the Great Hall, neither of them sparing a backward glance for Ron.

Hermione was certain the news had been communicated telepathically to every student before the two of them even sat down. Perhaps Ron's voice had just travelled that far. The other students had to have cricks in their necks from all the craning they were doing to get a view of her and Harry at the Gryffindor table. They'd seated themselves at the end nearest the High Table, as it lessened the chance that anyone—like, say, Ron—would make more of a scene in the midst of their meal.

The redhead, still rather red-eared, had taken possession of a portion of the bench at the very opposite end of the table and was glowering ferociously. As far as Hermione was concerned, he could sod off and rot down there. Now that averting the potential hallway crisis was accomplished, she felt free to be completely furious on her own account. Accusing her of "fraternising with the enemy" when she had gone to the Yule Ball with Viktor had been bad enough, but accusing her of being a worthless slag at the top of his voice in front of half the school was something else again.[11]

Because Harry had been quite right to point out that Ron had never made an attempt with her himself. He had never asked her on a date or done more than express irritation at her choices. He had evidently felt free to spend his nights in other people's beds—such as French exchange students and Hermione's roommates—but she wasn't allowed to make her own choices without being badly insulted by him.

He'd picked those he thought she should be embarrassed about as the people she could have slept with, and when her actual—supposed—choice had clashed with his preconceived notions, he'd had the temerity to call her easy!

It really didn't help her temper or the squirming pain that insisted on manifesting that she hadn't had very many options or offers and that she was, in fact, still a virgin.

One of the very few close friends that she had in this school, and he had said she wasn't worth any effort. That he would only have thought of her if he'd known that he could fuck her and not have to have anything else to do with her.

I could poison him in his sleep.

Harry and Hermione exchanged slight smiles at this unusual suggestion from Albus's familiar.

Are phoenixes allowed to poison people? Harry asked curiously.

We may do whatever we wish , the phoenix responded haughtily. He admitted after a moment, It is not, perhaps, a frequent choice.

Thank you for the thought, Hermione said with a sigh. I'll work more on monitoring my emotions.

A mental head shake. I got that one verbatim; I didn't have to see in your head to know you'd be annoyed.

But sadly, if we poisoned everyone who annoyed me, the wizarding population would be decimated in no time. You don't want to be responsible for the destruction of the wizarding world, do you?

Harry snorted in his head. From poisoning Ron to the death of the wizarding world. I know the Weasleys are prolific, but that's a scary leap.

She made a mental moue of distaste, protesting, Harry, I positively refuse to think of him as the father of the wizarding world and may have to go wash my brain out with soap at the thought.

I'd like to see that procedure, Fawkes piped up cheerfully.

She laughed mentally. All right, mission accomplished. I feel much better now. Is dinner over yet?

It couldn't really be considered more than halfway by most people's standards, and Harry's plate was still mostly full, but he immediately confirmed for her that the meal was most certainly finished.

At least when Harry had been suspected of being the Heir of Slytherin or of being insane, plenty of the students had been too scared to look at him. Hermione was not fond of eating under a microscope.

There was a perceptible drop in the noise level as they rose. All eyes seemed to be glued to them.

Making a show? Harry asked.

Yes, please.

Harry held out his hand and she readily took it.

Looking neither to left nor to right, the two of them strolled out of the room, passing by Ron but not looking to see what his reaction was. When they crossed the threshold, it was as though a spell had been broken, the swell of noise making them very glad that they were on their way out. They didn't stop walking or holding hands until they were in the safety of their own rooms.

"Well," Harry observed, "that could have gone better."

"You think?" she said sarcastically. "Trust Ron to bring it up at the worst possible moment and not let it go."

Harry hesitated for a moment. "It is what we wanted, though, right? For the school to find out about us?"

She sighed. "For the school to find out, yes. For Ron to call me an easy cow in the middle of the corridor, not so much."

Harry made a face of mock distress, eyes widened comically large. "That wasn't what we wanted? Guess I shouldn't have scripted the evening's events quite like this, eh?"

She was a witch and one who knew wandless magic to boot, so she didn't even have to move to lob one of the decorative couch pillows at him. His shield was a little overzealous, and the pillow sizzled out of existence on contact.

She raised her eyebrows.

He shrugged defensively. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Ensures that there aren't rebounding objects which might inadvertently injure someone on my side in a battle scenario."

She nodded. "Points for intent. Not sure our pillow was a big danger to me, though."

He wrinkled his nose at her before admitting, "It might have been a little much in this case. Care to go over to the other side of the room and toss some more dangerous projectiles?"

Hermione consented, pleased at the notion of distraction, and they doffed their robes, moved across the room, and set to work. Harry's shield was excellent for destroying rocks and other physical projectiles. There was a middle ground of spells that were almost too strong for the shield; rather than dissipating, the spells would hit the shield, wobble a little, and then bounce off at odd and unpredictable angles, which made it a little dangerous to be using when friends were around to be potentially hit. When Hermione overloaded the shield with several strong spells almost at once, the spells exploded outwards in a blinding burst of light which was rather startling.

Sweaty but pleasantly energized by their fight, they flopped back onto the couch.

"It will certainly work if you're on your own or in a small group," Hermione pointed out. "Not," she hastened to assure him, "that I'm in any way advocating your running off on your own."

He smiled. "Emergencies seem to find me regardless of my intentions; I'll keep it in mind for those unplanned scenarios."

"Agreed," she said cheerfully before rising to grab up their robes.

Early on, Harry had accepted that mess was not tolerated in the common room for any longer than necessary; their belongings could be out while they were using them but the mess should be cleaned up promptly.

Hannah and Ernie were announced, and receiving a shrug from her, Harry waved open the door.

The two Hufflepuffs blinked at the two Gryffindors.

"We can come back later," Ernie said immediately.

Given that the two had just arrived, it seemed an odd opening statement.

"There's no need," Hermione said, tossing Harry's robe into his room. What he did with his own space was his business.

"We assume you came now with a reason," Harry added, and Hermione was impressed with how mildly he'd managed to express the thought.

Hannah was already backing out of the room. "No, really, it wasn't that important. We'll catch you tomorrow."

And they were gone.

"That was … odd," Hermione pronounced.

Harry looked over at her, and his face suddenly creased into a wide grin. She raised an eyebrow in query.

"You look all sweaty, 'Mione."

"And so do you," she replied, nonplussed. "Shortly, we'll both be taking showers."

"You just collected our discarded robes and put mine in my room with a great deal of familiarity."

"Uh huh."

"What do you think Ernie and Hannah thought it was we'd been doing before they arrived?" Harry was grinning fit to burst.

The dots connected, and she couldn't believe she hadn't realized why the two Hufflepuffs had been so uncomfortable. She collapsed back onto the couch next to him, still clasping her own robe.

She was a mixture of amused and appalled. "It's going to be all over the school in seconds, isn't it?"

"We don't seem to have to do much to foster the rumour of our relationship. I'd be willing to bet it's already firmly entrenched in people's minds as verifiable fact."

"It does seem perilously easy to hoodwink the masses here," Hermione agreed. "Of course, all I have to do is think 'Heir of Slytherin', and I realize that the precedent is well-established."

Harry made a face at the reminder of that episode in his academic career. "At least nobody's going to be shunned over this."

Hermione let out a short bark of laughter. "Speak for yourself. I'm going to be lambasted." Her mood softened immediately when she saw how distressed he had begun to look. "I should obviously have been giving out pointers to help all the eager girls and boys get to know you better. Possibly I should have been writing a book."

A corner of his lip curled up. "I'm sure that would have helped, yeah."

"You let me know when your life is getting too boring for you, and I'll get right on that." She hauled herself off the couch. "All right. I have to shower so I can get to work on the Wolfsbane."

"I'd hate for you to have to tell Remus that he wasn't getting his potion on time because we were chatting about our fake love life. Go ahead."

Feeling rather more cheerful than she thought the overall situation warranted, she went, showering quickly and efficiently and then moving into the lab and continuing to work on the base that she had begun this morning.

Harry had seen the lab last week after he had tentatively expressed some concern about how much time she was now spending in the bedroom. She had not considered how it would look to him and had hastened to reassure him that her habits had not changed, only the location where she indulged them.

She had been inordinately pleased that he had taken the appearance of the lab and her relocation in a stride, not asking any of the awkward questions that he had clearly been thinking. He really could be an extraordinarily good friend.

In the excitement of having her relationship with Harry outed, Hermione had failed to immediately consider the impact it would have on anyone else. As far as the rest of the wizarding world was concerned, she and Harry had officially done the deed, and that left Vera and Millicent holding the bag, as was very garishly announced by the Prophet Tuesday morning.

There was an odd splintering of attention at this point. Hermione would have thought that finding the two Pure Adults would be the only news- and gossip-worthy fact. Yet a huge percentage of people found the time to talk about her and Harry and theorize about their relationship. The aspersions seemed to have begun in earnest with no regard for other important information.

Hermione was being given the cold shoulder by a fair portion of the female population of Hogwarts. The interested males had either decided that Harry liking females was not actually her fault or they were just being more discreet in their dislike. So far, Hermione had overheard multiple wild theories about her and Harry's first time: that she had been completing school work at the time and hadn't even noticed Harry's actions, that she had been reading a sex manual while they were having sex to make sure she got it exactly right, and that afterwards she had given Harry a formal grade with a step-by-step breakdown of his performance.

Fortunately, her anger at how ludicrous they were all being helped to counter the hurt that she did her best to push away. She knew their opinions of her shouldn't matter, but now not only was everyone speculating about her sex life, they still refused to see her as anything but the Gryffindor brain.

Harry had remarked acerbically that for a gaggle of girls who were supposedly so upset on his behalf, they were remarkably insulting to both his discernment and his abilities. He was getting a large number of offers to "show him a better time" that made him roll his eyes at the cliché.

There was even a petition made to force the two of them to be moved into separate quarters. Albus had nipped that one in the bud, reminding everyone that all of age students were allowed to have consensual relationships as long as they were appropriately conducted.

Given Severus's recent mood, Hermione was surprised that the man hadn't gone to the headmaster to complain about them being found in bed together, but perhaps he was unwilling to reveal that he'd taken the time to check on Harry following the Halloween attack. Whatever the reason, he had remained silent, so their quarters were safe. It was all annoying but not insurmountably so.

The moments that the students were not thinking about Harry and Hermione were spent obsessing over their two other targets. Millicent and Vera still wouldn't say who their partners were or had been, and this was enough to convince a number of people that the girls were lying and simply trying to deflect attention.

Some students—perhaps the same gems who'd tried with her and Harry—had apparently attempted to get Millicent moved out of the dungeons, claiming worry about Voldemort getting at her if she stayed in her own house. Albus informed everyone sternly that all students in all houses were being protected. Whatever that meant. Neither Millicent nor Vera spent much time alone, and Hermione couldn't really blame them for being worried.

There was now a great deal of solicitous behaviour towards these two, as people seemed to want to cement their place in their good graces or maybe offer themselves up as possible partners. Slytherin though she was, Millicent, like Vera, wasn't taking any of it. To each query they replied that they were, in fact, not virgins, and they were not, as it happened, looking for a partner of any kind right now.

This statement was met with polite and less-than-polite incredulity from virtually everyone, but Hermione hoped that it would prevent any serious backlash once the real truth came out. So long as Millicent and Vera were always straightforward in their denial of Pure status, no one could legitimately accuse them of taking advantage of the situation or of representing themselves as something they were not.

The Prophet, faced with no exciting news about the Pure Adults since the Tuesday morning paper that had proclaimed Hermione out of the running and Millicent and Vera as the de facto winners, had dredged up the year of the Triwizard Tournament. Skeeter was more careful this time around not to say anything grossly defamatory, but the woman was still a hard-nosed reporter, and she was happy to bring up the "odd rumour" and "old news" as frequently as she could.

Overall, Hermione didn't think this could result in many more glares than she was already receiving. Letters to the editor showed that Viktor was getting his share of sympathy now, since apparently she'd really been after Harry after all and had obviously been using the International Seeker to make the Gryffindor jealous.

Since Viktor was still in Bulgaria, and they hadn't actually seen one another for more than a few minutes at a time since fourth year, he would probably laugh himself silly if anyone sent the articles his way…. She made a mental note to post them as soon as there was a sizable number, as someone should be getting a kick out of this fiasco.

Their relationship, contrary to the belief of many, had never strayed beyond that of friendship. Viktor had once hinted that he wouldn't be opposed to more, but she had been young when they first met, and he had been a gentleman. Having school girls throw themselves at him for an entire year had been a trying experience, apparently, and a sensible girl had been exactly what he was looking for; they could talk, but he didn't have to worry that she'd make a hideous fuss over him, distract him overly, or give it a couple months and then accuse him of knocking her up and abandoning her and the baby.

They had continued to keep in touch by owl, but since there was so much war-related news that she couldn't speak about, the letters were never deeply personal. She chatted about school, making sure not to get too theoretical and lose him entirely, and he did the same for her with Quidditch. If Ron had ever realized just how much Quidditch theory was in the letters, she'd probably never even have gotten to read them, let alone keep them.

While Ron had managed to get over himself long enough to ask Viktor for his autograph at the end of fourth year, this appeared to be the biggest concession the redhead could make; barring his nasty questions in the wake of the Pure Adult fuss, he had chosen never to ask about her relationship with Viktor, and she wasn't about to enlighten him. It did seem odd that she was the one of the three of them to have an international Quidditch star as a friend, but there it was.

She would remain forever grateful to Viktor because he had helped her realize, in retrospect at least, that she was attracted to Severus. She hadn't been completely impervious to Viktor's physical charms, and for several years that knowledge had continued to niggle at the back of her mind because he wasn't terribly attractive. As Quidditch hero of epic proportions, he would never want for female companions, and he was in good shape, but on his own, he really wasn't much to look at; on land, he was gloomy and awkward.

Hermione liked to think that she would base her relationships on traits that were more than skin deep, and it was there that her mind had always stalled. Viktor was by no means stupid, but he really did prefer sports over academics, so the two of them didn't have a "meeting of the minds", either. Why the attraction, then?

Seeing Severus sleeping the morning after that hideous Cruciatus torture in sixth year had finally made everything click into place. What she had been attracted to in Viktor were the physical aspects that resembled Severus, whom she hadn't consciously let herself be attracted to. As soon as she admitted that to herself, the truth had seemed so self-evident she couldn't understand why she hadn't worked it out before. Severus was dark-haired, big-nosed, pale, and often rather grim, and all these parts made up the whole—of which she was very fond. Or usually fond; it was harder to be fond when he was being a complete and utter arsehole.

Whatever truce-like arrangement for training they had had over the weekend disappeared, and Severus took clear pleasure in every bit of pain he was able to inflict upon them during the week. Tuesday's meeting had ended when Severus simply left the room in a huff and didn't return. She and Harry had waited almost forty minutes to ascertain that he really wasn't coming back. They still didn't know what they'd done to offend him.

On Wednesday, the head of Slytherin seemed determined to make up for the abandoned training the day before, for he attacked them relentlessly.

Finally, when Harry was knocked almost unconscious by his impact with the wall after she'd been disarmed, she threw herself in front of him and took the Skin-burning Hex Severus had cast at the downed Gryffindor. Wandless Shield Charms took a lot of energy, and at this point in the evening, she had been certain she couldn't manage it.

Severus lifted the charm—which prevented further injury but did nothing for the damage already inflicted—and glared at her with evident distaste.

"Trust a Gryffindor to come to the rescue when she is defenceless."

Hermione rose to her feet, clenching her jaw and not letting herself wince as this stretched the damaged skin across her abdomen, side, and right arm.

Her voice was cold. "There is no question of my being willing to put his life above my own."

"Hermione," Harry protested. He still sounded more than a little out of it from the knock his skull had taken against the wall. If it wasn't for her Cushioning Charm, he'd probably have been out cold. "That stupid prophecy isn't worth your life."

She smiled sadly at him as she helped him to his feet with her good arm. "You don't really think that's why I do it, do you?" He looked at her uncomprehendingly, and she fondly muttered, "Idiot. I protect you because I love you."

He blinked at her, eyes seeming impossibly green. He suddenly looked very young.

"Oh."

Apparently, none of them had ever taken the time to clarify the situation for him.

"There are, however, plenty of us whose only concern is the destruction of the Dark Lord."

She nearly growled, but Harry's lips tipped up slightly, and his voice was calm and truthful as he responded to the still-glaring professor standing a few feet away from them: "I'd be shocked to learn that was not the case, sir."

Severus's expression remained sour, and his tone was biting as he said, "Since you are both quite clearly lost causes, that will be all for the evening."

Harry Summoned her wand for her and wordlessly held it out. She smiled her thanks and tucked it back into its sheath, wincing involuntarily as this aggravated her arm. The Gryffindor's eyes narrowed.

"He got you with that curse, the last one," Harry said suspiciously.

"Of course he did." She rolled her eyes. "That was rather the point."

Harry's lips tightened. "Why didn't you say anything?"

She sighed. "I was going to take care of it once we got back to our rooms."

"Certainly if the discomfort is too much for you, Miss Granger, it should be attended to promptly."

Why did every word out of his mouth have to be snide?

"I have no doubt that I'll live until I get to my room," she answered stiffly.

Harry's expression had gone stony. "But you shouldn't have to. We can take care of it now, and it won't cast any aspersions on your pain tolerance or anything stupid like that."

Her lips quirked. "That was not my primary concern, Harry. I don't happen to have any Burn Salve on hand, so going back to our quarters is a requirement."

"But Snape is the Potions master."

"I'm aware of Professor Snape's profession, but it doesn't mean he goes around with Burn Salve in his pockets. Unless you don't trust the efficacy of the batch I brewed?"

He made a face at her. "You know I'd drink anything you gave me."

"Which would be a mistake in this case, as it's topical."

He made a face at her. "You know what I mean. Am I going to have to rip your robe off your arm to see the damage?"

"I wouldn't particularly recommend trying," she said flatly. He just continued staring at her. "Oh, very well," she conceded with bad grace and began to undo her robe.

"Since Mr Potter is determined in his efforts to get you undressed, I will go retrieve the salve."

She didn't dignify that with a verbal response, merely nodding stiffly. Severus stalked off, robes whipping furiously.

She shrugged out of the black garment and looked down at her jumper. It was light weight and relatively close-fitting. Like her robe, it was completely untouched by the curse that had injured her skin. That was the beauty of the Skin-burning Hex; it left clothing perfectly intact but burnt what was beneath it to a crisp. Being held under the curse would eventually lead to unconsciousness from the pain, internal organs would overheat and cook, and death resulted.

It was likely, Hermione realized, the source of the Muggle rumours of spontaneous human combustion. She shuddered to think of it used on defenceless Muggles especially now that she had firsthand experience of how much it hurt.

To get at all of her injuries, the jumper would have to come off. Despite what everyone thought, she didn't particularly relish getting half naked in front of Harry, let alone Severus. At least, she corrected herself mentally with wry amusement, not under these circumstances.

The jumper was staying on, then, and she'd pull up her sleeve. So long as nobody got too inquisitive, she'd be fine.

She held out the injured arm. "Can you maybe enlarge the sleeve a bit and pull it up for me? I think that would be the most painless way to do this."

Harry obliged her, carefully pulling up the material in an attempt not to make contact with any of the burnt skin. She heard the hitch in his breathing as he caught sight of the burn. The spell had mostly caught her on the front and side of her torso, but the edges of the spellfire had washed over her arm, damaging the bottom of her triceps, across the elbow, and along her forearm. Contorting a bit and looking down, she understood Harry's distress.

It looked like a bad second-degree burn, the skin red, blistered, and hurting like hell. The topical Burn Salve wasn't likely to do as much good as she wished; if this was how her arm looked, her torso was going to be a lot worse. What she really needed was a Burn Potion that would work from the inside out. She ran through ingredients in her head and tried to calculate how long it would take her to make one.

At her nod, Harry unbuckled the wand sheath and eased it off her arm as gently as he possibly could, and she clenched her teeth so he wouldn't realize how much it hurt.

Severus returned, took one look at her, and said, "Remove the jumper."

So much for her stellar plan. Sadly, she wondered how many times Severus had to have seen the effects of the spell to recognize so quickly that the arm wound was only the edge of the injury.

Harry took umbrage on her behalf. "What?"

"I didn't hit her on her arm. I need to see the actual injury."

"It gets worse?" Harry demanded, sounding utterly appalled.

"The shot was across my torso," she admitted reluctantly.

"Then we can go to Poppy," Harry said belligerently. "We don't have to do it here."

"And tell her what?" Hermione demanded. "That someone accidentally hit me with a Skin-burning Hex? I'm afraid a great deal more circumspection is required."

"Well, we could—" Harry was eyeing her torso warily.

I could come down.

And waste your tears on this? Not to mention explain to Severus why Fawkes was willing to pop by for a simple burn. Don't be silly. Thank you for the thought, though.

Harry's continued frown showed that Fawkes had had the sense to make this offer only to her; Harry would have jumped at it, regardless of the consequences. It was best she moved on before the possibility occurred to him. She didn't make another attempt for her wand, just thought the spell that would divest herself of her jumper. Really, she told herself, it was just like wearing a bikini. Which, admittedly, she'd never do in this situation with these two men … who were staring at her.

She looked down at herself. When she'd got up this morning, she hadn't planned on being only half-clothed in front of anyone. Her bra was cream, plain, and completely serviceable, but that's about all that could be said about it. Under the circumstances, she supposed that that was better than something lacy and risqué. It took more twisting for her to be able to see the damage the spell had wrought. The skin here was not just red and blistered but cracked in places with little bits of charring around the broken skin.

Reaction had set in now: Harry look horrified, and Severus was completely expressionless.

"It looks worse than it feels?" she tried.

"Next time, don't you dare leap in front of me," Harry said fiercely.

"I can't turn off my urge to protect you," she protested.

"What about my urge to protect you?" he demanded. "You're running roughshod over it and don't seem to mind."

She smirked. "I guess we'll just have to duke it out each time to see who gets to save whom. Today, I won."

"And received such a spectacular prize," Severus cut in dryly.

His eyes were very intent upon the injury; she was left feeling more like a bug under a microscope than anything else, and it seemed unlikely that he'd even noticed that she was a woman standing there without a shirt on. The mixture of extreme relief and extreme embarrassment almost cancelled one another out.

The Slytherin spoke once more. "It is as I suspected."

He held out a potion bottle to her. She quaffed it with relief.

"I thought you said the salve was topical," Harry said with a frown.

"It is. The Burn Potion is for … more severe burns."

Harry rounded on Severus. "You shouldn't be using such painful spells!"

"Harry," she admonished, "it would hardly do us any good to become proficient against the Jelly-Legs Jinx. This is how we learn." Harry still looked mutinous. "Unless you think Professor Snape could go to Voldemort and request that he stick with non-lethal spells because those are the ones we're trained against, we don't have any other choice."

The Gryffindor's aggressive stance softened, finally. "And maybe we could send a request that the snake-faced bastard just up and off himself?"

She smiled faintly. "Yes, I'm sure if the professor ever has a death wish, he'll make sure to get both of those recommendations in."

The potion had already started to work its magic, and the pain was easing.

"Thank you, sir," she addressed Severus.

He handed over a second container, this one squat and round.

"To speed complete recovery. Once the burns have healed over, apply the salve." He looked between her and Harry. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble getting it applied to any hard-to-reach areas."

Right when she thought he was being reasonable again, he got a dig in. She had taken the Burn Potion as an apology, and that seemed to be as good as it got.

"I'm sure I'll manage," she said noncommittally.

"I'll leave you to it," he said without inflection, and before Hermione could think of a suitable reply, he was gone.

She made sure the privacy charms were still up and then conjured a chair and tried to find a comfortable position in which to sit. It seemed much easier to just let the potion do its work before she tried to put clothing back on and return to their quarters. Finally determining that anything causing her to bend hurt, she transfigured the chair into a chaise longue and … lounged. All her skin stayed relaxed and unbent, anyway, and that minimized the pain.

When Harry had still made no move after all these adjustments on her part, she conjured a more standard armchair for him and gestured him into it.

"He might at least have apologized," Harry protested as he finally sat down.

"He fed me healing potions. In this situation, that's quite welcome, I assure you."

Not that she'd have said no to a heartfelt apology, though. It would be rather reassuring to know that he didn't enjoy hurting her. Some days, it was alarmingly difficult to tell.

Harry was still staring at her torso, and she cleared her throat loudly. "Do you think you could unglue your eyes?"

He flushed crimson, eyes instantly staring everywhere but at her.

"I'm so sorry," he gabbled. "I wasn't staring at you, just at the burn, you know. I'd never want to invade your privacy, and I really didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, and I—"

She laughed. "It's all right, Harry. I'm sure we were getting equally little enjoyment out of it. You did look as though you were getting an eyeful, though."

Now that he realized she had been teasing, he recovered enough to say, "If I were less gay, I'm sure it would be a marvellous opportunity to ogle to good purpose."

"Oh, the lost opportunities," she lamented.

They grinned at one another and lapsed into silence that was comfortable, but Harry broke it a few minutes later with a question she would have preferred he didn't ask.

"How are you holding up? I notice people have been … a little harsh."

She thought she'd hidden it better than that.

"Par for the course," she said, shrugging. "I always knew people weren't going to be happy about it, and they're finding some sort of comfort in making up ridiculous stories. This makes me the easy target, but I know I can handle their scorn, and this way we don't have to worry about any innocent targets getting attacked."

"But you are innocent, remember?" Harry reminded her.

"I was forewarned, and the opinion of people I don't know has never meant that much to me." Mostly true. "This keeps us both safe, and that's the important part."

"I seem to be getting a much better deal, that's all," he said with difficulty.

"People were hardly lining up to shag me, Harry." She didn't roll her eyes only with an effort. "Of course nobody's annoyed that you're sleeping with me."

"Trust me when I tell you that you don't want my lot of annoyed groupies. I guess we're both stuck having fallen for idiots if your bloke isn't upset. Draco doesn't give a damn about you and me, either, and he's the one bloody person I'd feel pleased about if he was disturbed by the news."

She tilted her head a little to the side in concession. "Maybe we could make that the basis for the reason we're both Pure Adults: the people we care about are idiots."

Harry smirked. "I'm sure you could write a really persuasive paper. We could mail it anonymously to Draco and … whoever it is you like. You are going to tell me one day, right?"

"When we're old and grey, sure," she agreed before turning the subject. "It is pretty funny that it's the two of us who are Pure Adults."

He raised his eyebrow in query.

"Think of all the so-called pure-bloods who go on and on about their blood purity. It's not actually an official designation, and if you look at it logically, they've all intermarried at some point or they'd've died out. We're the two who get officially labelled 'Pure', and we're half-blood and Muggle-born."

He smiled. "If it's ever safe to do so, Lucius Malfoy and Voldemort are the first people we tell."

Hermione grinned. "Agreed."

By this point in their discussion, her burn had healed sufficiently that there was no more broken skin, and they were able to apply the Burn Salve. She actually got most of it on herself, but Harry sat down next to her and applied the unguent to the bit of the burn that had stretched towards her back and made sure she hadn't missed any spots on her torso and arm.

They watched the damage from the burn fade away completely. Harry was frowning. He reached out his hand and traced a finger across the pinkish scar that was still there.

"Why hasn't this healed?"

It had faded a lot since it was first inflicted and was now no more than a faint pink line of scar tissue which transected her torso, widest in the middle where it passed just above her bellybutton and tapering off on either end as it reached her sides. It was almost eight inches long but only a few centimetres thick at worst.

"It's not a burn." He looked at her questioningly, and she gave up. "It's from Dolohov's Cutting Curse in the Department of Mysteries."

The look on his face showed that he hadn't realized she had any lasting scars.

"Hermione…" he breathed penitently.

She shook her head. "It doesn't hurt. It doesn't get in my way. I wouldn't trade it for not being there that night."

It didn't exactly make her feel better about her body, but there was no way she was going to say that to Harry.

"But it's my fault!" he exclaimed, anguish in his voice.

"Each of us made a choice to go that night," she overrode him. "We protected the prophecy. We all suffered losses, and we're all dealing with them."

His face was shadowed, and she had to use two fingers under his chin to force him to meet her eyes.

"That's why we're training," she added gently. "That's why Professor Snape uses tough spells against us."

Harry was frowning again, but it turned out she'd successfully distracted him, because what he said next was, "Does he normally go easy on us?"

"I'm not sure. These last two sessions were … difficult. But he must be working us harder as we become more adept. Maybe he just upped the ante sooner than we're used to this time around."

He watched as she rose and pulled her robe back on without bothering to conjure a shirt.

"I guess so. It just…. Today seemed a little personal, and I don't think I've done anything particularly annoying recently."

She smiled. "Professor Snape's behaviour is hard to anticipate. We have been getting a lot of media attention."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Like we've ever wanted that, but you're right. It always has annoyed him, hasn't it?"

They were both remembering fourth year. Suddenly, Harry grinned.

"Do you think I could successfully get a rumour going that one of those scrolls is his, and there's just a really big time delay?"

She snorted with laughter. "I somehow doubt that would work, but it's a glorious idea. He could get all the attention, and we could disappear into obscurity."

Harry sighed happily. "That would be lovely, wouldn't it?"

She hauled him up before Vanishing both chairs. "Lovely and unattainable. Come on. I've got to finish the Wolfsbane; Remus will be coming to pick it up tomorrow evening."

They Masked themselves and returned to their quarters, where Hermione bid Harry goodnight before disappearing into her lab. Once she finished with the Wolfsbane, she was going to see about brewing some Burn Potion, as it appeared to be quite handy to have around.

Chapter Ten: The Tests

The Ministry finally took an official stance on the matter of the Pure Adults. Although they wholeheartedly supported the anonymity instituted by the Wizengamot, they strongly believed that in this particular case it was in the best interest of the students in question to reveal themselves. The Ministry was careful to point out that it was a matter of security and safety, as Voldemort was looking for the Pure Adults, too. The Ministry felt confident it could protect them but needed to know who they were in order to do so.

Hermione found the whole thing a little ludicrous; unless the Ministry whisked the two Pure Adults away under Fidelius or put every seventh-year under Auror guard, there was no way it was going to go unnoticed that the Ministry was suddenly protecting two specific people, and that as good as pasted giant targets on their heads. They were much safer in anonymity.

However reluctantly, Hermione did have to concede that it was a rather awkward time for the Ministry to appear to be doing nothing, and since that illustrious institution hadn't had any luck so far in bringing down Voldemort, finding and protecting the Pure Adults would be a particularly timely accomplishment.

As a result of their decision, Ministry officials were coming to Hogwarts on Thursday, thirteenth November, one week after the news of the Pure Adults had been revealed to the public. Since the virginity-testing bit of Blood Magic wasn't legal, these officials only wanted verbal confirmation of virginity or lack thereof.

Scrimgeour's trial was closed to the public, but through Kingsley—who'd been appointed Acting Head of the M.L.E. as well as retaining his position as Head of the Aurors—they had learnt that Scrimgeour was trying to argue that he had simply been trying to find and protect the students in question without tipping off Voldemort.

It was his best line of reasoning, given the situation he was in, but the Blood Magic was a bad business, wiping the records and the memory of Andrew Stebbins with no accountability was worrisome, that bit about framing Voldemort was poorly planned, and not informing Minister Bones of the whole situation looked likely to put the final nail in his coffin; no matter how much Scrimgeour claimed he wanted to keep the situation quiet, unless he was prepared to outright accuse Amelia Bones of being a mole for Voldemort, he should have informed her of his discovery and his intentions.

Like Scrimgeour's unofficial attempt, this official Ministry venture was couched in terms of its being voluntary. The subtext of the "request", however, made it plain that everyone was expected to respond. Hermione thought peer pressure would take care of that; anyone who didn't participate would be assumed to be admitting their guilt—or innocence, in this case, Hermione realized with a smirk, in a very specific definition of the word.

Over lunch on Thursday afternoon, Millicent and Vera were the first two to volunteer the information that they were not virgins. Since there was none of the subterfuge that Scrimgeour had employed, it was only a matter of the seventh-year students having to make this declaration, and it was quickly accomplished.

There was a male and a female Ministry official, neither of whom Hermione knew. They both looked slightly incredulous that it had suddenly become part of their job description to ask Hogwarts students if they were virgins. Hermione found on her turn, at least, that they were virtually waving her on before she could answer in the negative; they were Prophet readers, apparently, and had heard all about her and Harry.

The Ministry officials did not have very accomplished poker faces. It was evident simply from looking at their expressions when they passed the Great Hall on the way out near the end of the lunch hour that they had not received the answer they were looking for. No one seemed to know quite what to make of this. Did this mean Millicent and Vera had lied to the officials?

It was one thing, the consensus ran, not to tell the truth to your peers, but would they really maintain that fiction of lack of virginity with the Ministry? What if the Ministry had other ways of testing and caught them out in a lie? Could this possibly mean everyone had been looking in the wrong direction after all? The student body turned back to examine itself again. But what had they missed?

Obviously, someone could have lied or misled or been misunderstood at some point in this mad rush to uncover the virgins in their midst. Plenty of what they were working with was conjecture. It was more than a bit of a relief for those who had been at the centre of the controversy to find that everyone was back to square one and uncertain how to restart without making the same mistakes.

Remus was set to arrive around ten in the evening, having left a wide window to ensure that he wouldn't run into the Ministry officials once Albus warned him of the impending visit. He came to meet her in Room One, which Remus knew of from their training sessions. It was relatively neutral territory; Severus had not wanted the man to come to his private lab a guaranteed once a month.

Harry and Hermione were the first to arrive. Hermione conjured a table and warded around it to protect the Wolfsbane before she and Harry practiced shielding and cursing one another wandlessly and wordlessly. They kept their spells relatively low-level as it still took them more effort to work wandlessly. They figured only practice would help them improve, and it was an advantage they wanted to have for an emergency; a little bit of shielding had to be better than no shielding at all.

Their bracelets apprised them of Remus's arrival before he made it to their location; by the time he actually entered the room, they had conjured chairs, and Kreacher had brought them tea. Hermione hugged Remus in welcome, pleased when Harry did the same a moment later. Remus looked surprised but happy at this dual embrace.

The last of the Marauders tended not to make many attempts to touch people. She had no doubt that he had had bad experiences with adverse reactions from others, and she therefore made it a bit of a mission to reassure him that there were people out there who weren't the least bit afraid of or disgusted by him. She knew Harry felt the same way, but he was normally not so willing to use physical gestures of affection; the fact that he had kept the openness to touch even as he became more used to the Veritaserum made her very happy.

Remus immediately drank the Wolfsbane she had made, grimacing as always at the horrible taste. The potion had to be consumed at a maximum of twenty-four hours before the full moon and a minimum of one hour before its rise. Remus thought that the potion was slightly more efficacious the closer to the moon it was taken but ever since his year here as a professor, he had been leery of leaving it too late in case events intervened and prevented him from taking it.

They all seated themselves in Hermione's comfy blue armchairs, and she served the tea. The older man liked to drink it as soon as possible after his dosage, and that first cup was always loaded with the sugar he would have liked to have put in the Wolfsbane.

"How you doing, Moony?" Harry asked.

"I'm well, thank you, Harry."

He looked, Hermione thought, as though it were the night before the full moon. His dark robes were plain but not nearly as shabby as the ones they had first seen him wearing in their third year; everything about him was neat, from his golden hair to his serviceable shoes, and yet there was an indefinable air of "wild" about him.

His eyes were edging from their regular brown to something that was closer to the amber of the werewolf. There was far more tension in his frame than normal and he seemed, even in the few minutes he'd been here, restless and slightly ill at ease. In a way, she knew that feeling. He needed earth beneath his feet and open space around him; he needed to let the wolf out, and that option was currently unavailable to him.

It made her feel slightly better that her Weresbane was fully grown and would be ready for initial testing by the next new moon. Now, she wasn't just seeing and sympathizing, she was actively trying to make his life better. Soon, her attempt could begin in earnest.

"And you?" the ageing Gryffindor inquired.

Harry shrugged. "It's been a bit of a zoo here."

Remus smiled. "The Prophet generally manages to make life interesting." He shifted slightly so that he was facing her. "It's been a little difficult not to hear about both of you. How are you holding up?"

Her shrug mirrored Harry's. "If you've been trusting the Prophet for accurate news of my mental state, you're probably grossly misinformed, but otherwise it's been tolerably amusing."

"Oh, I've been taking highly publicised news about the lot of you with a grain of salt for years," Remus responded easily.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Severus … with a goblet of Wolfsbane in his hands. They all exchanged looks.

"What?" Severus demanded shortly, his glower becoming more pronounced. "I'm not here for socializing, I'm here for you to drink your bloody potion and leave, Lupin."

Remus cleared his throat. "I've already had my potion, Severus."

An eyebrow rose. "You've discovered a heretofore deeply, deeply buried talent along with an unexpected capital and started brewing for yourself?"

Remus looked to her, and she shrugged at him to go ahead.

"Hermione made it for me."

Severus's dark gaze focussed sharply on her.

"You made it for him."

She bristled at his tone. "You gave the task over to me in July. You made no indication to the contrary, so I've continued with my duty."

"You don't have anywhere to brew."

She rose to her feet so that she felt less at a disadvantage when facing him.

"Just because you threw me out of your lab does not mean that I have nowhere I can brew."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "If there was another lab in the castle that you were using, I would be aware of it."

Her lips tightened. Was he going to accuse her of going out and buying an inferior black-market version next?

"You've already offered a suggestion as to where I brew; what makes you think I didn't take you up on it?" she said icily.

His expression grew sterner. "If you're caught without two usable bedrooms, the consequences would be … severe."

"The list of people who can enter without my permission is very small, and there will always be two beds in our rooms."

They stared one another down. Harry and Remus were watching curiously from the sidelines.

"You should have informed me that you would not renege on our agreement," he pronounced.

She drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly through her nose. It was abysmally worded, but she supposed he did have a point. He had left her, as far as he knew, without a lab, equipment, or the proper ingredients; assuming she was somehow going to continue making the Wolfsbane would have been dangerous.

"I am not in the habit of reassuring people that I will continue with a task that I have no intention of stopping; rest assured that had I felt myself unable to perform any duties you had assigned me, I would have informed you of that fact."

"It was so thoughtful of you to clarify that for me before I went to the trouble of making this Wolfsbane, Miss Granger."

She could sense another furious run in the Forbidden Forest coming out of this conversation.

"I apologize, sir," she said evenly. Maybe if it hadn't been nearly impossible to see him privately and if he wasn't frying her skin to a crisp on those occasions, it would have occurred to her. "It was never my intention to make you waste your time."

But really, it was an added bonus as far as she was concerned, and she didn't regret it nearly as much as he no doubt thought she should. If he were getting some discomfort over what he was putting them through, he deserved it.

Severus was looking at her as though he knew full well what she was thinking, but what he said after a stilted moment of silence was, "I trust you can find a recipient for this, Lupin?"

Remus did a fairly credible job of not looking completely startled at the unexpected generosity.

"Of course, Severus. Thank you."

Severus frowned at him. "The more of you who are drinking it, the less danger the rest of us are in."

Harry stiffened, but Remus looked unoffended and completely serious as he answered, "Quite right."

This straightforward agreement meant that Severus merely marched over to hand Remus the goblet and then turned for the door.

"Would you care to join us?" Remus offered.

"I think not," Severus replied without turning round again. "I told you, I am not here to socialize. Miss Granger, you will continue to make Lupin's potion."

Orders from his back. Charming. "Yes, sir."

And he was gone.

"I know you've said it's unlikely Professor Snape could be passed off as a Pure Adult," Harry said, still staring at the doorway the man had passed through, "but do you think we could just get him laid?"

Remus choked on his tea, and Hermione smiled.

"You work out a list of candidates, Harry, and Remus and I will be there for, er, moral support."

"But you're the one who's so good at research," Harry protested.

Remus smirked into his teacup, and Hermione reflected that they really didn't want to know who she'd put at the top of the list.

"I'm the one with nine N.E.W.T.s. You're on your own for this one."

Harry sighed theatrically. "You're no fun. Moony?"

Remus shook his head. "Much as I love you, Harry, I don't fancy dying a slow and painful death at Severus's wand."

Harry gave in and grinned at them. "It would be amusing, though. I guess you have to get this to someone?" He gestured at the Wolfsbane.

Remus nodded, rising from his chair. "Yes, I shouldn't really delay. I'll try to manage a longer visit next time, all right?"

Harry nodded. "Once the bastard's dead, we'll have more time for social calls. Do what you have to do, Remus."

The werewolf smiled. "As you say."

"Harry, you have somewhere to be," Hermione said cheerfully.

Rolling his eyes, Harry rose. "You're going to have to start coming up with cleverer ploys, Hermione; I'm seeing right through these ones."

She merely smiled at him, and he gave Remus another quick hug before ducking out of the room.

Remus looked at her inquiringly.

"It's a long story. He's getting better at expressing his emotions."

"So I see. It's a nice change."

"I thought so. You'll be in on the twenty-ninth?"

"Sneaking in under cover of darkness," he agreed, suppressed excitement leaking out. "It reminds me of old times. You said you wanted me here for most of the night?"

"Well, the tests themselves don't take long, but I'll want to keep an eye on you, make sure you don't have any unexpected reactions to this version of the plant."

He had been badly allergic to one of the first batches that she had tested on him, and it had nearly been enough to make her stop trying entirely. He had prodded her on, however, swearing up and down that no bad reaction was worth halting her effort.

"I'm sure we'll manage. Thank you for the potion. I hadn't realized Severus had you making it all on your own."

"Back when we were both using the same lab, it came nearer to being collaborative. That would be a little awkward at this juncture."

"He kicked you out?" Remus asked, the tone of his query making it plain that she could choose not to answer and he wouldn't take offence.

She had no desire to go into the details but felt rather relieved that Remus had gone with this line of questioning rather than asking about her intentions towards his de facto godson. "We … agreed to disagree," she summarized.

"He has never been the easiest person to get along with."

"I'm prepared to make my own arrangements when necessary and wait him out if I have to." She offered Remus a small excuse: "I think this year's events have been making us all a little crazy."

Remus nodded. "I didn't think I'd ever have the chance of meeting a Pure Adult. I still can't really believe there are two in our midst."

"I'm sure they're perfectly normal, as you know because you have to have met them before," Hermione pointed out blandly. "You'll have taught them."

"You're right," he agreed, looking the slightest bit surprised at this realization. "They wouldn't have been Pure when I taught them, though."

"But it's not as though becoming Pure Adults means that they morph into another species and grow horns and fangs. They're still them, they're even still virgins, it's just taken on more significance than it had before."

Remus grinned at her. "Wouldn't that be a surprise if it was one of the details lost to history."

It would certainly have been a shock to her, although the way people were hunting for them, it did make her feel like a rare endangered animal.

She nodded, deadpanning, "At this very moment, we should really be looking for two dragonish goat creatures that suck the blood out of unsuspecting dairy cows."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled."

"Keep safe," she admonished. "And I'll see you in two weeks."

He promised to take care before Disillusioning himself, the door closing behind his difficult-to-see form. She was still aware of his magical core, so she knew for certain when he had actually left the room. Given how widely Disillusionment was used, she sometimes wondered if she oughtn't to be explaining to every Order member how to do it properly. But since it was a skill that Albus knew and wasn't sharing, she'd finally decided that perhaps it was the wiser course of action not to disseminate it widely. She had standing proof, after all, of there being a traitor in every group.

She wanted to go out to see her herd now but knew it was unwise to disappear when Harry was expecting her back from her tête-à-tête with Remus. She sighed. It looked as though she'd be making yet another early morning run instead.

Back in their common room, she convinced Harry that it had been a long day and she was tired. Since she'd been staying up nights—as far as he was concerned—to finish the Wolfsbane, and just today had had two classes, lied to Ministry officials, sparred with Harry, and fought with Severus, Harry didn't doubt her veracity. He let her go after ensuring, without asking for any details, that her talk with Remus had gone okay.

She slept until three, and after double-checking that she wasn't going to run into a suspicious Harry—but no, he'd gone to bed—she sneaked out. Since the moon was nearly full, it made for a glorious light when it peeked from behind the clouds. Cloud cover didn't bother unicorns the way regular obstruction, perhaps because the UV and other invisible rays were still getting through…. Whatever the reason, although it was more enjoyable to actually see the sun and stars, just being outside and knowing that the light was streaming down unhindered by objects manmade or otherwise solid made all the difference.

Her herd was happy to see her, and they gallivanted around the Forest for several hours until she felt rested and happy. It had definitely been a wise choice to come out and reenergize today. Castina preferred that Hermione didn't join them on full moon nights; the herd patrolled to ensure that werewolves weren't encroaching upon the Forest and endangering the students, and for all that Hermione wasn't human in her unicorn form, the herd mare liked her to be safely in the castle.

This reminded Hermione that one day, she was going to have to reveal to Remus that he had been more monitored than he had ever realized while he was at school. If Remus had ever slipped away from the rest of the Marauders on a full moon, as long as he'd been anywhere near the Forbidden Forest—which it was difficult not to be on the Hogwarts grounds—there would have been swift intervention. The herd was well aware that a werewolf had been allowed to transform in the Shrieking Shack, and they always knew when he was roaming the grounds instead.

In Hermione's third year, though, the entire herd had spent their time to the far east of the Forest; when Dumbledore had been forced to host the Dementors, the foul creatures had effectively been given dominion over an area where the unicorns dwelled. Since Dementors were one of the creatures to whom unicorns gave no quarter, Castina had reluctantly agreed to keep her herd away for the duration. Otherwise, Hermione, Harry, and Ron would have had more assistance once Remus transformed and when the Dementors had attacked Harry and Sirius.

In Hermione's fifth year, the herd mare had apparently been just out of sight, ensuring that the situation didn't get out of control with the centaurs. When Hermione learned that, she had bitterly bemoaned the fact that she hadn't known she could run to the unicorns for help; Castina had laughed, telling her that she had done very well on her own, and Umbridge had gotten no more than she deserved being dragged away by the centaurs.

This was not to say that Castina and the herd could be everywhere at once or instantly knew what was going on in all parts of the Forest. They had become more cautious since the Voldemort-possessed Quirrell had caused such damage in Hermione's first year, and Barty Crouch, Jr. had still been able to get away with killing his father and attacking Viktor. Especially in the eaves of the Forest closest to Hogwarts, the unicorns had to be circumspect.

Being back inside the castle by around five had thus far kept Hermione safe from Severus or anyone else's notice. Sneaking back in through the dungeon entrance, she began to patrol. It was early, sure, but she was an early riser, and it was therefore perfectly logical that she was making sure the castle was safe before everyone else started their morning. It made her feel better, and since she really was getting in an early morning patrol that nobody else wanted to do, it benefited others as well as herself.

Since the news of the Pure Adults had come out, a record number of students had been found outside of the dorms after curfew. They were catching others in the act, trying to memorize other students' habits, seizing the moment to prove their own lack of virginity, and so on. The excuses were myriad, and the Prefects and Harry and Hermione had been forced to get pretty fierce in their removal of points to try to discourage the new trend.

This morning, Hermione had to roust four fifth- and sixth-year Gryffindors who were camped out down the hall from the Gryffindor dorm ready to catch anyone who was sneaking back in after a late night just in case this enabled the "master spies" to work out what no one else had been able to discover.

One of them had fallen asleep, two of them were drowsy, and none of them had seen Hermione coming; it had been quite amusing to make them jump, take away points, and send them back into the dorm with a stern admonishment not to come out again until breakfast time unless they wanted to lose twice as many points and add detention to their punishment.

She could kind of see the kick Severus got out of it.

Over the next several days, Hermione had the opportunity to observe that another trend was not abating; she was seeing even more of Harry now that Harry was seeing less of Ron.

Ron had taken his normal hard-headed attitude and didn't look to be apologizing anytime soon for the aspersions he'd cast on her character and the revelation of their personal business in front of half the school at high volume. Since it would be a cold day in hell before either Hermione or Harry forgave him for that without at least some acknowledgement on his part that what he'd said and done was wrong, it looked as though they wouldn't be speaking to Ron in the near future.

In class, the redhead was sticking with other Gryffindors whenever possible, which meant some configuration of Seamus, Neville, and Dean, depending on the subject. It was only in Potions that the "golden trio" were the only three Gryffindors, and Ron had resolutely taken to sitting with Hufflepuff Christopher Dempster.

Since everyone knew why the three of them were fighting, none of the other seventh-years made much of a fuss about it; public opinion seemed to even out between agreement that Ron had been a prat to lay it out publicly like that and a continued sense of entitlement; everyone had really wanted to know who Harry had slept with. Plus, how could Harry and Hermione have kept it a secret from their best friend?

Hermione wished her hypocritical peers would admit that there were plenty of them who had kept their romantic liaisons a secret. As it was, she supposed she should be grateful that they had at least assigned some of the blame to Ron.

She had been touched that Ginny had taken Hermione and Harry's side of it entirely; she had been more than a little worried that the revelation of her supposed relationship with Harry would wreck her relationship with the youngest Weasley as well as with her brother, but Ginny appeared to be truly over her infatuation with Harry, and she hadn't taken Ron's insults well.

As a result of the break with Ron, Harry's free time was spent almost exclusively with Hermione. He hadn't ducked out or Saturday or Sunday afternoons, and he was in their quarters on Tuesday, Wednesday afternoon, and Thursday morning. The status of his schoolwork had never been better, but she was a little concerned about his psychological health.

Harry laughed it off. "I'm quite used to whole stretches of time when Ron is being a prat. I'm not going to buy that you think spending more time like you is unhealthy."

Hmm. It was sort of hard to argue when he put it that way. Since she wasn't advocating making up with Ron and could hardly tell Harry to go out and find more hobbies lest she relished being hoisted by her own petard, she let it go.

Really, she reflected, this was so much easier when two of them were mad at the third member of their trio. She remembered quite clearly how she had tried to mediate between Harry and Ron during the Triwizard Tournament and when Harry had tried to do the same for her and Ron when the redhead had thought Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers in third year. It had been miserable and frustrating. Now, however, Ron had managed to alienate both of them, and no one was stuck in the middle.

Severus had yet to institute another training session since the disastrous ending of the one on Wednesday last, so Hermione and Harry were left to their own devices, improving upon their sympathetic shield and working on whatever struck their fancy.

Since they were capable of putting a lot of force behind their spells—especially when they used their wands—it wasn't difficult for them to square off against each other and ensure that they were getting quite a workout even if they rarely threw Skin-burning Hexes at one another. That, Hermione reminded herself sourly, was what Severus was for.

Despite what the man seemed to think of Gryffindor reasoning skills, she and Harry both knew that they would be up against some nasty curses and hexes. It did make sense to be trained against them, but they had also reasoned that no matter how much they learnt, there would always be crazy Dark spells they didn't recognize that some Death Eater was going to throw at them. What they needed to survive were good reflexes, good spells to disable their opponents and keep them down, and good shielding wherever possible. Those were the skills they were trying to instill in one another.

During Herbology on Thursday afternoon, Hermione and Harry were startled by their bracelets announcing a plethora of people arriving at Hogwarts: Minister Bones, Kingsley, four unknown names, and a little more than half a dozen names that she recognized vaguely, suggesting they were probably Aurors. The two of them exchanged glances.

Did they discover Voldemort's set up a base of operation in the Astronomy Tower? Harry asked.

She smiled. It does appear to be momentous; I'm guessing we'll find out in short order.

Such proved to be the case, as Hagrid and two unknowns came to collect not only their entire class but Pomona as well. A quick walk across the grounds and then they were escorted to the waiting room off the Great Hall where they hadn't been since their first year. Hagrid then took Pomona off, saying in a soft rumble that Hermione heard clearly that everyone else was already up in Albus's office.

In the waiting room, she quickly realized, was the rest of their year. Apparently, hiking out to the greenhouses and back had been the longest collection time, beating out the seven students who had to be retrieved from Professor Trelawney's domain and the six students whose free time had been interrupted. Those thirteen already present were all seated and silent, hands in their laps. They were being watched by six adults whose stance and watchful eyes gave them away as the Aurors that Hermione had guessed.

The nineteen Herbology newcomers were instructed to put their bags and wands in one corner of the room and to join their classmates in seating themselves with their hands in their laps. After a stunned moment, almost everyone moved to obey, having taken notice of the pile of their schoolmates' possessions that was already there.

Head Girl? Harry asked.

Head Boy, she agreed.

Harry was frowning mentally. They're making sure we don't have access to something.

I suspect this is the nice version of binding our mouths closed. They don't want us to take anything. Don't mind me. She wordlessly Vanished their Veritaserum capsules just in case this escalated to anyone being searched.

They were now the only ones who hadn't followed the instructions. Hermione was a little surprised that the Slytherins hadn't put up more of a fight, but a moment's more consideration made her realize that being a Slytherin and refusing Ministry instructions was rather unwise without a great deal more provocation. She had no doubt that the Slytherins had known before anybody else in the room that these adults were Aurors.

Rather than following the rest of their classmates, she and Harry had repositioned themselves until they had their backs facing the wall. The door was on their left and their seated classmates on their right. Book bags on their shoulders and arms crossed, they faced off against the half dozen adults.

"You're impeding a Ministry investigation," the stockiest and fiercest-looking man said, his wand suddenly in his hands, and a hard look in his flinty blue eyes. Two of the other five Aurors had followed suit.

Neither Hermione nor Harry made the mistake of going for their own wands, although she was ready with wandless and wordless spells should the occasion call for it, and she didn't doubt the same was true of Harry.

"I don't see how that can possibly be the case," Harry answered calmly.

"As we haven't been informed that a Ministry investigation is taking place," Hermione took over.

"Our cooperation hasn't been requested," Harry pointed out.

"And you haven't identified yourselves as Ministry officials," Hermione added.

"I'm not in the habit of surrendering any of my belongings to random strangers," Harry said coolly. "As these tend to be Death Eaters up to no good."

"We're Ministry Aurors," Flinty-Eyed said gruffly.

"Do you have proof of this?"

There was some shifting amongst the other Aurors. They were continuing to survey their other charges, but it was clear they were listening carefully, as were the other thirty members of Hermione and Harry's year.

The flinty eyes got colder. "We don't take kindly to being played with."

"We're perfectly in earnest, I assure you." She made sure her tone was very reasonable. "Look at it from our point of view. We don't know any of you. None of our professors are here to vouch for you."

Harry nodded in agreement. "It's easy enough for anyone to say they're Aurors."

"Professor Moody," or the person they had thought was Moody, "spent the better part of a year drumming 'Constant Vigilance!' into our heads. Professor Tonks has been doing the same this year. We would therefore like proof of who you are before we start doing what you say."

As a group, the Aurors seemed to be wavering; apparently, she and Harry sounded adequately serious. Without their bracelets, after all, they wouldn't have had any way of knowing that these people had come with Minister Bones and Kingsley. Hermione wasn't sure if the earlier group had gotten a better introduction than they had, but she hoped that some of them learned a lesson as a result of her and Harry's position.

Harry grinned disarmingly. "I want the option of putting 'Maintained constant vigilance' on an Auror application."

That did it. Even Flinty-Eyed's lips quirked, and there were full-fledged smiles on several other faces.

"Do we have a problem here?"

Harry and Hermione were two of the people who didn't startle at Kingsley's deep voice from the doorway.

"No, sir," Flinty-Eyed answered, sounding positively cordial compared to earlier. "I trust you know Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Head of the M.L.E., Mr Potter, Miss Granger?"

She wondered if he'd recognized her from the picture in the Prophet.

"Auror Shacklebolt," they both greeted the man politely.

Kingsley nodded his head at them and then raised an eyebrow in query at Flinty-Eyed.

"They wanted proof we were Aurors before they obeyed us, said they can now put 'constant vigilance' down on their Auror applications."

Kingsley smiled widely. "Moody would be proud. Since the two of you are standing, perhaps you should be first. I'll send Bryant for the next one."

Everyone acquiesced, and Harry and Hermione were led into the Great Hall. The last two Aurors were on either side of the room, one by the door through which she and Harry had just come and a second waiting at the doorway to the chamber Harry had gone into when his name was announced at the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament.

The shimmer of visible wards drew their attention to a smaller table which had replaced the regular Hufflepuff one. Seated at the table were Albus at the head, the four Heads of House down one length, and Minister Bones at the foot. Kingsley brought Hermione and Harry through the wards to stand beside the empty side of the table.

Everyone looked grim, even Filius and Pomona. Minerva's lips were pinched into a clearly disapproving line, and Severus had broken out his Death Eater look of complete dispassion. The twinkle was absent from Albus's eyes.

What do you reckon? Is he upset because they're doing it or because they can get away with it while he can't? she asked.

Or perhaps that they didn't tell him first. Fawkes'd've let us know, right?

Of course he would have, she reassured Harry before adding solely for the phoenix's mind and benefit, He'll get better at directing his Speech eventually.

It made Hermione tempted to take Harry out to meet the herd. There had been nothing like being faced with three-dozen MindSpeakers to teach her how to properly direct her conversation. But she wasn't quite ready for that secret to be revealed. Right now it was hers alone, and she needed that when the castle got to be too much.

The phoenix snorted and replied to her, You'll just have to mind what secrets he shares until then. Have I mentioned that it's a good thing you always plan ahead?

She sent him a mental image of her months-long, colour-coded revision schedule. That would be me.

He laughed and let her go. Oblivious to her other mental discussion, Harry wanted to know, Where are the others who showed up on the Map with these blokes?

Supervising our Heads of House's classes, I imagine, she answered.

Oh, he said, slightly blankly. That was well-planned.

They wanted to accomplish this quickly and quietly; it will get out as soon as they're done, of course, but by then it will be too late.

"This will be administered individually for everyone else, but given the situation … I trust you won't mind going together," Kingsley told them.

Harry smiled and said politely, "Not at all."

Might be nice if he informed us what we agreed to do together, Harry added mentally.

Don't be silly, Harry, it's a surprise, she said facetiously.

He gave a mental smirk. Right. A lovely Ministry surprise. I'm so fond of those.

They reached the table, and Kingsley, thankfully, explained.

"I will be administering the Veritaserum. The headmaster and your Heads of House are here for joint impartiality in ensuring that nothing but the single question is asked. They will not speak or interrupt in any way unless I or someone else attempts to make further inquiries. Minister Bones will be recording the results so you know that the information will go no further. I will then administer the antidote, and you will wait with Smith," he gestured at the Auror on the other side of the room, "until testing is completed for everyone."

Hermione realized that they'd lucked out about when the Ministry had decided to do this. If it had happened early in the morning or right before dinner, she and Harry might have been facing six and three quarter drops of Veritaserum in quick succession. She hadn't considered what would happen if someone as legally endowed as the Ministry forced them to take it at a specific time when they were still in the midst of their tolerance-building, and she was relieved that this had not proved a fatal mistake.

Harry cocked his head. "I'm not aware of having committed any crime that means I should be questioned under Veritaserum."

Minister Bones spoke, her tone no-nonsense. "Mr Potter, the Pure Adults must be found, and you and Miss Granger are two of the possibilities. Voluntary questioning without Veritaserum excluded all of you, leaving us with no choice but to compel an honest response."

Hermione made sure her tone was polite but slightly cool. "I believe what Harry was trying to express, Minister Bones, is that 'compelling an honest response', as you put it, when we are under no suspicion of criminal activities is not legal."

The Minister explained about wartime and the emergency law enacted for this particular situation which gave the Ministry every right to ask this one question to protect its youngest new adults. Overall, Hermione could appreciate the effort that had been made to protect their privacy outside of that one question, but it still rankled.

It was clear, however, that there was nothing they could do about it, so she and Harry consented.

Three drops were administered first to Harry, then to Hermione. Facing Kingsley, they were only aware of their professors from their peripheral vision.

"Mr Potter, are you a virgin?" Kingsley asked.

"No," Harry answered flatly.

"Miss Granger, are you a virgin?"

She made sure to answer the same way Harry had. "No."

By the time their answers were recorded and the antidote administered, their professors were studiously blank-faced.

She and Harry went to wait in the waiting room. Inside, she was jubilant. Her plan had worked. They proceeded to have an external conversation for the watching Auror's benefit while saying what they really wanted internally.

"I'd hate to be one of the people going in there by myself right now," Harry said.

You know there's no doubt that you're the smartest witch of several ages, right?

"I think many of them will be happy not to have to answer in front of their peers, even with the understanding that it's just the one question."

Thank you. I'm just so grateful that it worked like it was supposed to.

"You're probably right," Harry admitted. "I wouldn't have been comfortable with anybody there but you."

Understatement of the century, but I apologize for how that sounded.

The Auror had taken it as appropriately mushy, from the look on his face, and Hermione hoped he wasn't filing the words away for a letter to the editor that would show up in tomorrow's Prophet.

Ditto.

"I feel the same way, Harry," she assured him with a smile.

Do you think this will convince them that the Pure Adults can't be found?

Hermione sighed. I'm not sure anything short of our cold, dead bodies sporting confessions written in blood would convince them of that.

Hannah showed up next, followed by Susan and then Terry, and it became too difficult to keep up an innocuous conversation while talking internally. Hermione found it amusing that they were testing the students alphabetically. So much of what they did at Hogwarts was defined by their Houses that she rarely considered their year as a cohesive whole where she was listed between Gregory Goyle and Daphne Greengrass.

She supposed it wouldn't do for the Ministry to be accused of mistreating one house by making them go first or wait until the end. It also prevented a whole roomful of Gryffindors suddenly being confronted by one Slytherin or vice versa. This way, it kept everyone civil, not to mention the fact that Ron was second from the end, so they didn't have to be stuck in the room with him for an extended period of time.

Minute by minute, more and more students joined them until all thirty-two had made it through the questioning. They had each taken roughly the same amount of time, and there was, of course, no indication that the Pure Adults had been found.

They were finally released back to the other room to retrieve their belongings, and although Ron studiously did not look at Harry and Hermione, a number of their year-mates thanked them for providing the most enjoyment of the whole afternoon. Constant vigilance, it appeared, lived on.

Much as the seventh-years had all wanted to know who the Pure Adults were, many of them resented the invasion of their privacy the official hunt had resulted in.

By dinner time, the Ministry officials were long gone, and their unofficial results had been broadcast throughout the entire school. The general consensus now, Hermione was relieved to hear, was that if the Ministry couldn't attain the answer with Veritaserum, the student body had little chance.

There remained, however, those students who would always believe themselves smarter than the Ministry and who therefore had every intention of making subtle or less-than-subtle inquiries until they got the answer they wanted. Like the Ministry, however, they were unclear what the next step should be. All the seventh-years had declared that they weren't virgins under Veritaserum. Could this mean that it was two graduates after all? Or, despite the belief about the orange-proof scrolls, did it mean that they were seventh-year students but they had lost their virginity since turning seventeen, and the Ministry and the rest of the world was just behind on the news?

It was a question which had no immediate or adequate answer, and the utter madness which had characterized the initial revelation had gone. There was a sharp drop in the number of bets that were being made, although Seamus insisted that no money would be returned and no winners or losers declared until they had a definite answer. There might still be people out there making charts and lists of likely candidates, but they were doing so more unobtrusively now, and people were far less likely to be accosted in the corridors and at mealtimes, for which Harry and Hermione were very grateful.

Sadly, the two of them remained a favourite discussion topic because the revelation of their couple status was, to all appearances, unrelated to the issue of Pure Adulthood. The fact that they were having sex could be talked to death even while the mystery of the Pure Adults was put on the back burner.

Kingsley's taking them in together had only cemented their couple-ness, and they were right back to telling everyone to bugger off and mind their own business when the majority of their impertinent school chums wanted lots of details.

Severus was Summoned over the weekend, but fortunately for her state of mind and Severus's health, this was only a fact-gathering meeting. Since Voldemort was amused when Severus informed him that Albus hadn't even been aware of the Ministry's intention to test the seventh-year students, Severus wasn't punished too badly for not being able to inform his master beforehand.

Severus reassured Voldemort of the integrity of the test as he had seen it with his own eyes, and the snake-faced prat didn't immediately announce a diabolical plan to ascertain the same results for himself; so far, he remained content to let others do the searching, seemingly believing that if the Ministry found the Pure Adults, it wouldn't be difficult for him to seize them from that often less-than-competent body. Harry and Hermione both hoped this resolution held for as long as possible.

It took a few days, but the school year finally seemed to settle into some semblance of normalcy. They had their second perfectly safe Hogsmeade visit, although the adults and upper-year students were once again taking extreme care. Voldemort had attacked children in the tragic Halloween attack, but those were unprotected Muggle ones, and the Hogwarts schoolchildren were anything but.

Hermione was glad the day hadn't been cancelled because she wanted life to go on as normally as it could under the circumstances—and she wanted to finish up with her Christmas shopping. She'd mentioned this to Harry, and he'd looked at her as though she were insane, as if a month before Christmas was astonishingly early to be getting gifts.

She had a horrible feeling that he wasn't going to be starting until the trip in December, and she had to bite her tongue to prevent herself from remonstrating with him. She really wanted to point out that they didn't even know if there'd be another Hogsmeade trip, because who knew what Voldemort might do, but she realized this was a low blow. Instead, she merely asked Harry mildly if he'd met her and maybe noticed a trend on her starting tasks early rather than late.

This had resulted in his laughing good-naturedly, and he'd been a perfect gentleman about following her around and letting her pick up gifts in shops that he rarely entered on his own. Given his upbringing, he was nothing like Ron, who was always trying to catch glimpses of the gifts and wondering if they were for him. Harry, by contrast, always seemed perpetually surprised that he was getting gifts at all, never mind what was in them. He was happy to stand a few feet away from her and let her shop in peace.

She was thus able to pick up part of both his and Severus's gifts without awkward questions, and find things for the majority of the Weasleys, Remus, Hagrid, Albus, Minerva, and Tonks, as well as token gifts for her other professors.

She was severely tempted to return the gift she had got Ron on the last trip and replace it with another homework planner, as she knew that would annoy him, but she resisted the urge. If only he knew how thankful he should be that she was an early shopper and had found that book on the history of the Chudley Cannons in October.

In class, they were gearing up into the pre-holiday rush of school work, leaving students busy and stressed. This was a positive occurrence as far as Hermione was concerned because it gave the idiots less time to think about her and Harry's love life. Hannah and Ernie still had trouble looking Hermione and Harry in the eyes, and Ron was still being a prat, but that, too, was beginning to feel like business as usual.

Hermione test-brewed a batch of the final version of her Weresbane, not wanting her first batch to be the one which Remus would be drinking. It matched her equations and the previous trials she had made, but she wasn't taking any chances.

Remus sneaked into the castle at two in the morning a week after the Hogsmeade visit, and Hermione was ready to cancel her announcement spell before the second syllable of his name started. Unfortunately, Harry was not asleep yet.

He appeared in the doorway of his bedroom looking even more messy-haired than usual.

"What's Remus doing here?" he asked sleepily.

"We're having a torrid affair. Go back to bed."

Harry blinked at them in confusion. "Right. Everything okay, then?"

"Just fine," she reassured him and tugged Remus into her bedroom and shut the door.

The sandy-haired Gryffindor was looking back at the door worriedly. "Do you think you should be leaving it like that with Harry?"

She regarded him with faint amusement. "Remus, I'm very fond of you, but Harry is fully aware that I'm not interested in you romantically; we have that level of trust in our relationship."

Remus's stance softened. "I apologize, Hermione. He didn't look worried. It's just that James was the jealous type. I'm glad to see Harry is more like his mother in that regard."

Somehow, she didn't think Harry would be quite so unconcerned about another man joining Draco in the middle of the night.

"It's good to know you care enough about us to make sure we're okay," she answered Remus with a smile.

She led him through the bedroom to the lab, where he was suitably impressed but kindly forbore asking awkward questions about why a fully functional lab was attached to her bedroom when he knew that all the kids didn't have one.

She sat him down on a stool next to the marble counter and indicated the four vials there, one empty, three full.

"The first is for a sample of your blood. I'll mix it with the first vial of Weresbane and check for any indications that you're likely to have a bad reaction again. This isn't the finished potion, which would interfere with your next full moon, just the plant extract."

Remus immediately shrugged out of his robe, rolled up his shirtsleeve, and held out his arm, and Hermione proceeded. She mixed the blood with the potion.

"It'll take a few minutes before I can test for a reaction."

"The other vials?" he asked.

"Assuming we don't get any negative indicators when this test comes up, you'll give drinking the Weresbane a try. The last vial is an antidote in case you have a reaction that your blood doesn't. The chances of this happening are slim, but I'd hate to have to explain why you were dead in my lab."

The near heart attack before she'd administered the antidote to him in Grimmauld Place over the summer had been bad enough.

He nodded, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. "I can see how that would be annoying. Seriously, though, I really appreciate all the care you're taking with this and all the time you're spending on it."

She brushed his praise off. "It hasn't worked yet, but there's no question of my doing everything in my power to help you, Remus."

To their delight, the test went off without a hitch. Remus didn't show the slightest indication of a bad reaction to this version of the plant, but she still insisted that he stay for three hours of observation just in case. He tried to make her sleep, but she refused and was able to get away with it because it was a Sunday, and she promised to have a lie-in if she needed it.

While they waited, they discussed her cure. Remus had heard a number of the details before, but there was no harm in a refresher as they got closer to when he would actually be giving it a try.

What had puzzled her since third year when she had found out about both werewolves and Animagi was why the transformation was so painful for the former and not for the latter; having listened to Remus's screams and having now gone through the second transformation with regularity herself, she knew that the differences between the two were extreme.

Minerva had explained to Hermione that a werewolf's body continued to treat the lycanthropy as a disease. On a fundamental level, the human body did not want to make the unnatural change. The werewolf was being resisted—albeit with a marked lack of success—and this unconscious and uncontrollable internal conflict caused the pain. By contrast, the Animagus transformation was a natural one. The animal came out of the wizard, so the transition between the two forms was smooth and painless.

All the research into improvements to the Wolfsbane that Hermione could find had looked for ways to suppress the transformation of the body as well as the mind, and no successful progress had been made in that direction.

For a brief period, Hermione had thought that the cure could be found based on the fact that Muggles couldn't become werewolves. A Muggle was statistically far more likely to die from werewolf-related injuries than a magical person, but no matter what infected blood or saliva was transferred, they would not turn into a werewolf on the next full moon.

She had come, however, to one inescapable conclusion: Muggles didn't become werewolves because they were non-magical. It was a wizard's magic which made him or her susceptible to lycanthropy, and that meant there was no specific immunity that she could isolate. At best, if she worked this angle, she might discover a cure that robbed wizards of their magic along with the disease, and she wanted to explore every other possible avenue before she considered that one.[12]

Faced with these other failures, Hermione chose to come at the problem from the opposite direction. Rather than fighting the seemingly hopeless battle to get rid of the wolf, she was going to try to convince the human body that the wolf was a natural form.

The hybrid aconite that she was developing was specifically a Were's bane rather than a wolf's. She had magically altered it so that it didn't target all of the werewolf's instincts for suppression, only the human bloodlust. All the normal wolfish traits—from the pack instinct to the keen sense of smell—would remain, and since Animagi functioned with their human and "animal" brains, she believed lycanthropes could as well.[13]

Remus had told her that it always felt as though the werewolf were there inside him, although the form only completely emerged at the full moon. Her Weresbane was to be administered first at the new moon, when the link to the Were desperate for human victims was the weakest. With the Were influences minimized, she believed that using an accelerated timetable she could help the werewolves transform into wolf Animagi.

This transformation would not be linked to the lunar cycle but would instead allow the witch or wizard to transform at will, just as every Animagus could. She suspected they might feel the need to transform periodically, as she did, but they would never again be forced to transform painfully against their will at a specific time.

In the fourteen days between the new moon and the full moon, Hermione would encourage multiple deliberate transformations in order to get the wizard to celebrate the freedom of choice and to embrace the wolf. Hermione had heard stories from Remus of the joy of running through the Forest with the other Marauders under the full moon; wizards who had been bitten didn't hate the wolf, they hated the Were, and she believed they could accept their Animagus form. The wolf and the human could coexist peacefully; they would, in effect, be pack.

On the full moon, she would dose them with the Weresbane again, and she believed that the wolf and the human would fight in concert against the Were and be strong enough to destroy it. If this theory proved true, a perfectly human wolf Animagus would be the result, and she would have her cure for lycanthropy.

Remus was an excellent test subject because of his background with Animagi, although she had reminded him numerous times that he needed to brush up on the topic given how long ago his friends had mastered the transformation and the fact that he had never done it himself. He had professed himself happy to do whatever she wished.

At half five, she finally agreed to let him go, although she pressed the antidote upon him.

"If you experience any unusual symptoms over the next fifteen hours, you take that antidote, and you come back to me." She could see the objections forming, so she continued in deadly earnest, "I don't care what you're doing or what I'm doing, you come back if you have to take that antidote, do you hear me?"

He wisely acquiesced.

"You'll let me know at the next full if you're having any problems?" she pursued.

He agreed to this as well. The impending full moon would also give her the chance to verify with her own eyes that nothing untoward had occurred; she'd performed every conceivable test at every stage of the creation process, but the human factor was always an unpredictable one. She was the only person in the world who understood what he'd ingested, so she was determined to take proper care of him.

Since the next new moon was on the twenty-ninth of December, they'd both agreed to wait until the one in January for the trial, as it was too difficult to guarantee where they would both be over the holidays; she wasn't planning this cure so that Voldemort could mess it up with some holiday attack or skirmish.

This meant that in two months' time, if all went well, Remus would end a night like this one as a natural wolf. She gave him a fierce hug and saw him out.

When she returned, Harry was waiting for her in their common room, seated on the couch with tea.

"You're not leaving me as the only Pure Adult, are you?"

He was ninety-five percent joking, she thought.

"Remus is a lovely man, but as I explained to him when he was worried that he was coming between us, he's not my type. Neither of you are."

"I'm still having a little trouble coming up with your type. Could you not see your way to dropping broader hints?" he asked hopefully.

She helped herself to a mugful of tea and curled up on the cushion next to him, taking a soothing sip of the hot liquid.

"I'm giving you a chance to work it out on your own; it's character building."

He made a face at that notion. "You are going to tell me about you and Remus?"

"Not right now, but yes."

Even if it was a failure, she'd have to inform Harry at least, as he was going to be seeing several more suspicious arrivals on Remus's part.

"And you'd let me know if you got sick of being a Pure Adult?"

"You'll be the first on my list," she promised him. "We're in this together."

"Speaking of, you ready for our morning workout?" He gestured towards the protected half of the room.

"Actually, I'm going to go to bed."

"Oh?" Harry asked pointedly.

She rose, smiling like a Cheshire cat over her tea. "Didn't I mention? Remus and I were up all night."

Harry shook his head, smirking slightly. "You're evil."

She went to bed.

Less than three hours later, for the second time in less than two months, she was roused from sleep by the gargoyle's announcement that Severus had arrived in her and Harry's quarters.

Chapter Eleven: The Fight

Hermione rose immediately and found Harry and Severus arguing in the common room. The debate was heated enough that they didn't appear to be aware that she had opened her door. It was no doubt too much to hope that Harry hadn't noticed that the Potions master had been able to come in before the Gryffindor spelled the door open.

"She's sleeping," Harry said, his aggressive tone suggesting this was not the first time he'd made this observation. "You didn't tell us there would be a session this morning. It's barely half eight and a Sunday. She doesn't have to be awake right now."

"We often have sessions at this time on the weekend," Severus said coldly. "Half the mornings of the week I find her out of your quarters by seven. She shouldn't be sleeping now."

Harry stared at Severus incredulously, and Hermione was impressed with the evenness of the Gryffindor's tone when he replied, "You didn't make previous arrangements with us, sir. She had a late night and is catching up on sleep."

She closed the door loudly behind her, making them both look sharply in her direction. It had been that or let Harry get detention, from the way the argument had seemed to be going.

"Which is remarkably difficult to do when the two of you are arguing out here. I can be ready in a few minutes, sir."

Harry looked as though he wanted to protest on her behalf, but she had known a lost cause from the moment she realized why Severus had come.

Severus was regarding her narrowly. "I thought you had a lab in there."

"And I fell asleep on a countertop," she said shortly. "Did you want me to get ready or not?"

"Do so, Miss Granger." Severus, naturally, gave no indication that he appreciated her acquiescence to what everyone in the room knew was an unreasonable request.

She headed into the bathroom directly from the common room, not wanting Severus to get answers to questions that were annoying him. There, she brushed her teeth, made use of a few cleaning charms, and promised herself a shower after their training session. Moving to her bedroom, she swallowed her slightly tardy Veritaserum pill and pulled on a tank top and tracksuit bottoms which she topped with an old robe. She was back in the common room in less than ten minutes.

Both Harry and Severus were still alive and appeared to be physically unharmed.

She ignored the anticipated barbs about how long it had taken her to get ready and wordlessly followed Severus and Harry out of the room. In Room One, they found both Tonks and Kingsley, and Hermione understood why Severus had been so insistent. Why the idiot man couldn't simply have said that the others were waiting, she didn't know. Except, wait, this was Severus she was thinking about, and he lived to make things difficult.

Tonks still looked rather bleary-eyed. "You know, it's cruel to have me here this early and stroll in twenty minutes late."

"Sorry about that," Hermione said apologetically before Severus could offer more explanations for their tardiness. She focussed on Kingsley. "It's lovely to see you, Kingsley. Dosed any unsuspecting students with Veritaserum recently?"

She was rewarded with a flash of his very white teeth. "Not a single one, Hermione. My life's been very boring."

"Poor you," Harry commiserated.

"What about you?" the older man asked in turn. "Confronted a room full of Aurors lately?"

She smiled widely. "Boring for us, as well. Why are we being gifted with your presence this morning?"

"Even the Acting Head of the M.L.E. occasionally gets a Sunday morning off, and I couldn't think of anywhere I would rather be."

She laughed outright, and Harry grinned as he said, "We're touched."

"I'll mark that down as Albus's officiousness, shall I?" she said.

"Tonks asked me to come, actually."

She and Harry turned to the pink-haired woman.

"Is that a not-so-subtle hint?" Harry asked.

Tonks shrugged. "A recommendation, I suppose. It could be advantageous, but you must do as you see fit."

Well?

Harry gave a mental shrug. Don't want them to die of curiosity, I guess.

She agreed. It wasn't as though either Kingsley or Severus were going to give her and Harry away. And it would be useful to see how well the shield held up against multiple adversaries. She had a sneaking suspicion, however, that Severus wasn't going to take the news particularly well. He got bloody weird every time he was reminded about Harry's relationship; a happy Potter was apparently not to be easily tolerated. She shrugged this concern off, however, as any desire to cater to Severus was considerably abated by the fact that he was still being a complete wanker.

She nodded resolutely and addressed herself to the other occupants of the room. "All right," she said seriously. "Let's say that all of you are out to get Harry. I'm determined not to let that happen. Further," she added with a slighly malicious smile, "I'll even foolishly bet that we'll have all of you disarmed before you successfully land so much as one shot on him."

Severus and Kingsley rapidly took her up on this bet while Tonks smirked to herself but joined the two men on the other side of the room.

They fought. Going up against two Aurors and a Death Eater spy was no laughing matter, but Harry and Hermione had been training with them in earnest for almost a year now, not to mention all the training they did on their own. The hardest part was keeping all three in their sights at once. She and Harry had to constantly block their opponents from getting round behind them. They didn't want to back themselves too close into a corner, either.

There was a lot of wild spell-fire, spells cast and dissipated or clashing in midair and bouncing off at weird angles. Severus finally got off a shot that neither Hermione nor Harry could parry because they were each firing spells at Kingsley and Tonks.

Peripherally aware of Severus's smirk of triumph, Hermione threw up the strongest wandless shield she could manage while she and Harry were finishing their previous spells. For obvious reasons, casting two spells at once could only be done by someone capable of casting wandlessly. It took a lot of skill since it required thinking in a very focussed manner on two spells simultaneously, saying one that employed a wand and thinking and wandlessly performing the other.

The force of Severus's spell impacting against her shield drove her back a couple of steps but the shield held, and the moment the last syllable of the spell she'd been saying against Kingsley was out of her mouth, she reinforced the shield with the full force of her power and smiled at Harry.

You're up, Boy-bird.

He grinned and sent out a Stunner that went right through her shield and took out Severus before the smirk had totally faded. There was new realization in Kingsley's eyes, but nothing he or Tonks cast made her shield waver, and it only took a few more shots from Harry before both of the Aurors were disarmed. She released her shield once they gave nods conceding their defeat and Summoned Severus's wand so that no one could argue they hadn't disarmed him.

She walked over to Severus and Ennervated him, holding his wand at the ready hilt-first so that he would feel slightly less at a disadvantage. He retrieved it before he rose to his feet. As Hermione had predicted, he did not look happy.

"Alastor spoke of the Longbottoms," Kingsley said, still sounding vaguely surprised and impressed.

She and Harry nodded. "Tonks said."

"How long have you been able to shield like that?" Severus demanded.

"We discovered it by accident in Tonks's class on Halloween," Hermione answered. "I decided I'd rather get hit by Harry's Freezing Charm than Tonks's Burning Spell." Harry nodded. "Instead, his spell passed through my shield while hers was repelled. It happened very quickly, so we don't think anyone else noticed."

"Except Tonks," Harry added, "who apparently wanted to have her butt kicked."

"It's a handy skill to hone, and the two of you require some serious competition to make that possible," Tonks said cheerfully.

"You should have informed me." Severus's voice was cold.

"At which point did you wish me to announce it, sir?" Hermione ground out the ultimate word. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you how much opportunity we've had to speak to you recently."

"It would only have taken a moment to open your mouth and transmit the necessary information," the Slytherin snapped.

"But when she stands a good chance of getting thrown out of your lab or given second-degree burns, why would she bother?" Harry jumped to her defence.

"Burns?" Kingsley inquired.

"Hazard of training," Hermione answered curtly without looking at him, her attention still focussed on Severus. "You expressed no interest in any extraneous talk. Had we needed to do so, we would have used the ability during training previously, but it didn't come up. Now you know, and we can continue to train that ability along with all the others we possess."

For a long, silent moment, she waited for an explosion, but to her surprise, a tactical question came instead.

"What happens to your shield if it's hit by high-powered spells from both sides at the same time?"

It was a question to which neither she nor Harry knew the answer.

They worked until lunchtime and discovered that the impact of a strong enough spell cast by Tonks, Kingsley, or Severus at the same time as Harry's emerging spell could cause quite the backlash. It only knocked her unconscious the first time before she learned how to brace for it; the consensus was that it was because she'd still instinctively protected Harry, who'd been left unharmed.

Kingsley took his leave before, in his words, the Ministry sent out search parties. Tonks agreed to walk him out since it would be easy enough to pass off his visit as an official one to her. This left Harry, Hermione, and Severus to head up to lunch together. They cast Cleansing Charms on themselves, and Hermione revised her shower promise; she'd have one by tonight.

At least there's no worry from his expression that he's happy doing this, Harry observed with a mental eye roll.

The Head of Slytherin's expression was nothing short of forbidding as they trekked up the stairs to the Great Hall.

I think our secret's safe, she agreed. No one will guess we spent such an enjoyable three hours together.

He snorted. Good point.

They separated, Harry and Hermione seating themselves at the Gryffindor table and Severus making his way up to the High Table. She really hoped they could continue training without bickering constantly, but at the moment, that possibility was looking rather remote.

December arrived, and Hagrid was happy to cut her and Harry a small evergreen that they could decorate and put in the corner of their common room to make it more festive. Hermione conjured plenty of garland and baubles and then experimented until she came up with something like Muggle Christmas tree lights; they were made of magic and glowed softly in all the colours of the rainbow. Hermione had swallowed heavily and very carefully said nothing pitying when Harry had confessed that this was the first Christmas tree that he had ever helped decorate; she told him instead that he had done a spectacular job for a novice, and he had grinned brightly at her.

Ron was still avoiding them as though they had the plague. He went out of his way not to stand near them, look at them, sit near them, or speak to them. Hermione didn't want to have much of anything to do with him, either, but she wouldn't have minded if he were a little less obvious about it.

By the time the second Quidditch match of term arrived, she and Harry were annoyed enough that they were actually tempted to boycott it. Unfortunately, as Head Girl and Head Boy, they didn't feel comfortable not supporting the school's teams.

Gryffindor won, and Harry and Hermione limited themselves to not cheering much, although Harry said he was pleased on Ginny's behalf.

But, he grumbled, I was really looking forward to cheering for Draco.

Hermione offered him a brilliant mental grin. It would be nice to give the Prophet something else to headline, wouldn't it? About time they got back to that most important of topics.

Harry snorted. If they started dwelling solely on Quidditch, our lives would be a lot easier. I don't suppose we can avoid the victory party?

Actually, I feel certain it's our duty to patrol the corridors and make sure the Slytherins aren't taking their loss badly.

He nodded. Or the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs; they could be acting out because they feel left out. You're absolutely right.

Feeling quite pleased with their only somewhat specious reasoning, they headed off to their rounds.

On Monday, students staying for the holidays had to submit their names to their Heads of House. For the first Christmas in six years, Ron had expressed no interest in what Harry was doing. He issued no invitation for Harry to spend the time at the Burrow, and he did not put himself on the list to stay at the school. Harry squared his jaw and signed his own name, and Hermione added hers.

Very few students were remaining in the castle. The younger children were, generally, wanted home by their families whenever possible, and all of the seventh-years had been under such scrutiny in the media, by the Ministry, and at school that parents seemed especially anxious to have their children in their own sight for three weeks of holiday time.[14]

Remus picked up his Wolfsbane on the morning of the second Saturday of the month. He reassured her that he was still feeling just fine and would continue to work diligently on everything else. Both Severus—who'd come to make sure she'd given the Wolfsbane—and Harry—who wanted to see Remus—looked curious, but she and Remus pretended not to notice.

The final trip to Hogsmeade followed Remus's visit. As she'd predicted, Harry had to do nearly all of his gift-buying, as did a number of other students to judge from the crushes in the stores and the desperation in many of the shoppers' eyes.

Since she was finished, Harry drafted her into helping him. She managed to avoid this for the most part by the simple expedient of constantly suggesting books, but she did help him with Ginny and Mrs Weasley, as he seemed particularly inept when it came to buying gifts for females. She was pleased that he didn't commit the solecism of asking her for help with her own gift.

Homework was heaped upon them in this last week, including plenty of holiday work for them to return after the break. Harry promised to work on the first four days of the holiday in exchange for her agreement to take Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day off. Hermione knew that this would put them well ahead of most of their peers; many wouldn't crack open a book until the very last minute in the new year. She wanted to get as much out of the way as soon as possible because not only was she anal like that, she had learnt the hard way that one never knew when a holiday was going to go pear-shaped and one would end up half a cat for over a month, with paws instead of hands.

On the eighteenth, she and Harry took their final continuous dose of five drops of Veritaserum. According to her calculations, their tolerance would remain, and they would never again have to worry that only three drops would make them speak the truth. Since what they were doing was unprecedented, however, she was switching them over to a maintenance program where they took five drops once a day. After they'd done this for a couple of months, she'd be willing to let them risk not having any regularly. Given the precarious situation they were in, it wasn't the time for them to be forced to tell the truth on the off-chance her Arithmancy calculations turned out to be wrong.

Seven of their year-mates had the lecture portion of Astronomy Friday afternoon, but more than half of their year had their last class with DADA this morning. Rather than devoting the time to a lecture that they might not attend to very carefully given how close they were to the freedom of the holidays, Tonks had come up with a plan to keep their attention.

She broke them off into their standard partners but announced that she was turning the class into a competition so that they could see their progress. Someone would go away as the head of the class because rather than all practising at the same time, the rest of the class would be watching as they went through the class pair by pair, matching winners with winners until there was only one person left. Everyone looked intrigued, and Hermione doubted drifting attention would be a problem.

They were permitted to use any spells they knew so long as they were legal. Duels were called once someone was successfully disarmed. Most of the classroom was cleared to give the duellers ample room; those not currently duelling were sitting on conjured benches along the back wall.

Hermione found it interesting to be able to really watch her classmates duel and see how they adapted the spells they'd been learning throughout the year. The duels tended to last between five and ten minutes depending on the relative skills of those fighting. Daphne lost to Draco, Lavender to Parvati, Seamus to Dean, Justin to Terry, Hannah to Susan, Morag to Padma, Vera to Neville, and Ron to Hermione.

She wondered if it had been a wise plan to pair them up as usual; she hoped a lot of hurt feelings weren't the result of that preliminary round, although she had to admit that she hadn't felt at all bad about trouncing Ron. However, since eight students now got to sit back and watch the rest of class rather than continuing to strategize about who they were going to be duelling with next, perhaps losing wasn't such a hardship. For the most part, everyone appeared good-mannered.

Since they were still an odd person out, Harry was joining in on this second round against Neville. If Harry won, he'd be going up against Hermione, making it an even round, as they'd both have fought one other opponent. If he lost, they'd be off by a person again, so they were clearly betting on his winning. To give Neville time to recover from his duel with Vera, who had acquitted herself well, two other pairs went first. Parvati lost to Draco while Padma beat Susan, and then it was time for Hermione to see who she'd be going up against.

Five and a half minutes later, Neville lost to Harry. Neville was almost unrecognizable from the accident-prone eleven-year-old boy they had first met, but even with his extra DA training, he couldn't compete with Harry and Hermione for sheer knowledge and practice time.

It took Dean almost twelve minutes to narrowly achieve a victory against Terry, and then it was time for Hermione and Harry to face off against one another.

Contrary to what many of their peers thought given their expressions, Harry and Hermione squared off with the ease of long familiarity, and their long initial pause wasn't waiting for the other person to make the first move but having an internal conversation.

How hard are we trying? he asked.

We want to give them a good show, but I hardly think this is the proper venue for the revelation of our best secrets.

In other words, wands, wordless, and a fair portion of what they'd learned from Severus and the Aurors.

He nodded, and they began. They were the closest matched of the pairs that had gone up, and it took almost twenty minutes for Hermione to get in the deciding shot. She finally managed to hit Harry with a Trip Jinx that took him off his feet, which she followed immediately with a Cushioning Spell. The unexpected soft impact when he'd been braced for a harder one caught him off-guard and gave her the crucial moment she needed to disarm him.

The class exploded into cheers. She and Harry, breathing hard, bowed to the crowd and embraced one another, and she returned his wand. She was sitting for less than ten minutes before Draco had taken down Dean, and then it was her turn to go up against Padma, whom she brought down without much difficulty.

Tonks gave them an extra ten minutes to recover and prepare before the final confrontation that had the rest of the class sitting on the edge of their seats: Draco versus Hermione.

Draco was a much more aggressive dueller than Harry. He concentrated far less on protective shields and more on deflecting her spells with spells of his own and attacking her as fast as he possibly could. She was finally able to use this to her advantage, erecting Harry's modified shield, the one that dissipated spells rather than reflecting them.

Given the strength with which Draco was casting at her, she knew this would result in that mini-explosion surrounding her shield. Since she was expecting it, she'd protected her eyes and was sending off the disarming spell while Draco was still blinking and recovering from the unexpected explosion.

For the second time, the class cheered madly. She returned Draco's wand to him and offered her hand. He shook it, his face expressionless.

Tonks reminded them of the work she'd set out for the break, and the bell rang a few minutes later as she was wishing them all a happy and safe Christmas holiday. They gathered up their schoolbags and moved en masse into the hallway to go up to lunch. Hermione and Harry hung to the back so that they could congratulate Tonks on an excellent final class and offer to help set the classroom back to rights, but Tonks waved them on, and they headed outside.

Harry was a few steps ahead of her, and Hermione just had time to realize that all the rest of the seventh-year Slytherins seemed to be in the corridor when Draco turned abruptly and put out his hand, preventing her from progressing more than a step past the door as it closed behind her. For a fleeting instant, she could have sworn that the look in his eyes was one of sorrow, but then all she saw were hard chips of ice.

"You don't really think you could beat me in real fight, do you, Mudblood?" he sneered.

She hadn't heard that word out of his mouth since fifth year when he had still been acting a complete prat. For him to say it in front of their entire Defence class was the height of stupidity. Expressions of outrage could be heard from the other students.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, giving him a chance to retract, amend, or apologize.

Draco, unfortunately, chose none of these options. He drew his wand, and she threw up a shield as she shook her wand into her own hand.

She would have been perfectly fine if he hadn't cast one of the three spells in the world that went right through her shield as though it weren't even there.

"Crucio."

He spoke quietly—barely a whisper, really—but she still went down like a ton of bricks, agony searing through her, and the corridor exploded into chaos.

Most of the class went after Draco, but the Slytherins defended their housemate. Spells flew wildly, smoke filled the air, a whole section of the corridor wall exploded, spraying rock chips across them all. Someone stumbled into her, but she couldn't even tell who it was in the confusion—not to mention the fact that she was a little preoccupied with the fact that it felt as though someone had lit her nerve endings on fire.

The mêlée was, fortunately, short-lived. Tonks wrenched the door open and nearly stumbled into Hermione but got round her and started disarming people. Severus must have been on his way up to lunch, for he appeared as well and waded into the fray.

By the time Tonks and Severus were done with them, they were separated down the length of the hallway.

"If I see a single person's wand, the offending student will not be returning from his or her holiday," Severus snarled at them. "All of you, into my classroom now. Tonks, retrieve the headmaster."

The students were smart enough to be obedient now, filing away without so much as a word of protest.

Hermione's motor control was still off; she had to clench her hands into fists just so that everyone couldn't see how badly they were shaking, and she couldn't seem to find her feet. Harry had to help her up, and he held her protectively, one arm over her shoulder and a hand clutching her arm in a death grip. He was white as a ghost and seemed to be breathing with almost as much difficulty as she was.

Albus arrived at an accelerated pace with Tonks, Minerva, and Filius before Harry and Hermione made it out of the corridor, suggesting the headmaster had been on his way down already before the pink-haired Auror found him. Given the alarms that would have been tripped by the use of the Unforgivable inside the castle, this didn't really surprise Hermione.

Albus sent Minerva and Filius to make sure the seventh-years weren't stupid enough to cause additional trouble. There was little doubt from the expressions on the two Heads of House's faces that the students would be read the riot act until Albus arrived.

Albus gestured those remaining back into the DADA classroom and threw up privacy charms. Harry conjured a chair for Hermione, as Tonks had not finished setting up the classroom normally again. Hermione sank into the armchair with relief, and Harry perched on the arm, apparently unwilling to be very far away from her. He seemed to have made a good educated guess about what had happened.

Tonks, Severus, and Albus remained standing in front of them.

"What happened?" Albus demanded with some urgency, his expression very serious.

Hermione cleared her throat and forced herself to speak clearly and evenly. "Malfoy wanted a rematch of our classroom duel."

Tonks, Severus, and Harry blinked at her, evidently not thinking this explanation adequate.

"And how did this result in the disaster I found when I arrived in the corridor?" Severus was the one to ask.

"He was … less than polite in his request," she answered circumspectly.

"He called Hermione a Mudblood, sir," Harry clarified, voice tight.

"Unbecoming as such uncouthness may be," Severus answered coldly, "it is insufficient reason for almost the entirety of the seventh year to be engaged in a brawl in the corridor."

"He attacked Hermione," Harry answered angrily for her. "Most of our class tried to stop him, and the Slytherins in the corridor tried to stop us."

"The Slytherins were waiting in the corridor?" Albus asked, voice mild but eyes sharp.

Harry nodded stiffly.

"In other words, this whole event could have been avoided if Miss Granger had simply shielded herself against Mr Malfoy's attack."

Harry growled, but the headmaster spoke first.

"Miss Granger can hardly be blamed for the actions of her classmates, Severus," he observed blandly.

"She did shield," Harry gritted out, his grip white-knuckled on the armrest.

"From the way you have been clinging to her, I understood that she was injured," Severus sneered.

"She is." The words were clipped.

Tonks was frowning. "The only spells that can go through the type of shield Hermione can cast are—"

"Imperius, the Killing Curse, and Cruciatus," Harry answered fiercely. "Don't you think I know that?"

"You have the temerity to accuse Mr Malfoy of—" Severus began.

"Of casting the Cruciatus on a fellow student," the Gryffindor boy answered with dead certainty in his voice. "I saw her go down. You did not."

"How dare you—" It was a low hiss.

"Severus," Albus interrupted. "I was already on my way down because the Dark Magic wards had sounded."

The Head of Slytherin's jaw clenched. "Mr Malfoy is a Slytherin, not an idiot. He would never cast an Unforgivable within the school."

"But he would cast one," Harry interpreted flatly.

"I did not say that," Severus snarled. "Did you hear him cast?"

Reluctantly, Harry shook his head. "He was facing away from us, and he spoke quietly. Hermione's the only one who could have seen or heard what he cast."

They all looked at her, odd expressions on their faces. Severus looked forbidding but almost resigned, as though he were certain of the words that would come out of her mouth. Albus looked both curious and disappointed. Tonks looked disturbed, perhaps because Unforgivables had been allegedly tossed about right outside her classroom.

"Did Mr Malfoy cast the Cruciatus on you, Hermione?" Albus asked.

She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly.

"No, sir." They looked shocked. "I'd just battled three strong wizards in class. My shield must not have been up to its usual strength."

It was true that her shield had likely been slightly weaker than it would have been had she cast it at the beginning of class. However, she'd been training in strength and endurance for quite a while now, and she'd hardly been facing an interminable pitched battle. She knew full well the shield she'd cast would have kept everything normal out. But they didn't know that.

"What did Mr Malfoy cast?" Albus asked.

She didn't falter. "He cast wordlessly. Some sort of Blow or Impact Hex, I guess; I hit the door as I fell. It took a lot out of me. But I'll be fine."

Are you sure this is a wise choice, Berit? Fawkes asked, his tone very serious.

It is the one I have chosen. Trust me?

Of course.

At least she knew he wouldn't blab to Albus about what had really happened.

"If an Unforgivable wasn't cast, what set off your wards, sir?" Harry apparently did not believe a word of what she'd just said.

"The wards detect Dark Magic, Harry, not solely Unforgivables," Albus clarified.

"It was a fight between most of the students in seventh year," Hermione pointed out, warming to her subject. "It's likely someone cast something they shouldn't have in the heat of the moment. There are Blasting and Burning Curses that are counted amongst Dark Magic. There was a lot going on, so I can't tell you precisely what was cast."

"You seem to be defending everyone's actions, Miss Granger, when this apparently began as an attack on you," Severus observed, clearly still fishing.

"It escalated very quickly into a situation that was out of everyone's control."

"We will have to remove points from everyone who was involved." The head of Slytherin was watching her through narrowed eyes.

"We were only trying to defend Hermione!" Harry exclaimed angrily.

"And the Slytherins were only trying to defend Draco."

"Malfoy was uninjured," Harry fired back. "We were only trying to subdue him."

"You had not already done so, Hermione?" Albus asked.

All eyes on her again. She shook her head. "I didn't cast any spells."

Her professors were looking at her with varying degrees of scepticism.

Tonks's tone wasn't particularly censorious, but it was hard to take her comment as anything but. "You took out Ron, Harry, and Draco in class but didn't cast a single spell in the corridor?"

Hermione had been a little too busy grappling with her first real experience of an Unforgivable. Severus was now scrutinizing her even more carefully, and she looked down so that she didn't have to meet his eyes, hoping that she'd clasped her hands in her lap tightly enough that he didn't see the quaver in them.

She shook her head in answer to the question, and murmured, "Not a single one."

Still staring at her hands, she saw a small bloody scratch which finally afforded her a plausible reason for what had happened. Get the entire seventh year involved in a huge fight, and none of them would be likely to notice the removal of a small blood sample. It would explain why the Slytherins had been lying in wait and why Draco would start something at such enormous risk to himself. Disobeying Voldemort tended to be seriously hazardous to one's health.

Albus considered for a moment. "I believe we'll make it fifteen points from everyone who was involved in the altercation." Harry opening his mouth to protest. "Hermione, you will be given forty points for only defending yourself rather than attacking, and Draco will lose an additional thirty-five points for beginning the altercation. Everyone except Hermione will serve a week's detention in the new year."

Harry opened his mouth again.

"Harry," she said, "over a dozen people went after Malfoy; you can't blame the Slytherins."

The Gryffindor closed his mouth with an audible snap, jaw clenched angrily.

The headmaster was regarding her with bright blue eyes that she hoped didn't see too much. "If you are still feeling the effects of your fall, Hermione, you may go see Poppy."

"I'm still a little sore," she agreed readily, "but I don't think it's anything a little rest won't cure. If it's all right with you, I'll just return to my room with Harry as my moral support."

"Of course." The headmaster gave his consent graciously. "I need to speak to the others and make sure they don't need Poppy's assistance, either. I believe you should be present, Tonks, Severus."

They followed obediently, leaving Harry and Hermione to make their way back to their quarters. As soon as the door was closed, Harry rounded on her.

"Hermione, you were shielding, and don't give me any of that nonsense about it not being strong enough. What the hell happened out there?"

"Look," she said, holding up her hand.

He stared at it uncomprehendingly. She pointed at the scratch.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?" he demanded angrily.

She sighed and sat down on the couch. "Harry. It's blood. I know there were rock chips flying around, but I seriously doubt that one of them caused this. Don't you see why that fight happened?"

He didn't, apparently.

"They had to have been under orders to get blood. That's why almost everyone in our year was there. They got most of us in one fell blow. Who's going to question a scratch in the midst of that chaos?"

Harry sank onto the couch next to her. "You mean they got me, too? That was all to get our blood?"

"Take a look."

There was nothing on his hands, but when he shrugged out of his robe and pulled up his sleeves, they found a small gouge on the outside of his left arm near his elbow. With a sigh, he cast Reparo and Scourgify on the tears in his shirt and robe.

"Voldemort's pretty determined." If she could summarize with a gross understatement. "I guess he decided the Ministry was capable of messing up even a testing by Veritaserum."

"And is Voldemort capable of messing up a testing of our blood?" Harry queried.

"Of course."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Why did you lie?"

She opened her mouth, but they were interrupted by the arrival of Severus. Harry had not been happy about her permitting the older man to enter at will, but since it was not an ability that Severus had exercised—let alone abused—in nearly three weeks, Harry had looked to be almost reconciled to it. One look at Harry now told her that this was likely to change.

The Head of Slytherin crossed to the couch and held out a little blue vial.

Hermione blinked back sudden tears. "I'll be fine."

"You'll be better if you take this," he said flatly.

She took the vial from him, lost in thought. If she drank it, she was admitting what had happened. She still felt poorly, though, and they both basically knew anyway. She downed the vial and instantly understood the grimace of distaste he had made when she had seen him drink it. It was positively horrid.

"Why didn't you tell Albus the truth?" Severus demanded.

She laughed softly, and he raised an eyebrow in query. "That's what Harry wanted to know just before you arrived." They both stared at her pointedly. She waved Severus into a chair and addressed him. "Draco Malfoy isn't about to cast an Unforgivable in front of almost our entire year on a whim." She explained her blood discovery, adding, "It looks as though most of Slytherin was in on it, and assuming they managed it on all of us, Voldemort will soon have a pretty comprehensive answer to his question."

"That doesn't explain why you lied," Harry pointed out. "Knowing they did it for Voldemort doesn't really help, does it?"

She sighed and tried to formulate her feelings into an answer they would understand. "I did it because I'm all that's standing between Draco and Azkaban. I'm not sending him there for what he did to me today. We'll all be fine. That's not worth his life. I don't think it was something he wanted to do."

"But he managed to call you a Mudblood and cast the Cruciatus on you with the required skill," Harry pointed out thickly.

"Yes." She remembered that fleeting look in Draco's eyes. "But I think what Voldemort would have done to him had he not succeeded would have been a lot worse. He could have held me under for longer than he did. People are put in horrible positions during wars; I won't condemn the genuinely regretful for that."

"But you don't know he regrets what he's done," Harry snarled. "You have no idea how he feels."

She shrugged. "But I do know he won't have the opportunity to truly regret it if he's condemned to Azkaban." They both continued to look somehow puzzled. "I was the one injured. It is my choice to offer forgiveness."

"The Ministry does not take such an enlightened view when it comes to Unforgivables," Severus observed coolly.

She smiled slightly. "Are we now advocates of every choice the Ministry makes?"

Neither of them seemed to have an immediate response to this. She did find it rather grimly amusing that she was the one defending Draco; it was she who had been injured by him while both Severus and Harry had more reason than she to want Draco to remain out of Azkaban.

Rather than taking up the issue of their feelings about the Ministry and its policies, the Head of Slytherin went with a non-sequitur: "As a result of the altercation, Gryffindor lost sixty-five points. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff each lost seventy-five points, while Slytherin lost one hundred forty points."

This seemed to soothe the last of Harry's overt anger, and Hermione was left wondering if that was why Severus had said it.

She cast Tempus and saw that, as she had thought, Severus was in danger of being late for his afternoon class.

"You'd better go, Professor. Thank you for the potion; it helped tremendously, but I think I'll just lie down for a bit."

What she really thought would help was an afternoon spent with her herd, but sneaking out to the Forbidden Forest at one o'clock in the afternoon didn't seem the wisest of plans.

At the door, Severus paused and turned back with what she thought was reluctance.

"I trust you remember all the treatments for that particular curse?"

She barely managed not to gape at him. Never once had he referred to the events of that night last year, and she had convinced herself that he didn't remember the way it had ended.

It appeared he recalled plenty.

Stunned and unable to find her voice, she nodded.

He looked about to say more but apparently thought better of it and left without another word.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," she said, smiling at him as she rose. "I really am feeling much better, but I'd like to lie down."

He rose as well. "If you say so." His tone softened. "I'm glad you're all right."

"And I, you." She smiled. "I'll be up in a few hours, good as new."

She slept until half three, showered, and dressed in jeans and one of the warm Weasley jumpers Molly had knit for her. She felt much improved, but it was still disturbing to realize that she had been hit with an Unforgivable this afternoon.

She wouldn't have guessed that Draco would be the one to cast it, and the fact that it had occurred at Hogwarts—in the corridor outside of her Defence classroom, no less—made it seem all the more surreal; she wouldn't be shocked to learn that she was just now waking from an odd dream.

She emerged into the common room to find that Harry was there and deep in the midst of his homework from the look of it.

"Hey," she greeted him softly. "That looks like an awful lot of schoolwork."

He looked up from his position on the couch, books piled around him, and his face lit up as he took in her alive and unharmed appearance.

"I thought if I wanted a hope of approaching the same level of completeness as you when we stop working before Christmas, I needed to do some major catch-up." He set the scroll that had been on his lap to the side and grinned ruefully. "Now it'll only look as though I was asleep for half the term."

"Nobody says you have to be as compulsive about your schoolwork as me."

"Nobody else is the top of every class she's taking, either," he said, grinning more broadly.

She shrugged, a smile peeking out at the corner of her lips. "Well, there are perks to being compulsive, yes."

He shook his head, trying to hide his smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Quite well, thank you." Nothing a trip to the Forest wouldn't fix, anyway. "I think reaction is starting to set in, but I've survived."

He looked concerned. "You're sure you're all right?"

She shifted a couple of books out of the way and sat down on the couch next to him.

"I've had some strange things happen to me over the years. I don't really remember being Petrified, so I can't speak to that. When we went into the Department of Mysteries, we knew we could be facing a fight. Once it started, there was every chance we'd be badly injured. When I got hit by Dolohov's curse, it was still sort of a surprise, because I thought when I Silenced him that I'd stopped him, but part of me still knew that I could be hurt." She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "I was even prepared to get injured in class today, and I know that scuffles can break out in the hallway from time to time, but I wasn't … prepared to be hit with anything that Dark. It's still a little weird to think about."

"As it should be," Harry answered sympathetically. "We should be more protected than that in our own school. So don't you worry about any reactions you have." He grinned suddenly. "Maybe I can come sleep in your bed!"

She snorted. She was certain he shouldn't be expressing quite so much glee at the prospect of her having nightmares, and he seemed to realize it as well, trying to tone down his expression, but she knew he was just pleased at the prospect of helping her the way she had helped him in the past.

She gave in and smiled at him. "I think I'll be all right, thank you, Harry."

"Well, just remember that I'm always here to help."

She nodded. "I don't think you have to worry; I doubt that Draco is going to try to hurt me again."

Harry let out a loud exhalation of breath. "I don't really understand why you can be so sure of that. I want it to be true, but…." he trailed off, looking frustrated.

"I can't really explain it," she said, which was probably not the answer that he was looking for. "I guess I … sympathise with people pushed into horrible positions with this war." All she ever had to do was think of Severus, and her heart went out to people who were forced to commit actions they found abhorrent. "I think it's good that we're all going on break. It will give everyone the chance to unwind and figure out what's going on in their lives."

"Speaking of, since I doubt everyone will be at breakfast tomorrow, we should probably head up to dinner."

Hermione nodded. "I suppose we ought to reassure them of our health and happiness."

"And cozy coupleness?" he added with another grin, rising from the couch and offering his hand.

Laughing, she accepted the assistance, merely shaking her head bemusedly as he tucked her arm through his.

"I guess so," she answered. "We wouldn't want the student body to think you'd abandoned me because I defeated you in class and then got the stuffing knocked out of me in the corridor."

"That would be shockingly heartless," he agreed.

They joined the Gryffindor table and were met with many solicitations after their health.

Hermione assured everyone that she was fine, played up how startled she had been by the attack after the afternoon of duelling had tired her out, and brushed off concerns about what Draco had cast at her; a brief nap, she said, and she was good as new.

Apparently, the seventh-years had spent most of the afternoon spreading the tale of what had happened, so everyone knew all about it, and the younger students were rather in awe of a fight that had required the participation of almost every seventh-year at Hogwarts. The few of her year-mates who hadn't been there looked as though they were feeling rather left out, which Hermione thought was completely nonsensical. She made sure to stress the punishment which had been meted out.

"Violence isn't a solution to our problems," she pointed out to all those who seemed to be listening for promises of vengeance. "We could have resolved the situation peaceably; instead, all the houses lost a lot of points, and all the seventh-years will start the new year with a bunch of detentions. Not much fun at all, really."

This, thankfully, seemed to slow them down a little; the last thing she wanted was the rest of the school mimicking their horrible example.

Albus seemed to be thinking similarly, for he took the time as dinner was drawing to a close not only to bid everyone farewell for their holidays, but to remind them of the proper etiquette within Hogwarts upon their return.

"We will not hesitate to take harsher measures should you decide that brawling in the corridors is an acceptable pastime. We take attacks on our students very seriously, both by internal and external forces. Now," he added, smiling at them as his tone softened, "everyone head off and finish packing. Remember that the train leaves promptly at eleven tomorrow morning."

There was the usual hustle and bustle as students grabbed a last dessert, shouldered their school bags, and climbed off the benches.

An ominous silence suddenly fell around the Gryffindor table, and Hermione had her wand in her hand and pointed at the reason before she'd quite processed that Draco was standing beside her. Both his hands were visible, and he was unarmed, but everyone in the vicinity had their wands trained on him.

Chapter Twelve: The Holiday

Once Hermione processed that it was Draco next to her, she put up her wand, but she was one of the few. A glance at the High Table showed that Severus, Albus, and Minerva were all keeping a close eye on the proceedings.

"Miss Granger, I would like to speak with you, if I may," Draco addressed her formally and carefully politely.

She nodded, and a murmur of protest went up.

"Harry, perhaps you'd better come with me," she said, smiling indiscriminately around at the clustered people. "Everyone else, I'll be there to see you off tomorrow morning."

She started for the door, and Harry and Draco trailed after her. She found the first unoccupied classroom on that level, ushered them in, locked the door, and cast strong privacy charms, as it was likely that half of Gryffindor House—or at least most of the seventh-years—had trailed them and would be trying to listen in on this conversation.

Harry was standing next to her and Draco, gaze belligerent. His wand was clenched in his fist, not quite pointed at Draco but definitely held in a non-friendly manner.

"This is a discussion I need to have with Granger," Draco said stiffly, gazing at Harry with stormy grey eyes.

Harry didn't move.

"Harry," she protested gently.

His stance didn't soften.

"Malfoy," she said, "I think Harry's going to have to hold your wand."

They both looked startled at this prospect, and wariness washed over Draco's features. He now looked as though he was itching to reach for the wand in question—and not to hand it over—as though he'd only just noticed that he was locked in a classroom with two Gryffindors.

"Malfoy," she said quietly, "do you not think that if I were out to get you, you would already know it?"

This seemed to get through to him, and since it was clear that Harry wasn't budging otherwise, Draco reluctantly handed over his wand. Holding the two wands, Harry consented to stand on the other side of the room, although he continued to watch them like a hawk.

She cast a Silencing Charm so that Harry wouldn't be able to hear what they were saying, and she and Draco faced off from one another. Since he no longer had a wand, he had his arms crossed in a defensive posture. Her own wand remained in its sheath, and she kept her arms at her sides in an effort to appear approachable.

Draco's tone was halfway between sneering and what she thought was almost wistful—although perhaps that was wishful thinking on her part. "He's absurdly protective."

"Can you blame him?" she asked pointedly.

He shifted, eyes not meeting hers. She saw his throat work as he swallowed.

"I have never been under the impression that you are hard of hearing."

Her lips twitched at this particular method of asking the question.

"I'm not," she answered, shrugging slightly. "But I think I know what you did and why you did it, and I've chosen not to condemn you to a life in Azkaban for it."

"Why?" he demanded, clearly uncomprehending. "Anybody else would have done."

"Then you'll have to be grateful that I'm not anybody else." Another reason why he might have cast the Cruciatus occurred to her suddenly. "Unless you wanted to land yourself in prison?"

He scoffed. "Of course I didn't, Granger."

She wasn't one hundred percent certain that he was being truthful, but she supposed that he could still manage to get locked up without her if that was his wish.

"We make choices all the time, Draco," she said, using his name very deliberately, as it caused his eyes to snap to hers. "I made mine this afternoon because I believe that you still have an important one to make."

He shook his head impatiently. "My decision was made a long time ago, Granger."

"Would you not have guessed the same about me and predicted a different outcome to the events of this afternoon?" They both knew that he had. She tried to push her point home: "We always have options."

He frowned at her, eyes dark, but he met her gaze directly. "It's not as easy as that, not for me."

"I didn't say it was easy," she corrected, "just that it was possible."

He continued to look troubled for a moment, but then the expression smoothed away as he became the consummate Malfoy once more, revealing no emotions to her critical eye.

"I've been instructed to apologize."

She smiled faintly. "I can imagine. We'll take it as read, shall we?"

He gave an aristocratic inclination of his head, and the conversation was suddenly over. She disabled her charms, Harry returned Draco's wand without looking at him, and then Draco was gone.

"Was that good or bad?" Harry asked, sounding thoroughly confused.

She hummed a noncommittal noise. "That was uncertain, but it could have been worse. He was ordered to apologize."

"And it took him that long?" Harry asked sceptically.

She decided that explaining the truth might not amuse Harry as much as it amused her.

"It took him a while to work up to it, yes. Shall we venture out into the hall and reassure all the Gryffindors who will happen to be there that we're still alive and well?"

He smirked, sufficiently diverted. "Let's."

Out they went, and the dozen or so housemates casually milling about looked relieved indeed by their reappearance. Hermione was glad that they didn't appear to have engaged in a pitched duel with Draco.

Hermione smiled at them broadly. "It's so sweet you all stayed to wish me a happy Christmas."

Harry strangled a laugh.

"Did you need to see me all the way down to our quarters to say goodbye properly?"

They did, apparently, so she and Harry were escorted to safety and bid farewell at their door. Ginny was the only Weasley representative, which saddened Hermione, but she couldn't make Ron be a sensible human being.

They invited the youngest Weasley in for tea, but she said she needed to ensure that the younger Gryffs were all ready to go, this Prefect duty having fallen to her this year—and given their House, they all knew that some of them wouldn't even have thought about packing yet. She gave them both big hugs, told Hermione she was glad that she was safe and healthy, and left the dungeons with the rest of the Gryffindors.

Hermione frowned at the state of the couch, and Harry obediently bundled all his school supplies away and back into his own room, allowing them to stretch out properly on the cushioned surface.

"I think we really deserve a break," she declared.

Harry nodded. "The less we see of the rest of the school and the people in it, the better."

On Saturday, they discovered that they were, in fact, the only seventh-years staying for the holiday. There were less than a dozen students staying in total, and Minerva had assured Hermione and Harry that it was not their responsibility to look after the others. Harry had looked truly alarmed, as it had evidently not previously occurred to him that the two of them might be drafted as babysitters.

Since the rules over the holidays were laxer than during the school year, the two of them didn't feel at all guilty about burying themselves in their quarters for the first several days in order to complete massive amounts of school work. Harry was amazed by how much he accomplished when he actually worked solidly like that.

They took breaks, of course, but homework was really the only topic on the agenda; they weren't even being interrupted by Severus or Tonks with more training sessions, as there seemed to be an unspoken consensus that Friday's events warranted a hiatus.

On Sunday, they had received the letter from Molly that made it clear that Ron had been less than forthcoming about the current situation. The Weasley matriarch had assumed that Ron had issued the invitation for them to stay and that Harry and Hermione were spending the holiday at the Burrow. She was not pleased about the subterfuge her youngest son had employed to skirt the issue throughout the month of December.

When Ginny had informed her mother of the reason for the less-than-cordial feelings between the three of them, Molly had apparently given Ron an hour-long lecture that, she sincerely hoped, would pound some sense into his thick skull. She very sincerely wished that they would join the household now, though the invitation was late.

Hermione and Harry had talked it over and sent their regrets. No matter what Molly had yelled at her son, Ron changed his idiotic beliefs in his own sweet time, and Hermione and Harry didn't relish being in the middle of untold awkwardness within that warm but fierce family. They had reassured Molly that they were happy at Hogwarts and that they were looking forward to spending the holiday together. They had both winced a little at the impression this left, but there was nothing for it; it was likely the only reason that would get them out of the invitation—barring arguments about safety and Voldemort, and she and Harry hadn't wanted to play that card.

Hermione also didn't want to leave her herd. Sneaking out to see them Friday night had finally restored her equilibrium, and she was looking forward to seeing them more frequently now that there were fewer calls upon her time and fewer people to placate about her absence.

She and Harry made themselves visible on Christmas Eve day so that everyone knew they hadn't expired in the dungeon when no one was looking. She quickly reassured everyone as to her full health, and somehow, she and Harry found that they'd agreed to train with Severus and Tonks in the evening.

They were set to meet at half nine, and it was about a quarter past the hour when they left their common room, since Hermione was compulsively on time whenever possible.

"It's a new Christmas tradition," Harry said facetiously. "The Christmas Eve fight. Just what we need to make our Christmas complete."

Hermione grinned. "At least it's not a real fight."

"Point. But can we do our very best to kick their butts for suggesting it?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Of course," she agreed as they made their way down the hall. "We wouldn't want to disappoint them this close to the holiday."

But it turned out that Hermione had been entirely correct in her supposition that Tonks was worried about how the Gryffindor reacted in an unanticipated fight; Hermione found herself rolling out of the way of a spell and shooting off a wandless response before she even made it all the way into Room One. She regained her balance in a crouched position, firing off spells in the directions she'd glimpsed people before slamming up a shield so that she could take stock of the situation.

Harry was still standing at the door looking completely stunned. He had his wand in his hand, but he'd made no move to use it. From the changing expressions on his face, he was working himself up into a full-fledged rage.

Severus had easily parried the Impediment Jinx she'd sent at him, as she'd not been certain whether or not he was attacking her. Tonks was the one who was facing her in clear attack posture; she'd fired off a Blasting Hex, avoided Hermione's Disarming Charm, and now sent off another Fire Spell.

The hero of the wizarding world exploded, the force of his anger knocking both Severus and Tonks into the wall, their wands clattering to the floor and Tonks's hair turning black. Hermione was uncertain if Harry was exerting some control over it or if Tonks had lost her concentration such that she went back to her natural colour.

Harry stepped all the way into the room and slammed up locking charms behind himself. He was holding his wand in his clenched fist, but Hermione didn't think he was actually casting with it. What he was doing right now, from the look of it, was without thought and without conscious control.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Harry yelled.

His hair was being stirred by a wind that shouldn't have been there. It was beginning to rustle Tonks's and Severus's clothing as well, but Hermione was completely untouched on her side of the room.

"'Mione has had bloody well enough of being attacked in doorways! We agreed to come to this training session, not to be attacked as we were entering. If all you're going to do is abuse us, we're going to turn right the hell around and go back to our rooms!"

Tonks and Severus, from the look of them, were pinned in place; neither had moved or reached for their wands.

"Do you like to feel helpless?" Harry asked, stepping nearer to them. "Do you like to be attacked at random?"

Hermione rose from her crouched position, released her shield, and made her way over to Harry. The closer she got, the more she could feel the hum of magical energy around him. His output was absolutely furious, and she was sure that Fawkes and probably even the unicorns were fully aware of what he was feeling right now.

This fact was confirmed by the phoenix's sudden query: Do you require assistance?

No, thank you. She laid a hand on Harry's arm and felt the jolt of magic travel up from her fingers at the connection. We've got everything under control.

Sort of.

"Harry," she said quietly. "I'm all right. Let them go, please."

If you're sure. The phoenix sounded somewhat doubtful.

Harry was breathing hard and fast. "They had no right to attack you like that."

Quite sure, she said firmly.

"I'm sure Tonks will explain once you put her down," Hermione pointed out reasonably, but Harry didn't seem to be wavering. "You don't want to make me fight you for them, do you?"

He finally looked at her, his expression easing as he let out a sigh. "That would be a little ridiculous."

The wind died, and Tonks and Severus were able to move and retrieve their wands.

Close your eyes, she told Harry.

He looked at her like she was crazy, but she only stared at him pointedly until he obeyed.

Find your core and look at all the magic you're leaking.

He did so, and she could feel his surprise as he realized what he'd been doing.

Um … oops? he said sheepishly.

That's all right. It happens to the best of us. Just concentrate on pulling your magic back to your core, and we'll work on your overall control later, okay?

He'd had plenty of practice working with his core, so it wasn't too difficult for him to get himself back under control so that he was once again partially Masking—as much as people normally did unconsciously, instinctively protecting their cores and preventing anyone from being able to assess their magical strength on sight.

The magical outpouring tapered off completely, and Harry opened his eyes again. She'd never closed hers and had kept her wand in hand in case the other two people in the room had decided that they were unwilling to wait for an explanation. Fortunately, they had decided to be patient.

"Let's sit," Hermione proposed, conjuring chairs for everyone. "We appear to have some issues that we need to work out before we decide if this training session can continue or not."

Reluctantly, everyone obeyed. Hermione asked Kreacher for tea since she thought it would be safer if they all had something to do with their hands other than contemplate their wands.

Moments later, they were all sipping the hot beverage and seemed to be alternating between glaring and not meeting one another's eyes. Harry and Tonks were slouched in their chairs in remarkably similar postures, while Hermione had curled up comfortably with her legs tucked beneath her, and Severus was seated straight and upright as though he were in one of the uncomfortable chairs from his office rather than a cushy armchair. She'd even made the chairs dark blue so as not to offend anyone's sensibilities.

Hermione continued her role as mediator. "Professor Snape, I'm sure Harry is very sorry for involving you in that little display of power earlier. He didn't realize that you weren't attacking me and only wanted to make sure that I was safe."

Or so she was saying, anyway, and Harry had better keep his mouth shut if he knew what was good for him.

"Tonks, if you'd advised us earlier even that this evening's session was going to be unusual, I think we could have avoided this whole misunderstanding with Harry. As I hope you've gathered, I am perfectly able to take a surprise attack under most circumstances. The events of Friday were unusual, and you're just going to have to take my word for it. Although we do espouse Professor Moody's tenet of constant vigilance, we have a certain expectation of safety." Sometimes, anyway.

"But what did happen on Friday?" Tonks pursued, meeting Hermione's gaze directly. "You'd just beat Malfoy in a duel in front of the entire class. Surely you were aware he would be displeased."

Hermione chose her words carefully. "He seemed to take it well, actually. He was second with fifteen people below him, and it could just as easily have been him at the very top rather than me, a fact of which I thought him aware. I guess his upbringing made it more of a problem than I'd hoped. When he got into the corridor, he was suddenly faced with all his Slytherin peers, and it seems like the situation spiralled out of control very quickly." She shrugged. "He's a boy. He needed to save face, and he went about it in a stupid manner. There's nothing unusual about that."

Annoyingly true from her experience, much of the time, but she apologized mentally for the huge generalization.

"But you didn't even retaliate."

"It wouldn't have assisted the situation. Besides," she noted as she grinned cajolingly, "I'm good at not getting into detention. I'm the Head Girl, you know; it would be unbecoming."

As one, they all looked at Harry, who rolled his eyes. "I'm Head Boy. That makes me the head of the stupid sex, apparently, so you shouldn't be surprised that I got detention."

She and Tonks laughed, and Severus looked slightly less grim. Harry addressed the Head of Slytherin.

"I am sorry for incapacitating you when it was unwarranted, sir." Hermione thought this rather magnanimous given the situation and whom he was talking to. "I only saw that Hermione was being attacked as she arrived, and I tried to subdue everyone."

"You were effective, if rather … uncontrolled," Severus observed dryly. "Is that habitual?"

Harry grimaced. "It's not happened in a long time. I blew up my aunt once."

There was a brief digression as he explained this, and Severus and Tonks snorted over Fudge's behaviour.

"I react strongly to strong emotions," Harry confessed. It was completely true, but more than she had expected him to admit in present company. "Like I said, I thought it was a thing of the past, but Friday still has me on edge, I guess, and I'm overcompensating because I couldn't protect Hermione then."

He was still upset about Draco and the Unforgivable.

"You two still make the best of teams," Tonks agreed. "I guess I was surprised that you beat everyone in class, Hermione, and then it all devolved so quickly in the corridor."

Hermione offered another shrug. "Harry and I spar against one another all the time. We both share the wins, and it's often a case of someone getting off a lucky shot, as we're pretty evenly matched. Draco's highly skilled as well and, like I said, the victory could just as easily have gone to him." And then he would probably have picked a fight with Harry in the corridor. "Nobody wins all the time; you should know that."

Tonks nodded, her hair suddenly returning to its bright pink color. "True. I only wanted to make sure we weren't training you up with skills that weren't useful in real life."

"I've faced enough danger to know that I can manage," Hermione negated, "but I can still be injured."

"Looking to shield and then assess in unknown situations is a wise decision, Miss Granger," Severus said, surprising her with his approbation. Then he added, "You will just have to ensure that you know the strength of the shield you are casting before you use it as your defence."

She wondered if anyone had ever been able to cast a shield that could keep the Cruciatus or the Killing Curse out. When Harry had been learning Occlumency, she had seen his memory of the first battle that Albus had engaged in against Voldemort in the Ministry Atrium. The headmaster had been able to stop the Killing Curse with solid objects like the pieces of the Ministry fountain, so that meant the spell could be physically blocked.

Conjuring or transfiguring stone took time, however, and the stone that Albus had worked with had been destroyed by the impact of the Killing Curse; it would hardly be prudent to surround oneself with a shield that was going to explode in jagged pieces; it might be an ironic way to die under the circumstances but would not prove very helpful ultimately.

With all the work she and Harry had done modifying shields for their own purposes, she wondered if they could keep working until they found one with the necessary strength to resist the Unforgivables. She'd have to explore at some point when she wasn't in a room with the head of Slytherin, an Auror, and her nosy best friend.

"Did we want to give a regular training session a go, then?" Hermione asked. Now that they were all in a better mood, they could prevent the night from being a complete waste.

Everyone agreed. First they split with Harry and Hermione against Severus and Tonks. She and Harry made good use of their sympathetic shield, and it was hard for Severus and Tonks to get much of an advantage, although Hermione couldn't maintain the shield indefinitely, especially with the strength of the spells that Severus was hurling at it. Severus finally called a halt and for round two, paired himself with her, and Tonks with Harry.

Hermione didn't often get to partner Severus, and she wasn't as used to working with him as she was to working with Harry. She was, however, at least as solicitous of his safety as she was of her fellow Gryffindor's, and she took care that he was protected at all times, which he didn't seem to be used to; Death Eaters didn't take care of their own, apparently.

It was Harry who ended up calling an end to the evening, stopping his own partner's spell when Tonks threw a Burning Curse at Severus that Hermione went to block.

"I'm not going through that again," he said shortly. "No more fire at Hermione, okay?"

Tonks looked as though she wished to question him but had the good sense to forbear.

"Am I going to have to name you my own personal hero?" Hermione teased. "My knight in shining armour?"

He made a face. "You're going to have to shut up."

She smiled. They'd had a bit of a weird evening, but at least it had given her some time with Severus right around Christmas. Seeing if she could push her luck, she invited them all back to tea in her and Harry's quarters.

To her surprise and pleasure, Severus accepted just before Tonks said she had to be off because she was visiting her mother and father before she had to return to duty here on the twenty-sixth. Now faced with the prospect of just an evening with his two Gryffindor students, Severus looked a little sour, but he apparently wasn't feeling so rude as to renege on the invitation he had just accepted, which made for a nice change from most of his behaviour this term.

They wished Tonks a happy Christmas and headed back to their common room, where she and Harry sat on the couch and Severus in one of the armchairs as they had their tea.

Since Kreacher had served them earlier in Room One, he was well aware that they had been training, so tea was substantial, including mounds of little sandwiches, scones, biscuits, and fruit. Harry set about to wolf down some of pretty much everything immediately, whereas Severus put a couple sandwiches and a scone on his plate and began to eat them much more circumspectly. Hermione helped herself to the fruit, reminded once again of how grateful she was that the house-elves understood the diet of a Pure Adult who spent a fair bit of time as a unicorn even without having it spelled out for them.

"I do hope you're going to eat more than that."

Severus was eyeing her plate of fruit with a great deal of suspicion.

She smiled. "They have plenty of vitamins and natural sugar, and they're good for me. I don't think it's me you're supposed to be haranguing."

Severus made a face as Harry consumed another scone covered with cream and jam as they watched.

"You could at least have a sandwich."

"But I don't wish to eat a sandwich," she said sweetly, rather amused. "I'm perfectly healthy, I assure you. There's only one food that could tempt me, and fortunately, it isn't—"

There was a tell-tale "pop" and several glasses of mousse arrived. Severus's lips quirked up in amusement.

"I will most certainly feel better if you consume some chocolate," he said drolly. "It will put us on equal footing as far as obscene calories go."

Cursing Harry's house-elves anew, she grabbed up the mousse.

"If I find out they've put some sort of Compulsion on this stuff, I'll be having stern words with them, Harry."

Harry only smiled. "I find it very endearing that there's a food you can't resist. You don't seem to eat enough to keep a cat from starving, otherwise."

Severus was looking at her sharply again.

"I'm fine!" she exclaimed, annoyed at their concerning themselves with what wasn't any of their business. Besides which, it was bizarre to see the two of them united like this.

"Here," she added with exasperation and cast a general health charm that displayed quite clearly that she was, indeed, in excellent health. "Satisfied?"

Wisely, they didn't argue the spell and let her enjoy her fruit and mousse in peace.

Severus took his leave just as the clock chimed the midnight hour. Albus had charmed it for the holidays so that they would all know when Christmas and New Years began. Apparently, he thought these were important to get precisely right.

"Happy Christmas," she said, desperately wanting to call him Severus but settling for leaving off the "sir".

"Happy Christmas, Hermione."

She tried to keep the goofy grin off of her face, but it insisted on appearing, and she hoped he didn't think that she was a complete nutter. Oh, hell, she didn't care if he thought she'd gone round the twist, she was too pleased to control her smile. Even if she couldn't take the risk of calling him Severus again, he'd called her by her given name, in the presence of Harry, no less, and that made her ridiculously happy.

Of course, unless she wanted to explain something to Harry that she didn't quite feel up to sharing, she couldn't keep acting like a complete loon. Or she'd at least have to share the joy. So she turned to Harry, that dopey grin still plastered on her face, and pulled him into a hug.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," she said, feeling in that moment that it really was.

They'd made it to Christmas with no more utterly outrageous actions on Voldemort's part. Severus was safe and sound. Harry was safe and sound. And they were both in the room, almost getting along.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," he murmured back, adding over her shoulder, "Happy Christmas, sir."

"I will leave you to it," Severus said stiffly.

She released Harry and turned back to him. "Have a pleasant night, sir. Will we be seeing you at breakfast tomorrow?"

Severus frowned. "Fortunately, Albus only compels us to come to Christmas dinner. I will be avoiding students in general and the holiday in particular until I am forced to do otherwise."

She decided to take it as a positive sign that, given his feelings about Christmas, his first act had been to actively wish her well of it. Even if she'd said it first, he could have said, "Bah, humbug," in response.

"Well, I'll wish you a good morning, then," she said as cheerfully as she could given his evident displeasure, "and we'll see if we can't sabotage the decorations before you arrive for dinner."

His lips quirked up ever so slightly. "That would be a gift indeed, but I doubt the headmaster would allow anyone to interfere with his," he sneered the words, "Christmas cheer. Goodnight."

He stalked out, and she and Harry were left alone. They each took their Veritaserum capsule.

"Time for bed!" Harry announced in a very chipper tone.

She regarded him with amusement.

"We've got to get to bed so that we can get up in the morning."

She loved the example of a moment where he allowed himself childish glee, so she didn't object to the daft assertion.

"Goodnight, Harry."

He grinned at her, and they went their separate ways. Hermione puttered around in her lab for an hour, brewing up another cough remedy. Once she was certain that Harry was asleep, she sneaked out for a celebratory evening with her herd.

They didn't celebrate Christmas, but they were very happy to see her, and if she was feeling happy because of some arbitrary human holiday, then they were pleased that she was coming out to seen them in a joyous mood rather than a spitting mad one. She played with Isaura, conversed with Castina and Ashwin, and had the chance to catch up a little more with the lives of her herd-mates.

It was somewhere in the vicinity of half four when she snuck back into the castle. Rather than going straight to bed, she made a stop in the Great Hall. It took her almost an hour to work her magic, but she was quite pleased with the results when she was done.

You'll help me out with this one, won't you? she asked.

Fawkes was deeply amused. I thought you liked the holiday, Girlicorne.

She laughed. It's a gift.

He sent a brilliant bird-smile her way. I will do what I can to assist.

This task accomplished, she headed to her bed for a few short hours. She was up and chipper at half seven thanks to how much time she had spent with the herd, and she'd showered by the time Harry woke at eight.

She'd put her pyjamas back on in his honour, as this was one of the few traditions that he had managed to acquire about the holidays; that first real Christmas he had spent with Ron had been pyjama-clad, so he liked to do the same every year.

They each had a pile of gifts that had appeared under the tree in their common room. There were their gifts from one another, the ubiquitous Weasley jumpers and food from Molly and Arthur, the treats they couldn't eat from Hagrid, their gifts from the rest of the Weasley clan, something from Remus, and a few odds and ends; there was one in the pile for Hermione from Viktor, and before fifth year, she had always had a present from her parents.

Despite the fact that the holidays were an occasion where she most missed her parents, it was difficult to remain morose when she was faced with Harry's delight when he saw that little pile of gifts with his name on them.

For a moment, she was saddened that Ron wasn't there with them to make the proper trio like last year, but she reminded herself that it had been his decision to leave and not even inform them of the fact, and it wasn't as though the holiday would have been a pleasant one if he was tossing accusations about. She and Harry were better off on their own this morning.

Harry had given her a new wand sheath to replace the one that had taken quite a beating in the relatively short time that she had had it. The new one was of dragon skin and imbued, he told her, with plenty of protections against fire and everything, so it would be sure to last her longer than the previous one. She immediately slipped the length of holly into the sheath.

Over Christmas in sixth year, she had retired her dragon heartstring and vine wood wand for the adult one of holly and unicorn tail hair—and she hadn't even had to ask Castina whose hair was at its core. She had been worried at the time that the new wand would not fit the old sheath, for it was several inches longer than the vine wood. Magic, of course, had taken care of that problem, and the sheath had worked perfectly.

Harry was one of the only people she knew who had not needed a new wand when he turned seventeen. Holly and phoenix feather continued to suit him, and she wondered if there was any special meaning in the fact that they both now had wands which symbolized purity. But there were wizards who weren't Pure who used holly wands, so it didn't appear to be a fact that was completely out of the common way.

The new sheath fit this wand perfectly, as well, and she was sure that she would soon become used to the slight differences in how it felt to her old one. With the sheath came a book on rune warding, and she thanked Harry for choosing a gift that was so well-suited to her but of little interest to him.

From Ginny, she received a long denim skirt and several bath products. Viktor had sent her a bottle of plum rakia and several sachets of medicinal herbs which he thought she might like to experiment with in potions. This amused her, as she had sent him containers of Earl Grey and English Breakfast tea and a book on the United Kingdom Quidditch teams.

There was an unlabelled gift at the bottom of her pile, and she wondered if it was from Ron. Opening it, she found a small blue book bag. The material was soft under her fingertips, and she could almost feel the hum of spells which told her that this was no ordinary book bag. Opening it, she found that she couldn't see the bottom of the bag; it appeared to be a great deal larger on the inside than on the outside, and she imagined that it had been spelled not to betray its weight, either.

She was now sure it hadn't come from Ron. She suspected it had been hand-spelled by the person who had given it to her, and she had some suspicion about who that was. The idea that he really had sent it to her made her inordinately happy, not least of all because it made her feel less self-conscious about the anonymous gift that she had ensured would get to him today.

Harry seemed to be just as pleased with his gifts as she was with hers. She'd given him one of the best books on Animagi along with her general notes from the previous year, as well as a vial of Eyesight-Correcting Potion. The potion had been a pain in the arse to brew and was full of expensive ingredients, but Harry was at the top of her list of people deserving of such effort.

She'd tried to improve in the last couple of years in giving people gifts that she knew they'd like, not just that she thought they needed. She still believed the homework planners could have been extremely useful tools for the boys, but she was fully aware that they'd hated them.

Ginny had sent him a nice pair of jeans; she had evidently decided that the two of them needed help dressing themselves. The twins had given their usual giant box of WWW products. Hermione figured she likely didn't want to know what most of them could do. She still couldn't quite fathom how two boys so obviously clever when it came to Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration, at the very least, could have done so poorly on their O.W.L.s and not even tried for their N.E.W.T.s; the die-hard swot inside her couldn't help cringing every time she thought about it.

Tonks had given them a book entitled Light Spells to Battle Dark Intent; a note on the flyleaf indicated that she thought they'd appreciate the idea behind it even if it wasn't the only manner in which they were forced to fight. Remus had sent them both a book on sympathetic magic, as well as a big box of chocolate, which amused them to no end; Harry had asked the older man once if he was under contract to Honeydukes. He had chuckled for days over the notion.

Hermione wondered if Tonks and Remus had considered that although they had carefully each sent separate gifts, they'd used the same wrapping paper. At least Hermione was now pretty certain that both of them would be having an enjoyable holiday.

She and Harry appreciated, of course, that their fellow Order members were showing their support for their supposed relationship, but they were slightly embarrassed by the gifts that had been given to them jointly rather than one book each. Harry handed both books over to her.

"I know you'll read them twenty times faster than I would, and I'm sure you'll find them more useful." He grinned at her. "You can tell me the highlights and then we'll tell Remus and Tonks we read them together in front of the fire."

She snorted with laughter and finished the thought: "With me curled up beside you and you stroking my hair."

His smiled deepened. "Just like that. Aren't you glad we're only pretending to date?"

She nodded. She wasn't uninterested in such intimacy, Harry just wasn't the man in that mental picture.

She still felt bad about the fact that Remus had sent her a gift when she hadn't returned in kind, but he had told her in all seriousness that if she sent him anything, he was sending it straight back; as far as he was concerned, her attempt to cure him was her quota of gifts until the day he died.

Dobby had given Harry a pair of very garish socks in shockingly mismatched colours of lime green and a bright salmon pink. The Gryffindor winced when he opened the box, but he gamely put them on. So long as the house-elf saw Harry wearing them at least once, he was thrilled to tears, and Harry reasoned that Christmas Day was the wisest time to manage this.

Kreacher and Winky had gifted Harry and Hermione with new winter cloaks. Hermione appreciated the effort they had made to assimilate her ideas even if they could never see eye-to-eye about her desire to set them all free with the option to work for a wage.

The giving of clothing indicated a sense of humour that neither had displayed to Harry and Hermione before, and Hermione thought it was brilliant. Hers was dark blue and his dark green. They were plain, which they both preferred, but made of a fine, heavy wool. They looked cozy and highly serviceable.

She and Harry had gotten together to give Dobby an extra holiday and to give new uniforms to Kreacher and Winky, as the latter two had already refused anything that smacked of payment or time off; they kept insisting that they had no more wants as far as objects or lifestyle.

The house-elves had also banded together to serve Harry and Hermione a positively lavish breakfast in their rooms. It looked as though there was every possible breakfast food with every possible condiment and enough for them to go back for fourths if that was their desire. Even Hermione managed seconds, and she was relieved to see that they'd not tried to serve her mousse for breakfast. There were really only so many days in a row that it was healthy for her to face that temptation.

She and Harry spent the rest of the morning in leisurely pursuit, reading the books that they had received for amusement's sake only, as per Harry's rule. She was pleased enough to comply, as it was nice to see Harry this carefree. He deserved a break from all the death and destruction.

Harry finally worked his way to the book on Animagi. He'd set it aside pretty quickly when he first opened it and gushed profusely over the potion. The look on his face now was painful; he'd lost the battle with trying not to let his emotions show.

"You don't really think one book is going to be able to help me, do you?"

He'd tried to sound doubtful, but that edge of desperate desire had crept in.

"I think," she said gently, "that last year was not the right time for you to attempt your transformation. There is no doubt in my mind that you're capable of it now."

He looked up at her with wonder in his eyes.

"But I was rubbish at it last year."

She shook her head. "You were blocked last year. We all know you're powerful enough, and you understood the principles and everything you needed to learn to make it work."

"And it didn't," he said, aggrieved.

"It didn't then," she corrected mildly. "It will now."

"How can you be so certain?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because I ran the Arithmancy equations?" she tried.

He snorted. "That can't be your answer to everything. You sound…." He tilted his head as he tried to work it out. "You sound like you know."

"I have a very strong suspicion," she said circumspectly.

"But what's different between this year and last year?"

"I think you should be able to work that out on your own," she said with some amusement.

There was silence for several moments as he made the attempt.

She offered another prompt: "Something big in your life that's changed between last year and this year."

Finally, his face lit up, but it was followed almost immediately by a frown. "But … why would that matter?"

"You'll just have to wait and see," she said with only a moderate amount of glee. "We're not attempting this until you've redone all the training from last year."

"But I did it once already!" he protested.

"And you remember it precisely?" she asked pointedly. "You didn't try to banish it right out of your mind because you were so upset that you weren't able to do it?"

His eyes skittered away for a moment before he met her gaze sheepishly. "That might sort of resemble what happened."

She smiled fondly at him. "We're doing this safely, and that means you go through the training."

He nodded resolutely, determination in every line of his face as he delved into his book.

At three, it was time for Christmas dinner. She had Harry had dressed properly by then, with Harry's nearly glow-in-the-dark socks thankfully hidden by his new trousers. Since they were on holiday, they weren't wearing their robes. She was wearing her new denim skirt and her new Weasley jumper—which was in a becoming shade of blue with green accents.

Harry's jumper, they'd been amused to note, had blue accents and was a green that matched his eyes. Apparently, Mrs Weasley was reinforcing how accepting she was of their relationship, even if her youngest son had declared that he would never ever accept it; his mother had scolded him, and Ginny had relayed the resultant declaration to Hermione and Harry.

They headed up to the Great Hall, hearing raised voices as they mounted the staircase, and Hermione did her best to keep a completely straight face and not give away the game before it had even begun.

They entered the room. Harry positively gaped. There was a fraction of the normal amount of Christmas decorations. The regular profusion of ribbons and crepe had been removed from the walls and ceilings, replaced with garlands of cedar twined with mistletoe, holly, and the occasional ribbon. The twelve trees remained, but they didn't look as though every ornament in creation had flown to stick to them. They were tastefully decorated with baubles, lights, and garland.

Each and every decoration—from the garland on the tree to the Christmas crackers at each place setting—was completely black. Hermione took hold of Harry's arm and got them through the doorway. He still looked as though he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

Albus, she was pleased to see, was still in high twinkle.

How long did he try to change the decorations? she asked.

Nearly ten minutes, Fawkes answered, and she could hear the amusement in his voice. He gave it up when the black banner on the wall attacked the new table decoration that he'd made. Have I mentioned recently how talented you are with defensive magic?

She smirked. I'm not sure that most people would consider attacking material as the most brilliant exhibition of that, but thank you.

The remaining children were chattering amongst themselves, trying to figure out just what was going on. Taking down much of the decorations had prevented the room from appearing too funereal; when she had first simply changed the colour scheme from Christmas-y to black, it had been positively gloomy. Paring down and focussing on the large and beautiful trees had instead made it look as though a slightly unusual theme had been chosen. It was now very elegant and a far cry from the normal almost-painful explosion of colour and decorations.

As far as Hermione could make out, Severus was the only person who hadn't yet arrived. Minerva was managing with a pretty straight face to compliment Albus on this year's decoration decisions, evidently fully aware that this couldn't possibly have been his idea. Filius was examining the decorations on the trees, and he looked to be particularly intrigued with her lights. Filch and Mrs Norris were prowling the perimeter of the room, but Hermione thought even they looked slightly more cheerful than usual.

That accounted for all the professors barring Trelawney, who Hermione sincerely hoped would not appear. Hagrid was visiting Madam Maxime in France this Christmas, and all the other professors had taken leave for the holidays.

Albus bade everyone sit down, and there was a general shuffling as seats were found. They had only just managed it, with an empty spot left next to Minerva for Severus, when the Potions master crossed the threshold and entered the Great Hall. He checked as he viewed the interior, an arrested expression upon his face. The younger students were watching with trepidation when Severus did an astonishing thing. His lips twitched first, then he threw back his head and burst into laughter.

Chapter Thirteen: The Gifts

The students looked completely stunned by Severus's outburst. Albus and Minerva appeared rather amused, but the other professors seemed to be nearly as shocked as the young people.

Inwardly, Hermione was grinning fit to burst, although she tried to school her expression to something mild and innocuous. She had never imagined that she'd be able to garner a reaction as marvellous as this, and she wondered what she could do to make him laugh like this again. As soon as possible. It was a rich baritone, and she found it positively enchanting. There was nothing snide or derogatory in this laughter; it sounded as though it were coming straight from his soul, spilling out in joyful amusement and causing him to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes as he recovered.

Severus made his way into the room and found his seat next to Minerva. Hermione could have sworn that there were lines on his face that had disappeared with that laughter and not come back even now that he'd finished. He was still tall and dark and grim, but an edge of the forbidding had worn off. Or so it looked to her; judging by the expression on most of the students' faces, they were more worried about either their sanity or his than they had been previous to his entrance. Only the sixth-year Slytherin—Gleeson, if Hermione remembered correctly—who had been brave enough to sit next to the empty seat which Severus would occupy didn't look completely disturbed.

"Albus," Severus said, face almost composed, "I must compliment you on your decorations this year. They're positively tasteful, and the colour scheme is so refreshing."

Minerva's eyes were dancing with laughter and Albus's were twinkling merrily.

"Thank you, my boy. Minerva made a similar observation. Unfortunately, I cannot take credit for the lack of festive colours. I'm afraid this isn't the state in which I left the Hall last night."

"No?" Severus asked, feigning surprise. "If not you, then who could have done it?"

"I was hoping you could answer that question for me, Severus," Albus said, and he would have succeeded at sounding nearly grave were it not for the merrily twinkling eyes. "I confess that I thought immediately of you when I saw what had been done."

"I can't imagine why," Severus said dismissively, as though every person in the Hall hadn't immediately thought of him when they saw what had been done. "I have neither the time nor the inclination to decorate."

"Hmm," Albus said contemplatively.

Minerva spoke up, sounding helpful, but Hermione suspected the older woman was really just enjoying Albus's being trumped. "It must have been someone who was thinking of you, Severus."

"I can't imagine who." Severus did not so much as glance in Hermione's direction. "Why didn't you simply change the decorations back if they disturbed you so much, Albus?"

The headmaster cleared his throat, and Minerva's stern face broke into a full-fledged smile. A smirk appeared on Severus's face.

"Don't tell me you weren't able to make the appropriate alterations?"

The headmaster didn't say so, which answered the question quite effectively.

Severus cleared his throat. "Well then, it seems that you're looking for someone skilled in Charms and Transfiguration."

He eyed both Minerva and Filius, who immediately disavowed all knowledge of the events.

"Then I am at a loss," Severus said simply. "Surely you're not saying that a student could best you, Albus?"

As one, they looked over at Harry and Hermione, who looked at one another and then back at their professors and shook their heads.

"We went to bed around midnight, Professor," Harry said earnestly. "And we've been together since early this morning opening presents and enjoying our gifts. We didn't have the opportunity to perpetrate such a … crime."

Hermione, I have to say it again: you're the smartest witch of your age. You know I love you, right?

She gave him a mental smirk. I love you, too, Harry. It was sort of irresistible.

You can do the same for Valentine's Day, right?

I suspect he'll have worked out a way to prevent me by then, but I'll see what I can do, she promised.

"Well, whoever's done it, it is a remarkable transformation, Albus. I recommend you hire them for next year's decorations," Severus said, seemingly quite serious.

Minerva gave in to her laughter, and most of the table joined in, although the younger students looked uncertain as to whether or not they should be laughing at something that might be seen as casting aspersions upon their headmaster to his face.

Albus nodded. "I shall certainly keep that in mind."

As a suggestion to ignore, Fawkes contributed, and Harry and Hermione grinned at him.

The meal began, first with the pulling of the Christmas crackers and then with the food. The Hogwarts elves, like Kreacher, Winky, and Dobby earlier, had completely outdone themselves.

It was quite a cheerful meal. In addition to the professors who had stayed for the holiday, there were seven younger students, two sixth-years, and Harry and Hermione. The younger ones didn't seem to know precisely how to act in present company. They managed to talk amongst themselves, however, and the older students took care to periodically inquire about innocuous topics such as what the younger ones had received for Christmas, allowing them to have the floor for a period of time without feeling self-conscious.

Wisely, the first attempt to ask about favourite classes was quashed, given that all the Heads of House were here, and Hermione was sure that none of the younger students would feel comfortable answering that question in their presence. Hermione briefly toyed with trying to get a rousing consensus on everyone's least favourite class, but she didn't suppose that would be a wise attempt, either. And really, it would be impossible for her to explain that she was actually quite fond of the material and was fond of the teacher, too, when Severus wasn't being an utter prat.

Once the meal was over, they went their separate ways, the younger students eager to have the snowball fight which Filius and Pomona had agreed to oversee. Hermione was glad that she hadn't been made to volunteer; she would have done it, but she didn't much feel like trooping out into the cold to watch over that sort of activity.

She and Harry headed back to the dungeons, Severus a few steps behind them, they realized, when he asked to see her. She waved Harry off, telling him she'd return to their rooms later, and allowed Severus to escort her where he willed: in this case, his office.

Once the door was closed and privacy charms cast, he turned to face her, and she found that he was smiling again, that genuine smile that she saw so rarely on his features and which made him look his age rather than older and angrier.

"Thank you, Hermione; that was quite enjoyable."

She raised an eyebrow and played dumb. "I don't know what you could possibly be referring to."

His expression turned sharp. "You know exactly what I'm referring to, meddlesome witch; the number of people at this school who could charm the decorations such that Albus would have difficulty easily charming them back can be counted on one hand. I place some reliance on Filius's and Minerva's disavowals, and since I had no part in what occurred, that leaves you or Mr Potter. The answer readily presents itself."

"Is the perpetrator of such a crime to be placed in detention? Or lose more than ten House points?"

He shook his head solemnly, although the glint in his eyes suggested that he might actually have been pleased that she'd had the sense to clarify this before admitting her guilt.

She smiled faintly. "I might have popped into the Great Hall this morning."

"In order to make a decorative change or two?" he asked pointedly.

She shrugged and said nonchalantly, "Perhaps a small alteration here and there."

His expression softened. "I will savour the look on Albus's face and only regret that I was not present at his arrival."

She grinned. "Me, too."

Severus smirked. "I believe it calls for celebration. Tea?"

They'd just come from a ginormous Christmas dinner. She didn't feel as though she could eat another mouthful.

"Yes, please," she said promptly.

There was no way she was giving up this opportunity if he was in a thoughtful and not snide-as-hell mood.

They made it about halfway down the hall from his office towards his quarters when they were interrupted by Gleeson, who was hurrying to inform his Head of House that Peeves was making a great racket three corridors down from the Slytherin common room, no doubt with a nefarious purpose.

Severus looked as though he wanted to use a few select curses, but he turned on his heel, and the three of them rushed back towards the source of the disturbance.

They'd almost reached the corridor in question—they could hear Peeves yelling something, accompanied by numerous loud bangs—when Hermione felt a spell hit them.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then they burst into song.

Despite Severus's amazingly happy and carefree-sounding singing, he was glaring fit to turn both of them to stone, but since they were singing by force as well, there wasn't a great deal that they could do.

As they hit the chorus, Albus emerged from his hiding spot, blues eyes twinkling like mad, clearly pleased that his ambush had been successful.

When the last strains of Jingle Bells died away, Albus bid all of them a happy Christmas and swept Gleeson off to go ensure that Peeves was now behaving. Since it seemed that the poltergeist had been drafted by the headmaster, Hermione wasn't overly concerned about their fate.

She and a quietly fuming Severus made their way to his sitting room. She wondered if it wouldn't have been wiser to have ducked out when she had the chance and followed the headmaster and Gleeson; being stuck in a room with a completely irate Head of Slytherin was not exactly her idea of a brilliant time. But she'd said she'd have tea, and skiving off and potentially making him angrier had seemed imprudent.

No matter how angry Severus was with the headmaster, it was unlikely that Albus would ever see any of the simmering rage that looked to be perilously close to overflowing right now. Since this couldn't be the first time that the headmaster had riled Severus with something childish like this, he either had a method of coping with it privately or she was going to be in for one hell of a time.

Once the door was closed, Severus started pacing the length of his sitting room furiously, whipping around so quickly that his robes swirled all the way around his legs. She stood just in the doorway and watched him for several moments, gauging the chance of her being attacked out of hand. Eventually, she shrugged somewhat fatalistically and moved to sit by the fire.

She Summoned his teapot, feeling it would be unwise to rise again, conjured water, and set it to boil as she helped herself to his tea canister and made them tea.

She noticed there were no festive decorations in evidence anywhere in the room. Not terribly surprising, she supposed, but it meant there were no handy items on which he could take out his fit of temper.

The tea was Earl Grey, so she left it black, Summoned teacups, and served them. She Banished his to the table next to the chair he was not occupying and settled back in her chair with her own cup.

She had the chance to cast a Warming Charm on his cup, drain hers, and pour herself a second before he really seemed to recall her presence.

He sat down heavily in the other chair and took up his tea.

"I'm certain we can Obliviate Gleeson," she offered, "but it would probably take a little more work to get Albus. I can make the attempt if that is your wish."

Severus made a face. "I'm certain Albus already has it distributed into several Pensieves and has no doubt shared it with Minerva and everyone else he knows."

Her lip curled. "I wouldn't put it past him, I suppose."

"And am I to Obliviate you myself?" he asked, a hint of dark amusement in his voice.

"I was going to go with swearing me to secrecy, as it happens," she said mildly. "You can certainly try to use a Memory Charm on me."

"You honestly think it would be more difficult for me to charm you than for you to charm Albus?" he asked sceptically.

She shrugged. "I can really only speak to my own intention to avoid the charm, which is quite serious, and now I am forewarned."

"Perhaps I will call upon your services later," he declared finally. "This is not over."

"You'd think Albus would have better sense than to start an altercation like this with someone who knows how to hold a grudge like you do," she said with much less thought than she should have employed; as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished them back.

Fortunately, Severus's lips curled up, indicating that he had, against all expectation, taken the remark in good humour.

"That's quite an accurate observation," he said dryly. "Hopefully, I will be able to point it out to Albus one day."

She smiled at him.

"How has your Christmas been thus far?" he asked.

Not one to quibble when Severus suddenly decided he not only knew what small talk was but that he desired to use it, she not only told him that she'd been enjoying it thoroughly for the most part but also gave a brief run-through of what she'd received, as she had not volunteered the information over dinner.

"I hadn't realized you were still in touch with Mr Krum."

She smiled. "Oh, Viktor and I never stopped writing to one another. It's been nice to keep in touch with someone from the wizarding world who has gotten away from the war; he's in Bulgaria and quite happy there. It helps remind me that Voldemort doesn't have control over our entire world."

"I notice you haven't mentioned a gift from Mr Weasley."

Her lips tightened, and she answered with forced evenness. "That would be because I didn't receive one."

"You must surely be aware by this time that he's a hot-headed prat."

This surprised a light laugh out of her. "I had noticed, yes. It still smarts."

"You sent him a gift, of course." It wasn't a question.

She nodded, wondering if she was that predictable to everyone. "I'd already bought it. We've been friends for a long time, and it seemed foolish to throw all that away over one altercation even one where he was behaving like a vile, reprehensible worm."

"The worms of the world protest," he said dryly.

"I didn't say snake."

"The snakes of the world thank you," he added in the same tone.

She smiled at him, really enjoying the fact that he was being so light-hearted and reasonable. "I did receive a gift that I at first thought might be from him."

"Oh?" Severus asked politely, as though he didn't have the slightest idea what she was talking about.

Nodding, she described the book bag briefly, continuing to explain, "I doubt that he would be capable of charming it or willing to take the time."

"Leaving the identity of the giver uncertain?"

"Leaving me with only an educated guess," she answered, obediently playing along.

"Perhaps you and I were given gifts by the same person," he continued coolly, "as I also received a gift that was anonymous in nature."

"Oh?" she prompted in turn.

"A set of rare and expensive ingredients for potions. They all come from a Basilisk, and the quantity which I received indicates an astronomical expenditure."

"Hmm," she said, as though giving it serious consideration for the first time. "Perhaps whoever gave it to you had access to a dead Basilisk and was able to harvest the ingredients rather than purchasing them."

"Dead Basilisks are hardly prolific."

"True. But the person in question may have a friend who happened to kill a Basilisk once upon a time."

Severus closed his eyes briefly, opening them with a long-suffering look. "I had thought that rumour unfounded." She gave him a pointed look, and he sighed. "As I recall, that particular incident occurred some time ago."

"The friend in question might have been unaware of the commodity's value. When it was pointed out to him subsequently, he might have agreed that the person in question could harvest as desired, so long as the remaining carcass was Vanished. That person might have thought that you could benefit from these ingredients."

"Then I am grateful to this person," he said, "as such a gift betokens considerable deliberation."

She nodded. "I'm quite pleased with the thought that went into my gift."

Talking with her Slytherin professor was irksome sometimes, but it had its own rewards. They could completely skirt the issue of whether or not it was sensible for the Head Girl who was a Gryffindor to be giving expensive gifts to the Head of Slytherin, and the ex-Death Eater spy similarly didn't have to be concerned about any gifts being traced from him to the Muggle-born best friend of Harry Potter. Yet they both knew that they'd done it and approved one another's choices. She wondered if he'd actually asked her down here solely for that reason.

"You are no doubt enchanted by Mr Potter's gift to you?"

There was a sourness there that hadn't been present before, and she wondered if she could just refuse to speak about Harry so that they could continue their nice conversation.

"They were lovely, but … not my favourite gifts," she answered slowly.

"No?" he asked, clearly fishing for a more elaborate answer.

"No. But that is between me and my conscience," she said firmly, because there was no way that she could give him that much.

"As you say," Severus said with studied nonchalance. "I wouldn't want to force you into an awkward position."

"Of course you wouldn't," she agreed cordially, trusting that he understood what she wasn't saying. He seemed less cross, at any rate. She wished he could forget entirely that Harry was a Potter. She supposed a Memory Charm to the purpose would still be considered illegal.

"He is no doubt wondering what is keeping you," Severus observed.

"He can mind his business," she answered. "We're quite able to spend time apart, you know."

"I've heard a rumour to that effect," he said coolly, "but observation suggests otherwise."

She frowned. "We live together, we're fighting the same war, and we're taking half of the same classes. We eat meals at the same time just as the rest of the students do. To be perfectly frank, there aren't that many opportunities for us to be apart." Aside from the times she spent out in the Forest at night, but she could hardly mention that.

He was gazing at her very intently. "But you'd spend less time with him if you could?"

"I didn't say that," she negated immediately. "I'm very fond of Harry."

"That's a rather lukewarm response to your lover."

She sat up straighter in her chair as the conversation strayed sharply into dangerous territory, leaving her with no choice but to end it. "Perhaps I'm simply not comfortable discussing my feelings about Harry with you."

His face grew expressionless again, and he rose from his chair.

"I would expect no less from you, Miss Granger." It felt as though there were more weight behind those words than she really understood, but Severus continued before she could decide if she had the guts to question him, "I have a very busy afternoon."

She followed his lead, rising to her feet, although what she really wanted to do was point out that when he hadn't even reissued his invitation for her to call him by his first name, he couldn't reasonably expect her to answer these very personal questions.

"Of course, sir," she said instead. At the door, she hesitated for a moment and forged ahead before she could think better of it: "It's difficult to be entirely frank while under constant threat of point loss and detention, sir, and that is not within my power to change."

She didn't wait for a response but continued out into the corridor and made her way slowly to her quarters, hoping that she wouldn't discover that her parting remark had cost her House more points. Her hint had been less than subtle, but maybe it would make him consider the situation from her point of view.

Harry was in their common room almost bouncing with excitement as he contemplated the Eyesight-Correcting Potion. He had evidently decided that now was the time to take it. His expression dimmed considerably when he saw her.

"'Mione, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she answered, forcing a smile that probably looked about as convincing as it felt.

He continued to look suspicious. "What did Professor Snape want?"

"To thank me for the decorations in the Great Hall."

"And then to yell at you and put that look on your face?" Harry added pointedly.

She grinned weakly. "We might have had a bit of an altercation at the end, but that's nothing new. You look as though you're ready to give the potion a try."

His expression indicated that he was well aware that she was changing the subject, but he let her get away with it, smiling down at the dull green liquid.

"It's still hard for me to believe that drinking this will correct my eyes." He looked excited once more. "I mean, I know magic does amazing stuff, but I've been in the wizarding world for years now, and nobody's ever even suggested it."

"It's not the most straightforward potion to make," she answered cautiously.

His head came up, and he gazed at her narrowly. "And it uses unusual ingredients? Expensive ones?"

"That's usually the case," she admitted when she realized he wasn't going to simply abandon the topic. "It helps if you have your own personal supply of Basilisk ingredients."

He made a face as he gazed down at the bottle again. "Tell me there aren't parts of that bloody snake in here."

"There are no Basilisk ingredients in there," she responded promptly.

He snorted, rolling his eyes as he said, "Thanks. I believe you completely. So it didn't cost you an arm and a leg?"

"All body parts intact," she confirmed. "And since you gave me the entirety of the 'bloody snake', I'll be able to handle an additional expense now and again."

"Like I said then, knowing it's not down there anymore is a relief to both me and Ginny, and that's all I want to know about it."

Harry had been less than pleased about the prospect of going back into the Chamber when she broached the topic of the snake's harvest at the beginning of sixth year. They had discovered, however, that since all she needed to do was request that the sink and the door to the Chamber itself "open", she could memorize the Parseltongue so that Harry would not need to be with her.

After checking a million times to make sure that she didn't mind being down there on her own, Harry had happily left her to her harvest. She owed a thank you to Salazar Slytherin for creating the giant Chamber of Secrets and keeping it freezing cold and practically hermetically sealed, which had preserved the corpse as it lay well outside the warmer chamber behind the Salazar statue.

It had taken numerous trips and hours of toil—because the work had to be done by hand, rather than with magic—but she had successfully reduced the giant snake to piles of ingredients, and she'd Vanished what little had been left. Whenever she needed to get the ingredients out of the Chamber, Fawkes, although he had pretended to grumble about it every time, had been perfectly willing to transport her.

It had taken her months to distribute the parts anonymously and responsibly to buyers in other countries so that Voldemort wouldn't get suspicious. Severus was still the only person to whom she'd given any venom, as she would not risk such a potentially dangerous ingredient hitting any market while Voldemort was still alive. The blood and organs still fetched a hefty price, followed by the bones, which were usually ground into powder and also used as potions ingredients. While the skin was not quite so precious—it couldn't be used in potions but worked like dragonhide as protective clothing—there was a huge quantity of it.

"Plus," Harry pointed out, smiling brightly, "you know how pissed off Tom would be if he realized a Muggle-born was selling off the Basilisk's body parts, so that's all right."

Hermione smirked.

"And," he added for good measure, "you're using it for the good of all and whipping up miracle potions."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," she said dryly. "Perhaps you had better sit down on the couch and have your potion now." Before he credited her with inventing the wheel.

He sat, uncorking the vial and sniffed cautiously at it, nose wrinkling at the odour.

"I didn't make it for its smell," she said tartly, and they both laughed.

He drank the potion, grimacing horribly.

"Nor, sadly, for its taste." She sat down next to him. "Now take off your glasses and close your eyes. It's less disconcerting that way."

He did as instructed, waiting patiently while the potion reshaped the curvature of his corneas. When she was certain that the changes had taken effect, she bid him open his eyes. He did so, blinking rapidly several times as though he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

"'Mione, it's even better than when I have my glasses on. You're the best!"

He threw himself at her, and she hugged him back tightly, dropping a kiss onto the top of his head.

"You're very welcome, Harry. I'm glad it pleases you. There are a great many people who are going to admire your beautiful eyes now that they can see them clearly."

He blushed, and with eyes that looked bigger and greener without his glasses, he really did look fantastic. She had to quash the urge to say so just to see him blush more.

"I'll just have to tell everyone that it's thanks to my beautiful best friend that they can see my eyes at all."

It was her turn to colour faintly, and he seemed to think that he'd acquitted himself well, for he returned to his side of the couch and retrieved his glasses, tapping each lens and charming the prescription out of it.

"I can get used to being able to see properly without glasses when I'm alone, but I'll keep these ones with plain glass in them so nobody else will know."

It was a tactical advantage, and they both knew it. One day soon, she sincerely hoped, they wouldn't have to think like that anymore.

He put his glasses back on and looked, Hermione thought, not quite as happy as he should.

"You know," she said, "it's Christmas Day. I think you should enjoy my gift to its fullest." He looked quizzical. "No glasses for the rest of the day."

He happily allowed himself to be persuaded and spent several moments staring at the whole room without glass between him and the objects that were catching his eye.

They read for several more hours, but while Harry was a good deal more studious than he had been in the past, he didn't really like to sit with a book all day like she did. When he began to get restless, she set her own book aside.

"So, Boy-bird, anything you're dying to do? To learn?"

He set down his own book with alacrity, looking mildly relieved. "I assume we're keeping up with our training."

She shook her head. "I mean something just for you."

A faint flush burned up his cheeks, but he didn't speak.

"Out with it," she urged.

"I … can't dance," he confessed in a rush. She blinked. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but that wasn't it. He seemed to think more explanation was necessary, for he continued, "Draco can dance. He was so graceful during fourth year."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, and Harry's flush deepened. "I know. I was jealous over Cho then. I thought I was watching Draco because he was," he floundered for words, "my enemy. But I apparently sort of noticed the, er, loveliness at the same time, and I never quite forgot about it."

She smiled. "That's sweet, Harry. I'd be happy to teach you how to dance."

He opened his mouth but wisely rethought what she knew had been about to come out and closed it again.

"You don't really think Viktor was the one who enabled us to distinguish ourselves at the Yule Ball, do you?" she asked pointedly.

Hermione's dance lessons, when she was younger, had always had more girls than boys in attendance, which was why she was able to take the man's part and teach a man to lead without trouble.

Harry seemed quite struck by this and said presently, "I'm an idiot, yeah?"

She snorted softly. "Don't worry about it."

He shook his head stubbornly, saying with a frown, "I know you know a million things, but I tend to assume that it's all book stuff, which is totally daft given that you can kick my butt. I don't mean to underestimate you. I don't want to be guilty of what Ron does."

She smiled. "Well, you don't have to worry about that. You've just done the one thing that Ron never manages gracefully: apologize. I know you didn't mean anything by it, and it isn't as though you often see me dancing."

He relaxed, his lips curving up. "Not so frequently, no."

"We're unlikely to get quite so far as 'distinguished'," she confessed, "but if we start right away, we'll be sure you don't make a fool of yourself by the end of the hols. That all right?"

He nodded enthusiastically, apparently not minding that his best friend was about to teach him how to dance. She considered for a moment how awkward Ron would be about it, then pushed the redhead firmly out of her mind. Comparing him and Harry was generally an exercise in futility because they were two very different people.

She started with the slow waltz, as it was one of the most basic and most likely to be danced at the high-end functions where Harry seemed to be mentally dancing with Draco. She was amazed anew at how Harry, who could be grace personified on a broom, could be so inept on his own two feet on the dance floor—but that was rather like Viktor, she supposed.

If Harry had learned anything during the Yule Ball, it seemed to be forgotten, and her feet suffered a fair few blows before she had the idea of getting him to meditate and slip into a light trance. This worked like a charm. When his brain wasn't engaged in trying to make him perform the moves, he was perfectly graceful, his body responding to all her cues. He danced without the rigidity, nervousness, and frequent looks down at his toes that had marked his conscious efforts.

Rendering him capable of dancing like that while fully conscious, aware of his partner, and able to hold a conversation was clearly going to take a good deal more practice. But dancing was an excellent cardiovascular exercise, so she was happy to add it to their daily regime.

"Leading and following aren't just useless terms, Harry," she told him when he tried to protest the knowledge she was trying to impart along with the dance steps. "We're doing this alone in our room right now. On a crowded dance floor, the person who leads has to navigate around all the other couples. The person who follows has to accept the lead's cues or there can be collisions and other accidents on the floor that I'm sure you would rather avoid."

She could almost see him envisioning the Prophet headlines, and he took her instructions much more seriously from then on.

By the time Christmas Day was drawing to a close, he could manage a pretty smooth waltz. When she made him lead, his coordination of their changes and turns still left something to be desired; he seemed perpetually surprised that he was the one in charge. They both thought that Draco would lead, but she also imagined that the blond Slytherin was the sort to appreciate that Harry had gone to the trouble of learning—should they ever be in a position to let Draco know, of course, but there was no harm in dreaming. Besides, as far as she was concerned, Harry should be able to lead even if he was never given the opportunity as Draco's partner; even if they did get together, it didn't mean Harry would never dance with anyone else.

The clock chimed the midnight hour once more, and she and Harry took their Veritaserum capsules and then changed into their pyjamas and read a little more before bed. Harry was extremely serious in his desire to become an Animagus.

The days passed. Obedient to their agreement, Hermione made sure nothing that smacked of schoolwork crossed her eyes before the twenty-seventh. They still spent a fair bit of time reading, and Hermione also did a lot of brewing, wanting to get very well stocked in all the potions she thought the Infirmary might need for the winter term. The more she could get out of the way now, the less she would have to do during term time.

She and Harry continued to practice dancing on top of their other training. Harry was getting quite good at the waltz. Once he saw himself really improving, he gained a lot of self-confidence. It helped that no one else had to witness this learning curve, as had been the case during the Yule Ball. As he really started to relax, even when he was leading, he was far less prone to losing the thread of conversation as he concentrated on not tripping them over the ottoman or into the Christmas tree as they twirled around the room.

Once she thought he genuinely had the hang of it, she conjured several large cloud-like blobs that were roughly people-sized and had them waltz around the room. This way, Harry would have some practice keeping his eye out for other moving shapes and learning to work his way around them without appearing as though he were anxiously scanning for rabid Death Eaters.

"Your partner will appreciate if you focus at least a fraction of your attention on him or her," she reminded him for the umpteenth time. His gaze was pinned to Dancing Cloud Number Four.

He looked back at her sheepishly. "You make it look so easy. But when I'm doing it, there just seems to be so much I have to watch out for."

"What's difficult to the uninitiated looks positively simple when done by someone who is skilled. Have you watched me do my Arithmancy homework recently?"

He laughed. "Point. I don't much like not being good at things, I guess."

She readily confessed her own dislike of that sensation.

"Unfortunately," she conceded, "the only way to overcome that is to learn, and that means a period of time during which you are a novice rather than accomplished. But you're a fast learner, Harry. I assure you that there were people in my dance classes who couldn't do this after months of work." Which was a bit of an exaggeration, but he seemed to need a boost. "You've got a good memory and you're plenty graceful when you don't get so stressed that you stomp all over your partner's feet."

He faltered slightly as he laughed, and she had to quickly shuffle her feet out of the line of fire. He almost stumbled to a stop as he tried to apologize, but she forced him to continue.

"Making a mistake is not the end of the world. You look awkward when you drag your partner to a halt in the middle of the dance floor in the middle of a song. So long as you smile charmingly and keep going, no one will notice, and your partner will admire your aplomb."

He made a face. "You've met the man I'm hoping will be my partner; I don't think that would be his reaction."

She smiled, pleased that he was continuing to be so open about it. "I think you'd be surprised by what you can get away with thanks to that smile, Harry. Smashing his feet every other step would be annoying, but showing him that you're not at your best but that you're trying hard for him anyway is endearing."

"Why do you know these things and I don't?" he asked plaintively, sounding totally clueless and lost.

She laughed. "I don't think you have a very good sense of your own charms."

"That's called being conceited."

She shook her head. "You're a little too good at recognizing your failings. You undervalue yourself as 'just Harry'. He's an outstanding bloke all on his own."

He smiled at her. "Thank you, Hermione. I think living with you is much better for my ego than living in the dorm with the boys."

She smirked. "I'll be sure to send you back if you get too big-headed."

"So long as you promise to keep an eye on it, then, I'll try to be more aware of my charms," he said with a moue of distaste.

Her smirk widened into a grin. She didn't think there was much danger of his ever becoming too assured in that regard.

They had several more training sessions with Severus, as well as with Tonks once the Auror returned. She was looking happy and relaxed, which pleased Hermione tremendously as she imagined that Remus was in the same state. Since they'd sorted out their difficulties before the woman left, these meetings thankfully ran smoothly.

Kingsley was able to stop by a couple of times, and Remus arrived for several days altogether that had nothing to do with the moon. He looked as happy as she had hoped. After the first session they all had together, Harry, Severus, Tonks, and Kingsley managed to get into an extended argument about the wisdom of tracking under-age magic.

It didn't impact any of them anymore, but that didn't prevent them from having strident opinions which they apparently all felt the need to bludgeon one another with over the holidays. While this was going on, Hermione led Remus over to a corner and cast a Muffling Charm, which was a standard part of the privacy charms she cast when she was in an area where others were near enough that they might expect to overhear what was being said.

While a Silencing Charm blocked any and all sound from the area that was being protected, it also made it dead obvious that it had been cast. The Muffling Charm blocked all the original sound but the listener heard an indistinct chatter which left them feeling as though they could almost overhear the discussion.[15]

Remus looked at her curiously. "I've been doing my homework, I promise."

She smirked. "That wasn't actually what I wanted to speak to you about, but I'm glad."

His look of curiosity deepened.

"I hope you won't take this the wrong way," she said, "but none of us would have been upset if you'd come back here together."

He gazed at her uncomprehendingly before shock was painted across his features. "How did you—?"

She snorted. "I'm not blind. I've seen how the two of you look at one another. You don't have to hide it. Honestly, we'd all be happy for you."

Remus looked over at the group of arguing people on the other side of the room, and he seemed doubtful. "I don't think they all—"

Hermione cut him off, listing them on her fingers. "You don't need to worry about Kingsley; he knows that Tonks can take care of herself, and he'd never gainsay her choice. Severus would probably have smart remarks no matter who you choose, but he knows your choice is your own. Since he would advocate someone who knows about your condition, he can't logically argue Tonks. And if your real concern is Harry, you should know him better than that. He cares very much for you, and he's very fond of Tonks, as well. He wants you to be happy."

Remus swallowed heavily. "I'm not sure—"

"It sounds as though you're not sure of your choice," she prompted.

He let out a sigh, the happiness gone from his face as though it had never been, and he looked suddenly tired. "I'm … very fond of 'Dora, but there are so many more worthy men out there, men who are younger, and richer, and not werewolves."[16]

The look she gave him was fierce. "But she doesn't want a younger, richer, or different man, Remus. She has accepted you as you are. You can't tell her that she's made the wrong choice unless you seriously doubt her decision-making capabilities. Do you think she's stupid or imprudent?"

He shook his head.

"Then you have to trust her judgement in this as well as other cases. She knows where she can trust her own heart."

"I wanted her to wait until January, at least, so I'll know if there's any chance." He swallowed. "It would be better if I were just a man."

"And if the cure doesn't work, will you push her away then, too?" Hermione asked severely. "You can always come up with excuses if you're unwilling to risk your heart, if you don't think she's worth it."

He seemed almost dumbfounded by this rephrasing of his doubts. "Of course she's worth it!" he snapped.

She smiled. "Then you have your answer. You think she's worth it, she thinks you're worth it, and now you get to kiss and be happy."

He stared at her speechlessly and suddenly pulled her into a tight hug, pressing a kiss into her hair. It was the first embrace that she'd ever seen him initiate, and she was thrilled. If only she could regulate her own love life so easily.

He slowly released her, and they discovered that the argument on the other side of the room had ended and she and Remus were now being stared at. As Hermione took in Tonks's expression before the older woman managed to school it, she realized that hugging the man who was in a secret relationship when Tonks was right there was not Hermione's most brilliant idea ever. Remus was completely clueless, clearly so happy about the resolution she had worked out for him that it didn't seem to occur to him how it must have looked to Tonks.

"Did you come to a resolution?" Hermione asked, deflecting the attention from the two of them to the argument.

"Of course not," Severus said shortly. "I'm arguing with two Ministry officials. Of course they think the Ministry is all that is noble and good."

"A house-elf's Hover Charm nearly getting me expelled and being dragged before the Wizengamot for using a Patronus against a group of Dementors, those were just flukes," Harry said facetiously, nodding his agreement with Severus.

She was pleased that Harry and Severus had inadvertently ended up on the same side. The argument looked close to starting up again when Tonks abruptly declared that if the training was over, she had to go.

The others shrugged their agreement. Remus looked puzzled and only more so when she left without a goodbye. Hermione doubted it was a good sign that the Metamorphmagus's hair had started changing from bubble-gum pink to blood red. Hermione loudly told Remus how glad she was that he was staying for several days and then dragged him to the door so that she could toss up the Muffling Charm again and mutter, "You gave me a giant hug."

He looked at her blankly, his expression turning slightly hurt and resigned as he inferred that she was put out by the contact, although how he could think so after she'd hugged him back at length, she didn't know.

"For the love of all that's magical, Remus, I'm not upset that you did it, Tonks is."

Understanding washed across his features, and he gazed after the woman with a suddenly troubled expression.

"Go, nitwit," Hermione urged, giving him a shove through the doorway. "Now isn't the time to analyze, it's the time to charge after her. Beat down her door. Explain before she has time to work herself into a righteous rage."

He finally seemed to process some part of what she was saying and darted after the woman he loved. Hermione shook her head as she allowed the door to close behind him, wondering if all men were born stupid. They needed some sort of emotional education that they apparently weren't getting, anyway.

She had enough experience with Cho Chang and Lavender to know full well how women reacted when they thought she was competition for a man she had absolutely no interest in; hopefully Remus would be successful tonight so she wouldn't have to put up with the cold shoulder from her DADA professor.

The three men left in the room wrapped things up, Kingsley declaring that he had to return to London, and Harry and Severus separating immediately so that they weren't in any danger of having a willing discussion between just the two of them. Heaven forbid, apparently.

She realized that Severus was looking at her more narrowly than Harry was.

"You and Remus seemed to be having a much friendlier conversation than we were," Harry observed cheerfully. There wasn't an ounce of suspicion in his voice.

The Boy Who Lived to be unjealous, apparently. Perhaps she would have a little talk with him about proper boyfriend behaviour; given the garrulous gossips of Hogwarts, it would probably be better for Harry to remember to be a little more possessive of her.

"I helped him resolve an issue that had been troubling him, that's all," she answered circumspectly. "It made him happy."

"So we saw," Severus said darkly.

There. That was the tone Harry needed to adopt for these sorts of situations, and Severus could manage it just because they were discussing one of the Marauders. Maybe she could get Severus to give Harry pointers…. Perhaps not.

"I'm always glad to help a friend," she answered, pretending she hadn't noticed the tone.

"You seem to be very good at it," the Slytherin pronounced snidely.

Hermione had no idea who he was referring to, and since she was used to getting tone from Severus for no particular reason, she once again answered as though there hadn't been any. "Thanks. Back to our quarters, Harry?"

Harry nodded and after bidding farewell to Severus—which got them a very curt nod in return—they made their way back to their quarters. Sometimes, Hermione had discovered, the only way to deal with Severus was to walk away.

Chapter Fourteen: The Dance

Before they knew it, it was New Year's Eve. Hermione and Harry weren't in the mood for the ebullient cheer of the younger students who were allowed to stay up until midnight in the Great Hall and toast the new year with tiny flutes of champagne, so the two of them snuck up to the top of the Astronomy Tower and heralded the arrival of 1998 privately instead.

Kreacher and Winky had provided Hermione and Harry with a picnic hamper crammed with food which they'd mostly ignored. They poured two flutes of champagne, set them on the balustrade, and proceeded to give Harry's increasing dance skills a workout. The slow waltz was still the dance in which he was the most accomplished, but she'd briefed him on all the International Standard ballroom dances just in case.

They'd switched to the tango by the time midnight grew imminent. Hermione had conjured a music box to play an appropriate rhythm and tap out the beat, as the fact that the tango had four beats per measure instead of the waltz's three threw Harry off until he got into the swing of it. He wasn't up for any difficult manoeuvres, but he was happy to twirl her round and round. Periodically, he'd cautiously attempt a dip which slowed them right down to an unnatural pace, but he was making an effort, so she didn't criticize.

It worked out really well for them that he was completely gay; neither of them felt awkward about the fact that they were plastered to one another for the tango in a way that they weren't for the waltz. This way, they could both fondly wish for the person they really wanted to be dancing with without worrying that they were hurting the feelings of the person with whom they were currently spending time.

Privacy charms had long ago been cast, Hermione was resting her head on Harry's shoulder, and he was making a quiet confession.

"I don't know how I can care for a man who cast the Cruciatus on you, Hermione. I still want him, and that makes me feel horrible."

"Hey." She tightened her grip on him. "I don't blame you for liking him, and I think he's being slow to forgive himself. If he ran around casting Unforgivables on people on a whim, I would be a little perturbed by your choice. But I believe in my heart that that's not the case. He's a pure-blood Slytherin from one of the most high-profile pure-blood families, and his father serves Voldemort. He's been forced into some horrible situations as a result. I think he chose the lesser of two evils when he cursed me; it was quickly over and didn't hurt anyone permanently. You can let it go. I promise I won't mind."

Harry let out a deep breath. "I know he's been a prat, and we don't agree most of the time, but seeing you go down under his wand … that was terrifying."

"It's the kind of incident that is supposed to cause turmoil in all human beings who feel moral conflicts; it disturbed you, and it disturbed him, too." Maybe it would have been better if she'd let Harry overhear the discussion she and Draco had had before the latter had left for the holidays, but it was too late for that now. It wasn't as though she could say positively whether or not Draco had taken anything from the meeting, anyway. "There's still plenty of room for you dreams, Harry."

"Unattainable fantasies," he corrected, sounding discouraged.

"Dreams are for desires that seem unlikely to be fulfilled right away," she argued. "They're not impossible, and this hope of yours isn't, either."

"I hope you're right." He sounded marginally less miserable than he had before.

"Of course I am," she said with mock indignation. "Think to whom you're speaking."

He let out a half-laugh.

The clock began to toll the hour. She attempted a more bracing tone as she said, "So we're not dancing with our preferred partners at the moment; at least we're dancing in the new year together, right?"

She felt the movement of his nod as he murmured, "You keep me sane."

"Someone needs to," she answered smartly.

He softly laughed again, a huff of breath against her hair.

"I love you, 'Mione."

"And I love you, Harry."

The last chime had barely faded away before they were interrupted.

"What a charming scene." Vitriol dripped from every word.

They pulled apart to face the menacing dark form which glided out of the shadows.

"Happy New Year, sir," she said as smoothly as she could under the circumstances, feeling that the taut silence needed to be broken somehow.

"I doubt you will feel that way shortly, Miss Granger. Given your exalted positions within the school, you must surely be aware that the Astronomy Tower is not to be used for illicit activities."

"We weren't doing anything illicit!" Harry exclaimed indignantly.

"I beg to differ," Severus said coldly. "Romantic assignations are prohibited." Harry opened his mouth, but Severus cut him off with a glare. "I see food and alcohol and find you locked in an embrace. How would it look to one of the younger students if they stumbled across you?"

"The younger students are being escorted to their beds by their Heads of House, sir," Hermione reminded him with as much calm as she could muster. "Even if they did escape from your watchful eye, run up here for some unfathomable reason, and see us, it would look as though we were only dancing because that's all we were doing. Thanks to the Prophet, every person in wizarding Britain has been informed that we're a couple, so it's hardly going to come as a shock to any of them."

"Not to mention the fact that a fair number of them quizzed us regularly about our sex life for weeks," Harry pointed out. "They're not five-year-olds."

"As Head Boy and Head Girl of this school, it is your responsibility to be above reproach in all of your actions," Severus declared condescendingly.

"There's nothing to—" Hermione began, aggravated.

Severus continued as though she hadn't been speaking, "Fifty points will be removed from each of you for your misconduct."

They gaped at him.

"Additionally, you will serve a week's detention to remind you that you are still subject to all the rules and regulations of this school despite your lofty," he spat the word out, "titles. You will serve the detention on the first week back, Miss Granger. Mr Potter, you will serve it in the second week, once you've completed your other week of detention, as it seems prudent to split up the oh-so-charming couple." He spoke with relish.

"But that's—!" Harry began explosively, halted only by her hand clenching his arm and her, Please don't.

But that's absurd! Harry railed internally.

But you know what he's like. I'd like to get off this tower without him tripling the point loss.

A moment's reflection assured that Harry saw the wisdom of this. Severus was gazing at them with a triumphant smirk, as though hoping Harry would start something that the Slytherin could finish with the point loss Hermione had described.

She didn't take her gaze off the tall man in front of her. "Harry, I think you should take everything back to our rooms."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Harry staring back and forth between her and Severus.

"Uh, Hermione, I'm not so sure—"

"It's all right," she reassured him, still without looking away from Severus.

You're sure we're not going to wind up three hundred points in the hole by tomorrow? Harry asked as he moved to gather up the basket and Vanish the champagne.

I try not to make those sorts of promises when Professor Snape is involved, but I'm going to try to smooth things over. I'll be fine, and I'll see you in a few minutes, okay?

He shrugged, finally. If you're sure.

Harry took the time to cast what she was sure was a long glare at Severus before trekking to the doorway and making his way down the stairs.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Severus asked cruelly. "You have something you wish to add?"

"Could you explain to me what we've done to warrant this point loss, sir? You know we don't have a curfew. We weren't committing any lewd acts, and we're allowed to have champagne on New Year's."

His voice grew dangerously soft. "You aren't questioning my professional judgement, are you, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head. "But we do have the right to understand what we're being punished for."

"And I have already explained it to you," he stated as though he were speaking to a small child who had difficulty grasping an extremely simple concept. There was still a faint smile on his face, the smirky, unpleasant one.

"I can see how it might have looked inappropriate." If you were blind as a bat, squinting really hard, and deliberately trying to misread the situation. "But now that you've heard what was really going on and realized that nothing inappropriate has happened, won't you reconsider?" she asked, an edge of desperation blended with hope in her voice.

He stared down his long nose at her. "Miss Granger, have you ever known me to reconsider a point loss?"

She shook her head but soldiered on doggedly because it was New Year's and she really, really didn't want this to be his first act towards her. She wanted to fix it. She wanted... She wanted those dreams that she and Harry had been talking about earlier. "But you don't generally inaccurately assess a situation, either."

This was a bit of a lie, although usually when he took points away for spurious reasons, it wasn't to such an absurd degree. They hadn't lost one hundred points or received a week's worth of detentions for having a library book outside on the one day when that had been his excuse of choice.

She'd thought her words were a pretty diplomatic way of saying what needed to be said, but he was still unimpressed.

"That sounded remarkably as though you were questioning my professional judgement, Miss Granger. We can't have students thinking they are above their professors, now can we?"

She opened her mouth to protest that she didn't think that at all—and what she really wanted to say was something completely different again—but he wasn't finished.

"That warrants another week of detention, I think."

All the air whooshed out of her lungs as she stared at him. Two weeks of detention was considerably more than she'd received in the other six years of her scholastic career combined.[17] She opened her mouth again, but no sound came out.

"More protests will fall on deaf ears, Miss Granger," he said, coldly dispassionate now.

She managed a shaky nod, not trusting herself to speak. He'd missed the fact that she was fresh out of words and struggling instead with a choking mixture of anger and tears. Unfortunately, the tears currently seemed to be winning, but she had promised herself she wouldn't cry in front of this man.

Without another word, she turned to leave.

"A wise choice, Miss Granger," he called after her, voice mocking. "You wouldn't want to lose anything else for the new year, now would you?"

She was perilously close to losing all control, and the words came out before she could censor them.

"You're mistaken, sir," she said quietly, voice quivering with suppressed emotion. She didn't turn back because she didn't think she could face him. "I've already suffered another loss. I hope you place a great deal of stock in your professional integrity," she gritted the words out, "because as far as I'm concerned, that's all you've got left."

She booted it down the stairs without waiting to see if that bald statement garnered a response. It seemed to be a frequent occurrence, recently, that she needed to make a run for it after telling him the truth.

She didn't understand what was wrong with him this year. Last year, after Harry's apology about Occlumency lessons and the Pensieve, they had all managed to work together pretty civilly overall.

Well, she and Severus had gotten along quite ably; she supposed it had helped that she had been preferable to Harry as a companion. She had shown her appreciation for what Severus was doing—working with them, working against Voldemort, putting up with abysmal Potions students—by assisting where she could with his work, whether that was brewing potions or even occasionally grading the first- and second-year papers because she was more than capable of wading through their foolish answers without a cheat sheet.

This year, she and Harry were older and more mature. Harry was more serious than ever about training and defeating Voldemort, and she was pretty sure he had acquired a grudging but solid respect for the Potions master. So why were they having such difficulties?

Severus could be positively cordial for all of about ten minutes and then he flayed them alive. She couldn't understand it, and tonight was the last straw. There'd been absolutely no good reason for his behaviour, and whatever it was that had made him decide to start attacking her and Harry in earnest, he was using his authority as a professor to make that possible. She knew he knew nothing inappropriate had been going on up there tonight. He was a spy, trained to assess situations at a glance, and she and Harry hadn't even kissed. As if they would have wanted to, and they'd been on their own, so it wasn't as though they'd been playing up on their pretend romantic connection or anything.

So he would continue to be her professor until the middle of June, but she was giving up trying to get to know Severus. She had never expected him to be perfect, but being a complete bastard all the time was too much. She kept getting her hopes up when he fed her chocolate mousse or invited her in to tea, and then they were dashed utterly when he made her call him Professor Snape and gave her weeks of detention. The emotional roller coaster was getting nauseating, and she wasn't going to make it through the school year if these sorts of ups and downs continued.

Why the bloody hell did she and Harry have to pick such daft people to fall in love with? Why did this all have to be so difficult and stupid and painful?

Fortunately, she made it to their quarters before her tears won out over her anger. Unfortunately, Harry was waiting in the common room, and he chose this moment to be unusually perspicacious.

"You're crying!" he exclaimed, startled. "What did he do? I'll curse him into next week!"

She had to actually grab hold of him to keep him from shooting out the door.

"He didn't do anything," she argued, sniffing miserably. She corrected conscientiously, "Well, he gave me another week's detention."

He blinked, stared, and then offered her a reassuring smile. "I know it probably seems bad, but the school year is so busy, it'll be over before you even realize. Everybody knows Snape can be like that; it won't reflect poorly on you."

She shook her head. "I don't care about the detentions."

Which wasn't exactly true, but the detentions weren't why she was crying.

He frowned. "But it is about Snape?"

She pressed her lips together but couldn't quite bring herself to tell the lie that even a shaken head would represent. He took her silence as agreement.

"But you said he didn't do anything else, so why would you…." He trailed off, and she could see the proverbial light bulb click on in his head. "I see why you didn't want to tell me."

Her lower lip trembled, hurt and anger warring within her. She couldn't quite bring herself to the cruelty of pointing out his own oh-so-stellar choice, but he could see if she ever comforted him again when he was angsting about the Slytherin bloody Ice Prince. "I'm going to bed," she snapped.

He had the temerity to look startled as she marched past him to her bedroom door. So all the men in her life were insensitive prats. It shouldn't have come as a surprise.

"'Mione—" he began.

Anything else he was trying to say was cut off by the satisfyingly loud slamming of her door. She proceeded to ward it such that a nuclear bomb could go off in her common room and she wouldn't notice. It would take Harry and Albus at least a couple of days to break through.

She tumbled into bed and tiredly closed her eyes. Happy bloody New Year.

She slept for nearly five hours, which was unusual for her these days, and woke up feeling slightly less raw. She'd fallen asleep in her clothing, which was now rather wrinkled, and she shed it and shuffled off into the bathroom for a very hot shower that made her feel almost human again.

She dressed, sighed, and opened her door with resignation, nearly ready to face the day.

Harry fell through. He'd apparently propped himself up against it and fallen asleep. She gazed down at his supine form. He blinked up at her from upside-down sleepy eyes.

"Have we considered getting you to ward the castle and other likely targets so that we could live safe in the knowledge that Voldemort would never get in?" he asked.

She was still a bit out of sorts, but she allowed the compliment to pull a half-smile out of her.

"That's an interesting location for you to have decided to take up residence."

"Well, I tried to get in, obviously, but that didn't go so well. I wanted to make sure you didn't sneak out when I wasn't looking before I could talk to you."

She sighed. "You're hopeless. Up you get."

She pulled him to his feet, and they entered the common room together.

"We need to talk," he said firmly.

She frowned slightly. "I'm not sure I'm up for that sort of talk this morning, Harry. It's supposed to be a brand new year, remember?"

He shook his head stubbornly. "And this should have been said last night, but it took me longer than that to attach my mouth to my brain and find the right words."

She gave in and sat on the couch, and Harry ordered tea for both of them, which the elves followed with toast and a lot of fresh fruit. They seemed to be aware of her mood and hadn't attempted anything heavy or meat-filled even for Harry. She helped herself to a bowl of fruit and a mug of tea. Tea was very useful for making her feel better, she realized. Not quite as good as light or mousse, but more practical at the moment.

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," Harry said, sounding contrite. "Honestly, I didn't."

"It's all right," she said dismissively. "You're entitled to your opinion."

He shook his head again with determination. "But I'm not, not about this. You spent the whole night comforting me about Draco. He cursed you with an Unforgivable, and you were still all supportive. Last night you were crying and upset about Snape, and I made you feel worse. That's awful. That's like..." He seemed to be struggling for an adequate description, finally settling on, "That's super bad friend material."

She laughed, a tight constriction easing somewhere deep inside her. "Thank you, Harry."

"But I can see why you didn't want to say, right? Because you thought I'd do something stupid like that."

She shrugged, conceding his point.

"I can't cast any stones, you know that." He sounded very definite. "I might not understand, mind, but you are entitled to care about whomever you care about. You are quite certain you care about him?"

She couldn't really blame him for questioning her, but she had only to think back to that night in Severus's arms, to the debates that they'd had where he seemed to forget for a few minutes that she was only a student, and she knew beyond question.

"Quite certain."

Harry shrugged, accepting this. "If it's anything like with me, I guess you didn't have a lot of choice in the matter."

She nodded.

"I am sorry you felt worse yesterday."

She shook her head. "I just went to bed. It was okay. I got to see you bright and early this morning, and now I feel better."

"He really gave you another week of detention?"

He winced at her nod. She explained, "He accused me of doubting his professional judgement when I tried to point out that he hadn't really seen any of the things that he was punishing us for."

Harry snorted. "Gutsy. Stupid, but gutsy."

She smiled in spite of herself. "I swear, sometimes he can be really normal."

"If you say so," he said, shaking his head. "I think he's been even weirder than normal this year, personally."

"Well, he does seem to have some ... extremes. I kept hoping that it would settle out or he'd get over whatever was bothering him."

"Not so much?"

She sighed, feeling she was doing a bit too much of it this morning. "Not so much. But," she added, forcing her tone to sound cheerful, "I bet you don't feel so bad about caring for Draco now, do you?"

He laughed involuntarily. "I don't think I should be stressing that point right now, since we're trying to comfort you, but, er, yeah. I'm sort of wondering if maybe they tainted the water in our bathroom or something."

She grinned. "We're in the same boat, anyway."

"And it seems like we have the same likelihood of getting what we want. That being slim to none, in case you were wondering."

"I think you have a fighting chance," she argued positively.

He shook his head, pointing out, "At least you know Snape's on the right side. It's entirely possible Draco's going to become a Death Eater for real, and then where will I be?"

"Eating too much chocolate mousse with me because Severus might be on the right side but he still thinks I'm some lesser form of being who's stupid and Gryffindor."

He shook his head. "Nah…. I'm more of an éclair bloke than a chocolate mousse bloke."

She laughed again, having expected him to negate her observation of what Severus felt about her, not her food choice.

"Seriously, though," he added, smiling at her, "I think he tolerates you above all the rest of us Gryffs. He let Ron and me into his class for you, you must have noticed that."

"He was doing his best to get me out of his class with the two of you," she said with a shake of her head. He opened his mouth to protest and she added, "I heard him discussing it with Minerva."

Harry frowned but moved on to another argument. "He gave you the Burn Potion and, except when he's being totally snarly, he seems more polite to you than he is to either Ron or me."

"But that's probably just because I'm more polite to him," she negated. "I don't think you're going to win this one, Harry, although I appreciate that you're trying. He just gave me two weeks of detention for catching the two of us dancing on the Astronomy Tower, and he told me to stop calling him Severus."

It was a relief to finally be able to confess that to someone who would be appropriately sympathetic.

Harry made a face. "He didn't."

She sighed. "He did. Took away points and everything."

"Okay," Harry conceded. "So both of us are doomed. We'll die virgins and be the oldest Pure Adults on record. How's that sound?"

"We'll have lots of cats and live together until we're two hundred and twenty," she agreed.

They grinned at one another.

"He's going to be horrible to work with this week, isn't he?" Harry questioned.

"I'm trying not to think about it." She suppressed another sigh. "And I'm wondering if I can just lock myself in our rooms for a week and a half and not come out again until I have to go back to school."

Harry appeared to take her idea seriously. "Well, I'm sure we could convince Kreacher and Dobby and Winky to feed us, and that's really the only reason we'd need to leave."

"Until Albus comes down and rousts us, and I don't relish explaining to him why I was hiding here to begin with," she said with a grimace.

"You're not hiding," Harry said indignantly. "You're making a strategic retreat. That's totally different and completely understandable under the circumstances."

"Thank you," she said, meaning for more than his words.

"You're very welcome," he replied. "Shall we get up for real and face the day?"

She nodded. They practiced hand-to-hand and duelling until it was almost time for breakfast. They showered, dressed properly, and headed up to the Great Hall.

They were the first to arrive, everyone else's late night making the eight o'clock breakfast time a trifle early, apparently. The house-elves were on the ball as per usual, however, and food that appealed to both her and Harry appeared in serving dishes on their end of the table.

"Do you ever wonder just how much magic they have? The house-elves, I mean," she clarified when she realized he had no idea who she was talking about.

He shook his head. "I've had a house-elf redirect my mail, hover a pudding, charm the barrier at King's Cross, tamper with a Bludger, sneak into Snape's private stores, and throw Lucius Malfoy the length of a corridor because he drew his wand on me. I have no doubt that they're plenty powerful."

She smiled, this having not been the answer she expected but making perfect sense in the context of his life.

"I'd just hate to think that we really oppress them because we're concerned about how much power they wield."

Harry appeared to take this seriously, answering after a moment, "You've talked to Kreacher and Winky and Dobby. You know how they feel about their positions. I'm not against paying them, as you know, and making sure they're treated properly, but they give every indication of wanting to serve wizards. Even Dobby doesn't want to stop doing that."

She nodded. "I guess I just worry about a lot of things."

"And that's what makes you such an upstanding individual," he said, grinning at her. "You think through all the issues that most of us are too lazy or too dismissive to think about. It means a lot to all of us that you've done your best by Winky even when she didn't see her way to freedom the way you thought she should. While Ron and I were concerned with day-to-day rubbish, you were the one who didn't forget that Hagrid was trying to save Buckbeak. You were going mental from all the time you were spending on so many problems, but you didn't forget like we did. It's great to have a friend like you; it helps me try to be a better person."

"You're a great person, Harry," she reassured him. "You have a lot on your plate that I don't."

He shook his head. "Voldemort might have marked me down for death, but it's not like he hasn't done the same for Muggle-borns, and you've been involved with me and my fight virtually from day one. You don't let what others consider lost causes fall by the wayside, and we've saved Winky and Kreacher and Buckbeak as a result, although it didn't necessarily turn out just how we expected it would."

She certainly remembered that crazy Time-Turner time and the relief with which she had returned the device despite the opportunities that were lost to her as a result.

"Shall we just agree that we think each of us is spectacular and continue our year from there?" she proposed.

Harry grinned. "I do seem to be kind of peppy this morning, don't I? Yes, no matter what anybody else thinks, we think we're great."

She smiled back. "You've got it." Her face fell as she saw who was stalking through the door. "Minerva, apparently, does not agree."

The Head of Gryffindor joined them at the table, sitting down heavily next to Harry, her lips pinched into a thin line of disapproval.

"Would you care to explain to me why we entered the new year one hundred points lower than we left the old? I roused MacDonald and Blair as soon as I saw the hour glass, but they assure me they went right to bed and haven't been out of the dorm since. This leads me to believe it has to be the two of you who caused such a disturbance."

Hermione sighed, and Harry was kind enough to take over the explanation.

"We committed the outrageous crime of dancing at the top of the Astronomy Tower at midnight on New Year's Eve."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "That's all?"

Harry nodded, expression belligerent. "We were fully clothed. There were two glasses of champagne which we didn't even drink. No kiss. Only dancing. The new sin, apparently."

Minerva's face tightened. "I take it Severus was the one to find you."

They both nodded.

"Did you receive any other punishments?"

Harry looked over at Hermione, and it was she who reluctantly answered, "Harry has a week of detention. I have two."

"And why is that?"

They all knew that, at least in the past, it was more likely that Harry would have the greater punishment.

"I tried to explain what had actually been going on and requested that he rethink the punishment he'd decided upon."

Minerva's lips twitched. "An interesting life choice, on your part."

Harry snickered at his Head of House's display of humour.

"I couldn't leave it the way he was leaving it," Hermione said. "I had to try."

"You're like Harry, here, pointing out outrageous behaviour whether it is wise to do so or not."

They each pondered Umbridge for a moment before Minerva cleared her throat.

"In that case, Hermione, Harry, that's twenty-five points apiece for being honest with me about what happened."

They looked at her in surprise, as she was not normally so generous with her point-giving.

"I'll have to go see if MacDonald and Blair actually got up after I roused them this morning." She rose. "Starting the new year with points for good behaviour seems a nice resolution, don't you think?"

Realizing what she was doing, they grinned at her.

"If you make your way up to the tower at a leisurely pace, as there's hardly any reason to rush, I daresay you'll even find them doing homework, which is positively angelic on New Year's Day."

Minerva smiled faintly. "That's lovely. And so helpful, Harry. Ten points to Gryffindor."

Chuckling to themselves, Harry and Hermione rose and obediently hurried off to ensure their housemates were worthy of points by the time Minerva got to them.

By lunch time, Gryffindor had made up the hundred points that Severus had removed at midnight, and Minerva's look had been so fierce at the High Table that not even Severus appeared to be willing to question it. Albus's eyes were twinkling like mad.

Hermione wished that someone could fix her two weeks of detention, but since Severus himself was the only one who could alter that punishment, she was pretty resigned to its happening.

She wondered how everyone would react when they got back and discovered that she was being so extensively punished. Despite what Harry had said earlier, she thought it was unlikely that anyone would believe her or Harry when they explained that nothing had happened, and she could just imagine what explanations the rumour mill would come up with.

It was a lowering contemplation. But, she squared her shoulders determinedly, she wasn't going to let Severus get to her like that. If he was determined to be their snarky professor, then there was nothing she could do to prevent him. And really, she liked cats, so being a spinster with a houseful of them wouldn't be so bad. Her mind unhelpfully supplied memories of sixth year, but she did her best to push them away. Trust Harry to find out who she cared about just as she was trying to convince herself that she shouldn't care for him after all.

Training was every bit as horrible as they had worried it would be. Severus waited four days, just long enough for them to hope that maybe he'd given up on it for the rest of the holiday—because clearly, putting the three of them in a room together was a Bad Plan—but then he abruptly told them at breakfast that they would be training with him in thirty minutes. Since they'd given up on expecting adequate notice when he was in this sort of mood, they simply finished eating their breakfast, hurried down to change into the appropriate clothing, and made their way directly to Room One.

It was just like those first days after the Pure Adults had been announced in the Prophet. Severus spent two days throwing everything he had at them, leaving them bruised and battered when stray curses got through their shielding. He was belittling of their abilities and censorious of how they worked together, and both of them found that this didn't tend to make them work better. It was stressful and tiring, and it was exactly what they didn't need for their Christmas holiday.

On the third such training session, which was on Wednesday the seventh, they showed up as ordered to Room One only to find that he'd decided to move them to the Forbidden Forest without informing them. He then huffed indignantly as though they were deliberately holding him up when they told him that they needed to retrieve their winter gear. By the third comment about their ineptitude and inability to accomplish the simplest of tasks, they were both steaming mad, and Hermione finally transfigured the clothing they were wearing, angry enough not to bother with her wand or remember to ask Harry's permission first.

Out to the Forest they went, walking far enough beneath the trees that it became rather dark and gloomy.

"Many of your battle situations will not be in the cozy school room environment which you have been lucky enough to be trained in recently," Severus sneered. "To give you a small taste of what you will really be facing, we'll be spending the next few days out here. You have thirty seconds, and then I will begin to hunt you."

He was clearly trying to be intimidating and come up with an environment that would disturb them. The Forest certainly didn't hold a lot of fond memories for Harry, and she was sure that Severus assumed the same about her. Unfortunately for him and his stellar plan, he couldn't be more wrong. The Forest was a second home. In thirty seconds, she could get lost and never be found by the likes of him. That wouldn't work quite so well with Harry at her side, but she'd be damned if she let Severus get away with walking all over them when they were on her turf. He might think that he had the distinct advantage—more hours in a battle environment and way more time in the Forest—but he was about to be proven very wrong.

She dragged Harry off even as he was trying to protest.

Shut up and block off your core, she told him fiercely.

He did as he was told, clearly sensing her mood.

We are not going to stop until he is disarmed and regretting he ever started this.

Harry simply nodded.

Follow me.

Harry did his best, but he simply wasn't as quiet as she was. She extended her senses and guided them to a good hiding spot while she paid attention to where Severus's core was located and thus where he was hunting for them.

Are you sure we should be wandering off the path like this? Harry asked. There're some crazy creatures in here that you maybe haven't seen.

She shook her head. I will not allow any harm to come to you. You have nothing to fear from this Forest when you are with me.

He was looking at her strangely, but she barely noticed, as she was busy thinking of ways to outsmart the Potions master.

Castina, a moment of your time?

You are playing a game of cat and mouse, Berit?

Apparently. It is training for the war we are fighting, but we have been having difficulties with the man who hunts us.

I have felt them, she agreed. What do you need of me?

A distraction would be helpful. She wondered briefly if this would be considered cheating, but Severus hadn't said they couldn't request help. I don't want either of them to see you, but if you could blunder around a bit, that would get him off Harry's track and allow us to sneak around and disarm him.

As you wish.

Severus didn't have a chance. He took off after Castina, assuming her to be either Hermione or Harry. Since it really wasn't terribly safe for Harry to be wandering around the Forest on his own, she had him creep after her as best he could. Even with Harry handicapping her, Severus didn't hear them until it was too late and she was wordlessly Summoning his wand from him.

He whirled around, looking completely surprised, especially when he caught sight of both of them.

"Who was over there?" he demanded, pointing in the direction of the noise Castina had made.

"Neither of us, demonstrably," Hermione said coolly. "Perhaps one of the denizens of the Forest; I don't suppose you had the chance to inform them that we would be hunting in this vicinity."

His lips tightened. "I may have you train anywhere on the grounds that I see fit."

"Certainly," she agreed. Her tone was completely even, but she imagined he still knew what she was really thinking.

His eyes narrowed. "Let's correct your beginner's luck, shall we?"

Oh, those were fighting words.

"If you mean you would like to attempt to avoid detection a second time, I accept," Hermione answered, a martial light in her eyes. "We'll see if you have better luck the second time around."

Harry looked as though he wished he could be elsewhere and leave the two of them to their battle. He'd evidently realized that Hermione was in her element here, even if he didn't understand why.

Castina, can you make sure Harry remains safe if I tuck him away somewhere?

Of course. Castina seemed amused. I don't mind watching you hunt this man who has upset you.

He has a gift for getting on my nerves, Hermione conceded. And in my Forest, the rules change.

Your Boy-bird will remain safe, Castina promised.

Hermione's lip curled. Do you and Fawkes chat about us when I'm not listening?

The herd mare laughed. He has chosen to be castle-bound for now, while I remain wild. We keep one another updated when necessary.

And he felt it necessary to share his name for Harry?

You think he wouldn't find that detail important?

Hermione readily conceded that the mare had a point.

Fawkes interrupted since they had bled the end of their conversation so that he wouldn't miss it. Names are important. I wouldn't want either of you to miss a crucial detail in the heat of the moment because I came out with a Girlicorne or a Boy-bird.

They shared a smile. Good to know you have our best interests at heart, bird, Hermione said. Are you enjoying the show?

He gave a mental nod. If I'd realized it was going to be a day of Severus-stalking, I would have considered sneaking away from Albus.

Hermione knew full well that he went where he pleased when he pleased, although Albus certainly appreciated being informed.

Watch if you wish. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a professor to hunt.

She hid Harry and then set out after the Potions master. He was being much more careful now, as he clearly hadn't expected her to be able to get around so quietly, but he was still no match for how well she knew the Forest, how acute her senses were, and how pissed off she was.

She was feeling more than a little vindictive, in fact, so she was giving no quarter. Normally, she would think her point made after she'd found him for the second time and would probably have given him some sort of out after that.

Not so, today. Today, she remembered two weeks of promised detention and one hundred points for a dance, and she was not granting mercy until he bloody well asked for it.

She disarmed him four times in a row before he finally snarled and asked after Harry.

"Harry is safe," she said simply.

"If you abandoned him somewhere in the Forest, that is doubtful."

"If you are so concerned for his safety here, you should not have brought him out in the first place."

"That's my business," he snarled.

"Of course it is," she answered with a sneer of her own. "You may do what you wish when you wish, and we will be forced to follow along. But believe me when I tell you that if I am keeping Harry safe, you need never doubt that he is unharmed."

"The foolhardy Gryffindor." His lip curled in patented disgust. "There are creatures in this forest that you can't even conceive of."

"That is your assumption," she answered flatly.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me you spend a great deal of time in the Forbidden Forest, Miss Granger?"

She gazed at him dispassionately. "I said nothing of the sort, sir."

"Do you spend a lot of time in the Forbidden Forest?" he asked her directly.

Fortunately, his question was open to interpretation; it was unlikely they had the same assessment of "a lot of time". She didn't spend nearly as much time in the Forest as she spent in the castle.

"No, sir," she answered flatly, Occluding for all she was worth and knowing that he wasn't going to get a single thing out of her that she wasn't willing to give.

Nicely answered, Castina cheered.

It was good to know someone was on her side, anyway.

"If I find that you've lied to me—" he threatened darkly.

She snapped back without thought, "You'll no doubt do what you do when I'm not lying to you and give me two weeks of detention."

Huh. Being in the Forest must have affected her more than she had realized, because she was pretty sure that those words wouldn't have actually escaped her lips within the castle walls. That it was perfectly truthful only made it more annoying that she was likely about to double the quantity of time she was spending with him in the near future.

She sighed and attempted something resembling contrition. "I'm sorry, sir. That was rude of me."

"How uncanny of you to have noticed, Miss Granger. Do you really expect me to make do with only an apology on your part?"

"No, sir," she answered tiredly, sick of being angry with him and having to walk on eggshells around him and not being able to simply have a normal conversation without ending up in detention. "That would be completely contrary to what I've come to expect of you."

His gaze skewered her, and she waited for the proverbial axe to fall. At least there were really only five detentionable months left in the year.

"Mr Potter is still in the Forest?"

If he felt like responding with a complete non-sequitur, she supposed that was his business.

"You haven't given us permission to leave, sir."

"Is that supposed to indicate 'yes'?" he asked sharply.

"I suffer from slips of the tongue, not a brain injury, sir. Yes, he is still in the Forest, just where you told us to be."

"I suppose there is a particular reason he hasn't been joining you in your crusade to disarm me?"

This was said rather mildly, all things considered, and she hoped it meant he was in a better mood. She gifted him with an honest answer as a result: "He sucks at being quiet in the Forest. I probably wouldn't have caught you every time if he'd been with me. As soon as he saw that I was on a rampage, he shut up and did what he was told."

An eyebrow rose. "That must be a fearsome sight indeed if it inspires instant obedience from Mr Potter."

"I'm probably not at my best, no, sir," she agreed.

"Take me to him."

"Yes, sir."

She led him quietly and deftly through the Forest, back to the spot where she had left Harry, which was now a considerable distance from where she and Severus had finished their hunt.

Incoming, she warned Castina.

I noticed, the mare said. He troops like an elephant.

Not an elephant, surely. She considered. A rhinoceros, maybe.

I confess, he is not what I expected.

What do you mean? Hermione asked, confused.

Your mate. There is a great deal of darkness in him.

It was difficult to work out what she should address first, and her answer probably told Castina more than Hermione wished.

He has defeated a great deal of darkness. He has a very strong character.

You are often very angry with him.

My feelings for him to do not dictate his towards me. I am his student. It's awkward. Love is not always about making the most prudent choice.

The mare sighed. No, it is not. I wish you happiness.

And I thank you for the wish. Perhaps when the school year is over, and I am no longer his student. It might be better then.

It might not, but she could hope.

They were nearing the area where Harry was hiding.

Thank you for watching out for Harry.

It was no hardship. Be well, Berit.

Thank you.

Castina disappeared back into the depths of the Forest, and Hermione focussed on Harry.

We're on our way back to you, so it would be good if you don't have a heart attack when we arrive.

Understood. That was a bloody long time to be sitting in the Forest waiting for something to eat me, you do realize that, Hermione?

I would never let something eat you in the Forest, Harry.

I'm sure Hagrid thinks the same, yet he sent Ron and me to see Aragog and an entire colony of bloody huge hungry spiders.

I have a complete understanding of what beasts are dangerous to humans, Harry, she reassured him. And I still wouldn't let them eat you.

Good, I guess, he said uncertainly. I don't understand how you can be so sure when you were chasing Snape.

I simply am, she answered. Here we are. You can come down now.

Harry dropped out of the tree he'd been hiding in. Severus regarded him sourly.

"I suppose if you have no skills in the Forest, that's really the only option open to you."

Harry looked between her and Severus.

You totally kicked his arse, didn't you? he asked gleefully.

Of course I did.

She cleared her throat, reminding him that he needed to answer Severus's question and not simply be internally gleeful.

"It seemed the most prudent choice, sir. I would have been in a great deal of trouble if I wasn't with people who knew what they were doing."

Meaning you, 'Mione, in case you were wondering, he clarified with a mental smirk.

Thank you, Harry.

Severus might not appreciate her, but at least her best friend did. Her life would be a whole lot less complicated if she and Harry had fallen in love. The thought was kind of creepy, though, so she shook it out of her head.

Severus apparently decided to abandon the topic of his being trounced without further comment. "Tomorrow, we will work in the Forest for several hours engaged in actual battle with trees for cover. I expect you at the edge of the Forest at half three."

"Yes, sir," they both answered.

Hermione was pleased that he'd taken the time to inform them of his plans beforehand.

You heard that, Castina? Tomorrow at half three?

You're very high maintenance this week, aren't you? She was amused again. I'll make sure nothing big and scary gets in your way.

Thank you.

The three of them headed back into the castle, and Hermione was at a loss to decide whether or not Severus's moment of civility had a chance of lasting. It still seemed possible that she would wind up with six million detentions for one or another of the things that she had said and done today, but she was going to continue to hope that that wasn't the case.

As it turned out, the second day in the Forest went much more smoothly than the first had. It was indeed useful to be in a real forest environment trying to dodge trees and underbrush while cursing and not losing sight of your opponent. Both she and Harry needed practice; she could disappear into the Forest without trouble, but this used another skill-set. It was even spookier in the dark and almost impossible for the fully human to navigate with the spotty moon coverage. Harry and Severus couldn't see much of anything—or so she gathered by the amount of blundering about that they did—by the time they finally called it a night.

Today, they'd made it an entire day without additional point loss or detentions, and Hermione was pleased. Of course, it would only be a couple more days until Severus could start enforcing all the detentions they had already accrued, so maybe savouring the nearing treat was keeping him relatively well-mannered.

Severus didn't call any training for Friday, but she hadn't expected him to. Harry had some last bits of homework left and wanted a chance to finish reading his new Animagi book, as he was getting antsy to start trying to transform again. She refused to let him rush the process; she wasn't going to risk his getting injured simply because he wasn't feeling patient.

At half nine in the morning, the Potions master stormed into their quarters holding a small wrapped gift. Harry still thought she was daft to have given the man access to the room without their permission, but when she'd said it would be up to him to inform Severus that his access had been revoked, Harry had resigned himself to living with the Potions master barging in whenever he wished for the rest of the year.

"What's this?" Severus demanded.

It had taken her several hours to decide whether or not to give it, and she had had Winky leave it for him in his sitting room.

"Happy birthday, sir."

He was staring at her as though she'd grown an extra head. He didn't appear to have opened it yet but was gesticulating with it a great deal.

"Why would you give it to me?"

She considered and discarded several answers and finally settled on, "I'd already bought it."

He realized immediately what occasion she was referencing, and the violent arm movements stilled. He looked down at the box.

"They wouldn't take it back?" he questioned mildly.

"I didn't ask."

He gave an absentminded nod, turned round, and exited. Harry was staring at the space the Slytherin had occupied with a very puzzled look on his face.

"What just happened?"

"I gave Severus a gift for his birthday, and he wanted to know why," she explained.

"I mostly got that," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "I meant at the end. If you've figured out how to calm him down, it's quite cruel of you not to share."

She shook her head. "It doesn't work for all occasions. I merely reminded him that I gave Ron a Christmas gift."

Harry's head tilted to one side. "So … you told Severus Snape that you were totally pissed off with him but giving him a gift because you'd picked it out at a point when you weren't pissed off with him, and he was okay with that?"

She shrugged. "Apparently."

Harry shook his head, turning back to his book. "I really don't understand that man."

Unfortunately, Hermione often didn't, either. At least he hadn't thrown her gift back in her face.

The weekend arrived, and Hermione and Harry started to mentally prepare themselves for the return of the rest of the students on Sunday and classes the day after. Hermione finished brewing the Wolfsbane which Remus would be picking up on Sunday evening.

At dinner on Saturday night, the other students who'd stayed over the holiday all expressed eagerness at the prospect of seeing their friends again. Hermione and Harry were already missing the quiet days they'd spent together. Probably it was indicative of some social problem that they had, but with all the Pure Adult issues and the constant trouble with Voldemort, it had been nice to have some peaceful time. It might become tiresome eventually, but they'd need a few more months of it, at least. Maybe a few more years.

Hermione noticed that the professors didn't look as excited as the younger students were, either, so maybe she and Harry were just aged before their time.

On Sunday, the normal tables and benches reappeared in the Great Hall, and Albus finally conceded that the holiday was over and allowed the Christmas decorations to be removed. He had either been fonder of her alterations than he had let on or he had been categorically unable to consider a holiday devoid of decorations.

The students arrived in a cacophony of noise that made Hermione wince and Harry hunch into himself at the table. They'd get used to it again—they always did—but it was rather disruptive at first. Everyone wanted to know about everyone else's holiday, and Harry and Hermione got lots of questions to which the response of "reading and homework" was apparently not an adequate answer. They couldn't really talk about their training, and there was no way Hermione was bringing up the dancing fiasco unless it was dragged out of her horribly tortured body.

Ron still wasn't speaking to them, they saw, because he sat himself deliberately at the other end of the table again and started chatting with Seamus and Dean. Hermione had thought that perhaps three weeks of absence would make the heart fonder, but that was apparently not the case.

Harry was facing the wrong side of the Great Hall, so it wasn't until they got up to leave that he had the chance to look at the Slytherin table.

Did you see Draco? he asked. He's not at the table now.

She scanned back through her memories. Sorry, Harry. I don't think I saw him, but maybe he's Apparating in late or had the good sense not to participate in this crazy dinner.

Seventh-year students, while they had to be on the train on September first and for the end of term, were allowed to Apparate to and from Hogsmeade for Christmas and Easter if they wished. Hermione wasn't sure if the concession had been made because the holiday was so much shorter or for some other reason, but it was a nice convenience. Students who had younger siblings usually boarded the train with them, and some of the Prefects always made sure they were on board as well.

Maybe, Harry said, not sounding happy.

It's just like a Malfoy to be fashionably late, she pointed out.

This eased some of the worry lines from Harry's face. That's so true.

They invited Ginny down for tea and a chat about what they had all done over the holidays. Remus arrived for his Wolfsbane and stayed for a quick cuppa as well, which, Hermione was amused to note, happened to coincide with Tonks wandering down to ostensibly see how they were doing. It was equally coincidental, Hermione was sure, that Remus and Tonks ended up having to leave at the same time. She wondered how long it would take Harry to cotton on.

At nine o'clock, she, Harry, and Ginny were interrupted by Pansy Parkinson's arrival at the door.

Chapter Fifteen: The Moon

Although Pansy lived in the dungeons just like Hermione and Harry did, the Slytherin had never visited them before. Hermione felt her heart sink, although she told herself it didn't necessarily bode ill.

Exchanging a look with Harry, Hermione gave Pansy permission to enter and watched her step nervously inside. It didn't seem to help that she was bearding Gryffindors in what was traditionally Slytherin's domain; the look she shot at Ginny indicated quite clearly that she was one Gryffindor too many, and Ginny politely rose and made her excuses.

Once the door re-formed behind Ginny, Hermione smiled at Pansy and spoke cordially, hoping to put her at ease. "How can we assist?"

"Draco and I have rounds tonight."

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks; they were both pretty sure they knew what was coming, but they played along.

"Is there a reason this salutary plan can't proceed?" Hermione asked.

"Draco still isn't back." Pansy had spoken more or less neutrally, but there was a slight edge to her voice that betrayed her worry.

"He didn't indicate that he might be late?" Harry questioned.

The blonde girl shook her head. "We had spoken about meeting on the train, but that was casually; I figured he was avoiding having to patrol the compartments with me."

"Only now he's still not back, and you no longer think that's why he was late," Hermione inferred.

Pansy nodded. "There were professors and other Prefects on the train for patrols; Apparating straight to Hogsmeade would obviously be his preference. But he knew that we have rounds tonight, and he counts that as a real responsibility. I reminded him last week, and he said he was looking forward to them. Sarcastically," she added, as though they might have missed that bit.

"We have heard of sarcasm," Hermione said dryly, and Pansy shot her a look. But honestly, they were Gryffindors, not mental incompetents.

"Have you told the headmaster?" Harry asked.

Another look was shot Harry's way.

"He needs to be informed," Harry said defensively.

Hermione nodded her agreement. "It's the headmaster who's responsible for students during term time. If Draco's not here when he's supposed to be and Albus hasn't been informed as to why, then he has the right to determine what has happened. We need to make sure that Draco hasn't told the headmaster that he's been delayed. He could still arrive for classes tomorrow."

Hermione was sure that none of them thought this was likely, but Pansy finally gave in to the inevitable, and the three of them made their way up from the dungeons.

There was nothing like instant problems to make it seem as though there had never been a holiday.

Hermione cast her best set of privacy charms around them so that they could speak freely, and Pansy looked reluctantly impressed.

"Can you identify any unusual behaviour over the break?" Hermione asked.

The Slytherin's gaze narrowed.

"We're trying to establish what's happened to Malfoy, Parkinson," Hermione said firmly.

Whatever the other girl was looking for, she seemed to find it.

"I only saw him once," she answered. "He was quiet, spending a lot of time at home, but that's rather typical of a Malfoy holiday; his mother likes him to be in attendance. We corresponded regularly—and all the letters were written by him, if that's what you're going to ask next. I know how to check."

"I know how, too," Hermione said, in case Pansy thought it was just a Slytherin trait. "No indication that he was being forced to write the letters?"

They all knew what she was really trying to ask, and Hermione was mildly surprised that Pansy didn't take more offence.

She shrugged. "It didn't seem that way to me."

Hermione wasn't sure if Harry was staying quiet because he assumed that Pansy would think he did not care what happened to Draco or if it was because he was worried that he would give himself away if he opened his mouth. Whatever the reason, it had apparently fallen to her to carry on the conversation.

"So despite the fact that he appeared to be acting of his own volition over the holidays, you are concerned that that's no longer the case?"

Pansy frowned. "If it was a voluntary decision not to come back to Hogwarts, he would have said so." Her chin came up, and she gazed at them defiantly. "He would have let me know."

"We're not disputing what Malfoy would or wouldn't tell you. You're in a much better position to know than we are," Hermione said soothingly. "If you say there's a problem, then we think so, too. That's why we're going to the headmaster."

Pansy was somewhat mollified by this pronouncement, and they were able to peaceably take the revolving staircase up to the headmaster's office. As always, it seemed as though he had been expecting them, and they refused tea and lemon drops as they took their seats. He inquired what had brought them.

They explained the problem. The twinkle diminished in his eyes, but he remained outwardly calm.

"Since I have received no notice that Mr Malfoy will be late, I will send a reminder of the date and time that classes resume. Although it is unusual for a student not to return by Sunday evening, it is not unheard of. Mr Malfoy is an adult, and until he misses class, there is very little that I may do."

If the looks on their faces were anything to go by, none of them were particularly happy with this, but they had all known that the likelihood of Albus announcing that he was instantly going to storm Malfoy Manor to get Draco back were slim.

The headmaster continued, "I will confirm with Minerva and Severus that they have not heard from Mr Malfoy, as he may have sent a letter to his Head of House or my deputy. Do not worry, Miss Parkinson; Mr Malfoy will be found."

This was probably true, but Hermione was pretty sure that what was worrying them was all the unpleasant ways in which that could happen.

They rode the staircase back down to the corridor and began their rounds, Harry trailing about a step behind them and still not making an effort to speak. Hermione cast privacy charms once more.

"That wasn't the most inspiring conversation I've ever had," Pansy observed dryly.

"But it's begun the official process," Hermione pointed out, although she didn't disagree with the other girl. "That could be important later. I assume you've owled him?"

She nodded. "I sent a letter right after dinner when I saw that he still wasn't here. I can't help thinking that a response isn't coming."

Hermione rather agreed. If Voldemort was involved, as they all suspected no matter what they were saying out loud, he had decided that he wanted them all to know Draco was missing. Otherwise, a letter would already have arrived informing the headmaster that Draco had been delayed.

"He may respond to the headmaster," Hermione said, although the doubt was clear in her voice. It was probably that which saved her another scathing look from the Slytherin.

They sent a number of students scurrying back to their dorms, the children clearly puzzled by this configuration of students making rounds.

"Apparently we need to shake up the Prefect partners more frequently," Harry observed, perhaps thinking it was safe to speak about a topic that didn't directly involve Draco. "It seems to be scaring them into obedience."

"It is refreshing that the shock has prevented the normal excuses from tripping off their tongues," Pansy agreed. "That's not to say," she added cuttingly, "that I'm dying to do rounds with Gryffindors."

"I'm sure you'll manage to do it occasionally," Hermione suggested, "if it helps the school."

Pansy shrugged. "I don't make the rules."

They kept at it until half ten, as there seemed to be a large number of students who'd "forgotten" that there was a curfew which they had to obey. Those who had the sense to go to bed once they reached their dorms would be thankful when they had to get up at half seven or earlier to make it to breakfast on time; there were better times for socialization than the night before classes restarted.

"You were moderately more helpful than I anticipated," Pansy admitted grudgingly as they stopped at the end of the corridor that led to the Slytherin common room.

"Malfoy's a student at this school," Hermione explained simply. "We take our positions seriously, and that makes the safety of all students our concern."

Not to mention that Harry was secretly in love with the blond boy, and they all knew that it was probably Voldemort who was causing the problem. Pansy understood at least half of what Hermione wasn't saying.

The Slytherin girl nodded. "I'll let you know if he writes tomorrow."

Once she'd made it safely into her common room, Hermione and Harry headed back to their own quarters.

"Dammit, Hermione," Harry said as soon as they were inside, "why Draco?"

"Unfortunately, he's almost as involved with Voldemort as you are," she said with a sigh as she sat down on the couch. "But we don't know what's happened yet, Harry, so calm down. There's nothing we can do right now."

He'd started pacing, and she had the feeling that stopping and calming down weren't anywhere on the list of activities he had planned for the rest of the evening.

"What if he's in trouble?" Harry demanded, still whipping back and forth across the room.

"Then as soon as we have a viable means to assist him, we will do so," she said soothingly. He opened his mouth to protest, and she continued, "There isn't a castle for us to storm to get him back, Harry." She hesitated for a moment but decided it really had to be said. "And if he's there voluntarily, there's nothing we can do."

Harry's shoulders slumped, and he collapsed onto the opposite end of the couch from her.

"What if he is, Hermione?" Harry demanded, sounding utterly dejected. "What if this is the end?"

"Then there's still plenty of time for us to buy lots of cats," she said since she didn't have a real answer that was any better.

He snorted, but his eyes were suspiciously bright. "Have I mentioned recently that it sucks to be me?"

"You've been very circumspect on the subject."

He grimaced. "Some days I want to run away and never look back."

"I know the feeling, sweetie," she agreed. "But Voldemort's never made this sort of move on a student before, so we might be jumping to conclusions."

It was vaguely possible.

He sighed. "I guess."

"What say you climb into your pyjamas, and we'll read a story before bed?" she suggested in her best adult voice.

He looked at her incredulously. "When did you become my mother?"

"I've recently decided that you need more looking after," she said in a lofty tone. "I realized that we were policing all the rest of the students, but you were being horribly left out."

"What about you?" he demanded.

"I'm much older," she said loftily from her Time-Turner advantage. "Go on with you."

He allowed himself to be persuaded; if he couldn't get news about Draco, he wanted to be distracted. They spent several hours on his Animagi book with her adding pointers and tips that she almost managed to make sound like general advice, although she was sure that he had already guessed the truth and was just politely letting her keep her secrets for now. They then moved on to the sympathetic magic book that Remus had given them. It talked a great deal about this sort of bond forming between really close lovers, so they had to keep glossing over bits.

"I think we need to write the author," Harry said finally in disgust when they got to the bit about sympathetic magic during sex. "Let him know that there are other possibilities. I'm feeling marginalized."

She snorted. "Yes, we'll tell him that he needs to consider the position of Pure Adults much more carefully."

Harry smiled brightly, suggesting ingeniously, "We can make the letter anonymous so no one will ever guess it's from us."

Hermione laughed. "Good of you to have put so much thought into that part."

They did a second set of rounds, thankfully finding fewer students, and Hermione finally persuaded Harry to turn in, pointing out that the morning would come faster the sooner he went to sleep.

"We'll find out more then, Harry. There's nothing more you can do right now."

Short of hunting down Voldemort and putting a period to his existence, anyway, and she really didn't think she should suggest that.

She was tempted to go back out to the Forest, since she hadn't been out in unicorn form in several days, but she had a feeling that this was going to be a bad night for Harry.

Such proved to be the case, as she was roused at half one by his distress. It turned out to be a nightmare rather than a vision, no doubt brought on by all his concern for Draco. She managed to get Harry calmed without waking him, which she was very pleased about as it meant he now had a good chance of sleeping through the night; if he'd woken, she was sure that he would have sat up and got progressively more worried about the absent Slytherin.

Morning arrived with Hermione managing to catch a few hours of sleep herself. Fawkes confirmed that no letters from Draco Malfoy had been delivered to Albus, Severus, or Minerva. There was no news of any untoward Death Eater-related events, so there was a chance that this was really just a show of power on Voldemort's part, a demonstration that he had control of the students whom Albus thought of as being under his protection.

Hermione let Harry sleep until they were almost late for breakfast so that he'd only have time to rush to get ready rather than to get even more worked up over Draco. At breakfast, Pansy gave them a discreet shake of her head. No letters to her, either.

Harry's expression grew positively grim, but fortunately, the surrounding Gryffindors took this as a sign that he recalled that the first class of term was Potions.

There was nothing in the Prophet headlines to alarm them, not even an attempt to revive the Pure Adult topic; apparently, it wasn't currently sensational enough to pique the newspaper's interest.

She and Harry had considered the possibility that Pansy had been sent to ensure that they informed Albus of Draco's disappearance. As far as Hermione could judge, however, Pansy was genuine in her worry. Hermione hoped for Draco's sake that he had at least one friend who was actually worried for him rather than following a Death Eater script.

Potions was not a terribly good class, as Severus was not pleased by the absence of his star Slytherin pupil. She knew that he was also worried because he hadn't been informed of Draco's absence. Assuming Voldemort was responsible for the disappearance, did this mean that he did not trust Severus? Was it a private task for the younger Malfoy? Was it supposed to be a surprise for the Slytherin Head of House? If so, a good one or a bad one?

It was nerve-wracking from Hermione's point of view, and she was only thinking all these questions on Severus's behalf, not living them.

Everyone was on edge, and since that included the Potions master, it made for an unpleasant learning environment. He was even snippier than a first class of term tended to warrant, and everyone kept their heads down and their comments to themselves until the three hours had finally elapsed and they were able to escape with their shredded dignity. Nothing had been good enough for the man today—including Hermione's perfect potion—but she hadn't really minded being a target for his ire when she strongly suspected it was an outlet for his concern for his godson. It was better than him being a prat for no reason, anyway.

Lunch brought the news, relayed to her and Harry through Fawkes, that Tonks had received a letter from her Aunt Narcissa. Given that Andromeda Tonks had been disinherited and was completely estranged from the rest of the Black family—and her daughter therefore not even acknowledged—this was a very unusual occurrence.

Without giving any details, Narcissa Malfoy explained that she had a rather delicate family matter than she needed some assistance in regulating; since she would prefer to keep it in the family, as it were, she was calling upon Tonks.

They all agreed it could be a trap. But it also wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Draco's mother really was concerned about him. Hermione remembered all the care packages that he had received in first year and the fact that it was apparently his mother's desire to have him close that had prevented Lucius Malfoy from sending the boy to Durmstrang. Trap or not, none of them doubted this related to Draco's disappearance.

Tonks and Albus had agreed that at this juncture, it would be wiser not to involve the Ministry in an official capacity. Tonks's business with the Malfoys now happily coincided with the headmaster's; his official inquiry into the absence of Draco from the school would be made with his deputy headmistress and with Draco's head of house, and now a fourth faculty member would happen to go along as well.

Hermione and Harry were there to see them off immediately after class that evening. The departing professors didn't seem to know quite what to make of the two Gryffindors' presence since the students hadn't been informed of what was going on by any human tongue. The two of them bid their professors quiet farewells since there wasn't really anything else to be said, especially out in the open, no doubt leaving the older adults to wonder whether or not it was a coincidence that they had appeared just then. Fawkes was perched upon Albus's shoulder, good protection when heading off into a possible trap, and Hermione was pretty sure that he winked at them.

Keep safe, Hermione admonished.

Try not to have any adventures while I'm gone.

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances.

We've got nothing planned , Harry answered, but that doesn't seem to mean much of anything.

They would all do what they had to do and try to do it quietly and efficiently, but that rarely seemed to work out. Still, Hermione was sure that it was safer for Harry to remain here, and she was glad that he hadn't made any attempt to insist that he go with their professors—or sneak after them.

Filius and Pomona had been left in charge, and both looked grim enough at dinner that nobody asked loud enough to be overheard where the missing professors had gone. It would no doubt get out eventually, but dinner was curiously quiet. The seventh-years' initial detention had been cancelled due to the sudden absence of professors—although Harry had suggested that it was Severus who had refused to let them suffer even one night without him there to watch. Hermione had wanted to disagree but had decided it was wiser to hold her tongue.

After dinner, Hermione walked purposely over to the Slytherin table and audibly told Pansy that she and Harry needed to discuss her Prefect schedule. In the safety of an empty and warded classroom, she informed the worried girl that the professors had gone, as it were, on a rescue mission.

Pansy nodded, looking a cross between relieved that firm action was being taken and more worried because such action had been necessary. "I hope he's all right."

"We all do," Hermione agreed. "Will you keep your ears open in the Slytherin common room?"

It was tantamount to asking the girl to spy on her housemates, but Pansy was evidently worried enough that all she did was nod before hurrying away distractedly.

Hermione got Harry down to their common room so that they could ostensibly do homework. Since Severus had been so brutal in class, there was plenty for them to do in Potions, and Filius had given them a more moderate amount in Charms. By dint of asking every five minutes how Harry was progressing and haranguing him if he wasn't, she managed to get him to work a little.

She tried not to comment when she noticed that he had begun to rub his scar with increasing frequency; he didn't appear to be aware of what he was doing. If it wasn't her imagination, the scar was growing angrier-looking, and she didn't think it was from Harry's touching it. When the motion became close to constant, she broke down.

"Scar bothering you?" she asked gently.

His eyes flew to hers, and it was only then that he seemed to become aware of his hand and snatched it away from the mark on his skin. His eyes were wide and fearful.

"It started to prickle. Something's happening, Hermione."

It was as though they were badly tuned in to a station on the telly. They could almost see when important events were occurring, but they couldn't hear the sound or really make out the picture. Realistically, it would be less frustrating to just turn the damn thing off, but since they had a bit of the signal, they just kept watching anyway, hoping for things to become clearer.

"Albus, Minerva, Tonks, and Severus have gone," she pointed out soothingly. "They'll be doing everything in their power to get Draco back. Voldemort could be upset about that."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure he's anticipated that. This is something else."

She suspected he was right, but they only needed one really negative person in the room right now.

"Keep going with your Potions essay," she instructed. "If it gets any clearer, you'll know."

Reluctantly, he turned his attention back to the page in front of him, and she watched as his eyes didn't move and he evidently read the same sentence over and over again and didn't write a single word down on his piece of parchment. She didn't have the heart to prod him any further. He was very pale.

Suddenly, he let out a pained exclamation and slapped his palm to his forehead.

"He's really pissed off," Harry ground out through clenched teeth. "Stupid bloody bastard. I should at least be able to see what he's doing."

If they'd been allowed to pick how this connection worked, Harry wouldn't have gone through any of the crap he had in the past several years. She got him a Pain-Relieving Potion from her stores, as she had had the sense not to deliver all she had made to Poppy, and he downed it quickly, not even grimacing at the taste. It was good these ones weren't addictive.

"Something definitely hasn't gone according to plan," Harry muttered. "I can almost see—"

She reached across the couch to clench his hand in a hard grasp, nails digging into his skin and snapping his eyes to her face so that he really looked at her.

"Don't you dare," she said sternly. "If you lower your shields, he could get into your mind, and there is too much that you can't tell him." She didn't let him look away. "You can't."

Harry tore his arm out of her grasp. "I know that," he snapped. "Don't you think I know I can't!" He let out a sharp exhalation and spoke pleadingly: "I want to help him, Hermione."

"I know you do," she said softly. "But that's not the way to do it. There's nothing we can do to help right now."

Quite suddenly, however, news arrived from an unexpected quarter.

A pack of werewolves invades the Forest. It was Castina, and she sounded angry. We found cages at the Forest's edge. They are now hunting.

Hermione's blood ran cold. Something in particular?

Yes, Castina confirmed. Someone injured was left deeper in the Forest; it looks as though the werewolves will drive him towards the grounds.

To be found when he's torn to pieces?

Castina didn't word her response, but it was an affirmative; it didn't take a genius to work out the evident plan.

"He's happy again," Harry gasped out. "I don't understand what's changed, but he's pleased." Harry winced. "It's to do with Draco, but I … can't … see," he trailed off, clearly trying to milk every emotion and thought out of the link without compromising his mind.

Oh, bugger. It didn't take very many guesses to work out who'd just been dumped in the Forest for the staff and students of Hogwarts to find. She sighed.

"He's in the Forest," she announced.

Harry blinked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"Draco's in the Forest. He's been dumped there, injured, and a pack of werewolves set loose."

Harry gaped at her for a good three seconds before he found his voice and demanded, "How can you possibly know that?"

"I don't think now is really the time to discuss it," she said firmly. "We need to get out there and rescue him."

It seemed to take a moment for this to process but then Harry leapt to his feet.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

She had to transfigure his clothes into appropriate winter gear as he nearly sprinted for the door, and she had to literally grab hold of him and drag him towards the secret entrance when he headed in the direction of the main door.

"Hey! What—?" he demanded.

"We don't have time to argue about this, so you're going to shut up, and you're going to follow me. I'm in charge, get it?"

He got it, thankfully, although it might just have been stunned amazement that quieted him. Hermione took full advantage of the obedience, getting Harry to shield his core and follow her out onto the grounds. It was bitterly cold as they trekked hurriedly across the snowy lawn, the wind biting into their face and hands and blowing snow across their vision. Knowing where the Forest was in her sleep, Hermione led them unerringly into the woods.

Where is he? she asked Castina.

The mare sent her a mental picture of the approximate location, and Hermione immediately began to wend her way towards the appropriate area. It was perhaps a kilometre from the wards that protected the grounds. The wind cut down as they went deeper, as it couldn't penetrate the trees, bushes, and other obstructions, but it was cold and dark. The snow tapered off underfoot.

There are many werewolves, Castina said, sending her flashes of images that added up to around thirty, Hermione thought. The herd is trying to head them off, but there are several packs who have all smelt blood. They are homing in on the area from several different directions, and they are moving swiftly.

Although the werewolves and the unicorns were roughly matched, Hermione knew that the entire herd wouldn't be present at that one location, and the unicorns would be hampered by the fact that they did not actually wish to harm diseased humans; they would do what had to be done, however.

We'll get to Draco, Hermione said, and see if we can't get him out of here.

Unfortunately, the Muggles had got it right when they recorded that unicorns did not tolerate the touch of non-virgins. It was actively painful to adult unicorns, and that meant that one couldn't simply carry the injured Draco out of the Forest.

Castina sent her agreement. Hermione began to move more quickly through the Forest, Harry following as best he could.

How do you know where we're going? he asked.

It's a very long story, and I need to concentrate on what we're doing at the moment. I'll tell you all about it when we're back in the castle and have had a good night's sleep, she promised.

They could hear howls now, and this made Harry stumble forward, spurred on to greater speed. With him alongside her, despite his new training, they weren't the quietest people ever to travel through the Forest, but given that they were heading straight for the area the werewolves were aiming for, she didn't suppose that really mattered.

Most of the other predators would probably be steering clear; werewolves were messy to get involved with, and there wasn't a large enough group of competing predators in the Forest to match them, unless Aragog decided to rouse all of his kin, which he was unlikely to do. The centaurs were similarly unlikely to involve themselves—which was all to the good, as they were likely to put down the dangerous humans, and Hermione was anxious to avoid that scenario.

They continued through the brush, Hermione instinctively skirting obstructions and just keeping a hold of Harry now as it got darker and darker the deeper they went, no light reflecting off snow or stray beams of moonlight reaching through clouds and trees. She had never been happier for the increased senses she had thanks to her unicorn self.

She finally let Harry cast a low light, as he was stumbling into obstacles that she didn't think were anywhere near him. It was probably safe, as the human Death Eaters were unlikely to want to be present for a werewolf attack here; reasoning with a ravening beast consumed by bloodlust on the full moon wasn't an option.

A dark shape suddenly loomed into their field of vision on their right-hand side. They barely had time to recognize the garb of a Death Eater before Harry set off a Stunner which she deflected away from its target, who fired back a brutal Cutting Curse at the source of Harry's spell-fire, forcing her to unMask and throw up a hurried shield around herself and Harry.

"Severus, Harry," she admonished in a harsh whisper, "stop that."

At least she knew the two of them would attack real Death Eaters without hesitation should they stumble across any. Only in hindsight did Hermione realize that she'd been unconsciously aware of Severus, categorizing him as not dangerous and therefore letting him advance to meet them.

Harry unMasked as the Potions master ripped his mask off his face. "What the bloody buggering hell are you doing here?" He sounded shocked, confused, and angry.

"Rescuing Draco, what do you think?" Hermione whispered furiously. "Now is not a good time to talk. We're almost there."

"How do you know that?" Severus demanded, sounding highly suspicious.

She didn't bother to answer his question. "I trust you're the only 'Death Eater' in the Forest?" She wanted to make absolutely certain.

"No," he snarled back, "we're all wandering around in a werewolf-infested forest in the hopes that we'll get eaten, too."

She rolled her eyes. There was no call to be rude.

They travelled for several more minutes, Severus reluctantly falling in line behind her when it became evident even to him and his ego that she really did seem to know where she was going, and she could travel at speed while navigating safely.

"Even if Mr Potter had a vision, it doesn't explain how you can get to Draco like this, nor why the two of you were insane enough to come!" Severus finally snapped explosively.

Travelling in silence indefinitely apparently wasn't an option for him.

"I didn't need Harry's vision, and you're here, too," she said curtly. "A little silence now would be good."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she shushed him loudly and moved more quickly, forcing him to focus on not falling on his face and therefore successfully slowing down his diatribe. The howls of the werewolves were getting louder and more frequent.

She picked up on the sounds of Draco's movements before they did. She brought them to a halt when they were just outside the likely range of Draco's hearing.

"Stay here," she told the two men, who immediately opened their mouths to protest. "Just for a minute. Draco's being chased by werewolves, and if we all suddenly converge upon him, he's likely to do himself or us injury. I'll announce us, and you'll be able to join me momentarily."

They still looked rather mutinous.

"You don't want to cause Draco further harm, do you?" she asked pointedly.

Neither of them did, fortunately, so they acquiesced, both with remarkably similar pinched looks to their faces. They stood almost back to back, a large tree protecting their left side and wands making a circuit of the ninety degrees they each had left to watch and guard against attack from. She nodded at them. Apparently, there was nothing like the threat of a werewolf attack to make them work together.

She slipped silently amongst the trees, making quick work of the remaining distance. Noise of Draco's painful and slow progress reached her ears more clearly now, his laboured breathing accompanying the stumbling gait. She stepped closer, making sure to step on some branches so that it sounded as though someone were there since she didn't want to pop up in front of him and give him a heart attack. She listened as all sounds of movement ceased and he made a concerted effort to quiet his breathing, as well.

"Draco," she called softly—to hell with surnames in this situation—"it's Hermione. I assume they took away your wand, but I'm warning you that I'm about to step out of the trees so that you can see me."

There was no response to this, but she hadn't really expected one because if she was really a Death Eater and this was a trap, his speaking would pinpoint his location. Fortunately, she wasn't a Death Eater, this wasn't a trap, and she didn't need him to speak to know exactly where he was. She lit the tip of her wand so that he would be able to see and stepped past the trees.

He squinted at her. She tried not to wince at the sight of him. The Death Eaters had evidently decided to have some serious sport before they dropped him in the Forest to die, and he looked completely battered.

"What the hell would Hermione Granger be doing in this forest in the middle of the night on a full moon?" he gasped out amidst his struggling breaths.

"Rescuing one of her favourite Slytherins, of course," she answered.

His eyes narrowed. "I'm actually having a little trouble coming up with a reason why anyone would be legitimately in the Forest right now, let alone pretending to be Granger, so I'm more receptive to this mad idea than I would usually be. Prove you're her."

"Let's just say I don't want my decision just before the holiday to be a complete waste. It would be a shame for werewolves to get you three short weeks after I decided that prison was no good for you."

Some of the tension eased out of his body.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

She smirked. "Severus wanted to know the same thing."

"Severus is here?" he demanded, looking instantly wary again. "I didn't think they'd send anyone to watch."

Come along, love, she bid Harry, and bring Severus with you. Straight ahead, and you can't miss us: follow my core.

"Don't be daft," she said to Draco. "Severus came straight from the meeting and plunged into this big dark forest because you were in danger. Both he and Harry have come to rescue you."

You think he's going to believe me when I tell him you want us to come? Harry asked doubtfully.

"Harry is here?" Now Draco sounded truly alarmed, and Hermione wondered if he'd realized that he'd forgotten to call her best friend by his surname. "Is he out of his mind?"

Then just start walking, and he'll probably get pissed off and follow, she told Harry. You know how he is.

To Draco, she said, "Harry's a Gryffindor with a mission." She shrugged. "Some might consider that a tautology, but the fact remains that none of us are about to let you die out here."

Severus and Harry arrived. Draco looked shocked to see them actually appear, despite Hermione's warning. Harry had gone white and looked ill. Draco had started back instinctively at sight of Severus, and Hermione realized, as she jumped to support the suddenly unbalanced Slytherin, that having him see Severus in Death Eater garb was perhaps not the most brilliant decision ever.

She felt as much as heard his hiss of pain as his body impacted with hers, but she kept him from falling, which would have hurt more.

"He came to save you, I promise," she said softly. "You have nothing to fear from him."

He looked at her with pain-filled eyes, the grey obscured by the blood that accompanied the black eyes.

"You promise." It was halfway between a question and a statement, as though he wanted to believe her but couldn't quite figure out how it was logical for him to do so.

"You have my word," she said solemnly.

A particularly loud howl carried through the air, reminding them that their mission was on an accelerated timeline. Draco shuddered violently, making Hermione realize that he was shivering from the cold already. He didn't seem to have a cloak, and his robes were inadequate against the winter chill. She thought a Warming Charm.

"Unless you've got a broom tucked away somewhere in that clothing, I think Severus is the least of my problems right now. They Apparated me to the border and took me up on a broom so that they could drop me from several metres above the top of the trees much further in. It's how I broke my ankle, I think."

She shook her head. "The Forest is a dead zone. They dropped you from the height they did because if they'd gone any lower, they'd have been stranded with you. We can't Apparate or Portkey for the same reason."

She wondered how Voldemort had become aware of this little-known fact about the Forest. Although really, she supposed he would be one of the most likely people to have tried to work out how to sneak into the Forest and thus get near Hogwarts undetected.

The howls were getting louder. Nobody else seemed to have any bright ideas. Hermione offered up a quick litany of swearing.

"I assume that you're moving as quickly as you can?" she asked the injured Slytherin.

Draco's look was scathing. The progress he had made while they'd hurried to meet him was miniscule, and she wanted to be certain that was the best he could manage.

"You are correct," he ground out.

No wonder Voldemort had felt confident planting Draco as close to the wards as he had. He was clutching at her with one arm, the other wrapped around his chest, suggesting that he had broken ribs. He'd identified the broken ankle. He was a mass of torn clothing, bruises, cuts, and blood. Hermione was reminded of why she hated Voldemort, which seemed to be the case for Harry, as well, given the look of intense loathing that had replaced the shock on his face.

"Is what I see the worst of your injuries?" Hermione asked.

The blond boy wouldn't meet her eyes. "It's hard to remember all of it, but you can see the vast majority."

She gazed at him critically, certain he was making an omission but knowing now was not the time to press.

"Ferula Examinus Totalis," she pronounced, drawing back only slightly so that she could point her wand at him and not impede the spell.[18] He was leaning rather heavily against her, and she didn't want him to fall over.

Long bandages snaked out and bound themselves all over his body, including his left ankle and thigh, his chest, up over his right shoulder, and down his right arm and wrist. Although he winced in pain as the bandages settled, he appeared to be breathing more easily now, and he gave her a curt nod of thanks.

"Give me a moment to clarify the plan," she told everyone.

Harry would have some idea of why she'd gone silent, but the other two were likely to wonder.

Fawkes? Any chance you're in range?

There was no answer, but she hadn't really expected one. MindSpeech didn't have an infinite range, and she had been pretty sure that the two of them were too far apart—but she had wanted to make sure.

It made her wonder, though, if getting Tonks and the headmaster and his familiar out of the castle had been a set-up; going to Malfoy Manor, Hermione would have brought Fawkes, too, if she could have. She imagined that the headmaster accompanying Tonks and the phoenix going along would be something that Voldemort and his minions could have bet upon, and now it was turning out to be awfully inconvenient for those back at the castle.

She could, she suppose, send her Patronus to the headmaster demanding that Fawkes be sent back, but that would likely take too long, and it would leave the headmaster in potential danger.

Without the possibility of a phoenix to fly down and carry their injured member out at speed, there was only one other method of transportation in the Forest that immediately sprang to mind.

Castina, I need some assistance, if you please.

The mare huffed a soft laugh. Did you think I might refuse?

It seemed impolite to order you here, Hermione answered. I know you have the entire Forest to protect.

And my herd most of all, Castina corrected. You are herd. Plus, I would never leave the two Pure Adults to die in my Forest.

Hermione smiled. I'm glad to hear that.

She turned back to the three men in front of her. Despite her words, Harry and Severus were arguing over ways of carrying Draco that would allow them to travel quickly.

"Help is on its way," she announced.

They all stopped to look at her. Completely incredulously.

"It would be better if you didn't ask questions right now." She seemed to be saying a lot of that today. "I've requested aid, and it's coming."

"Requested it from whom?" Severus demanded.

"Does it really matter?" she asked. "We need it, and it's coming."

The howls of the werewolves were almost constant, as though to illustrate her point.

"Fawkes is with Albus," Harry said, obviously trying to work out what she was planning.

"Far away," she confirmed. "You're about to see one of the last tricks up my sleeve."

Castina and the herd members who had come to help them must have been galloping all out because they arrived in the next moment. Despite their speed, their arrival was soundless, causing all the men to jump. Hermione smiled at her herd welcomingly. Castina was in the lead and stepped closer to Hermione.

Thank you for coming, Hermione said in greeting.

You are always welcome, Berit, you know that. Despite the dire situation, humour laced her tone as she added, They seem surprised.

I don't think it's everyday that they run into unicorns. I'll sort them out.

"Do you see a whole bunch of unicorns?" Draco asked of nobody in particular.

Severus and Harry nodded.

"Huh. I thought the pain had finally got to me and I was hallucinating," he confessed.

"They're really here," Hermione said. "They're going to ensure we get safely out of the Forest."

"And how do you know that?" Harry asked.

"Because this is Castina," she said, gesturing to the unicorn. "She's the herd mare, and she has agreed to help."

"You asked a unicorn for help," Severus said flatly.

"Indeed I did," she confirmed, trying not to sound too amused because she knew that would only annoy him. "And if you'll pardon the pun, now is not the best time to look a gift horse in the mouth. The werewolves aren't far away, and the herd cannot hold all of them off—at least, not without serious injury to the werewolves—if we stay in a stationary position and the werewolves continue to smell the blood they crave. We need to get to the safety of the grounds."

"It's, er, great if the unicorns are going to surround us," Harry said, "but it doesn't really help us move faster. Draco can't do more than hobble." He eyed the blond and amended, "And I think he was only doing that on adrenaline which is quickly wearing off. Unless Hagrid was totally wrong, that doesn't give us very many options."

She looked at Castina. I know you can't bear a non-virgin, but what if Harry rode and carried Draco?

The herd mare snorted. You live to stretch our limits, don't you, Berit?

If I had a better idea, you'd be the first to know.

It hadn't sounded brilliant to her, either, but it was all that she had.

I suppose it will have to do. Ashwin, will you consent to carry the Pure Adult?

Ashwin agreed and stepped forward, kneeling down in front of Harry, who looked at Hermione in confusion.

I'm sorry, she said to Harry.

"He's agreed to carry you," she explained out loud. "We'll put a Featherlight Charm on Draco, and you'll have to carry him and make sure he doesn't touch Ashwin."

"But how could that possibly—" Draco began.

"That is completely non—" Severus started at the same time.

"I can't—"

She had to wait a few seconds for the Knut to finally drop for all of them, understanding painting Harry's features and shock drawn across the other two.

"How could you have kept this a secret?" Severus demanded.

"Now is really not the time to discuss it," she repeated impatiently. They all just stared at her, and she snapped, "Harry, on the unicorn!"

Harry obeyed, and with difficulty, they got Draco charmed and sitting cradled in Harry's lap. Ashwin surged upright, and Hermione wondered if she'd ever see such a bizarre sight again. She cast a Scent-Deadening Charm on Draco to interrupt the smell of blood and make the werewolves concentrate on what was closer.

She said her next speech both mentally and aloud so that everyone would understand. "Ashwin, straight to the grounds of Hogwarts; advise me when they are safe."

He bowed his head. Yes, Berit.

"But what about you?" Harry began to ask.

Go, she admonished.

Ashwin sprang away, Harry's protest cut off abruptly.

She turned back to Castina. Severus must be returned to safety as well.

Castina spoke rapidly with her three companions, a blur of mental noise that Hermione didn't catch before the mare turned back to her. They will protect him.

Thank you, she repeated. Very seriously, she added, I care for him more than I care for anyone in the world.

We will not fail you, Berit. They spoke in unison.

And I need to know when he is safe.

Of course.

She turned to Severus. "Aila, Aland, and Silon will escort you back to the grounds by the most direct route. You'll be running in their midst, and they will keep pace with you and protect you."

"What about you?" he demanded.

"I?" She smiled. "I will be bait."

He looked at her incredulously. "You can't possibly hope to outrun a pack of werewolves on foot."

"On my own feet, of course not. But I do not intend to travel that way."

She leapt astride Castina; Hermione's humanness and the blood that she had absorbed into her clothing from Draco's injuries were both important to her plan.

"Go!" she admonished. "We will lure the werewolves away, and then I will rejoin you on the grounds."

He stared hard at her before he finally turned away and began to run in the direction the unicorns led him. She didn't know how she looked astride a unicorn and covered in Draco's blood, but maybe it had only been in that final moment that Severus had fully realized what it meant that she could talk to the unicorns. Perhaps it was only when she was astride one that the Slytherin had realized that both the Pure Adults had been staring him in the face this whole time.

It had been some time since she had ridden a unicorn, but as Castina had explained back in sixth year, if a unicorn consented to carry someone, that person would not get off until the unicorn willed it, so there was no fear of falling off or being accidentally dumped.

She and Castina shot off at breakneck speed. It wasn't the same as having the ground beneath her own hooves, but Hermione settled into the rhythm quickly. They streaked right towards the oncoming werewolves until she was certain that the packs had caught the scent of Draco's fresh blood.

Castina turned north now, away from Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. There was a moment of uncertainty when the werewolves went silent, and then the howling took up, more ferociously than before and growing louder, and she knew that the bait had been taken. Rational humans might have wondered how the injured man was suddenly moving at speed, but these were werewolves who were unfettered by Wolfsbane and their human minds, and the bloodlust was strong; they would go where the blood led them, and now it led north.

She and Castina made sure that they didn't travel fast enough to outstrip the werewolves who might lose interest if they ceased to smell Draco, and Hermione found that she was now catching glimpses of both the werewolves and her herd; the unicorns paced the packs, ensuring that no werewolves broke off and began to hunt those on their way to Hogwarts. Fortunately, all the werewolves were single-minded in their pursuit of Hermione. Unicorns didn't have fun and exciting human smells, Hermione supposed, and since they weren't interfering in the werewolf hunt, the werewolves were currently disregarding them.

Ashwin advised her that they had reached the safety of the grounds, and a moment later advised her that they had reached the edge of the Forest. The Pure Adult and his mate have dismounted.

Hermione wondered what Harry had done to make the stallion guess at Harry's feelings.

Thank you again.

He sent her something that seemed to be a cross between a snort and a huff. I would not refuse this sort of request, Berit.

She smiled. Doesn't mean I can't properly express my gratitude.

Another human voice intruded: Thank you.

Harry's remark, which he had no doubt intended solely for Ashwin, reached all of them, but Hermione thought it was cute, as did the other unicorns, apparently.

That reminds of a time not so long ago, Castina teased.

Hermione smiled in spite of herself. I've improved drastically since then, I hope.

Castina agreed. She remained surefooted as the terrain began to change, becoming rockier. At the speed they were going, it would still take a day or so until they ran out of trees.

The werewolves were beginning to get frustrated with the elusiveness of their quarry, but they were now far away from other human settlements, making her the only truly interesting meal within smelling range. At least she was giving them good exercise without their injuring anyone.

She wondered how Voldemort had convinced all of them to join in this hunt. Thirty werewolves was a huge group. She knew that many of them were discontented because of the rights that the Ministry denied them, but she couldn't bring herself to believe that such a large number of them had decided to throw their lot in with Voldemort and kill at his pleasure.

This hunt, in particular, seemed rather nonsensical to her. She didn't think that many people who happened to be werewolves could possibly be so upset with the Malfoy scion. As for hunts that would appeal to the werewolf or to the beastly part of the man—if Fenrir Greyback was any indication—surely the hunting of one solitary human wouldn't actually give them that much satisfaction. After all, one little Draco Malfoy divided thirty-odd ways wouldn't make a very good meal for all the hunting they were doing.

That left the possibility that they had been bribed to do it or that they had somehow been tricked or lured here against their will. Hermione wondered if Voldemort could possibly have the manpower to seize them all; in human form, she supposed, it would be possible, and once they were in their animal form, they were going to go after the nearest human. If he were bloodied, as Voldemort had assured that Draco was, there was no question that the werewolves would pick up the scent and hunt him down.

She found that she was suddenly back in contact with Fawkes, as he advised them that the delegation who had gone to Malfoy Manor had returned.

I assume Albus will want to speak to me, but he will have to wait his turn.

Understood. You are well?

Quite good, all things considered. You?

The same.

She and Castina varied their route a little so that they were no longer heading in such a straight direction towards the end of the Forest. Since they were looping round and doubling back, the werewolves had to work harder to track them, which picked up the somewhat flagging interest of the combined pack. The herd had dropped back a bit more, keeping its collective eyes on the werewolves but otherwise making sure they didn't get in the way.

It felt like an eternity until more news reached them, but Hermione knew it couldn't actually have been that many minutes.

Your mate has reached the wards and has passed safely onto the grounds of Hogwarts. Aila snorted. He says he is perfectly capable of making his way through the rest of the Forest himself.

If he were to be eaten by some unexpected monster on the way, I'd have to chastise you strongly, Hermione pointed out.

Aila laughed. We will follow him.

There was a moment of silence, and then, He does not appear to be amused, but he's guessed that you ordered us to follow. You are being threatened with losing points, Berit. Points of what?

Hermione made a brief explanation of the points system at Hogwarts.

But why is what you are doing considered misbehaviour? Aila wanted to know. Does he not want to be kept safe?

He disagrees with my decision to ensure his safety when he believes that he is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. He may or may not go through with the punishment when he sees me again.

He is a strange one, Aila said. I can see much darkness.

He has had very dark portions of his life, Hermione conceded, suppressing a sigh. But he has struggled to correct any evils he has committed, and he fights whole-heartedly against the evil now. He is strong.

Aila huffed an agreement. He ran very fast.

That kind of strength, too. He had a bad experience with a werewolf in his youth. It could not have been a good night for him. But he came out to save Draco anyway.

It sort of boggled her mind, actually, to think about his decision to plunge into the Forbidden Forest with no expectation of really being able to fend off the werewolves but trying anyway because Draco was out here.

Yes, that is noble, Aila assessed. He has reached the grounds and told us … "Thank you. Now, bugger off. I can't have a herd of unicorns following me around all night". This was said quizzically.

Hermione snorted her laughter. The, er, sharpness of the "bugger off" is really directed at me. He's grateful, I promise. He doesn't express gratitude terribly well.

As you say, Berit. He has reached the castle but does not appear to be going in.

She smiled faintly to herself. I believe he will not do so until I return to the grounds as well.

It is good that he seeks to protect you.

She merely nodded, transmitting her agreement non-verbally. That was too complicated for words.

Taking out her wand, she cleansed herself of Draco's blood and Masked her core so that it would appear as though she'd suddenly winked out of the werewolves' sight entirely.

And so it was; a massive howl of anger tore through the night.

If you let me off, I can make my way back to Hogwarts now.

If you wish to change forms, you may do so, but we will both be going back to Hogwarts, Castina said sternly.

She tried to protest, but Castina continued, No unicorn travels alone when we are being overrun by werewolves. Don't be foolish, Berit.

She and Castina quickly outstripped the werewolves, making short work of getting out of their range when they were really trying. This gave Hermione the opportunity to dismount and transform, and then she and Castina looped around the hunting pack and began to make their way back to Hogwarts.

The rest of the herd continued to keep an eye on the werewolves; they would still interfere only if necessary.

I'm very glad unicorns are unicorns, Hermione said, pleased that they didn't have foolish prejudices. I suspect that's why I like to spend so much time with you.

But not lots of time?

This had become a running joke since she had made her assertion to Severus.

Never that, she agreed with amusement.

You know you may change that whenever you wish?

Hermione nodded. Some days I'm very tempted. But I have many responsibilities there that I must fulfill and numerous reasons to stay.

The invitation remains open.

Thank you.

They crossed the wards that indicated they were now on Hogwarts grounds, and Castina slowed to a halt.

Be well, Berit. It was good to see you tonight.

And you, Hermione agreed. Let's hope Voldemort doesn't get more bright ideas, shall we?

We will keep him out of our Forest, Castina said fiercely. I must rejoin the herd. I will advise you when the werewolves have ceased to be a threat.

Thank you again.

Castina was gone in a flicker of light. Hermione cantered to just before the grounds came into sight and transformed back into her human form. She did not Mask herself but emerged onto the snowy grass. Sure enough, Severus was still waiting for her.

He had been sitting on the steps that led up to the main doors, but he rose as she approached. Not only had his face not lost the worry lines that had been there since they had begun their hunt for Draco in the Forest, anger now darkened it further, and he bore down on her with an expression of fury.

Chapter Sixteen: The Confessions

As soon as Hermione was within hearing range of the man in a towering rage on the steps outside the castle, Severus ground out, "I am going to wring your little Gryffindor neck and then I'm going to put you in detention for the rest of your life."

She wanted to point out that that particular order of punishment was a little odd but decided regretfully that it wouldn't be wise to antagonize him when he was in this sort of mood.

"Sir," she therefore pointed out calmly as she came to a stop in front of him and cast appropriate privacy charms, "you were in the Forest looking for Draco. I didn't do anything you didn't do."

"Didn't do anything I didn't do?" he repeated in astonishment. "Did I use myself as bait to distract a group of ravening beasts? Did I take longer than everyone else to emerge from the Forest? Did I communicate with big, white, hairy denizens of the Forest?" He said this last in a fierce whisper; despite the privacy charms, he seemed to think that this particular detail should be relayed quietly.

"Actually, sir, you communicated just fine. Aila relayed your message to me," she said sweetly.

He positively glowered. "Don't take that tone with me, Miss Granger; you know exactly what I'm talking about. You are going to sit down and explain everything to me."

She shook her head. "First, I'm going to see with my own eyes that Draco Malfoy is safe. Then I'm going to speak with Albus, as he has already put in his request to have a word with me. You may attend this meeting if you wish, or we can speak privately later, at which point I will explain to you what I am at liberty to explain."

He didn't look at all pleased with her suggested program.

"I have to know that after what we just went through, Draco's all right," she said gently.

He wavered, and she realized that he had to be anxious to do the same. If she'd had more sense, she would have played up on that and suggested that they go for his sanity's sake, not hers. Although, on second thought, given that this was Severus she was speaking to, perhaps it was just as well that she'd not brought up any of his worries.

Without another word, he turned in a flurry of robes and passed inside, and she followed obediently at his heel. They walked swiftly to the hospital wing, and after a moment's consideration, Hermione informed Fawkes of this fact.

We're going to check on Draco; i f Albus wishes to join us here, there is no doubt at least part of this discussion that needs to be in front of Draco.

I'll relay the message, Girlicorne.

She smiled to herself. Fawkes, at least, couldn't be very upset with what she had done if he was calling her by her nickname.

When they entered the hospital wing, Poppy looked up with the obvious intent of telling them off, but when she saw who it was, the impending diatribe was forestalled, and she beckoned them in.

"Let me get a look at you," she said, eyeing them up and down professionally.

"We're perfectly fine," Severus answered for them. "It wasn't we who were attacked by Death Eaters and then chased through the Forest by werewolves."

"No werewolves got anywhere near me," Hermione confirmed. "I promise."

Poppy didn't seem to find this adequate and insisted on scanning each of them to ensure that they were really in health. Hermione winced internally as she realized that Severus had been hit with the Cruciatus. He was studiously not looking at her and had evidently worked out that she knew how to read that much in a medical scan. She supposed that both he and Lucius had likely been targets if Draco had done something egregious enough to deserve death by werewolf.

Once Poppy had done her medical duty, they were allowed to cross over to Draco's private room, and Poppy gave the two of them permission to enter. Draco had been tucked into one of the well-warded rooms far at the back. These were the rooms that were used in quarantine conditions—not that they had been used in recent years—so Hermione knew that meant they could be well and truly sealed if Poppy wished it.

Severus glared pointedly at the matron until she huffed a breath and told them she would be back in a few minutes, leaving Hermione and Severus with Harry and Draco.

The small room contained a single bed, a chair, and a small table by the bed that was clearly for any prescribed medication, as a number of bottles lay on it. A doorway off the back led, presumably, to the loo. Harry was perched in the chair next to Draco's bed. He hadn't had the sense to transfigure his clothing back into its indoor variety; he had to be roasting, but he gave no indication of discomfort, his gaze pinned on Draco.

Her best friend had apparently given up on subtle. She took out her wand and fixed his clothing. He offered her a distracted smile of thanks and immediately looked down at Draco again. Hermione was pretty sure that if she'd taken her wand out and cursed him he would have responded in the same way.

Shaking her head bemusedly, she conjured two more chairs—dark purple fabric, no hint of Gryffindor colours—so that she and Severus could sit. Severus looked at her oddly but sat down in the chair without protest.

She cast a whole slew of privacy charms despite the protections the room already had; given what she suspected they would be talking about, they couldn't be too careful.

"How are you doing?" she asked Draco, who was awake and had been properly re-bandaged by the matron. He looked very wan tucked up in the bed covered in so many layers of white.

The blond shrugged. "I'm not exactly at my best, but I'm alive; that's a great deal more than I anticipated given how my evening was going until you showed up. Thank you."

"We were all happy to come."

Perhaps happy was a stretch, but she wasn't about to say that they all had felt it was their duty or something horrid like that.

"Fortunately, you had a plan," Draco said with a very serious expression. "You betrayed a sensitive and dangerous secret in order to save me." His tone became more formal. "Please know that I will never betray it. I am willing to make a Wizard's Oath."

She shook her head. "That isn't necessary. You've given your word, and that's enough for me." Harry nodded his agreement, and Hermione tried to ignore Severus, who looked as though he thought Oath-giving was an excellent option at this point. "Our secret isn't more important than your life."

"It's of extreme importance," Draco protested, frowning at her and Harry. "Everyone is desperate to find out, and now you're in more danger."

"It was bound to come out eventually, one way or the other," she answered reassuringly. "I trust you both with the knowledge."

She might not have wanted to share it, but what was done was done. Draco's eyes slipped past Severus's dark form before he asked pointedly, "Are you absolutely certain that's a wise choice?"

She glanced over at Severus; he was sitting as still as stone and didn't look approachable at all, meaning someone else was going to have to give the answer to this question. Since Harry wasn't talking, it seemed to fall to her once more.

"Draco, would I be correct in understanding that your presence here today means that you have repudiated Voldemort?"

Draco winced marginally at the name, studiously did not look at Severus, and nodded.

"Then you need to understand that that is the case for everyone in this room."

The blond couldn't seem to help where his eyes immediately strayed.

"More than seventeen years ago he realized that he had made a horrible mistake, and he hasn't wavered from our side since then."

Severus's face could have been hewn from marble, but he hadn't once tried to stop her from speaking.

"He's a spy?" Draco gasped. "I mean, for your side? For real?"

She gave a short nod of assent. "He's been a spy for almost as long as you've been alive. If I had to pick someone in this school to tell our secret to, I would choose him because then I would know it would remain safe."

Huh. Now everyone was staring at her—including Severus with unfathomably dark eyes. Perhaps that had been a little too earnest? It was only the truth, though, and she thought Draco was in need of some truth at the moment.

Fortunately, the charged moment was broken by the arrival of Albus with Fawkes perched on his shoulder.

"Good evening, sir," she greeted him hurriedly as he conjured another chair for himself, this one garishly patterned and much brighter than hers were. "May I inquire how your meeting at Malfoy Manor went?"

This successfully deflected attention from her, as Draco had not known this was where the headmaster had been, and Severus had evidently been Summoned before most of the action had occurred. If Draco hadn't been completely put at ease by her revelation, the fact that the headmaster spoke without the slightest hesitation in Severus's presence could only further reassure him.

Albus explained what had happened: "Lucius was not at home when we arrived, and it was Narcissa alone who received us. She was worried, and it became apparent that her son was her primary concern." The headmaster nodded at the pale boy. "She made it clear as circumspectly as possible that it was her belief that Draco's desire was to return to class and therefore if he had not done so, he was being prevented. She claimed not to know where Lucius and Draco were destined when they left on Sunday.

"At this point, an injured Lucius returned to the Manor. He seemed to be in shock and rather surprisingly allowed us to stay and accepted that our primary concern was his family. He was quite sure that you were lost to him, Draco, but Voldemort rather miscalculated when he planned your gruesome and undignified death. Malfoys are very proud of their families and titles as a general rule, as I am sure you are aware, and Voldemort's malicious dismissal of this helped convince your father of the necessity of rapidly reassessing his loyalties."

Draco was staring at the headmaster in astonishment. Harry actually stopped looking at the blond Slytherin for a moment in order to offer the headmaster a very similar expression. Severus's face remained expressionless, and Hermione made sure hers was schooled to polite attention. Family and the Malfoy name were very important to Lucius, as Hermione understood it, and if Draco's fate finally made him waver, it was about bloody time.

"Voldemort took out some of his displeasure on Lucius," Albus said. On Severus, too, Hermione was certain, but she was careful not to so much as glance at him, as he would only be angry if she called attention to him. "We were therefore concerned about the retribution that would result when word of your survival reaches him. For their safety, the elder Malfoys will be going into hiding. As we speak, Malfoy Manor is being stripped of its most precious effects and the Gringotts vaults secured."

Tonks had to be the one facilitating this; she made the most sense if Lucius and Narcissa were willing to work with her, and given their current position, it would be the height of foolishness to refuse to do so. Hermione wondered how the pink-haired witch was reconciling what she was doing with being an Auror, as Lucius Malfoy was still a fugitive and a confirmed Death Eater. On the other hand, putting him in Azkaban hadn't done a bit of good, and this way, Tonks—and probably by extension, Kingsley—would know where he was.

Hiding the two of them away would keep them from getting up to mischief with Voldemort and that really made more sense than a public arrest that would result in either Lucius's death or his being broken out again.

Albus concluded, "You need not concern yourself over the health of your mother or father any longer. Lucius indicated that he had no idea until you spoke out at the meeting that you did not intend to become a Death Eater."

They all looked to Draco now. He still seemed unnaturally pale and young-looking as he lay bandaged in bed. She'd often thought the same of Harry on all the occasions she had had to look in on him in the hospital wing over the years.

Draco spoke quietly. "My life choices seemed very limited. From a young age, I knew it was in my best interest to appear very willing to follow in my father's footsteps, and in the beginning, I generally agreed with him and accepted what that entailed. The older I grew, the more questions I had, but it was only recently," he admitted, his eyes flitting for a moment to Harry and Hermione, "that it seemed as though other options might truly be available to me. But I remained concerned about the ramifications of breaking with my family both for their safety and for my own.

"When—" He faltered for a moment, swallowed heavily, and had to start over. "I went with my father yesterday not knowing where we were going or why. Before I knew it, I was in front of the Dark Lord being told that I was to become one of his followers the next day. This seemed like the point of no return. If I refused in that moment, I realized I was going to die at that—that thing's feet. So I managed to appear appropriately pleased.

"Unfortunately, my hope of making a run for it as soon as I got home was quashed when I was informed that we would be remaining with the Dark Lord until the ceremony. I told myself that I would go through with it to stay alive. But today..." He shook his head, not looking at any of them. "I found that it was not within my power to bow to him and pretend to serve him. When I realized I was about to have that brand burned into my arm forever, I couldn't endure it. Malfoy's don't belong to anyone!"

He said this defiantly, colour burning in two bright spots on his cheeks, but he still did not meet their eyes.

Severus took over the narrative when Draco did not immediately resume. "Instead of consenting to be Marked, he took the opportunity to brazenly tell the Dark Lord what he thought of his bloodline, his half-blood status, the way he treated his followers, and various and sundry other topics that seemed of interest to him. I've never seen a more Gryffindor display of bravado in my life."

Harry was laughing softly into his sleeve. Draco glared at him, but amusement twisted his own lips as he saw how delighted Harry was with this behaviour.

"Regrettably," Draco resumed more seriously, "I had not considered the ramifications of it being a full moon on the night the Dark Lord decided to have the ceremony. I'd known I was to die from the moment I opened my mouth, but I hadn't considered being mutilated by werewolves as one of the possible methods."

When he stalled a little, Hermione interjected for him, "So before you knew it, you were beaten and in the Forest, trying to stumble to safety."

Draco nodded gratefully. "I knew I had no chance of making it; they'd snapped my wand already. But I refused to simply lie down and die."

"Resulting in several foolhardy Gryffindors plunging into unknown danger to effect a rescue," Severus said darkly.

"It was hardly unknown danger," Hermione protested. "Castina informed me of the whereabouts of Draco and the werewolves. I knew exactly what we were getting into, I just didn't care."

"Me either," Harry contributed staunchly. "We had to try."

It looked as though either Severus or Albus was going to take the floor, protesting something that was bound to upset her or Harry.

Hermione resumed before they had the chance. "We did more than try, as it happens, since you can all see that Draco is safe right now. We completed our rescue mission with no injuries of any kind."

"You were out of the castle longer than the others, Hermione," Albus observed.

You're not giving away my secrets, are you, bird? she queried.

He stuck out his tongue mentally. You arrived openly through the main doors.

Hermione briefly explained her role in the rescue scenario, assuring them, "I was never at any real risk."

Severus and Draco scoffed, the blond verbalizing, "You were covered in my blood, running away from a bunch of werewolves."

She shook her head. "Castina could outrun werewolves in her sleep, and unicorns don't lose those they consent to carry. It amounted to nothing more than a run through the Forest."

They still didn't look convinced of her veracity, and she wasn't sure what else she could say; Castina never would have let anything happen to her.

The argument was let go, however, in favour of a larger one, as her direct mention of the unicorns seemed to give Albus the opening he sought.

He gazed at them severely. "You should have informed me that you were the Pure Adults."

"Why?" Hermione asked dispassionately.

Albus looked taken aback for a moment at the straightforward question, turning to look at the equally blank-faced Harry before he managed to say, "We would have protected you."

"We have been effectively protecting ourselves," Hermione explained coolly. "Harry and I assessed the situation and came up with an appropriate plan of action. So far, we've countered Scrimgeour's attempt to find out who we were with a blood test that we refused. We came up with an adequate cover story to protect us from our peers, the Daily Prophet, and the public. We stymied the Ministry's attempt to ask and then to compel the answer out of us, and we blocked Voldemort's attempt to ascertain the answer in our blood as well. Why do we require more protection?"

"About that," Draco interrupted. "How did you fix the blood test? I know I got blood from you, Granger, and Vince got it from Potter. The Dark Lord tested each sample, and they all came up negative."

"You don't honestly think we'd wander around with unprotected blood when we knew that it was the necessary ingredient in the one conclusive test for virginity, do you?" Hermione asked scornfully. "I Glamoured our blood so that any test using it will give a non-virgin result."

"You did what?" Draco demanded incredulously. "But you don't know when it will be taken."

She explained the permanent-until-removed-by-her Glamour that was always on their blood.

"That's genius," he said, and he sounded absolutely serious.

Hermione's lips curved into a smile. "Thank you, Malfoy."

"While we're on the topic, how did you avoid the Veritaserum?" Severus demanded. "I saw it administered, and the officials were quite certain that no student had the opportunity to consume the antidote or any potions that might interfere with the results."

"We don't need an antidote," she answered. "We are no longer susceptible to Veritaserum's effects."

This wasn't one hundred percent true, of course, but it sounded damn good. Everyone but Harry stared at her in shock.

"It can't be done," Severus said flatly.

"It has been," she replied. "Harry and I are perfectly safe from forced questioning, and we will continue to be so."

Albus and Severus opened their mouths.

Her lip curled. "I'd tell you the same under Veritaserum, but that wouldn't do much good in this case, would it?"

"I could really dose you both right now, and you'd be able to lie?" Severus asked, eyes narrowed and glinting.

Harry glared at him. Since so much of what had happened was Hermione's idea, he'd been leaving the speaking up to her, but he couldn't seem to let this comment by Severus pass. "That's assuming a lot about your being able to get near us with a bottle of Veritaserum."

Severus opened his mouth, and she knew he was going to be scathing, so she interjected. "It took a special act of the Ministry to get us to take the potion last time, sir. We don't do it on a whim."

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she realized how ridiculous they were, and a glance out of the corner of her eye confirmed that Harry had found it just as amusing under the circumstances. Although it wasn't precisely on a whim, there likely wasn't anyone else who consumed as much Veritaserum as they did.

Draco was gazing at her narrowly. "Are you certain you were Sorted into the right House?"

Hermione blinked at him in astonishment, quite sure that he wasn't saying she should have been in Ravenclaw.

"It put me where I needed to go."

He continued to stare but finally said, "Perhaps it is more advantageous for you to be in Gryffindor, leaving everyone to think you're the nauseatingly good little know-it-all."

She smiled, not taking offence. "It's hard to be perfectly good with the company I keep."

"Yes, your company." Albus once again turned the conversation to the topic he wished. "How long have you been in contact with the unicorns?"

"Castina made herself known to me at the beginning of sixth year," she said carefully.

If that left most of them with the impression that the herd mare had done so when Hermione had her legal seventeenth birthday, that was all to the good. Much as she trusted that Albus's heart was generally in the right place, she wasn't sure it would be wise for him to have any sort of blueprint for growing Pure Adults.

"Since she dwells in the Forbidden Forest, that's a curious occurrence, Miss Granger," Severus observed.

"She called me there," Hermione answered, having a fair idea of where this was heading.

"You were called to the Forest and you just went?" he asked scornfully.

She smiled. "And here Malfoy was doing so well implying that Gryffindors weren't complete idiots. Of course I didn't just go, Professor. I spent a considerable amount of time worrying about what could possibly be trying to lure me out there to gobble me down and then I got a second opinion from a trusted source."

"Mr Potter looked as surprised as the rest of us when the unicorns arrived."

Very much so.

"Much as I love Harry, he's not exactly the creature expert I go to in such situations."

"Don't tell me you went to Hagrid," Severus said, still sounding derisive.

Harry coughed something that sounded remarkably like, "Follow the spiders," and she hid a smile as she shook her head.

"Well?" Severus prompted impatiently when it was clear that she wasn't giving anything away unless specifically asked. "Whose opinion were you so trusting of that you ventured into the Forbidden Forest?"

Well? she asked. It's only a matter of time, and I'd rather do it on my own terms.

As you wish, Girlicorne.

Fawkes flew the short distance between them and settled on Hermione's shoulder, petting her hair with his beak. She smiled at everyone.

"Fawkes seemed pretty reliable to me."

Harry was smirking at the looks on the others' faces. There'd been a moment where Albus had looked pretty close to flabbergasted again, although he was back to full twinkle mode in short order.

Albus cleared his throat. "Fawkes does not tend to communicate with people in general."

"He communicates at need, and he's … fond of Pure Adults."

They are such lovely individuals, Fawkes confirmed, and she could see from the widening of Draco's eyes and the slight narrowing of Severus's that the phoenix had made that comment audible to everyone.

We like you too, Fawkes, Harry responded as the magical bird fluttered to perch on the table with the potions.

"Don't tell me both of you can communicate like that." Severus sounded appalled.

"It's a skill that Harry recently acquired," Hermione admitted.

"You taught him how to do it, you mean?" Severus asked pointedly.

She shrugged. "I suggested to Fawkes that he was probably ready to learn. It's come in handy a time or two for the two of us, as it's great for emergencies. Or even for occasions like thanking unicorns for carrying you to safety."

Colour tinted Harry's cheeks. "Everybody heard that?"

"Oh, don't worry," she said dismissively, "it just gave them the chance to tease me about how I'd been at the beginning. It doesn't take that long to get used to when you're in an environment with lots of other MindSpeakers."

She was hoping that she was reassuring the others that this was not a totally bizarre skill, but she wasn't entirely certain that she was succeeding. Given her audience, it was hard to tell what they really thought from what she was seeing on their faces.

This left her with option number two.

"Fawkes seems to think that it's quite standard for Pure Adults."

Draco seemed to be considering something else. "How is it that the two of you can be the two Pure Adults?"

Harry bristled. "If you say one single word about Hermione's bloodline, I won't be responsible for my actions."

Draco looked startled for an instant, then he grinned. "Actually, I think it's fabulous. If only we could tell the Dark Lord, he'd probably expire from apoplexy. A Muggle-born and a half-blood are the two Pure Adults of this century."

They smiled back at him, the tension easing out of Harry's form.

Draco clarified, "I simply meant to inquire as to the chances that it would be the two of you who are the two Pure Adults when you're friends, go to school together, and are part of the same house at the same time."

They exchanged looks.

"It's better not to ask," Harry said hurriedly, shuddering theatrically. "We discussed it once. It took hours. There were Arithmantic calculations. There's no good answer, I promise."

Hermione suppressed a smirk. As far as she could recall, there actually hadn't been any equations evolved in her explanation, but it apparently still lived on as horrifically long in Harry's imagination.

"If you say so," Draco said, nevertheless sounding as though he really wanted to know, but Harry nodded emphatically to indicate that pursuing the topic was not advisable.

"You might have trusted us with this, Harry, Hermione," Albus said, managing to sound very disappointed in them.

"We might have," Harry agreed. "But the fewer people who know, the safer we are. As the only two people aware of our secret, we knew without question that it wasn't going to be accidentally leaked. It's a secret that we're willing to guard with extreme care because it means our lives. The Order has not always been known as the most secure environment ever."

Hermione was impressed with this circumspect mention of Pettigrew.

"Most of what you were doing to hunt for the Pure Adults involved listening to what the Ministry was doing and getting us to pick up what knowledge we could at Hogwarts," she continued. "You weren't expending untold resources on the project. It was clear to everyone that nobody knew the answer. That continues to be the safest environment for us."

"We don't need anyone acting like they're the cat who got the canary," Harry said darkly.

"But until someone does solve the mystery, do you think the Dark Lord is really going to stop looking?" Draco asked.

"I think Voldemort," Harry answered deliberately, "is unlikely to give up until he's harnessed our power for himself and made us die ignominious deaths. Fortunately, he's not actually so good on the follow-through when it comes to that one and me."

"There is the problem of what will happen if one of the werewolves brings back news of a woman astride a unicorn," Severus pointed out, eyeing her as though this entire thing were her fault.

Hermione considered this possibility. "I've spoken to Remus about what he recollects from his time in werewolf form. Once the bloodlust is on him, there is very little. Most memories are concentrated on smell. What few images he remembers are fragmented in the extreme. There's almost no chance they would be able to identify me specifically, especially since I was covered in Draco's blood at the time."

They were looking at her oddly. She raised her eyebrows. "What?"

It was Harry who answered. "You've discussed Remus's time as a werewolf with him?"

She nodded. It had been in the context of her research, so maybe she shouldn't have said, but it was too late now.

"I … can't believe he was willing to talk about it. He normally shies away from the whole subject." Harry still sounded shocked.

"I can be very persuasive," she said with a smile.

Harry shrugged, nodding his agreement at that. Severus was still looking at her very strangely, but when she looked at him specifically, he looked away.

"At worst," Hermione continued, "Voldemort's attention will remain focussed on the school. Realistically, this is where it was likely to dwell anyway. He's not been successful yet."

"But if he knows for certain the Pure Adult is here, and he knows he's been tricked in the past, he'll come up with other ways to test," Severus said with the certainty of someone who knew intimately what Voldemort was like. "There are ways that are far less pleasant than the ones that have heretofore been employed."

"I know," she answered very seriously. "But I don't believe that he will be absolutely certain that the Pure Adults are here even now. Besides, the students in general are protected at Hogwarts; he doesn't have the ability to commit the type of widespread capture that would be necessary to test all of us. That option is not open to him, and the seed of doubt about our even being here remains; as long as everyone else appears to be clueless as well, he won't be particularly incensed."

The headmaster was regarding her and Harry gravely from over the frames of his glasses as he pronounced, "You know you'd be safer still if it were not an issue."

Hermione turned on him fiercely. "Understand, Headmaster, that I will have sex when I'm good and ready to have it, not because Voldemort or anyone has forced me into it."

Albus's eyes weren't twinkling, but he didn't look nearly as cowed as she could wish. "I'm only saying—" he began calmly.

"I understand quite well what you're saying," she snarled back, causing Fawkes to sing reassuringly for an instant, "and this would be the other reason why we have not spoken of this matter before now. I will not be forced into this, do you understand me?"

Albus looked to Harry, who shook his head, stating firmly, "We're in this together."

"I would like you to think about it," the headmaster said, continuing to remain infuriatingly calm. "Consider your options and the danger that the other students are in while the Pure Adults remain unidentified."

Hermione's jaw tightened. "The safety of the other students at this school has always been a priority, Albus, and it will always remain one. I don't think I need to remind you what Harry and I were doing today or what we have done in the past to ensure that that is the case."

"Unless you want the two of us to paste giant targets to our heads by revealing ourselves by name, we can't take away the suspicion from the other students, anyway," Harry pointed out. "If we do that, you'll have the opportunity to see how much harder Voldemort tries to capture us, torture us, and kill us."

"We're trying to keep all our students safe, Harry, and that most certainly includes you and Hermione." There was a hint of censure in Albus's voice.

He may not have explicitly stated that it was their duty to lose their virginity as quickly as possible, but it had come closer than Hermione liked. At least he hadn't yet sunk so low as to point out what an asset the power would be to their side—although he might simply have realized how completely that would anger them right now.

Anything else he might have attempted to say was cut off by a knock on the door that was so clearly aggravated that Albus immediately let the mediwitch in.

"Mr Malfoy needs his sleep," she said, evidently at the end of her patience with them. "He's been through a great deal, and he will remain in the hospital wing under observation for several days."

None of them were about to deny the rough night he'd had.

Albus told Draco he would return the next day in order to discuss what was going to be done to keep the boy safe for the rest of the school year and then they allowed themselves to be prodded out of the room, splitting up in the hallway, Albus to return to his office and Hermione, Harry, and Severus to return to the dungeons.

"I know I offered you the opportunity to yell at me once Albus was finished, sir," she told Severus, "but do you suppose it could wait until tomorrow? It's been a bit of an action-packed evening, and I could really use some sleep."

Severus regarding her narrowly before he consented with a short nod. "I will see you on Friday evening at nine o'clock once I have finished with the detention of your classmates."

She opened her mouth to ask about her own detentions, but Severus's glare silenced her.

"Friday evening at nine o'clock," he repeated sternly before stalking off.

Once Harry and Hermione made it back to their quarters, they changed into their pyjamas; she might have Vanished Draco's blood, but she didn't particularly want to be wearing her current clothing any longer, and since Harry looked as though he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, she imagined he could do with a change as well.

Once they were cleaned up, they settled on the couch with tea, Hermione with her feet tucked under her and Harry with his legs stretched out towards her and crossed at the ankles.

"You offered him the opportunity to yell at you?" he said incredulously.

He'd been holding that comment in for a long time, apparently.

She sipped at her tea and shrugged. "He was quite intent on doing it on the front steps, and that didn't seem particularly desirable. I had to get him inside somehow, and I wanted to see how Draco was first, and then I knew Albus would get wind of us, so that made Severus third in line."

"No chance you could convince him to snog you instead?" Harry asked hopefully.

Hermione let out a huff of pained laughter. "I don't think so, no. What about you?" she asked, switching the focus of the conversation. "Ashwin has started identifying Draco as your mate."

Harry blushed crimson, taking a hasty gulp of tea.

"Draco fell unconscious somewhere in the middle even though it was the smoothest ride I'd ever taken." Harry's face darkened. "Can't blame him, given what they did to him. I was holding on to him so carefully to make sure he didn't touch the unicorn, and I might have tried to reassure Draco that everything was going to be okay, and, er, maybe a comment about how soft his hair was sneaked in there somewhere. I guess Ashwin can put two and two together."

Hermione smiled softly. "Were you blocking your emotions at all?"

Harry's eyes widened and then he sighed. "Bugger. Forgot all about it. I'm sure he and half the herd could tell how I was feeling. I really hope Draco was unconscious the whole time."

"You were looking pretty attentive when we got to the hospital wing," she observed as mildly as she could.

"He woke up as I was carrying him in. I was upset, and I yelled for Poppy. I couldn't seem to let him out of my sight. Poppy actually had to physically turn me out of the room so that she could examine Draco and get him changed into hospital robes." Harry flushed. "I was totally out of my head."

She smiled. "But now you have your answer. Draco isn't going to follow Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "I wouldn't in a million years have wished this upon him, but I'm really, really happy and so proud of him."

"Make sure you tell him that," she advised.

"Sure," Harry said with heavy sarcasm. "In the middle of the bit where he's laughing in my face for being such an idiot last night, I'll be sure to bring that up."

"I think he's going to need a little reassurance right now, Harry. You're free to offer it."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I'll maybe give it a try if the opportunity arises."

Meaning he never, ever intended to bring it up. She supposed that it would be up to her to ensure that Draco's morale was boosted whenever necessary. What was a little bit of meddling between friends?

"He seems to be all right, though?" she asked since Harry was the one who had actually been in the Infirmary during the examination.

"Well," Harry said with a frown, "I'm not sure why Poppy wants to keep him in there for so long apart from the need to hide him away, but I didn't hear anything bad from either of them."

She considered him for a moment. "So what time are you going to sneak up to the hospital wing?"

He blushed again. "I hadn't quite decided but probably in a few hours. Speaking of, I take it that's where you've been disappearing off to—the Forest and the unicorns?"

She nodded.

"And that's why you're so good in the Forest?" he pursued.

"Part of the reason," she conceded slowly.

He waited a beat and then finally just asked directly, "Were you ever going to admit that you could transform?"

"Eventually." She smiled faintly. "I knew from my first transformation that I could not share it indiscriminately, and there never seemed to be a terribly good time to bring it up to you."

And she had wanted something for herself. She was pretty sure he would understand this impulse but didn't want to hurt his feelings just in case.

"What's so special about it?" he asked.

Sighing, she rose from the couch, set her tea down on the table, crossed over to the bare half of the room, and transformed. The room suddenly seemed a lot smaller, the magic permeating it more tangible. Harry positively gaped at her.

"You look an awful lot like a unicorn."

She snorted. That would be because I am one.

But humans can't transform into magical animals, he said, showing that he really had paid attention in Minerva's class a time or two.

Regular humans, no, she agreed.

The proverbial light bulb clicked on. Oh, he breathed. Pure Adults. Magical animals. That's why I couldn't do it before and why you think I'll be able to do it now.

She nodded and transformed back into human form.

"I run with my herd in the Forest whenever I have the opportunity," she confessed.

Harry still sounded sort of stunned. "That's … amazing. You're really beautiful."

She smiled, having never heard a human's point of view on the subject before. "Thank you, Harry." She retrieved her tea and sat down again. "How is your training coming?"

He was now filled with renewed enthusiasm for his own change; he might have guessed about her before, but now he'd seen it with his own eyes, seen that she was magical. He gushed about what he thought and the feelings he'd had while he meditated, and he even hauled out her notes and began to question her more specifically on details and thought processes that he now assumed she wouldn't mind talking about.

She answered every question that he had to the fullest of her ability until he finally decided it was late enough that he thought he could get away with sneaking into the hospital wing and making sure that Draco continued to be all right.

She hoped that the Slytherin could read between the lines because knowing Harry, he wouldn't properly explain himself.

Hermione sympathized, though, because there were now a whole bunch of weird issues surrounding their relationship. Harry had helped rescue Draco. Draco was now faced with one of the two Pure Adults in existence, and it was hard to see how he wouldn't want to take Harry up on any offer that he might make.

She realized that they didn't even know for certain if Draco was interested in men. He seemed to be some sort of interested in Harry, but they didn't know the kind or degree. It hadn't come up before, she supposed, largely because there were so many other issues in the way first—like his devotion to the madman who was trying to kill Harry. It was only now that that giant impediment had been removed that all those other "little" questions were being asked. How did they get honest answers out of him at this point when he knew beyond question that Harry was a Pure Adult?

On the other hand, if this was what it took to keep Harry safe, and if Harry really wanted at least one night with Draco, this was probably a guaranteed way to get it. If all Harry got was that one night, it would get messy when Harry's heart was broken into tiny little pieces, but not getting any nights would likely result in the same given how strongly he seemed to feel for Draco. If he got one night, he'd have lovely memories to savour while he lived with her and her houseful of cats, and there'd be one less Pure Adult for Voldemort to have any chance of using for his own nefarious purposes.

She realized with a grimace that that argument could be used of her and Severus, as well. But Severus was still her teacher, and at least Harry didn't have to worry about detentions and point loss when he was spending time with Draco. There were still plenty of ways for them to hurt one another, but at least they were equals.

She wondered if Severus would take her up on her offer were she to ask. He was the head of Slytherin, and she would be offering power at a pretty cheap price. Shagging her under the circumstances would probably not deter most Slytherins. Most people, she acknowledged; the whole school and most of the wizarding world had been mad to find them.

She stared into the flames absently. Was she a coward? Was she advocating that Harry try to be happy with Draco while she was unwilling to take the same risk with Severus? Maybe, but she still felt that Harry was safer placing his happiness in Draco's hands than she was in Severus's, although perhaps that was only because she could feel the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach at the idea that the Slytherin she'd chosen might not care about her.

Realizing her tea had gone cold, she Vanished it and made fresh. Admittedly, the situation was rather horrid right now, but it wasn't as though she could have confessed her feelings before this, right? She hadn't worked it out until the end of sixth year, and no matter what the charter said, she couldn't really see Severus having a relationship with an of-age student. No, if she'd confessed how she felt, he would almost certainly have disbelieved her, and it would have resulted in months of detention.

And now Severus was going to want to know why she was still a Pure Adult, and poor Harry was probably going to be asked the same questions by Draco…. Why did their lives have to be so complicated all of a sudden? Voldemort had thrown Draco and a bunch of werewolves into the Forbidden Forest, and it had affected her life more than she wanted to admit.

Harry arrived back at their chambers around half five. She'd been almost dosing on the couch, thoughts swirling madly around in her brain.

"You okay?" she asked.

He didn't look okay.

"Draco woke up and kicked me out," he said flatly. "He wasn't terribly kind about it."

"He's a Slytherin who's stuck in the hospital wing and injured," she said soothingly. "I don't think he wants you to see any weakness."

Harry shook his head. "No, it was more than that. He was really edgy. He yelled at me." From the depth of emotion on Harry's face, she began to doubt that this was merely hyperbole. "My hope was stupid and pointless, 'Mione. He doesn't care about me at all."

She frowned. It must have been really quite scathing to have driven Harry from tentatively optimistic to completely hopeless in such a short period of time.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as all that, love," she said, attempting to cheer him once more. "He's had a really rough night, and I don't think he reacts well to pain. You remember the scratches from Buckbeak, don't you?"

They spent an enjoyable couple of minutes lambasting the younger prat that Draco had been, and Hermione eventually convinced Harry to curl up on the couch with her, where they both fell asleep for a couple more hours before they gave in to the inevitable and rose for one more day.

Fawkes relayed to them the information that Draco was being kept under wraps in the hospital wing for several more days. By the time he was released, word of his supposed demise at Voldemort's hands would have spread amidst the Slytherins; his presentation alive and unharmed would have the most impact then, and he'd be in the best sort of health to enjoy the moment.

Even with the spotty recollection they had at that time, the werewolves would likely remember that they hadn't eaten anything human that night. As the day progressed, however, it became more and more apparent that they were unlikely to share this news with Voldemort, as Hermione and Harry learnt from the very helpful Fawkes, who informed them of everything that was happening even when Hermione was in class.

They had been run off their feet by Hermione's herd until they slept off their exhaustion in a stretch of Forest corralled by the unicorns. Shortly after half eight in the morning, they woke as very confused humans. Castina had contacted Fawkes who had contacted Albus who had contacted Hagrid so that he could retrieve the group of naked people, clothe them, and lead them out of the Forest.

By then, Albus had been in contact with Remus, and the haggard-looking man fresh from his own transformation had shown up and helped them to piece together what had happened. Compared to their other options, Remus was the person they preferred to talk to; he might not be wild, but at least he was a werewolf.

Greyback—who had sneaked off at the earliest opportunity—had given up the location of the largest werewolf enclave to Voldemort. The snake-faced bastard had sent Death Eaters to Stun, cage, and move all the soon-to-transform humans to strategic locations at the Forest's edge. They'd been left with blood-soaked rags that would give them a taste for Draco's blood.

They'd transformed with that smell in their noses, and they had immediately picked up the scent and headed into the Forest to hunt, just as Voldemort had wanted. Voldemort had evidently wanted Draco to be terrified and suffer as long as possible trying futilely to run from them because Draco had been dropped a relatively far distance away; there was still no way he would have made it to the safety of the grounds in his injured state.

These werewolves hadn't suddenly declared their love of the Ministry, but they were quite cross with Voldemort. As feral as some of them could be, they didn't like to be used as his private hunting team. Remus believed this was the Order's best chance to convince them not to join with Voldemort, whose claim that he would give them the rights which the Ministry denied them had just flown out the proverbial window.

Remus had hurried off again to help them find a new safe location, and his look at Hermione before he left had made it plain that he had to bite his tongue in order not to give them an even better reason to side with the Order.

She knew that they were all tired of the sort of lives that they were leading, and a cure would be a miracle that they were desperately desirous of. In less than two weeks, she and Remus would be finding out whether or not they had exciting news which they'd be able to share; until then, she was determined not to spread what could turn out to be false hope.

Having now heard all the details of the lengths to which Voldemort had gone to get the werewolves to the Forest, she thought it was an absurd amount of work to go to in order to kill Draco. She knew that Voldemort liked to come up with elaborate and symbolic ways to kill people, but this seemed like a ridiculously complicated plan implemented at the last minute.

Draco, when he heard, had explained that he had been given the treatment that was supposed to have been given to a group of Muggles as the crowning celebration of his Marking.

Apparently, Voldemort was still smarting from the loss of Bellatrix. According to Draco, he wanted to train up a new lieutenant. Displeased with Lucius as a result of the fiasco with the Chamber of Secrets and the disaster in the Department of Mysteries, he'd looked for fresher blood. Draco was young, clever, and primed to follow in his father's footsteps, making him the perfect first induction of the new generation.

Draco's refusal to be Marked had left Voldemort feeling especially vindictive, so the blond had fallen victim to the werewolf plan which was, Hermione supposed, quite dramatic.

Since Draco was now presumed expelled, missing, or dead—depending on whom you asked—Albus had free reign to remove his belongings from the Slytherin dorms without anyone asking too many awkward questions; everyone knew that the headmaster tended to know more than he revealed to the world at large.

Meanwhile, Hermione, Harry, Severus, and Draco were aware that Albus was really preparing other quarters for Draco in the dungeons. It would be just like Voldemort to get one of his "loyal Slytherins" to off Draco in his bed one night, and Albus was nipping that plan in the bud.

Draco was going to need a place to feel safe because his house was likely to shun him, and the other three houses were hardly about to accept him with open arms. The Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs had suffered through a great deal of his scorn for years, and a sudden change of sides was unlikely to be trusted by them.

Hermione thought that if the lot of them had been out in the Forest with werewolves after them, they'd see how his conversion could be in earnest, but she could hardly drop the memory in a Pensieve and share it around.

The headmaster was doing what he could to make Draco's situation comfortable, so he'd invented a valid reason for him not to be forced to sit at the Slytherin table if that looked to be hazardous to his health. Currently, permission to sit at any table for meals resided solely with the Head Boy and Head Girl. Given the political climate, she and Harry rarely availed themselves, as sitting with the other two houses but not Slytherin would have set a bad precedent, and they knew the Slytherin students emphatically did not want to dine with them. She and Harry had therefore agreed to remain at the Gryffindor table for the most part.

Albus had decided to extend the privilege to all the Prefects; they would now be officially encouraged, even, to sit at other tables. There was even going to be the occasional "Prefect Lunch" where an entire table would be set aside for them, meaning that all four houses would be forced to mingle.

Hermione and Harry had promised to sit at the Slytherin table occasionally if it looked like nobody else was doing it. Truth be told, she rather relished the idea of sitting down with Draco in between them; it would irk the hell out of the Slytherins who were on Voldemort's side, and between the three of them, she wasn't too worried about their safety. If they got a lot of amusement out of following one of the headmaster's directives, that was merely an added bonus.

Draco's new quarters turned out to be in the same corridor as Harry and Hermione's. She had to wonder if Albus had picked up on the feelings Harry had for Draco and had decided to push his agenda of getting rid of the Pure Adults. She found this interference galling, but if he had decided to endorse Harry's choice, that was a lot better than what he could have done; she would be eternally grateful that he hadn't tried terribly hard to force her and Harry together. Unless he thought Draco would break Harry's heart and he'd be driven into her arms as a result, it looked as though Albus was doing something right even if it was for the wrong reasons.

All the seventh-years who had been involved in the fight in the DADA corridor were beginning to serve their detentions now. Since the group was so large—twenty-five students, including her, Harry, and Draco—the detentions were being supervised by at least two of the four Heads of House each night as well as Filch.

Rumour had it that Severus had insisted that they serve a full seven days of detention since Albus hadn't specified whether or not it was only a five-day school week. Perhaps as a compromise, they weren't being forced to work on the weekends, so the "week-long" detention took a week and a half of school days to complete. Since the students had their weekends free and clear, not one of them complained where a professor might overhear.

Dorms, common rooms, classrooms, and corridors were being cleaned, suits of armour polished, portraits dusted, potion ingredients sorted and chopped, plants moved in the greenhouses, and all sorts of menial labour performed. Harry left from five to eight on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and came back in relatively high spirits. He was in good company, he said, and there were so many of them participating that it almost felt like a communal class activity, rather than a detention. He was used to doing unpleasant tasks for Severus, he added, so these detentions didn't feel even close to harsh and unusual.

Harry had tried to visit Draco in the hospital wing again on Tuesday and Wednesday, but the blond routed Harry both times. Last night upon his return, he had declared his absolute certainty that Draco hated him, so he wasn't going to try anymore. Hermione was having none of that, so late Thursday night, she sneaked into the hospital wing and let herself into Draco's room.

"Harry bloody Potter, can you not take a hint and stay the fuck out of my room?" Draco snarled angrily.

Chapter Seventeen: The Visit

Hermione closed the door behind her and stepped far enough into the room that even with the dim light that was burning by the bedside, Draco could see her. When he realized it wasn't Harry who'd invaded, his manner became dramatically less vitriolic, if still ungracious. He sat up so that his back was against the headboard and he could see her clearly. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see why you're being such a complete and utter prat to Harry, of course," she answered, sitting down even when he didn't invite her to do so.

He actually looked down at the bed and plucked restlessly at the cover. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He'd not delivered this lie smoothly or believably, and she thought it was a pretty poor showing for the Slytherin Ice Prince.

"Since the rather deplorable showing of manners upon my entrance was directed at Harry, I find that rather difficult to believe," she said dryly. "You're not being very kind to him."

"What business is that of yours?" he demanded shortly, and then his lips twisted into a sneer. "Oh, I forgot: you're here to make sure your boyfriend's feelings aren't hurt."

"Did you take a Stupidity Potion?" she asked scornfully, narrowly managing not to ask if he'd been knocked up the side of the head one too many times by the Death Eaters, but she was pretty sure that fell under the category of unnecessarily cruel under the circumstances. "I thought you'd grasped the salient points about the two of us being Pure Adults."

"I grasped that you aren't having sex," Draco snarled, clearly unimpressed that she was treating him as though he were stupid. "That does not mean that you aren't dating."

She frowned at him. "I'm going to hope that's jealousy or some other mind-altering emotion talking because that's still awfully stupid."

He looked instantly defensive. "What would I have to be jealous about?"

"I honestly don't know," she said, exasperated. "But if Harry and I were actually a couple, why wouldn't we be having sex? We've had years of opportunity to have it if we wanted it, and if for some bizarre reason we managed to hold off until we were both seventeen, do you really think we wouldn't have leapt at one another the moment this whole Pure Adult mess came to light? We could have avoided it all if neither of us were virgins anymore, but we didn't. Because we don't care for one another that way, get it?" she said sternly.

He was looking at her with wide grey eyes. "You really don't care for one another."

She wondered where all his sarcasm had gone.

She shook her head. "We're friends. Best friends. We live together right now and spend what might be an inordinate amount of time together, but we are most definitely not kissing or canoodling or whatever it is that real couples do."

He snorted. "You're not sure?"

Her look was mocking, although she was not sure if it was directed at him or herself. "How many couples do you think I've been part of?"

"You and Krum—" he began.

"Friends!" she interrupted sharply. "You sound exactly like Ron with that notion."

Draco made a moue of distaste and immediately abandoned the idea.

"So you and all the blokes you know are on friendly terms only, then?" he clarified.

She nodded, unsure how this had got to be about her love life rather than his. Sneaky Slytherin. "None of the boys my age seem to have the, er, maturity I require of a life partner."

He cocked his head at her. "But you are interested in someone? Someone older than you?"

She snorted. "You and Harry are both like dogs with bones. Yes, I'm interested in someone, and no, he's not interested in me, making it quite easy not to have sex."

He laughed softly. "Granger, you're the strangest woman I know."

She smiled. "I'm touched that you think so. Now, explain to me why we can have a civil conversation yet you feel compelled to scream Harry out of the room."

He attempted expressionless, but he was still off-kilter. He was upset, she thought, and uncomfortable.

"I … don't like Potter, that's all."

She shook her head. "Did you lose your ability to lie out in the Forest? That was absolutely pitiful, Malfoy. You called him Harry then, and when you found out he was there, you panicked completely." He opened his mouth, and she added severely, "If you even try to tell me it was because you were suddenly more worried about your own safety when he was in the vicinity, Poppy is going to have a bunch of extra wounds to heal on you come morning." He closed his mouth with an audible snap. "You were worried about him, and that means that you do care for him."

He looked mutinous and stubborn now. She sighed and shifted her chair closer to the bed.

"If you can give me a good reason, I won't push this, but you must realize that I only want what's best for Harry."

His expression turned bleak. "What's best for him is to stay away from me."

She regarded him contemplatively for a long moment. "How much of what he said while you were riding Ashwin did you hear?"

"I was drifting in and out of consciousness." He smiled faintly, apparently lost in the memory, sounding pleased as he said, "He likes my hair."

She smiled involuntarily but watched as Draco's face hardened again.

"He's not going to get the opportunity to touch it again, so it would be better for him to forget the idea." The Slytherin scowled. "If he was looking to rebel with a bad boy, I've recently not come to fit the bill."

She remained unconvinced by his weak-sounding arguments, so she tried again. "You guessed straight off and seem to have no difficulty with the concept of my being interesting in someone quite exclusively; why can't Harry feel the same?"

He stared at her. "That's nonsensical."

"I don't see why you should think so," she said, rather amused by this abrupt and illogical claim. "Why shouldn't Harry be interested now in the same person he's been interested in for quite some time?"

"There's no reason for Harry to be interested in me," he said defensively.

She smiled faintly. "I didn't say I understood his choice." She was delighted in the consternation that flitted across his features before he could school it away. "But I'm quite certain he's made it. And your reaction, while not exactly what I might wish, shows that you're not indifferent to him."

"I might as well be," Draco said stiffly.

"Okay," she said. "Let's say you are indifferent."

He blinked in surprise.

She smiled cheerfully at him. "Now let's ask ourselves what would happen if an indifferent Slytherin were offered the chance to sleep with a Pure Adult. What do you think this Slytherin would do?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you think he would do everything in his power to drive the Pure Adult away and convince him that he had no interest in him? Or do you think that he would do his very best to secure the Pure Adult's interest and the power that went with it?"

Draco was starting to look slightly hunted which told Hermione that he didn't know how to get out of the hole he had dug himself into.

She looked him straight in the eye and spoke very firmly: "You're doing your very best to drive him away, and since it's clearly going against your inclination and your desire for power, I'm hoping it's a spectacularly good reason and that this isn't just some sort of mind game. You don't want to hurt him, do you?"

Minutely, he shook his head.

"You're trying to protect him…." She was fishing.

A slight nod.

This was not going particularly quickly. "You're going to have to help me out here, Malfoy, because I'm at a bit of a loss as to what you're protecting him from. If you'd been there to see how depressed he was every time he came back from the hospital wing, I think you'd agree that he's not exactly weathering this unscathed." Draco looked unhappy. "What's going on?"

"You won't tell him?"

"Not without your express permission," she agreed, wondering what she was getting herself into. Another secret: just what she needed.

Draco remained silent for so long that she thought he'd changed his mind. When he suddenly spoke, the words were clipped. "When I was tortured, Greyback was there. He bit me."

She blinked at him. "He can't have been transformed yet." Not if she correctly understood the timeline of Voldemort's absurd plan.

"No," Draco agreed. "But it was so close to the full, a margin of a half hour, maybe—they wanted me to be freshly bleeding and injured—and he doesn't seem to need to transform to be entirely werewolf-ish." Draco's eyes were glittering as he stared at her. "I looked into his eyes. He wasn't human. I'm going to turn into a werewolf at the next full moon, I know I am."

She just stared at him for a minute. "And?"

"And?" he hissed explosively, sitting up completely so that he could yell at her properly. "There isn't an 'and', Granger. I'm going to turn into a werewolf. I am a werewolf. Why do you think Poppy has me in here observing me? We're still waiting for the wound to heal. It's resistant, just like werewolf bites always are. She's breaking the law not reporting it to the Ministry. I'm not human anymore!"

She frowned at him. "I hate to break this to you and your pure-blood nonsense, but that's complete and utter rot. You're still human, Malfoy. You're as human as I am."

"Of course I'm not," he said impatiently. "I'm a werewolf."

"I'm a Pure Adult," she countered. "Just like you and the other werewolves, Harry and I are different. Set apart. Unlike normal humans. Does that make me less than human?" she repeated.

He frowned, leaning back against the headboard again, needing to think for a moment before he could argue, "It's completely different. You're not going to turn into a monster once a month for the rest of your life."

"I still don't agree with you, but if I were?" she prompted. "Do you think Harry would abandon me?"

His frown deepened, this idea obviously not meshing with what he knew of the Gryffindor hero. "But it's different with me," he finally complained. "Harry deserves someone better than a … a killer. That's what I'll be, you know."

She shook her head, wondering where logic went when Draco Malfoy was upset. Probably the same place it went when she was upset, but since she was currently quite calm, she was easily able to counter him.

"To the best of my knowledge, you haven't killed anyone to date."

He shook his head, confirming that fact.

"Even if you became a werewolf, there's nothing to say you'd suddenly start. You have heard of Wolfsbane, haven't you?"

His look was scathing, but what he said was, "It only works if you take it before every full moon. Accidents happen."

"Yes, they do," she agreed, thinking of third year. "But that still doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to kill anyone. Accidents happen when you're human, too. Besides, we'd all know that you weren't doing it because you wanted to, and you're still underestimating Harry if you think that would stop him from caring about you."

Draco crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her belligerently. "I'm not going to make him suffer because of me."

She shook her head, still sort of amazed that they were having this conversation and wondering rather irreverently if the Hat had ever considered putting Draco in Gryffindor. But then she remembered how quickly it had chosen Slytherin. Really, it just went to show that the House system was daft; she knew full well that there were Gryffindors who wouldn't be trying to protect Harry like this if they were in the same situation.

She thought Draco's position was stupidly reasoned, but it was still one of the least selfish things she had ever seen Draco Malfoy attempt to do.

She wondered if Draco thought that he owed her because of the rescue and if that was the reason that they were actually able to talk about this.

"One of the closest people Harry has to proper family right now is Remus Lupin," she explained carefully. "Harry loves Remus without difficulty, and his being a werewolf has never been the slightest impediment to that. I'm sure it would be the same with you; it wouldn't matter to Harry."

"It matters to me!" Draco snarled. "I can't let myself care for him when I know I'm a werewolf."

She sighed. "But you do care for him? If it weren't for the werewolf bit, you wouldn't be acting such a prat?"

He nodded agreement on both counts, not even arguing about being called a prat.

Sitting up straight, she stared directly into his stormy grey eyes and spoke very seriously. "Draco Malfoy, I'm going to tell you a secret known to only one other person beside myself. And it isn't Harry."

He looked surprised and doubtful. "Are you sure you should trust me with it?"

"Are you not trustworthy?" she asked mildly.

"I am, but I might not be," he pointed out as though she might honestly not have considered this. "How do you know this isn't some big Dark Lord plot?"

She tilted her head, observing him carefully. He seemed to be asking the question genuinely, so she offered him an honest answer.

"It could be. I don't believe that to be the case, however. In the end, my trust is mine to offer for my own reasons, and I have chosen to trust you. I would have to deal with the repercussions in the event that you turned out to be evil, but I know which way I'm betting." She smiled at him.

He still looked perturbed.

"You trusted me to change your hair back to blond, didn't you?"

He looked as though he'd forgotten about that incident. He rolled his eyes. "Sure, but you're Hermione Granger, and even if you had screwed me over, it would have faded eventually or I might have worked out how to fix it on my own."

"Or I might have changed it red and gold for a month and made sure you couldn't dye it back. You made the decision to trust me and live with the consequences; it might be on a larger scale, but that's exactly what I'm doing now."

He let out a huff of breath. "Fine. If you're certain, reveal your giant secret."

"I'm growing a hybrid in Herbology, a Weresbane." His look expressed his incomprehension, and she continued reluctantly, finding that it took a bit of a push to get the long-suppressed words out, "In twelve days, I'm going to find out if it's as successful as I hope it will be in curing lycanthropy."

He simply stared at her, at a complete loss for words.

"Are you an Animagus?" she asked.

He nodded blankly.

"How would you feel if your animal were to change?"

"They don't do that," he managed.

"Hypothetically."

He shrugged, cheeks tingeing suddenly pink before he added with obvious reluctance, "I'm a ferret."

She ruthlessly bit the inside of her cheek and didn't give into the gales of laughter that she could feel were trying to bubble up and escape out her mouth.

"You need to hone your meditation technique, I think," she answered with praiseworthy composure. "Turning into another animal would be desirable, even?"

"Hypothetically," he stressed. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"It's part of my cure. To suppress the Were and support the wolf."

He listened intently as she explained the process. She was pleased to see that there was a light gleaming in his eyes that had been absent for several days now. He seemed hopeful.

"You know, if this works, not even the Slytherins are going to be able to deny that you're brilliant."

She was touched by the compliment but cautioned: "I can't guarantee that it'll work; I've told Remus the same. I've been working with him extensively. I checked him for allergies to the new plant, and he's been prepping for a long time."

Draco said flatly, "You have a cure. I'll try it."

She felt the eerie certainty that Draco wouldn't last very long as a werewolf. Remus was the best example of someone who had persevered despite the illness, but she supposed it was a lot for Draco to even contemplate overcoming given his upbringing and the beliefs he had been raised with about non-pure-blood wizards.

"If you're certain." She waited for his nod. "I'll speak to Poppy in the morning."

He looked quizzical.

"She knows you might be infected, so she's keeping you under observation; since you might be a werewolf, she has to know that you won't be a danger to yourself or anyone else come the next full moon. Assuming you don't want her to go to the headmaster," Hermione pointed out the other option, and Draco shook his head hurriedly, "then she'll need to know that you've been released to my care."

He frowned. "I thought you said no one else knew about the cure."

"No one else does."

"Then what are you going to tell Poppy?"

"That I'm going to be brewing your Wolfsbane, of course."

He blinked at her. "She won't question that?"

"Given that I brew Remus's, it's unlikely."

He came close to goggling at her. "You brew Professor Lupin's Wolfsbane?"

She nodded, amused by his incredulity. After a moment, he managed to get his eyeballs back into his head and come up with a coherent sentence.

"I'm sorry, that was stupid. I remember Severus saying how difficult it was, but if you're attempting a cure, of course you're familiar with the original. I thought he brewed it for Lupin?"

"He has a number of calls upon his time," she said, not trusting herself to anything else. "I do it now."

He looked as though he wanted to speak but wasn't sure if he should.

"Out with it," she admonished.

Draco cleared his throat. "After third year, he told me he wouldn't trust anybody else to brew it or give it to Lupin."

Hermione was more affected by this than she wanted Draco to know, so she brushed it off as best she could. "I'm a pretty anal person. I'm sure he knew I'd get it right and make sure Remus took it. It cuts down on the time the two of them have to glare at one another."

Draco hummed a noncommittal agreement, and she changed the subject.

"Harry doesn't know about the potential cure because I don't want him to get his hopes up unnecessarily. If it's a dud, I'm burning my research and never speaking about it again."

He smiled, the expression refreshingly genuine. "You'd do no such thing. You'd go through it with a fine-toothed comb and work out version number two."

"You're just rolling out the compliments today, aren't you?" she said with a raised eyebrow.

"It might have escaped your notice, but I'm actually quite a charming person." This was said quite haughtily but with an edge of humour that made it tolerable.

If she were being honest, she didn't suppose that anything he'd said in this meeting could beat the presumption that she had brought to it, but since it was with a noble goal in mind, she had gone ahead and done it.

The fact that Albus probably felt he was doing the same thing all the time was a little unsettling, but there it was.

"You've tended to hide your charm quite well when dealing with Gryffindors," she said dryly.

"I've been doing my best to improve upon that impression," he pointed out.

"And other than one spectacular exception recently, Harry and I have noticed," she said mildly.

He made a face. "I am sorry about that." She hadn't actually expected to hear a real apology on that front, and the fact that it wasn't in front of Harry or anyone but her went a long way to assure her that he really meant it. "I knew how well you shielded from class, and I'd been instructed to prove myself to the Dark Lord. Failure was not a terribly attractive option."

"I can see why that would be the case."

He shook his head. "I hadn't quite anticipated how horribly wrong it would go, though. My 'spectacular success' right under the headmaster's watchful eye made a big impression on the Dark Lord; he decided that now was the time for me to become his number one goon." His eyes were clouded, his expression dark. "The moment I cast, I knew I didn't want to be doing it for the rest of my life. Seeing you collapse like that, knowing that I was the one causing you such pain—"

He swallowed heavily and confessed very quietly, "It didn't become real before then. Hexing people in the corridors, fighting with Harry like I did up until fifth year, that was kid's stuff. Even when Dumbledore's bloody Army got me on the train in fifth year, they were essentially harmless spells. You weren't trying to mortally wound me or torture me into insanity. The Cruciatus … that's all it does. That's its sole purpose, and the Dark Lord uses it indiscriminately and without mercy. I … didn't want to become the person I could be if I kept using it."

"That shows an enormous strength of character, you know. Rather than deciding it was too late or too difficult, you decided to correct your mistake even if it was at the price of your life."

Regarding her through eyes that betrayed his confusion, he said, "I'm still not sure how either of you can possibly forgive me."

She shrugged. "As I said before, I understand why you did it. You didn't hold me under it for an unbearable amount of time, and you weren't doing it because you wanted to hurt me. Harry wasn't too happy about it, to be frank." Draco's face fell. "But I did my best to convince him that if I forgave you, he was perfectly within his rights to do the same. I think it mostly worked."

"You're a much better person than I am." This assessment was offered without inflection.

She shrugged. "I am who I am; you are who you are. People make mistakes, and people recover from them; I assume that you aren't about to continue to indiscriminately curse people with Unforgivables in the corridor?"

"First and last, I swear," he said solemnly.

"Then that's all there is to it. You were tempted once upon a time but practical demonstration revealed it didn't work for you. You made a hard choice that many people don't have to go through, and now here you are."

He huffed a breath that was almost laughter, and she thought that perhaps her explanation had been a little too brief for him.

"Thank you. Again." He sounded very sincere. "I could be languishing in prison or completely dead, and you've saved me both times."

She offered another shrug. "I guess Harry's not the only Gryffindor with a hero complex. Now, to business: neither of us will speak of the potential cure."

He nodded.

"I won't tell Harry about your lycanthropy, and you will allow him to get close to you."

Draco opened his mouth, no doubt to protest, and she hurried on.

"I'm not saying that you have to confess your undying love for him or let him do the same towards you." It might be nice if they'd get that out of the way, but she knew it wasn't likely. "There's to be none of this driving him away virtually at wandpoint. You're going to let him care about you even if you don't let anything physical occur before the eleventh of February. I want things in motion, all right?"

"And if I refuse?" This was said more amusedly than anything else, and she didn't think he was really serious.

"Then I'll have to resort to plan B," she said brightly, "which involves accidentally dosing your pumpkin juice with a Love Potion some morning."

He laughed. "In the interest of avoiding such an ignominious fate, I accept your terms."

Making her, she was pretty sure, manipulator-in-training if anything happened to Albus. But she was doing this for Harry and Draco, not to win a war.

She reminded him of the first dosing with the Weresbane at the end of January.

"You'll be able to get along adequately with Remus for this to be successful?" she asked with more than a little censure in her tone.

He grimaced. "I realize what I said before didn't lend itself to an impression of tolerance. I was actually rather fond of Professor Lupin; I insulted him because it was expected of me. Although," he added, frowning slightly in memory, "I maintain that his clothing left something to be desired."

She snorted. They both knew why he had been forced to dress as he had; it wasn't really funny, but she couldn't help but be amused by how much the Malfoy heir was offended by lack of proper dress. She wondered for a moment how he could possible care for Harry. Of course, if he liked the Gryffindor in spite of his appalling fashion sense, that was probably a good sign.

"I admit that I find it a bit difficult to think of him exactly the same way now that I know that he's a werewolf." The thunderous look on her face was quite apparent because he continued hurriedly, "But I'm working on it, and Merlin knows I don't have any reason to be rude to him at this point. I'm in his situation exactly, and if that doesn't teach me manners, nothing will."

She nodded, accepting this for now. She'd have to see how he treated Remus when they were actually in the same room together, but it seemed as though Draco was trying. It couldn't be easy to overcome a lifetime of prejudice.

"So you're going to play nice when you see Harry next?" she confirmed pointedly.

He laughed softly. "Yes, I'll be on my best behaviour. You still haven't explained what he could possibly see in me."

She shook her head. "I have no idea, remember? I think he's completely insane."

"Which is why you're here convincing me to give him a chance," he pointed out dryly.

"Oops," she said unrepentantly.

He smiled a full-fledged, brilliant smile that had none of the usual haughtiness in it. "Thank you, Granger."

"Hermione, if you think you can manage it," she corrected. "I suspect we're about to begin seeing a lot of one another."

"Only if you call me Draco," he returned.

She smiled, taken a bit by surprise. She'd known he was making an effort, but this was another milestone; it was going to be a reminder of what he had decided every time they were together.

"Draco," she responded. "I'm glad we've had this little chat. Did Albus say when you'd be returning to the land of the living?"

"In the morning, actually. He says he'd prefer not to wait until Monday; the only class I have tomorrow is Defence, and he reasons that I'll be safest there. He's spoken to Professor Tonks, and she's agreed to keep an eye on me."

"It's the cousinly thing to do, I'm sure."

He smiled. "I still find it a bit hard to believe that we're related."

Her own lips tipped up. "You can't see the Black family charm?"

"I try to compare her to Mum, and it doesn't work so well, that's all." He added wryly, "It's probably all to the good if she fell far away from that tree."

"I think it's Bellatrix who was the rotten apple," Hermione argued. "I'm sure your mother can be perfectly lovely."

He snorted. "You've just to witness it yourself. You're too generous."

She shrugged. As if she didn't know better than to insult people's mothers indiscriminately. "I've got to keep the optimism up when I'm surrounded by pessimists and Slytherins who like to think the worst of everyone. I think the world will be a very sad place if there's no trust or understanding fostered between people. That's how beliefs like Voldemort's grow as we separate ourselves from whole segments of society and hold ourselves up as ideal. I try to get along with all sorts and be tolerant of many. Then I know that I can't ever wind up like him."

"You never could, I promise," he said. It should have been flippant, but it was said with the certainty of having just stared into the mouth of that bit of insanity, and she appreciated his wholehearted denunciation.

"Thank you, Draco." She cast about for a more innocuous topic. "Are you looking forward to getting out of here?"

He shrugged. "The place is a little wearing on the nerves, I confess, but I'm not precisely anxious to get back into the madhouse that will be my life once everybody knows I'm alive. I'll have lots of enemies and very few friends."

"You've got me and Harry," she reassured him. "And Parkinson."

He blinked at her. "I wasn't aware that you and Pansy were on those sorts of speaking terms."

"She was the one who came to us about your disappearance. Harry and I took her to Albus, and that's why he went to the Manor. She was really worried."

He looked slightly shocked as he confessed, "We've always been friends, but I didn't think she'd have the poor sense to put herself out like that."

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"If others find out that she's genuinely worried about me, she could get into serious trouble."

"That means she cares." More about Draco than about herself, and Hermione had experience with that sort of emotion. "She's not stupid; she came to us because you missed your rounds, and if she wishes, I could certainly have compelled the Prefects to report any neglecting of duties to me personally."

He smiled faintly. "I won't be able to see her very much, but it's a relief to know that there are at least two Slytherins I can speak to from time to time."

"Try being Harry," she suggested. "The scarcity of people who care for just Harry as opposed to the Boy Who Lived is a bit alarming. I'm sure the two of you can trade stories."

He snorted. "You're determined to get us together, aren't you?"

"I have a great many determinations," she responded. "If the two of you genuinely care for one another, then yes, I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure that nothing stands in your way."

"And how is Harry going to feel about that?" he quizzed.

"About the fact that I've just told you all of this?" She grinned. "Oh, he's likely to be mad as anything. But as long as you kiss and make up at some point, I suspect he'll forgive me."

Draco shook his head and tsked. "Risking your friendship on some nebulous future event that may or may not occur—really, Hermione, that's quite ill thought-out of you."

She smiled. "I'll trust to it. I think that the two of you will make a very pleasing couple—and I'm sure we'll sort out at some point just how and why he supposedly went from me to you."

He thankfully swallowed the first comment that she could see was on the tip of his tongue, correcting himself to, "We'll just have to make sure you get together with your love interest by then, and that will leave Harry free to make a shocking rebound."

She smiled in bemusement. "That's certainly one plan."

"And if you tell me who you're interested in, I'll make sure that it happens."

She snorted with laughter. "Nice try. Clumsy and Gryffindor-ish, but otherwise well executed."

"Hermione," he pointed out pedantically, "I'm a Slytherin and you're a Gryffindor. It's my House that you're supposed to be insulting, not your own."

"It must be getting late," she answered with a smirk, rising from her chair. "I'll be fine, though."

"Pure Adults don't need sleep?" he asked with some surprise.

"You'd find Harry curling up and sleeping here in this room if you let him," she said with a shake of her head. "As for me, that's another story for another day."

"Does anybody know how many secrets you have?" he asked.

"Probably not," she admitted, thinking that, offhand, she didn't even know an actual number. "But I'll let you get some sleep if you're supposed to be up in the morning. I'll walk you to breakfast, all right?"

She saw the struggle between his desire to spurn assistance and his recognition that he really might need it. He offered her a curt nod.

"Goodnight, Draco," she said softly.

His voice was so quiet that she almost didn't hear it before she opened the door. "Goodnight, Hermione."

She returned to her quarters so that she could get a few hours of sleep before making her way back to the hospital wing at an early but decent hour in order to speak with Poppy. Hermione had told Harry that she needed to disappear for a few minutes but would expect him to conduct her to breakfast. He'd been confused but agreeable.

Hermione drew the mediwitch aside before she could go in to see if Draco was awake and threw up some privacy charms. Poppy looked curious.

"I just wanted to let you know that you don't need to worry about Draco's condition. I've agreed to take care of him just as I do Remus."

Poppy looked both shocked and relieved.

"I must say, Hermione, that's quite a relief to hear, but I'm surprised that he spoke to you about the subject. He's been extremely reticent."

Hermione, having been on the receiving end of that reticence, quite understood.

"I can be very persuasive," she said blithely. "I'll ensure that he's dosed and protected on the tenth of February."

The mediwitch seemed ever further reassured since Hermione knew offhand when the next full moon was.

"Thank you," the matron said with a smile. "You'll advise me if there are any problems?"

"Of course. Remus will be willing to stay with him, I'm sure. I would never let him or the school be endangered."

Poppy smiled. "I know you wouldn't, dear."

Although Hermione wasn't altogether certain that she was wanted, she wasn't going to let Draco spend the morning worrying about what his reception by the rest of the school was going to be like, so once they had ascertained that he was awake, she simply installed herself in his room.

"Have I acquired a keeper?" he asked.

"Better to call me an enthusiastic friend," she recommended cheerfully.

He looked a mixture of amused and resigned, especially once he found her still patiently sitting there after he showered and dressed in the bathroom.

She summoned Harry once she and Draco had left the hospital wing. Harry looked a bit surprised to find her and Draco walking companionably side by side when he joined them, but he didn't question either of them, obviously pleased when there was no immediate yelling.

They reached the Great Hall as the food was being served and sat down quite nonchalantly with the Slytherin in their midst, so much so that no one noticed straightaway. Pansy managed to knock her pumpkin juice all over Nott's lap when she looked up and saw Draco sitting there with them, and the exclamation that resulted was enough to garner everyone's attention.

For a long moment, there was complete silence, and then a murmur of sound picked up and raced round the room as people seemed to be confirming that they were seeing correctly. There were a lot of dark looks and a lot of stunned looks (and some combinations of both) at the Slytherin table. Hermione didn't have a whole lot of sympathy for those who had been banking on the blond's death.

She hoped that some of the stunned looks were from those who counted Draco amongst their actual friends. It saddened her to think that he didn't seem to be certain about any of them, knowing about Pansy only because Hermione had relayed the other woman's behaviour to him. She had thought that Slytherins stuck together, but maybe that was more to the outside world than within their House. If most of their relationships were politically motivated, to her way of thinking, that was a sad way to live.

To be fair to the Slytherins, however, they were balancing between being hated by everyone else and being desired by Lord Voldemort; it was bound to make for some sticky political situations. Not knowing anyone's true loyalties, it would be hard to form lasting friendships. If Draco had convinced not only those in the rest of Hogwarts but also those within his House that he was going to become a devoted Death Eater, he would likely feel with good reason that he needed to cross all his previous friends off his list of acquaintances.

She wondered if her words about trust would help or hinder in this situation; she didn't want to put him in more danger, but she also didn't want him to be stuck with only Gryffindors for company. They'd probably drive him bonkers.

Ginny, sitting on Hermione's left, leaned closer.

"Psst," she said. "Have you noticed that Malfoy is sitting between the two of you?"

Hermione turned on her with a look of completely feigned shock, noticing with amusement that almost the whole length of the table was carefully listening in, not even pretending to eat.

"No!" she exclaimed theatrically. "You don't say? I thought it was this weird shadow that I'd picked up somewhere between my quarters and the Great Hall. Did you hear that, Harry? Draco's sitting between us."

A murmur ran the length of the table as they noticed her use of the Slytherin's first name.

Harry nodded, looking suitably puzzled. "Really? That does explain why I didn't get much of a response when I tried to hold your hand earlier."

Half the table dissolved into laughter, the other half looking shocked and appalled. Draco gave a very disdainful snort.

"Have you quite finished amusing yourselves at my expense?" he demanded at his most supercilious, and everyone paid attention again, waiting for the explosions to start.

Hermione and Harry shook their heads solemnly. "Nope," Harry answered.

"But we'll be sure to advise you when we have done," Hermione promised with her most manufactured, sugary cheerfulness.

Draco continued to stare at her haughtily for a long moment before offering her a brief but genuine smile that once again shocked everyone in the vicinity who could see it—and many of those who were craning to watch from nearby tables.

"Well, so long as you keep me informed. Pass me the jam, 'Mione?"

She did so, amused by his use of the short form of her name and the immediate effect that it had on everyone. She could actually hear the news being repeated in accents of extraordinary shock further down the table to those who hadn't heard the original: "He called her 'Mione."

Oh, this was going to be so much fun.

They didn't get the opportunity to consume very much food as everybody kept peppering them with questions; there were only so many bites they could manage in between fending off the inquiries. Yes, their friendship was relatively new. No, they didn't think it was wrong for Draco to be sitting at the table with them, hadn't everyone else heard the announcement Albus had made about Prefects sitting wherever they pleased? Yes, they would have a problem with Draco if he started cursing the other Gryffindors at the table. No, they did not think that he was going to do so. Draco's added commentary of, "Not unless they curse me first," once again caused a storm of noise, but Hermione thought it was a fair point.

Ron spent the entire meal glaring at them ferociously from the other side of the table. Ginny did her best to help them out, despite her not knowing anything about the situation. Hermione was reminded of what a great friend the youngest Weasley was, especially now that she'd given up any idea of Harry being romantically interested in her.

"So, Malfoy, how was your holiday?" she asked.

"Tolerable, Miss Weasley," Draco said politely. "It was going quite well at the beginning. I enjoyed being reunited with my family and was able to spend some nice quiet time at home. The end was rather less pleasing, as I informed Voldemort"—a twitter went up the length of the table—"that I did not intend to serve him, and he tortured me and dropped me in the Forbidden Forest to be torn apart by werewolves during the full moon on Monday."

Just in case any of those Slytherins were wondering if this was actually Draco.

Ginny took this news in a stride. "May I congratulate you on how well you appear to have survived that ordeal?"

Draco smiled, still carefully courteous. "Thank you. I was quite satisfied with the outcome."

Hermione wondered if he had run his decision by Albus and decided that she was going to have fun working with the Slytherin; neither of them appeared to blindly follow the headmaster. He was a brilliant and long-lived man, but even he couldn't see and plan for everything—though she supposed that he was trying about as hard as she was. Still, their goals weren't identical; she had to take care of Harry and Severus (as best she could) and herself. It appeared that Draco had adopted a similar methodology.

She, Harry, and Draco went down to Defence together and were amused by the wide berth that was being granted them by the rest of the students. Daphne was stuck without anyone to walk with as she couldn't seem to bring herself to join the Gryffindor duo, and Hermione wondered if that meant that she was really one to cross off the list of Draco's friends; she could also be wisely hedging her bets while waiting to see how Slytherin House reacted. Neville, Hermione was pleased to see, was finally the one who walked up to join them.

"How did you get out of the Forest, Malfoy?" he bravely asked.

"That's an excellent question, Neville," Tonks said, appearing from the opposite direction as they converged outside her classroom. "Defence against werewolves falls within the purview of my class, so let's save that answer for once we're inside, shall we?"

They all entered and sat down hurriedly, the other students looking very intrigued and pleased that Neville had had the guts to ask the question that they had all been thinking.

Harry and Hermione were a little worried about just what was going to come out of this discussion, but Tonks was more than able to handle the students. She managed to turn their rapt interest in this topic into a full lecture on defence against Dark animals and dangers to wizards, and there was plenty of opportunity for students to answer questions from the text or from their life.

"So, Mr Malfoy," Tonks finally asked as class was drawing to a close, "how do you escape from a pack of werewolves trying to tear you to pieces in the Forbidden Forest?"

He shook his head. "You don't. If you're really lucky, however, you're rescued."

"And who or what is capable of rescuing you from a pack of werewolves?" their professor questioned.

Draco smiled. "Unicorns, actually. The Forbidden Forest is home to a herd of them, and they don't fear humans infected with lycanthropy. They drove off the werewolves, allowing me to escape to safety."

It was a fairly nice summary under the circumstances. Everyone knew that unicorns had powers that humans didn't, so it made a lot more sense to mention them rather than any human assistance—especially since she and Harry couldn't explain how they'd known to go out into the Forest, nor could they give a good accounting of how they'd fought off a pack of werewolves unless they mentioned the unicorns anyway.

"It's good news for us that Voldemort doesn't anticipate the intervention of creatures of the Light," Tonks said cheerfully.

She let them go with an admonishment to always be on their guard and to plan for a practical lesson next week, as she wanted to ensure that they were all keeping up their defensive skills after the holiday.

We'll have to ask Severus if Draco can join us for our training, Hermione proposed as they headed down the corridor on their way to the Great Hall for lunch.

You think? Harry asked doubtfully. He didn't seem so happy before.

I think Severus is just a little more suspicious than you and I are. Hugely paranoid, really. He's watched Draco grow up, after all, and has had years to see him as a Malfoy clone. The jury might still be out on how much he believes that Draco could really have changed.

Or he was just really annoyed about that Pure-Adult-kept-a-secret detail and that annoyance was bleeding into everything else.

But you believe him? Harry asked.

I do, she said simply. I've trusted him with our secret, and if that doesn't tell you how I feel, I don't know what will. As for the training, I just think he'd like to join us.

Harry blinked. Well, I'd certainly like to have him.

Hermione gave in to soft mental laughter. I think that goes without saying.

Harry blushed crimson, the pink staining his cheeks physically as well as mentally. You know what I meant.

Draco stopped to regard them through narrowed eyes, forcing them to stop, too. "I don't think it's polite to do that when another person is with you."

Hermione smiled. "You're just going to have to get used to it. We barely notice anymore. It's very useful."

"I can easily believe that," he said, still rather sourly. "But it leaves me extremely curious as to what you were discussing."

Harry's blush deepened, and Draco suddenly smirked.

"Do I feel my ears burning?"

Hermione's smirk matched his. "I don't know what you're talking about, Draco. Why would we be discussing you?"

Draco started walking again, heading down the hallway ahead of them with a bounce in his step.

What did you do to him? Harry asked incredulously. He's been completely different today.

I might have spoken to him briefly, she admitted, amused that he immediately linked Draco's change of manner to her. It probably just went to show that she was a busy-body and her best friend knew it. We sorted a few things out. Don't worry about it.

Harry was looking after the blond, and after a moment, he shrugged and smiled.

Well, I'm glad he's happy. I just hope he doesn't get upset with me again.

She touched his arm, tugging him into motion to follow after the blond before he got too far ahead and was in danger of being on his own in the corridor at a time when that was probably unwise.

I think you'll be pleasantly surprised, Harry.

Harry turned a sudden look of suspicion on her.

Just what did you say to him, Hermione? he demanded.

We discussed a number of subjects, she said evasively. He had one very pervasive worry, but I was able to stop him stressing so much about it.

Oh? he asked curiously.

There was no getting around that one. I promised I wouldn't say.

Harry was regarding her narrowly, just as Draco had done a moment ago. Should I have extracted a promise that you not speak about me with him?

She smiled softly at him. I think if you really didn't want him to know, you shouldn't have mentioned how much you liked his hair in his hearing.

Harry's head fell as he blushed brilliantly red once more. He was awake? He sounded mortified.

Drifting in and out of consciousness. But don't worry: it made him smile.

Harry immediately brightened. It did?

She nodded as she tried to work out the best way to phrase her warning without making it sound too ominous. Just … don't rush, okay?

You know I wouldn't leave you in this alone, he said indignantly.

She shook her head. I mean for Draco. He's … at a point in his life where you can't go too quickly with him, that's all.

Harry wanted to ask more questions, she could see that, but he'd apparently gathered from her tone that she wasn't going to say more.

With everything that's going on, I imagine we won't be progressing too quickly.

She smiled, thinking privately that if Draco weren't being such a twit about the werewolf issue, they'd probably already be in bed. Draco had nearly died, after all, and there had been a great big emotionally charged scene. You two will be fine, I'm sure.

As they sat down to lunch, Draco and Harry both appeared lost in thought in a good way rather than a bad one, which was just as well, as Ron was back to glaring absolute daggers at them. Hermione once again resigned herself to not speaking with him anytime soon. The most annoying part was that he wouldn't at least ask them what was going on; no, he was just going to sit at the other end of the table, glare a lot, and make up stupid reasons for what he saw them doing.

She knew how it would look to Ron; he already strongly disliked the Slytherin, and the fact that Draco now made Harry and Hermione a trio without Ron was going to incense the redhead. Since Draco's being with them was now intimately connected to the issue of Pure Adults, Hermione really felt as though her hands were tied.

Besides, although most touted her as the Goody-Two-Shoes of Gryffindor as well as its know-it-all, she did possess the Slytherin side that Draco had seen in all her planning for her and Harry's safety. She was sick of being the one who always tried to bridge the gap between her friends. If Ron wasn't going to make even a little bit of an effort, she didn't see why she had to—even if it annoyed her on principle to sit here and know that he was blatantly misunderstanding the situation.

Ron had spent so much less time than she and Harry had in training both last and this year that it was hardly surprising that he felt outstripped by them in ability. They spent a lot of time doing that training—whether it was the actual sessions or their own practice—and they spent a lot of time doing school work.

Add in the Pure Adult factor this year, and it was nearly impossible for Ron to spend very much time with them. He hadn't given them any compelling reasons to consider involving him in their secrets; the only information he'd thought he'd found out this year had been shouted to the corridor, and she didn't even want to think about how he'd feel about the men she and Harry had fallen for. It was only going to upset her if she dwelled on it, though, so she tried to resolutely turn her mind away from him entirely.

Fawkes, when does Albus intend to take Draco to Diagon Alley?

Tomorrow, I believe, the phoenix answered, evincing no surprise that she was asking.

That's precisely when he might be expected to go, she pointed out. When all the professors are free.

The phoenix's tone was resigned. Come to your point, Girlicorne.

She used her most persuasive tone. Especially given that the Death Eater sympathizers wouldn't have wanted to call attention to themselves by instantly sending off an owl after breakfast this morning, the news might not even have reached Voldemort yet. Harry and I are willing and able, and since Draco doesn't have Astronomy, either, he's got the time.

You don't seriously think Albus is going to let Harry go to Diagon Alley unescorted. Fawkes's tone eloquently expressed his doubt.

Ask him, she suggested. Harry can be Disillusioned the whole time if the headmaster wishes. We can be back before anyone even knows that we left.

There was a moment of silence as Fawkes conferred with Albus. She trusted that the headmaster would realize all on his own that this would be an opportunity for Harry and Draco to get closer to one another, and if Albus did want to get rid of the Pure Adults without alienating her or Harry completely, then….

Boy-bird is to remain Disillusioned, Portkeys are to be at hand, and you're to return at the first sign of trouble.

Albus's eyes met hers piercingly for a moment from the High Table, and she inclined her head marginally. Inwardly, she smiled to herself, unsurprised.

She ate slowly so that they had to linger at lunch, Draco and Harry politely waiting for her to finish, forcing all the students with classes to head off so as not to be late. By the time it was just Hermione eating, the others seemed to lose interest; perhaps they no longer anticipated a spectacular fight of some sort. At any rate, they drifted off for their afternoon activity of choice.

When she finally pushed her plate aside, the two boys rose immediately, and they walked out of the Great Hall together. Although it would hardly be an inconvenience to go down to the dungeons to grab their cloaks, Hermione wasn't in that sort of mood. Besides, it made them much more unpredictable this way.

She conjured cloaks for each of them and Summoned some of her money for Draco's pocket. They could sort it out afterwards because she wasn't able to Summon his; any sensible wizard charmed his coins so that they couldn't be magically seized by someone else.

Harry and Draco looked down at themselves and up at her.

"Are we going somewhere?" Draco asked.

Harry took in her smirk. "Apparently." He leaned closer to Draco to say conspiratorially, "It's better to just go along with her when she's in this sort of mood."

The Slytherin looked up at her again, shrugged, and fell in step. With Hermione in the lead, they headed out the door, down the steps, and across the snow-covered lawn.

When it became clear that the gates were their destination, Harry stalled.

"Er, 'Mione," he said hesitantly, "are you sure we should—?"

Her smirk deepened. "And you're supposed to be the Gryffindor troublemaker."

"Well, uh—" he began sheepishly but couldn't seem to acquire more articulacy.

Laughing, she said, "Actually, it's rather reassuring to know that you won't rush off the grounds for no reason. In this case, however, you can rest assured; we have the headmaster's approval."

The two of them looked surprised. "What?"

She smiled. "You'll understand when we get there. You're to Disillusion yourself, love," she told Harry, "and then I'll let you know where we're going. We wouldn't want to risk being overheard, so you'll have to Side-Along Draco."

While Harry Disillusioned himself, Draco looked pointedly around the deserted, snow-swept grounds. As if she couldn't have charmed the area. She offered him her best look of wide-eyed innocence, which caused him to roll his eyes. She noticed that he didn't actually attempt to talk her into revealing the location, however, and she saw by the slight widening of his eyes as much as the marginal distortion around him when Harry had wrapped his arms around the blond boy.

A trial for both of them, she was sure.

We're going to Diagon Alley, Harry, she instructed. Apparate to the entrance behind the Leaky Cauldron.

Thirty minutes later, they were back on the Hogwarts grounds, Hermione smirking to herself again over the fact that the boys had somehow found it necessary to Side-Along on the way back despite their both now knowing where they were going. She could sort of see why Albus was the way he was if a little bit of manipulation was this much fun; she probably needed to keep a stern eye on herself.

She Vanished their conjured cloaks as soon as they were inside, and the three of them headed down to the dungeons together. Draco wanted to see his quarters, and he seemed happy enough to have company; solo travel in the dungeons was still not his safest option right now. Looking very happy to possess his new wand, he spent several moments working out what password to set for his door that none of his ex-friends might guess, and Hermione watched with approval as he wove runes into the wards for added security.

The rooms were serviceable although considerably smaller than Harry and Hermione's; they had the privilege of being Head Boy and Head Girl, apparently. Draco had a bedroom, a small sitting room, and a bathroom. All his belongings had been unpacked and set out by the house-elves in what he confided to them was a relatively close approximation to how he'd had everything laid out in his old dorm. He expressed himself satisfied—"I always knew I was deserving of a single room"—and then wanted to see their quarters. He had never been inside them before, not being one to seek out the Gryffindors despite the open invitation they had issued to all the Prefects.

They led him down the hallway to their quarters which prompted a very suspicious look back towards his own.

"We suspect it was Albus's bright idea," Hermione said. "He's been known to do these sorts of things."

"Every minute of every day," Harry muttered, and Draco snorted.

Once inside, Draco proceeded to explore, poking his head into both of their bedrooms and the bathroom as well as prowling around the entire common room. He wondered about the open space until they explained themselves, and he looked impressed.

He flopped onto the couch, somehow managing to do it much more elegantly than she or Harry did, and pronounced, "I like what you've done with the place."

"We're so pleased to have the Malfoy seal of approval," she said, laughing, while Harry grinned. "I assume you have homework that you need to catch up on?"

"I don't think you need to assume, Hermione," Draco said with an eye roll, "given that you made sure to give me the notes from the classes I missed."

Hermione was unrepentant. "It would be a shame for Voldemort's idiotic plan to impact your scholastic career."

Draco did his best to nod solemnly, whereas Harry just laughed.

"That's definitely our biggest concern here, 'Mione. Good to know you're on top of it."

Despite the teasing, they both sat down to get their schoolwork out of the way. Both of them had detention after dinner, and Hermione had her detention-cum-yelling session afterwards.

The afternoon passed peacefully, a lot more so than it would have done if Ron was the third member of their trio. She reminded herself that she wasn't thinking about him. Harry seemed to grow more and more relaxed the longer the day progressed without Draco yelling at him, and she hoped that he wouldn't require an answer as to what was going on from either of them before they could give him one.

They had dinner together, confirming to everyone that neither breakfast nor lunch had been a fluke. Since they wanted to begin as they meant to go on, they invited themselves over to the Hufflepuff table for the meal. The Huffs looked a little surprised—or perhaps it was alarmed—to have a Slytherin in their midst, but since he was corralled by two Gryffindors, they seemed to decide finally that he had to be safe enough.

After dinner, the boys went off to their detention. Despite the fact that Draco was a Slytherin, several people were offended on his behalf that Severus had insisted he begin his detention on the same day that everyone else had learnt that he was alive and well. Hermione found it funny, as well as a relief because otherwise his seventh day of detention would coincide with the new moon, and she'd prefer to have him under observation for the whole evening.

This was what she would be doing with Remus, who had promised to sneak in early in the morning to drink the potion. He was going to stay in her lab the whole day to ensure that he was safely ensconced and wouldn't be sighted by anyone even though the action wouldn't occur until that evening. Although becoming an Animagus would be accelerated in a werewolf's case according to her plan, she intended to use the entirety of the sixteen hours and five minutes from the moon's set until its rise the next day. If that meant a night of no sleep, then so be it.

Caught up on her homework, Hermione spent the hours while the boys were in detention going over her notes for the Weresbane, mentally cataloguing and verifying that she had all the proper ingredients. She'd done this at least three times before, but she was sure that it didn't hurt to check one more time. The potion required longer resting phases than the original, so she would be beginning it next Thursday, five days before the new moon.

Harry came back from detention happier than ever because Draco had been entirely civil—downright cordial, even—despite her not being there to act as a buffer. Hermione realized that keeping the attraction between the two of them a secret was likely to prove to be an exercise in futility, but she supposed this new development didn't change the fact that she and Harry had supposedly originally slept together.

She wondered if she would finally be dismissed from the role of villain or if it would somehow become her fault that the hero of the wizarding world was gay.

She snorted to herself. Who was she kidding? It was the Daily Prophet which informed people's opinions; it was her fault for sure.

Just before nine o'clock, she obediently headed to Severus's office so that she would be on time for what she suspected would be her very comprehensive dressing down. Drawing a deep breath, she knocked on the door and entered when she was bid to do so.

Chapter Eighteen: The Explanation

Good evening, sir," Hermione greeted Severus politely. There was no need to start off on the wrong foot if she could help it.

"Miss Granger," he responded curtly.

Well, maybe it was too late for real civility, but at least she'd tried.

He was working at his desk and had yet to look up to properly acknowledge her. He was grading, she supposed, as he had a quill full of red ink and seemed to be making liberal use of it. She hadn't been invited to sit down, so she clasped her hands behind her back, settled into a waiting stance, and started a mental tally, wondering how many errors he could find on whatever he was grading and how long it would be before he decided it was possible to acknowledge that he'd asked her to arrive at nine o'clock.

It was nearly ten minutes later before he put down his quill. The angle had been wrong for her to ascertain whose paper it was; three minutes into the waiting game, she'd made a concerted effort. She'd followed that up with cataloguing the potions and bizarre liquids that were in the jars on the shelves that covered the walls, and then she'd discovered that there was an interesting lack of cobwebs festooning his ceiling, suggesting that what was covering some of the weirder jars on the shelves was merely for effect. Or, she supposed, suggesting that he'd had to compromise with the house-elves.

He rose.

"Come."

She went, wondering if this brevity was going to characterize the entire evening. She was used to him having a much wider vocabulary and wasn't entirely certain if this boded well or very, very ill.

He led her to his private lab which she hadn't seen the inside of since he had thrown her out last term. Her area still appeared completely unused, and she tried really hard not to feel resentful or hurt. It was a losing battle, but at least it gave her a topic to occupy her mind while he continued to remain silent.

"Sit."

She sat on the stool that he indicated, mentally grinding her teeth. She felt a bit like a dog responding to simple, one-word commands. She supposed he wouldn't find it funny if she "woofed" at the next one, but it was awfully tempting.

He was doing that looming thing that made her feel as though she were all of three inches tall, and given that he loomed over her already by virtue of being quite naturally considerably taller than she was, she was not impressed that he'd made her sit down while he continued to stand.

"While I generally make allowances for a certain amount of mental incompetence amongst Gryffindors on the whole, your behaviour recently is really outside the bounds of what can be tolerated."

Hermione, torn between laughing at the notion that he ever made allowances for mental incompetence and being quite offended that she was being so insulted, didn't manage to say anything before he spoke again.

"In the interest of being able to document the loss of what passes for your mind, I am going to give you the opportunity to explain what in the name of all that is magical you were thinking."

She blinked at him. He was staring at her as though there were no reason for her not to be able to answer right away. She felt as though she had missed something obvious in a viva voce exam, but she refused to let him rattle her. "I'm sorry, sir, but I believe I would be better able to explain myself to you if I knew what, precisely, makes you think I've lost my mind."

He looked on the brink of taking points for cheek, but Hermione had made sure to phrase herself as politely as possible; she wasn't about to give him the chance of finding out a fact he hadn't actually known to ask about simply because she thought that was what he wanted to know.

"You and the Saviour of the Wizarding World went out into the Forbidden Forest knowing there was a pack of werewolves in it," he said coldly.

She nodded. No getting around that one. "It's a decision which I stand by. Forbidden or no, the circumstances were dire. We would have gone in for most students, I suppose, but we certainly weren't about to let Draco die just after he'd made the right decision."

And while Harry was in love with the other boy, but Hermione didn't suppose this would be the venue to mention that detail. Without knowing that fact, it probably did seem a little daft to have let Harry out there; she knew full well, however, that there had been no stopping him. And she wasn't going to tell Severus why.

"Do you not realize how dangerous it was?"

She did not appreciate being treated as though she were a particularly stupid first-year student and tried not to look quite as withering as she felt—because this was Professor Snape she was talking to. "I do understand that it was dangerous, sir, but I was hardly out there alone. You went with the intention of trying to save him, as did I."

"I, nonsensical witch, did not serve as a distraction covered in Draco's blood."

Hermione stared at him in some confusion. Was he concerned about her? Not just pissed off that she'd been doing something forbidden but actually worried about her health and safety? Or was he simply trying to point out the ways that what she had done were different from what he had done as a way to explain why he was punishing her when he had also been out there?

She took a moment to compose what she hoped was a suitable reply, wondering if it was a bad indication of her emotional state that the thought of him being stressed, angry, and chewing her out because he was worried about her was rather heart-warming.

"Sir, as I said at the time, I was astride Castina, and she could outrun any werewolf in existence. I wasn't really in much danger. It was the best plan that was available under the circumstances that ensured that everyone could get to safety as well as preventing the werewolves from deciding that the people of Hogsmeade were of interest; Castina and I led the werewolves as far away from civilization as possible, and she and the herd kept them running about until they were tired enough to sleep."

He was staring at her with eyes that glittered. "It was unbearably Gryffindor."

She bit back a laugh. She supposed she could probably be nauseatingly Gryffindor for the consummate Slytherin—and she didn't suppose that pointing out once again that he had also been in the Forest would help her case. "I'm not denying that it had risks, but I think the benefits outweighed them. I'm not sure what you want me to say, sir."

"You'd do it again." It wasn't a question, and he still didn't sound pleased.

She nodded.

"You realize I should take points from you."

She raised an eyebrow; if that was supposed to sound threatening, he had fallen rather short of the mark. And since he usually just took points—and assigned detention and ranted—she was left rather nonplussed.

"You entered the Forest without permission and displayed a great deal of familiarity with it. You told me that you didn't go there frequently," he said severely.

She'd wondered when that would come back to bite her. Sooner rather than later, apparently.

"How would you gauge such a subjective question, Professor? I spend the merest fraction of my time in the Forest compared to how much time I spend in the castle. It's much less time than the herd or I would like. Therefore, as far as I'm concerned, it can hardly qualify as frequently."

He considered her for a long moment, and she thought she was teetering on the edge of that rant she'd been thinking of a moment ago, but he surprised her with a very calm, "That's a very Slytherin response, Miss Granger."

"Come now, sir," she said with a slightly teasing tone, pleased that the mood seemed to have lightened somewhat. "Just because I'm a Gryffindor doesn't mean I don't try to talk myself out of trouble."

"So you don't think you should get into trouble?"

"If I get a vote?" she asked with amusement. "No, sir. In all honesty, when Voldemort interferes with our lives at the school, the headmaster has a tendency to accept that as exigent circumstances and therefore as a reason not to punish us for any of the bizarre array of activities in which we've been involved as a result."

"You feel that I should do the same?" His expression was unreadable.

"I feel that you, even more than Albus, are in a position to know just how disruptive Voldemort can be to our lives. Of course," she admitted somewhat ruefully, "I can't blame Voldemort for every time that I've been in the Forest. If you intend to punish me for that, then I can't really offer a compelling reason for you not to do so. Would I, however, have been in the Forest on a full moon night and put myself in the danger that resulted without Voldemort? No. It was his actions which led to me being out there on Monday night, and I hope that he therefore holds some portion of the blame."

"So I should take away house points from him and assign detention?" Severus asked, sounding darkly amused.

She laughed softly. "That didn't come out quite how I meant it, but if you could do, I would wholeheartedly support you."

Severus sighed. "The headmaster does have an annoying habit of assigning your house six hundred points rather than removing them as a result of all the rules you have broken over your scholastic career. I don't suppose any of you have kept track?"

"I don't think Ron and Harry would know a rule if it bit them," she admitted with a smile. "I confess that it didn't occur to me early enough to keep a running total. And now, well, I wouldn't want anyone to come across it and implement your point loss scheme."

"I don't believe Albus would actually allow me to go back and remove points from previous years."

"Just imagine your being able to remove points from Harry decades after he ceased to be a student," she said with a theatrical shudder.

Severus's eyes gleamed. "I hadn't considered it quite that far into the future. I'm sure I can convince Albus that it is necessary."

She laughed again, wondering in a small part of her brain when the yelling was going to start because thus far, this was qualifying as a positively lovely conversation overall.

As if her having such a thought signalled the end of the pleasantness, Severus asked another probing question.

"I would like to know why you didn't reveal to any of us that you were the Pure Adults."

She frowned. "We discussed this already."

"Many topics were covered in that discussion," Severus said dismissively. "Not all was said on this particular matter that could have been said."

Hermione was quite certain that he was right, but she hadn't ever intended to say everything.

"I'm not going to begin a monologue on the subject, sir," she said politely but firmly.

His eyes glittered. "In that case, I will ask questions. How long have you known?"

Now that he'd asked the question, she realized that it wasn't simply that she wouldn't gush about everything that she had been thinking about Pure Adults. He was going to be angry as anything, probably, but she didn't feel she had any choice.

"I don't think I can have this discussion with you, sir."

As predicted, he looked instantly incensed.

He sounded as though his jaw was clenched tightly as he asked, "I beg your pardon?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid you heard me correctly, sir. I don't believe I can discuss the issue of Pure Adults with you."

"Why is that?" he asked acidly.

"If you're going to yell at me and take away points for my being in the Forest when I shouldn't have been, that's within your rights as my professor. As far as my being a Pure Adult goes, however, it's utterly beyond the scope of my school life and your business."

His voice was arctic. "I see. I certainly won't force you to speak about a topic with someone you feel is inappropriate."

"It's not that," she protested. "I'd rather talk to you than Albus or Ron or almost anybody else."

This cleared the slightest bit of fury from his face.

"Then what?" he demanded sharply.

"It's my life," she said simply. "My personal life. I can't sit here and discuss it with my Potions professor." He opened his mouth for a doubtless scathing retort, and she hurried on to try to explain herself better: "I can't sit here worrying that you're going to put me in detention for the rest of my life or take away those six hundred points from Gryffindor. It's not fair to me or my housemates when the topic has nothing to do with the school."

He considered her. "So you'd willingly discuss it if I weren't your professor?"

"If I didn't feel that I was talking to my Potions professor, I would do my best to answer what questions I could, yes, sir."

He was staring at her contemplatively. "Then stop calling me 'sir'."

Her lips twitched involuntarily, and she let out a huff of breath. "I would, sir, except that I don't particularly relish losing a whole bunch of points for Gryffindor and being thrown out of your lab again."

He stared at her with a look of incomprehension for a fleeting moment, and then uttered, seemingly without thought, "That's why you started calling me 'sir' all the time?"

"Of course it is," she answered indignantly. "You threw me out of the room for familiarity! How else was I supposed to take it but that you didn't want me to call you by your given name?"

He looked truly startled.

She was now confused. "Hold on. Why do you think I started calling you 'sir'?"

He shook his head.

"I have a right to know."

He stared at her. "You really thought I told you not to call me 'Severus' anymore? That's quite insulting."

"I know it's insulting," she said incredulously. "It most definitely did not escape my notice; given the thirty points I lost, it would be difficult for me to forget. Now answer my question."

He raised an eyebrow, and she realized that she hadn't phrased herself terribly politely.

"You told me not to call you 'sir'?" she offered sheepishly.

The slightest showing of amusement edged in around his lips, and she was more than pleased. He appeared, for whatever absurd reason, to be in good humour again.

He drew a deep breath and let it out with what sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

"I was under the impression that you had chosen to start referring to me more formally after the events on Halloween."

It didn't take a genius to work out which events he meant, but that realization didn't help her.

"You're going to have to forgive me for being very stupid." It was what he'd been calling her all evening, anyway. "But I don't understand why the one would affect the other."

His gaze had narrowed again as though he thought that she were playing with him, but she really didn't know what he was talking about.

He hesitated. This was clearly not something he wanted to discuss, and she wondered what it was that had made him decide to be honest with her in this moment. Was it the promise of some honesty in return on her part?

She would have promised it ages ago if she'd known it could be as simple as that.

He spoke stiffly. "I killed seven children as you watched."

She stared at him like a complete nitwit, stunned utterly speechless. He'd actually thought—

Only she had delayed for too long because his face hardened. He opened his mouth for something that she knew was going to be crushing. She did the only thing that sprang to mind, leaping up and wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his chest. She could ignore the likelihood of impending point loss and a slew of detentions with the best of them.

She sniffed several times and hoped that she wasn't getting tears or snot on the fabric. This was not exactly the context wherein she'd hoped to get closer to him. But the misunderstanding was so horrible that she would do just about anything to fix it.

She had no idea how long they stood there, but it was only when she felt some of the tension ease from his body that she reluctantly released him and stepped back once more.

He was staring at her with an attempt at that normal expressionless look but it appeared more vulnerable to her than normal. Maybe it just came of knowing one of the things that he had been thinking under that veneer of hardness.

"Idiot man," she breathed. Unwise, probably, but no other words were coming to mind. "I would never hold you responsible for what happened in that orphanage. You were forced by your position as a spy to commit an action that was abhorrent to you. The poison was fast-acting, and you took no pleasure in what you were doing. How could you think I would condemn you for that?"

There was still something akin to shock in his eyes. "How could you not be horrified?"

She shook her head. "I just said. I know what you do as a spy. Those things horrify me, but you cannot. You're doing them when you have to in order to bring crucial information to us and keep others safe.… You're one of the bravest people I know, and Halloween only confirmed that for me."

He gazed at her wordlessly. She didn't think she'd ever seen him quite like this before.

She tried again: "Voldemort killed those children; you were forced to participate. Checking how you were doing was actually the first thing I planned to do when I got to the lab, but those thoughts were brought to a screeching halt by the dismantling of all my work."

He almost looked chagrined as he admitted, "I thought your opinion quite plain; it seemed prudent to curtail our encounters in a prompt manner."

She considered this and then interpreted, "You wanted to kick me out before I stormed out on my own?"

He offered the most marginal of nods.

She forced down slightly hysterical giggles with an effort. It was so very much like something Ron would do, but she knew Severus would kill her if she said so.

"I wasn't going to leave," she clarified when she had herself under control. "I was very confused."

"So I gather. I had not intended for that to happen."

That was perilously close to an apology from the man.

"So I may call you by your given name?" She wanted to be absolutely certain.

"You may."

She grinned. "Severus."

His lips tipped up. "Is there more to that sentence, or were you just making sure you hadn't forgotten how to pronounce it?"

She shot him a look. "I don't think you should be insulting me yet. I need at least another moment or two to bask in the glory of that misunderstanding being cleared up."

"Speaking of misunderstandings: where exactly is your lab?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"It has recently been brought to my attention that you are not sleeping with Potter. It seems unlikely that you turned your bedroom into a lab."

She grinned, still pleased that he'd heard and recalled that snide comment.

"My bedroom is still there, and if you'd ever let me finish a sentence, you'd know that I only spend the night with Harry when he's having bad nightmares. He's calmer when someone else is with him, and after the hideous way the Dursleys treated him, I wanted him to know that he's not a burden to anyone and that he shouldn't have to hide his nightmares behind a Silencing Charm."

Severus was staring at her, and she realized that she'd gotten a bit intense in her rant.

"Sorry," she apologized quickly. "The lab is attached to the bedroom."

He spoke slowly: "There isn't a lab attached to the Head Girl and Head Boy quarters for Slytherin."

"There wasn't a lab," she corrected. "There is now."

"How did you manage that?" he asked suspiciously.

She considered how to answer the question. "I was rather upset about my loss of lab space." And the fact that the man she loved had just repudiated her in an utterly appalling fashion, but perhaps she wouldn't mention that bit. "There were several … beings who were aware of my distress."

"Fawkes," Severus said flatly.

She nodded. "He communicated with the castle and when I returned," she cleared her throat, "from the Forest, it was simply there."

"That's a very handy talent to possess," he observed dryly.

She shrugged. "I've never asked Fawkes or the castle for anything specifically. But they apparently anticipate needs sometimes."

"Does anyone else know?" he asked curiously.

When he was behaving bloody reasonably, she didn't even mind answering his questions. She wondered how long it would take him to work that out and use it to his advantage. If, of course, he wasn't doing so already.

"Harry, who'd started to wonder why I spent so much time in my room." Severus smirked. "And Remus, who's been there for potions."

"And you didn't want Harry to wonder why the wolf was spending so much time in your bedroom?"

She made a face at his tone. "Actually, I told Harry that we were having a torrid affair. Remus was very confused."

Severus actually let out a short bark of laughter, and she was impressed that he could be so light-hearted after her mention of the last of the Marauders.

"I can imagine he was. Fascinating as discussing Mr Potter and his favourite wolf is, however, I have some other questions for you."

She sighed. "I was afraid you might."

The right side of his mouth twisted up in a half smile. This time, however, he let her conjure chairs, and he even requested tea before he repeated his first question: "How long have you known?"

She considered him. "You're not going to take away house points?"

He sighed audibly, sounding quite put-out, but she was pretty sure he was just acting now.

"I won't remove any house points or assign any detentions as a result of anything surrounding the topic of Pure Adults."

"And you're not going to report this meeting to Albus?"

He looked offended. "Certainly not. The old man finds out quite enough on his own without me ferreting out information for him." She raised an eyebrow, and he amended, "I do enough of that on other topics."

She nodded, accepting this as the best guarantee she was going to get. "I knew nothing about Pure Adults until Kingsley told us about it at the meeting."

"Yet you and Mr Potter both played dumb?"

He seemed to doubt their circumspection.

"It seemed the wisest course of action under the circumstances," she said coolly, mildly annoyed because she was quite sure that he wouldn't have doubted a Slytherin's not leaping up to announce his or her Pure status. "Afterwards, we came up with the plan that we've been sticking to ever since."

"No one else knows the truth?"

She had thought this rather self-evident, and her expression evidently conveyed this because he continued.

"Mr Weasley—"

She rolled her eyes, thinking that Ron's egregious behaviour should have been quite clear, too. "We've been guarding our secret from everyone. We know how important it is, and staying silent was the only way we felt we could be reasonably assured of our safety."

"And now that I, Albus, and Draco know?"

"If it were an option, I would go back to none of you knowing," she admitted since she imagined he had already guessed. "If someone had to find out, however, it could have been worse. I would take Albus out of the loop if I could."

"Why?"

"Weren't you at that discussion?" she asked with a frown. "It was very clear what he wanted us to do, and I have absolutely no desire to do it."

"Where is this reticence to have sex actually coming from?" he asked, his sharp gaze particularly piercing. "You must realize that it would be safer to cease to be a Pure Adult."

He was the one person she thought really deserved an answer to that question, so she said, "Because the person I'm interesting in having it with is not interested in having it with me."

"Mr Potter—" Severus began.

"Oh, for God's sake, not again. I don't want to sleep with Harry! We were pretending to be a couple to protect our identities in the search for the Pure Adults. How difficult is that to understand?"

"That seems like an awfully vehement protest."

Her lips pursed into a sour line. "Draco said exactly the same, and I got annoyed with him, too. I thought both of you would have had the sense to grasp the simple concept that Harry and I are not a couple. We are not having sex. And we don't want to have sex."

"If you say so." He sounded completely unconvinced.

"I do," she said firmly. "If we wanted to have sex, we wouldn't be here." She rolled her eyes. "I should obviously have called you up to the hospital wing when Draco and I were having this discussion, because I feel as though I'm repeating myself."

"But you've considered what would happen if the two of you were to sleep together?" he questioned. "From a power perspective, I mean."

"We've considered that it is not meant to be," she answered immediately. "We are not interested in one another, and we're not doing it just for power."

Maybe it was her, but she thought that was rather the point; for whatever reason, it had worked out that it was the two of them who were Pure Adults. Two people, best friends and on the side of the Light but who had no interest in one another sexually. Two people who weren't hunting for power. She'd always thought that was one of the better reasons for them to get it.

She knew that it would be useful in the war effort for them to have an exponential increase in their power but what would be the point of any of this if they created two new would-be dictators? No one knew for certain what would happen if two Pure Adults slept with one another, and she was sure that it was meant to stay that way.

She was equally sure that if Albus got up the nerve, he'd try to argue all for their finding out what happened if the two of them had sex. She was more or less reconciled to Severus bringing it up, perhaps because she was crazy about him, or possibly because he always seemed so annoyed at the notion of any sort of Potter sex; she didn't think that he really wanted her and Harry to have sex, but as the Head of Slytherin, bringing up the power topic was pretty much a requirement.

No matter what anybody told her, her belief that they were not meant to have sex was unshakeable.

"Could you not do it for the war?" Severus asked, recalling her attention to him.

She shook her head, making a face. "And that is why I didn't want Albus to know."

"Oh?"

She was beginning to feel that they were playing a never-ending game of twenty questions where it was always her turn to answer.

"Because he'd try to force us into that exact position." She grimaced again, hoping that hadn't come across as a bad double entendre to him. "If we were going to have sex, don't you think we would have done so already?"

"So you're Pure Adults because you haven't found someone to shag yet?" he asked sceptically.

"One of the reasons we're Pure Adults," she responded tartly, "and I'm not getting into any of the others, is that we're both of the more single-minded approach when it comes to people with whom we want to have sex."

"No one-night stands for you?" he asked mockingly.

Her lips tightened. "I'm still a virgin."

He finally seemed to have got off the idea that she and Harry wanted to or were going to have sex with one another, thank God, only this appeared to have given him the chance to consider the rest of what she had said, for he asked, "There's someone that you're interested in?"

She suppressed a sigh and nodded.

"Why have you not approached him?"

"Because he's not interested in me," she repeated, thinking that was a pretty clear statement to begin with.

He looked at her as though she had said something monumentally stupid again. "Anyone would want to sleep with a Pure Adult."

Her nod of agreement wobbled a little, but she forced it out. She didn't want just anyone to sleep with her, and she didn't want the one person she was interested in to do it because she was a Pure Adult.

"That's probably true," she answered when she was sure her tone had settled. "But I didn't get this far by being unchoosy in my partners, did I? I guess I'm looking for more than someone who's just out to bed a Pure Adult, reassuring as it is to know that anybody would."

She hadn't kept the edge out of her voice, not at all.

He looked faintly annoyed. "That wasn't exactly—"

"Of course it was," she said brusquely. "It's perfectly true. If I stood up and announced in the Great Hall that I was a Pure Adult, most people would probably offer themselves up as willing partners. If I stood up and asked who wanted to have a go otherwise, the response would be pretty quiet. I know that."

"I didn't—"

She shook her head. "Please don't."

"Mr Potter is a Pure Adult."

She pressed her lips together and wondered what that had to do with anything.

"For reasons that escape me, lots of people want to sleep with him, do they not?" he pursued.

She nodded. Possibly a majority of the school.

Severus's look was pointed. "So what makes you assume that the situation is so different for you?"

She opened her mouth to make a sharp retort but paused. That was … kind of sweet, actually. She knew damn well what made the situation different, but Severus had asked the question as though the answer were not obvious, and she could not help but feel a bit better.

"It's so unfortunate I can't make the announcement and actually track the results," she said facetiously.

He almost smiled but what he said was, "You maintain that you honestly have no intention of consummating a relationship in the near future? You haven't really given me a particularly good reason why you're putting it off, and it keeps you in danger."

"I thought I was rather clear," she said sharply. "When I want to have sex, I will do so. Until that time, no matter how much Voldemort is looking for me, I will not be pushed into a position that I do not wish to be pushed into."

He stared at her closely but seemed to realize that this was the extent of her position and her willingness to discuss it. The dark gaze lingered for a long time.

"I gave you two weeks of detention," he pronounced as he rose to his feet.

She rose as well, knowing that he wasn't about to rescind them because that simply wasn't the way the man worked. Apparently, the question and answer portion of her detention was over, and it was about to begin in earnest.

"Yes, you did," she agreed.

"I have some Pepper-Up that needs to be brewed."

"Okay." It took her a moment to understand, at which point she nodded once more.

Well. It wasn't quite as good as not having detention at all, but she'd take it. She had spent many evenings in his lab making potions that had nothing to do with a detention. While these would remain detentions in name, it seemed that he was trying to show her that they weren't detentions in fact.

"I'll get right on that … Severus."

He gave her a nod, indicating that he understood that she understood, and she got to work before she could become embroiled in further contemplation of the intricacies of working with a Slytherin.

It was nearing midnight when Hermione tidied up, and Severus told her that her detentions would remain at this hour each day of the week but her presence would not be required on the weekends. Her last detention would therefore be two Thursdays from now.

This meant, she realized immediately, that he was only making her do ten so-called detentions rather than fourteen. Plus, he wasn't going to make her suffer the ignominy of public detention with the rest of the seventh-years. She could have hugged him for it, but she had the sense not to attempt it for a second time in one evening.

She bid Severus good night and made her way back to her quarters. Harry was waiting up for her in the common room, immediately putting aside the book that he had been at least pretending to read.

"Well?" He looked anxious, no doubt because she'd been gone for so long.

She grinned at him, and he looked flabbergasted.

"Okay, not the expression I was expecting to see. What on Earth happened?"

"We sorted out a misunderstanding," she said happily. "He invited me to call him Severus again—it turns out he didn't really uninvite me, but we're not going to talk about that." Severus would kill her, she was sure, if she revealed how he had felt to Harry. "Then he had me brew potions for a few hours."

Harry stared at her. "Like you do practically every night anyway."

She nodded.

"So," he said slowly, "it's not really a detention."

She shook her head. He beamed at her suddenly, springing off the couch to give her a hug, and she accepted the embrace readily.

"That's great, 'Mione. I didn't think he had it in him, but that's wonderful for you."

She smiled back at him. "Thank you, Harry. I must admit that I don't mind a happy meeting now and then."

"Let's hope they stay that way," he said, and she nodded her head in fervent agreement.

They had their Veritaserum capsules together and retired to their beds, Hermione thinking that she would be very happy indeed if she was beginning a period of sweet dreams.

The next week was incredibly busy. Until Wednesday, Harry and Draco had detention at the same time, so she saw them very little apart from class time; she had her detentions once they returned from theirs. On Thursday, she began to brew the Weresbane Potion for its real trial.

The potion had a rather rigid schedule to which she needed to adhere, and in order that it wouldn't conflict with her detentions with Severus and would be ready by Tuesday morning, she began it immediately after class on Thursday. While Harry wasn't exactly used to her skipping out on meals during the school year in order to brew, she had only to say that she was working on something exciting and look as though she might launch into a long and detailed explanation, and he was practically shoving her into her laboratory.

Since Draco seemed to spend virtually all of his free time in their common room, Hermione didn't think Harry was hurting for company. She was amused that as much as Draco had explained to her why he and Harry shouldn't be together while there was still a chance that he'd turn furry once a month, he couldn't seem to stay away from the messy-haired Gryffindor.

Hermione thought it was rather sweet, especially as the two of them continued to dance so carefully around one another. As far as she could tell, she was still the only one who had actually discussed their feelings; they had both been very careful not to raise the topic between them. She didn't think this was just in her presence, either; the way they kept stealing glances at one another when the other wasn't looking smacked of a relationship that was in its most nascent stages.

On Tuesday, Draco had appeared before breakfast, and they had shown him some of the physical training they did. He had been hugely amused to watch them throw one another around without wands but thought it "barbaric". When Hermione had Summoned his wand and Harry had tackled him and had him subdued in all of ten seconds, he had confessed that perhaps it had its advantages. Of course, since he had been smothered under a happy, sweaty Harry, she hadn't been entirely certain that he had been speaking of the benefits they had originally had in mind. Harry had flushed crimson and suddenly drawn back. Hermione had smirked merrily at both of them.

On Thursday, after she'd finished with the Weresbane and while Draco was still at his detention, she spent the evening until her own detention continuing with Harry's Animagus training. He was still pursuing the topic, but as he had classes again and so much of his free time was now taken up with Draco, he wasn't studying as much as he had over the holidays. She assured him that he was keeping on track and stressed the fact that it was important that he learnt the topic carefully and well.

She wished she could have the two of them study together, but she didn't think it would go over well in the end. Draco knew too much about the transformation—much as the ferret embarrassed him—and he would likely give himself away with knowledge that could not be easily explained. He would also already be on edge about the reason he was re-examining all these facts, and he would certainly get defensive if Harry asked any awkward questions. She would really prefer not to contribute to their first fight before they were even really a couple, so she made do with schooling them both privately out of her non-existent free time.

Brewing with Severus had continued through the week, and it was peaceful and wonderful as far as she was concerned. She really didn't care what he asked her to brew. If Severus wanted her company while she brewed a standard Nose-Bleed Draught, then she'd happily brew it even if it only had six steps and she could make it blindfolded and half asleep.

Severus was actually allowing her to ask questions again, too, and she'd been so delighted that she hadn't been able to think of a single thing to ask. He had teased her mercilessly. It felt almost like it had in those lovely days in September and October before Pure Adults and Voldemort had messed everything up. She found herself actually glad that Severus knew the truth because it seemed to improve the situation between them so much. It wasn't worth Draco being sacrificed to werewolves, of course, but given the happy outcome that night, she couldn't feel totally horrible about not minding that events had unfolded the way they had.

On Friday afternoon—marking a week since Draco had been released from the Infirmary and become a fixture in their common room—he learnt about their dancing hobby. He'd ducked out after lunch, saying he needed to speak to some people. Since the Slytherin had ventured forth alone, Harry was extremely nervous.

She allowed him to check the Map, showing that Draco had indeed met up with Pansy, but when the dark-haired boy showed no inclination to move away or stop staring at the two labelled dots, she forced him to dance with her. It was a task that still required thought on his part so it was bound to take his mind off Draco. If he stepped on her foot and she yelped with pain, it meant he'd be paying attention to the here and now, and it would be a pleasant surprise when the blond showed up.

They were now practicing the slow foxtrot, and it was progressing very slowly indeed. When she had explained the International Standard ballroom dances to him, he had expressed a desire to learn each of them, and she was trying to oblige. At the moment, however, it seemed as though he could only learn two or three dances at one time before his brain short-circuited.

Draco returned, and since they were in the midst of an almost successful bit, Harry didn't even try to stop. Harry made it another minute or so without egregious error, and then he tried to lead her in some sort of turn that resulted in her arm being twisted up her back.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, Harry, that was pitiful!" Draco exclaimed. "See how it's supposed to be done."

Without another word, Draco had swept her out of Harry's arms and into his own.

Draco knew how to dance. She had not, obviously, had the chance to learn this fact personally during the Yule Ball. She had been involved enough with Viktor and the explosion that was Ron that she had paid very little attention to Draco Malfoy. Now that she was actually in his arms, however, she could feel that he was superb. He knew the steps like the back of his hand, and he led her around the room with an air of casual grace. This was one pure-blood lesson on which she could not fault him.

He twirled and dipped her in a finish which she had not anticipated, but he was skilled enough that he could actually get her to follow him successfully. They were breathing heavily with their exertion and both grinning at one another. She was happy to teach Harry, but it was rather exhilarating to be on the arm of someone who knew what they were doing.

She looked across the room, and her smile died as she saw the look on her best friend's face. Oh, bugger. By the time Draco had straightened her up and they were both facing Harry, the look was gone.

"You're really good at that," Harry said in a suspiciously even voice.

"I should hope so," Draco said condescendingly. "And Hermione's an excellent partner. I don't want to think about how horrid you are to have made her look so awful when the two of you were dancing."

Harry offered them a clearly forced smile.

"Well, how about you two give it another go, and I'll just run to the kitchens? I'm a little hungry."

Before she could protest, he was gone. Hermione swore softly to herself. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"He knows a number of house-elves."

Draco made a face. "Making him more fortunate than I?"

She shook her head impatiently. "They delight in indulging him, and he knows it makes them happy; if he wants food outside of meal time, they're just itching to bring it to him."

An eyebrow rose. "Then why did he go to the kitchen?"

She sighed. "To compose himself? To give the two of us space? I'm not entirely certain."

Draco still looked mystified. "Why would we need space?"

"Because you and I dance beautifully, and you just told Harry that he sucked at it."

"But he does suck at it."

Circumspection did not seem to be working, and since she'd contributed to this mess, she was determined to sort it out before Harry could get daft notions firmly planted in his brain.

She started over. "Do you know why he's trying to learn to dance?"

"Trying is definitely the optimal word," Draco snorted, looking miffed when he got a glare as a result. "No," he said, clearly annoyed. "Enlighten me."

"Because you looked so graceful at the Yule Ball." When he looked about to say something joking again, she clarified, "His words, not mine."

Now he looked pleased. "I hadn't realized he'd noticed."

"He did. He cared so much, in fact, about your being a superb dancer while he couldn't dance for the life of him that he asked me to teach him over Christmas so that there was a chance he wouldn't stomp all over your toes if he ever got the chance to dance with you."

Realization had dawned on Draco's face. "And instead of being touched by such a romantic gesture, I crushed his budding dance abilities and swept his best friend off her feet."

She smiled in commiseration. "Got it in one."

Draco made a face. "How was I supposed to know he was going to go and do an adorable thing like that? I wouldn't have been quite so insulting if I'd known he'd only been trying for a couple of weeks. He just … he made it look really painful. It was hard to watch."

She laughed at his evident distaste. "We've only been trying the foxtrot in the last few days."

Draco sighed. "Is he going to come back from the kitchens?"

She shrugged. "Depends how seriously he's convinced himself that maybe it's not him you're interested in."

It took an amusingly long time for the Knut to drop, and the look of absolute disgust and horror on his face was priceless.

"You've got to be kidding. He thinks I'm interested in you?"

Once the words were out of his mouth, he evidently realized how they sounded, for his eyes widened slightly, and he added in a completely altered tone of voice, "Which is to say that if I were interested in women, I would of course be interested in you, but since I'm not—"

She waved his attempt away before he could dig himself into an even deeper hole.

"I don't want to have sex with you either, Draco, so let's call it even, shall we?"

He smiled. "You know, it's sort of sweet that he thinks something as daft as that. Makes me feel better about worrying about the two of you."

"You're both completely daft. Isn't that lovely?" she said with false cheerfulness. "Here I am caught in the middle and not the slightest bit interested in sleeping with either of you."

His expression grew sharper. "About that. You do hand out clues?"

She shook her head. "You're on your own. I wouldn't give Harry any hints either."

His eyes narrowed. "Wouldn't, eh? So now he knows."

She narrowly managed not to give away how annoyed she was with herself that she'd given that much away.

"I've entrusted him with a number of my secrets, Draco," she said calmly instead. "We're best friends."

"He guessed, and you couldn't come up with a big enough lie to deny it?" he suggested perceptively.

She smiled, tilting her head back and forth to indicate that that might in some small way resemble what had happened.

"Shall I go looking for him, then?" he asked, returning to his primary concern. "Reassure him that we're not in here having crazy sex?"

She laughed. "I'm getting creepy mental images. Please stop."

He wrinkled his nose as her comment evidently brought the same images to his mind. "Ew. Girl sex."

"So you've never had sex with a woman?" she asked curiously.

He sighed. "In my misguided youth, I was much more devoted to the idea of a proper pure-blood future of marriage, wives, and babies."

Her lip curled. "Not to mention that you didn't want word of any inappropriate liaisons to get back to your father."

A grimace passed over his features before he continued hurriedly, "I had plenty of urges, so yes, there was some hetero sex, but I assure you that I will never go back. Men are much more pleasing."

"I can't argue with you there," she agreed with quirked lips.

A wide smile suddenly lit his features, and she felt as though she'd caught a glimpse of just why it was that Harry had fallen for the Slytherin.

"I can't believe we're having this discussion. I'm going to stop immediately. He'll come back, you say?"

"Eventually, of course he will." She considered their options. "If you wish, I can tell you where he is."

"You can do that?" Draco said suspiciously. "Have a lot of hidden talents that I don't know about?"

"Probably," she answered easily. "We've only been on truly friendly terms for all of a week, Draco; you can't expect to learn all there is to know about me in so short a time. It would be best if you don't ask what I'm doing."

She made Harry's dot visible again on the Map and quickly located him. "He's foregone the kitchen entirely and is in an abandoned classroom on the sixth floor. Not sure quite when he found that hidey-hole."

Draco was staring at the Map with awe. "Is that—?"

"All of Hogwarts laid out with labels for each and every student, professor, and visitor? Why, yes, yes, it is. Aren't you going after Harry?"

He looked at her, completely gobsmacked as she smiled at him angelically, and then he rolled his eyes as he headed obediently for the door.

"I'm coming back. I'm asking questions. I'm getting answers," he declared determinedly.

"Good goals. Noble goals. I look forward to seeing how they turn out for you," she said with a smile.

He was still shaking his head at her attitude as the gargoyle reformed behind him. She tracked his progress on the Map until she saw that he'd made it safely to Harry's location, and then she declared her mischief managed before she was tempted to watch them until they returned. If they lost control of themselves and shagged in the classroom, she didn't really want to be watching. She considered the notion. Probably.

Smirking to herself, she imagined either of their reactions to that possible interest on her part. Then she thought of how Severus would react, and she had a good chuckle before she took the opportunity to pop into her lab and make sure that everything was in order with the Weresbane. It was almost at the end of the twenty-four hour simmer that she had begun yesterday, and then she'd have to complete a couple more hours' work after dinner before she had her detention.

The Weresbane itself wouldn't be added until Sunday night, and since it had to be of the utmost freshness, it was still planted in the greenhouse. She'd been checking on it with such frequency that even Pomona was giving her strange looks. She couldn't risk anything ruining this attempt now, though; she had both Draco and Remus counting on her.

Once she'd assured herself that her potion was progressing just as it ought, she verified the Weresbane plant one more time, just in case. It was still fine. Since she was on the grounds, she nipped over to visit Hagrid. The gamekeeper was surprised to see her without Harry, and she explained that the other Gryffindor was in the midst of some personal difficulties that required some time away from her.

She would just as soon be absent while he went through this bout of irrationality; if he honestly thought that she and Draco could be interested in one another, he was out of his mind. Perhaps he'd decided that since she didn't think she could get her Slytherin, she was going after his? She snorted at the very thought.

Hagrid served her tea and told her all about the extremely odd creatures he'd bred for the fifth-years to take care of. Hermione thought that he had to have an intuitive but brilliant grasp of wizarding biology that most people didn't recognize; she didn't know anyone with his knack for crossing species and producing viable results. That they were all a bit scary was somewhat unfortunate, but it was still a rather amazing achievement.

After tea, she returned to her quarters where she found that Harry was alone on the couch. He wore an expression that she had difficulty identifying. It was only as he leapt up and threw himself at her, holding on with a death grip, that she realized what it was: bliss.

"I love you, 'Mione," he declared.

She was a little worried about where this was going until the world righted itself as he whispered in her ear, "He kissed me."

She drew back to beam delightedly at him. "Harry, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for you."

"He said right after that he shouldn't have done it, that the time wasn't right or something, but then he said he wished he could do it again, so I knew it was okay, and you know, 'Mione, it was just like I always thought it was supposed to be, and not at all like those horrible kisses with Cho, and I don't understand how I could ever think that I was interested in her, 'cause when I'm with Draco, it's all like heat and fire, and it's totally wonderful, and with her I was busy being confused and wondering what was up with the wetness, and Draco just knew exactly what he was doing, and I felt like I was going to melt into a pile of goo, and it was the happiest moment of my life!"

She was glad that he'd managed to find an end to his sentence and draw breath, as she'd been a little concerned about accidental asphyxiation.

"Maybe you should go lie down for a bit," she suggested gently.

If he didn't calm himself down, he wouldn't last ten minutes through dinner before someone guessed he'd pulled; he looked blissful enough that it could cause awkward questions. She was really quite impressed that Draco had managed to rock Harry's world with one kiss. The Slytherin's intention of not being at all intimate with Harry seemed to be crumbling day by day, and she hoped that meant that even if her cure didn't work, he wouldn't be able to let Harry go.

The more time they spent in one another's company, the more certain she was that Harry and Draco were meant to be together. Much as she'd teased Draco about it, she really wasn't altogether surprised that Harry's attention had focussed on the blond. They'd always had a very intense relationship, and once Harry realized that he liked blokes, it was only a matter of time until he realized just whom he'd been staring at for years. Even as an outside observer, it felt to her that the two of them were connecting on a meaningful level. It was as though their years of animosity had inverted, and all the connections they had forged in previous years could now be used for good.

They were joking about topics that she was sure should have set the two of them off explosively. And since they were both trying, they were wise enough to steer clear of Sirius and Lucius and other prominent disasters, but otherwise they were able to chat about most of the antics that they had got up to in the earlier years of their schooling without biting one another's heads off.

It was the weirdest courtship she'd ever seen, but she was perfectly willing to go with the flow. She was happy that they weren't letting the past get in their way, and she was really hoping that the same could hold true for her relationship with Severus.

When she and Draco had some private time without Harry, she made sure that he was preparing for her cure by spending plenty of time thinking about the wolf. She wasn't about to risk the same sort of fiasco he had evidently had when he started thinking about ferrets. Fortunately, Harry seemed to have recovered his composure following the kiss and didn't seem to be in any danger of thinking that she was trying to steal his man from him.

Currently, they were perched on stools in her lab; Harry thought they were brewing.

"I'm telling you," Draco said impatiently, "I wasn't thinking about ferrets."

"Did you actually want to turn into a ferret?" she quizzed.

He made a face. "Of course I didn't. I'm just ferret-like, I guess. You don't get to pick what animal you want to be."

His fair skin was really no good for hiding blushes, and it appeared that he hadn't managed to train quite all of them out.

"Don't be silly. Although," she admitted, "it's true that you might not be one hundred percent without any ferret-like characteristics. They're kind of sneaky like you."

"Hey—" he protested.

She tilted her head as she considered him. "But when I think about you, that's not the overall impression that I get."

"My magic doesn't agree with you," he said, sounding annoyed. "I meditated, I did the spells, and I came out a snow-white ferret."

"Have you examined yourself?"

He looked at her as though she were insane.

"Have you looked to see if you're exactly like the ferret that … Moody turned you into?"

He gave her an odd look, and she was glad she'd caught herself just in time. After his spectacular failure to kill Harry, it seemed that Voldemort had not advertised all the details to his Death Eaters despite his triumphant resurrection. Or Lucius hadn't shared the news with his son, anyway, so the blond had no idea who had really taught them Defence in fourth year.

She was unused to guarding her tongue in these rooms, and she'd either have to get better at that or get used to the idea that Draco was soon going to know all their secrets. She was pretty sure she knew which option Harry was going to vote for.

The Gryffindor had been adorably embarrassed when he came to ask her to add Draco to the wards. They'd made it all of a day with Draco out of the hospital before Harry had decided that Draco needed to have access to their chambers without their having to invite him in every time. It was probably the cutest thing she'd ever seen, and she'd mercilessly reminded him of how he'd been so sure that he wouldn't mind that she had to be the one to add people to the wards. She'd made the adjustments with a minimum of actual fuss, but it had been fun to see Harry blush so much.

Draco's expression made it plain that he thought what she said was particularly daft. His tone indicated the same as he said darkly, "No, I haven't taken photographs of myself and compared it to Pensieved memories of other people's sight of me from fourth year."

"You might have looked in a mirror," she said mildly. "I'm sure someone would have been happy to give you a look at their memory of the event." He glared at her as she didn't hide her amusement very well. "Besides, you've got a very bendy body as a ferret; I'm sure you could have looked at whole sections of yourself without trouble."

"When Moody turned me into a ferret, I wasn't concerned with what I looked like! I had no idea what was going on," he spat.

She considered how to get him to understand what she was really saying. "You spent a lot of time thinking about what it felt like to be turned into a ferret?"

"Of course I did!" he said defensively. "One second I was me and the next I'd been turned into a furry little animal. It was an extremely bizarre sensation."

Finally, they were getting somewhere. "The next time you were supposed to turn into an animal, did you think extensively about that particular sensation? The one other time you'd turned into an animal?"

An arrested expression appeared on his face.

"I think you meditated on exactly what it was like to turn into a ferret," she explained. "Your body knew that animal. I'm not saying that will work for everyone; they can't pick an animal they want, meditate on it, and turn into it. But since it was unconscious on your part, I'm guessing that your magic picked up on it, and it may indeed have decided that there were adequate characteristics between you and the ferret."

He made a face. "I knew I had good reason to hate Moody."

She lost the battle with her tongue.

"Actually, the person you hate is Barty Crouch, Jr., one of Voldemort's most ardent supporters."

"I beg your pardon?"

As succinctly as possible, she explained.

"Come again?"

She gave a few more details.

He came close to gaping at her. "And that's why Harry wound up in the cemetery?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"I read the Quibbler just like everybody else did," he said with annoyance.

She accepted this, agreeing, "That's why Harry wound up in the cemetery."

It had been a detail they had glossed over even in the Quibbler interview because they were talking about a Death Eater teaching everyone's children for almost an entire year. It would likely have caused complete panic. They'd wanted people to understand that Voldemort was back, not remove their children from the school and lose all confidence in Albus.

She saw Draco swallow. "And he's still willing to trust me?"

She nodded. "But he's been put through a great deal. You've got to be gentle with him. Serious about him."

She realized that she'd changed pretty quickly from that daft notion that Harry could have one night with the Slytherin to sustain him for a life of loneliness after that. Here she was talking intent and commitment with the other man. It was a shift in viewpoint that had occurred speedily and unconsciously. Maybe it was seeing the two of them interact all the time; they both seemed to be so engaged that she wasn't about to let either of them do something stupid if she could help it.

"I've always been quite serious about Harry," Draco said stiffly.

She laid a hand on his arm. "I don't want to fight with you about this, Draco, I just want you to realize that despite how well you two have been getting along recently, Harry has a very troubled past, and you, your father, and Voldemort feature in a rather large part of it. I'm not saying you have to walk on eggshells around him, but I don't want you to forget about it."

"Why would I walk on eggshells around him?" he asked, looking truly puzzled.

Oops. "Muggle phrase, apparently. Hypothetically, if you were going to walk on eggshells, you would have to do so gently so as not to break them. It just means treading carefully around someone."

He shook his head. "That's bizarre."

"Most expressions of that nature are for both Muggles and wizards." He opened his mouth, no doubt to protest, so she continued, "But I don't think we should engage in a debate about it at the moment. I have one last comment to make about you and Harry. May I?"

He looked a cross between amused and resigned. "I doubt I could stop you."

"I do seem to be rather interfering, don't I?" she acknowledged with good humour. "I'm worried that you'll miscommunicate between yourselves, and I really want to see somebody happy."

He looked like he wanted to question her again, so she hurried on.

"I have the distinct feeling that as soon as you're able, you're going to sweep Harry off his feet. When he remembers, can you please reassure him that I don't mind?"

Draco frowned. "I believe you assured me that you don't care for him."

"I still don't want to have sex with him," she confirmed as solemnly as she could, wondering if this pretend relationship she and Harry had had would haunt her forever. "At some point, however, Harry will remember that we weren't going to leave one of us as the only Pure Adult in existence."

"I'm sure I can—" Draco began.

She shook her head and assured him, "That's not what I want at all. The reason he hasn't done anything yet is because it hasn't been possible with you. As soon as it is, there's no reason for him not to be happy. I know he'll feel guilty, that's all, and I don't want to ruin that moment for him. You should both be happy."

"Why are you so certain that we'll get together before you and your mystery man?"

"I simply am." If she gave any indication as to why, he might well guess who she was trying not to mention. She changed the subject. "Now, have you been thinking about the wolf?"

He rolled his eyes, but as this was extremely important to him, he allowed himself to be distracted.

"Of course I have." He had a better work ethic than Ron or Harry, she'd give him that, so when she quizzed him as she would them, he tended to find her behaviour annoying. "I've been reading all of these books and looking at all of these pictures, but I'm not sure that I really 'know' the wolf any better than I did before."

"Every little bit helps," she said encouragingly.

He pursed his lips. "I know all kinds of useless facts."

"They're not useless," she protested immediately. "They're going to help you integrate the possibility of being a wolf with your human self. I'm going to make sure that you have all the necessary information to make that happen. I've got two options for you, and you may want to start with this one." She held up a sheaf of papers.

He didn't look overjoyed by more reading material. "What is it?"

"Notes on what it's like to be a wolf. Smells, sight, hearing. The feeling of running with the ground beneath your paws. The nitty-gritty details."

"Lupin?" he asked.

She nodded. "I told him I needed it to make my test study complete. He obliged, and they arrived this morning."

"And what's option number two?" Draco asked hopefully.

She offered this choice with relish: "I can change you into a wolf, much as Crouch did with the ferret."

Draco grabbed the sheaf of papers. "More reading, oh, goody."

She laughed, having been pretty certain of his response, and watched as he settled in for more reading. The truth of the matter was that he'd do just about anything for this cure, and they both knew it.

Chapter Nineteen: The Experiment

Hermione couldn't really believe how quickly they were arriving at the time to test her cure. The Weresbane, fortunately, was brewing exactly according to plan, matching the test batch she had made in November. She was getting awfully close to a state that some might call jittery with excitement.

Severus had finally asked her if she had recently taken up or abandoned a recreational drug use of some sort. She'd reassured him that she was just getting excited about the end of the year and the impending N.E.W.T.s; he had let the matter go with a snort. It was actually almost embarrassing how little she'd thought about the tests compared to how much everyone assumed she obsessed over them. Right now, her attention was taken up by nearer and more pressing concerns, leaving her much less time to be preparing colour-coded study notes.

Of course, she was well ahead on her homework, and she was working on what amounted to the bonus project of the century, but that still meant that she was doing a lot of practical application rather than book-learning. She imagined that her twelve-year-old self would be appalled, but it was not unpleasant to realize that she had grown up since then. She knew that plenty of people thought she was still the same know-it-all she had been, but she knew better. Ever since she'd lied for Harry and Ron about that troll, her little rule-bound world had been slowly dissolving.

She might still be far more concerned about the rules than lots of people, but she'd lived through enough of the war to know that arbitrary laws made by the Ministry or the Hogwarts governors sometimes had to be ignored. That was probably her Slytherin side talking. Or possibly her Gryffindor one. It was hard to distinguish between them sometimes.

She had completely restocked the hospital wing during her "detentions" with Severus, and he was now letting her brew whatever she wished. Draco thought that a Gryffindor at the Potion master's beck and call for three hours a day for ten days was a brilliant way to get manual labour, but one look at the thunderous expression on Harry's face had made it clear that discussing the matter would not be wise. She said she was content, Draco narrowly managed not to comment on what that said about Gryffindors, and Harry reluctantly chose not to express his opinion.

Severus, for his part, seemed to be pleased that she was working openly in his lab rather than in her own, and she was happy to bounce ideas off him and find that he was still being amenable.

Pomona looked less worried now that Hermione wasn't visiting the greenhouse multiple times per day. She was still checking up on her plants, of course, but now that she'd harvested for her immediate needs and was brewing the Weresbane, she had other details to concentrate on.

Severus had consented to Draco's joining their training sessions, and the older man apparently found it quite amusing to put Harry and Draco together and split up the two Gryffindors. Hermione spent a lot of time internally smirking and trying not to let him realize how perfect this was as far as everyone else was concerned.

Before she knew it, it was Tuesday and time to discover for real if her Weresbane would allow werewolves to turn into Animagi. The potion wouldn't be ready until a quarter to seven in the morning, but she'd asked Remus to come at half five to minimize the possibility of his being noticed. She escorted him into her quarters personally so that Harry wouldn't be warned by the wards of the man's arrival, and she'd taken care to remove his presence on the Map as well.

While she knew that Harry wouldn't ever worry that the two of them were having sex, she didn't want him to ask awkward questions. If he knew that Remus and Draco were closeted in her lab during a moon phase, he might eventually work out that something werewolf-related was going on, something she didn't want to happen for all of their sakes; there was no need to get his hopes up with all of theirs, and she knew Draco would baulk at explaining his own involvement.

She led Remus through to her lab where Draco was already waiting and pacing. She had tried to convince him that sleeping would be a good plan, but he hadn't been able to manage it. He had been a nervous but otherwise not insupportable presence while she had been monitoring the Weresbane and adjusting the potion as necessary.

Fortunately, while she had Muggle Studies this afternoon, he had a free period; as long as she could convince Harry that the blond was doing something perfectly normal, he would be able to nap then. She wanted him to be well-rested and functional during this test, a fact which she had pointed out to him several times, but it hadn't really helped his seemingly frantic energy.

He ground to a halt, however, the moment she and Remus entered the room. Remus looked more than surprised to see the Slytherin, and the two of them just stared at one another. She tugged the older man all the way into the room and closed the door.

"Remus, I believe you know Draco Malfoy. Draco, I'm sure you remember Remus Lupin."

They both looked at her as though she were completely insane, but at least her words had ended the staring contest between them.

"I'm not likely to forget him," Remus said, inclining his head politely. "You could have been one of my best students, had you wished to be. I'm a little confused about why you're here, however."

"Hermione," Draco said warningly.

"Draco," she returned.

She hadn't thought he was going to be stupid about this; there was no way that they could get through these trials without the two of them knowing about each other. She bloody well wasn't going to administer it to them separately, not to mention the fact that she thought they could use the support.

She and Draco had a staring contest of their own, and Draco finally bowed his head.

"Remus, during the attack in January when Draco was being held by the Death Eaters, Fenrir Greyback had ... an active role."

Remus looked up sharply, his gaze skewering her before flying to Draco, who was still staring studiously at the floor, looking aloof but oddly vulnerable.

"It was before the moon rose but very close to transformation," she continued quietly.

Remus's eyes flickered closed briefly, pain etched starkly across his features. "He bit you."

The fact that this statement was directed at Draco seemed to get the Slytherin's attention, for his eyes rose and locked with those of the man who had been bitten so long ago.

Draco nodded jerkily.

"You believe you've been infected."

Draco nodded again, words coming with difficulty. "Hermione told me about her cure."

Remus spoke very gently. "You could wait and see what happens at the full moon."

The blond shook his head hurriedly. "I can't wait. I can't … I can't bear it."

Hermione had thought Remus might take offence at this, but there was nothing but compassion on his face.

"That's why we've got Hermione on our side, right?"

Draco nodded once more, eyes suspiciously bright, and Hermione suddenly wondered just how many new werewolves Remus had counselled over the years. She remembered his going to speak to the one who was in the ward with Arthur at St Mungo's. He was always doing his best not to make them feel ostracized; this apparently extended to Draco Malfoy without prejudice.

"Greyback was the one who bit me as a child."

Both Hermione's and Draco's eyes flew to Remus's. She had never heard him give that information so quickly before.

For an instant, she could have sworn that Draco's lips trembled, but when he spoke, it was to say with cool amusement, "He really gets around."

Remus nodded solemnly in response. "It's about time he was stopped."

They both looked to her.

"So, no pressure, right?" she said brightly.

Remus looked immediately chagrined, but she waved his attempt at an apology aside. "No worries. I'm glad you two are able to bond about something. I was a little worried that I was going to need to take away your wands before I went to class this afternoon."

Draco snorted. "I'm perfectly able to behave civilly, Hermione."

"Oh, I didn't say you weren't able," she responded promptly.

Remus gave a suspiciously laugh-like cough, and even Draco relented and smiled faintly.

"Now that the first disaster is averted, why don't you take your cloak off, Remus, and we can have some tea while we wait for the potion."

Remus obediently shed his outerwear, and the two men took seats at the wooden countertop and managed to quietly chat while she made tea and kept an eye on her Weresbane.

Right on cue, she added the very last ingredient to the potion, watching with satisfaction as it instantly turned a light, iridescent blue. It was done.

"Are we ready to do this?" she asked.

They both nodded.

She faced them seriously. "According to every test that I've done, this is completely safe, but if either of you have any unusual symptoms, you will find me immediately, whether that means Remus rushing into my Runes class or Draco stepping foot into the Muggle Studies classroom for the first time. We're not going a step further until I have your word."

They duly promised.

She ladled out two goblets of the potion. Remus looked down at his with evident surprise.

"It's completely different from the Wolfsbane." He sniffed it. "Smells much better."

"It's the antithesis of the Wolfsbane in many ways," she answered, "and I did the best I could. It's still not likely to be a pleasant taste, but the Weresbane actually bonds well with sugar, so you'll at least get a rush out of it. Remus, no chocolate for the rest of the day."

He actually pouted for a moment, but he nodded reluctantly, and she cleared her throat to avoid giggling. Draco clearly didn't get it, and she left it to Remus to explain later on if he were so inclined.[19]

She smiled at them. "You'll drink these, and then we're going to take your vitals every ten minutes for the next hour. As long as nothing untoward occurs, Draco and I are going to go off to breakfast—nothing terribly sugary for you, either, Draco—and then off to class. I'll be back at lunch to make sure you're okay, Remus, and Draco has the afternoon off. I expect you'll both be able to take a nap. Even a short one will help," she said a little sharply when it looked like they were both going to argue. "I don't know how long this last step will take, and I'm not prepared to risk failure because one of you is too tired to manage a transformation of which you would otherwise be capable. Understood?"

They nodded agreement once more. They toasted her, drew deep breaths, and downed the potion in a series of continuous swallows. There was no shudder of disgust as she was used to from the Wolfsbane.

"Well?" she asked.

She'd never actually tasted it herself as she didn't suffer from lycanthropy; she could extrapolate based on what had gone into the potion, but that was hardly conclusive. Although it wouldn't cause any lasting harm to a non-infected human, it had nevertheless seemed foolish to try it just to find out what it tasted like.

Remus was looking thoughtful, and Draco appeared to be running his tongue over his teeth and gums in an attempt to get rid of the taste.

"A vast improvement over the Wolfsbane," Remus declared. "But a bit odd all the same. Sort of … grassy?"

Draco shook his head. "Sort of like a bowl of sugar flavoured with something really weird. Sickly sweet, actually." She was amused that Remus hadn't noticed. "I can't speak to the taste of grass, but if Lupin is sure that's what it tastes like, we'll have to go with his assessment."

"Wolves eat meat," Remus said, as though they might not be aware of that fact. "It tastes … the way wet grass smells after you roll in it."

"Again—" Draco began.

"You've had a deprived childhood, we know," Remus said slyly, and she was reminded that he was a Marauder.

Draco opened his mouth to protest, but Hermione added sweetly, "Maybe you want to explain to him when all the rolling in wet grass occurred, Remus?"

Remus looked immediately tongue-tied.

"He might like to learn about his cousin," she added softly.

Remus looked startled and Draco confused. "This is about Tonks?"

Now Remus looked confused, and she figured she'd given them plenty to talk about when they were stuck alone together.

"No," Remus answered slowly, "this is about Sirius Black."

"The mass murderer who broke out of Azkaban?"

"Harry's godfather," Hermione corrected.

Both Remus and Draco looked at her sharply. It was clear that Remus wasn't so sure that she should have spoken of it in front of Draco.

"It might be nice if Harry had someone else to talk to about it," she said pointedly.

Remus sighed. He'd never spoken of Sirius's death to Harry, and she still thought he'd made the wrong decision. As far as she knew, she was the only person who'd made Harry discuss Sirius; everyone else had been desperately avoiding the entire topic once rumour of the destruction of Albus's office reached them.

This had left Harry with such a well of anger and pain and guilt within him that it was a bloody invitation for possession by Voldemort, and she wouldn't stand for it. She'd pushed, and Harry had managed to knock her unconscious with—perhaps fittingly—a book that had struck her a glancing blow to the temple.

She had refused to give up, which had left him petrified that he would hurt her again and made it much easier for her to insist that he needed to work through his feelings for everyone's safety. It had not been an easy battle. She'd done her best to be sympathetic and a good listener, but she had always known that she could never feel about Sirius the way Harry had. She would be forever grateful to him for helping her with her parents, but she had seen what was happening during fifth year, and she knew that the years in Azkaban had not left Sirius unmarked.

For the longest time, Harry had remained utterly unwilling to apportion any blame for events during their fifth year to Sirius. She had nearly had to wring the boy's neck to get him to admit that it wasn't all Severus's fault, and it had taken weeks to get Harry to say that it was Voldemort's fault and sound as though he meant it. She knew that he would never hold himself blameless, but as she herself accepted part of the blame for the events that had occurred that night, she knew that she would never be able to talk Harry out of a belief in his own complicity. As long as the majority of the blame went to Voldemort, that was good enough for her.

Harry's attitude was now vastly improved when it came to the topic of Sirius, but it still hurt him, and she thought he would always remember Sirius more idealistically than the man perhaps deserved. Sirius was dead, though, and if Harry needed someone to hold up and admire, she wasn't going to destroy that image for him. Someone else to really share the image with, however, would have made him happier.

Remus's voice had a defensive edge to it. "It hurt me, too, you know."

"Of course it did," she breathed in ready agreement. "It probably hurt you more because you really knew him. But Harry needed support, and you could have understood his pain, just as he understood yours. He thought you blamed him."

Remus raised startled eyes to hers, gasping, "He what?"

She nodded. "Thought you weren't speaking to him because you blamed him for Sirius's death."

"I didn't," he said, clearly horrified. "I just needed some time to lick my wounds. I would never..."

"And so I told him," she said compassionately. "He mostly believes me, I think, but it would be much better if you seriously considered talking to him about it. It's about as stupid as your never talking about being a werewolf. Maybe you can change that one a little, too, for Draco? He's never transformed before, and he's going to need all the help he can get tonight."

She could actually see Remus squaring his shoulders as his gaze flickered to Draco. The Gryffindor always seemed to take responsibility for others when it came to their affliction, and if it wasn't quite the same as discussing it on his own account, it was better than nothing. Since she'd managed to chastise Remus for something that was hurting Harry, show Remus that she trusted Draco, and lay the groundwork for the two of them to bond and get closer to Harry—and all before eight in the morning—she thought that she should really not complain about her progress.

Taking out her Weresbane journal, she recorded the initial impressions and vitals of her two test subjects. Having one of the oldest werewolves and one of the probably newest would hopefully tell her if her cure had a good chance of working universally.

Once the potion had been in their bodies for an hour, she gave Remus the appropriate foods that she had set aside for his breakfast and told Draco that she expected him to eat something similar when they went up for breakfast. On a Weresbane day, they were doing everything in their power to suppress the Were, and that meant no consumption of any sort of meat.

Neither Draco nor Remus had thus far shown the slightest ill effect from their dosing, and after she threatened to dose them with Veritaserum—which would interfere with the Weresbane—in order to ensure that they weren't hiding anything, they swore up and down that they would let her know if they had so much as an unusual ache in a little finger.

Remus wanted to know if she really had Veritaserum on hand, but Draco told him that it was better not to ask. She left Remus, who promised that he was going to read up one final time on his Animagus training, and emerged with Draco into the common room.

Harry, who'd been sitting on the couch waiting for her, raised an eyebrow at the sight of both of them. She still marvelled a bit about that kiss because she didn't detect any of the sour emotions that he had evidently felt in spades after her and Draco's dance—and they'd just emerged from her bedroom.

"Another tawdry affair?" he asked.

Draco looked confused.

"She had Remus visiting one night and said they were having one."

Draco smothered a laugh, and she knew exactly what he was thinking and was glad that he couldn't say it in front of Harry.

"Draco's just helping me out with a potion," Hermione said with a reassuring smile. "Not something you'd be interested in doing, I'm sure."

"Well, I—" She raised an eyebrow, and Harry subsided. "Not terribly interested, no."

They headed up to breakfast together and had a mostly quiet meal. Draco was preoccupied with the potion that was coursing through his veins, and Harry was lost in some contemplation. She was slightly panicky about the Weresbane, busy thinking about how Remus was faring, and looking far too frequently at Draco, apparently, because he finally told her to bugger off.

Then she had to explain to Harry that she'd had the blond test an experimental Mood-enhancing potion; after they reassured him that it was completely non-dangerous, non-toxic, and not-at-all-a-risk-even-a-little, it was time to go to class. Draco looked pleased that Harry was so worried about him, and she shook her head, wondering how they hadn't managed to get together before this, given how much they seemed to obsess over one another. Draco had always been very sensitive to how much attention Harry paid him, she supposed, and this sudden heaping of all the right kind was doing wonders for him.

She and Draco went off to Ancient Runes with Hermione solemnly promising Harry that she'd look after Draco. Draco had smirked about it, but he hadn't realized just how truthful she was being. Every fifteen minutes she took a careful look at him; since they were sitting next to one another now, it was easy enough to do. After three such examinations, he'd taken to writing out and then pointing to a note which said, "I'm fine: no side effects," every fourteen and a half minutes so that she'd know he was doing all right. A couple of students had given her a few weird looks, and she realized that by the end of the day there was probably going to be a new rumour that she was looking to catch Draco Malfoy.

She was greatly relieved when lunch finally arrived. Draco pointed out that they couldn't abandon Harry without awkward questions, so they ate with him first in the Great Hall, and she did her best not to look horribly antsy.

"Look," Draco whispered, "don't you think you have a feathered friend who would inform you if something furry had expired in your room?"

She considered this and had to concede that Draco was probably right.

You didn't notice anyone die recently, did you, bird?

Fawkes offered her a mental eye roll. No one you know, Girlicorne. Are you sure you haven't taken up any drugs of any kind?

She mentally stuck her tongue out at him and relaxed enough that they were able to make it through the rest of lunch. Two students had asked if she'd taken enough Pepper-Up in the morning; she apparently really needed to find out if her cure was looking to be successful or not.

After lunch, she convinced Harry that Draco needed to be examined again for the test that they were doing. As soon as she intimated that Draco would be self-conscious if Harry observed with her, Harry backed right off, and she was able to get Draco into the lab with Remus and make sure that the two of them were really all right. Both assured her that they were totally fine, and their stats confirmed it. She reminded them that now would be a good opportunity to take a nap.

They forced her to go off to Muggle Studies when she started to suggest that maybe she could play hooky for once in her life, and she found that she was able to put her mind to her work when Fawkes promised to keep an especial eye on her room.

She was still more anxious that she should have been, but between the drug use, her love of school, and the fact that she had been away from Harry for two whole classes, there appeared to be adequate inaccurate rumours about why that was. She didn't dignify any of the supposition with a response, and when Muggle Studies was over, she made no attempt to go to dinner. She met Harry heading up the stairs as she was heading down them.

"We're not eating in the Great Hall today?" he asked, looking ready to turn right round again and head back with her.

"I'm not eating in the Great Hall today," she corrected. "I'm about to disappear into my room all night. Everything is fine, but it's important that you don't disturb me." She got this all out in one fell blow.

"What?" He looked confused. "You're not going to be at dinner? You'll be in your room? What about Draco? Is he going to be with you?"

She nodded.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, sounding suddenly panicked.

"Hey," she said reassuringly, "I said everything was okay. I just need to do some observation for an extended period of time, that's all. You don't have to worry."

"But can't I sit in even for a little of it?" he asked, looking at her with big, hopeful puppy eyes.

She shook her head.

"All right." He didn't sound happy or certain of what was going on.

"Please, Harry," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "It's important, but I can't talk about it any more right now."

He forced a smile. "If you say so. I just want him to be safe."

"I'll make sure that he is," she promised. "You don't have to worry about that."

On the point of heading back up the stairs, Harry turned back suddenly. "Hey, don't you have to spend the night with Snape?"

She nodded.

"But you're spending the night monitoring Draco instead?"

She nodded once more.

He looked completely astonished. "You're certifiable, but good luck with that."

She smiled. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry finally continued up the rest of the stairs, and she hurried down them.

She hadn't quite had the nerve to speak to Severus about her absence yesterday in case he forbade her; she had to attend Remus and Draco, and while Severus had been quite reasonable in the last few days, she had so much experience with him suddenly turning dreadful when he didn't get his way that she didn't think she could risk it. In February, once the Potions master knew what she had been doing, she thought he'd understand. She wasn't willing to say anything yet, and that meant that right now, he was likely to be furious. She'd written him a letter, though, and made sure he received it today.

She was no longer altogether certain that this was the most brilliant idea she'd ever had, but it was done now.

The moon set at 4:02 p.m., which meant that they were just entering the period during which this new transformation was possible. The new moon would occur at 6:01 in the morning, but the theory behind her potion was that the Were would be in abeyance from moon set to moon rise.

She hurried into her quarters, through her bedroom, and into the lab. Remus and Draco were quietly sitting in comfortable-looking armchairs that they'd conjured in her absence, and they didn't look as though they'd done one another injury in the three-odd hours they'd been alone.

"How are you—" she began.

"We're fine," they said in unison, grinning at one another. "No side effects."

She smiled back at them. "Honestly, though, I still need actual impressions."

She got out her log book again, and they tried to catalogue how they were feeling. Remus was more helpful at this stage because he was much more familiar with the feelings wrought by lycanthropy and thus whether or not there were differences now.

He tilted his head, closed his eyes, and considered.

"It's a little quieter, I think. Normally this is the most peaceful time with the werewolf. It's when I'm most human with the least sensory acuity, the least ... animal urges. It's hard for me to tell anymore, as I haven't been completely human for a long time, but it seems…." He struggled for words. "I can't pick up sounds in the other room or smell what you might have had for lunch. It's good." He shrugged. "It seems almost normal."

She smiled, nodding her thanks as she made notations in her book. "Draco?"

The blond offered a shrug of his own. "I don't really have anything to compare against, but it's like Remus said, I guess. I feel normal."

Hermione smiled at him, too. "I'm glad to know that you still feel human."

He blinked at her as he realized what he'd just said, the exact opposite of what he'd been claiming since he'd been bitten. He nodded to her in concession.

"Have you two had the chance to trade stories? Between the two of you, you've got firsthand wolf and Animagus experience, and I think it'll be really important and helpful for you to share your insights."

Given the lack of hostility when she arrived, she thought that they might have done some of that in her absence, but she figured it wouldn't hurt for them to keep it up.

They alternated between meditation and quiet discussion. They got into a long chat about the different physical characteristics between a wolf and a werewolf, and she smiled as they hauled out books and pointed at pictures and generally seemed to be acting like study buddies and not two people who were complete opposites in many ways and hadn't really been on speaking terms before today. She'd noticed that whatever else had happened while she was gone, Draco had started referring to Remus by his first name. It was nice to see, and she hoped that Harry would be able to witness it soon.

Before she knew it, it was almost nine o'clock, and her conscience pricked at her sharply.

"Would you two be all right if I ducked out for a few minutes?" she asked.

They looked puzzled but nodded, and then Draco saw what time it was, and his eyes went wide.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said as resolutely as she could.

"Good luck with that." He was looking at her the same way that Harry had, like he wasn't altogether certain that they would ever find the body.

She turned resolutely and left, the door closing behind her as she heard Draco begin to explain to Remus about her evenings with Severus. Harry was sitting with a book in the common room, but he apparently knew what time it was, because he didn't say a word as she checked the Map and then headed off to present herself to Severus in his office.

The Head of Slytherin was staring at the letter she had sent to him, and she stepped in and closed the door feeling as though she'd foolishly cut off her escape route.

She smiled as brightly at him as she could manage, which wasn't terribly much or very effective at all if the look on his face was anything to go by. Taking a seat without being invited seemed singularly foolish, so she remained on her feet, feeling very much like a recalcitrant school girl.

"I got your note," he said, holding it up and looking as though it were hugely offensive instead of a very carefully worded and polite missive.

"It seemed safest under the circumstances," she admitted, "but I found when it came down to it that I had to see you in person." She swallowed at the forbidding expression on his face, and added earnestly, "It's really important, I swear."

He waved the note again. "So I read," he said curtly. "I have obviously been too lax if you are under the impression that you can rearrange your detentions at your convenience. I—"

She knew that the next words to come out of his mouth were going to be a correction of that previous error, so she jumped in.

"Severus, please," she begged. "Honestly, it's of the utmost importance, I just can't explain why right now. I'll happily do another detention later to make up for this one. I just can't move or rearrange what's happening right now."

"How long have you known about it?"

His voice was deceptively mild, and she winced marginally. "Weeks."

His voice was cold. "Yet you only informed me a short time ago."

"It was obviously not my most brilliant moment ever," she said in a small voice. "I was … concerned that you weren't going to give me permission, and I have to do this no matter what. I don't mean to be disrespectful, sir, and I really don't want to upset you, but I can't be here right now. What I'm doing is really important," she repeated.

He regarded her through narrowed eyes. "Important enough to face detention for the rest of term?"

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was her choice, she reminded herself, her unwillingness to tell him yet. She could only imagine what he'd do to her when she skipped the detention on the full moon. Or when she had to brew. And if the trials tonight and in February were both successful, she'd be repeating the procedure twice a month until the end of term. But what choice did she have?

"Yes, sir," she said firmly, the die-hard swot within her wincing painfully, curling up into a ball, and screaming at the top of her lungs. "It's important enough even for that."

"Then I shall see you tomorrow evening at nine o'clock." His expression made the polite-sounding words a mockery. "My classroom, I think."

She drew another deep breath, reminding herself that lack of oxygen to the brain had unfortunate results.

"Thank you, sir," she said evenly.

She left before she could do something horribly embarrassing like break down into tears; it was her own fault, she reminded herself yet again, but she refused to tell him about what she was doing until she could present him with a beautiful fait accompli. Something really, truly clever. She passed through the common room where she only shook her head at Harry who looked at her quizzically and then with some alarm, and then through her bedroom to the lab.

Remus and Draco took one look at her, and Draco leapt up to bring her to a chair while Remus got tea and pressed it into her hands which she noticed distantly were shaking slightly.

"What happened?" Draco demanded. "It was bad?"

She shook her head. "No, it was fine."

There was absolutely no reason for her voice to be quavering slightly like that.

Remus and Draco exchanged glances.

"This is Severus we're talking about. Of course it wasn't fine," Remus said, and Draco nodded in agreement. "What happened?"

She shook her head again, swallowing down a long mouthful tea and letting it pool in her middle. She realized she felt very cold.

"It's fine," she said with more resolution this time. "He wasn't pleased, that's all, but he's let me off for the evening, and that's what matters."

"Wasn't pleased like he wants your firstborn child?" Remus asked, and Draco smirked.

"Wasn't pleased like Gryffindor has no points left?"

She sighed. "Wasn't pleased like I'm in detention for the rest of my career at Hogwarts."

They grinned at her, taking this as another outrageous comment. She stared them down.

"You're not serious."

"He gave you five months of detention?"

She forced a smile. "He probably won't need to give detention to anyone else for the rest of the year."

"I'll talk to him," Draco said. "I'll tell him—"

She shook her head. "You'll do no such thing. Detentions won't matter if we can cure lycanthropy."

"But, 'Mione," he protested, "I know you—"

"No," she interrupted. "He can't know yet, and I can take whatever he dishes out. Given what Harry, Ron, and I have got away with over the years, I'm sure this is just detention karma."

They both looked doubtful, and she took the opportunity to swallow more tea.

Remus opened his mouth. "But what are you—" He stopped abruptly.

Her smile was pained as she attempted to joke weakly, "I'm probably going to be promising the detention time of my children when I don't go again on the tenth, yes."

Draco grimaced.

"I'm not being handed over to Voldemort," she admonished. "I'm not getting expelled. I'm not even getting detention with Filch." She hoped. "It will be worth it."

They still didn't look convinced, but she knew that there was nothing for it. Letting either of them talk to the Potions master would only make Severus angrier, and it was still her potential cure and her decision when the information was disseminated.

"So how are you two feeling now?" she asked, rising from the comfy chair and walking over to her log book as she made a concerted effort to pull herself together; she wouldn't risk their progress because she was feeling out of sorts.

They reported to her that all was well, and she rallied further and smiled at them. They were going to do this, and they were going to do it right.

She reminded them of the agenda: "At midnight, you'll be entering the extended meditation that will make the change possible. The two of you are going to be dropping all the way to your cores, and you're going to open yourselves up to your animal selves."

They both nodded.

"When I'm satisfied with your progress, we'll begin the spell transformations, and I'm warning you right now that part of the process is resting when I tell you to rest. From here on in, you do exactly what I say," she said in her best no-nonsense voice. "I will not hesitate to give you the antidote and throw you out if you attempt to ignore my instructions. Understood?"

This bit of autocratic behaviour was rewarded by two more solemn nods; they didn't even make a crack about this being remarkably similar to her usual behaviour.

"There's an antidote?" Draco asked, a frown creasing his brow. "It's not permanent?"

Hermione shook her head. "At this point, nothing permanent has occurred. I can still counteract the Weresbane that's in your system, and you'd be no worse or better off than when we started. Once you've succeeded in transforming, however, the change is fundamental."

"So, I can stop obeying you once I can transform properly?" he asked hopefully.

"Nice try," she said with a grin. "You can stop obeying me just as soon as I throw you out of the lab or when I tell you that you are free to leave, whichever comes first. Clear enough?"

"Blind obedience," he agreed. "Until eight o'clock tomorrow morning, it's yours."

She nodded back, suddenly serious, not having quite considered what her demand would remind him of. She appreciated that he had clearly laid out what he was able to give her.

"Thank you, Draco. Remus?"

"Whatever you wish, Hermione, of course," he responded promptly.

They continued chatting quietly between light meditation, working their way up to the big one.

What do you think, Fawkes? she asked. How are they doing?

Pretty well. Boy-bird's mate still has some trouble getting that ferret out of his mind.

She snorted softly to herself. I guess it's a … powerful association.

It has been better since Golden Wolf spoke to him, but he may still have trouble.

I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for keeping an eye on us.

You know I always will, Girlicorne.

Draco was looking at her pointedly when she started paying attention to the exterior world.

"Hmm?"

"Lost in thought?" he asked with clear insinuation in his voice.

She cleared her throat. "Briefly. I'm better now."

Draco shook his head in wry amusement. Remus looked confused but left her to her secrets.

While they were in one of the light, almost trance-like meditations, she started an association game until they came up with only wolf-related words; she didn't want anything ferret-like or Were-influenced to pop in at an inopportune moment.

As she watched them go off into a tangent about wet grass since Draco didn't appear to want to let the topic go when Remus raised it in response to the word "running", she wondered if she could have left them here and done her detention with Severus after all.

She was still taking their vitals and staying in charge, but realistically, this part of what they were doing could easily have been controlled by either of them with a promise to come and get her if there were problems. But despite the fact that it would have saved her a lot of grief with Severus, she couldn't imagine being in his lab right now, working on some non-Weresbane-related potion and knowing that Draco and Remus were in her lab waiting to try to turn into Animagi as part of the cure for lycanthropy. No, she had to be here, and she would simply have to live with what that meant for her and Severus.

Midnight arrived. She took her Veritaserum capsule before she called attention to the hour, and then she sat them both down in the comfy chairs.

"This is one of the most important parts of the Animagus training. You need to let go of all outside influence and find your animal form. We know what I believe it will be, but now is the time when we make that belief a reality. Now is the time for you to close your eyes and meditate. Remus," she turned all her attention on the golden-haired man, "you're not likely to have any problems coming up with your form, but you need to concentrate on letting go of all Were influence. This isn't about Fenrir Greyback or being forced to change. It isn't about pain or hurt or disease or bloodlust." She listed all the problems starkly, knowing that they were never far from his mind. She continued resolutely: "That is all a part of you that you are going to let go of right now. All those problems exist, but they are going to be tucked away and pushed to the side. Because this is about the wolf inside of you, the one who runs in the grass and plays with his friends. You want to let him out, and you want to celebrate the fact that you are free and happy and at peace with your body, not fighting anymore." She smiled softly as she watched his eyes flicker closed as he drifted into the necessary meditation.

She put up the charms that would ensure Remus was not bothered by her speaking to Draco and turned to the Slytherin.

"Draco, fourth year was a long time ago. You have grown so much since then. You need to look very carefully inside of yourself, and you need to let the discussion you had with Remus guide you. You and your magic both know what the goal is today. So I want you to concentrate with that formidable mind of yours on all the things you have learnt this year. Think of everything that you know about the wolf. Think of what it would feel like to lope through the Forest on four paws. This is a wonderful gift. It is part of who you are, and anyone who cares about you is going to care about the wolf as well."

And Draco was gone, too. She stepped back and protected Draco, too, from any sounds she might make. Standing there, she contemplated the two men meditating in her lab. This was extraordinarily important to both of them, and they needed her effort to be successful. She now had months of detention, and she didn't want that to be for no reason. She shook her head. It was worth it. Draco and Remus trusted her, and she'd sworn that she would say nothing until she knew if the cure was real or not. She let out another breath slowly. It was done, and it couldn't be fixed. It had been stupid to think that she could simply leave him a note, but there was that Gryffindor stubbornness—possibly idiocy—come to the fore.

She took the opportunity to slip out to the common room and reassure Harry that everything was just fine. He allowed himself to be persuaded to bed, especially when she promised that Draco would be present at breakfast tomorrow as though nothing had happened. She couldn't actually swear that he'd be fully functional given that he would likely be sleep-deprived and magically depleted, but Harry didn't need to know that now.

She poked her head into her lab to make sure that Remus and Draco were still doing all right, and then she took a quick shower to ensure that she was perky and clean. She returned to the lab and made more tea.

Well? she asked.

Fawkes sent her a mental nod. They've settled in right near their cores. It is hard for me to hear them from there. They are doing what they ought to do.

Good. Thank you.

She was going to be casting the first of the spells on them when they came out of the meditation. In the normal course of events, the spell was cast by the person trying to become the Animagus, but since they were working on an accelerated timeline, she was going to be powering the initial spells to help give them the proper focus and control.

Truthfully, she was making modifications as seemed appropriate along the way because she was certain that the first transformation needed to be made within the new moon so that the Weresbane could do its work properly and the Were didn't interfere.

When an hour was up, she lowered the Silencing Charm on Remus first, and without bringing him out of the meditation, she cast the initial spell.

"Känn Förvandlingen."[20]

His eyes flew open, wonder in them as he felt what it would be like to turn into a wolf rather than into a werewolf. It was only in his head, but it would be no worse when it was really happening to his body, and she knew that he was shocked by how little it hurt. He smiled at her, absolute joy painted across his features in that moment.

She turned to Draco, lowered the second Silencing Charm, and repeated the spell.

Draco's eyes widened as they met hers, and she could see the panic in them.

Fawkes!

She saw in Draco's eyes the moment when the phoenix joined with Draco's mind and suppressed the ferret transformation, allowing the wolf transformation to assert itself when she repeated the incantation. Draco sagged with relief and offered her a nod of thanks.

Okay? she asked.

It was close, but he has the appropriate feelings now, the phoenix confirmed.

Thank you. Again.

Fawkes pulled out of her mind and Draco's. The blond's expression did not change; he was still feeling the correct sensations.

She made eye contact with both men now, received nods in return, and let the spells terminate.

"What happened?" Remus asked.

Draco admitted ruefully, "I started thinking about the wrong furry, four-legged creature. All of a sudden, it seemed too similar; I was used to the bloody ferret. Thanks for that."

She smiled. "Not a problem."

Remus was looking between the two of them. "Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for nothing that I can explain at the moment," she said brightly.

He rolled his eyes but didn't pursue the matter.

They ate again, the two men practicing the spell themselves until it felt immediate and natural. Now, they would be far less likely to baulk or panic when it came time to do it for real; neither of them had good associations with their previous transformations, and they wanted to correct that as much as possible now.

At two, she judged that they were ready for the next step, and once again cast the spell one at a time.

"Se Förvandlingen."[21]

They still weren't ready for a complete transformation, but this spell made them display some of the physical characteristics of the animal they were soon to change into. Remus grew fur on his legs—it had itched enough for him to pull his trousers up to see what was happening—ears—also pointier—and arms—which were now as long as his legs. He reminded her of nothing so much as every werewolf she'd ever seen in a Muggle movie, but she was very careful not to say so, making sure that he focussed on how wolf-like the ears and fur were. She released the spell when he told her he was ready.

When she performed the same spell on Draco, she was a little surprised to see how different the results were given that he was going to change into the same animal. His face elongated into an approximation of a lightly-furred snout. His hands and feet both began to be furred and padded, while the rest of him remained largely intact. Seeing the very un-ferretlike face and appendages in the mirror Hermione had conjured made him visibly a lot more confident about what they were doing, and she was pleased.

She had them rest again before the next spell; the initial Animagus spells didn't seem that intense compared to the final transformation, but they actually took a lot out of the witch or wizard undergoing them. It was part of the reason that only strong wizards tended to make the transformation, though it had been proven that those of lesser power could be assisted.

This third spell had been her favourite, and she cast it on them at the same time because there was nothing for her to see or do.

"Märk Förvandlingen."[22]

Now Remus and Draco had the senses of the wolf, able to pick out the smells in potions she had across the room and see much better than in human form even when she lowered the lights considerably. When Draco caught the whiff of an interesting smell, he miscalculated and fell over in his attempt to use his arms and legs as though they were four wolf legs.

She offered him a bruise salve for his shins and watched as his nose wrinkled at the strong smell.

Just before she released the spell, she performed one last test, drawing one of her clean, sharp knives across her forearm to create a shallow cut as she stood across the room from the two men.

Remus's head whipped up a fraction of a second before Draco's, both of their nostrils flaring, but neither of them made a mad attempt to get across the room to her. Remus let out a giant huff of breath and nodded at her.

She terminated the spell. He looked as though he needed a minute to compose himself.

"I never thought that I would be able to smell human blood again without being hungry." He smiled tremulously at her. "I knew you were bleeding, I could smell the blood, but I didn't particularly want it."

Draco nodded in agreement.

"Splendid," she said, getting out the skin-mending potion that would heal the cut.

"Remind me to kill you later, though," Remus added. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

She shrugged. "It was a reliable way."

He nodded. "I understand; I just need to kill you."

"That seems fair."

Draco snorted. "Personally, Hermione, I suggest you make a run for it when he comes after you."

"I'll keep that in mind," she promised, feeling light-hearted that they were all able to joke about this. Who would ever have imagined?

There was only one more spell to perform, and that was the full transformation.

She insisted that they nap. They were both anxious to get on with it, and she appreciated that, but she thought the closer they were to the actual new moon, the safer they would be in terms of Were suppression—not to mention the fact that she didn't want either of them to make stupid mistakes because they were tired. When they tried to insist that they were ready now, she simply stared at them until they remembered their promise to obey her.

She transfigured the chairs into little beds and told them that if she didn't hear deep breathing in ten minutes she was coming round with Sleeping Draughts that would interfere with the Weresbane. Despite how excited they both were, they somehow managed to fall right asleep. She wondered if they would get suspicious at some point about so many potions she had on hand interfering with the Weresbane.

Rather than going to sleep herself, she brewed an analgesic potion as it kept her occupied; otherwise, she was in danger of drifting into horribly maudlin thoughts about her many detentions with Severus. When this trial was over, she was going to sit down and work out exactly how many detentions she had. She'd need to confirm, she supposed, whether they went to the end of classes or until the end of the school year so that she could correctly apportion her time.

She was such an idiot, she thought with a sigh. A stubborn, determined idiot with wonderful dreams, and there was nothing for it now.

After an hour and a half, she woke Remus and Draco, had them eat fresh fruit and nuts and have a hot mug of tea so that they were fully awake before they attempted a dangerous transformation for the first time.

Normally, after extensive preparation, a wizard wishing to become an Animagus would perform this spell himself, just as he had all the other spells. This was the most complete and invasive of all the spells; having someone else cast it could be not just ineffective but actually dangerous. Hermione was going to be working closely with their magic, however, and since her goals exactly matched theirs, she believed it would be the successful first step in their being able to do it on their own. The Marauders had managed it with Pettigrew, after all, so she was sure she could do it.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

They both nodded eagerly, although she could see the undercurrent of nervousness.

"I'm going to change you both, give you the chance to examine yourselves and the room from your new perspective, but it'll only be for fifteen minutes or so. Remember that there's more to the night after we make this transformation, and it wouldn't do to have either of you forget how to be human. All right?"

They assented once more. Even with someone assisting, it was possible that if a wizard stayed in his animal form too long—especially before he had any control over the transformation—he would get lost in the animal sensations. If that happened, casting the spell to render him human again would be ineffective. In some of the worst Animagus accidents, the human form had been retrieved but all that was left was the animal mind. No one had found a cure, and in the majority of the cases she had read about, the afflicted person had been transformed back into his animal form because that was the only way for him to live out the rest of his life—such as it was—in peace. It was one of the reasons that so few wizards ever attempted to transformation. Things could go horribly wrong.

She took out her wand and faced off from Remus, making sure that there was plenty of room around him. The older man regarded her steadily and then offered a careful nod. She drew a deep breath, watched him do the same, and then cast.

"Förvandlas till djur."

Chapter Twenty: The Animagi

Before her and Draco's eyes, Remus transformed into a grey-brown wolf with distinctly golden highlights in his fur. They all stood stunned, and then Remus's tail began to furiously wag back and forth; it wasn't exactly wolf-like, but it made her think of Sirius, and she imagined that was where Remus had got his inspiration. His amber eyes looked alert and very similar to what they normally saw in Remus's human face. He pranced around the room a few times and then came over to snuffle at Draco before looking back at Hermione with a look in his eyes that said he wondered what she was waiting for.

She looked at Draco, who was smirking at the antics of his ex-professor, and the younger man nodded at her, so she repeated her spell for a second time, not allowing herself to consider that it might not work for the Slytherin. Draco seemed similarly confident, and a moment later, there were two wolves in front of her, and Draco was behaving just like Remus, gambolling about the room, smelling everything, gazing with sharp eyes at things that he had not perceived as a human.

Draco was about two thirds the size of Remus, and he was predominantly white with grey blue eyes that were rarely seen on adult wolves. She hadn't previously appreciated how much a wolf's face could express emotion, but there was no doubt in her mind that the two of them were the happiest wolves in existence right now. She let them have fourteen whole minutes of chasing one another round and round her lab, growling and yipping and making happy wolf noises at one another, and then she reminded them of the task at hand.

"All right, you two, you have one minute in which to admire yourselves in these mirrors before I turn you back into human form."

The looks they shot her were ones of annoyance, but they nevertheless came over and obediently looked at their reflections. Draco circled round and round on the spot, and she wasn't entirely certain whether he was admiring himself from all angles or chasing his tail.

Remus seemed to be staring at his form very intently, and she knew that he was marking the differences between this true wolf form and the werewolf form he had always transformed into up until fifteen minutes ago.

"Gentlemen," she said authoritatively, knowing that they would not change back any time soon on their own, "come over here and lie down. Having four feet suddenly switch to two tends to make people fall over until they've got the hang of the switch in balance."

She'd be using a spell to get them out of the transformation because they didn't have the preparation—or the mental discipline, yet—to do it themselves.

Draco obeyed, and after a quick "Förvandlas till människa," she had him back in human form. The Slytherin didn't look too pleased to find that he was lying on the floor, but she knew that he would have been more annoyed by a painful fall; although he'd been an Animagus already, the difference in size between the ferret and the wolf made her doubt that he would have stayed on his feet this time around.

Remus was still standing, and after looking into his very solemn eyes, she suddenly understood why he was on all fours. As a werewolf, he had ended every full moon painfully collapsed on the floor; tonight, he didn't care if he fell, but he was going to make this transformation as different as possible in every way. She nodded to him and stepped closer.

"Förvandlas till människa."[24]

A human sprouted from the wolf, shooting to his regular height and lurching ungainly as his balance shifted completely. She caught him as he stumbled and braced herself to keep them upright. To her surprise, once he'd regained his balance, he didn't let her go but wrapped his arms tightly around her and held her close.

"Hermione," he breathed.

She blinked back tears and had to sniff for a moment.

"Don't you worry," she said, despite all her promises not to make promises. "We're going to get this one."

He nodded against her before pulling away. Draco was grinning at both of him.

"That's so much cooler than being a ferret."

They both laughed before she resumed her no-nonsense tone once more. "You're eating more food, and then we're going to go through the basics of using those spells on your own. You'll practice more before you leave because until you get the hang of it, it's too easy to get stuck as an animal or to transform back into human form without clothing."

From the redness of Draco's ears, he had experienced that one personally at least once.

"Remember," she continued, "that you must always have your wand with you when you transform in the beginning. Unless you're extremely adept with wandless magic, there's every chance that you won't be able to transform back into your human form. Statistically, those fledgling Animagi who don't have their wands with them are more likely to remain animals and not respond to spells if others try to transform them. You should take care at all times but especially in these early stages."

They both nodded solemnly and tucked into the breakfast that she'd had the sense to have ready for them.

"We do get to eat meat again at some point?" Draco asked, noticing the lack of sausage on their serving trays.

She nodded. "Once the moon has risen, you're free to eat whatever you wish. Until eight-oh-seven, however, you're eating what I want you to eat."

He snorted. "You're getting a lot of mileage out of being in charge, aren't you, 'Mione?"

"Seizing the moment while I can," she agreed cheekily. "So," she hauled over her logbook and opened it up, "how are you both feeling?"

She took down their descriptions of how they'd felt while transformed, how they felt now, and what they'd thought of the transformation process. They both seemed very happy. Now that the initial euphoria had faded from her mind a little, she felt it incumbent upon her to remind them that this was only half the battle. She didn't want them to be discouraged, but she didn't want them to forget that they still had a big hurdle to face on the full moon.

Both of them nodded. "We know," Remus said, still sounding so very happy. "But this is visible and definite progress, Hermione. No werewolves have ever been able to transform into Animagi after they were bitten, whether or not they could do it beforehand."

She'd done the research, too, and she nodded in understanding.

"Even if we don't get any further than this, I now know what a painless transformation is like, and I can feel what it's like to be a wolf without having to worry about what the werewolf wants to do."

She appreciated that he was trying to see the positive in even the possibility of failure of the final stage of the cure.

It was now half six in the morning, and they'd made it past the moment of the new moon. Both Remus and Draco were anxious to try the transformation again, and she allowed it after what she hoped was adequate practice of the incantation and wand movements. She felt rather Minerva-esque as she was doing it, and from the looks on their faces, she might well have been channelling a bit of the stern Transfiguration professor as well.

Draco's solo transformation was much smoother than Remus's, as he'd done all this before, but Remus, too, managed it without any assistance. It went more slowly than normal, and while he pranced around for a few more minutes, getting back into the habit of being a wolf, she reminded him that once mastered, the transformation was almost too quick for anyone to see the transition between the two forms.

It needed to be instantaneous and without thought to minimize the danger of getting stuck at some point in the middle of the transformation, which was another one of the dangers inherent in trying to become an Animagus. Transfiguration experts had to be called in for incomplete or partial transfigurations that the Animagus couldn't fix, and sometimes even the experts couldn't put the Animagus back together perfectly.

She only let them have ten minutes in animal form before she told them to transform back. Draco managed it after about twice as long as normal, apparently still needing to think a little about turning from a wolf into a human. It took Remus nearly five minutes to manage it, but he kept wolfishly glaring at her when she suggested that she do it for him. But he finally managed it, and his look of joy and triumph told her that the patience had been well-rewarded.

She congratulated them both on getting the hang of it so quickly—she had memories of Ron taking weeks—and reminded them of the concentration techniques that they needed to employ if they were ever stuck.

"Both the human and the animal are always inside of you." They knew this, but a reminder never hurt. "A person in animal form who forgets his or her human form does so because it's been pushed so far into the back of his or her mind it's been effectively lost."

She didn't believe that it was actually gone but rather that it became inaccessible, much like the animal part was for someone who had never tried to become an Animagus to begin with.

"You've read the material I gave you. You know that state can become permanent. Therefore, I don't want you to try to transform for more than fifteen minutes at a time to start. If you ever have trouble getting out of your animal form, it's important not to panic. Think human thoughts, remember your multiplication table or potions ingredients or anything that will help you concentrate on being human. Calm yourself, wait a few minutes, and try again. If you're still unable to transform, find someone who can help you. If possible, make contact with someone who will be aware of what you are doing and will know what has happened if an animal wanders up to them and looks desperate. I'm happy to assist you, Draco, but I know you might have a little more difficulty, Remus. Can you get up to the castle more frequently until we get this settled in February? You should be getting as much practical experience as you can."

He nodded. "I'll make it a priority. There are very few people before whom I could transform into a wolf without causing a great deal of panic. Of them, you are the only two who wouldn't have a great many other questions. I'll come by as often as I can."

She nodded. "Just make sure it's after midnight if you want to see me." They both grimaced as they remembered her detentions. "It would probably only take Draco a couple of days to get the hang of the counter spell, and then the two of you could spot one another, if that's all right."

They agreed readily to this plan.

It was now nearing seven in the morning, and they decided that it would be safer for Remus to sneak back out while everyone was at breakfast, so they kept up with the transformations until half seven. By then, Draco was almost up to regular speed, and he looked as though he was well on his way to settling quite happily into this form.

Hermione knew that Harry would be especially anxious to see that Draco was fine, and Remus agreed that he could see himself out discreetly.

Draco transfigured his clothing so that it wouldn't look as though he'd spent the whole night in her bedroom, and then the two of them made their way out into the common room where Harry was once again on the couch waiting for them.

"All right?" he asked, eyes scanning Draco minutely as though looking for any signs of permanent injury that she had been hiding from him the day before.

Draco smiled. He seemed to be enamoured of any show of concern that Harry made on his behalf.

"Just fine," Draco said. "You?"

Harry was still scanning over his body and answered absently. "Fine, thanks. You're sure there's nothing wrong?"

"Do I not look all right?" Draco asked with mock-censure.

"Oh, no, you look wonderf—That is to say, you look just fine," Harry said with another spectacular blush. "Breakfast time?" he asked, leaping off the couch as though he'd been catapulted.

Draco and Hermione shared a grin and let Harry get away with leading them up to breakfast, where they sat with the Ravenclaws. Draco eyed all the food that was on the table with delight, but she was pleased to note that he didn't take a single meat product until the requisite few minutes past eight. But then, it didn't really surprise her that he was as anal about those sorts of things as she was.

Transfiguration was next, and Draco murmured to her afterwards that the only reason he hadn't nodded off was because he had transformations so much on his mind anyway. Having just successfully undergone a should-have-been-impossible transfiguration, he was feeling pretty chipper about the class.

Hermione was pleased that he was so functional and happy. Arithmancy, though, did not go quite so well; she had to nudge him several times when his eyes closed. Halfway through class, she gave up and ensured that her notes and answers were in excellent order; he evidently wasn't taking in a word that Septima was speaking.

He yawned his way down to dinner, and Harry looked immediately concerned. Hermione managed to get them all through the meal and back downstairs, and it wasn't difficult at all to convince Draco to make it an early night; as soon as Harry got involved in the requesting, it was all earnestness and solicitude and puppy-dog eyes, and Draco didn't stand a chance against Harry's puppy-dog eyes. He went to bed, and Hermione smiled at Harry.

"You all right?" she asked. "I'm not stepping on any toes?"

He shook his head, smiling at her with what appeared to be genuine happiness. "Draco's great. If he's helping you out with a potion, that's really cool. I'm glad to see that you're getting on so well. I don't think he's going to mesh so well with the rest of my friends."

Oh, she was going to be able to give him such a great surprise in the near future.

"I'm sure we'll manage," she said casually. "How's your homework going?"

He laughed. "It's going fine, thank you, Mother." He summarized what he'd been doing and how his days looked in the future. They did homework for a few hours together, and then she headed off to her detention, meeting Severus in his classroom as requested.

She was subjected to more of the silent treatment when she arrived, but she knew she mostly deserved it this time, so she made no protest. He finally gestured at a giant pile of cauldrons in the sink, and she wondered if he'd had his classes dirty them deliberately because the pile looked to be unnaturally large. Without a word, she set to work. It went without saying that she wasn't to use magic in the endeavour, so she neither asked nor made the attempt, just scrubbed until her fingers felt as though they were going to wrinkle up and fall off.

She put the clean cauldrons on the counter until she ran out of space and then she made a second layer. Followed by a third. She didn't think she'd fit a fourth without making the pile really precarious, but the seemingly unending number of dirty cauldrons finally dwindled and then disappeared. She had no idea what the younger years had been brewing, but she could have sworn that the remnants in the cauldrons resembled nothing so much as superglue.

She brushed her now frizzy and damp hair out of her face for the millionth time and turned back to face Severus, who turned out to be sitting at his desk watching her work. She'd assumed that he was grading and wondered how long he'd been staring at her. She narrowly fought off a blush and said, "I've finished cleaning the cauldrons, sir. Is there another task for me to perform this evening?"

He considered this for what she thought was an inordinate amount of time.

"You may go, Miss Granger," he finally pronounced, drawing the syllables out.

"Thank you, sir."

A Tempus in the hallway told her that it was half twelve, and she took her Veritaserum capsule and reminded herself to try not to get on Severus's bad side; it was hard on the fingers.

Harry had been kind enough to wait up for her, and he sympathized very sincerely with the state of her hands.

"Rotten luck, annoying him. It was going so well, too."

She shrugged. "That seems to be the extent of our relationship. Brief happy moments and then long periods of my upsetting him for reasons that I often have trouble grasping. In this case, however, it's my own fault; I have to live with the consequences."

"And he's just changed what you're doing in detention?" Harry pursued. "It didn't get worse than that?"

She regarded him seriously. "You'll not try to do anything about it?"

He grimaced. "Not a promise I want to make if you're trying to extract it."

"But I'm going to do it anyway."

He sighed. "Very well. No interference on my part. What did he do?"

"Gave me detention until the end of the year."

Harry's face twisted. "That's months of detention for one day that you didn't go! That's not reasonable."

"Harry," she said with a bit of a helpless laugh, "I skipped a detention with Professor Snape." Not even Harry had ever done that. "Of course I'm being punished heavily."

"You're sure you couldn't talk to him about whatever potion thing you were doing with Draco?"

She shook her head. "I can't discuss it right now. Maybe later. I … I'll try later. He'll hopefully understand then. And you know it'll only get worse if you try to talk to him, right?"

Harry made another face. "Yeah. Trying not to get you stuck here after we've graduated. I'll keep my nose out of it."

"Thank you, Harry."

They both went to bed, although she sneaked out a few hours later to visit with Castina and the herd. She needed to recharge after the sleepless night she'd had, and she could unburden herself without seriously worrying that her herd mare was going to charge into the castle and have strong words with Severus. Castina was sympathetic but thought Severus's behaviour was rather typical. Hermione felt much better when she headed back into the castle.

Over the next several days, Hermione's life settled into a pretty definitive pattern. She taught Draco how to counter the Animagus transformation and made sure that his transformations continued to go smoothly. She began to obsessively check her Weresbane again, as she would need to begin making the fresh batch in less than a week. She spent her days in class and her evenings on both school days and weekends doing the most unpleasant jobs that Severus could come up with for her.

There were rats' brains to clean and place into fresh containers of pickling juice. There were more cauldrons to scrub, the whole classroom to clean on a memorable day when one of the second-year students had exploded a cauldron that managed to cover a large percentage of the classroom in bright violet sludge. She was curious as to what the student had been trying to make but didn't think it was safe to ask. She wondered, too, what—if any—punishment this second-year had received, as cleaning up one's mess was normally an important component of Potions accidents.

They completed these detentions in almost total silence; Hermione could understand his pointed instructions without asking questions, and he made no attempt to engage her in conversation. The detentions went on until she finished her task, and they were always long enough that she was dragging her aching limbs out of the room and back to her own quarters by the end of the night. Harry waited up for her every time despite her telling him that it was unnecessary, and sometimes Draco was there, too, calling it a night once she returned.

She was very happy that Harry and Draco's relationship was going well, but it was a little depressing to see the two of them together when she and Severus had turned into a first-class disaster. Still, it would hardly make her happier if they were fighting, too, so she supposed she would just try to live vicariously through the two of them.

Severus said not a word to indicate that he had noticed that she'd finished her first set of detentions and started on the new ones. She was relieved that Draco had no trouble with his transformation and was indeed able to work with Remus without her supervision because on Thursday, she started brewing the Weresbane again.

Since Harry knew that she was juggling her school work along with all the detentions, he didn't even question the fact that she was ducking out from dinner and he didn't see her for hours at a time. On Friday, she was just able to finish brewing the Weresbane in time to make it to her detention fifteen minutes early.

Today, she needed to figure out how the rest of the term was going to unfold because on Saturday, she couldn't be in detention from nine until past midnight. That cut right through the Weresbane-brewing time, and the potion was still more important than any other consideration.

If she already had detention until the end of exams, then she didn't suppose that there was anything else he could do to her—beyond expelling her, of course, but Albus would probably step in if he attempted it. If the current detentions were set to end with the term, then she could be making the situation worse for herself by not showing up tomorrow—as she really didn't want to have detention during exam time if she could prevent it—and it might be better, despite his mood, to try to rearrange the time for the detention in question.

The only other option she had was Polyjuice, a potion that she did not actually have on hand. That would mean that she would have to steal it from Severus to be able to use it against him. Somehow, she doubted he'd be amused. And while she could probably convince Draco to cover for her on Saturday—he knew why she was doing this—on the tenth when she needed him to be taking the Weresbane she'd brewed, it would have to be Harry who took the Polyjuice.

And her mind simply failed at imagining Harry Polyjuiced to look like her and serving her detention with Severus. It had Very Bad Idea written all over it.

Before she could decide which desperate option to choose, therefore, she wanted to know where she stood with Severus.

Fortunately, the man was in his classroom and able to tell time, apparently, because he said flatly, "You're early."

She cleared her throat. "I wanted to discuss my detentions with you, sir, and I thought that conversation would be more appropriate before the detention itself was occurring."

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Oh?"

He seemed very expectant, and she wasn't certain of what.

"Yes, sir," she said at her most docile. "By my calculation, there are one hundred and twenty-two additional detentions between the thirtieth of January, when I would have finished the original two weeks, and the end of May. Since we haven't spoken of it formally, I wanted to verify the time they would be occurring and check if they ended at the end of May or if they went until the literal end of the school year—which would be the fourteenth of June, as I'm sure you know, and would make it one hundred and thirty-six detentions."

He sat forward again, dark eyes boring into hers. "You worked out how many detentions you have."

"Yes, sir," she answered, still uncertain of his tone. "It seemed sensible; I wanted to be aware of my responsibilities for the rest of the year."

"So you know how many detentions you have left for the year?" He sounded as though he were testing her.

"Including the one I'm about to start in a few minutes, either one hundred and twenty nine or one hundred and fifteen depending on the end date."

"You've no doubt worked out how many hours that would be?"

She thought that he sounded faintly amused and hoped that was a good sign.

"Averaging three hours per detention, sir, that would be three hundred eighty-seven or three hundred forty-five. Which is sixteen or just over fourteen days, respectively."

She'd sat down and done all the calculations days ago.

"You're feeling entirely sanguine about doing almost two and a half weeks of solid detention?"

She blinked. "Well, I'm pretty resigned, sir, yes. It's going to be until the end of the year, then?"

"What?"

"You said almost two and a half weeks of detention, sir, so I take it you intend for me to complete detention until the end of the exam period?" It would make exams a bit miserable, but it meant he couldn't possibly give her any more detentions no matter what she did.

"I intended for you to stop a week ago, nonsensical witch," he said, sounding exasperated.

She stared at him. "I'm sorry?"

He let out a huff of breath. "I wanted to ascertain your seriousness, but you didn't once question any of the completely odious tasks that I set you, just kept coming back again and again."

She was having trouble grasping what he was telling her. "You're not making me have detention until the end of the year?"

He shook his head with a look of condescension, and she took it that she was supposed to have grasped that more quickly.

She sank bonelessly into a chair.

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

Her eyes flew to his. "God, no. I just spent a good deal of mental energy gearing myself up to survive it, that's all, and it's a little surprising to find it was all needless. I definitely don't want you to reinstitute them in kindness to me."

He smirked. "I don't think even the Hufflepuffs would have put up with my plan so agreeably. You didn't voice a single complaint."

"I skipped one of your detentions, sir," she pointed out. "I didn't think I had the right to complain."

"But it was for a reason important enough for you to suffer through up to three hundred eighty-seven more hours of detention." There was an edge of mockery in his repetition of the hours she had worked out.

She shrugged. "Well, yes."

"Then it was important enough to skip detention," he said simply. His eyes narrowed. "Naturally, if you ever tell anyone I said that, no one will find your body."

She smiled at him for the first time in what felt like forever. "Understood, sir. My hands thank you."

He rose. "Come."

It wasn't even to his lab but to his sitting room where he proceeded to serve her tea and engage her in a decent conversation. He still seemed mildly boggled that she'd treated the whole detention fiasco so seriously whereas she was shocked that he hadn't done so. She couldn't imagine what his reaction would have been if she'd confronted him on his "odious tasks" only to find that he'd meant them in earnest. They'd be back to the finding-the-body scenario, she was sure.

"At least you know I follow through on my promises," she said quite cheerfully now that yet another misunderstanding had been cleared up.

She was beginning to think they needed to write their intentions down on pieces of parchment and exchange them regularly or something.

"Hmm," he agreed. "You seem very stalwart, certainly."

He let her go after no more than an hour with a dry comment that he rather thought she'd earned a respite.

She thanked him profusely several times, and he waved her away. Harry and Draco looked quite surprised to see her when she arrived just after ten o'clock, and she was glad that she hadn't caught them in an embarrassing position. She'd not heard of it going beyond the one kiss, but there was no saying when they'd get carried away.

"What are you doing back?" Harry demanded. "You surely didn't decide to skip another one?"

She laughed. "I've been threatened with enough bodily harm today, so, no. I'm not supposed to say."

Harry nodded. "Uh huh." He waited all of three seconds. "So what happened?"

She sighed, although her lips tipped up at his impatience. "You can't ever say." He opened his mouth. "Don't make me swear you to secrecy."

He nodded more solemnly now. Draco looked a little puzzled until Harry quietly explained that Marietta Edgecombe's acne was Hermione's doing. Draco agreed with even more alacrity than Harry that he would never speak of the matter.

"I don't have any more detentions."

They blinked in surprise. "How on Earth did you get out of them?" Harry demanded. "Did Albus intervene?"

She shook her head. "No, I went to Severus to discuss the rest of them, and that's when I learnt that he had actually expected me to call him on how ridiculous they were and not do any of them."

They blinked at her, and she explained in detail. Draco was about as amused as Severus had been that she'd done all that work whereas Harry thought it was rather unsporting that Severus hadn't clued her in sooner.

"I don't have detention for the rest of the year," Hermione said with finality. "I'm perfectly satisfied with today's outcome."

All three of them could agree about that, so they settled in without further argument to do homework for what remained of the evening.

The next morning after breakfast, Harry approached her about becoming an Animagus. Hermione realized she should have anticipated it; he didn't know that she was all of four days away from testing the most important potion of her life. As far as he was concerned, life had finally settled a little from the craziness that was January, Draco was in good health, and even she had finished her insane run of detentions.

Given how anxious Harry was to perform this transformation, he'd been extraordinarily patient about it, really, and she was lucky he hadn't tried to do it on his own while she was otherwise occupied. Since her life was going to get even busier starting on Tuesday—because the potion would work or she'd be having a mental breakdown because of its failure—Harry had probably inadvertently chosen the most sensible time to make this attempt unless he wanted to wait until June.

It wasn't difficult to get time away from Draco given that the blond was trying to get time alone for his and Remus's transformations. She still regretted that she couldn't have them all work on this together, but she knew it wasn't practical. Revelations would be made at a later date.

She actually had to give Harry a mild sleeping potion to get him to sleep in the evening; he insisted that he wasn't even a little bit tired, but when she told him that they wouldn't be making any sort of attempt if she had the slightest doubt about his being perfectly awake and aware later, he took the draught and went to bed without protest.

Because she knew Harry; he had started contemplating asking her to do this once she'd come back from her aborted detention last night. That meant he'd spent time considering whether it would be rude to ask so quickly after she'd finally regained some free time of her own. Having evidently decided that the risk was worth it, he would have wanted to ensure that he was ready to undertake the task, and that meant he'd reviewed the Animagus book and her notes. And that meant the amount of sleep he'd gotten last night was minimal at best.

Having discarded the possibility of performing the transformation during the afternoon or evening in case Severus called a training session or they were called upon as Head Girl and Boy, letting Harry sleep now so that they could try during the night had seemed the most logical course of action. There was less chance of interruption the later it got.

She brewed from shortly before eight until nearly eleven while Harry slept. She would need to bank the heat shortly before half three in the morning; if they hadn't finished by then, she was sure that Harry would be able to spare her for a few minutes.

Once she had everything tidied up, she woke Harry. He was so instantly awake, excited, and ready to go that it was as though he hadn't taken a sleeping draught at all. They headed to Room One. As she saw the barely suppressed energy and his almost visible nervousness as Harry paced the room, she conceded that making him perform his first transformation in front of the boy he was crazy about would not have been a good plan.

Especially, she barely suppressed a grin, if he had the problem most beginners had and ended up without his clothes at some point during the process. Of course, she imagined that would likely do wonders for eliminating Draco's restraint when it came to his daft belief that he wasn't good enough for Harry right now. She needed the Slytherin to be in top form on Tuesday, however, making the irresistible distraction of a naked Boy Who Lived something that she would try to avoid.

Harry swore up and down that he'd been keeping up with his reading and his mental preparation, and a quick viva voce examination confirmed this fact. Harry knew how to be very serious about a topic when it was necessary.

She warded the room with especial care given that it would be quite unfortunate if anyone came across them while they were working on this. Harry would be vulnerable while he was training, and even if they were found by someone who meant them no harm, the scene being witnessed would give their secret away to anyone who didn't know. While they were most likely to be found by those who did already know, she would really prefer to keep this detail between her and Harry for as long as she could.

"Before we start," she said, "I need to ask something annoying of you. Two somethings, actually."

His anxious movements stilled as he met her eyes and took in her serious expression.

"What?"

"First, I'd like you to promise to obey me while these lessons are continuing and until I say that you're free to do as you please in Animagus form."

"Of course," he answered immediately.

"Harry," she admonished, "a moment's consideration, please. If I say stop, you have to stop. If I say we're not going to try again for a week, we're not going to try again for a week. That's what I need you to agree to."

His nose scrunched up as he took the time to think about what she was saying, but he nodded again.

"I know you're doing what's best for me. What's the other thing?"

"I'd like you to promise me that you won't go beyond any of the Hogwarts wards in your Animagus form."

Puzzlement showed on his face now. "But … don't you go into the Forest all the time? I mean, beyond the wards?"

She nodded. "But never beyond the border of the Forest. Besides, it would be more disastrous if you were captured." He opened his mouth to protest, but she overrode him. "You know that as soon as you're in your animal form, you're going to get so excited about the idea of not being recognized as Harry Potter, you're going to want to go everywhere and see everything. I want to make sure you're safe. Please, Harry."

He considered her, green eyes thoughtful. She was sure that he'd recognized that she hadn't made his agreement a condition of her teaching him, and she hoped that he'd also noticed that she wasn't asking for more than his word.

Once he saw his form, she was pretty sure he'd understand exactly why she had asked, and she'd prefer that she had this promise before he was airborne.

"What if there's an emergency?" he asked.

She laughed. "I hate to say this, but if there's an emergency meaning you would foolishly leave the grounds in human form, I'd rather you go in your Animagus form."

The indecision left his features, and he gave a sharp nod. "You have my word."

She smiled. "Thank you, Harry. You might as well take off your glasses. You can practice transforming with them later."

He obeyed with alacrity, always pleased when he had reason not to wear them.

After that, the process was remarkably similar to the one she had undergone with Remus and Draco except that Harry really had studied this topic extensively this year and last year, and he was able to cast the spells on his own.

He meditated for almost an hour before he opened his eyes and cast the first spell, showing that the meditation had worked just as it was supposed to; he wasn't aware of what his animal form was in so many words, but he was accessing it, and he'd known instinctively when it was time to continue to the next phase.

All his reactions were painted across his features; she could see his child-like wonder at the mental feeling of transforming. The only transformation Harry had ever felt before was that of the Polyjuice Potion. Although it wasn't nearly as painful as the transformation into a werewolf, it was most definitely an unnatural one—especially in the particular context that Harry recalled.

This seamless and natural mental shift from human to animal would remain in Harry's mind as a clear objective now. He was giddy in his excitement once the spell terminated. She imagined it was not only because of what it had felt like but also because this was the step which he had failed at last year when the group of them had tried. This time, she had seen the ease with which he had managed it, and she knew that had to be a big boost to his self-esteem.

She didn't want him to become over-confident and try too much, too fast, however, so she sat him down and made him drink some water and rest for a bit before she let him move on to the next spell. She could see that he was doing his very best to obey her and not get snappish or whinge that he was fine, so she only made him rest for half the time that the most cautious part of her wanted him to.

She'd have to be sure never to tell him what her own transformation had been like; a unicorn had been guiding her, and they hadn't exactly done everything by the book. Hermione was in charge of this transformation, though, and that meant she was going to be cautious. Just imagining what would happen if the Boy Who Lived was stuck mid-transformation or injured in some freak accident was enough to convince her of the necessity of going carefully.

For the next step, she Conjured a large mirror and set it right in front of him. When he cast the spell that allowed him to see the beginnings of his transformation, the result was as bizarre on him as it had been on everyone she'd ever witnessed under the effects of this spell. His nose began to elongate and started to harden into a beak. He sprouted red feathers along his forehead and cheeks, and his arms began to flatten and broaden, partway to being wings.

Harry stared at himself for a long time in the mirror, his expression of confusion especially amusing given his current facial configuration.

"What am I?" he said finally. "A parrot?"

She had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing.

I heard that! Fawkes said with outrage. A parrot?

She sent him mental peals of the laughter she couldn't express out loud. Just think how pleased he'll be when he sees what he really is. He's trying not to get his hopes up too high.

Fawkes didn't send back any actual words, just a lot of indistinct grumbling and an image of him turning his back on them and tucking his head under his wing on his perch in the headmaster's office. Despite this, she knew that he was still paying careful attention to his protégé.

Still suppressing the giggles, she turned her attention back to Harry. To be fair to him, there'd been very little but the red feathers for him to go on, and he apparently wasn't knowledgeable enough in ornithology to realize that the beak-like protuberance that he had wasn't anything like a parrot's.

He kept up a running commentary as he examined himself. "Well, it wouldn't exactly be inconspicuous, but at least it has wings. Wings are good. And I s'pose I could always pretend to be a Muggle kid's pet if I got caught or something…. Not exactly the animal that anybody'd expect me to be, so I guess it's safe and all that."

She realized she'd better stop him before he got himself so mentally geared up to being a parrot that he influenced his change; she believed that Draco had subconsciously let it affect his choice. Given Harry's relative power—not to mention the odds with which improbable things happened to him on a regular basis—she didn't want to take unnecessary chances.

"Let's shed those feathers and move on, shall we?" she proposed briskly.

During this break, she fed him extra-strong Butterbeer and cinnamon and ginger biscuits. He found this very odd, she could tell, but he refrained from asking questions, and she refrained from telling him that she had considered a bottle of hot sauce and a bowl of spices as well.

She sighed as she realized she was doing that Albus-manipulative thing again. He was doing what he thought best, just as she was doing right now. But that was really a debate for another time. Harry was looking at her with those puppy-dog eyes of his and was clearly ready to move on to the next phase.

She could see the moment he'd cast that the physical senses had kicked right in. He was gazing around the room as though he'd never seen it before, showing that his eyesight was sharper than even his corrected sight had been, and he blinked at the room in astonishment.

She whispered her question as quietly as she could and saw his head snap up as he heard the words: "Still think you're a parrot?"

His guileless green eyes blinked at her, and she knew that the parrot notion had gone right out of his head. She knew that many abilities weren't revealed with this spell; she hadn't known just from this spell that her horn could purify water or just how far she could run without tiring, but when she had cast it, there had been a very strong sense of new abilities and amazing possibilities which she suspected were overwhelming Harry now just as they had her.

When he released this spell, she had him sit back down and meditate to restore his equilibrium, and she didn't get a word of protest out of him. He seemed to be aware of how much he'd been shaken, and he knew full well which spell came next.

As he settled into his meditation and closed his eyes, she wondered if he recalled and appreciated that she was letting him perform all these spells in a row. The book she had given him recommended spreading it out over a bare minimum of a week, repeating each of the transition spells several times over a period of days in order to acclimate and ensure that magical levels were optimal for the final transformation.

She and Harry had a lot of magical strength at their disposal, and she knew that he'd been hoping and studying for this since sixth year—and probably dreaming of it since third when he'd learned that his father and Sirius could do it. She'd managed it all in one go with Castina's assistance, so she trusted that he could do it with hers. Plus she had acquired a fair bit of experience with an accelerated timeline thanks to her Weresbane, leaving her more confident that it could be pulled off quickly by anyone who had the right motivation and the correct sort of help.

Nearly a half hour elapsed, and then Harry's eyes popped open, and he gazed at her with certain eyes.

It was the moment of truth.

She nodded at him. He rose to his feet in one fluid motion, drew a deep breath, and gripped his tightly grasped wand even tighter. He closed his eyes and spoke the incantation firmly: "Förvandlas till djur."

He was concentrating fiercely, and she and Fawkes were watching closely for any signs of distress. None came, however. Harry was desperately determined and very magical; he had a great deal more discipline and skill than when he had tried to learn the N.E.W.T.-level Patronus Charm at thirteen, so she wasn't surprised to see his body blur, shift, and slowly resolve itself into a brilliant red and gold form low to the ground and roughly a third of his previous size.

Closed eyes blinked open as the change stabilized. His head tilted to one side as he processed all the sensory differences between now and a moment ago. And then he saw the mirror.

Harry's gait as a brand new phoenix was rather ungainly, but he made it over to the mirror, standing within all of an inch of it to peer at himself closely. He ruffled his tail feathers, looking inordinately pleased, even in bird form, when this resulted in the colourful movement and display of the plumage in the mirror. Experimentally, he spread his wings, looking even more content as he tilted them back and forth and got used to the feel of them extended as well as tucked at his side.

He looked over at her and made a musical chirping sound, looking immediately surprised at what had come out of his mouth.

Phoenixes sing, Harry; surely you hadn't forgotten that?

I'm a phoenix!

She laughed. I'd noticed. How are you feeling?

Extraordinary, he said immediately.

He sounded blissful.

Better than a parrot? she teased.

Oh, he groaned. You won't tell Fawkes I said that, will you?

The phoenix appeared in a flash of light.

I heard it myself, and I've spent all my time since then thinking of new nicknames for you, Boy-bird. Perhaps Pea-brained Parrot? Or Polly?

At least in phoenix form, Harry's blushes didn't show.

I didn't guess what I would be, either, she confessed to him.

He sent her a brilliant mental grin, physically turning in a circle, still a little awkward but better than he had been moments ago.

What do you think? he asked hopefully.

Welcome, Fawkes said very seriously. It has been a long time since I have known a human such as you.

The phoenix, she realized, probably had more than one tale that he could tell about Pure Adults and Animagi, but Hermione had always trusted that what she said to him was in confidence. Without really thinking about it, she had always believed that her secrets would be honoured even after she was dead and long-buried, and this confirmation was reassuring.

Since there was now another phoenix in the room, Hermione retired her teaching position and settled on the floor with her back up against the wall as she watched Harry learn how to be a bird.

Fawkes, she was pleased to see, was as cautious with Harry as she had been, ensuring that he could walk, hop, run, turn, and perform every other conceivable land-bound movement before the subject of flying was even broached.

Once it was, there were still all kinds of wing and tail movements that Fawkes obliged Harry to learn from a standing position before he was willing to move on to what the fledgling phoenix really wanted to do.

Upon request, Hermione Conjured a pillar beneath Harry that raised him up nearly to the ceiling. As Fawkes had explained, there was a reason that baby birds were eventually pushed out of their nests; that first flight was most easily accomplished with gravity and instinct. The niceties of taking off and landing could be worked out afterwards.

Fawkes flew up so that he was hovering next to Harry before taking off with a musical trill. To Hermione, it looked as though Harry just threw himself after the other phoenix, but Fawkes had been right. About halfway down, Harry opened his wings, and a moment later, he'd adjusted his descent and was levelling off so that he could fly round the entire room—which he proceeded to do multiple times, letting out his own trill that was so evidently thrilled that it brought a smile to Hermione's face.

It was the same as when he had gotten on a broom for the first time; Harry Potter was meant to fly, even Hermione could see that. As he raced Fawkes round the room a few more times, took corners with his wingtips practically brushing the stones and swooped down to skim just above the floor before rushing towards the ceiling again, she knew that Harry wouldn't ever regret that he wasn't a stag like his father.

Hermione was impressed but kept up her extra Cushioning Charm on the floor and walls just in case. Fawkes showed Harry how to slow, brake, and land several times, and then it was time for Harry to attempt it on his own. He came in a little fast, stumbling the slightest bit as he touched down, but there was no need for her charms.

She applauded, and he sent her a mental grin and strong feelings of affection. She rose to her feet as he flicked his wings as though he were going to immediately try to take off.

I know you want to fly again, but you need to change back into human form.

But— he started to protest.

She simply raised an eyebrow, and the promise he had made to her appeared to come back to him.

Right. Back to human form.

She smiled at his attempt to sound agreeable and not grumpy. He closed his eyes, and she could almost feel him pulling in on himself and reminding himself what it felt like to be human.

In reverse slow motion from the transformation she had watched not so long ago, the red melted away as Harry grew larger and taller and pale-skinned. Once he was human again, he opened his eyes and grinned at her.

"Good job, right?"

She pressed her lips together and offered as serious a nod as she could manage under the circumstances, given that while all integral body parts had reformed just as they ought, several external items were missing. She Conjured a robe and handed it to him without a word.

She now knew that when he blushed, it extended well past his sternum and down his chest. He shrugged hastily into the robe, skin still an amazing shade of pink.

"Can we never speak of that again?" he asked hopefully.

She smiled at him. "You did extremely well, you know. You managed to transform from bird to standing human with very little awkwardness; I can't count the number of people who would have ended up on their arses rather than on their own two feet like you did."

"I'd rather land on my arse with clothes," he said immediately.

She smiled. "Some people can't manage either. Once we're able to show our forms to everyone else, you can wow them all with your entirely clothed transformation. Your secret is safe with me."

"Hold on," he said suddenly. "How did you transform? If you didn't have you to be a super guide, how did you do it?"

She smiled, having a fleeting vision of a Time-Turner-using self coming back to instruct the novice Hermione in her Animagus skills.

"I went out to the Forest. Castina helped."

"But Castina doesn't transform."

"But she's a unicorn, and I'm a human who turns into one. We managed all right," she answered easily.

"With clothes?" he asked pointedly.

"If Castina saw me without clothes at any point, you'll never know," she said evasively.

Harry looked as though he were contemplating marching out to the Forest and seeing if Castina was proof against his puppy-dog eyes, but then he caught sight of Fawkes and was adequately distracted, thankfully, because Hermione had, in fact, been entirely without clothing for more than one of her early transformations. Especially given that clothing was so foreign to unicorns, it had taken a while for Hermione to be able to make the necessary mental adjustment.

Thanks, Fawkes. That was brilliant.

You're very welcome, Boy-bird. It was my pleasure. But I'd better go make sure Albus hasn't gotten into horrible trouble in my absence; we will continue later.

Okay, Harry agreed cheerfully. Thanks again. Bye, Fawkes.

The phoenix launched himself into the air and disappeared in a flash of light. Hermione could almost see the questions forming in Harry's mind, but he refrained from asking her, correctly divining that she was not the expert in these matters.

"There's time," she told him. "Plenty of time to talk it over with him thoroughly. You spent longer in animal form than is usually recommended for a first time, so it'll be good if you think human for a little while, all right?"

He nodded in agreement.

She gave him the standard warning about being trapped in animal form forever and losing his human mind to make sure that he was taking the entire matter seriously. To be perfectly honest, she wasn't sure if she and Harry were in the same danger as others because all the unicorns and phoenixes she'd ever met were quite clever; keeping a self-aware, conscious, and very smart unicorn or phoenix mind didn't exactly seem like a hardship. Still, there was no saying that a "magical animal" brain was meant to run a human body, so caution was still the word of the day.

Harry agreed to get further lessons from Fawkes before he attempted to fly anywhere but in Room One or their quarters. Fawkes could also teach him how to Mask himself into the form of an ordinary bird, and Harry had recognized the necessity of that ability.

She was startled when he launched himself at her and wrapped his arms around her in a death grip. She realized that he'd apparently decided that the dire warnings for the future meant that the first lesson was over.

"You're the best," he said. "Thank you so much."

She hugged him back tightly. "You're very welcome, Harry. It was, as Fawkes said, my pleasure."

The next several days flew by as she brewed and monitored the Animagus transformations of her friends. Before she knew it, the second very important Tuesday was upon them. Remus had once again sneaked into the castle in the wee hours of the morning, and he and Draco had performed a whole slew of final practice transformations. Both of them could now transform smoothly and quickly, and Remus hadn't lost his clothing beyond the first couple of times. They were anxious to move on to the second step and appeared to be ready for it.

They'd both impressed her with their ability to transform with their wands sheathed; they still had them on their persons, but they no longer had to hold them, normally a step that only advanced Animagi like Minerva achieved. Holding the wand to transform, there was always the chance that instead of melding into the animal along with the person's clothing, it would be lost. This could happen especially in moments of panicked transformation and would leave the wizard without a wand, dangerous in early transformations and inconvenient if the Animagus changed locations before transforming back into human form.

Hermione hadn't ever actually used her wand for her transformation; Castina had been teaching her to become a unicorn her way and that hadn't included human props. Hermione, like Remus and Draco now, had had her wand sheathed on her arm. She wondered if the two of them had a better sense of the integral nature of the animal form thanks to all the grappling they had done with the foreign werewolf. Maybe they were just very motivated.

The potion had only been ready shortly before eight in the morning, and she'd had to fob Harry off once more so that he wouldn't worry about where the two of them were. She observed Draco and Remus carefully for an hour before she and Draco headed reluctantly to class.

They returned at lunchtime to the welcome news that Remus reported considerable difference from his standard pre-transformation feelings. He was calmer, not pulled about by the werewolf struggling for freedom. He said he did feel an urge to be in his Animagus form, and she allowed it. Stressing the naturalness of the wolf form along with the human one was essential to her cure.

She had added special transfigured bars to one end of her lab; Remus and Draco each had a separate cage, and she had them warded and layered in spells to ensure that in the worst-case scenario, no one would be in any danger.

The original Wolfsbane had been made and set aside; she'd wanted to be able to say with all honesty to Severus and Poppy that she'd made the potion.

Remus had tested the bars with his increased strength, and Draco had shot a fair few spells at them until they were all satisfied that they would hold. She'd woven runes into these wards, just like around her quarters, so that she would be the only one who could lower them with any sort of ease; she intended to make sure that even in apparently human form, Remus and Draco couldn't get out until she'd thoroughly tested them, and they had both approved of this caution.

Draco and Hermione were the jittery ones all day. When Remus had seen how anxious Draco was, he had been concerned that the potion was not working as well for the blond as it was for the older man, but Draco had sat down and thought about his feelings and then assured the other man that he wasn't feeling any increased blood lust or moon anxiety. No, he was just panicking as a human, and as Hermione was in a similar state, she understood completely.

This was the culmination of a great deal of work, and it was now only a matter of hours until they found out whether or not her cure would be successful.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Cure

The moon rose at four twenty-one in the afternoon, and Hermione had wanted to ensure that Remus and Draco were behind bars and supervised well before then. Poppy had spoken to Charity, and whatever excuse she had given, Hermione had been excused from the class without comment.

Draco and Remus had reassured the mediwitch that the older man was going to be there for Draco's first full moon; Hermione wasn't certain if that knowledge alone had been sufficient to convince the mediwitch that she did not need to be present or if the two of them had come up with other reasons. Poppy had always had a soft spot for Remus, and whatever had been said, Draco and Remus had been given the all clear.

They had got round Harry by claiming that they were following up on the Mood-enhancing potion that he had supposedly been helping with during the new moon, another harmless test that would nevertheless take all evening. Since ninety percent of Harry's concern had immediately centered on the blond, as Hermione had hoped, it hadn't seemed to occur to him to link Draco's disappearance into her lab with the full moon—which he'd already remarked upon because he had been a little worried about not seeing Remus.

She had assured him that Remus had already come to collect his potion and soothed the boy as best she could that Remus must indeed have had a good reason not to stop in to say hi to Harry. She had left him resigned if not reconciled in the common room while she, Draco, and Remus had locked themselves in her lab.

At four o'clock, she cast the Acuity Charm on Draco and Remus and ensured once again that the bars were perfectly secure, having the two men test from the inside a final time; she'd had to leave their wands on them, as they were still too new as Animagi and the event too crucial to risk working wandlessly.

"This is going to hurt a hell of a lot," she said very seriously. "Every painful moment that you remember surrounding the transformation into a werewolf, Remus, is going to be magnified by the Acuity Charm. But I need you to remember exactly what you're fighting for this time."

They both nodded solemnly.

"All this work and time and pain, it's all with the goal of fighting off the Were and remaining a wolf Animagus. I've cast the charm because you have to be able to feel everything. You need to be able to differentiate between the Were and the feeling of the wolf and the Animagus transformation. The wolf Animagus is the one essential reality that you need to focus on with every fibre of your being. The Were is foreign, a disease; tonight we're going to defeat it."

There was no room for doubt in this pep talk.

"We've got less than twenty minutes until the moon rises. I think you'd both be more comfortable sitting down."

She'd made sure to pad both the floor and the walls and bars from the inside with the spell that prevented injury at high velocity; she wasn't sure how violent the fight against the Were would be, and she didn't want them to be hurt.

"There are now ten minutes left until you begin the transformation," she told them at four eleven. "I want you to close your eyes and meditate. You know what you have to do, and I'll be right here with you."

Having a heart attack as she watched from this side of the bars, but still.

They obeyed her, and she watched their breathing even out as they settled into the light trance that would help them concentrate on what they were about to do.

She didn't need a Tempus to tell her when four twenty-one occurred because both bodies in front of her jerked simultaneously. There was no instant sprouting of fur as there had been in the previous transformations that she had witnessed, but what she was watching now was perilously close to convulsions. High-pitched whines were issuing out of their mouths, and it was impossible for her to tell if they were human or animal noises. But they were clearly horribly distressed.

"Fight! You can do it!"

The convulsions grew worse, and she couldn't bear to just watch them.

Fawkes, she begged.

That is a bad plan, Berit.

I know, she agreed, a conversation from months ago echoing through her head. Do it anyway?

He obeyed, and as fast as thought, she was linked to Remus's and Draco's minds. She dropped to the ground like a stone, the part of her mind that wasn't in agonising pain wishing that it had occurred to her previously to pad her side of the lab as well.

Fight it, she admonished in their minds. Remember the wolf. Remember your training. She forced both ideas into their minds, and they latched onto them, hanging onto her like a lifeline.

In tandem, they issued inhuman screams that hurt her ears, the residual agony ripping through their enhanced senses.

Wolf, wolf, wolf, wolf, they began to chant, and she joined them as they fought against the Were that was trying desperately to cling to them and their magic.

They collapsed in unison, the room deathly silent for a moment, and then she heard the refrain continue: Wolf, wolf, wolf, wolf.

Two wolves lay in their cages in front of her, both panting desperately for breath.

She stared at them from her position on the ground next to them and felt almost as exhausted as they had to be. She levered herself to a sitting position and scrutinized them more carefully. They weren't trying to get out and get at the human as a Were would, and they looked like regular wolves to her, but she admitted that she was feeling a wee bit uncertain and shaky at the moment.

She swallowed and found her voice, wondering why she felt as though her throat was scraped raw when it hadn't been she who had been screaming. She released the Acuity Charm since its usefulness had passed, and they didn't need any pain they were still in to be enhanced.

"Remus. Draco." She spoke quietly in consideration for what she was sure had to be tender ears because hers still ached. "You understand me?"

They nodded.

"I'm going to give you a few minutes to recover, and then we're going to transform back into human form, okay?"

More wolfish nods.

She spoke to Fawkes. You're a lifesaver.

I'm still waiting for the ending, Berit, but this is more than I thought to see in this lifetime.

He must, over the years, have seen some really quite extraordinary things.

If I need your assistance later? she asked.

You will have it. But I do not think you will need it.

She couldn't imagine why not; she was going to help more werewolves, and that surely meant more of the same. But perhaps after tonight they could streamline the process a little.

The two wolves had water dishes in their cages, and once they'd recovered enough to move, they lapped up large quantities, leaving Hermione grateful for the replenishing spell that she had set on dishes. She rose to her feet and followed their example, getting herself a large glass of water before sitting down on one of the stools, still rather amazed by what had just happened and by how much it had hurt echoing back into her mind.

Twenty minutes ticked by, and she moved to stand in front of Remus and Draco.

"It's time, gentlemen," she said, making sure her voice was calm and filled with certainty. "Take your human forms."

They rose to stand on all fours, and there was a moment where everything was once again breathtakingly still and silent.

In the blink of an eye, two humans stood across from her.

She stared at them. They stared at her. She only noticed when the tears began to drip off her chin that she was crying, and it seemed that Remus was as well.

"Oh, my God," he said blankly.

These, she realized, were the first words that he had spoken during a full moon in over thirty years.

She broke into an incredulous grin, still crying and sniffing to try to get under some semblance of control.

"Remus," she gasped out a little shakily. "Draco. Congratulations."

She had to sit down again because she was feeling a little overwhelmed. Remus seemed to be concentrating on taking deep breaths over and over again while Draco was grinning stupidly at her.

"I can't believe it's over." Remus still sounded a bit as though he'd been hit with a Confundus Charm. He shook his head. "Even after the new moon, I tried not to let myself believe, not really, and now I'm standing here, and it's … it's done."

She nodded. "I understand. I've been working on this since third year and suddenly here we are. I'm staring at two people who aren't werewolves any more. The first two people. Ever. It boggles the mind."

They grinned stupidly again for a little while, laughing at one another. She drew some deep breaths of her own, wiped away her tears, and tried to think logically.

"I'm going to have to leave you in there for several hours to ensure that you're functioning as you ought to be."

They were back to nodding obediently.

"As long as there are no contraindications, I'll allow you out to test your blood. Assuming that comes up all clear, I'd like to go surprise a whole bunch of people."

They both grinned at her again, nodding enthusiastically.

She noted down all their vital statistics and every feeling that they could recall from the process.

Remus commented on the fact that he felt much as he did during the new moon; his senses weren't nearly as sharp as they always had been around the full moon.

"I suspect that will be a permanent side effect."

Remus shook his head. "I don't count that as a side effect, Hermione. I might have to get used to being human again, but I'm looking forward to it, I assure you."

Draco confirmed that he felt much as he normally did.

"Speaking of what feels normal now, I want you to be aware that you may feel the need to transform from time to time."

They both looked instantly alarmed, and she realized that this had been particularly poor phrasing on her part.

"Nothing like for a werewolf," she hastened to reassure them. "You won't ever be forced to transform against your will." The tension eased. "But I guess you could say that you're in a symbiotic relationship with your wolf now, and I think it will go deeper than it does for a normal Animagus who has the option of learning to transform and never doing it again. Mind you, my research suggests that it's rare that Animagi do this. I've begun to suspect that it comes a little closer to everyone's animal wanting to get out from time to time. It's not unmanageable for them, however, and the same is true of you.

"You still choose when and where, and I'm sure you'll get a sense of what makes your inner wolf happy. You may find that going for a run once every two weeks keeps you from ever feeling a true need to go out, or maybe you'll want to do multiple little transformations throughout a week or a month. It's completely up to you, and it may well vary from person to person. You're going to have to figure out what system works best for you."

Draco was now looking at her quizzically, a very sharp expression in his grey eyes.

"You know an awful lot about the Animagus transformation."

She hadn't really thought this would escape his notice.

Remus's gaze suddenly narrowed as well. "You do," he confirmed. "You knew exactly what we were going through, and whatever you did when we were about to transform, you sent us precise images and feelings of the transformation."

She nodded. "That's entirely possible."

"So why haven't we ever seen you transform?" Draco asked more pointedly.

"Because it's not time. Only one human has ever seen my transformation."

It didn't take either of them very long to guess, although they'd probably come to the conclusion by different paths.

"Harry."

She nodded. Draco understood now, except that he didn't.

"Why would that matter?"

"It does," she said simply. "Is that enough for now?"

Remus laughed. "Hermione, I'm curious, but if you told me it was because you thought everyone else in the world but me deserved to see it, that would be just fine; in case you've forgotten, you've just cured lycanthropy."

She smiled at him. "I don't intend to take advantage of that, you know."

"Psst," Draco stage-whispered. "You're supposed to take advantage of it for as long as you can. You never know when we'll become ungrateful and you'll have missed your chance."

Her smiled deepened. "I'll risk it."

They spent the next several hours chatting quietly and keeping up the scans to ensure that they were in happy human health. They both were, all scans coming up completely normal.

She had them perform the Animagus transformation several more times, confirming that they could now do so at will and painlessly. They followed this with two full hours in wolf form in order to ensure that they didn't feel any Were-like urges even when in that near shape during the full moon. They both reported that they didn't have the slightest urge to hunt her, not even when she added the temptation of an open cut in the last half hour of the test. They appeared to be fully and completely human.

"Okay," she said finally. "I've done every test I can from out here, and both of you appear to be perfectly normal wizards. I'm going to let both of you out, but please leave your wands in the cage until my final tests are completed."

They followed her instructions. Remus was hesitant as he stepped past the bars as though he couldn't believe that he was actually standing with a human on the full moon without being restrained in some manner.

She Summoned their wands to her and gestured the two men to stools before taking samples of their blood and running a quick test.

"I'm introducing too much pure Wolfsbane and Weresbane extracts—the plants—into these blood samples. They're detoxified so that they're harmless to humans, but still fatal to werewolves in this concentration. A werewolf would be poisoned in a matter of minutes."

She offered tea which Remus and Draco took and didn't drink as they waited anxiously for these official blood results. The results came up, and she smiled at them.

"Human."

They both breathed full sighs of relief.

"This is the last test for tonight." She held out two vials. "The pure Weresbane and Wolfsbane extracts. Detoxified for humans, obviously. I need to test it in your bodies not just in these samples."

Without hesitation, they took the vials and swallowed them down, making faces of disgust.

"Now I see where a lot of the foul taste from the Wolfsbane comes from," Remus said. "The Aconite is not so pleasant."

"But you don't feel as though you're about to expire?"

He shook his head. "It tasted awful but that was about the extent of it. Draco?"

Draco shook his head. "About standard for swallowing something from a potion vial. Death does not seem imminent."

She held up two more vials. "These are the counteragents should you find yourself in distress. Otherwise, we're going to give it a half hour to metabolize further and ensure that you still don't react to it in any way."

Neither man exhibited any symptoms of discomfort as she quizzed them on what they would like to do now that they were free of the disease.

Remus waxed eloquent on the myriad places he would like to go, people he would like to see, and jobs he would like to hold now that he wasn't hindered by any laws against non-humans. At the top of his list, though, was his desire to help his fellow werewolves.

Hermione nodded. "I felt certain that would be the case, and my potion and I are at your disposal. I think we may need to come up with some sort of dispensing centre as there are more steps to this cure than people might be hoping for. We need to ensure that all the rules and steps are followed in order to make the cure successful."

"I've been thinking about that," Draco contributed, "since we were talking last time, Remus, about how the potion could help all the werewolves. I've narrowed my most likely properties down to two, and I have no doubt that we can set it up properly for the werewolves for however long they need to be there. I mean, it can't be above a few months, right, with the training and the actual cure? We've got the capital to fund it, anyway."

Remus stared at him as though he had only just realized that Draco was the youngest of the Malfoys, and the Slytherin smirked.

"It will be nice to put the family money to good purpose. Generations of Malfoys will be rolling in their graves."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Remus asked in surprise.

"After what I've just been through?" Draco said incredulously. "They're dead, and they don't have any say over what I decide to do with my money. I know it's a noble cause, and that's the end of it."

He sounded snooty and arbitrary and pure-blooded in that moment, and Hermione loved that he'd been inspired to passion for this cause, for a cause that most of the pure-blood families would no doubt look down upon. Right here and right now they were helping to make one of the changes that would hopefully slow down the return of someone of Voldemort's malevolence and intolerance. Draco Malfoy thought the werewolves were a cause worth fighting for. Every instance of such open-mindedness made her gloriously happy.

"It would be great if the two of you could come up with a plan for the werewolves," Hermione said. "Once you've found out how many are interested, Remus, Draco can be sure of which property would suit best, and we can move on from there."

The two of them agreed, and internally, she cackled like mad. Remus Lupin and Draco Malfoy voluntarily collaborating. She was sure there were Malfoys rolling in their graves.

"One last thing." They looked at her curiously as she held out two bracelets which had a small potion vial worked into the metal design. "I've tested you as completely human. I'm sure that once we get out there, Poppy and probably some St Mungo's professionals are going to want to do the same. I believe that you're human, but this is an experimental potion, so these bracelets contain a potion that will knock anything smaller than a dragon out cold. If you rip them off your wrists, the vial will enlarge and be ready to drink. Just in case."

They nodded solemnly and put the bracelets on without complaint.

She smiled at them. "The whole world is laid out before. What do you want to do first?"

"I want to see the moon," Remus said immediately. "With human eyes. I need to see it."

Draco nodded agreement with the plan, and Remus put his cloak back on. She lowered the wards she'd put up between her lab and her bedroom and again between her bedroom and the common room; she hadn't been about to risk Harry even if two ravenous werewolves ate her in the lab because she was well locked in. It would have been an ignominious way to die, but at least no one else would have been hurt.

She opened her bedroom door, and Harry's head immediately popped up over the couch.

"Heya," he said happily. "I didn't think I'd be seeing you for the rest of the night."

She smiled at him. "I told you Remus had a good reason not to see you earlier, didn't I?"

She moved out of the doorway, allowing both men to emerge with her. It took a few minutes for the Knut to drop. Harry's eyes grew large as saucers.

"But 'Mione, Moony, it's the middle of a full moon!"

The three of them laughed. "Yes, Harry, it is."

"But," he spluttered. "Then how..."

"Surprise," she said inadequately.

He stared at her in complete shock before vaulting over the couch and flinging himself into her arms.

"I love you, 'Mione," he declared staunchly. "You're the most brilliant witch ever."

She sniffed, telling herself that sternly that she wasn't crying again.

"Thank you, Harry. Remus wants to see the moon. Would you like to come out with us?"

Harry nodded, headed off to get his cloak, made it halfway and then hurried back to fling his arms around Remus and assure him that he loved him, too, and that he was so happy for him.

Then, since he was on a hugging spree, Harry, looking slightly sheepish and slightly hopeful—a pretty adorable combination—looked at Draco, who gave the briefest nod of consent, and then Harry had flung his arms around the Slytherin and was holding him close.

"I have no idea why I'm hugging you," he whispered to the blond, "but I'm happy and you look happy, and I hope that's a good enough reason."

Draco was holding Harry back just as tightly. "It very much is, Harry."

Harry beamed and was practically skipping as he went to get his cloak for the second time. Remus was looking rather confused, and she hurried over and offered her arm.

"It's better if you don't ask. Come along before all the good moon-viewing spots are taken."

Laughing, Remus allowed himself to be led, and once Harry had come out of his room, been admonished by Hermione for not bringing his proper cloak or hat and going back for both of those items, they finally made it out of the door.

Since it was after ten, it was relatively quiet, and they only passed a few students in the hall. None seemed to recognize Remus or at least didn't keep a calendar of the full moon at the forefront of their minds, so there was no alarm, just the occasional curious glance because a non-staff adult had appeared.

They reached the entranceway without incident. Remus positively flung the large doors open and stepped outside. Moonlight streamed down upon him and she had to hand it to the universe for giving him this one. It was a perfectly clear night, allowing him to bask in the full moon.

He raced down the steps and positively twirled in the snow.

"Woo hoo!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Hermione found that there were tears in her eyes yet again.

Remus let off a few more yells—just for the sheer joy of it, apparently. It finally drew some attention.

"What on Earth are you doing out here at this hour—?" It was Minerva, and she cut off as she saw that it wasn't a student she was addressing out on the lawn. "Remus Lupin, what do you think you are doing?"

"Look up," Hermione whispered.

Clearly puzzled, Minerva did so, staring blankly. And then her eyes grew wide beneath their spectacles.

"How is that possible?" she breathed.

"Hermione!" Remus yelled. "Come down here and dance in the moonlight. It's so beautiful."

Laughing at his antics, she nevertheless obeyed. She didn't think she'd ever seen him so joyful. They proceeded to waltz under the moonlight and the bright stars, and it was almost perfect.

"What is the meaning of this?"

It was Severus this time, and unlike Minerva, he knew exactly what day it was.

"How?" he demanded shortly.

Remus took the opportunity to scoop her up and twirl her around, and she let out a shout of delight and alarm, holding on for dear life as he spun her around and around. When he finally set her down on her feet again, she clung to him dizzily.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced loudly. "I would like to introduce you to Hermione Granger, the inventor of Weresbane, the cure for lycanthropy."

Minerva and Severus were positively gaping at her, and she couldn't do much more than smile up at them as she fought the last of the dizziness off.

Uh, bird, there appears to be a party down here.

"Hi," she said finally, still a bit breathless.

The phoenix sounded amused. Albus is on his way.

"When did you cure lycanthropy?" Minerva demanded.

"Just now," she said. "That's my bonus project."

"You cured lycanthropy for your bonus project," Severus repeated flatly.

"It encompasses several fields?" she offered uncertainly, still feeling rather giddy about the whole event.

Minerva's stern face broke into a broad smile. "Hermione, you never cease to amaze. This is a miracle."

"It is miraculous," Remus agreed, "but it was also a whole lot of hard work. She's been working on it for years, and this last stage has taken nearly seven months."

Fortunately, Albus arrived before she was forced to go into a detailed explanation on the spot of how she had cured the disease. They seemed to have acquired a following of students and professors, too, despite the lateness of the hour; there were now multiple faces at the door, peering out to see what was going on.

"Hermione," Albus said with a large smile of his own, "how nice it is to see that your hard work has paid off with such a spectacular achievement. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir," she answered. "I think I can safely say that we are all quite delighted."

There were several students from Slytherin who'd joined the group standing at the door, and Draco was staring at them defiantly. If Voldemort thought he'd had the last laugh, he would soon learn that such was not the case.

"Delighted as we may be, I believe it is a little late to be celebrating on the lawn," Albus pointed out mildly.

Recalled to their duties, Minerva and Severus helped send the students off to bed. Several of the older ones still remembered Remus from when he had taught them, and it was very real for them that he had been a werewolf and was no longer. It took a few moments to get rid of the stragglers, more than enough time for Fawkes to relay the message that Albus expected Hermione tomorrow evening at eight o'clock in his office.

She hadn't really thought that she'd get away with not talking to him about it.

She and Harry and Draco were given permission to see Remus off, and Severus stayed, ostensibly in order to make sure that the three students got to bed.

Hermione still couldn't quite believe that they'd succeeded and were standing here under the full moonlight with two non-werewolves. But here they were, in the flesh. It was a whole new world for every werewolf out there.

It could also mean a shift in the balance of power for the war, and she knew that Albus was going to want to discuss that more than anything else. She was happy to brew gallons of Weresbane, if it was necessary, but she was doing it predominantly for the werewolves.

Hopefully Pomona would be more understanding about Hermione's need to check the Weresbane compulsively.

Actually, she supposed she'd have to move it now, make sure it was in a secure location in case a Voldemort-supporting student tried to sabotage her efforts through the source plant. Given how much time she had been spending in the greenhouse, it was likely that it would be a target even if no one she didn't trust knew about the plant specifically.

Once the hubbub died down tonight, she'd sneak down to the greenhouses and see what she could do about warding them.

She smiled at everyone, still feeling an awesome high even with problems looming in the not-so-distant future.

Harry, could you do me a favour?

Whatever you need, he agreed instantly.

Could you go get Tonks?

Sure. You don't want her to miss out on the action?

Something like that.

"Draco," Harry said with an inviting smile, "take a walk with me?"

The Slytherin had gotten quite good at knowing when the two of them had been MindSpeaking to one another, so it was with a slight roll of his eyes that he fell into step with Harry, and they disappeared back into the castle.

Hermione was now left with Remus and Severus, always an interesting combination, but she was pretty sure that Remus was too happy to take anything the wrong way, and one of the biggest reasons that Severus had been leery of Remus had just been removed. They still had their past to contend with, but there was no current monthly reminder anymore.

"Congratulations, Lupin," Severus said stiffly.

Under the circumstances, she thought that was quite a good effort, although she noticed that he still hadn't managed to call Remus by his first name as Albus had bid all of the Order members to do.

"Thank you, Severus," Remus said, still looking blissfully happy. "Thank you for training Hermione so well in Potions."

"I couldn't have done it without either of you," Hermione said, but this didn't seem to lighten the expression on Severus's face any. Naturally. She suppressed a sigh and smiled again at Remus instead. "Just think; you'll be able to eat chocolate whenever you wish."

He beamed at her.

Severus snorted, but they both ignored him.

After a few minutes of silence on Severus's part and rapture on Remus's, Tonks emerged with Harry and Draco and stumbled down a couple of steps as she took in the scene in front of her.

"Remus?" she asked, sounding completely flabbergasted.

Remus's head shot up. "'Dora?"

Then they were in one another's arms and all over one another. It was good that the rest of the students had gone in because the display was a little much for the front lawn of Hogwarts. A look of comprehension had dawned on Harry's face.

"How did you know?" he asked Hermione.

"I suspected for a while, but over Christmas it became quite clear, and I talked to Remus about it."

"I love you, 'Mione," Harry said on a sigh, "but sometimes you're a very difficult person to have as a friend."

She looked at him quizzically.

"You make me feel very stupid."

She shook her head even as she smiled. "We just look at the world differently. We're not all supposed to be curing lycanthropy."

"Some of us are standing up against Voldemort," Draco pointed out. "Some are even occupying the number one position on his hit list. I'd say you're doing all right, Harry, and nobody could possibly consider you stupid."

"Oh, no?" Harry's eyebrows rose. "I seem to recall hearing that epithet out of your mouth a thousand and one times."

Draco made a face. "That was when we were expressing ourselves only in insults. That's over and done with."

"So I can look forward to no more insults from you ever?" Harry asked with a grin.

Draco made a face. "Most definitely not. I would never make such a foolish promise." He looked fleetingly at Hermione and then back at Harry. "Would you like to head in with me, Harry?"

She knew that Harry wouldn't care, but she also knew that Draco would feel better having revealed all to the Gryffindor. The whole evening had gone splendidly, really; their relationship was definitely looking up.

Harry consented, and with a last blinding smile at Hermione, the two of them walked back into the castle. Remus and Tonks had long since ceased to pay any attention to the outside world, and Hermione, worried that she might be exposed to more of the two of them than she was comfortable with, braved their wrath to interrupt.

Remus gave her a smile as beaming as the ones that Draco and Harry had given her, Tonks stumbled into her to give her a big hug, and then Remus and Tonks made their way back inside as well.

Hermione was amused to note that not even Severus pointed out that Remus was heading in the wrong direction.

This left her and Severus standing in front of one another on the grounds to Hogwarts. She put up privacy charms without taking out her wand.

"Would you care to take a walk to the greenhouses, sir?" she asked, thinking that spending a little more time in his company would be very pleasant. "I want to put wards up around the Weresbane to ensure that no one has the brilliant idea of sabotaging our source of the plant."

"So you have need of me now."

Oh, dear. That didn't sound good, and she thought that her "pleasant company" thought had perhaps been a little optimistic.

"I'm sorry?"

His gaze narrowed, his voice acidic. "Now that you would like the menial service of an escort down to the greenhouses, you're inviting me to participate in this project of yours."

She licked her lips and contemplated how best to answer.

"It's my bonus project. I wasn't supposed to ask for help. I came up with what I thought was a workable solution on my own."

"You were creating a potion to cure lycanthropy, and you didn't once mention it to me," he ground out.

"I didn't mention it to anyone," she said defensively. He glared. "Really. There were only two people besides me who knew before tonight, and one of them found out only recently."

"I'm surprised that the secret wasn't shared with everyone if you trusted Mr Potter with it," he snarled.

This was a particularly asinine point, because Harry had kept the secret of the Pure Adults, amongst others, without wavering.

"Harry found out tonight," she answered in a hard tone, "the same as everyone else. Remus knew because he was my test subject. He had to understand what I was trying to do, and he volunteered blood and any information I needed so that I could come up with a viable cure."

"Then who else knew?" Severus demanded curtly, face set in hard lines.

She realized she should have kept her mouth shut, but it was too late for that now.

"Draco," she answered quietly.

His face cleared of the trace of confusion but remained dark. "The night he was attacked."

She nodded. "Greyback bit him. Draco was certain it was close enough to the full moon for him to be infected. He was not … accepting of that reality, so I told him about the possibility of a cure, and he insisted on participating."

"You cured them both."

She offered another nod. "And tonight a bunch of Slytherins saw, so Voldemort will soon know that Draco is alive and unharmed even as the full moon shines down."

"You still might have told me." His voice had not lost the edge of harshness.

"I didn't want to tell anyone."

"I'm not anyone," he hissed and then looked immediately regretful that he'd spoken.

"You most certainly aren't, Severus," she agreed readily. "Don't you see? I couldn't tell you above all."

His face went even whiter than normal, bright spots of colour burning up his cheeks.

"Because I'm a Death Eater."

"Because I wanted you to be proud of me!" she fired back with more frustration than good sense.

Her words arrested him completely. "What?"

"I was trying to cure lycanthropy," she said in a more reasonable tone of voice. "I didn't want you to know about a failure."

He no longer looked angry, but she had difficulty working out exactly what his expression indicated.

His voice was completely free of censure as he said, "I wouldn't have mocked you for a failure of that magnitude. Even making the attempt is admirable."

She shook her head. "I wanted you to see me succeed," she said much more quietly. "All on my own. Just me. I needed you to know that I could do this."

"And drown out all the voices that said you couldn't out-do the pure-blood wizards?" he asked with only a trace of mockery.

She shrugged. "And drown out all the people who said I couldn't succeed period. Drown out all the times that you praised Draco's potion and ignored mine. It's childish, I know. But I needed to keep it secret politically, anyway, and I wanted something shining and splendid that was all mine to hold up and show the world."

"I would say that you succeeded," he replied.

She let out a huff of breath. "Yeah."

He began to walk towards the greenhouses, and she fell in step with him.

"Congratulations."

She smiled at him, feeling a bit like bursting into tears again. "Thank you," she said sincerely, swallowing against the lump in her throat. "That means a lot to me."

"If you are considering allowing anyone—"

"I'd be happy to show my research," she said in a rush before he could finish, causing his eyebrows to rise, and she flushed lightly. "Quite happy, apparently. I've only had myself to bounce ideas off; you know how much Remus sucks at Potions, and I've only had Draco the last couple of weeks, and he really just wanted to hear that it was going to work, not listen to me ramble about exactly how."

"Well, rest assured, I'll be pleased to hear all the details that would bore everyone else."

She grinned once more, probably looking a complete fool. "That would be wonderful."

They arrived at the greenhouses, and Hermione crossed the wards that Pomona had put up that prevented the younger students from getting in amongst the more dangerous plants. She led Severus over to the Weresbane which he quickly catalogued, running over its differences to the Wolfsbane as she watched in some amusement. He caught himself as she stood there smirking at him, and he immediately ceased.

"I look forward to your notes," he said coolly. "Do you have a section on all the safety and health procedures you ignored?"

"I didn't brew in a lav," she pointed out.

He eyed her sardonically.

"Hey," she protested, "I've brewed with you in the Grimmauld kitchen before."

The twins had never said what Severus had done to them, but they had never ventured into the lab again let alone caused an explosion inside that had taken several days to recover from and which had left her and Severus with potions to brew and no proper location in which to do so.

Since the potion they'd been brewing had, in fact, been experimental, he couldn't even argue that one with her.

He was still staring down his nose at her. "I have years of experience and a Potions mastery."

She kind of had to give him that one, but—

"I'm a know-it-all who is friends with a phoenix."

He opened his mouth, considered, and finally just nodded his head in concession of that one, and she smiled at him once more, continuing to ward the area quite carefully.

"Have you ever read Damocles Belby's treatise on creating the Wolfsbane?"[25]

Severus sighed. "I was rather hoping you had not."

"Have you met me?"

"Point taken, Hermione." Exasperated. "You're still a foolish Gryffindor."

Sometimes she was just in good company. Belby had believed in the idea of the potion and found werewolves to test it on long before any healthcare professionals would pay the slightest bit of attention—other than telling him it was his funeral if he went ahead with his tests. He still had loads more experience than she had, of course, but their methods had not been dissimilar otherwise.

Severus watched her ward, and she assumed that he had decided it would be awkward to be found to have warded the area containing a plant that Voldemort would want to destroy or have access to himself.

"You realize I'm observing what you are doing."

She nodded. She would move it all later tonight, and Severus could tell Voldemort whatever he needed to tell the crazy man.

She put up enough wards that it would take a small army to get through.

"Making us work for it, are you?"

She shrugged. "I tend to do my best at everything. And it would disappoint a lot of people if the plant didn't survive. I've got seeds, of course, but that would retard the cure severely. I've got to make the potion every two weeks until everyone is cured."

"It takes more than one dose per month?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to answer and then reconsidered. "We're not talking about this right now. If we start, Pomona will find us out here in the morning. I'll bring you my notes by the end of the week, as soon as I'm sure that they're in some sort of sensible order."

"You realize," he said dryly, "that I'm shocked and appalled by the notion that your notes aren't in the most perfect order at all times."

She grinned, delighted that he was teasing her. "Well, they're probably still anally organized if you asked someone like Harry, but now that I know I'm about to hand them over to someone to read, I need to make sure that they're," she cleared her throat, admitting sheepishly, "completely perfect."

He snorted. "Indeed. Now, you have trespassed upon my time long enough this evening. I have rounds to perform; there appears to be a rather wild moon in the sky tonight."

Remarkably content despite the end to her time with Severus, Hermione fell in step with him. As they made their way across the grounds, Hermione saw the flicker of movement in the Forest that indicated that the night's events had been observed.

Congratulations, Castina said. The Golden Wolf is quite joyous.

Thank you, she answered. He has much to be happy for.

Indeed. Be careful.

I know, Hermione answered softly. But I had to try.

Of course you did, Castina answered with a snort, affection clear. That is what you do. It is what you are, and no one would change that. I am glad that your mate protects you.

Hermione narrowly forbore glancing over at Severus. It's nice when he does that, isn't it? I'll visit as soon as I'm able, which might not be for a few days, under the circumstances.

Until then, Berit.

The flicker was gone, and Hermione and Severus reached the doors to the castle and passed inside. Severus walked her down to her rooms. There was no sign of Harry and Draco, and she wasn't sure if that meant they were having a long discussion or if they'd passed that and were already having wild and crazy sex somewhere. She'd find out eventually, she supposed.

She checked the Map to make sure that no one was heading out to sabotage the greenhouse just yet, made sure that Severus was otherwise occupied, and then headed out to make decoys and transplant.

She followed this up back in her lab with making proper notes about the evening. Since it was fresh in her mind right now, it seemed like the prime time. Severus already knew about Fawkes, so she wouldn't even have to edit that part out for him; she wanted someone to be able to read exactly what had happened.

Given the complexity of the potion and the treatment, she knew she wouldn't be able to simply write up a paper on how to cure lycanthropy and let people go at it. The cure needed to be controlled to keep it from being misused, and it needed to be controlled by her or people she trusted to keep its dispensing from being abused.

By the time she had flipped through all her notes, added addenda, sorted them, and copied them, she felt that she was getting closer to a state wherein she could sleep. She climbed into bed secure in the knowledge that there were two more blissfully happy non-werewolves in the world thanks to the Weresbane.

On Thursday morning, the greenhouse almost burnt to the ground, which Hermione guessed meant that her decoys had been discovered as such. Or someone other than Severus had been tasked with retrieving the plants and, failing that, had sought to destroy them right away.

The sight of the smoke billowing in the air around the building had caused a great deal of panic, as this was where all the seventh-years' final projects were growing. Once the flames were subdued and the smoke had subsided, however, the students had seen that all the plants were intact, encased in shimmering wards that had kept the smoke and flames out and maintained the ambient temperature for the plants which otherwise would have been exposed to the harsh air of a February in Scotland.

In addition to Hermione's wards, the Heads of House and the headmaster had added their own, so the success—or blame, depending on which side they were talking about—could be shared around.

The headmaster played up the unfortunate accident aspect of it, though Hermione thought it unlikely that anyone actually believed this. Hermione hoped that the futility of such action had been brought home to whoever had made the attempt, as she would hate to keep putting students and their hard work at risk—not that she felt she could have done much different given the importance of the cure.

The meeting with Albus had gone much as she expected. They had agreed that the werewolves needed to be cured, and if she continued to suspect that their reasons for wanting it to occur as soon as possible were not quite the same, she could admit that it was important for the war effort and he that it was important solely for the werewolves themselves, and they could go on from there. She knew being the leader of the Light was no easy task, and she did not envy him the position.

Albus approved Draco's and Remus's efforts, tacitly agreed to forgive them all what bending of school rules might be necessary to get everything accomplished, and then they were sent about their business.

On Friday evening, there was another training session, and Hermione brought her copy of her final notes on the Weresbane to give to Severus. He accepted them with something that resembled a smile before attempting to wipe the floor with her, Harry, and Draco.

This Friday, however, was the thirteenth of February, and it seemed that Voldemort could not resist making a statement. Severus was Summoned all of an hour into their training. She shielded him from the attack by the other two without thought, causing everyone to stare at her.

She evidently spent a lot of time staring at Severus to notice quite so quickly.

"The headmaster?" she offered.

He gave a curt nod as he Summoned the appropriate garb.

Fawkes, Severus has been Summoned.

I'll inform Albus.

"Be safe."

He pulled the cloak on and pressed her notes back into her hands. "I cannot have these. I will return."

She nodded, face pinched as he Disillusioned himself and passed out of the room.

He'd never promised to return before, and she couldn't help but feel as though he had said that he would return to her, although this probably just meant that she was stressed and overly emotional.

She hastily verified that she was shielding her emotions, checked to make sure that her face had lost its grimace of distress, and turned back to Harry and Draco.

She cleared her throat. "Shall we keep training?"

Harry and Draco exchanged looks and then nodded. They managed almost another forty minutes before she lost all concentration and nearly blasted out a section of the wall because she wasn't paying enough attention to what she was doing.

She found that Harry was smiling kindly at her and realized as he wrapped his arms around her that he was "handling" her, but she couldn't seem to be able to snap out of it so it wouldn't be necessary. If he made sure that she got back to their rooms, then she didn't have to worry about it; at the moment, the less responsibility she had, the better.

In their common room, Harry served her tea, wrapped her hands around the mug, and urged her to drink until she actually took him up on the instruction and swallowed some of the hot liquid. Draco was gazing at her narrowly.

"What?" she finally asked when she caught sight of his expression.

He shrugged. "I thought you'd be more used to it, I guess. I mean, this happens pretty frequently, right?"

The tea seemed to be thawing whatever it was that had frozen solid inside of her, and she nodded at Harry in appreciation. He settled at her side, perching on the arm of her chair, seeming a little calmer himself.

"Certainly not as infrequently as we might wish," she said as circumspectly as she could.

"You seem really upset." Draco was frowning.

"I don't like anyone going out to be tortured, Draco," she said, an edge to her voice now, "and we all know what he's likely going through at that meeting."

As the last meeting Draco had attended had resulted in his being horribly beaten and left to die, the conversation ended rather abruptly, but the look Draco gave her suggested that her distraction would have worked better on a daft Gryffindor and he hadn't really been put off.

Whatever Draco had guessed, she wasn't so sure that he really wanted to know that she fancied his godfather.

Harry still had an eye on attending to her because he suggested that they do homework, and she didn't feel she had any choice but to agree. She needed to distract herself somehow. Amongst other assignments, she was supposed to be writing up a paper for her professors explaining all the different components of the Weresbane. Given the very visible evidence from Tuesday, they all believed her, of course, but to make it official, they would each need a detailed description of the aspect of the cure that pertained to their field of study and a précis of how it fit in with the rest of the cure.

Albus had agreed that, under the circumstances, he could ask all the professors to grade the papers in one sitting in his office, all details that Severus would be aware of as one of the professors involved. He could therefore leak the information back to Voldemort, and the chances that someone would break in to any offices or that the professors would be in any particular extra danger because someone thought that they had the cure would be minimized.

Hermione didn't like the position that this left Severus in, but she reminded herself—multiple times, as the evening progressed at a snail's pace—that Severus had been a spy for many years and was very good at what he did.

Draco and Harry gave up on their homework and started on some physical training. Draco was a fast learner, and he ensured that they practiced whenever possible because he hated being behind. He really didn't like Hermione bringing him to the ground; Harry doing the same did not seem to be nearly as grating.

She still couldn't quite believe that the two of them didn't appear to have done anything to advance their relationship. They were so clearly enamoured of one another, and Harry had been so adorably upset at the distress caused to Draco by the werewolf issue, offended that Draco thought so little of Harry as to imagine that he would care, and delighted anew by the cure that Hermione felt that surely their joint exuberance would have the expected result.

Thus far, however, nothing. And she didn't kid herself that she wouldn't know because this was Harry she was talking about. It would get around everywhere eventually, but since Voldemort already really wanted to kill both her and Draco, she doubted that it would matter much which one of them everyone believed was dating Harry. It wasn't a safe position, but it was unlikely to be much worse than what they were already living.

She watched Harry and Draco essentially rough-housing across the room and was pretty sure that they were getting a lot more casual touches and caresses in than was quite normal for the activity they were supposedly engaging in.

She really hoped that they weren't holding back because it would leave her the last Pure Adult. She didn't want to bring it up in case that wasn't the reason; she knew how stubborn Harry could be.

Given how much they were all over one another right now, though, perhaps she wouldn't have to wait very much longer after all. Harry would be a great deal safer when that happened, so she really didn't begrudge it him. She'd manage, as she had always done; for the longest time, she'd thought she was the only magical Animagus, and she could keep on as a Pure Adult even if she didn't have company.

It grew later. Draco offered to do her rounds with Harry at half twelve, and since they so clearly wanted the opportunity to walk around together, she consented, telling them that she wanted an early night anyway.

Neither looked terribly convinced, but they allowed her statement to stand and ducked out into the hallway to begin their rounds. Checking the Map for their location, she waited until they reached the beginning of their circuit up on the Astronomy Tower and then she sneaked out of the room, making her way Masked to the secret exit.

She had an unshakeable bad feeling about the state Severus was going to be in when he came back. Although he was in good standing with Voldemort now compared to how it had been at the end of her sixth year, it didn't mean he couldn't be badly punished for an infraction of some sort.

Hermione didn't know why the emotions were quite so strong right now; while she was never comfortable while he was gone, she did not usually go out and wait for him. She knew he could take care of himself.

That didn't stop her from worrying.

And no matter how logical she tried to be, she couldn't convince herself that she was just being fanciful. Casting a Warming Charm and transfiguring her clothing, she was finally forced to still her bad case of nerves by making her way outside so that she could wait against the wall of the castle right next to the door. This way, she would be able to see Severus approaching once he made it onto the grounds.

By the time an hour had passed, she'd somehow progressed all the way over to only a few feet away from the gate that guarded the entrance to the grounds.

It was another hour before the Potions master arrived with a barely audible pop, collapsing immediately to the ground beyond the gate.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Decorations

Hermione knew it wasn't entirely prudent, but she didn't care; she rushed past the wards to help Severus up, hushing him as she got his arm braced across her shoulder. She Disillusioned them so that they wouldn't be easily seen and helped him stumble back towards the dungeon entrance. It was an occasion where she was very thankful for her wandless abilities.

"What are you doing out here?" he somehow managed to ask. She could feel the violent shudders that were wracking his body in what she guessed was a combination of the Cruciatus and the cold.

"I wanted to make sure you didn't take a nap outside the gates," she said, pretty sure that a confession that she had been worried out of her mind wouldn't go over well. "It didn't look terribly comfortable."

"Would have been fine," he gritted out.

"Uh huh," she agreed, not believing a word of it. "I'm sure lying face down in the snow like that was much more pleasant than it looked."

He gave a grunt that might have been acknowledgement of the stupidity of what he had said. She couldn't help but note that while he might be annoyed with her, he hadn't yet actually attempted to take away points, assign detention, or even get her to go away. He needed assistance, even if he wasn't willing to admit it in so many words.

They managed to hobble all the way back to his quarters, and he was apparently resigned by then, as he simply spoke his password and allowed her to help him inside where she released her spell so that they were visible once more. She at least had previous experience navigating the sitting room, and she got them to the bedroom quite quickly compared to the last time she had done this.

Once they arrived, she was relieved to note that there was no repeat of the covered-in-blood scenario, but he'd definitely suffered through a protracted dose of the Cruciatus. He looked terribly pale, his face locked into a pained grimace.

"I still know this neat spell that undoes lots of buttons," she said softly.

He managed the briefest of nods, and she got him out of his cloak and outer robes so that he was once again in trousers and a white-collared shirt. She was having very strong feelings of déjà vu.

"Time to lie down, I think. Before you fall down."

He didn't protest nearly as much compared to last year, and in short order, he was stretched out on the bed. She retrieved the blue vial without being asked and held it up to his mouth so that he could swallow rather than spill it. It took her all of two seconds after that to decide that the little bottle wasn't going to be enough to deal with this bout of that hideous curse, so she crawled into bed with him, sternly reminding herself that she needed to not think of other contexts where this might be happening.

"Shouldn't," he muttered.

She snuggled up against him. "If it helps, I'm doing it," she said firmly. "You're in a bad way. What happened? I thought he was pleased with you."

He seemed to press himself closer to her warmth whether he thought it was a good idea or not, and he managed to clumsily wrap his arms around her, still shuddering and twitching violently.

"He's not happy," Severus admitted.

"I gathered not." Not that she'd ever seen much positive behaviour when Voldemort was happy, but this would have been a bit extreme even for him.

"C'we talk about it in the morning?"

It didn't seem sporting to tell the man who was in horrible pain that she insisted on their talking about it now, so she agreed, and he relaxed against her with a relieved huff of breath.

It took longer this time for the nerve spasms to end, she was sure that it did, and she had to wonder how long he'd been tortured. It was not a pleasant thought. She pressed herself closer to him, hoping that this would somehow speed up the healing process.

Ever so slowly, the pain seemed to leach out of him until his breathing settled into the even rhythm of sleep.

It was more awkward this time around when she realized that she still wanted to stay this way with him forever. Unfortunately for her, it was only when he was in agony and drugged out of his mind that he allowed this intimacy, and that was a rather depressing thought.

It occurred to her that there were probably others who were worried about the man's return.

Severus is back, she announced. He won't be able to report to the headmaster until tomorrow.

Fawkes sounded immediately concerned. He's all right?

He's been better, she said, trying to keep her tone even. Snapping at Fawkes wouldn't improve the situation. He'll be in a fit enough state tomorrow morning. I don't want him bothered for the rest of the night. He's asleep now.

As you say, Berit, Fawkes agreed, his tone turning faintly teasing. It is good that you are taking care of him.

She rolled her eyes. Go away, bird.

He smiled at her before fading out of her mind, and she imagined that he was now reporting to Albus. She closed her eyes and decided that she didn't care that it would no doubt be more sensible to leave right away. She was going to get a bit of sleep, that was all, and she didn't want to risk waking him now.

Even in her mind, she made a face at that excuse, but she didn't move away from him, and the soothing sound of his breathing lulled her to sleep.

It was nearly three hours later before she awoke. Reluctantly, she began to slither her way out of Severus's grasp. It wasn't easy since he had wrapped both arms around her. She knew she'd failed to be careful enough when she felt his entire body tense. She looked up to find glittering black eyes locked on hers.

She offered a very nervous smile and said completely inanely, "Hi."

"Hello." His voice was still gravely and not up to its usual level of velvetiness.

"I was trying not to disturb you," she said, still stupidly. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"I'll survive," he said dryly.

"You feel better?" she asked hopefully.

He nodded. "Yes." He was silent for a moment. "Thank you."

She shook her head. "It was the least I could do after the state you came back in. I'm sorry he does that to you."

"There is no use dwelling on it."

He seemed to realize suddenly that he was still holding onto her and let her go. She sat up, moving away from him so that they were no longer touching anywhere; too much of her wanted to latch onto him again and go back to sleep, and she knew how well that would go over. Severus sat up as well so that they were facing one another properly.

"I suppose not," she admitted. "I informed the headmaster that you would be well enough to report to him in the morning."

He looked faintly puzzled before he remembered: "Fawkes."

She nodded. "He doesn't mind being a messenger bird from time to time. Will you tell me what happened?" His expression became very grim, and she immediately rescinded. "I'm sorry. You probably want to sleep. I'll just go—"

She'd made it halfway off the bed when he spoke.

"He wasn't pleased that I could tell him nothing of use about the Weresbane. He wasn't pleased that whoever set the greenhouse on fire failed to retrieve or destroy the plant. He knows that he will now have difficulties with the werewolves, and this has made him more determined than ever to get his hands on the Pure Adults. I have been charged with finding the two of them."

Bugger. She sank back down onto the mattress. They'd all been worried that Voldemort wouldn't take it well, but she hadn't considered just how much of the responsibility for the solution was likely to fall onto Severus's shoulders.

She opened her mouth to apologize, but he shook his head a trifle impatiently, she thought.

"You can't wish that you hadn't cured lycanthropy, Hermione, and you can't help being a Pure Adult. You were the one who said you weren't going to let the Dark Lord rule your life, and so you shouldn't. He's unpredictable and violent no matter what while you and your cure are going to help us win this war."

It still didn't make her feel better. She knew with absolute certainty that she couldn't lose Severus to this war. There was at least half of her that was declaring very loudly that the cure wasn't worth his life, and she didn't want to even think about the decision she would have had to make if she had known this would happen before she'd given that final dose to Remus and Draco. It was one thing to say that the needs of the many were greater than the needs of the few, but it was heart-stoppingly difficult all of a sudden when the few was someone whom she cared about rather desperately.

"I…." Nothing adequate seemed to have suddenly materialized in her brain, so all that came out was: "I'm still sorry."

He made a face. "I would expect nothing less of you, Hermione. What time is it?"

"Just after six."

He let out something that was nearly a sigh. "I'll report to Albus."

"I'm sure he doesn't expect you for several hours; you could get more sleep."

She still felt bad for having woken him.

He shook his head. "I'm awake now."

With an effort, she bit back her protest that while three hours of sleep was fine for her, she doubted that it was fine for him. It was a Saturday; he didn't have to be completely functional if he didn't want to be.

She finally had the good sense to get out of his bed, and he did the same. They were both fully clothed, but the awkwardness was almost visible.

Casting about for anything to say, she settled on, "I'd better get back to my rooms and make sure Harry isn't about to send out a rescue party."

"You didn't inform him where you were going?"

She shook her head. "He and Draco took my rounds, and I told them I was going to have an early night."

"And instead you sneaked out to watch for me?"

She nodded. "I didn't want them to worry."

He nodded, stiffly she thought, and she wondered what she'd said wrong. Since he would likely curse her if she said she was sorry again, she gave up on the idea of an apology.

"I … I guess I'd better be off." She had the sudden urge to hug him goodbye and began to reassess whether or not three hours of sleep was actually adequate for her to be rational. "I'll see you later, Severus."

He nodded again, and she hurried out of the room.

She should definitely have left before he'd woken. She now knew that he tolerated her presence in an emergency but was not pleased. He'd been alarmed, even, when he had first woken. Severus Snape did not like to wake up next to Hermione Granger. It was clear. Depressing, but clear.

Masking herself before she left the sitting room, she made her way back to her common room and found that Harry was already awake. She contemplated trying to sneak past him, but he'd already noticed the gargoyle disappear, so she let it re-form behind her and unMasked.

He frowned. "I thought you were in your room. I was waiting for you to wake up."

She shook her head, admitting after a brief inner battle, "I went out to make sure that Severus was all right."

He didn't seem terribly shocked or appalled by this news. "Is he?"

She nodded. "More or less. I had to help him get to his rooms, and I fell asleep while I was monitoring him."

Harry nodded, apparently accepting this explanation, which sounded a little dodgy to her, but perhaps he was just being nice about it.

"How were your rounds?" she asked, trying to get them off the topic of her and Severus and his quarters as quickly as possible.

Harry shrugged. "Fine. Despite how long we've been doing it now, it still seems to disconcert everyone when Draco and I go about together." Harry smiled affectionately. "Draco's really good at delivering the scathing lines that send people scurrying back to their rooms. I think we should trade up with Pansy more often."

Smirking to herself, she imagined that Harry had multiple reasons to think that.

She wanted the two of them to be happy, but she felt compelled to point out, "As it stands at the moment, rounds are a legitimate way for Pansy and Draco to be 'forced' to spend time together without undue censure from the other Slytherins."

Harry clearly hadn't considered this, for his head tilted to one side before he said, "Never mind, then. You're right. I don't want him to lose the opportunity to talk to one of his friends—he doesn't get nearly enough chances."

She nodded, pleased that he didn't seem to have any reservations about the two Slytherins spending time together. She was sure that she wasn't the only one to wonder how close the two of them were or had been. But it really wasn't any of her business—unless Harry were hurt, of course, and then she could stomp all over everyone who'd caused him harm.

"Do you want to duel?" Harry asked. "I feel a little rusty after last night being cut so short."

She agreed, and they spent almost an hour and a half fighting. This was more amusing for the two of them when they were alone because they could both cast wandlessly and as powerfully as they liked; they'd started not calling the duel until they'd actually stopped the other person for real, whether that was by knocking each other out or casting some sort of spell that prevented them from using any of their abilities. Harry had once managed a laughing spell that kept Hermione from casting even wandlessly because she'd been too consumed by mirth. Usually, though, they had to Stun one another to finish the duel for sure.

This morning, Harry won, and he Ennervated her a moment later and helped her to her feet.

"Thanks," he said, grinning happily. "That was fun. I think we're doing pretty good."

She nodded her agreement.

He was silent for another moment before ventured, "Have you noticed that Severus doesn't seem to insult us as often when Draco is duelling with us?"

Hermione nodded.

She wasn't sure if this was due to the fact that they really were better than Draco and Severus was forced to acknowledge that by not slinging insults their way when they kept beating his godson, or if it was because they were often split up, making them less of a big, shiny Gryffindor target.

"Perhaps he's happier because it's less two-on-one Gryffindor time," she said mildly, not having any really useful answers.

Harry considered this and then shrugged as though to say that was as good an explanation as any.

She and Harry showered, dressed properly, and headed up to breakfast. It was only as they reached the Great Hall that they realized what day it was. They exchanged glances. Ri-ight.

It was fully as bad as it had been in second year when Lockhart had been in charge. Albus had evidently felt he had a point to make after what had happened at Christmas, and Hermione had been far too preoccupied the night before to even remember that it was the fourteenth of February, let alone take any corrective action.

There was a profusion of pink, red, and white. It looked a bit as though the walls had grown a multicoloured skin because they were positively covered in bows, streamers, and cut-out hearts. There were a great many hearts, more than Hermione thought should ever be in one place at once, varying in shape, colour, and size—and truly appallingly garish.

"What shop did he have to rob to get all this?" Harry asked, sounding stunned.

She snorted. "Shop? Harry, he had to go straight to a manufacturer warehouse in order to get this quantity. Do you realize how large the Great Hall is?"

"Sweet Merlin." Draco had come up behind them. "What big pink monster crawled in here and died with a giant explosion?"

Harry conceded that possibility with a grin. They were three of the first to arrive.

"There's nothing you can do?" Harry asked, turning to her.

"It's a little late for that," she said defensively. "It took hours last time."

Even Albus wasn't here yet.

"You couldn't try?"

She sighed. Draco looked quizzical.

Fawkes, do you know what he's done to keep it all here?

The phoenix did not. He waited until early this morning to put everything up, but I think he realized you were otherwise occupied. He'll be down in about ten minutes, so now would be the time to make the attempt.

She surveyed the room. What sort of improvements could she actually make in such a short period of time? The tablecloths were red. The ceiling had been charmed a lurid pink, so the clouds blowing by looked sort of like candyfloss. She was pretty sure that all their food was going to come out in colours, and she couldn't do anything to prevent that. The dishes were pink, and she was guessing that the serving trays would be white to round out the colour scheme.

The worst of it, she thought, was the ceiling and walls. And those were the parts where Albus had tried to get away with modifying the castle itself. If he'd done it hurriedly this morning, he might not have been very careful.

She went over to the nearest wall, tried to ignore the hearts and dug her hand in until she found the cool stones of the castle. She closed her eyes and drew several deep breaths, finding her core and spinning out enough magic with little control over her emotions so that she connected with the castle.

She thought about how beautiful Hogwarts was unadorned and how garish all the decorations were which obscured this beauty. The founders who had made the castle hadn't asked for a ceiling like that, and Hermione was sure that they were right.

If nothing else, she was pretty sure the castle would get a kick out of her thoughts, which was why she might get away with this.

It was the same principal she had used when charming the gargoyle for her door back in September. Old, magically-permeated areas like Hogwarts had to be coaxed as much as spelled, and if Albus had been in a hurry, then it was possible Hermione's coaxing now would prove more effective.

She opened her eyes and returned to Harry and Draco. They were looking expectant and confused.

"Well?" Harry asked. "I don't see any difference."

She just smiled and said sweetly, "Patience is a virtue. We may be having a long breakfast this morning."

Confused or not, they followed her lead and sat down at the Gryffindor table. The Hall filled up. The headmaster—dressed very luridly in pink robes covered in red and white hearts—was looking very smug up at the High Table.

Most of the students seemed to be up, despite its being a Saturday morning. But the post was bringing valentines, plus it was the first Hogsmeade visit this term. It was a perfect date day, meaning that everyone was apparently out of bed and raring to go.

It was perhaps ten minutes into breakfast when Draco noticed.

"Is that wall shedding?"

Harry turned around to look and saw that this was indeed the case; the wall behind him had started to lose its decorations. One by one, they were detaching from the wall and fluttering to the floor.

The two of them turned to look at Hermione, who offered them a look of innocence which they didn't appear to buy.

As breakfast progressed with many of the children stretching the meal out so that they could open their cards and gush over them, a steady rain of decorations continued around the perimeter of the room.

"Look up," Draco whispered.

They turned their gazes to the ceiling where a ferocious gale seemed to be ruffling up those pink clouds, whipping them right out of the sky to be replaced with calm blue and fluffy white clouds.

"Is it just me," Harry asked, "or did someone just get a little creative about the weather that's up there? I don't think that just happened outside."

She smiled. "The ceiling is just an enchantment, you know."

"But I've never seen anyone able to affect it," Harry protested. Then he made a face and conceded for the occasion, "Except the headmaster, obviously."

"He might not have asked very nicely," she pointed out with amusement.

They looked at her in puzzlement.

"If you were the castle and you had a lovely enchanted ceiling, would you want it to be turned candy floss pink without someone asking politely?"

They shook their heads slowly.

"Precisely," she said with satisfaction.

As more and more of the decorations fell, the room began to look quite normal. There were still the decorative place settings, but without the Valentine's Day entrails all over the walls, it was nearly pleasantly festive instead of horribly oppressive.

Severus was smirking openly by this point, clearly amused that Albus seemed to be losing another decorating challenge to her—and no doubt feeling vindicated after the headmaster's Christmas revenge. Hermione knew there was no way Severus was going to let the headmaster perpetrate a similar ambush this time around.

Albus decided that he wasn't done, however; more decorations began to appear on the denuded walls. Hermione waited to see how the castle would react.

The show was a good one. Thunder crashed violently overhead, lightning sparking through the sky. A torrential downpour began, and despite the fact that it was only the ceilings that was spelled, the enchanted water ran across the ceiling and down the walls and washed all the old and new decorations off so that they were quite abruptly all piled around the perimeter of the room.

I think a Vanishing spell wouldn't go amiss at the moment, Hermione suggested.

You got it, Harry said cheerfully.

The decorations disappeared. In the blink of an eye, the storm was over, the dark clouds rolling away so that there were clear skies above once more. The students looked puzzled, although more than one seemed to be trying to covertly point out the amused Severus.

She thought it was rather funny that they were all blaming him. Albus spared her a glance, nodding in apparent defeat, although his eyes were still twinkling. She merely raised an eyebrow, not about to admit to anything in such a public setting.

Whether he was really giving up or not, she didn't believe the castle would let him get away with anything else during the day, not unless he managed to convince it that he was accenting the structure rather than burying it.

She, Harry, and Draco finished their breakfast and then rose to prepare for the trip into town. The visit began at ten, and they'd been scheduled for the first shift. Hermione needed to get the overly hormonal children out of her system as early as possible in order to prevent her being annoyed enough to curse them by the end of the day. She didn't actually dislike the idea of Valentine's Day, but she was driven absolutely bonkers by the reality of it at Hogwarts; the children ate far too much sugar, had far too many lurid teenaged romances, and got far too emotional over things that they likely wouldn't even remember by this point next year.

She knew there was no use in telling any of them this and that it was all a part of growing up. But it was awfully annoying to have to monitor it all when she'd already got through it once on her own. She didn't want to step foot in Madam Puddifoot's. She really didn't want to counsel any of the many students who would no doubt be in tears by the end of the day because they hadn't got a card from the person they fancied, or they did get a card but it didn't say what they wanted, or they did get together, but it wasn't what they thought, or they didn't get together and their friendship was now ended forever.

Hermione couldn't handle that many adolescent hormones, she really couldn't. Yet here she was at Hogsmeade at ten o'clock in the morning, suffering through it anyway. She refused to even consider the possibility that she might feel better about the holiday if she had someone that she was spending it with.

But it was amusing to contemplate for a few minutes just how everyone would react if she'd invited Severus to accompany her. It would probably have shocked them right into good behaviour, actually. Hmm … that was almost tempting. Purely for its disciplinary benefits, of course.

She, Harry, Draco, and Pansy were walking around together, having agreed that a group of four would be safer given the sugar high that the kids were on. Additionally, of course, Hermione was covering for Harry and Draco, and now that Pansy was with them, it seemed even more legitimate. Draco and Harry weren't exactly going to have the opportunity to wander around holding hands and snogging, but at least they'd be in Hogsmeade together over Valentine's Day. Maybe they would be able to remember it as their first Valentine's Day together. Sappy, of course, but sort of sweet.

The day passed without anything horrible happening. She was amused to note that Remus had somehow been "roped" into Hogsmeade duty and happened to be doing his rounds with Tonks. The two of them had a tendency to thank her whenever they saw her though she insisted every time that no thanks were necessary.

Remus had begun informing the werewolves about the cure and a safe place to take it, further explaining that they would need to be cured in small groups. They were going to start with those who'd been Animagi or who had Animagi or Transfiguration training, giving everyone else more time to train.

Thanks to Harry and Draco, Remus had been able to promise that they would be helped each month with the Wolfsbane until they were all cured. Now that the secret was out that she had created the Weresbane, there was nothing to stop her from making the Wolfsbane for everyone, and the two boys were going to fund it all. To protect his position, Severus had been unable to do so for either side, claiming that it took too long and was too difficult to brew at volume. Since Voldemort would already be after her head for the Weresbane, she could finally openly brew the Wolfsbane as she had wished to do last year when she had learnt how to brew it—but when Albus and Harry had refused to let her risk herself.

The next new moon was on the twenty-sixth, and Remus was going to bring her blood samples that she could test for everyone who'd signed up. At that point, they would all be put in the safe house that Draco had devised so that they would be free of Voldemort and Greyback's influence.

She wasn't going to start the first trial until the new moon in March so that the first batch of werewolves would have almost a month and half to study for becoming Animagi and practice all the necessary techniques and spells; she, Remus, and Draco had agreed that it was absolutely essential that they do this carefully.

Hermione was greatly relieved when their shift ended and she was able to return to Hogwarts. Two hours of babysitting emotional Hogwarts students was one hour and fifty-nine minutes too long as far as she was concerned. Harry and Draco invented a book that they needed which required them to stay in town a little longer, and Pansy agreed to walk back to the school with Hermione.

Once they were out of sight of the town, the Slytherin spoke.

"It's not exactly prudent for you to be walking alone with me. If Draco were thinking with his brain, he'd have noticed that himself."

Hermione shrugged, throwing up privacy charms so that their subject would not be overheard, just in case. "I have my wand, and in a fair fight, I imagine I could take you."

"I heard about the duel in class before Christmas," Pansy said, rolling her eyes. "If you can take Draco down, you can take me down. Walking with me is still unwise."

Hermione considered this. "I guess it depends on whether or not I trust you."

"Your walking with me is supposed to indicate that you do trust me?" the Slytherin asked sceptically.

Hermione shrugged, admitting, "Well enough. I'm not saying we're about to become best friends, but I trust you not to injure me on the walk back to Hogwarts."

"But you trust Draco more."

It wasn't a question, so Hermione didn't answer it. Instead, she said, "I'm going to ask you a question."

Pansy's nod was wary.

"Have you been asked to gauge our sincerity and how much we actually trust Draco?"

Pansy didn't even bother to look offended.

"I may have been one of several to be asked, but that doesn't mean I'm obliged to give an accurate answer."

This was a fair point, but it didn't mean she wouldn't give an accurate answer, either.

"After all," Pansy continued, looking at Hermione out of the corner of her eyes, "if I were going to do that, I would be able to make a very interesting observation about how well Potter and Draco are getting along."

Hermione merely nodded, which was evidently not the response Pansy had anticipated.

"You can't be that blind," Pansy protested. "Not even a Gryffindor could miss what's up between the two of them."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I'm well aware, but you've misjudged if you think that I'm upset about it."

There was stark disbelief in Pansy's voice now. "You don't care that Draco Malfoy is stealing your boyfriend?"

Hermione shook her head. "Harry and I are great friends, and we were convenient for a while. But I always knew I wasn't the love of his life."

Really, really knew.

A strange look passed over Pansy's face, and Hermione was now certain that Pansy and Draco had been intimate.

"It's hard to be female and the love of his life when it turns out he's a gay boy," Hermione pointed out helpfully.

Pansy let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Merlin, you know exactly what's going on, don't you? I guess I expected more protest from one of the Golden Gryffindors."

Hermione shrugged. "Why would I protest? If Draco makes Harry happy, then that's all I need to know."

"You always talk like that; I just didn't think you really meant it." Pansy shrugged. "A Slytherin would fight harder for what's hers."

"Would you fight harder?" Hermione pursued.

For a moment, she looked mutinous, but then the Slytherin girl shook her head, sighing. "Not if he's happy. I always had my suspicions about how well that pure-blood marriage was going to work for him. And he doesn't … serve people well."

"There are always similar options for the rest of you," Hermione pointed out.

Pansy stopped short, causing Hermione to do so all well. The Slytherin met Hermione's eyes carefully. "You really mean that?"

"I really mean that," Hermione confirmed. "I would never ostracize an entire house just because some of them have gone bad. Draco's made it, and there's no reason why more of you can't."

"It's not safe," Pansy said stiffly. "Even talking to you, somebody's going to ask why."

"Then you inform them that the Head Girl pulled rank because she wanted an escort back to Hogwarts. Tell them she wanted to discuss the new duty roster for the Prefects," Hermione answered. "I mightn't think that Slytherin is pulling its weight, you know."

Pansy snorted, and they started walking again. "Of course." She was silent for a moment and then asked, "You really think the headmaster would trust us?"

"I think he could," Hermione answered. "He might require testing by Veritaserum or something of that nature. If any of you intend to fight, proof of your loyalties is likely to be necessary. Regardless of his feelings on the matter, however, if you want protection, then Harry and I will grant it to you."

"With or without the headmaster's approval?" Pansy asked curiously.

Hermione nodded, knowing that the casual tone had been carefully manufactured. "With or without it. But the headmaster has always been open about his policy of giving second chances, and you lot haven't really ruined your first yet."

There was a smirk on the girl's face now. "That's a nice way to put it. I'd say some of our first chances are pretty tarnished, though. If I mention it to anyone else, you'll back me up?"

"I will," Hermione agreed with another nod. "I can't promise that we won't be suspicious."

Pansy shrugged. "I'd be disappointed if you weren't. You need to show some good judgement at some point."

"As you say."

Hermione released her charms as they reached the grounds and made her tone bossier. "I want to see a report of all the work that the Slytherins are doing. I've heard rumours about the lot of you that I have to investigate thoroughly."

"Rumours from whom?" Pansy inquired with a whine in her voice that Hermione was very glad she didn't employ when they were having a real conversation. "If it's a bunch of your precious Gryffindors, you know it's a lie."

"I know nothing of the sort," Hermione countered. "I have to investigate every report of wrong-doing brought to me, and I don't have to reveal my sources to you. Make sure you get it to me by the end of next week."

"I don't see why I have to do all the work just because you're getting along so well with Draco now," Pansy said petulantly.

"You're going to do it because I told you to do it, Parkinson," Hermione said stiffly. "You don't want me to take this to the headmaster, do you?"

"Professor Snape is your liaison with the staff."

"I think in this particular case, the headmaster would understand why I went directly to him. Professor Snape is not exactly known for his impartiality, is he?"

Pansy sneered. "You'll see how you feel after I tell him that you were insulting him to my face."

"Go ahead," Hermione said flatly. "You'll see how much effect that has after I've spoken to the headmaster. I think we both know who has more power in the school."

Continuing to bicker about whatever sprang to mind as related to their duties, they finally made it all the way into the castle and went their separate ways. Hermione imagined Pansy was as relieved as the Gryffindor was to abandon the conversation.

Popping her head into the Great Hall, Hermione was pleased to see that the castle was still winning. No new decorations adorned the walls. She sent a mental thank you to the castle before adding a suggestion of what they might do to please Albus and settle the whole matter.

Since the Hogsmeade visit went until two in the afternoon, there were few students at Hogwarts for lunch. It was therefore at dinner that most people saw the last of Hermione's handiwork.

On the wall that wasn't broken up with windows or the large doors, the stones had changed colour to make a large heart that was red, white, and pink. The stone was only tinted, so it didn't look completely horrible, and Albus looked positively delighted when he saw it. Since it didn't look like it would sing, explode, or fall off the walls, the rest of the school ignored it. Harry and Draco came in looking very happy, and Hermione wondered how well they had passed off their late return as waiting to ensure that there weren't any stragglers from the town.

When Draco saw her, however, his face changed to an expression of great seriousness. He sat down next to her, leaving Harry to take the seat opposite, which he did agreeably as it gave him the opportunity to stare at Draco through the whole meal.

"We shouldn't have just left you like that," the Slytherin said quietly.

She shook her head. "Don't worry about it. It's the first observation that Pansy made, and we skipped right over any attempts to kidnap me and give me to Voldemort. We can talk about it later."

"You're sure?" Draco asked.

She nodded, and they passed the rest of dinner quietly. Most of the students who'd gone to Hogsmeade didn't eat much, but the first- and second-years were utterly delighted by the large array of puddings that they got on this particular day.

Once they were able to do so, she, Harry, and Draco headed back to their common room, and Draco demanded an explanation of the talk that she had had with Pansy. She repeated it to him.

He looked troubled. "You realize this is the perfect opportunity for Voldemort to infiltrate us with a spy."

She nodded, pleased that he'd classified himself as part of the "us". "It's also the perfect opportunity to save some of your housemates."

"I'm not sure it's worth the risk," Draco said frankly, although he didn't look pleased to be making that assessment.

Harry took her side immediately. "Of course it's worth the risk."

He had never been known to champion the Slytherins, despite his current happy experience with Draco, and the Slytherin was looking at him with scepticism.

"If we can help any of them turn away from Voldemort, Draco, it's worth the risk. We probably won't become best mates, but it's like Hermione's been saying all year: we need them to know that they have other options. If they think they have no choice but to join Voldemort or continue being shunned by the wizarding world, what choice are they left with? And if they do join him, they would have to do things that I don't want any of them to have to go through, you know what I mean?"

Draco did, obviously.

"So I'm with Hermione," Harry said firmly. "We help where we can. It's the only way we're going to get through this war with a whole wizarding world to rebuild."

Draco shrugged. "Well, if you really think it makes the most sense, I'm hardly going to disagree with you. I'd be happier if Pansy were safe."

Hermione was pretty sure that if Severus or Draco were in charge, they wouldn't be accepting the word of any of the other Slytherins. For better or worse, the Gryffindors—or her and Harry, anyway, as she knew that they weren't always following the party line—tended to be more accepting of the possibility of changes of heart.

"There we are, then," Hermione said with a smile. "We've all agreed, and for the moment there's nothing we can do about it, anyway; it's their move. Until then, we'll be civil."

Which was basically what they had been doing all year anyway.

They had settled into their homework when Severus's arrival interrupted them.

"Tonks and Lupin," he sneered, not even trying to hide his eye roll, "are both here and have managed to make time out of their busy snogging schedule to do some training. Room One now."

The three students were smirking by the end of his speech. Hermione thought Remus and Tonks were adorable; ever since the man had been cured and their relationship revealed, the two really couldn't seem to keep their hands off of one another in public; it was evidently too much for Severus to take.

Draco was the one who asked, "What are the chances that we'll get there and they'll be half naked again?"

That had happened on the eleventh, as Remus had still been at the castle in order to go over the details of the cure and the initial plans with Albus before he went out to approach the werewolves. He and Tonks had taken the excuse of the training session for him to stay longer, and it had taken an embarrassingly long time before she, Draco, Harry, and Severus had been able to get their attention when they showed up in Room One. Severus had been very close to cursing them.

Fortunately for Severus's temper, the happy couple had this time decided that discretion was the better part of valour; when the rest of them arrived, Tonks and Remus were on opposite sides of the room and didn't look particularly mussed.

The new occupants of the room were still smirking, and Remus coloured slightly. Unsurprisingly, Tonks didn't seem particularly embarrassed; it took a lot to seriously faze her. To be fair, though, Remus was doing really well. He was so preoccupied with his happiness and the cure that he didn't appear to be second-guessing how he was acting in front of everyone, and the notion that he shouldn't be revealing his relationship with Tonks didn't seem to have occurred to him. Everyone else was teasing them about finding them in various states of undress, and there wasn't a word about their being an inappropriate match.

Since there were six of them here this evening for the training, it made for even teams again. Severus took evident pleasure in breaking up Remus and Tonks, but he miscalculated when he separated her and Harry. It was now Harry, Draco, and Remus against Hermione, Severus, and Tonks. Draco and Hermione just shook their heads at one another. Sooner or later, Severus would clue in. She thought he was being remarkably stupid about it, actually, but perhaps the notion of his godson with Harry Potter was simply too much to take and his mind was subconsciously protecting him.

They fought. Having Tonks as a partner was always interesting; she was usually wicked on the defence and offence, but if you tripped her up, she could be a huge liability to whomever she was defending. Both Remus and Harry knew this about her, so Hermione finally resorted to putting up a shield against Trip Jinxes just for Tonks. It was low-level enough that it wasn't too distracting for Hermione to maintain, and it made the whole situation that much safer. As soon as Remus and Harry realized what she'd done, they abandoned that tack.

They continued on for almost three quarters of an hour, blasting back and forth with all kinds of spells. Both Draco and Severus were edging into dark ones, and Harry and Hermione were casting shields left, right, and centre. Since they were on opposite sides, they couldn't use their sympathetic magic to benefit one another, and they were raising and lowering shields constantly.

Working with two other people made it a matter of that much more concentration, and there were spells that got through no matter how hard she and Harry worked to block them. There were therefore plenty of rebounds and barely deflected spells that made the duel that much more intense.

It looked, finally, as though it were coming to a draw. If nothing else, Hermione didn't really want to see how much more brutal Severus and Draco could get. She was pretty sure more of those Burn Curses were coming soon, and she and Harry didn't like those; they'd already seen a Bone-Crushing Hex, several forms of blinding curses, and a Blood-Boiling Curse that she sincerely hoped hadn't had much power behind it because it would have been absolute agony if it had hit anyone.

Think we've had a good work out? Hermione asked.

Harry hadn't yet learnt how to concentrate quite as well as she could on MindSpeech and intense physical activity, but she didn't take advantage of the distraction that she had known it would cause. He parried a spell sent by Tonks.

Hmm? he asked.

I think we'll be at this all evening until someone is seriously injured. You and I can end it.

Harry sent a mental shrug as he fought off another spell from Severus. But as the man sent the Skin-Burning Curse at Draco, Harry growled, Yes, please.

Your shield charm on three. Straight at one another, as close to full power as you want to get in a room of this size.

Agreed, Harry said curtly.

One. Two. Three.

They threw their shield spells at one another, and there was a terrific explosion as the two spells collided and tried to dissipate one another.

She and Harry were the only two left standing when the air cleared.

"I think we win," Harry said cheerfully.

"What the hell was that?" Remus asked, sitting up and looking a little woozy.

Draco sat up as well. "That's the same spell you used on me in class, isn't it?"

Hermione nodded. "Harry modified a shield charm. It dissipates spells that are thrown at it rather than reflecting them, making it safer if you're in a situation where you're worried about the rebounds. As you just saw, however, it can be overloaded if it tries to dissipate a spell that's too powerful."

"And the two of you just happened to throw these powerful spells at one another at the same time?" Severus asked sceptically.

"Great minds think alike," Hermione said cheerfully.

Severus glowered.

Harry shrugged. "You can separate us, but Hermione and I will always be a team. It's good to know we can get the correct results whether we're side by side or on opposite ends of the room."

"That shield sure packs one hell of a punch," Tonks agreed, rising to her feet with Remus's assistance. "I can see why you didn't stand a chance, Draco."

Draco was looking at Hermione. "You didn't put nearly as much power in it during class."

Hermione smiled. "No, I didn't."

Draco tried to look offended, but he gave it up, admitting quietly after a moment, "It wouldn't have been helpful if I'd thought you could shield even more strongly than you can."

Hermione understood exactly what he was saying, and she nodded. The dose of the Cruciatus that she had received had been quite strong enough as far as she was concerned.

Remus, Tonks, and Severus all wanted to understand the shield better, and since Harry and Draco looked so much as though they wished to be elsewhere, she suggested that she could show the adults more while Harry and Draco patrolled. She trusted that the two boys would know she didn't actually expect them to do any such thing.

Severus looked as though he wanted to protest, but before he could do so, Draco was dragging Harry out the door. She hoped there was a romantic evening planned.

Tonks was staring after them with a very puzzled look on her face. "Doesn't it often seem to you as though—"

Hermione knew how that sentence was going to end and didn't want to get into it right now, so she quickly overrode the woman.

"Harry's shield is a magical barrier that can absorb magic that's thrown at it. Instead of the spell bouncing back at the caster or being deflected elsewhere, it's broken down and absorbed across the shield. The more powerful the spell thrown at the shield, the more difficult it is for that breakdown and absorption to occur and diffuse evenly. When there's a huge power imbalance, the spell overcomes the shield as it spreads across it. The results, as you saw, are explosive. The strength of your shield will determine the strength of the spells that are successfully absorbed."

They were all attentive; Remus had a half-smile on his face indicating that he appeared to have noticed that she was in full professor mode.

"For it to be fully useful," she continued, "you need to learn how to form the shield, then how to use it correctly, and then how to overload it. I'll warn you now that the overload isn't always as fun as it looks; until you're used to it, you're just as likely to end up knocked out as your opponent is."

They went to work. All three were very talented when it came to shields and defence, so it didn't take them long to master the shield and use it properly. When it came time to overload it, however, they ran into the first bit of trouble. Remus and then Severus both managed to knock themselves unconscious when she lobbed spells that were too powerful at them. Severus had smirked all through Remus being woken up, but he had then made the same mistake and didn't look happy about it.

"Was that still less power than what you and Harry threw at one another today?" Remus demanded.

She shrugged. "I told you it takes some getting used to."

"Did you put all of your power behind the spell before?" Severus demanded, eyeing her closely.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Okay," Remus said, "I'm not going to ask how powerful you are, but I am going to take better heed of your warnings next time. How come you're still on your feet?" he asked Tonks.

The pink-haired Auror grinned. "I saw her land Draco on his arse in class, and I noticed that the rest of us were knocked out earlier."

"How much do you practice?" Remus asked.

Hermione smiled. "We duel most mornings and sometimes in the evening."

"Do you get any sleep?" Tonks questioned, although Hermione imagined the woman must have been used to tough schedules in the Auror Department.

"We don't sleep as much as some people, I guess," Hermione admitted with a shrug. "We're very serious about the training; you never know when that sort of protection is going to come in really handy."

Everyone agreed about this, although Severus had a note of caution.

"It's hardly a well-kept secret if the entire Defence class witnessed it."

Tonks shook her head. "We saw it, but it just looked as though Draco's spell had interacted poorly with the shield. It's only tonight that I realized it was deliberate. We're lucky they don't use it on us all the time."

Hermione shook her head. "If we used it all the time, you'd be used to it. Besides, we like to keep all our other skills up as well; we want to have lots of different ways to end duels."

"A wise approach," Remus agreed. "I think that's done it for me for the night, though. I need to head back to London early in the morning."

This seemed to signal the end of the evening for Tonks, too, surprise, surprise, and Hermione saw the two of them out with only a slight shake of her head. She and Severus were the only two remaining.

"Those two are enough to turn the stomach," he declared with a sneer of disgust.

"Oh, come on," Hermione cajoled. "It's good that they're so happy. I'm glad that they've managed to find one another and that they've chosen to stick with one another."

Severus didn't look convinced. "I think it was better when they were hiding it from everyone."

She made a face. "It's wonderful that they feel comfortable being open about it. It's a vindication for Remus who's had to hide far too many secrets over the years."

"How is the petition at the Ministry going?" he asked, eager to change the subject, apparently.

"Albus has been speaking to Minister Bones. Currently, no werewolves will be removed from the registry. I'm not sure if she's waiting to ensure that it's permanent or if she wants to outwait the war. Not keeping the public safe would be a serious error at this point, I suppose, and at least she hasn't forbidden the attempt. She seemed relieved that the funding and everything was being taken care of by us."

Severus's lip curled up in a faint sneer. "I imagine that once it's all over and the cure is proven, she'll be happy enough to come on board, push through the expunging of the records, and look as though she's helped a great deal."

Hermione shrugged. "So long as it gets done."

"So long as they don't forget who brought them their freedom," Severus added sourly.

Hermione shrugged once more. "I want the werewolves to be cured; it's less important that they know it was me."

Severus looked gratifyingly as though that were a rather important aspect, but they let the argument fall, and obedient to his desire, she went through the proper way to shield and brace so that he could make another attempt. Tonks and Remus might have given it up for the evening, but Severus wanted to know that he could do it successfully before he left for the night.

He succeeded in staying on his feet after a couple more tries, and they shielded and protected for almost two dozen more attempts until he felt that he was performing adequately, at least for a first day's attempt, and he finally called a halt.

"I think you've had enough teaching time for the day, Hermione."

She was pleased that he had still called her by her given name and took that to mean that he wasn't as upset as his words might otherwise have suggested.

"I thought you might appreciate it if you got a break, Severus," she returned with a smile. "What with all the teaching you have to do during the day."

His lips tipped up slightly. "How very thoughtful of you. Now go away."

She moved to obey but stopped at the door.

"Before it's too late: Happy Valentine's Day, Severus."

He grimaced at her, although his expression cleared as he said, "I assume I have you to thank for the show in the Great Hall?"

She smiled. "Well, I'm the one who gave the castle the idea, yes."

He looked immediately pained again. "Now you're talking to the castle?"

She tilted her head back and forth, indicating that that wasn't exactly the case. "From what I've gathered recently, it understands impressions and the needs of its inhabitants. Albus was a little speedy in his decorating furor, and he wasn't as thoughtful as he could have been before he covered the castle in decorations that obscured its walls. I merely suggested that the castle was lovely as it was."

"Causing the castle to shed the decorations itself?" Severus said, eyebrows raised and a shade of dark amusement evident in his voice.

She nodded.

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "And causing the castle to counteract anything Albus came up with subsequently, whether you were there or not. That really was rather clever."

She beamed at him. "Thank you, Severus."

"But that also makes you responsible for the heart at dinner?" he clarified.

"The castle doesn't really like to be at odds with the headmaster, so I compromised."

Severus shook his head. "Peacekeeping even between the headmaster and the castle. I think you're a bit of a busybody, Hermione."

"I'm not sure whether to be indignant at the slur or shocked that you haven't noticed sooner," she said with amusement.

He shook his head. "You're impossible."

"So Harry often tells me," she said with a smile. "It's a gift."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you have plans for the rest of the day?"

She shook her head. "Nothing special. I'll probably do some extra rounds and roust the students who think the day gives them permission to disregard the usual rules of conduct. You?"

He made a similar negation. "Grading papers. In my quarters rather than my office so that I'm more difficult to find. I refuse to counsel any lovelorn students."

She laughed. "I made the same resolution." There was a brief moment where she toyed with the idea of asking him to tea and then she realized that she had gone insane if she was actually contemplating it on Valentine's Day of all days. "I'll wish you a very quiet evening, then."

They left the room and went their separate ways. Since she hoped that Harry and Draco were otherwise occupied, she stopped by the Slytherin common room and "demanded" that Pansy accompany her on her rounds. Pansy made the appropriate protests, and they remained aloof from one another the length of the dungeons and up towards the Ravenclaw common room, by which point Hermione had cast her Muffling Charm.

"Dare I ask why Harry and Draco aren't accompanying us?"

Hermione shrugged, smiling faintly. "Because it's Valentine's Day and I'm hopeful. It seemed best to make myself scarce and not interrupt."

"Fair enough," Pansy agreed.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything on your end?" Hermione asked politely.

The blonde shook her head. "Not at all. I'm between men at the moment. You?"

"Apparently the same," she agreed, alluding to the relationship with Harry that had, to all appearances, just recently ended.

Pansy nodded in understanding, and they didn't have a lot of time to speak after that as there were indeed couples out in force, and some were in quite embarrassing states of undress when Pansy and Hermione came across them. It really was handy for the two of them to be together, though, because neither the Slytherins nor the Gryffindors they came across could sensibly claim that either house was being unfairly persecuted. That wasn't to say that most of the couples didn't protest, but there weren't any sweeping slurs or horrid point losses accrued through any giant scenes.

The Slytherin girl took pleasure in pointing out that it was the Gryffindors who tended to be the most obstinate that they had done nothing wrong. Hermione had no rebuttal as this was perfectly true and just the way Ron and Harry would have acted in the not-so-distant past.

To her immense displeasure, she discovered that such was still the case when the two patrolling women came across Ron and Lavender in a very compromising position in one of the hallways off the Charms corridor. Hermione had now officially seen more of Ron's arse and Lavender's breasts than she ever wanted to.

And then Ron really seriously tried to tell them that he'd done nothing wrong. Lavender, at least, simply slipped back into the dress that she'd partially shed.

Pansy let Hermione take the lead on this one.

"This is a school, Ronald Weasley," Hermione said sternly, "full of children as young as eleven years old. Public nudity is completely unacceptable. That will be twenty points from Gryffindor for a poor display of judgement and for being in the corridors after curfew. Return to the dormitory immediately."

Ron was red-faced and angry. "That's nonsense, Hermione, and you know it. You're just jealous!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, her expression one of cool disdain. "I don't know what you think I have to be jealous about, but I assure you that you're sadly mistaken."

The redhead's voice was full of spite. "Things have gone sour between you and Harry, and now you're regretting being so horrid to me."

She laughed, although it was a bit brittle. "Ron, I've taken points because I've found you in the corridor having sex, not because I'm jealous. Don't make me take away any more."

"You wouldn't dare," Ron spat at her.

Pansy snorted.

"Congratulations," Hermione said dryly. "That's now twenty points apiece. Would you like to try for thirty?"

Ron opened his mouth, no doubt to achieve that thirty, but Lavender finally stepped in, grabbed his arm, and dragged him off towards the dorm. In recognition of Lavender's good show of sense, Hermione pretended not to hear any of the things that Ron was muttering quite loudly before they rounded a corridor and were lost to sight and hearing.

Pansy was looking at her with a mixture of amusement and pity. "Have I pointed out that I don't understand why you're friends with him?"

Hermione sighed. "His heart is usually in the right place. Sometimes, though, he lets his jealousy get the better of him, and he's too stubborn to admit it, and then we end up with situations like the current one. You may have noticed that we're on the outs."

Pansy smiled as she said dryly, "I did notice that trend, yes. Have you spoken since November?"

"I'm still waiting for an apology," Hermione admitted on another small sigh.

"I can see how splendidly that's going."

"He'll come to his senses eventually." Probably.

They finished their rounds without any more outrageous loss of points, and they returned to the dungeons just after midnight. Hermione saw Pansy back to the Slytherin dorm and then made her way back to her and Harry's rooms.

The gargoyle, as always, was silent as it removed itself, and Hermione checked on the threshold, momentarily stunned by what she was seeing. She'd hoped this was what they were doing, but she hadn't anticipated their doing it in the common room where she could actually see them.

Draco was straddling Harry on the couch and kissing him with a great deal of enthusiasm. Harry was responding with equal fervour, and there seemed to be hands everywhere and a great deal of skin; they'd lost their shirts by this point in the proceedings. It was somehow a lot hotter than seeing Ron and Lavender, Harry's tanned skin contrasting with Draco's pale colouring. Mesmerizing as it was, Hermione could see that it was going to get a good deal more graphic in short order, and she didn't actually want to see them having sex.

She quickly backed out the door and allowed it to reform behind her. She could have Masked herself and sneaked past them, probably, but there was something about sitting in her room knowing that the two of them were in the common room having sex that just didn't work for her.

Although she told herself she was thinking about where she was going to go instead, she found herself at her destination without any real consideration. She raised her hand and knocked on the door.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Invitation

It was a good thirty seconds following her knock before the door was wrenched open; Hermione found herself confronted with a fully enraged-looking Professor Snape. Fortunately, when he saw her, this expression softened slightly; he must have assumed it was going to be one of those lovelorn children whom he had intended to eviscerate with his glare. She wondered if he was descended from Medusa in some manner and suppressed a snort; it was likely she'd find out if she had the temerity to suggest it to him.

He stood back to allow her to enter and closed the door behind her once she had stepped inside. The snick of the lock seemed unnaturally loud to her ears, but it was probably her imagination. The room was mostly in shadows, only a pool of well-lit brilliance at his desk where he had been grading, just as he had said he intended to do when she last saw him.

He was still wearing his teaching robes, and she wondered if he'd had them on all night or if he had donned them again when she knocked on the door. She supposed it would shock the students irreparably if they saw him in only a shirt and trousers. He created such a persona when wearing his teaching robes that it was hard to think of him without them.

Much easier to think of Severus without them—and the vast majority of the students didn't want to go there.

She turned back to face him now that she was inside, leaving him facing the fire, his dark eyes glinted in the light of the flames.

"What brings you?" he asked positively cordially, for him. "I don't recall a visit being on your agenda."

She smiled faintly, amused that he remembered their earlier conversation and was calling her on it. She confessed, "This is a new plan. Bit spur of the moment, actually." She gestured back towards the nearest chair. "May I sit?"

He nodded, and she did so, wondering why sitting down here made her feel a bit better immediately. Perhaps it was because, barring their plain brown colour, the chairs here were the type that Albus would conjure: large, squashy, comfortable. The chairs in Severus's office were exactly the opposite: small, hard, designed for discomfort—the chairs in the office were meant to make any student forced to sit on them squirm. Here in his quarters, though, he seemed to have anticipated guests he actually wanted, and he'd planned for their comfort. She felt at ease in this chair, like she wasn't being a nuisance and he wasn't about to kick her out. This wasn't necessarily remotely true, of course, but it was how the chairs made her feel.

Severus was still standing, probably observing the fool she had just made of herself getting all comfortable and sighing happily in his chair.

"Must I offer tea?"

Although the question hadn't been terribly gracious, the tone was mild, so she nodded gratefully. "It wouldn't hurt."

He did the necessary and offered her the steaming mug before he sat down in the chair opposite, his own mug in his hand. He always made Earl Grey when he made the tea himself, and it was a brew she'd begun to associate solely with him. He allowed silence to reign for several moments.

"Well?" he prompted when she still hadn't figured out what to say.

She forced the words out: "I'm about to become the last Pure Adult."

He regarded her impassively before saying with distaste, "That's more information than I have ever wanted concerning Mr Potter's love life."

She smiled briefly in recognition of this sally, but the smile fell away as she continued to speak: "I thought it would be useful information for you to have, from a spy perspective, I mean. It would help your position."

"It would put you in more danger," the Slytherin pointed out severely. "Focus will be redoubled on the second person. If Mr Potter shows his typical ill-sense, he'll no doubt parade around with this new girl, and—"

"Boy," she corrected.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He'll be parading around with his new boy, not girl." She didn't even try to deny the other bit because with the way Harry and Draco had been acting recently, it seemed likely that Severus was right. They'd be happier, she was sure, if they didn't have to hide; it was high time, really, that they were allowed to be truthful about it.

"Potter's gay?" Severus said, mug tilting dangerously in his hand as he apparently forgot it was there in his astonishment. He sounded utterly stunned.

"Very much so," she answered cheerfully, amused by his reaction.

He jerked the mug back upright, cursed as he spilt tea over himself and waved it away with his wand. "I had really hoped…. Please tell me the behaviour I have been witnessing recently is not an indication of whom he is with currently."

Hermione smiled in spite of herself. "I suspect you've made the correct educated guess."

"Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy are having sex." It sounded as though it pained him just to speak the words.

"Currently," she confirmed. "Or at any moment, anyway. I didn't want to stick around to see it get that far."

"They were doing it in front of you?" Severus asked, a sneer of distaste crossing his features.

She wasn't even going to try to guess which part of that thought disturbed him most. "They ended up having their moment in our common room. I found them after Pansy and I finished our rounds, and I turned right round again."

"You felt it incumbent upon you to inform me immediately?" His tone was mostly indecipherable, but she thought she caught a trace of annoyance.

She shrugged. "You know what's happening. Hard to explain to most other people why this is such a big deal for me."

"Yet you were certain that I would understand and sympathise?"

She frowned. "I'm not looking for pity, Severus. I thought you wouldn't mind if I sat here for a little while, that's all." She rose to her feet, setting her tea down on the table next to the chair. "Clearly, I was mistaken."

She headed for the door.

"You haven't finished your tea."

He hadn't risen to come after her, and the words were curt, but they were much kinder than the earlier ones had been. She turned back towards him, hesitated.

"I'm not terribly thirsty," she answered, testing the waters before she committed herself.

"Sit down anyway," he admonished.

Maybe, if she squinted, that seemed like an apology. She returned to her chair.

"I do commend you for coming to me rather than to Albus."

This was clearly said to lighten the mood, as there had never been any question.

She made a face, shuddering delicately. "I'm not about to talk to Albus because Harry and Draco are having sex. He'd probably want details."

It was Severus's turn to quirk his lips in distaste. "I sincerely hope you weren't standing there long enough to have any details with which it would be possible to furnish him."

Flashes of flushed skin and roaming hands skittered through her mind. She could feel her face heating.

She defended herself at his sharply arched eyebrow. "It was rather shocking. It took me a moment to ascertain just what was going on."

"I hadn't pegged you as a voyeur, Hermione." The mockery was back.

"And you can only do so now if you wish to peg yourself as one, too," she said with an edge to her voice. "I haven't seen anything that you wouldn't have while walking the halls full of hormone-charged teens."

"You're quite certain you didn't watch longer in this case out of interest?" he needled.

Her spine stiffened, and she said with heavy sarcasm, "I would, of course, have gotten comfy and enjoyed the show, but then I realized I didn't have any popcorn. Since that ruined the whole adventure, I left after about twenty seconds." Hell, it might only have been ten. Her eyes narrowed. "Are you quite certain that you aren't extremely interested?"

His face darkened. "I have never had any interest in Mr Potter's sexual escapades."

"I find that difficult to believe," she snarled, "given how you've been acting ever since you found out Harry and I were supposedly a couple."

"You have a comment you'd like to make about my behaviour?" he asked dangerously.

"I think I've already made my comments." She glared at him. "Thus far they've resulted in getting thrown out of your lab, badly burnt in training, and attending detention for two weeks."

"You're treading on dangerous ground, Miss Granger," he warned.

"Why?" she demanded, incensed by the return to formality. "You already promised you wouldn't take any points or give detention surrounding any issues of Pure Adults, and that's what we're talking about right now."

"Is it?" he asked sharply.

"Yes!" she snapped. "What do you think we're talking about?"

"Mr Potter's sex life," he gritted out angrily.

"And he's a Pure Adult!" That was the whole bloody point, so how it could possibly have slipped his mind, she didn't know.

Rather than responding to her angry explanation, he changed tacks entirely, saying doubtfully, "You really intend to let him consummate his relationship with Draco without any protest?"

"Why would I protest?" she demanded, feeling very confused about what they were discussing and what he seemed to be so upset about. "It's what Harry wants, and that's what's important."

He was regarding her very closely. "And you still intend to remain Pure?"

"What would you have me do?" she demanded stiffly. She had, she thought, made her position on the matter quite plain.

"That, I think, should be obvious to someone of your intellect," he said with a sneer. "The longer you remain a Pure Adult without Mr Potter, the more danger you put yourself and me in. The Dark Lord has grown suspicious of the results of the blood tests as a result of the revelation about Draco's true allegiances, and that means that you are one of the students who must be retested."

She really, really, didn't want to put Severus at risk, but as far as the blood test went, there was an easy solution. Purely out of the goodness of her heart, she was going to pass that insult on her intelligence.

"My Blood Glamour will continue to protect me."

"For how long?" he demanded.

"Until I remove the Glamour," she said coldly. She wasn't a first-year, and she knew perfectly well how to correctly limit a spell. "Are you questioning my ability as a witch, Severus?"

"When you didn't even recognize that you were a Pure Adult until Kingsley brought it to your attention? Why would I have reason to doubt?" he asked with a mean edge and clear insinuation in his voice.

She stiffened. That hit home, for she agreed with him. She had been a Pure Adult for longer than any of them knew, and she had never once come across reference to the phenomenon or suspected the special status which had been granted to her.

She rose from her seat once more, realizing that this conversation had gone on more than long enough. "You're quite right." She felt very cold, anger and pain both frozen inside her, voice emerging without emotion. "I guess I have a little bit of that Mudblood showing, sir."

His gaze darkened, eyes narrowing as they bore into hers, and he rose to tower over her.

"Don't call yourself that," he snarled.

"Why not?" Pointedly, she added, "Wasn't that what you were just saying? You weren't attributing my lack of knowledge to any other cause."

His face was set into grim lines, but his voice was curiously mild in comparison. "You cured lycanthropy, Hermione. There isn't any question of your being extraordinarily intelligent."

"But that won't ever be enough, will it?" She felt suddenly very depressed about the whole damn thing, even when she knew that she shouldn't, that she had cured lycanthropy, and how many people could say that? Her lips tightened. "There will always be something I don't know and a pure-blood somewhere who can sneer at me because of it."

"There will always be someone who tries to bring you down, Hermione," Severus said, tone still lacking animosity and actually containing remarkable patience given the situation. "They will come up with any excuse that they think will affect you, and yes, some of them are likely to bring up your blood status. But I will never be one of those people. You're one of the smartest people I know, and you've gone to amazing lengths that prove this beyond a shadow of a doubt to anyone who really knows you."

She swallowed, asking pitifully, "You really think I'm smart?"

It had to be a mark of how bad he felt about his earlier comment that he chose not to lambaste the stupidity of that comment.

"It's been hard not to notice since you were twelve, Hermione, and it's become impossible to ignore since you reached adulthood. You're tipping the scale in this war with your cure, and you've protected yourself and Harry assiduously."

That sounded very much like a real compliment. Pretty much on the opposite end of the spectrum from impugning her wizarding knowledge.

She'd nearly started to smile when he continued with the dreaded "but", and she forced her face to blankness again before he could realize how close he'd come to making her feel better before he snatched it out of her grasp.

"But you must surely be aware of how much safer you would be if you weren't a Pure Adult."

She clenched her jaw. "So you think I'm stupid for not just having had sex by now?"

He actually rolled his eyes at her. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't really have to," she said, pissed off with how he'd been driving her back and forth between comforted and angry so many times tonight. "You started the sentence with 'you're really smart' and then you added a 'but'. I don't think I'm making much of a logical leap here."

"I could perhaps have phrased myself a little more carefully," he conceded, tone rather ungracious.

"You think I should have sex," she pursued grimly.

"I think many people would be safer if you did so," he added much more circumspectly this time.

The problem was that she thought so, too. But it was her only first time, and she didn't want it to be for the wrong reasons. That didn't seem so unreasonable to her, only there seemed to be a lot of lives hanging in the balance, and now that Severus's was probably next for the chopping block, it made it really difficult for her to stick to her principles and wait for the situation to resolve itself. It didn't look to be doing that any time soon. She could risk her own life, but she didn't think she could risk his.

"Why does it trouble you so much?" he asked.

"I've already said," she answered, trying not to sound really annoyed. "It's the same reason now as it was then."

"The person you want to have sex with doesn't want to have it with you," he repeated without emotion.

She gave a stilted nod.

"The stakes are rather larger right now."

"I know!" she said desperately, wheeling away from him to face the fire. "You think I don't know that?" Breathing hard, she stared into the fire, desperately trying to find some composure. "You said that anyone would have sex with a Pure Adult," she began again, struggling with the proper way to indicate that that wasn't what she wanted.

"I did say that, yes," he confirmed.

The silence was taut as she found no miraculous words to explain the situation. And then he spoke again.

"Is that an invitation?"

Breath left her in a rush. Now it was too late. She'd been informed explicitly of why he was interested in her. Harry and Draco got to have happy sex, and she was doing the "smart" thing to save lives. She would be having sex with someone who was offering to sleep with her because of what she was rather than who she was.

So much for a special first time. But there wasn't anyone who could make this better. Severus wasn't about to confess his undying love, she didn't want to sleep with anyone else, and this was therefore her only option. Nineteen years, one month, and twenty-seven days of unPetrified life and virginity, and this is what it came down to. The lesser of two evils.

"Yes," she answered, barely audible.

He laid a hand on her shoulder, and she had to still the urge to jerk away and scream at him that this wasn't the way she wanted this to happen. He must have felt the sudden tension in her body, for he spoke again, voice utterly emotionless.

"I'm sure you can go find someone more to your liking."

She made a face. As if there was anyone who wanted her for her and not because of her stupid status. He'd made it clear that was what this was to him, and she would simply have to do her best to treat it as such. "It's more prudent that Harry and I do this at the same time."

His voice remained flat. "Of course."

How had she ended up in this situation? She was about to have sex with the one person in the whole wide world whom she wanted to have sex with, and he had accepted a business proposition. It kept him safe from Voldemort, she reminded herself. It hurt, but it would have to be a good enough reason.

"Shall we adjourn to the bedroom?" he asked.

She nodded, and he escorted her there. Of course, it wasn't as though she didn't know where it was, as she'd half-carried him there twice, but she trailed behind him as though she had no idea where they were going or what to expect. How could it possibly feel more awkward now than it had either of the two previous times when Severus had been injured?

But despite the fact that he had been in horrible pain, everything had made more sense then. She had helped him because she was able to do so, because she had wanted to do so. She had been happy that she had been able to end his suffering a little bit sooner than would otherwise be possible. It was just yesterday night that she had been here, she realized, soothing him. It already felt like a lifetime ago.

Now they were marching into the room with the theoretical goal of pleasure for both of them, and she was more than half-wishing for the old situation over again. Part of her was aware that such a thought was ridiculous—she really didn't want him to be badly tortured and in need of assistance—but at least she hadn't felt as lost and hopeless then as she did now. She didn't remember it being nearly this bad, anyway.

Severus closed the door behind them, and she suddenly found a great deal to interest her in the floor near his feet. Trying not to hyperventilate, she told herself that staring at the dark rug and grey stones was a perfectly reasonable response under the circumstances.

"Are my shoes of particular interest, Hermione?"

Her eyes flew to his, and she felt her face heat. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Sorry, s—"

She actually had to snap her jaw closed to prevent the word from leaving her mouth because she'd actually been about to call him 'sir'. She was experiencing more than enough awkwardness for both of them; there was no need for him to feel any of it because she was treating him like he was her professor.

She needed to be engaged in some activity, she decided, anything to keep her mind occupied or her hands busy, so she shrugged off her robe and then started resolutely on the buttons of her shirt.

"Don't you know a really neat spell for buttons?"

The tone was mild again, she would almost have said teasing, and her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away and sniffed masterfully and told herself that she would not embarrass herself by crying in front of him.

She nodded her head a little unsteadily.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head, managing with difficulty to get two words out of her clogged throat: "I'm fine."

There was no possible way to explain how much she appreciated that he was trying to make this easier for her—and how much she desperately wished that she wasn't a Pure Adult right now because then they'd be doing this because he cared about her.

His face lost some of its mobility. "Perhaps you'd be more comfortable if you get into bed while I make use of the facilities."

She nodded her consent to this plan and watched him stalk off into the loo and close the door with something that was perilously close to a bang.

In record time, she shed her clothing, reconsidered, and transfigured her shirt into a silk nightie so that she didn't feel completely naked. She set her shoes with her socks neatly tucked inside next to his chest of drawers. Her carefully folded clothing was piled on top of the drawers, her sheath and wand at the very top of the pile where she could easily Summon the latter if she needed it. There wasn't a cabinet next to the side of the bed that wasn't his, and she didn't want to tuck her wand under her pillow in case it got in the way at a crucial moment and she died of embarrassment. Surely displays of wandless magic were preferable.

Climbing into bed, she pulled the covers up to her neck and felt like the annoying virginal heroine in every bad romance novel she'd ever read. Well, she rationalized, they didn't have to contend with this whole stupid Pure Adult issue, now did they? Their awkwardness would be legitimate if they were facing the same set of circumstances that she was facing now.

Of course, they no doubt felt as though they were pushed into a similar type of situation where they didn't have a choice … and it was definitely a bad sign if she was starting to sympathize with Mills and Boone heroines. She needed to get a grip on herself.

Severus returned. He'd shed his outer robe and shoes and socks so that he was wearing only the shirt and trousers that she was used to seeing in this room.

He proffered a small red vial. She took it, unstoppered it, and sniffed it curiously.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Do you not trust me?" His voice was dark.

"It's not an issue of trust, Severus." She didn't suppose rolling her eyes at him would help, but his tone had really been completely unnecessary. "I simply like to know what I'm drinking before I consume it."

"This encounter will not continue without it."

He was obviously making some sort of point; she wished that she had some sort of an idea of what. But if it was that important to him that she drink it without his saying exactly what it was, then that's what she would do. If it was necessary for her first time, then maybe it was a pain-numbing potion of some sort. She'd read up enough to know what to expect.

She quaffed the potion, noticing with surprise that it tasted faintly of cherries—but proper cherries, not the sickly sweet kind that you got in many Muggle cough medications—and wasn't the slightest bit unpleasant. She held the empty bottle back out to him and thought that he looked faintly surprised.

"Much more pleasant than most of your potions, Severus," she said calmly.

He gave a faint sneer, as he always did when someone brought up the taste of his potions, and then he set the bottle aside on the bedside cabinet. He matter-of-factly undid the buttons on his white shirt and shed the piece of cloth, and she did her best not to look like a complete ninny by gaping at him. Would it be totally inappropriate, she wondered, to fling herself over to that side of the bed and sprawl all over him?

He was as pale as Draco—although she really didn't need to be thinking about Harry's mate at this particularly moment—with only a smattering of hair and flat brown nipples. He was toned from all his training, and there was a sprinkling of scars across his flesh, including a vicious-looking one that was almost an inch thick. It started on his left shoulder and disappeared out of sight, presumably to continue onto his back.

He muttered the spell to extinguish the lights. "I needed to see to get to the bed," he said gruffly.

She should not have stared so stupidly, apparently. She struggled with something to say but turned her head away so that she was facing the ceiling and couldn't see him. With only the faint glow of embers in the fire, it was quite dim in this dungeon room—but Severus didn't know about the enhanced vision that came with her being a unicorn Animagus. Since she'd made him uncomfortable, she couldn't do him the discourtesy of scoping him out when he wasn't aware she could do so. He had done her the courtesy of going into another room while she undressed, after all.

She heard the rustle of fabric that indicated that the rest of his clothing was joining his shirt on the floor. The bed creaked, a dip in the mattress indicating that he was climbing in. She turned back to face him and found that there was still several feet between them. Silence descended, and she forced words out of her mouth in an effort to fill it.

"Did you see my scar?" she asked abruptly.

"What?" he asked uncomprehendingly. "When? There wasn't a great deal for me to see with the bedclothes covering almost every inch of you."

She realized that this was probably the stupidest opening line she could have come up with once they were both in bed, but it had somehow made sense in her head, and now it was too late to take it back. "You might have left before you could really tell it was there. When I got burnt, you know, I had to take off my shirt, I'm sure you remember." She was rambling, it was awful. "The burn was across my right side, but the scar runs across my abdomen, so it was partially obscured. Harry noticed it after the burns had faded—he was confused as to why it hadn't healed."

"All the way across your abdomen?"

She nodded. "It was the Cutting Curse from Dolohov in the Department of Mysteries. It never quite healed like it was supposed to."

"Dark Curses often don't," he said, and he finally sounded less tense, probably because he was lecturing. "Especially if they aren't treated immediately and properly. I could have brewed the proper potions."

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "In that case, it's unfortunate I was unconscious and unable to ask."

His lips pinched together, his tone softening slightly in what might have been the equivalent of an apology. "I would have, if I'd known."

She smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate the thought. No one heard what he got me with because I'd Silenced him, and it was chaos. I was still unconscious when they got me to St Mungo's. The healers did their best, but I guess they didn't really know what they were up against. It healed, though, and I'm fine, and it's just a memento of what I've gone through to thwart Voldemort."

"Was that your point?" The snarl was back in his voice.

"My point?"

"When you brought your scar up. To make me feel better about all of mine?"

The entire idea was patently distasteful to him.

"I just wanted you to know that I have a scar, too." She hadn't meant for him to take it as pity, but she was certain that telling him she thought he was beautiful wouldn't go over well at all.

His voice was chilly. "I think it would be best if we didn't discuss anything … physical."

"Okay," she agreed, not particularly anxious to have his verdict on her body under the circumstances; he could no doubt find lovely beautiful women who weren't barely nineteen and transected with a big long scar.

The silence stretched, long and uncomfortable.

"This is going to be a very long night if you spend the whole time over there," Severus finally said with a huff.

She hadn't been aware that she was the one who was supposed to be doing the moving. Maybe he was more comfortable on his side of the bed. He'd chosen it, after all. And it didn't really matter to her because she was uncomfortable in the entire bed, so she might as well move over.

Which would require movement, she realized a moment later when she still hadn't managed to get any of her limbs to coordinate. She wasn't a coward, she could do this. She'd wanted to touch him the moment she saw him, hadn't she? So she could do it now, she was going to do it now, and then she could forever know that she'd lived up to the reputation of a Gryffindor even if no one else would ever know because she was never, ever going to speak about this to anyone.

She shifted to his side of the bed, stopping when she was right next to him, realizing that she had no idea what should come next.

"Am I just supposed to climb on top of you?" she asked, mortified by having to ask the question.

"Do you or do you not know what you are doing?" He sounded very put out.

"What kind of a question is that?" she demanded. "I thought we ended up here because you grasped the fact that I've never done this before. I don't know what I'm doing, Severus, not really: it's my first time."

He looked ever-so-faintly sheepish now.

"You don't have to climb on top of me," he said with what she figured was no doubt a praiseworthy effort on his part to keep his voice even and not sound completely inapproachable. "This does require a certain amount of contact, however."

Trying not to roll her eyes, she reflected that this would work better if he didn't treat her like a complete idiot. She had grasped that they would have to touch, it was just the actual bodies-smushing-together-really-touching-and-kissing bit that made her a little nervous. Once it was actually happening, she'd no doubt be all right, and since he was being such a prat, it was looking as though she'd better take charge.

She reached out a hesitant hand and touched his cheek, feeling him jolt underneath her fingertips.

"What are you doing?" he asked, voice low.

"Just want to know where I'm going," she replied in a whisper and continued her exploration.

His cheek was smooth, and she wondered if he'd shaved before returning from the bathroom. Her fingertips lightly brushed over his skin, ghosting down his cheekbone and finding and tracing his lips. The skin was silky soft, and she liked the way it felt beneath her questing fingers. He could spew such harsh and hurtful phrases out of those lips, but they seemed gentle and responsive beneath her fingers. She moved her fingers out of the way and leaned closer so that she could finally press her lips to his.

The contact was awkward; she hadn't properly anticipated his nose and how it got in the way if she tried to kiss him straight on. Once she'd worked out that she needed to tilt her head so that their noses didn't meet, the contact was more effective, and she found that she could concentrate on the sensations of her lips brushing softly against his. It was much better than any of the other kisses in her life—which amounted to friends, family, and that one brief awkward one with Viktor. That was when she had told him that she only wanted to be friends with him, and he had accepted it, and it was easy enough to be friends through letters.

Oh! Severus had deepened the kiss, nipping at her lower lip and slipping his tongue into her mouth, and she'd never felt anything like it. A long arm snaked out and yanked her up close to him, so that their bodies were flush.

Suddenly, they weren't kissing anymore, weren't even touching anymore, and she was sitting there on the bed, the sheets pooled around her, breathing heavily with no idea what had just happened.

"You're wearing a nightgown."

It was impossible not to miss the disapproval in his tone, his eyes glittering in the low light.

"A nightie, really," she corrected, feeling unaccountably nervous. "Practically a negligee. It made me more comfortable before I climbed into bed, that's all."

"I suppose you intend to wear it the entire time?" he asked acidly. "I daresay it was particularly tactless of me to have offered the bed where you might be expected to spend a certain amount of—"

"Dammit, Severus," she gritted out. "Could you please stop ruining the moment? I was nervous so I wore a nightie to bed. Yours is the first bed I've ever climbed into for the express purpose of having sex, and of course I want to have sex in a bed. Do I look like someone who wants to be taken up against a wall her first time?" She probably shouldn't have asked a question that he might decide to answer, so she rushed on, "Maybe you and Ron should take notes from one another, because you both seem to have a pretty horrible picture of—"

Her words were cut off as he pulled her back to him and brought his lips crashing down on hers. Although she'd had no notion of its being able to do so, she found that the insistent and glorious pressure of his lips against hers drained her anger away. In fact, if the nightgown annoyed him so much, she'd really better take it off, as she didn't much fancy his deciding not to kiss her again. With clumsy fingers, she reached down and started to pull the thin material up over her thighs; she made it as far as her waist when the kissing stopped once more. She bit back a curse with an effort.

His voice was low again, a growl of sound. "What are you doing?"

"Taking my nightie off," she answered, thinking the answer had been rather obvious and there was no need for him to stop kissing her to ask it.

"Why?"

"Because you seemed annoyed that I was wearing it," she answered, beginning to feel annoyed again.

"I thought you wanted to wear it." There was confusion in his voice.

She wanted to know why they were even discussing this, but she knew from experience that not giving him an answer to his question was just going to upset him.

"It made me feel more comfortable having it on and then climbing into bed," she explained with a slight sigh. "I didn't fancy a mad dash for the bed starkers. I always supposed that it would come off at some point in the evening, and that might as well be now if it annoys you."

"Perhaps I could help you with it," he suggested, voice a low burr of noise against her ears.

"Um, okay," she managed to squeak, feeling as though all the oxygen had suddenly been squeezed out of the room. But it would take a powerful spell to do that, wouldn't it, so she was probably imagining things? Severus wouldn't be able to breathe either if that were the case, and he seemed to be doing okay, able to move his limbs properly and everything, because there were his hands, sliding up her thighs, and she was pretty sure her breath hitched, but maybe that was just the oxygen coming back into the room. Or maybe it was thin in the dungeons instead of at the top of Hogwarts. One of those weird details about Hogwarts that no one thought to mention, because it only came up in bizarre situations like this, and Hogwarts: A History had edited it out….

Now Severus's hands were sliding up over her hips, ghosting over her pelvic bone and finding her waist. The silk was slithering up her body, and she decided that worrying about the oxygen content in the room was a waste of mental energy. All she needed to be concentrating on was the feeling of his hands on her skin, the trails of fire that seemed to ignite wherever he touched her.

Light fingers callused by potion work slid up her sides and ghosted around the swell of her breasts. She lifted her arms obedient to his urging and then he'd pulled the piece of silk over her head and dropped it over the side of the bed.

"There we go," he growled, his voice low and sensual, sending a shiver down her spine. "That's better, isn't it, Hermione?"

Definitely better, yes, although she was having difficulty actually vocalising that sentiment. Fortunately, he didn't wait for her to try to marshal her scrambled faculties enough to speak. He simply pulled her to him so that he could kiss her again, and before she knew it, she was lying in the bed, the sheets somewhere beneath her, and Severus was half on top of her. She wasn't wearing her nightie anymore, so there was the delicious sensation of skin-on-skin contact, and she discovered that her nipples were incredibly sensitive to the heat of his skin and the feeling of him pressed against her.

She let out something that was perilously close to a moan and felt his mouth turn up at the sides as he kissed her. He shifted so that he was completely covering her, legs tangling with her own, and she felt the hardness of his erection against her thigh. She bucked up against it and delighted in the hiss that exploded out of his mouth as a result.

It was glorious to let these new sensations overwhelm her, but she felt a surge of satisfaction when he responded to a direct action on her part; she wanted to actively bring him pleasure.

She wrapped her arms around him, bringing her hands up to delve into the strands of his hair. She'd wanted to do this for ages and ages. Well, ever since she'd been in his bed in sixth year, at least. She'd wanted to touch him then, but she'd been afraid of waking him, and she hadn't quite understood what she was feeling. Lust. Tenderness. A desire to touch him and pull him closer and never let him go. To comb her fingers through his hair and stroke his scalp with her fingertips and find pleasure in touching what everyone else thought was greasy and unpleasant.

It was greasy; her fingers could pick that up even in the heat of the moment, but she didn't care. After all, her hair could be an absolute rat's nest, but it was a part of her just like his was a part of him. He made a noise in the back of his throat, and she thought it sounded like pleasure, so hopefully she was doing something right, novice though she was.

One of his hands slid up to curl in her hair now, and she loved the way his fingers teased through the curly strands, twisting them round his fingers and letting them spring away from him and then worming his way deeper, the heat of his hand seeping into her skull, a reassuring warmth.

His other hand was ghosting lower, across her face, trailing down her neck and collar bone, and then lower still until he was brushing across the swell of her breast and his fingers swiped across one of her nipples. She arched up into him involuntarily with a whine of pleasure, and he broke their kiss long enough to huff a soft laugh.

"Like that, do you?" He sounded too pleased to be terribly mocking.

Yes, she really, really liked it. Went without saying, surely. She leaned up and did her best to kiss him senseless and show him just how much she liked it. He attempted to move his hand away, but she seized it with her own and kept it in place. He twined his fingers with hers and together they ran over her skin, stroking her sensitive flesh. He slid their fingers across the valley between her breasts and over to the other nipple, which he proceeded to caress as thoroughly as the first, turning her into a big pile of mush. Aroused mush, but still.

Finally, she let him have his hand back, and he slid it across her stomach, fingers ghosting across the scar that she had mentioned earlier, feeling across the length of it. He pulled away from the kiss she had initiated, his hair brushing down her skin as his head followed to where his fingers were, and he pressed kisses along the marred skin there, making her stomach muscles clench. She wasn't objecting, definitely not; she took it that this was his way of saying that he didn't mind her scar. Far more effective than her stupid statement at the beginning of the night, apparently, and she would have to remember it as a possible plan of action for later. She arched up against him again as his hands brushed lower. A plan of action for much later when he had finished doing whatever marvellous things he had in store for her because she'd hate to interrupt him at a crucial moment right now.

His fingers delved inside her, and she found herself crying out incoherently. She certainly couldn't come up with any useful sentences or actual words—which was embarrassing for someone who was usually so articulate—but Severus didn't seem to be complaining. Plus she hadn't turned out to be like any of those students thought, the ones who had guessed what sex between her and Harry had to be like; there was no grading and no reading a manual while she was in bed. She was all for chucking the manual out the window and just letting Severus do whatever he wished because he seemed to have memorized the manual, and wasn't that lovely of him?

Instead of moving up to kiss her again, his head moved lower down her body, and she had the chance to experience what Lavender and Parvati had lamented far too few men were willing to do or could do with any sort of talent. Admittedly, Hermione couldn't really speak to the relative talent of Severus in this art, but she could most assuredly attest to the fact that it felt bloody fucking fantastic and speedily brought her with a loud cry to her first social orgasm.

Since she had read everywhere that women often didn't have an orgasm the first time, she thought that Severus was doing an absolutely spectacular job of making this pleasurable for her. Tugging at him with fingers that didn't work right, she nevertheless managed to make herself understood, and when his face was even with hers again, she kissed him deeply, tasting herself on his lips.

"Thank you," she whispered breathlessly when she drew back to allow them to breathe.

He huffed another laugh, and she worried she'd been horribly gauche.

"You're welcome." His voice was amused but not maliciously so.

She really wanted to reciprocate his generosity, but despite all the nauseating details she'd overheard from Lavender and Parvati, she didn't think that she would make a very stellar showing of herself. Maybe if she'd had some advance warning, she could have done some research. Which, she grimaced, meant she was exactly like those whispering students had said she was, looking to do research in the middle of sex.

"I could…" she blurted out hesitantly and awkwardly, sort of half gesturing, and he seemed to understand well enough what she meant.

"There is no need." His voice was gruff again. "Then we would have to wait."

It took her a moment to work out what they'd be waiting for and then another moment to understand why waiting would be bad since every action thus far had been marvellous as far as she was concerned. But she was stupid and awkward and new at this—that had been made abundantly plain—so maybe Severus just wanted to get it out of the way.

"Oh, uh, okay," she said, now fully feeling the awkwardness of the situation once more.

Severus kissed her again, settling his hard body against her softer one, letting her relish in the feeling of how well they fit together. He might not think so, but she could imagine that they fit together perfectly, could imagine that they were supposed to be together, and if that made her throat a little tight with unexpressed emotions, he would never know.

He nudged her legs apart with his own, and although she felt a little nervous about what was coming, she allowed the movement. It helped when he deepened the kiss, plundering her mouth hungrily, and one of his hands came up to toy with her nipples. That was very good, really quite … suited to distracting her from what else he was doing, which, she realized a moment later, was arranging himself properly so that, if all went according to plan, she would very shortly no longer be a virgin. He was still kissing her, but he'd moved his arms to brace himself on either side of her.

And then he gentled the kiss, pulled back a bit to look at her, a question in his eyes.

Since his earlier actions had ensured that she was very aroused and she was only going to get more nervous the longer they put this off, she nodded as resolutely as she was able.

He stared for a moment, then leaned down to kiss her again, and then he was thrusting inside of her.

Her breath hitched painfully, and she felt him freeze, could feel the tension in his arms and upper body as he held himself perfectly still at her involuntary noise. She blinked back tears at the unexpected pain. Intellectually, she'd known it was coming, but it still bloody hurt.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he rasped out, sounding as though speaking was difficult. "Keep breathing."

She did as she was told and found that the changed angle did ease the pain—or perhaps it was the fact that he had cared enough to stop and give her time to recover.

"Nowhere near as bad as Cruciatus," she managed as soon as she was certain that she had complete control of her voice.

He snorted but leaned down to kiss her again, lips surprisingly gentle, and she tilted her head up, wanting more contact. She deepened the kiss this time, exploring his mouth with her tongue and gradually relaxing her involuntarily clenched muscles. When she felt able, she experimentally tilted up her hips, and he let out a groan of pleasure. His pleasure mingled with hers, new sensations washing through her.

"Please," she whispered.

He didn't need more urging, pulling out and thrusting more deeply inside her. She felt connected to him as she had never felt before, filled with him in a way that wasn't just physical. He would probably think she was the cheesiest woman in the world if she mentioned any of this, so she wouldn't speak, but he was totally brilliant, and she wished that this was on the list of activities in which they could engage all the time.

There was silence except for the slide of flesh against flesh as he moved above her, sending pleasure coursing repeatedly through her. His face was intense as he stared down at her, and it was awe-inspiring to be the focus of so much of his attention. She reached for him and pulled him closer, desperate to touch him, latching onto his mouth as soon as it was in range. He seemed to engage in the activity whole-heartedly, and she lost herself to the feeling of the two of them joined together in all possible ways.

Pleasure was building inside of her, centering between her thighs and radiating out with each of Severus's thrusts as she surged up to meet him, fingers tangled messily in his hair, lips melding together. The cresting wave of bliss grew higher and higher and higher, bubbling out until it seemed to encompass her entire body all the way from her toes to the tips of her hair, which she logically knew were dead cells that couldn't feel anything, but right now she'd be willing to swear that every single bit of her was alive with the pleasure, pulsing with the pleasure, and about to be completely overwhelmed with—

There was a blinding flash of white light, and Hermione spiralled off into a haze of ecstasy.

Hermione awoke to the feeling of warmth, heat positively radiating off Severus's skin and soaking into hers, making the dungeon feel toasty warm. It was dark, dawn still over two hours away according to a silent Tempus, and she found that they'd managed to get under the covers at some point, and she was snuggled up against Severus much as she had been the two times she had been in his bed under drastically different circumstances. She had been sleeping with her entire right side pressed against him, her leg thrown over his, her head pillowed against his shoulder. His right arm was cradling her.

She took the opportunity to cuddle, closing her eyes again and basking in his warmth. It seemed unlikely that Severus was more warm-blooded than Harry, but lying with the Slytherin like this seemed to be fundamentally cosier than it had been with Harry. This had held true, she realized, even when she had been helping Severus with the Cruciatus and neither of them had been naked. The skin-on-skin contact made it even better; she continued to feel linked to him, as though they had joined together on some fundamental level that wasn't physical. Magical or emotional or soulful—or maybe all three—it hummed between them, creating this warmth and this sense of belonging that was so powerful it had nearly overwhelmed her last year before she even realized that she was in love with him.

Her fingers, quite without her conscious volition, had begun stroking his skin. That hand that didn't seem to be controlled by her brain anymore slipped up until it found the ropy scar on his shoulder. She catalogued the sensory differences as experienced through her fingertips. The scar tissue was slippery and smooth, but the raised ridge of flesh felt rough before it evened out into the unblemished skin. She wondered if it tasted different from the rest of his skin and then wondered how upset he would be if he were awoken by her finding out.

According to the potentially reliable source of Lavender and Parvati—at least when it came to men and sex—the vast majority of men would be very happy to be awakened by a woman who wanted more, so perhaps she could gear up the courage, and—

A steel band clamped around her wrist, and she jerked her eyes open and herself upright to discover that it was actually Severus's hand that held her wrist in a vise-like grip that actually hurt.

"Remember where you are."

This was not a happy morning voice. She thought he was also lacking in more than a little logic, because she knew bloody damn well where she was, and she thought her fingers had been rather illustrative of that fact.

His eyes were chips of black ice, and she knew before he said another word that this was about to go horribly wrong. It was going to be a dreadful morning after right out of the movies and the trashy novels for her; she should evidently have slipped away when she had the chance, but it had been so pleasant and perfect, and how could he not have felt any of that?

"I think that's quite enough," he continued with the harsh voice. "You've made use of me for more than long enough."

She pulled away hard, and he let her wrist go as she scrambled away from him so that they were no longer touching.

"You think I was using you?" she repeated, stunned and horrified.

His voice was cold, bereft of so much as a hint of the emotions that had warmed it the night before. "You needed to have sex with someone."

She was breathing too fast and knew that she needed to calm down, but she felt like she was going to explode.

"I forced myself upon you, I suppose?" she demanded, struggling to keep her tone even.

He shrugged with supreme indifference. "You came to me for sex. It was necessary to protect yourself now that Potter's gone and fucked Draco, and you made an offer it was impossible for a Slytherin to refuse."

She swallowed heavily, pressing her lips into a thin line to fight back any of the words that were trying to escape because they'd come out as angry and hateful or torrents of maudlin sobs, and she couldn't let him see either. She couldn't give him the satisfaction because then he'd know how much he'd affected her.

Without thought and barely more than a half-formed intent, she dressed herself so that she was able to climb out of bed without the embarrassment of facing him naked now that he had called an end to whatever it was they had had. A mistake, apparently.

She tamped down on all her emotions ruthlessly, ensuring that Fawkes and Castina couldn't pick up on her distress and helping her to control herself in front of the head of Slytherin.

"As I recall," she said acidly, "it was you who asked."

His eyes were hard, his voice colder. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for your tone."

She opened her mouth to protest.

"Any agreement I made pertained to the issue of Pure Adults." He sneered. "You are no longer one."

Despite her control on her emotions, she reared back slightly at such a low blow, feeling the crack in her emotional shielding almost physically. She controlled herself ruthlessly.

"A very acute observation, sir," she responded carefully. "Now that that's out of the way, I would hate to take up any more of your precious time."

She turned away from him and started towards the door.

His voice was cruel. "I haven't finished with you, Miss Granger."

For the first time in her life, she felt the massive surge of magic that had frequently plagued Harry whenever his emotions overwhelmed his control. Her fury was so all-encompassing that she whirled back to face Severus feeling something perilously close to hatred, and a wave of golden energy flashed out of her before she was even aware of what was happening.

With an instinct that she didn't know she possessed, she grounded the magic into the stones of the floors and walls before it could do more than ruffle the hair of the man on the other side of the room. The discharge of so much power made her sag slightly, and she had to put her hand out to the doorframe to steady herself.

There was stunned silence, no one moving, and then she turned and fled. Speaking to him right now was going to get one of them badly injured.

Running on automatic, she Masked herself, knowing that she couldn't deal with any of the questions that would result if one of the Slytherins saw her leaving the Potion master's quarters this early in the morning. The vindictive part of her felt that it would serve the man right, but the rational part of her knew that there would be serious repercussions if Voldemort were to hear of it, and even her badly bruised feelings didn't seem an adequate reason to see Severus sentenced to death because he'd had the temerity to take up with a Mudblood.

Of course, Severus was very clever, and he could no doubt spin a nice story to tell Voldemort about how he thought it would be amusing to take Harry Potter's best friend and use her at his whim.

It ought to be awfully easy for him to manage, as it wasn't a lie.

She blinked back tears. It was still hard for her to believe that it had gone quite so wrong. She had known when they began this last night that it wasn't love for him, but she hadn't thought he was going to be such an utter bastard. He was the one who'd asked if she was issuing an invitation. It wasn't as though she'd come in there, stripped, and demanded that he take her. He'd been the one pushing for her to have sex the whole damn evening—the last month—and now, this morning, he accused her of going there simply to use him?

Her emotions were threatening to boil over despite her effort to shore up her shields. The man was absolutely infuriating. He made her want to stamp her feet, curse everything within sight, and then break down and cry. She had the feeling that she would do all of those things if she didn't keep careful control of herself. Since not letting everyone else know what had happened was imperative to her continued mental wellness, she had to keep a lid on her temper.

The gargoyle dissolved without her even thinking about wanting to enter her quarters. She checked at the threshold, heart clenching painfully in her chest.

They hadn't managed to make it to Harry's bedroom, but at some point one of them had at least had the sense to Summon a blanket. They were cuddled up on the floor, and they both looked perfectly content in sleep. They looked the way she had felt when she woke up with Severus such a little time ago—but she was certain that when they woke up, it would continue to be a happy morning for them.

Gazing down at them with a fondness that was tinged with pain, she realized that they must have really tired one another out to still be sleeping here. She would have suspected the light-sleeping Harry to notice where they were at some point or the snobby Slytherin to notice they were on the floor rather than in a bed. But no, they were snuggled together on the floor, sleeping without a care in the world.

She wordlessly conjured pyjamas and pillows, softened the floor, and made sure that their blanket was covering them adequately for warmth before tiptoeing past them and into her bedroom. This was when she noticed that tears were trickling down her face and dripping off her chin. She scrubbed at her face angrily. She was happy for them, honestly she was, but it still hurt to seem them like that, and she couldn't seem to make that gnawing pain go away because Severus had insulted her, used his school authority against her, and accused her of using him.

He had taken her virginity and then bloody well split hairs, although she supposed that by the narrow definition, the bloody prat was right.

There were no more Pure Adults.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Morning After

Hermione dragged herself off to the shower, feeling very grimy between her day-old clothes and the aspersions that had just been cast on her. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she looked very pale in the bathroom mirror, so she threw herself into the shower cubicle and scrubbed herself clean with water that was too hot. She emerged and found that while she was no doubt physically clean, she still felt emotionally scarred, and her eyes looked haunted.

She clamped down on her emotions again—which had apparently started leaking along with the spate of tears in the shower—and stared at herself defiantly until she'd schooled her expression to one of acceptable normalcy. She wasn't going to ruin this morning for Harry and Draco, not for anything. It had gone all wrong for her, but that just meant there was more reason to ensure that it went right for them.

She dried her hair, pulled it back to get it out of the way, and dressed in jeans and a cozy jumper so that she was physically warm. Emerging again from her bedroom, she found that the boys were finally rising. Harry peeked at her from around the side of the couch and went a spectacular shade of red.

"Good morning," she greeted him kindly.

"'Morning, 'Mione." He cleared his throat. "I don't remember going to sleep in pyjamas."

"You didn't," she answered.

Although it hardly seemed possible, his flush deepened.

"Oh. Thanks."

Draco sat up. "I second that. Especially for the pillows. It must have been your idea to sleep out here, Harry, because I like to wake up in a bed in the morning."

If their night had been anything like hers, it had culminated in their losing consciousness in a blinding flash of light, so she doubted that Harry could be held responsible for what had happened.

Harry grinned at Draco, however, apparently completely unrepentant.

"I wouldn't trade a single moment of that for a bed, Draco."

Draco's expression softened to one which Hermione had never seen before, leaving her pained and touched. The blond didn't even have to speak the words for Hermione to know that he felt exactly the same way as Harry, and she was delighted that Harry was going to get his happily ever after. The two of them were fast losing themselves in one another's eyes but as sweet as she thought it was, she didn't really want to risk a repeat performance of the night before, so she cleared her throat.

Harry raised startled eyes to hers, and she smirked slightly as she realized that he'd forgotten that she was there. The humour in this situation helped her shake off the melancholy; besides, Harry would completely misinterpret if she acted upset, so she needed to keep herself together.

"You're absolutely adorable, but I'd rather not see you any more intimately, if you don't mind. As Draco pointed out, you have a perfectly serviceable bed, and I'd take it as a kindness if you used it occasionally."

Harry was blushing again, which only seemed to amuse Draco, who didn't appear to be at all embarrassed by having been caught by her.

"But this is such a lovely large room, Hermione," he observed, laughter dancing in his bright grey eyes. "You can't really blame us for getting carried away out here, can you?"

"Not at all," she agreed solemnly, playing along. "In fact, I don't mind if you have sex all over this room, but I'd prefer if you arranged it with me beforehand so that I can make myself scarce at that time."

"Would you two please stop talking about me having sex?" Harry asked plaintively. "It's horribly, horribly embarrassing."

"Do you mean to say that you're embarrassed to have sex with me, Harry?" Draco demanded imperiously, managing to sound very serious.

Harry's eyes widened. "Of course not!" he exclaimed with what Draco no doubt found a gratifyingly huge amount of indignation. "I couldn't ever be embarrassed about anything I do with you, Draco."

This was said with such patented earnestness that it wasn't possible to even poke all the holes in his logic that such a statement deserved. Harry could and had been embarrassed several times in the short span that they'd been friends, but both Hermione and Draco knew exactly what he meant, and the pride that he obviously felt in his partner was obvious. She didn't think it made Draco want to cry like it did her, but it was evident even from across the room that he was not unmoved, and now it looked as though they were going to wind up naked again.

She cleared her throat once more, and Draco grinned positively devilishly.

"Hermione has clearly decided that you have no willpower when it comes to me, Harry. Perhaps we'd better take ourselves off to your room before we offend her sensibilities."

This did not have the effect she imagined he'd intended. Instead, it reminded Harry of what had evidently heretofore slipped his mind.

"Hermione," he breathed, remorse evident.

She shook her head. "Don't even think about it. I've already given Draco official dispensation."

Draco's lips quirked up at this description, but by the time Harry looked at him, he was nodding with an attempt at solemnity.

"She brought it up a good three weeks ago, Harry."

"So you anticipated that I'd be a complete prat and go back on my word?" Harry said bitterly, his stupid interpretation of what she was trying to say only upsetting him more.

She gave Draco a brief apologetic look, crossed the room, and cupped Harry's face in her hands so that he was forced to look right at her.

"Are you happy?" she asked. "Does he make you happy?"

Harry nodded, eyes huge and brilliantly green.

"Then you don't ever have to apologize to me," she said with absolute conviction.

She should, she supposed, tell him that she wasn't a Pure Adult anymore, either, but given how dismal the aftermath had been, she didn't think it would make him feel particularly better. Not to mention the fact that she'd done what she'd done because she'd found Harry and Draco about to have sex. Plus there would be Draco's reaction to the fact that she'd had sex with his godfather. She didn't want to go any of those places, not right now.

Harry swallowed and then nodded.

She smiled back at him. "There we are, then. I'm sure the two of you could benefit from a shower, and I'm going to go to the library, so I don't mind if it's communal."

It was simply too funny to watch Harry blush and Draco smirk.

"I'll see you at breakfast?" she suggested.

Harry needed to clear his throat before he could speak. "We'll walk you down at eight, okay?"

She was perfectly capable of walking down to the Great Hall herself, but she knew this was Harry's way of showing that he cared about her, so she acquiesced without complaint.

It wasn't until she arrived at the library that she realized something was wrong. Well, wrong was perhaps not the correct word. Different, at any rate. When she had gone to bed the night before, she hadn't been able to actually see wards unless they'd been deliberately rendered visible; she had felt the tingle of their magic when they were very powerful, had been able to access their layers and deactivate them. Like Harry, she had been what could probably be termed unusually sensitive to their presence compared to most people, but she hadn't just looked around and seen them.

Now, apparently, she could—or they'd made some drastic changes to the library in the two days since she'd last been in it, including visibly warding the entire room against burning and the Restricted Section against intrusion. The fire wards were a dull red colour, and she knew without thinking about it that it meant that they were old.

The wards around the Restricted Section were an amalgamation of multiple times and headmasters, layered on top of one another to form a more or less cohesive whole; she could see the spots where Albus had manipulated it so that Harry could sneak in and accomplish whatever life lessons and battle prep the headmaster had thought was necessary—otherwise, the wards could be breached only by Hogwarts staff and students who had passes.

She immediately wanted to backtrack to her and Harry's rooms but wasn't about to risk interrupting the two boys or explaining her reason for coming. Had she really not seen the wards there? Could she only see certain types of wards or only wards in certain places? Admittedly, she'd been more than a little out of sorts when she had arrived in her rooms, and then she'd been concentrating on Harry and Draco, so it was perhaps not impossible that she might have missed them.

Peering curiously around her—while trying not to look like a complete idiot because she'd probably spent more time in the library than most of the other students—she found that the more she peered at the Restricted Section, the more it looked to her as though there was an entire section behind the regular stacks that had been warded from sight. She made a mental note to come back and investigate further; it might turn out that she couldn't get past the wards back there, but she wanted to have a closer look and ascertain if they posed any danger.

She retrieved the Transfiguration books that were the purpose of her visit but spent her time staring at the library itself rather than reading them. When she concentrated fixedly enough, she found that she could see faint traces of magic in the very stones of the castle. She had always known that Hogwarts was imbued with magic, and now it appeared that it was visible to her.

By the time Harry and Draco came to pick her up at the end of the hour, the books remained as unread as when she had got them, but she'd begun to differentiate between outer and inner walls of Hogwarts based solely on what magic they emanated, and she'd realized that two fifth-year Ravenclaws were wearing Glamours to cover up horribly dark circles under their eyes. She should probably have been tipped off by the fact that they were in the library this early on a Sunday morning; they'd clearly gotten more than a little obsessed over their O.W.L.s, and she made a mental note to speak to Terry or Morag. It was only February, after all, making it a little early for students to be self-destructing based on their study schedules.

At the arrival of the boys, she discovered that they'd Glamoured their visible love bites. She found the shimmering Glamour much more distracting than the bite itself. Since she'd had to concentrate to see the walls—and given herself a headache if the pressure building in her temples was any indication—she tried unfocussing to lessen the impact of the Glamour. It worked, the magic fading out until she couldn't see it again, but this apparently required a little too much staring, as Harry reached up to cover his neck self-consciously.

"The Glamour hasn't slipped, has it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just admiring your handiness with the spell. I remember them just fine from this morning, thank you."

Draco was back to smirking, apparently quite pleased with his handiwork.

"Shall we go down to breakfast?" Harry asked hurriedly.

They took pity on the Gryffindor boy and headed to the Great Hall. She heard a gasp of breath at her side and looked over at Harry. Perhaps she wasn't the only one experiencing these after effects, then, because the Great Hall was stunning to behold. There was no way to miss the fact that the ceiling was enchanted and warded, because she could see the spell in the stone. It was colourful and a lot of information to suddenly take in, and Draco stared at them as though they'd lost their minds when they ground to a halt at the door.

Everything all right? she asked Harry as she reminded herself that he had no reason to suspect that she would be suffering from the same.

Yeah, he said, frowning faintly. Uh, I'll explain later?

Sure.

She had kept her own secrets often enough, after all, and she had already guessed about this one.

They sat at the Ravenclaw table this morning, as Hermione wanted to talk to the Ravenclaw Prefects, and as she examined the Great Hall further, she discovered some interesting facts. If she was interpreting correctly, there appeared to be dormant wards that could separate the High Table from the rest of the hall as well as ones that could separate the house tables from one another. She wondered how often in the past they had needed to be used. Did Albus know about them? She was tempted to activate them just to see them working but had enough sense to restrain herself.

Once Severus arrived for breakfast, she studiously trained her attention to the Ravenclaw table, not wanting him to think that she was trying to sneak glances at him. Although she'd been quite preoccupied with the issue of seeing more magic than ever before, now that the man was in the same room as she was, she was finding it difficult not to think about him.

Her feelings were such a cross between angry and hurt that she really couldn't work out what the appropriate reaction should be, which probably saved her from making a fool of herself in the Great Hall. Draco commented on the ferocity with which she was spearing cubes of fruit this morning; she was not, it appeared, being as non-reactive as she wished. She forced herself to eat her food normally.

There had been so many moments of tenderness the night before; she had actually begun to believe that there was an actual possibility that he had some positive and possibly romantic feelings for her after all. All those hopes dashed was difficult to accept. She understood it logically, but her heart was rebelling despite its hurt state; the desperately lovesick part of her still wanted to talk to him and try to understand what had happened, try to work out if there was any salvageable part of their relationship. The logical part of her, by contrast, was already informing her that there wasn't the slightest chance of that.

Her emotional side kept countering with arguments that it was difficult for her logical side to refute; her mind was inundated with images that revolved around the fabulous night they had spent together once they'd gotten over their awkwardness. Again, the logical part of her tried to point out that the vast majority of it had been awkward; there had been indications throughout that Severus was not as engaged as she had been, as he had often seemed upset or put out by what she was doing.

But then she was reminded of the tremendous amount of pleasure that he had given her; why would he have done that if he didn't care for her at all? She couldn't answer that question except to remember that he had thrown her out the morning after, was currently glaring at her as though he could turn her to stone simply with his eyes, and hadn't given the slightest overt and definite indication that he cared for her. Maybe he just thought pleasure in sex was important. Maybe he thought her pleasure was crucial to the exchange of power when she lost her virginity. He was the one who'd pointed out that anyone would sleep with her, and that was why.

She wondered what power he'd gained, what increase in ability had manifested, and then admonished herself for even thinking about it. She shouldn't care what was going on with him, not after the way he had treated her. This was, unfortunately, easier said than done.

Despite all that had happened, she found herself wishing that she'd taken more time to examine all his scars, to find out what they tasted like. And she could have tried a few more of those things that she hadn't thought she was up for last night. In retrospect, it felt rather as though she'd missed an important opportunity; he'd made it perfectly plain that it was a mistake that would never, ever be repeated. Which was unfortunate, because the part of her which wasn't obsessing over the morning after and her bruised feelings was telling her that their experience should be repeated time after time.

Harry and Draco had to regain her attention to get her out of the room, and she could see that Harry was becoming genuinely concerned. Given how his mind worked, she was sure that he was working his way to some sort of conclusion that it was his fault she was upset and a belief that he was therefore a horrible friend. With an effort, she pulled herself together and convinced him that she was perfectly all right and definitely not uneasy in the presence of the two of them now that they had consummated their relationship.

Forcing herself to behave happily around him went a fair way to making her feel better in reality. From ten until noon, she gave any seventh-years who so desired pointers on N.E.W.T. preparation, as it was generally acknowledged that she was the most organized and studious student in the school. Even the Ravenclaws didn't seem terribly put out to concede this to her, given that they had all seen her studying like a maniac, living in the library, and colour-coding her notes months in advance for years. Since she was also Head Girl, it seemed only fitting for her to be trying to guide the other students towards better scholastic achievement.

Draco dragged Harry along to the session despite the fact that Harry had told her when she first came up with the idea that he wouldn't attend; he and Ron had both declared that they would boycott since they thought they got enough of her encouragement without going to any special sessions about it. Whether Draco felt it was his duty to go as a Prefect or because he really wanted to learn how she studied wasn't quite clear, but if he was going, he was taking Harry with him. Ron, of course, did not come.

In the afternoon, she did the same for the fifth-years preparing for their O.W.L.s, doing her best to instil in all of them a realization that these tests weren't far away at all and that they had a large impact on their futures. Breaking their revision down into small portions starting well in advance meant that there wouldn't need to be horrendous cramming sessions at the end of the year, and that was good for everyone's mental health.

She was fairly certain that most of them wouldn't take her words to heart, but if she convinced any of them to improve their study habits at least a little, then she thought it was worth the effort. Of course, if she hadn't had it planned for weeks already, she would have picked any day but today, although it did serve to distract her for a little while.

By the time dinner rolled around, she was feeling pretty good, all things considered—which lasted until the meal ended and Severus stalked over and dragged her and Harry off for a discussion about their duties as Head Boy and Head Girl. His sneer and utter contempt when he said this made it clear to everyone in the vicinity that he thought they were grossly deficient in some manner.

He asked Draco along as well—with politeness that only highlighted how rude he had been to them—as though they could learn important lessons from the Slytherin paragon. Hermione clenched her jaw and didn't let herself utter a single word, and Harry followed her lead. They trooped down the stairs where she discovered that Severus was a glutton for punishment, or maybe he'd determined that she was a masochist, because he actually wanted the three of them for a training session.

He started the way he evidently meant to go on, his sneer pronounced, and the venom in his voice enough to confuse Harry and Draco. "Let's see what the Gryffindors can manage against the Slytherins." He looked directly at her. "You should be able to do something with Mr Potter."

Her nostrils flared as she fought to control a spike of temper. She glared at him stonily.

What's that all about? Harry wanted to know.

Don't ask, she said, gritting her teeth. Not right now, anyway. It looks as though he's not going to wait to— She blocked the Blasting Curse Severus sent their way before he'd even formally begun their duel. She finished grimly, —attack.

Both Harry and Draco still looked confused, but since it was clear they were supposed to be attacking or Severus was likely to turn on the blond as well, they began. She noted to her amusement that Harry and Draco were going easy on one another and wincing each time anything came close to hitting the other person. Unfortunately, Severus more than made up for Draco's reticence; the two boys might not want to hurt one another, but Severus was rather determined to grind her into dust from the look of it. She was left open to a rather concerted attack, in fact, given that Draco didn't want to hit Harry, and Severus was delighting in throwing everything he had at her.

By this point in the duel, she'd begun to work out what colours indicated which spells, and she wondered if Harry was doing the same, assuming that he was seeing the same things she was. The milder hexes and jinxes that Draco was throwing at Harry—which were normally invisible to the naked eye—were perfectly clear to her in various pastels as they flew through the air towards their intended target. It made it quite straightforward to deflect them, although it had been a little disconcerting at first to have the room so bright with spells.

Harry was spending more time defending her than himself, and this only seemed to make the sneer on Severus's face more pronounced. Out of deference to the Slytherins—at least one of whom was a decent human being—Hermione had thus far kept the duel sporting by not employing any shielding they couldn't counter. It didn't make for much of a duel, after all, if one side couldn't land a single hit or even come close.

The third time Severus threw the Skin-burning Hex at her, however, she averted his demise at the hands of the Boy Who Lived who had mentally ground out, I'm going to kill him! with every semblance of seriousness by throwing up her sympathetic shield around her and Harry. Truth be told, she was feeling a bit out of sorts herself. She hadn't expected roses and poetry, but trying not to maim her would have been a perfectly acceptable alternative after the night they had shared.

Now, although she had made her shield invisible to everyone else's eyes, it was clearly delineated to her, a glowing golden dome that encased her and Harry. When the spell ricocheted back at Severus, Harry paused in his casting and in a rare moment of maturity, given how upset he'd been a moment ago, simply let the Slytherin dodge his own furiously cast spells. Severus had already been putting a great deal of force behind his casting, but he increased it now, throwing curse after curse at her shield.

It never wavered. She was just beginning to feel the drain she normally experienced when warding against so determined and strong an attack, but given the look on the man's face, she wasn't about to let the shield down any time soon.

It seems as though it's personal, Harry observed.

It is, she agreed stiffly, although I really don't think he has the right to be upset.

Draco was half-heartedly tossing a curse or two at them occasionally. From the look on his face, this was purely preventative, trying to keep Severus from cursing the other Slytherin for his desertion.

Severus's movements had been growing angrier and angrier, the spells darker, and there was no longer any doubt in her mind that he was stronger than he had been—and he had already been a very strong wizard to begin with.

He cast again. She had a fraction of an instant to notice that the Cruciatus was a sickly browny-orange colour, and then she was reacting without thought, throwing up a shield that was solid, a half dozen inches thick, and stronger than steel or stone.

Her initial attempts over a month ago had indicated the shield wouldn't be strong enough or erected quickly enough. In this instant, however, she had acted instinctively, and the power had simply come.

She felt the spell impact the shield and staggered back several steps but kept to her feet by sheer force of will. The shield went opaque, cracks spidering across it audibly, but it held. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and then released the shield. She felt winded, as though she had been running or spell-casting for quite some time.

Severus was on the ground, felled, it would seem, by his own spell. Draco and Harry were both staring at the two of them in shock.

Hermione walked over to the Slytherin, staring down at him and his dazed expression with steely eyes and a clenched jaw.

Her voice was icy. "The next time you cast an Unforgivable on me, Severus, you had better make it the Killing Curse."

She didn't wait to see if he had anything to contribute because she already knew it wasn't going to be an apology. She marched out of the room and back to her quarters, spine straight and head held high. Distantly, she noticed that she could, in fact, see her wards, but this fact was far from her most pressing concern at the moment.

It was apparently open season on casting Unforgivables on her, and the amusement factor was really beginning to wear thin. She was grateful their training room had wards up to prevent Albus from detecting Dark Magic; there were only so many excuses she could come up with before it began to look suspicious that she was involved so recurrently in such incidents. The Slytherins appeared not to have grasped by themselves that repeatedly attacking her was a badly thought-out plan.

Harry and Draco joined her a few minutes later.

"What just happened?" Harry demanded.

"Your shield just blocked an Unforgivable," Draco said. "Shields can't do that, remember?"

Her lips quirked up ever so slightly. "This was the first time it worked."

"But why would Snape hit you with an Unforgivable, 'Mione?"

She sighed, contemplating a number of answers, none of which she liked. Informing them that Severus was a daft berk would hardly surprise Harry, but it wouldn't really answer their question, either, and the last thing she wanted was for him to head over there, bent on attacking Severus. If they got into a serious fight, they'd wind up seriously injured, sacked, or expelled, and she couldn't have that on her conscience.

Truthfully, she was counting herself lucky that the head of Slytherin hadn't decided to follow the other two and confront her as well. It was quite possibly all that could make this conversation worse.

"I didn't want to talk about it today," she finally began. "I knew I'd have to tell you or you'd work it out yourselves eventually." Their looks showed that she wasn't elucidating quickly enough, and she suppressed another sigh. "This morning was not the first time I saw the two of you together." Confusion. "I came in last night while the two of you were … otherwise occupied. You didn't notice."

Harry was really going to have to work on his blush control, although the reliable reaction made it a little easier for her to continue speaking.

"I didn't want to risk interrupting, given how it looked that events were unfolding, so I left immediately, and there seemed to be only one sensible place to go."

Part of her still wondered why that was. She could have gone to her herd. She could have gone to the library. She could have done an extra set of rounds and probably still outlasted the two of them, sneaking back in once they'd fallen asleep. Instead, without thought, she'd immediately gone to Severus.

"Severus had sex with you?" Draco demanded, disdain plain in his voice.

Hermione swallowed heavily, unable to look at either of them when it was so clear what they thought of her.

"Out!" Harry ordered, his voice clipped, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

She knew she should be making some sort of observation about this being her room as well, but she couldn't seem to get her mouth to function properly, so she took a jerky step towards the door.

Harry's hand on her arm stopped her, and a moment later he had pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her.

"Not you, idiot girl," he breathed into her hair, and then she heard his voice change as he addressed Draco over her head. "I'll not ask again. Get out of this room."

"Harry," Draco began, sounding offended and incredulous that he was being ordered out.

The Gryffindor's voice was implacable. "You are not welcome here with that attitude. You have both mocked her and attacked her with curses that should have resulted in your being thrown into Azkaban; it is on her sufferance alone that such an outcome has not occurred. There are only two other people in this world who were aware of the significance of you and I spending a night together and I, for one, don't blame Hermione for choosing not to discuss the matter with Albus. So I will thank you to take your pure-blood, Slytherin stupidity and get the hell out of our room."

She really, really hadn't wanted to ruin the accord between Harry and Draco. It had been part of the reason she had been keeping quiet about what had occurred. But she couldn't seem to find her voice to try to temper Harry's words or ask Draco to stay. She felt the shift in the wards as Draco passed through and left. Harry led her to the couch and pulled her down to sit next to him.

"Did he hurt you?" Harry asked with a great deal of gentleness.

She let out a shuddery breath, wondering how on earth she could answer that question. He'd ripped her bloody heart out, but she didn't think that was exactly what Harry had meant with this question. It seemed an almost insurmountable task, however, to open her mouth and declare that Severus hadn't hurt her. They wouldn't be here if that were the case.

"I went because I knew he'd understand," she answered instead, deciding that the only way to explain this was to give the entire story—much abridged, of course. "We talked, and he reminded me of how dangerous it was for both me and him if there was one Pure Adult left. He … he asked me if I was issuing an invitation, and I agreed I was."

She hadn't realized she was crying until Harry brushed the tears off of her cheeks.

Sniffing inelegantly, she struggled for words. "It was horribly awkward, but he was very gentle and as patient as Severus ever is, and I was happy for a few perfect moments. And then we woke up, and he accused me of using him and threw me out."

"He accused you of using him," Harry repeated blankly.

She nodded. It made her feel a great deal better to know that at least she wasn't the only person who thought that was completely daft.

"You realize I'm going to have to march over to his quarters and kill him with my bare hands, right?"

She snorted a half-laugh, half-sob, and Harry cuddled her closer.

"He said anyone would have sex with a Pure Adult," she confessed quietly, tears choking her voice. "That was the last thing I ever wanted."

"I know," Harry said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm so sorry this had to go so badly for you. You deserve so much better."

It was such a relief to have someone on her side; she had half-expected Harry to react with disgust, just as Draco had. He might have been okay with the idea of her and Severus, but that was vastly different from being confronted with the reality of their having had sex.

"I'm sorry I messed everything up with you and Draco," she said pitifully.

He shook his head. "Don't you even think about that. Just because we've had sex doesn't mean I won't throw him out when he's being a complete prat."

"But I wanted at least one of us to be happy," she protested.

"And my being happy can't come at the price of either Draco or Severus treating you like dirt," Harry said firmly.

She was sniffling again. "Thank you, Harry."

"You don't need to thank me for being a decent human being. You should be able to expect it, you know."

Her lips quirked up. She was still torn between laughter and tears. "I'll try to remember that."

Harry's tone was dry. "It's difficult in the company we keep sometimes, I know."

Her lips quavered. "He took my virginity and cast an Unforgivable on me on the same day."

Harry held her while she cried, neither storming off to kill Severus nor getting impatient with her for sobbing over the bastard who had treated her so abysmally.

When she had calmed to the occasional sniffle, he spoke.

"We are safer now." Reminding her of why she'd made the choice she had. "Nothing can happen that will allow Voldemort to gain any additional power through us. You noticed that they were stronger?"

She appreciated that he was trying to distract her.

"Well, it was hard to tell with Draco, given that he kept sending Jelly-Legs Jinxes at you," she pointed out.

He gave a fond smile, seeming to forget, for a moment at least, that he and the blond in question were on the outs. "He is stronger, though. He conjured a hairbrush to his own specifications because mine wasn't good enough, silly ponce, and ended up with a half dozen of them. We've been trying to sort out how much power we need to put into spells since then." He cleared his throat. "Snape's casting seemed stronger than normal as well."

She nodded her head.

"But you blocked everything, including an Unforgivable." He said it almost like a question, as though expecting her to explain that that wasn't what he'd actually seen.

"I don't feel particularly stronger, but I do seem to have more magic at my disposal." She drew a deep breath. "I, uh, had a bit of an uncontrolled reaction this morning. Nearly flattened Severus with a burst of magic out of nowhere."

He looked as though he could guess well enough the reason for the outburst.

"So," she said with an attempt at a smile, "I owe you an apology for ever chastising you about any uncontrolled outbursts you've ever had. It's a hell of a thing. And I suspect the same thing happened just now in the training room."

He was staring at her intently. "I don't think you can accidentally cast an Unforgivable."

"I think the lines between thinking it and doing it are a little more blurred for all of us right now, and we need to learn how to control ourselves again."

"You're trying to talk me out of killing him again, aren't you?"

She huffed a laugh. "I suppose so, yes. It won't make anything better if you fight."

Harry spluttered. "Well, it'll—He deserves—That's—"

"And what are you going to tell Albus?"

"The headmaster doesn't have anything to do with this."

"The headmaster will become intimately involved because unless your first spell is the Killing Curse, the two of you are going to do your best to kill one another and I don't think the headmaster could miss that."

"But … he didn't even apologize."

A fact which Hermione had not missed.

"I will take care of Severus," she said firmly. "You were the one going on about my sufferance—nice vocabulary, by the way."

Harry made a face at her. "Okay, okay. But if he tries to hurt you like that again, he's going to regret it."

The best she could hope for under the circumstances, she supposed. A change of subject was in order.

"You saw the Great Hall, too, didn't you?"

His frown of confusion smoothed away even as it was forming. "Oh, thank God. I thought I was the only one. So that's like … us seeing wards and stuff? All the time?"

She offered him a smile. "It looks like. You know, it's something that unicorns can do, see magic, or at least see more than humans can. I would guess that phoenixes can, too, yeah?"

His head tilted to one side as he considered the matter. "Yeah, I guess they do."

"So the lines between us and our magical forms are even more blurred than it was before."

Harry nodded. "Sounds plausible to me." Suddenly, he grinned. "I know you were dying for my opinion on your theory."

She smiled back at him. "I'm always happy to hear your opinion, Harry; you know I'll ignore it if it's totally useless."

He laughed, rising to his feet. "Come on, then, and show me how I'm supposed to organize my notes to make N.E.W.T.s manageable."

He had no desire to start organizing his notes four months before their examinations, she knew that. This suggestion was solely to make her feel better, and she so badly wanted to forget about this whole horrible day that she allowed it. Harry really was a great friend.

The next several days were not very pleasant. Potions was Monday morning, and Severus was, unsurprisingly, in a beastly mood. He continued to be hell bent on making her and Harry work together and being all snide about it while he separated Harry and Draco. He may not have noticed, but they were busy being all separate on their own already; Harry was still not speaking to the blond after having tossed him out of their room, and the Slytherin didn't seem too happy with Harry for having done it.

Hermione was still angry with Severus, but she couldn't really blame Draco for his sharp comment; it had been said in a moment of shock, and she knew full well that a lifetime of prejudices couldn't be overcome instantly. At the same time, however, she couldn't help but feel that given all she had done to fight for his and Harry's happiness, it would have been nice if he could have been a little more accepting of her choice.

There was a lot of glaring all around, really, and since Ron was still pissed off with them in general—and with her in particular for curtailing his fun with Lavender—that was one more person to add to the growing trend. It was only two days after Valentine's Day, and they were all miserable. Hermione tried to remember how it had felt when she had bested Albus with the decorations and seen Harry and Draco being so goofy and emotionally attached.

This made her think of those moments with Severus, and she found herself clinging to the happy bits. She couldn't seem to decide if it was the best worst day of her life or the worst best day. Everything had gone horribly wrong, but she had known bliss; if she'd been more articulate, she would no doubt have cried out her love for Severus that night, and despite how angry and hurt she was, her heart seemed remarkably certain of the continuing strength of her feelings. Trying to walk away and actually managing it were two completely different problems, apparently.

By Wednesday, the Potions master had worked out that Draco and Harry were upset with one another—even he couldn't miss the fact that Draco was eating at the Ravenclaw table while they were at Gryffindor or Hufflepuff—and Severus managed at every opportunity to get in a dig about how happy she must be to have driven a wedge between them.

Draco had to have heard at least some of these comments, and she figured that with her luck, he'd now be convinced that she was sabotaging him, too. Just what she needed: two malicious Slytherins intent on making her miserable. There seemed to be a fair bit of jeering from both the Slytherin and the Gryffindor—led by Ron—tables that the "unholy alliance" between the two of them and Draco had come to an end. There were lots of "I told you so"s being tossed around, and Hermione was royally annoyed.

She had to visit the library again that evening, and the glow of the Restricted Section caught her eye once more and reminded her that she needed to investigate. Shortly after half two in the morning, therefore, after using the Map to ensure that no one else was breaking into the room because wouldn't that be embarrassing, she sneaked back into the library fully Masked and made her way over to the out-of-bounds area.

Albus's wards still held, allowing entrance to Harry. Peering at them more closely, she wondered for the first time how she'd gotten through the wards on those occasions when she had needed a book and it wasn't Harry who'd retrieved it. According to what she was looking at, the headmaster had made an exception only for his Golden Boy which meant she should have tripped the alarm wards every time. She hadn't, though, not once, and she wanted to know why.

It took her almost three quarters of an hour to reach the ward level that she was now pretty sure pertained to her, granting her the equivalent status of a professor and thus access to this section of the library at all times. There were name wards in place but none that she recognized, which confused her to no end until she finally realized what she was looking at. These were wards that permitted the entrance of "Berit". It only got spookier from there, because if she was reading the wards right—and up until this point, she'd had no reason to doubt her skills—this part of the warding was the original rather than a later addition. This part of the warding was almost a thousand years old.

Having no idea what to make of this but unwilling to give up, Hermione decided that now was not the time to once again test those wards. Now that she knew how mysterious her ability to get in was, she wasn't about to try making use of it at half three in the morning in case things suddenly went horribly wrong. She wanted to make a much more thorough examination before she considered just sneaking in again.

Instead, therefore, she went to the wall on the far left and found where the wards ended. It was here that a wizard with enough power and knowledge could most easily coax the wards apart, enabling safe passage or more permanent modifications, such as permitting herself entry in perpetuity.

Since she didn't want it to be clear to anyone that it was she who had been modifying the wards, Hermione contented herself for the moment with only loosening them, enabling her to get in and out now; she would tighten them again as she left, and no one would ever know that she'd been through.

The more time she spent getting through wards, the more mental notes she made for herself for improving her own wards to prevent others from doing the same. Wards weren't really ever impenetrable, but they could be designed so that they barred the vast majority of people who didn't have the power or the necessary skills to get through them. Of those few who were left, layered wards and various alarms and booby traps could be rigged to slow them down until it became impractical and very time-consuming for anyone to make the attempt. Sheer power only went so far; subtlety was needed as well.

The wards surrounding a section of the wall at the back of the Restricted Section were both strong and subtle, and it took Hermione the better part of an hour and a half to work her way through most of them. The final layer gave way, surprisingly, at her magical touch before she'd even had the chance to examine it more closely to work out how it had been spelled.

Beneath the wards was a recessed bookshelf covered with rows of books. This wasn't entirely surprising, given the location, but Hermione still found it particularly pleasing that she'd found a secret compartment full of books. She didn't think there was anyone else in the castle who'd be quite as excited as she was by this particular discovery.

She started with the book on the far left of the top shelf, examining it minutely without touching it to ensure that there weren't any further spells on it that would be activated by her touch to deleterious effect. Once she was as sure as she could be that it was safe, she pulled the book down, sat down cross-legged on the floor, and began to read.

What she discovered over the next hour was more than she had ever expected about the Founders, Pure Adults, and the warding of the castle: the books were actually journals kept by Salazar Slytherin's youngest child, Solace.

Hermione tore herself away from the captivating material at half five, as she didn't want to be caught in the library by Irma or any nosy students. The initial journal had contained an insert that outlined the protections the books were under here in the library so that Hermione knew it was safe to remove them if she wished. Given the lateness of the hour and the fact that she didn't have anywhere in particular to safely put them in her room, she thought they would be safer where they were for the time being.

She therefore put everything back the way she had found it and re-warded as she went. Fortunately, Solace had given Hermione the key that allowed her to activate and deactivate the wards surrounding the bookshelf so that she wouldn't need to spend an inordinate amount of time working through them when she wanted to get at the books. According to what she'd read, it was also thanks to Solace that she could get through the wards around the Restricted Section; in future, she would trust to the woman's warding and go through the wards knowing that the headmaster would not be alerted.

As she sneaked back into her room at nearly six in the morning, she remembered that she'd intended to spend not more than a couple of hours in the room so that she could get a few hours of sleep before classes began. Oops. If part of her still wasn't spitting mad and hurt, she'd no doubt find it hilariously funny that she was having secret night-long assignations with books while other people were sneaking around to shag. She probably didn't want to think about how many people wouldn't be surprised by this revelation.

Drawing a deep breath, she pushed these thoughts out of her head. Given how her life was going right now, there was only one sort of assignation that she was likely to have, and she was very pleased to have found these books. And really, if she and Severus had been busy going at it like rabbits, she might not have had the chance to make this spectacular discovery. She would take, she smiled a little grimly and a little wryly at herself, solace in that fact.

On Friday evening, Severus once again summoned them for a training session, although Tonks cheerfully invited herself along. Hermione wasn't sure whether that was going to make the situation better or if it was just going to leave the Defence professor with a lot of questions that none of them wanted to answer. They arrived at nine, as requested, and found that Draco had put himself in charge, putting Harry with Tonks, her with himself, and Severus to observe them.

Hermione knew that, given the mood he was in, the Head of Slytherin would have killed either her or Harry for attempting any such manipulation, but he allowed Draco to do it without comment, the slightly expectant smirk on his lips indicating that he thought Draco had a plan that would result in humiliation for one or both of the Gryffindors. Knowing better than to argue, Hermione and Harry simply obeyed.

She and Harry were left facing off against one another. Tonks looked slightly puzzled, indicating that she had picked up on the tension in the room even if she didn't know its source. Hermione took up her position next to Draco, back-to-back but at an angle so that they could survey as much of the front and sides of the room as possible. She hoped that she wasn't about to get hit by her team mate.

Tonks sent off the first curse, and Draco blocked it.

"Put up your shield, please," he said softly.

"What?" she demanded as she deflected Harry's Blindness Curse and fired off a Sleeping Curse in response.

"Your shield," he repeated. "I need to speak to you, and this seemed the best way to manage it."

Hermione considered. Harry had insisted that she remove Draco from the wards to their room. She hadn't actually done so, but she'd added a glyph to his name that temporarily rendered it inoperable; it would be easy enough to remove once Harry and Draco made up, which she sincerely hoped would be in the near future.

It was true that the messy-haired Gryffindor boy had been hovering around her, and he wouldn't have been interested in letting the Slytherin have a private word with her. Once she put the shield up, it meant she couldn't get any outside assistance if Draco decided to attack her, but she could hold her own against him. And he'd said "please".

The shield shimmered into place, Tonks's and Harry's curses immediately bouncing back at them. Hermione turned to Draco, who put up privacy charms so that no one could overhear them.

"Yes?"

Draco's face was twisted into an expression of distaste.

"I hate to say this," he said, reluctance clear in every word, "but he's being a complete arse."

She stiffened. "Harry isn't—"

"Not Harry," Draco said with an impatient shake of his head. "Severus. His behaviour is abysmal."

She blinked at him, and he evidently saw her surprise, because his lip curled up into a look of self-deprecating amusement.

"I know. Harry was right. He had every reason to tell me to leave, but I was too offended to actually listen to what he was saying. You've done a great deal for me, and I reacted just as I would have done before any of this started; it was very insulting to you, and I apologize."

She smiled. He might not be the Slytherin she most wanted an apology from, but it still meant a lot to her. "You're forgiven."

"He shouldn't treat you like this. You gave him a great gift."

She let out her breath in a huff, offering him a wan smile. "Not to hear him talk about it."

Draco's face settled into grim lines, lips pursed. "Unless you marched in there, tied him up, and had your wicked way with him protesting every step of the way—and you're simply far too … Hermione to do that—he doesn't have a single reason to complain."

"He doesn't seem to be of the same opinion as you, Draco," she said, and even she could hear the sadness in her voice.

"I know he's not the most gracious person in the world, but this is really the outside of enough," the blond Slytherin complained. "He's not usually such a complete arse."

"It doesn't matter," she said with as much firmness as she could force into her tone, although she did not really feel that way.

Draco looked at her as though she hadn't managed very well. "But he's the one you want."

She nodded marginally, a lump in her throat. Completely unexpectedly, Draco pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. He kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, for everything both of us have done to make you unhappy."

Her voice was muffled against his chest. "Who are you, and what have you done with the real Draco Malfoy?"

He snorted as he pulled back enough to look at her. "I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of being gracious. Belatedly, sometimes, but perfectly capable."

She smiled genuinely at him. "And I appreciate it."

Her attention was widened abruptly to the rest of the room when all three of those outside of her shield cast at the same time, each sending some of their strongest spells her way. No Unforgivables, fortunately.

Unfortunately for them, the combination of a Blasting Curse (Harry), a Cutting Curse (Tonks), and a very nasty Vanishing Curse (Severus) didn't quite manage to break her shield; she felt the jarring impact all the way to her toes, and reacted without thought; they all fell to the ground, Stunned.

She let her shield fall.

"Oops," she said, knowing she didn't sound all that sorry.

Draco was smirking. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"They were interrupting," she protested as she Ennervated them.

Harry sat up, shaking his head. "I knew that was a bad idea."

"It's a little embarrassing that you still defeated us when you weren't even paying attention," Tonks agreed.

Severus was glowering, not that that was a big change from his usual expression, especially these days. "This is a training session, not social hour."

She didn't need to leap to her own defence as Draco did it for her. "And yet, as Tonks was kind enough to point out, we still bested the lot of you—and you were only supposed to be observing, Severus; railing against our method under those circumstances just makes you seem like a bad sport."

Harry was seized with a sudden coughing fit, which she assumed was his commentary on there being any doubt about Severus being a bad sport.

"I can't believe you found someone else whose magic can go through your shield," Tonks said as she clambered to her feet.

She and Draco exchanged looks, and he shrugged slightly, indicating that what was said now was up to her.

"That would indeed be an amazing occurrence," Hermione said, "but I'm afraid Draco and I aren't nearly close enough for it to occur—fond, of course, as I am of him," she hastened to assure him, causing him to roll his eyes and smile. "I'm afraid that was all me."

There was a moment of silence.

"You kept up that strong a shield and then you Stunned us through the shield?" Tonks clarified.

"That about sums it up," she agreed.

"I had no idea you could practice wandless magic to that degree." The pink-haired Auror continued to sound stunned.

"It's not normally a fact that I advertise," Hermione clarified, "but that's what happens when you catch me off guard."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, she forgets to temper her power and completely kicks our butts."

There was still a furrow in Tonks's brow. "It's like the lot of you have suddenly started throwing all your weight behind your spells."

"It's getting closer to the Final Battle," Harry answered. "We all know it's coming even if we don't know exactly when it will be. We have to be prepared to do whatever it takes."

"Sure," Tonks agreed. "I'm still waiting for my extra boost of power to kick in, though."

Hermione smiled at her, wondering if at some point, Tonks would realize what she'd just said and connect all the dots correctly. Hermione was going to take every extra moment she had, however, which was why she was deliberately not trying to find out if Albus knew what had happened.

"We're all very powerful," Hermione agreed as circumspectly as she could manage. "It wasn't as though you were the only one I Stunned, right?"

"But that does strongly suggest that you're the most powerful wizard here," Tonks pointed out.

Hermione shook her head. "It means I'm talented with shields. If Harry got a shield up like that, he'd be in the same position." And if he'd gone all-out, he might have managed with the other two to bring her shield down, and he probably knew that. Not a theory that she felt like testing right now.

Unfortunately for her, she didn't get a vote.

"So if the four of us went up against you, we'd break through your shield?" Tonks asked curiously.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Severus suggested with what she could really only term glee.

Looking reluctant but nevertheless curious, Draco crossed to the other side of the room, and the four people facing her raised their wands. She thought it was really quite careless of the Head of Slytherin not to secure her agreement before he began this manoeuvre.

By the time their spells crashed through her shield in a blinding flash of spell-fire, she was Masked and nowhere near that side of the room. She took Draco and Harry down with the same Stunner because they were standing close to one another. Tonks had immediately shielded, and Severus sent out several rapid-fire spells that didn't quite succeed in catching her, but she had to move quickly out of the way; he might not be able to see her, but he could feel her magic, so whenever she was casting, she wasn't completely hidden anymore.

At her most silent, she crept about the room and succeeded in bouncing a Jelly-Legs Jinx off the wall, causing Tonks to turn in the wrong direction and leave herself open to attack by Hermione from behind.

This left just Severus and Hermione, and he was regarding the room warily, backing towards the wall that he thought was on the other side of the room from her. She, however, had immediately made a bee-line for the corner where he would likely head to be most protected. She threw her voice with the charm she used on the gargoyle in their quarters so that it sounded as though she was in front of him.

"Do you really want to end up Stunned like everyone else, Severus?"

His face grew even more expressionless, his body tenser.

"You assume you can catch me, Miss Granger."

He took another step back and froze when he felt her wandtip against his back.

"Yes, I do," she answered. "Must I Stun you?"

His hands clenched white-knuckled for a moment, and then he offered his wand hilt-first over his shoulder. She unMasked herself and merely touched the wand with one finger before sliding away from him. She kept herself shielded since she was giving Severus her back but moved without comment to wake Harry, Draco, and Tonks.

Harry sat up again. "That's it. We need to stop with these daft plans. You just let us know when you want to Stun us, and let's say we skip all the way to being conscious again afterwards."

She grinned at him. "You all told me you were about to attack me with spells as strong as you could manage, which is hardly the best attack technique ever. Surely you didn't really expect me to stand around for that?"

Tonks cleared her throat. "Of course not."

Draco gave her his best guileless look of agreement. "It was a test for you, Hermione. We were making sure you weren't going to let yourself get attacked even if that seemed to be the plan."

I don't think you followed through with your part of this foolish story, Hermione said with good humour.

Harry gave her a mental smirk in return. It was the second blow to the head when I hit the ground again. It doesn't make me as quick as I should be for impromptu lies.

"How very thoughtful," she said aloud, lip curled up in amusement. "It's good to know you're thinking of me."

"Speak for yourselves," Severus sneered.

Her lips compressed into a thin line. Yes, she was well aware that he didn't think anything of her.

Since his apology, Draco had apparently decided to take her part in the fight that they were so evidently having.

Draco's voice was deceptively mild. "I'd be curious to know why you allowed her to defeat you in that case, sir."

Harry wouldn't be pleased if Draco was given a swath of detentions just as they were happy together again, so despite how much she thought Severus deserved every uncomfortable moment everyone could cause for him, she chose to diffuse the situation instead.

"Professor Snape is the only one of you whom I didn't have to Ennervate."

"You mean he defeated you?" Harry said with clear scepticism.

"You'll have to stay awake long enough next time to see for yourself, won't you?" she teased.

Harry wrinkled his nose at her. "Does anyone else vote that we adjourn for the rest of the evening?"

She couldn't interpret the look Severus was giving her, but he chose not to dispute Harry's intimation that this was a democracy, which she took as a good sign, given that he was normally one of the most autocratic people she knew.

The session broke up promptly thereafter, and Hermione invented imminent rounds with Pansy that would allow Draco and Harry to adjourn to their room without a third wheel. They were being googly-eyed enough that they didn't question this news, despite the fact that she and Harry had discussed her plans at dinner and these rounds had not been mentioned then. Pansy was right; they were completely daft when they stopped thinking with their brains.

The blonde Slytherin allowed herself to be summoned with more of a demand than an excess of politeness, and they waited until they'd hiked all the way up to Astronomy Tower before Hermione cast privacy charms.

"I don't recall a planned encounter," Pansy said. "Have you decided to become the spoiled Gryffindor dictator in truth?"

This was said archly, so Hermione was not terribly worried that she'd irreparably damaged their relationship.

"Harry and Draco are making up."

A pleased smile came to Pansy's face. "Excellent. He's been utterly horrid recently. It'll be good to give him back to the lot of you."

"I'm sure Harry's overjoyed to take him," Hermione said with a smirk.

"What were they fighting about?" the girl queried.

She sighed. "Me."

"You realize I'm biting my tongue," Pansy said after a moment.

Hermione looked over at the other girl, and her lip curled up in amusement as she tilted her head and conceded the Slytherin girl's point. "Draco made a … biting comment, and Harry took my side rather than Draco's."

Pansy's look was assessing. "Can I anticipate this sort of reaction with frequency?"

Hermione considered. "This particular issue was a sensitive one, but I think we've got it sorted now." In unity against Severus, apparently.

The other girl nodded, her face showing that she was undecided about making an observation of some sort. The decision to speak apparently won.

"He was very unhappy."

Hermione nodded in recognition of this admission and offered her own: "Harry, too."

Pansy stared at her for a long moment, then nodded.

Necessary exchange of information over with, they remained proficient as they scanned the halls for disobedient students, appearing generally civil with an edge of irritation over enough floors that it was likely the right people, if they were watching, had noticed. Pansy was still living in Slytherin, after all, and Hermione didn't want to make her life any more difficult than it already was.

Hermione dropped the Slytherin off at her dorms and then headed back to her own quarters. She'd barely made it around the first corner, however, before a barrage of spell-light came flying towards her.

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Toast

Hermione was shielding against the attack even before she'd completely recognized the Full-Body Bind, Cutting Curse, Boil Jinx, and Flame Charm. Her attackers apparently knew about the Dark Magic detection wards and had therefore picked light spells that could still cause damage.

She was not anxious for her wandless abilities to become common knowledge which meant that she couldn't retaliate with her shield raised. Given that the spells had come at her simultaneously, she was likely outnumbered four to one, so she wasn't anxious to lower her shield, either.

There was a moment of stillness, presumably as her attackers waiting to see what she would do. When she didn't fire any spells back at them, they made a second—equally unsuccessful—effort. They might not be able to see it, but her shield was fully operational and not in any danger from the quality of spells that they were currently throwing at her.

Since she didn't have any desire to stay in the hallway indefinitely, she began to walk slowly and deliberately on towards her quarters despite the fact that it was also in the direction of her attackers. The shield would deflect bodies, come to that, but she was betting on their not wanting to be identified.

So it was proved. By the time she was halfway down the corridor, there were no more spells being cast at her, and by the time she reached the end of the hallway, there were no students in either direction. She turned right and finished the trip to her quarters.

She hadn't been close enough to sense magical cores, so she couldn't recognize her attackers that way. If they cast the same spells in her presence, she thought it likely she would know them, but she imagined she probably wouldn't get that opportunity.

They were in Slytherin territory and Slytherins had more of a reputation for attacking Gryffindors than any of the other houses, but that proved nothing; even her sensitive ears hadn't picked up any sounds that would help identify her attackers. It was a good spot for this sort of ambush, really, as it was a fairly long stretch of corridor with no branches, doors, or areas where she could have taken refuge if she hadn't shielded successfully at the beginning.

Whoever had attacked her had known that she would be on her own once Pansy was back in Slytherin, and Hermione was relieved that the impromptu nature of her retrieval of the woman from her common room made it unlikely that she had been involved.

Hermione figured that if she was lucky, her easy repulsing of her attackers would show them that she wasn't vulnerable to those sorts of attacks and there would be no repeat performances. Harry would no doubt try to insist that she not travel in the dungeons alone, but she had no intention of letting anyone impose such restrictions on her.

Knowing that this resolution would be more easily upheld if Harry never found out about what had just happened, she returned to the common room without a word on the matter. If Harry and Draco had had spectacular make-up sex, they were finished by the time she arrived, for she found them sitting cosily and fully-clothed on the couch reading their Potions text. It must have been Draco's choice.

They smiled in welcome, questioning her briefly and politely about her rounds, and she assured them that she and Pansy hadn't had a single problem. She joined them with her own text a few minutes later, settling into one of the armchairs so that they could have the entire couch to themselves.

The next morning, they had breakfast at the Gryffindor table. Hermione, sitting next to Harry, had wound up with her back to the Slytherin table and couldn't scan the diners to see if any of them seemed to have guilty consciences, but she had thought that a long shot, anyway.

She was somewhat surprised when partway through breakfast Draco, sitting opposite them, looked confused as he gazed past them in the Slytherins' direction and then focussed on Hermione.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

She raised an eyebrow, requiring more information.

"We're hardly at your level," Draco said, indicating her and Harry with a motion of his finger, "but we know how to use body language to ask those sorts of questions."

At least one of her attackers had indeed been a Slytherin, then, and had told tales. Hermione was quite sure that it was Pansy who had alerted Draco, and she couldn't quite decide whether she was impressed or alarmed that they needed to learn to communicate like that at such a young age.

She contemplated prevaricating but knew that she wasn't going to get very far.

"I'm fine, thank you."

And why wouldn't you be fine? Harry asked suspiciously.

The look on Draco's face indicated that he'd guessed that Harry was using MindSpeech. When he spoke aloud, however, all he said was, "I'm glad to hear it."

Perhaps we could discuss this later? Hermione suggested. Say, not at the breakfast table with half of their house in attendance.

His expression grew instantly stern, both mentally and physically. I'll not be put off.

But do you really want to make me tell you while Draco is left sitting here, knowing that we are discussing it but unable to participate? she asked reasonably.

The effect of this question was salutary.

Oh. He looked over at Draco guiltily. Of course not.

She was thus given a reprieve until they were all back in her and Harry's quarters. Once she had explained, Harry reacted exactly as she had predicted, wanting her to promise that she wouldn't travel alone anywhere in the dungeons.

"I'm not going to promise anything of the sort," she said with a laugh as that seemed to be the only way to deal with such a request. "If you really wanted to prevent me from being injured by Slytherins, you'd do better to make me promise not to train anymore with Severus and Draco. I didn't so much as break a nail during last night's ambush."

Harry looked ready to protest some more, but Draco interjected.

"I'll speak to Pansy, see if I can find out more details."

She nodded her thanks, mildly amused that he was trying to keep the peace between her and Harry and more than willing to have a list of students to particularly look out for if it was available to her. She knew, however, that Pansy had to be very careful that she wasn't put in an untenable position. Hermione hoped that the Slytherin woman had worked out that Hermione was quite adept at keeping secrets and was therefore perfectly capable of not betraying either the source or subject of any information she received. Since subtlety was hardly a hallmark of the Gryffindors, however, Hermione imagined that Pansy was going to be cautious. Hermione wouldn't hold her breath for more information.

It was several hours after lunch that Draco came storming back to their common room muttering about idiotic, stubborn, pig-headed people as he paced furiously in front of the fire.

Harry had risen to his feet from his position on the couch but was currently just watching the blond, having apparently decided that approaching when he was in that sort of mood would be unwise.

"It's all right, Draco," Hermione hastened to assure him. "I don't mind if Pansy doesn't say anything. I didn't really think she'd have anything she could give us."

Draco was frowning at her. "Pansy? What about Pansy?"

Hermione realized she'd missed something. "Sorry. I thought you were complaining about Pansy and the fight from last night."

The Slytherin waved this aside. "No, no, I'm talking about Severus."

"Severus?" she asked in surprise.

She had seen most of the other students in the other houses get this way about Severus at one point or another but rarely the Slytherins and definitely not Draco Malfoy.

"I merely wanted to bring to his attention the fact that he had apparently lost his bloody mind, and do you know what he said to me? Can you imagine? The prat actually pointed out that it's illegal to cast the Cruciatus Curse on another human being and since he had not, in fact, actually hit anyone with the curse, he had not done anything wrong. The nerve of that man!"

Hermione spun around to look at Harry, still standing in front of the couch, and he held up his hands.

"Hey, I had nothing to do with this."

Draco stopped pacing abruptly. "How would Harry be involved?"

She turned back to him. "I forbade him from talking to Severus about this. I thought that he spoke to you."

It would have been a nice way to get round her restriction, actually, but she had seen from the expression on Harry's face when she rounded on him that he had had nothing to do with it.

Which meant that Draco had gone to chew Severus out of his own volition, and that was ... sort of amazing. He had surely known that she had not expected it of him.

"Thank you, Draco," she said very sincerely.

"You're welcome."

"Hey, how come he gets to go yell at Snape and I don't?" Harry asked indignantly.

"What Draco chooses to say to his godfather is his business," Hermione answered—which was basically to say that she did not have as much control over Draco as she did over Harry. "I'm sure he knows that you would like to continue to spend time with him and that doing so would be difficult if he is put into detention for the rest of his natural life."

Draco sniffed. "Yes, well, I will probably give him a chance to get over his bout of insanity, yes. There's no reasoning with the man when he's in that sort of mood."

"So he's always insane, then?" Harry said sourly.

Hermione thought it better not to respond. The reaction was so typically Severus that there really wasn't anything to be said unless she wanted to incite Harry to head off to curse Severus in truth.

And she still didn't want either of them to wind up in Azkaban.

At half two the next morning, Hermione geared up her courage and gave in to the inevitable. First, she made certain that no one was currently keeping tabs on her; Harry was still being rather protective, and she was even more wary of Severus than usual. Given his current temper, she had the feeling that being caught doing something technically forbidden—of which he particularly disapproved—would result in detentions for the rest of term in earnest. She really didn't want to test this theory.

It had been almost two weeks since she had last seen Castina and the herd. First, she had been busy with the Weresbane and Severus being Summoned—and then the disaster on the fifteenth had rocked her world. Ever since then, much as she had wanted to visit, too much of her had been worried about exactly what would happen when she did.

For the first time since she had encountered Castina and the herd, she was no longer a virgin. She knew better than most all the ways in which unicorns couldn't interact with non-virgins, so where did that leave her?

She couldn't imagine no longer being able to transform, but how could she be a non-virgin and a unicorn? The notion seemed very contradictory, and she had been unable to bring herself even to test it out in the privacy of her room in Hogwarts. She didn't know what she would do if she couldn't transform, and she couldn't imagine transforming into some other animal instead. So she had been making do with a large dose of denial; if she didn't find out either way, then she could almost pretend there was nothing wrong, that she was simply busy.

Only busy or not, the truth was simply was that she was scared. She couldn't keep living in denial. She needed an answer one way or the other.

She passed quickly and quietly over the lawn and beneath the eaves of the Forest. Castina appeared almost immediately.

I have been expecting you, Berit. You should have come sooner.

Hermione knew that but didn't think she could admit in actual words what had made her hesitate. She did not want to make the possibility real.

Castina's voice was soft and chiding only in the gentlest of ways. You need never fear, Berit. You will always be welcome amongst us no matter what happens.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't even realized she had been holding, pulling more air into her lungs and wondering if it was only her imagination that her heart had just started beating again.

She didn't think that if she became a mass-murdering dictator trying to wipe out all the Muggles of the world that she'd still be welcome, but she appreciated the idea of Castina's unwavering support.

I wasn't … entirely certain that was the case, she admitted quietly.

The herd mare's eyes were full of compassion. You are a thousand times welcome, even now. You don't really think Purity is judged so fleetingly, do you?

Hermione frowned. We've actually spent a great deal of time dealing with it in the last few months; is that not exactly how it's defined?

Castina shook her head. That is very human and far too simple. Come. You will feel better if you run with me.

Before Hermione had more time to second-guess herself, she was doing as Castina suggested and running beside her on four hooves instead of two human legs.

If unicorns could cry, Hermione would have been sobbing with relief. As far as she could tell, this transformation had been identical to all her others; Castina had been perfectly right. Hermione was no longer a virgin, but as far as the unicorns were concerned, she was still Pure. Severus had been wrong, and whatever he had changed, taken away, or broken, this was not one of those things. She didn't need flimsy human definitions when she knew that silver blood was currently coursing through her veins as she ran at Castina's side.

Hermione spent hours in the Forest, relieved beyond measure and very happy to recharge out amongst her four-legged companions, drinking in the light that she still seemed to require. Business as usual when she had thought that everything had changed irreparably.

She was still almost stunned when Castina nuzzled her with no indication that there was any discomfort on the herd mare's part. Unicorn or no, it still felt as though a golf ball were lodged in her throat. In unicorn form, at least, she was not anathema to her own kind. She was welcome within her herd, no matter what happened everywhere else.

As I said, Castina said, and Hermione realized that she had not been shielding her thoughts quite as tightly as she ought to have been. But then, perhaps it was all right that Castina understood just how much it meant to Hermione. You will always have a home here, Berit.

Thank you, Hermione said with utmost sincerity. Out of curiosity, how long would you have left me stewing?

Castina laughed softly. I would probably have given you another week or so. It is better if it is your decision.

Hermione would have felt better if she had not felt so cut off from the herd this last week, but perhaps Castina was right. She needed to make her own choices, not be prodded to them.

It is … very confusing in the castle right now, Hermione admitted.

So I have sensed. Come whenever it is too much for you. Or whenever you desire our company.

The temptation to simply remain in the Forest was stronger than it had been, but she knew it wasn't a valid option. She could just imagine how Harry would react if she announced to him that she was just going to stay out here. Severus would no doubt react immoderately because of all those school rules she would be breaking, and it would probably be hard to hide the fact that something a little unusual was going on if she was taking refuge in a forest. She was pretty sure that was the sort of thing that got out no matter how one tried to keep it secret.

Still, just knowing that she had a guaranteed home out here, that her herd wanted her even if she had been thrown out by Severus and that they didn't see that anything had been damaged beyond repair, meant that it was easier to go back to the castle.

It was past six in the morning when Hermione sneaked back inside. She knew she wasn't going to get any human sleep, but she felt so much calmer and more peaceful that she was sure that it was worth it. She mentally chastised herself for not going sooner. It had been stupid not to face her fears; they had only gotten worse as the week progressed.

But she had done it now. The unicorns were firm in their belief that she was Pure and worthy. Unfortunately, Severus seemed to be equally determined that she wasn't worth so much as civility. It still irked her that she hadn't received at least an acknowledgement of the power that he had gained.

On the list of things that she wished him to acknowledge, this wasn't anywhere near the top, but it was still something. If he wasn't interested in having anything to do with her emotionally or even amicably, then that was his business, but persisting in denying that the one night they had had was of no benefit to him was simply insulting. Nothing would induce her to bring the topic up, of course, because he'd only be odious and no doubt misunderstand if she did.

She would have to treat him solely like her professor for the rest of term. And occasionally best him soundly in training sessions. That would surely make her feel at least a little better. There weren't so many months of school left, after all, and she was going to be kept very busy with the Wolfsbane and the Weresbane … and being Head Girl … and revising for N.E.W.T.s…. She wasn't even done with Pure Adults, either, because the rest of the world didn't know that she and Harry weren't virgins anymore.

Really, it was amazing she'd had any time for him previously, and she would no doubt be freed up for many more pleasing enterprises now that she was cutting him from her list of friends.

She sighed. Trying to cut him from the list. For someone who was being a complete arse, he still seemed to feature pretty frequently in her thoughts. With all the training and casting of curses that he was doing, it wasn't actually so easy to ignore him. Combine that with her memories of their night together, and she wasn't doing so well at all.

But now at least she knew that the unicorns continued to accept her, Harry had defended her choice, and even Draco had apologized and gone after Severus. It had only been a week, though, and her life still felt very muddled.

Would it have been better to have maintained her previous status? All the arguments that had led her to Severus's bed still stood. She might wish that it had ended better, but that was a wish for her, a selfish one—if not unreasonable, she would have thought—while being where she was right now meant that Severus was safer and she and Harry could not be used as weapons for the wrong side of the war.

There had always been a chance before, and now that chance was gone. Now, if she were captured, she'd have more power than ever before with which to defend herself, and if the worst happened, she'd die knowing that she wasn't hurting anybody else in the process. Plus she'd make damn sure to throw the fact that she'd been under Voldemort's nose all this time in his face. Multiple times.

She sighed as she realized that she wouldn't even do that if she thought it would put Severus in more danger; he would be the one most likely to have figured out she was one of the Pure Adults, and she hardly wanted her last act on Earth to be assuring that he was killed.

Angry as she was about everything else that had happened, she would remain grateful to him for making her actual experience of sex for the first time a pleasant one. There had been horrendously awkward bits, but she had known a good deal of pleasure, and she had been deliriously happy for those brief moments when she had forgotten why he was doing it and it had just been the two of them together.

She was still finding it difficult to reconcile those moments with the way he had behaved towards her afterwards. What she'd really like to do was sit down and discuss it with him, but unless she put him in a full Body-Bind, dosed him with Veritaserum, and Obliviated him afterwards, she was quite sure it would not work the way she wanted it to.

Not the most practical of plans.

He would need to be unable to punish her before she would be able to say what she now felt she needed to say to him. It wasn't even that she wasn't willing to risk the points and detentions to speak with him; an actual relationship couldn't be based on that sort of power inequality. She didn't think she should have to risk academic punishment when she was raising a topic that was so completely non-academic.

On top of the hurt, it simply made her boiling mad that he had revoked his caveat so quickly. He had promised not to penalize her for issues surrounding Pure Adults, and if what they were dealing with now didn't qualify, she didn't know what possibly could.

She also knew, however, that he wasn't being his most calm and rational on the subject right now—hard to miss, really. There was little she could do except wait for June and N.E.W.T.s, therefore, because it was clear that he wasn't going to try to accord her any equality on her own. Until then, she would have to try to put him out of her mind. Which, she realized with a large eye roll, was what she'd been trying to do when she began to dwell on the topic extensively this morning. Oops.

She resolutely pulled out all her school books and installed herself in front of the fire in her common room. She'd think about something else if it killed her, and she could usually depend on her school work to keep her occupied.

This proved to be a fortunate decision because Harry didn't appear for their morning training as he usually did; he stumbled out of his bedroom looking particularly rumpled—but quite happy—around ten, and Hermione was not at all surprised to see Draco—much more composed—appear behind the Gryffindor.

"Good morning," she said, grinning at the two of them.

"'Morning," Harry said around a yawn.

"Sleep well?" she asked with mock innocence.

Harry made a noise that didn't resemble an actual word but sounded very positive.

"Of course he slept well," Draco said haughtily. "He was with me."

Her grin grew wider. "Of course. There isn't any other reason why he might have agreed to have you in his bed."

Draco's lips twitched as they watched the anticipated blush wash up Harry's cheeks.

The morning continued leisurely. Hermione kept up with her schoolwork, and Harry and Draco half-heartedly joined her. After lunch, Harry proposed a visit to Hagrid.

"But I don't want to visit—" This was perilously close to full-out whiny, a tone that Draco didn't usually take with Harry, at least not that Hermione had seen.

The Gryffindor cut him off before he could come up with any insulting epithets, saying very pointedly, "My first friend?"

Draco's mouth snapped shut, opening a moment later to voice a single word. "What?"

"I've said how the Dursleys treated me." Hermione doubted that he'd given all the details, but the fact that he'd volunteered any of the information so quickly to Draco was a feat nonetheless. "Dudley made sure I didn't have any friends at school, and since I was barely allowed out, it wasn't as though I had any other opportunities. Albus sent Hagrid to make sure my letter reached me, and he brought me my first birthday cake and everything." Harry smiled in fond reminiscence. "He took me to Diagon Alley and introduced me to the wizarding world and bought me my first real present—Hedwig."

Draco's expression was slightly pained but his tone was almost convincing when he said, "Let's go visit Hagrid."

Harry positively beamed, and the blond's expression softened. He might not like Hagrid, but he wasn't being asked to have tea with Voldemort, and his acquiescence had clearly delighted Harry. Unbelievable as it was in some ways, Hermione really was convinced that Draco was now very concerned about Harry's happiness. She wondered if he was still on his best behaviour after the argument they had had or if this level of thoughtful behaviour could be expected at all times.

Fang's stentorian barking greeted their arrival, followed by the door being flung open by the Care of Magical Creatures professor.

"Harry, Hermione!" Hagrid faltered slightly. "Mr Malfoy. This is a surprise." He smiled at the two Gryffindors. "Come in, come in."

Holding Fang back with one large hand, he stepped away from the door so that they could enter. He eyed Draco strangely, and Draco returned the favour, but Harry appeared oblivious to the tension as he immediately set to clearing off one of the chairs that was piled with an unidentifiable, blue-tinged vegetable-like mass. Once it was clear, he ushered Draco into it with a smile, and Draco, clearly swallowing several possible comments, sat.

By this point, Hermione had cleared her own chair, and Hagrid had moved to put the kettle on for tea. Harry had just started on a chair for himself when Hagrid spoke.

"Harry, could you go see Bu—Witherwings? 'E's out back, you see, an' 'e misses you, I think. 'E's been quite moody recently."

Harry looked from Draco to Hagrid to Hermione. He stopped in his effort at chair-clearing.

"Of course," he agreed. "Back in a sec."

Once he was gone, Hagrid put the kettle down on the stove with more force than seemed to be necessary and pinned Draco with a stern stare.

"Yeh tried ter kill Buckbeak an' get me sacked."

Huh. Hermione hadn't forgotten about the events of third year—it was rather hard to, thanks to the Time-Turner—but it had somehow faded from her mind just how involved Draco had been. She supposed that both she and Harry were employing a selective memory about their past in order to interact with Draco now. Since he was doing the same, it worked out all right, but it made it a little disconcerting when they suddenly ran up against someone who wasn't making such allowances.

It meant there was a better reason for Draco to have been leery of coming to visit Hagrid than the obvious lack of respect he felt towards the half-giant, though Hermione hoped that that was his upbringing again and time would show him more than he had ever let himself see before. She wasn't blind to Hagrid's faults, but he was a good man and she was sure that Draco would learn that if only he made a conscious effort.

Draco had evidently determined that either agreeing or disagreeing with Hagrid would not be helpful. Since he didn't appear to be ready to apologize, either, he remained silent which, all things considered, was probably their best option.

Hagrid continued, "I don' 'ave a lot of use fer yer airs and graces, an' between you an' yer father, I've lost me livelihood an' been locked in ter Azkaban for longer'n any sane person would wan'."

Hermione wondered if it would make things better if she jumped in. She couldn't in good conscience belittle what Hagrid had gone through, and she worried that that was what he would feel she was doing if she argued that the important thing was that Draco was a better person now.

But it turned out that Hagrid hadn't finished. "If Harry an' Hermione can forgive you, I reckon I can do the same." Draco was regarding him with something close to shock. Hagrid continued: "But if you hurt Harry, ye'll 'ave me to answer to, d'ye hear?"

Draco found his voice at last. "It is not my intention to harm Harry in any way."

"Righ', then," Hagrid said, just as though the whole problem had been solved. He turned back to the kettle which had begun to whistle. "Ye'll be stayin' fer tea?"

"Yes," Draco said, sounding surprised by his own answer.

Harry returned a few minutes later, looking relieved when he found that none of them had injured one another in his absence.

"And how is Witherwings?" Hermione asked, feeling a new subject would be beneficial.

Harry spent several minutes explaining the state in which he had found Buckbeak—a story that he did not appear to have got around to sharing with Draco yet. The blond had reacted quite well so far, but she rather doubted he'd be pleased to know that Harry was visiting the Hippogriff which he continued to claim had tried to kill him. But perhaps now he would be willing to admit how much bunk that had been... She would leave it to them.

They stuck with innocuous topics after this, filling Hagrid in on their academic progress, and he told them how he'd been doing with his classes. Accidents in class were carefully not alluded to in any way, and while Draco had to almost visibly bite his tongue a couple of times, he didn't say anything outrageously rude. By the time they'd left, Hermione conceded that while it would probably be safer for everyone if it wasn't a weekly occurrence, tea with Hagrid had gone quite well.

Harry was still visibly pleased by Draco's effort, and Hermione excused herself to the library so that the blond could be properly rewarded as was so evidently on the agenda.

Perhaps visits with Hagrid would become a regular occurrence after all.

In the evening, after Draco had returned to his own room, Hermione checked with Harry about whether or not he'd tried to turn into a phoenix recently.

"I was practicing with Fawkes … last Wednesday or Thursday, I think. Why?"

"Just checking."

Something she should have checked sooner if she hadn't been scared of what she would learn on her own behalf.

Harry was staring at her with a look that said that had not been her most stellar excuse ever.

She sighed. "I guess it didn't occur to you that you might not be able to turn into a magical creature after you'd slept with Draco?"

Harry's mouth formed an "oh" of surprise, and then he shook his head. "Nope, I assumed there was nothing to worry about. I mean, I know we aren't virgins anymore, but it's not like—"

And then his mouth caught up with his brain and he realized why she had been asking. He was looking at her with alarm.

"But you can't not be a unicorn. It would just be … wrong."

Her lips tipped up at the certainty with which he had spoken.

"Fortunately, you turned out to be right. I went out last night, and it's all just as it was before."

She apparently sounded as relieved as she felt because he flung his arms around her and held her tight.

"I'm so glad."

She returned his embrace. "Me, too, Harry. Me, too."

Monday brought with it the promise of the second Potions class since Severus had thrown her out, but Hermione had no expectation of the day being particularly unusual.

The day began regularly enough. She, Harry, and Draco were some of the first to arrive for breakfast, and they sat down together at the Gryffindor table, watched the Great Hall fill up, and served themselves.

Hermione frowned faintly as she realized that although they had got all their food, there was no sign of their goblets and juice. Hermione would be the first person to argue that house-elves had as much right to get busy and fall behind as any human did, but she couldn't actually think of any occasion where such a thing had happened before.

She was just beginning to wonder if she was paranoid when all the missing goblets appeared. A murmur of appreciation went up from the other students who had apparently also noticed the lack, many of them reaching out immediately for their cups.

Automatically, Hermione scanned the contents of her cup just as she had done on her food before she had started eating it. In all the scans that she had done up to this point, she had never found anything. Today, however, the spell was informing her that her cup had been doctored with both a truth and a compulsion potion.

The compulsion potion was mild, and the truth potion was one of the unregulated versions that was considerably milder than Veritaserum. Even the latter wouldn't have affected her, of course, but it was more that the potion was there at all that was a cause for concern. She looked at it curiously for a moment and then surreptitiously cast her standard monitoring spell over the glasses of her nearby peers.

She considered this for a moment, which was apparently as much time as Harry needed to perform his own check since they were equally paranoid.

No hint of confusion showed on his face, but there was a mental frown as he pointed out to her, Truth potion in our drinks this morning.

I noticed. Compulsion potion as well.

Just us, do you think?

Hermione shook her head mentally. I would guess the entire school; all the glasses arrived late, and you need a pretty serious pay-off to make this worthwhile. The glasses are affected for as much of the Gryffindor table as I can easily scan.

Looking to find out who the Pure Adults are, then? Harry asked.

She shrugged in casual agreement since it was the default plot of the year. It has been a while since Voldemort made his last attempt; we're about due, I suppose. It gets all of us at once.

But what about those of us who might not drink?

Hermione considered this. Did you notice how many people drank out of their glasses right away? Harry nodded, and she cast wandlessly over the cup and its contents again, more in-depth this time. Slight compulsion on the glass, as well, making you want to drink it. Someone's obviously decided to make a bold move, and whoever it is, I wager he or she has a Portkey and is ready to get out of here the moment this is over. A little brassy for a Slytherin, though, since no one knows with any certainty that the Pure Adults are present. More the style of a Gryffindor.

Harry scanned their table carefully. Surely not?

She shrugged. One can hardly say there isn't a precedent for that sort of behaviour.

I don't suppose so, no, Harry said darkly with a sigh, and she knew he was thinking of Peter Pettigrew.

Draco, beside them, had noticed that they were not paying enough attention to the outside world and was scooping more scrambled eggs onto his plate with rather more force than was necessary, the spoon making a rather sharp rap on the plate each time he tried to get the bits of egg off of it.

Hermione was quite sure those sorts of manners would not have been tolerated at Malfoy Manor, but she recognized the wisdom of not mentioning this fact when he was already annoyed.

He picked up his glass only once he'd set the serving spoon aside, and he got it all the way to his lips before he fumbled it and spilled it all over Ginny, who was seated next to him.

Ron, fortunately, was far enough down the table that he hadn't seen, and Draco very carefully apologized to Ginny as he Vanished the juice from her robe.

I take it Draco noticed the potion, too?

It certainly looks that way, she agreed.

He was a Slytherin; she would have been very surprised if he hadn't noticed.

She started filling Fawkes in on what was going on, assuming that the professor's table had to have been unaffected because Severus was up there and drinking out of his glass. While he was as capable as she was of neutralizing or Vanishing the offending liquid, he would take an attempt to drug him very seriously—as would Albus and Minerva and the rest of the staff.

Hermione put a Stasis Charm on her glass and its contents and Banished the whole thing back to her lab even as she conjured a facsimile to her hand. Although she had guessed that whoever had planned this was going to disappear one way or the other at the end of this gambit, she wanted some sort of proof in case steps had been taken to dispose of the evidence.

Since her Banishing spell—like that of any advanced student—did not send an object flying through the air away from her but sent the object from one place to another near instantaneously, she didn't have to worry that anyone was going to wonder why there was a goblet floating through the air.

Albus, through Fawkes, agreed that while drugging the students was not to be tolerated, finding out who was behind it—especially if it was related to the topic of Pure Adults and Voldemort—was to be desired.

This meant they needed to wait for someone to make a move while most of the student body was drugged with a truth potion enhanced with a potion that made them susceptible to suggestion. Just brilliant.

Most people seemed to be drinking from their glasses, and she hoped this was because a number of them were capable of the same slight of hand as she was. Because otherwise, they really weren't taking the admonitions of constant vigilance from Moody and Tonks seriously enough. It wasn't paranoia if one's glass was actually full of potions.

She supposed that constant vigilance in DADA still made most students think that they had to be on the lookout for a flashy attack. Hermione—despite the fact that she had mostly seen Crouch Jr. with his Polyjuice—had never forgotten that Moody had drunk only out of his hip flask. At moments like this one, that seemed particularly well thought out.

According to most of the students surrounding Hermione in this hall, there was evidently nothing to fear from the Hogwarts breakfast. They were drinking heartily, and whoever had planned this had apparently been counting on this fact.

We're just waiting to see who's done it? Harry asked.

We don't have a lot of other choice, not if we want to make sure something like this doesn't happen again.

But it means we have to deal with a whole bunch of children who will want to do what they are told and tell the truth.

There were people who would be able to resist it, but the younger years were kind of doomed.

Yup, she agreed. I think we're going to have to Silence everyone until the potion wears off. I'll see what Albus thinks.

She relayed the suggestion and was once again met with agreement; making the antidote and getting it into the students would cause more questions than any of them wanted to answer. Albus didn't want the children to suffer, but he wanted to remove a threat.

Fawkes, as requested, relayed the plan and the assigned students to Albus and Draco, she to Harry, and Albus to his heads of house in whatever manner he had. Perhaps he spelled their plates with words; Hermione had not asked, nor did she attempt to ascertain if they thought this request coming from the headmaster a very odd one or not.

Fortunately, they didn't have much longer to wait. Hermione and Harry blinked at one another when Lisa Turpin rose from the Ravenclaw table and tapped her fork on her glass.

"I'd like your attention please," she said clearly.

I rather liked Lisa, Harry said blankly. She always treated me normally.

It had been a good cover, apparently.

I'd never noticed anything amiss about her myself, Hermione admitted. Lisa was half of Hermione's classes and had always seemed quite sensible. But she was either working for Voldemort or had decided very ruthlessly that she really wanted the power of the Pure Adults for herself.

"I'd like to propose a toast," Lisa said, smiling brightly at everyone.

Unless, of course, she'd just picked a very unfortunate time to have a toast, but Hermione rather doubted that.

That's clever, Harry observed. Make it even more likely that we'll all drink.

They only had their suspicions, though; there was no proof of anything yet.

Lisa toasted them with her own glass. "To Purity."

There was some shifting all round. Whether she was talking about Pure Adults or pure-bloods, it was a topic that could easily become explosive. Unwise didn't mean evil, though, so they still couldn't act.

Lisa drank from her own glass—presumably undoctored or neutralized glass—and most of the students followed suit. Any who were faking it were doing a good job, but Hermione imagined that all of the older Slytherins were quite capable of emptying or replacing their glasses just as she had done. She, Harry, and Draco clinked glasses and drank.

"Thank you all for joining me in my toast." Lisa spoke again, an edge of triumph in her voice. "I have only a few last remarks to make, and then I will let you get back to your breakfast. In all this time, I don't believe that anyone has actually tried asking politely and publicly, so I thought I would: If you're a Pure Adult, please stand up and admit that you are."

The students were quite still and silent as they'd all been admonished to pay attention to her, not to chatter amongst themselves about her odd requests. The staff at the High Table had gone very tense, and Fawkes relayed back to her that Albus had given the signal to begin Silencing the students.

Hermione focussed intently as she had so recently learnt to do, making sure after she had cast on all her students that none of the others were missing anyone. It took the professors whose magic wasn't as strong as her's and Harry's several more castings to cover everyone. She, Harry, and Draco had all shielded so that they were not hit by anyone else's spells.

No one had made the slightest attempt to identify themselves as per Lisa's request, and her face darkened as she frowned fiercely at the assembly.

"I'm speaking to the two virgins who are seventeen or older," she rephrased. "I'd like to see you both here for a moment."

Everyone was Silenced now, and Lisa's words were good enough for Hermione.

I have a clear shot at Lisa.

Go.

The response was so fast that Hermione was not sure that Fawkes had even asked Albus, but she obeyed, and Lisa fell to the ground, Stunned.

There was uproar—or at least what would have been uproar had anyone been able to speak. Silent chaos, she supposed, until Albus rose to his feet.

"You will all return to your seats and calm down immediately!"

They were still under the effects of the compulsion potion, and he was the headmaster; everyone obeyed.

Hermione was hastily running the Arithmantic calculations through her head and trying to work out just how long the children would have to stay Silenced before the effects of the potions wore off entirely.

"Madam Pomfrey, please take Miss Turpin back to the Infirmary and see to her. Mr Potter, Miss Granger, please assist."

Hermione thought this was a rather transparent attempt to get them out of the room, but she wasn't going to try to argue with the man. They were Head Girl and Head Boy, and she didn't suppose that anyone would be surprised that Albus was trying to get Harry to safety if there looked to be danger of some kind.

Madam Pomfrey met them by the downed Ravenclaw and cast Mobilicorpus on her, and Harry and Hermione accompanied her. If they'd been Muggles, they could at least have helped carry her.

As they left, Hermione heard Albus apologizing to the students for the inconvenience and disruption to their class schedule because they were going to need to stay here and study quietly for a little while.

About an hour and a half according to Hermione's calculations, a fact which she relayed to Fawkes as she and Harry continued to follow Poppy down the corridor with Lisa in tow.

Hermione couldn't help but remember the walk back from the Shrieking Shack in their third year when Sirius had been tugging a similarly incapacitated Severus back to the castle. She didn't fail to notice that Poppy was a little more careful that Lisa didn't bump into the wall, floor, or ceiling.

Hermione supposed the mediwitch would be too professional to do so even if she knew why Lisa was currently incapacitated.

Once they reached the Infirmary, Poppy placed Lisa on the bed, ran a quick diagnostic over the girl, and then turned to the two of them with a sigh.

"I suppose the two of you can explain why Lisa has been Stunned and that's why you were sent to assist?"

Hermione smiled faintly at the other woman, realizing that there were many of them who were very used to Albus's ways. Poppy clearly had no expectation of their being Silenced like everyone else.

"The Stunner is mine," Hermione agreed. "And you're going to have to leave her unconscious until Albus arrives. There is, naturally, a good reason."

"Naturally," Poppy agreed with a mixture of understanding and exasperation, and they all settled in to wait for the Headmaster.

He arrived with Kingsley, Tonks, and Severus. From the expression on the latter's face, Hermione got the impression that he had simply insisted upon coming.

They greeted one another, and then Albus asked for her and Harry to explain what had happened that had led to making their extraordinary announcement to him. Severus looked even more annoyed, though Hermione was pretty sure that he had guessed that they were involved.

Harry gestured for her to go ahead, so she explained about the potions that they'd found in their drinks.

Severus stopped her immediately.

"How did you detect it?" he demanded.

"I looked, and it was there," Hermione said coolly.

Severus's lips pursed. "Why would you be looking for a potion?"

Hermione made a face. "I never eat or drink anything without checking that it hasn't been tampered with. Harry and Draco did the same."

Severus dismissed this. "Well, I'm not surprised that Draco had the good sense to check, given where he was seated."

Harry's jaw tightened, but he didn't rise to the bait.

"It may have escaped your notice, sir," she said coldly, "but a little caution was clearly called for with no regard to seating arrangements."

How he could still think either that they were stupid Gryffindors or that they would really try to harm Draco after everything they had gone through this year, Hermione couldn't imagine. But then, he'd made it abundantly plain that he didn't think much of them.

"You found the potions in your glass," Albus prodded mildly, getting them back on track.

Hermione nodded and went on to explain that since there was no way of knowing who had done it initially, she had suggested waiting and Silencing to Albus.

"What proof do we have?" Severus demanded.

Hermione Summoned the glass that she had secreted away, pleased with the control that allowed her to make it appear in the air in front of Severus; there had been a slight tightening around his eyes that suggested he was surprised.

"My glass shows the compulsion upon it as well as the combined potions within. It's in stasis and available for both you and the Ministry to test. I suppose you'll need to take it with you, Kingsley?"

The Head of Magical Law Enforcement nodded. The nice thing about dealing with the head of the department and someone she trusted was that she didn't have to worry too much about what was going to happen to the glass once she handed it over.

"You're all welcome to use the standard diagnostics now."

They did so, Severus with his wand in his hand before she'd even finished speaking. Her results were repeated: compulsion on the glass followed by compulsion and truth potion in the glass.

"As far as I know, all the glasses in the Great Hall will show the same effect, but I put mine in stasis just in case Lisa was thinking ahead. By my calculations, the potion should wear off in another hour or so; you're welcome to make your own assessment."

Hermione took Severus's silence as agreement with her assessment; he would clearly have delighted in saying that she was completely wrong.

Harry took over, perhaps in an attempt to get Severus's attention off of her. "We assume that Lisa was going to Portkey out of here with the Pure Adults, had she found them."

"Yet you have no proof of this."

Kingsley acted this time, saving Hermione and Harry the trouble. " Accio Portkey."

The object flew out of Lisa's pocket and stopped a few inches from Kingsley's hand; Hermione supposed that Auror's had to search for potentially dangerous objects all the time and knew better than to touch them.

No one bothered to suggest that the Ravenclaw might have a Portkey for any other reason.

Kinsley conjured a container around the Portkey and tucked it away in an inner pocket.

"We will have to question her," Kingsley said. "I believe we have sufficient evidence to take her back to the Ministry. May I borrow Tonks, Albus?"

"Of course, of course."

It was an easy way to transmit information back to Albus, certainly.

Kingsley produced his own Portkey that Hermione presumed would take them back to the Auror holding cells, and suddenly the conversation was over, and they were gone.

Harry looked slightly green just from seeing the Portkey in action.

Albus turned back to the two of them and thanked them for their quick work in saving the school. They agreed that officially, the only option was to say that the professors had cast the Silencing spell, but Albus assured them that points would be awarded to them as soon as an adequate interval of time had passed to make the point gain unremarkable. Severus ground his teeth together but did not say anything.

Hermione didn't care about the recognition; she and Harry had inadvertently helped capture one more person who was trying to harm them, and that was all that she needed to know. It was true that Lisa's attempt had been too late even if Harry and Hermione weren't impervious to truth serums and hadn't caught on to what she was doing, but it was still a relief to know that she couldn't be busy hatching more plans.

Hermione and Harry were sent back to the Great Hall where they shrugged at all the students who looked curiously at them as though they might know crucial information; the others couldn't ask the questions right now, and Hermione and Harry were happy to pretend that they couldn't answer them.

They joined their house-mates at the Gryffindor table and got out their school books for the time that remained until the potion had metabolised. Albus and Severus returned to the Great Hall as well, and they were able to effect the removal of the Silencing charms easily enough.

Albus told the students to head off to their new class—half of a class for the older students—and finding that they could speak again, the students moved to obey, every sentence out of their mouths unanswerable questions. Hermione and Harry admitted that they had had to sit with Poppy until Albus and Kingsley had arrived but that they had been sent back to the Great Hall before they learnt anything of interest.

Severus was in a dreadful mood again, although since class was only half as long as normal, they didn't have to put up with it for the usual length of time. It meant he piled homework on them to make up for the lost time, though, and his glare seemed to be particular potent towards Harry and Hermione—as if it was their fault that Lisa had picked this morning to launch her clever plan.

Hermione could only imagine what a class with Severus would have been like with most of the students dosed with a compulsion and truth potion. They'd do what he said, but they'd probably tell him what they were really thinking, and it would end in detention and point loss. Possibly tears.

It would have driven him insane.

It was a relief to get up to lunch although everyone had noticed the fact that Lisa was still gone; it was a bit of a shame that the students could all speak again, as everyone was wondering why she had fainted—the younger students, generally—or what her plan had been—the older students—and where she was now.

Enough people would probably get close to the truth, but there was nothing definitive that was being circulated; all the proof had gone with Lisa and the glasses that had been at breakfast and were not at lunch. Those who were already paranoid like Hermione and Harry and the Slytherins would continue to be so. There would perhaps be a few more converts now, which she thought was all to the good.

There might be some desperately worried students, too, and there was unfortunately no way that she could safely point out that she and Harry would not have allowed anyone to be poisoned; had there been poison in the nearby glasses, Hermione would have Vanished them all immediately. But she and Harry would keep monitoring whether anyone knew about it or not, and she imagined that Albus was looking into whatever safety procedures he currently had in place.

It took all of a day for Lisa's removal from the school to be confirmed and therefore linked in a sinister way to what had happened at breakfast, but it didn't come as much of a shock to students as it might have in days past. Then notion that some of their peers were working for Voldemort was unfortunately as real as the fact that some of their parents and neighbours and Ministry officials were. Lisa had been whisked away with a minimum of fuss, and rumours were rife but fairly empty.

Hermione and Harry got the rest of the story. Dosed with Veritaserum before she was woken from the Stunner with an Ennervate that was too weak to dispel all of the disorientation felt under such circumstances, Lisa had told Kingsley and Tonks all about her plans to be exalted above all others at Voldemort's side by bringing the Pure Adults to him—which had included some rather nasty spells used on several house-elves.

This confession earned her a ticket to Azkaban—guarded by humans now that the Dementors had joined Voldemort—which none of them could feel very sorry about. Lisa had made her choice, and now she had to live with the consequences.

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Replacement

On the twenty-sixth, three days after Lisa's attempt to find out who the Pure Adults were, Remus brought Hermione the blood samples of the forty-six British werewolves who had declared interest in the Weresbane. She'd have her work cut out for her once confirmed word of the cure spread abroad. But Hermione, Remus, and Draco were nothing if not determined to reach everyone that they could; they were starting with those were most in danger as a result of the war in Britain.

Despite knowing what someone could do with a vial of blood, these werewolves were desperate enough to trust her on Remus's assurances. Hermione was trying to be restrained in how ecstatic she felt when all forty-six blood tests showed no unexpected allergens or other undesirable reactions to the Weresbane. This was a more-than-representative sample of the werewolf population of Britain, at the very least, and not encountering any problems at this point boded well for her future endeavours.

They short-listed those people who would be up for the first trial, she and Remus discussing the most likely candidates, focussing on those who had been Animagi or had Animagus or Transfiguration training. Remus had agreed to spend his time making sure that they were ready for the appropriate transformation; he was now devoting all his time to this endeavour with the headmaster's full support.

Curing the children would be the most difficult, as they had little control over their magic and would thus have the most difficulty finding their Animagus forms; Hermione was not actually certain whether or not it could be done at such a young age even with assistance. The children would therefore have to be slotted for the later trials, as they would need the advantage of time and as smooth a process as she could work out in the meantime.

One positive aspect of her cure was that the new moon portion could be repeated as necessary; if any werewolves failed to transform into Animagi, once the Weresbane worked its way out of their system, it would be back to square one. They'd become werewolves on the next full moon, but on the new moon after that, they could attempt the cure once more.

Until everyone was cured, the Wolfsbane needed to be administered; now that they knew numbers, they'd chosen one of Draco's properties for the safe house, and on Friday night, Hermione and Draco sneaked off the grounds so that she could cast the initial wards to protect it—supplementing or supplanting the Malfoy family wards that were already there—and once the place was fully converted, she'd be adding more. Thanks to Solace's journals, which she had been continuing to read in her spare time, her warding abilities were steadily improving, and she felt as though she were in an excellent position to keep everyone in the safe house protected.

She became the building's Secret Keeper; after what had happened to the werewolves in January, none of them were taking the risk of the location being betrayed. She noticed that Draco and Remus looked at her a little oddly because she knew all the spells and the process just as though she'd done it before. She made no attempt to explain, and they didn't ask.

They had determined that a condition of the Weresbane being administered would be that the werewolves remain in the safe house until they were completely cured; it gave them safety, and it ensured that their knowledge couldn't be used against them by unscrupulous people. Since most of them didn't know where their next meal was coming from, there was little complaint from those being "incarcerated", and since the problem of unemployable werewolves could now hopefully be measured in months rather than years or decades, Harry and Draco had been more than willing to host as many of them as necessary for the required time period.

All other wizards were being encouraged to exercise the utmost safety during the upcoming full moon. The general consensus was that if Voldemort and Greyback couldn't sway the current werewolves to their side, they were likely to try to infect as many more wizards as possible. This didn't pose quite the horror that it once had, but it remained a highly unpleasant experience, and the more people who were infected, the longer it would take for the cure to reach everyone.

Hermione wasn't alone in her desire to have werewolves become a memory as quickly as possible; they were all doing everything they could to make this possible, and she was nothing but impressed by Draco's dedication to the cause.

It was rather nice to be on the same side.

On the first of March, Voldemort's attacks—displeasure about the lack of news on Pure Adults or general violence, Hermione was not sure—hit close to home; Madam Hooch and her sister were attacked by Death Eaters while picking up new brooms in Diagon Alley on Sunday afternoon.

Beatrice Hooch had died of her injuries, and Madam Hooch was now on a secure ward in St Mungo's. She was out of commission at least for the rest of the year; there was no definite news about whether or not she would be able to come back to the school as there was apparently both nerve damage and memory loss from the torture. It would take time to assess the full extent of the damage and determine the chances of a full recovery.

With the woman gone at such an awkward time, there were rumours spreading like wildfire that Quidditch and flying lessons would have to be cancelled for the rest of term. Everyone knew how important Quidditch was to the students' morale, but the professors were stretched thin as it was and simply didn't have the ability or time to add this additional task to their workload; flying couldn't be a top priority when they were fighting a war.

Ron could be heard animadverting on this fact all over the school the entire week of the attack, and Hermione had to bite her tongue to keep from making any comments about the fact that Madam Hooch was seriously injured in hospital—and missing her sister's funeral. Hermione knew he wasn't always completely insensitive, he was just a bit Quidditch mad. Yelling at him for being a prat wasn't going to make the situation any better—and would probably lead to her ranting about issues that had nothing to do with Madam Hooch, either, and she didn't want to be a hypocrite.

The third Quidditch match of the year was supposed to take place on the fourteenth. By the end of the week of the attack, Albus had still not made an official announcement as to whether or not it would be taking place. Especially given what had happened to the previous coach, there weren't exactly a lot of Quidditch experts popping out of the woodwork hoping to come to the school and teach. The students were beginning to get seriously worried.

Hermione cared little for Quidditch, but she did care for the well-being of the students, and she didn't want Voldemort to disrupt their lives if it could be prevented. She imagined that her attempt to assist probably just went to show how much of a busybody she was.

Saturday was the second Hogsmeade visit of the winter term. Although Madam Hooch had not been injured near Hogsmeade, everyone was once again at their most vigilant in an effort to ensure that all the students remained protected. Hermione, Harry, and Draco—along with most of the other Prefects—spent most of their time patrolling the streets, wands at the ready, and there was a large contingent of Aurors who were doing the same. Voldemort, it appeared, was still not yet ready to strike so well-guarded a target so close to Hogwarts, and they were all able to breathe sighs of relief when all the students were safely behind the castle walls once more.

On Sunday evening, Hermione personally Side-Alonged each werewolf to the safe house, and Remus ensured that they got settled. Winky and Kreacher had been only too happy to take over the care of this household, and Albus had been happy to loan Dobby—who'd been pleased as punch to aid Harry Potter even if it meant returning to a Malfoy property. The elves would spend most of their time at the safe house but return to the castle to assist Harry whenever he needed it, or whenever they thought he did.

Molly Weasley had been only too delighted to come mind the children, and Albus was in the process of drafting several other Order members who would patrol, ensure that order was maintained, and keep the werewolves from going stir-crazy. They were safe and free from persecution here, which meant a lot to them, but they were also going to be stuck here for months.

Hermione, Draco, and Remus were therefore planning activities that would keep them occupied. There was a library—from which Hermione had warded and hidden the objectionable texts—and once the other Order members arrived, any werewolves who wished could be trained in defence; all the werewolves were about to lose their preternatural skills, so having a good grasp of physical and magical defence techniques was a helpful way to compensate for that.

There were also remedial courses in several branches of magic since some of the werewolves had been virtually unemployable for years; once they became regular citizens again, they would need to be up-to-date, and these training sessions would at least get that process started.

Hermione knew that she couldn't fix everything, but she was determined to do everything possible to make this transition easier for the werewolves.

On Monday, Hermione was alerted to the new arrival at the castle, and she hurried up to the entrance with two confused boys in tow.

An accented voice hailed her immediately from the entrance.

"Hermione!"

He still wasn't the most graceful person when he was touching earth, but he'd grown up considerably since she'd last seen him. He was still sallow, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and big-nosed, though, and she wondered how she'd deluded herself for as long as she had.

They met in the middle of the entrance, and he swept her into a tight hug that seemed to engulf her smaller frame, especially as he was currently wearing a fur-trimmed cloak.

"Viktor!" she cried, muffled by his chest. "I didn't think you'd actually come."

"After that oh-so-compelling letter you penned, mila moya, who could resist?" he asked, tone teasing.

It had been quite a straightforward letter, really:

Dear Viktor,

I know this is extraordinarily last minute, but I feel it's my duty to ask—though I fully expect you to tell me to bugger off and leave you alone. Do you happen to have the slightest desire to take a leave of absence from your lucrative and (relatively) safe position on a world-winning Quidditch team to come to a war-torn country to teach hormonal children how to fly? Madam Hooch has been injured in an attack, and we're in need of a replacement.

Yours,

Hermione

She drew back and beamed at him. "I hadn't actually anticipated your dropping everything and landing on my doorstep with no warning like this."

He shrugged. "It vas time for a change."

"You were able to get away from your team without trouble?" she questioned with concern.

He offered another shrug. "I told them vhat I alvays tell them: if they don't vant to let me go, they are free to replace me vhen I leave anyvay."

She snorted. "And they didn't leap at the opportunity to get rid of such a conceited player?"

His lips twitched, an almost smile appearing. "Strangely, no."

At a rather robust clearing of the throat, she was reminded of the other people with her and drew Viktor further inside towards them. Since Draco was the one with his eyebrows nearly to his hairline, she gathered it was he who had ensured she didn't forget about them. She smiled and gestured towards her best friend.

"I imagine you remember Harry."

Harry and Viktor shook hands.

"It is difficult to be forgetting him, yes," Viktor conceded with a nod.

"And this is Draco Malfoy." She indicated Draco and saw the puzzlement beginning to settle on the Bulgarian's face as he no doubt recalled how Harry and Draco had felt about one another previously. She continued, "It is perhaps better if you don't remember him."

Harry gave an unconvincing cough, Draco's expression grew lofty, and Viktor smiled slightly, reaching out his hand again.

"As you say, mila moya. It is a pleasure to meet you, Draco." He looked around. "Vhere is your other friend, Ronald?"

Hermione suppressed a sigh. "He's no doubt scented your arrival and should be arriving any second."

Viktor didn't miss her tone, but he thankfully remained silent, as they'd already begun to acquire a crowd, and Viktor liked publicity as little as she did.

"I'm sure Albus is expecting you," she said loudly enough for the wildly whispering crowd of students to hear clearly. "Let me show you up."

He was quick to take her up on her offer, and Harry and Draco flanked them. She invited Viktor to tea in her quarters that evening after he'd had the day to get settled, and he'd seemed quite pleased to accept.

They left Viktor with the headmaster—who was, of course, delighted by the whole turn of events.

Draco's voice was eloquent of his incredulity. "You asked Viktor Krum to come take over Rolanda's position, and he dropped everything to do so?"

"Er, yes?" It sounded a little funny put like that.

"You realize most of us don't have that sort of a relationship with international Quidditch stars," Draco said dryly.

She shrugged. "It didn't seem sporting not to at least ask, given that I know him. It was his decision."

Draco's expression was very sharp as he agreed, "Yes, it was."

Neither Viktor nor the headmaster made it into the Great Hall for breakfast, but it seemed that news of the former's arrival reached everyone anyway. Severus was certainly aware of it by the time they had Potions. When he detected a higher-than-normal whisper quotient in the classroom, he roundly informed them all that the presence of a new celebrity—Harry and Hermione carefully didn't look at one another—hardly constituted a reason to misbehave in Potions class. In fact, if they wished for any free time for the rest of term in which to gape at their leisure at whatever they wished, they would do well to pay very close and particular attention to Severus right now.

First year and now seventh year, Harry observed. Does that mean it's the end of an era? Can I pass on the torch and skulk off into obscurity?

He sounded inordinately hopeful despite the dismal-sounding words.

I'm not sure your lot in life is as straightforward as that, Harry, she pointed out, amused.

He made a face, sighing. No, I didn't really think so, either. Nice to imagine for a minute, though.

Come on, she cajoled. We'd better pay attention before Severus accuses us of being enamoured of Viktor.

Just the rumour I need, Harry agreed wryly. I somehow doubt that Draco would be amused.

Hermione rather thought not, as well. The blond Slytherin didn't share.

They settled in to the rest of the class, Harry shaking his head minutely at Draco to indicate that what they'd been discussing wasn't important. The Slytherin seemed to have Harry radar that informed him whenever the Gryffindor was not paying full attention to Draco. Hermione found it amusing and hoped that it didn't come to bother Harry. At the moment, she knew that Harry was pleased that there was someone out there who noticed so much about him and was so desirous of his regard.

Viktor was at lunch, and Hermione wondered at Albus's decision to put him next to Severus. It was true that the Bulgarian had spent a fair bit of time with the Slytherins during the Triwizard Tournament; given who his headmaster had been, that wasn't terribly surprising. Now, however, it was like assigning a grim area of the table. Perhaps Albus had put the Quidditch star next to Severus so that the head of Slytherin's particularly potent glare could protect the famous visitor.

There were an inordinate number of stares and sighs and giggles in that direction, many of them redirected when Severus sent the glare of death their way, but Hermione doubted that he would be pleased to have been drafted for guard duty. Of course, the headmaster was known for his daft plans that often miraculously worked out all right. If she or Harry bore the brunt of Severus's distemper as a result, though, it would be more than a little annoying. At least Viktor didn't act anything like Lockhart and didn't try to engage Severus in frivolous discussion. She didn't think that Severus would put up with it for a second time.

Hermione smiled at Viktor as she, Harry, and Draco gathered up their bags and headed off to Charms. This resulted in a smile from him which caused a marked increase in the noise in the room and a bigger glare from Severus.

Remind me why I thought this was a good idea? she asked Harry plaintively.

Harry just smirked at her.

Dinner was more of the same, with the younger students trying to get information out of any of the older students who had been here during the Triwizard Tournament. It didn't take long for everyone to be informed or reminded that she had gone to the Yule Ball with Viktor, not to mention the fact that she had been his most precious possession in the second task. Between her and Harry—who'd been a fellow Champion and therefore had to know lots of juicy details—they were once again being pestered with questions.

Have we started counting down the days until we leave Hogwarts? Harry asked. I swear they get younger and more annoying every year.

Ninety-seven days until we catch the Hogwarts Express, she answered after a quick mental calculation. This year has certainly been … plentiful with regards to impertinent questions.

Draco was keeping a low profile next to them, careful not to remind anyone how much time he had spent with the visitors from Durmstrang.

They didn't linger over dinner, ducking out just as pudding was being served.

"I don't suppose the Head Boy and Head Girl can stop having meals in the Great Hall?" Harry asked hopefully.

"There's no way that you're leaving me in there by myself," Draco declared immediately. "If I have to go, we all have to go."

Harry smirked. "Don't worry, Draco, I'll protect you from all the itty-bitty first-years."

"Prat."

Harry just grinned unrepentantly as they took the stairs down to the dungeon. They'd just turned down the hallway that led towards their rooms when Hermione found herself throwing up shielding around all three of them—at the same time that Harry did, so it was a good thing their magic worked well together—as they were attacked by a barrage of spells. Draco's wand was clenched in his fist as they all backed up against the wall so that their backs were protected.

Hermione rolled her eyes. There was a certain lack of creativity expressed by this choice, and she was starting to contemplate the possibility of using a shield at all times while she was travelling the corridors. The attacks were beginning to get more than a little tiresome—although it was a nice bonus to be able to see the spells coming.

Someone had had the forethought to cast a smoke charm so that it was impossible to see who or how many people were attacking them.

Draco spoke quietly. "This is awfully in the open and near the Great Hall to be a random attack."

She and Harry both nodded. It had seemed like a set-up to her, too.

After a few moments with no indication of the smoke dissipating, Harry asked, Can we Vanish it yet?

She frowned. I don't doubt I can disable and re-cast the shield before they have the chance to attack, but they must have seen us or heard about us in class. The fact that she had won against Draco, at least, had done the rounds. They know how quickly we can react.

Before they had to make a decision, the smoke suddenly dissipated. What they found was rather startling. Severus was to their left and had evidently come from the stairs just as they had. He had his wand out and had apparently been the one to Vanish the smoke.

Ten feet or so down the corridor in the opposite direction were the Slytherins who'd attacked them; all of them were unconscious on the ground. Hermione had a sudden premonition of where this was going even before Severus had begun Ennervating them, and the looks on Harry's and Draco's faces suggested they'd guessed the same.

They were proved immediately correct when Tracey Davis, the first person to be woken, immediately launched into a creative and histrionic story of how she and her fellow Slytherins, who had of course been minding their own business, had been violently set upon by the two Gryffindors and their traitorous Slytherin companion.

This was confirmed by Nott, Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle in succession. Severus turned to face the three of them, and one look at his face told her that nothing they said was going to make any difference.

"Well, well, well," Severus sneered at his darkest and coldest. The other Slytherins smirked behind their Head of House. "What a despicable crime to attempt."

"We didn't—" Harry began, seemingly unable to help himself.

Severus's glare quelled him. "Of course you did, Mr Potter. Gryffindors are always up for this sort of sport. We can't really have the three of you believing the normal rules don't apply to you, now can we?"

"But—"

Severus didn't wait to see what protest Harry was going to offer now. "That will be detention for a week, I think. Starting tonight." A cold smile twisted his face. "And to ensure that you learn your lesson, we'll make it all your spare time."

"You can't—" Harry started again.

"Oh, but I can, Mr Potter," Severus said in that silky, low register that boded ill for whoever was being addressed.

At least Hermione thought she now knew what was going on.

Summon Albus, please. I believe Severus is under orders to prevent me from brewing the Wolfsbane.

Fawkes responded with alacrity. He comes. Do you need immediate assistance?

Hermione hardly thought that a phoenix appearing out of thin air would do a lot for the discussion.

No, no, we're fine.

Pretty used to Severus being a prat, really.

Severus's tone turned more cordial as he addressed his "attacked" Slytherins. "You had better go to the hospital wing and ensure that you were not permanently damaged in the attack."

Holding imaginary or self-inflicted injuries gingerly, the Slytherins managed to look smug and hurt at the same time.

Before they could move off for this gratuitous visit, however, they were interrupted.

"Vhat is going on here?"

Viktor, apparently early for tea. Tracey Davis immediately took it upon herself to play up to him, putting on her best simpering smile while she nursed an apparently injured arm.

"We were attacked, Mr Krum," she said with big eyes and a tremor in her voice, pointing accusingly at Hermione, Harry, and Draco, "by them!"

Viktor came to stand next to Hermione and asked with all apparent seriousness, "Is that so, Hermione? Did you attack these students?"

"I did not," she answered. She had considered calling him Viktor, just to thumb her nose at the Slytherins, but she had restrained herself.

Viktor turned to look at Severus.

"Have you determined vhat really happened?"

The smile slid of Tracey's face to be replaced by a nasty scowl.

"Miss Davis has already informed you of the sequence of events," Severus said emotionlessly.

"And Hermione has informed me that events did not occur like that," Viktor said simply as though that settled the matter.

"Are you calling Miss Davis a liar?" Severus asked dangerously.

"Are you calling Hermione vone?" Viktor countered.

It helped to have someone whom Severus couldn't shush to come to her defence.

Severus's voice was still cold. "I have five students here who confirm those events."

Viktor gestured at the three of them. "And three who counter it, including the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogvarts. It is a dangerous accusation to be making."

Severus's gaze was very narrow. "It's absurd to imply they can do no wrong, although you would hardly be the first to make such a claim."

Viktor's expression was as grim as Severus's.

"I am not saying so. But I believe them now."

"Did you see what happened?"

"Did you?" Viktor returned. "How is it that your students are claiming they vere attacked?"

"We were ambushed," Tracey declared hotly. "We—"

Albus arrived before she could finish this second bout of creative storytelling.

"What seems to be the trouble this evening?" he asked, serene as always.

Harry, Tracey, Viktor, and Severus all tried to explain at the same time. Albus held up a hand for silence.

"Your students appear to be in some distress, Severus. Perhaps you had better take them to the Infirmary."

"I need to supervise Mr Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr Malfoy's detentions," Severus argued.

"Not just at the moment, I think," Albus said gently but utterly implacably. "I will speak with the Gryffindors and Mr Malfoy. We wouldn't want your students to be further injured by our delay, now would we?"

"Of course not," Severus said expressionlessly.

Looking mildly disgruntled but recognizing their impotence, all the Slytherins but Draco headed off.

The headmaster smiled benignly at those remaining. "To your quarters, I think, Harry, Hermione."

Once they were in the privacy of their common room, Hermione, Harry, and Draco described in short order what had actually happened.

"I will speak to Severus," Albus said. He smiled faintly. "No perpetual detention, of course."

"Thank you, sir," Draco said politely.

Hermione thought he sounded a little conflicted and wondered if it was at being on this end of the potential favouritism. Albus hadn't been there to see what had happened, after all, and was simply taking their word for it. Of course, they were speaking the truth and were members of the school and Order in good standing. There was good reason for Albus to believe them—and what did that say about several years of events that Draco had witnessed?

That rationale worked quite well until someone in a trusted position went bad and abused the trust that had been placed in him or her—Tom Riddle the Prefect opening the Chamber of Secrets immediately sprang to mind. Hermione was hardly going to advocate that Albus not trust the three of them, however, and thus they ended up here.

Albus rose from his seat by the fire. "I will go see how the situation is resolving itself in the Infirmary."

Hermione wondered if he'd actually check the spells that had come out of the Slytherins' wands or if he was just going to let it go at no one being seriously injured given that it was likely Voldemort was behind it all anyway.

Once the headmaster had left, Hermione served the tea that she had promised Viktor that morning.

"Hogvarts does not seem to have changed much since the Tournament," he observed.

"We always have a number of adventures," Hermione agreed.

"It would hardly be a school year without numerous attempts on our lives," Harry put in fairly cheerfully.

As far as attempts went, after all, this one had been rather mild.

Viktor only stayed for a half an hour or so, informing them of his schedule, confirming the details of their days, and making certain that they didn't mind if he visited them from time to time when he was fed up with teenaged hormones.

"You do realize that we're all still teenagers?" Hermione pointed out dryly.

"But you are nothing like the masses," he said with a smile. "That has been true of you since I first met you, mila moya."

She thanked him for the compliment and ushered him out.

"What does 'mila moya' mean?" Harry asked. "He's used it three times now, and I thought he'd finally worked out how to say your name."

Hermione laughed. "He can do, but we both agreed it was easier if he used a nickname most of the time. 'Mila moya' is Bulgarian for 'my darling'. He keeps telling me that it's not his stock phrase so that he doesn't have to differentiate between any of his Quidditch groupies, but I'm never convinced."

"He actually spends time with his Quidditch groupies?"

"I suspect that everyone is tempted sometimes," she answered circumspectly. She really didn't want to get into a discussion about Viktor's sex life, so she seized the moment to change the subject. "I have to start on the Wolfsbane. It would hardly do for Voldemort's plan to be successful because I was here nattering with the two of you instead of working on the potion."

"Voldemort's plan?" Harry asked.

"Severus was hardly giving us such crazy detentions for no reason, Harry." Granted, he had been known to do something like that in the past on occasion, but she was sure that there had been more going on there, because it had been too grand a set-up otherwise. "It was to prevent me from making the Wolfsbane for the next full moon. It rises in less than seventy-two hours now."

"Why would Voldemort think that Albus would allow that?" Harry sounded confused and doubtful.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not sure that Voldemort puts a lot of stock into what Albus will pick up on." She frowned. "Or he imagines that is Severus's problem to solve. He probably won't be happy, but at least there are all those Slytherin witnesses to attest to the fact that Severus tried. Hopefully, the headmaster will be blamed for the failure."

"Couldn't someone just have pushed you down the stairs or something?" her best friend asked.

Draco snorted, and Harry opened his mouth again when he realized what he'd said.

"Of course someone might have tried," she agreed, waving aside his attempt at an apology. "But thus far, the Slytherins don't have a great success rate when it comes to attacking me. There was at least a plan to this ambush, and had I not been able to call for Albus, it's entirely likely that Severus would have been forced to keep us for the night; the base that I started this morning for the potion would have been completely ruined, and I couldn't have fixed it in time for this moon."

"Then why didn't Snape warn us?" Harry asked. "He had to have known long enough in advance to warn us."

"If he did know, he is no doubt being monitored. Besides, he's certain to know that I would have no trouble summoning Albus. I'm sure it seemed to the others that the earliest anything could be done would be tomorrow, which would be too late for the potion. Severus, though, would have known the plan would fail."

She might be all sorts of upset with him on a personal level, but she would always know which side he was on.

She rose from the armchair she had been sitting in, putting her finished teacup back on the tea tray which the elves had served them.

"Fortunately, it is not too late for the potion. I'll be in my lab if you need me."

She passed through her bedroom to the lab and checked on the potion's base. It looked to be the proper consistency, so she turned up the flame, carefully washed her hands, and began chopping the next ingredient.

It was only a few minutes later that there was a knock at the door. She looked up to find Draco standing there.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, eyes flicking back to the bayacura root she was chopping.

"That was going to be my question for you, Hermione," he said with amusement, stepping all the way into the room. "You're making the potion for almost fifty werewolves. I'd like to help."

"Thank you," she said, slightly surprised but trying not to show it because she actually knew how much this meant to him. "Wash your hands, take one of the silver knives from the second drawer on the left and come join me. You can mince the ginger."

He did as instructed although when he returned to the countertop, he made no motion to actually start cutting. She realized after a quick glance up that he was staring at her. She didn't pause in her rapid chopping, but asked, "What?"

"I hadn't appreciated quite how adept you are at this."

She spared a moment to look up and offer him a wry grin. "I examined the Wolfsbane in minute detail, pulled it apart, and designed the Weresbane."

Draco nodded distractedly as he finally sat down at the stool on the opposite side of the countertop from her and readied his knife. "I know you're good at it. I mean, I've seen you work on potions in class, but I just didn't quite," he gestured with the knife, "put it all together like this. Have you considered a Potions mastery?"

Smiling at him without looking up as she continued to cut, she nodded. "I have, yes. I've not yet decided what I want to do in the future, but that possibility is not without its appeal."

The Slytherin nodded in understanding, thankfully not bringing up the possibility of her having an apprenticeship with Severus, which currently seemed about as likely as Voldemort declaring a sudden love for Muggles.

Silence reigned for a minute before Draco paused in his task.

"This ginger is quite fresh."

"Of course."

"It was grown here?"

She made a noise of assent.

His knife halted abruptly. "Don't you realize what the Slytherins are likely to have done to these ingredients?"

She gestured with her knife towards the cupboards behind her.

"All the contaminated ingredients are in there. The ones I'm actually using were grown out of sight and beyond any else's notice and ability to modify."

He started chopping again.

"You should have been in Slytherin."

This was said in a very heartfelt manner, and she laughed aloud.

By Tuesday morning, the Daily Prophet knew all about Viktor being at the school to teach, and they had no problem whatsoever making all kinds of insinuations about why that was and what that meant for Harry. She was displeased but not surprised by the immediacy with which she was once again cast in the role of villain.

The Wolfsbane was distributed successfully Thursday morning. Despite what a number of people thought of the stupidity of the plan, Hermione was firm in her intention of being present at the safe house from lunch time on Thursday until nearly breakfast time Friday morning.

Although what Hermione was currently doing wasn't precisely related to her bonus project—at least not the normal scope of a bonus project—Pomona had been only too pleased to give Hermione the afternoon off from class to work at the safe house. The Herbology professor had made it clear, although not in so many words, that growing a plant and then designing a potion around it to cure lycanthropy had essentially guaranteed that Hermione do well in Herbology; missing one class was hardly going to jeopardize that.

Those who were protesting her intention to remain in a house filled with forty-six werewolves then argued that she'd be dead on her feet partway through the night, but she knew she'd survive without the sleep, and she wanted to ensure that everyone was safe and reacting properly to the Wolfsbane; she'd made it before for Remus but never for so many people.

These were strangers who were relying on her, and she couldn't let them down. If she couldn't trust the job she'd done on her potion and the wards of the safe house, then she might as well quit Hogwarts and run off to live as a Muggle. She was finally forced to tell Albus and Harry that she was going whether they gave permission or not.

Harry nearly caused a riot when Draco insisted on going with her. As far as he was concerned, if Draco went, then he was going, too. Albus put his foot down: Harry was not to be away from the protection of Hogwarts for that extended a length of time. This made Harry furious, of course, and he shattered three of the strange instruments in Albus's office without going near them or his wand and told Albus that the man could expel him for disobeying, and then where would they be?

It took her and Draco the better part of three hours to calm Harry down and convince him that it really would be safer for everyone if he stayed behind.

"It would be safer for you if you stayed behind, too." Harry was looking at Draco with that wounded, pouty look that seemed like it would be impossible to refuse.

But Draco faced him squarely, voice intense. "Harry, this is something I have to do. I need to help. Please don't try to take that away from me."

Harry might not like it, but he did understand about doing what needed to be done and about feeling compelled to perform difficult and dangerous tasks. He finally consented, though clearly unhappy. She left Draco consoling Harry in a quiet voice.

The truth of the matter was that it would be very helpful to have Draco spending the night. A number of the werewolves were not happy about the associations with the Malfoy family brought about by the ownership of the safe house; Draco would be able to show them that he fully supported them. For those who'd been in the January hunt in the Forbidden Forest especially, it would be a relief for them to see the unharmed boy whom they had been chasing. And as a second recipient of the Weresbane potion, Draco could only be further proof that her potion really worked as she had said that it did.

She thought it was important that all the werewolves who had entrusted her with their lives got the opportunity to spend some time with her and to actually see during the full moon that Remus and Draco were cured.

Remus had been working hard in the weeks leading up to this full moon to ensure that the dungeon level of the house was appropriately altered to contain the large quantity of werewolves it would now be housing, and she had sneaked back over several times late at night to continue the warding. They had all agreed that, certain as they were of her potion-making skills, they were taking no chances.

As they had explained to all the werewolves, they wanted to trust them, but they had to operate as though they trusted no one. Separating everyone kept not only the humans safe but also each of the werewolves in case one chose to attack his or her fellows.

As a result of their need for as much care as possible, each of the werewolves was monitored as they drank the Wolfsbane and then locked into one of the sixty containment areas that the room had been converted into. She, Remus, and Draco had done their best not to make them appear too cell-like, putting in comfortable chairs and books and activities—and screened off sinks and toilets—for the period during which they were human and plenty of warm bedding and comforts for the animal form. There were very few things that couldn't be done between magic and money being no object.

The werewolves' wands had been taken from them for the period of their incarceration, and Hermione and Remus had solemnly sworn that they would get them back just as soon as they were allowed to leave the cells at six thirty-five Friday morning when the moon had set and they were all back in human form.

Thanks to the information provided in Solace's journals, Hermione had been able to efficiently individually ward each cell with her name runes worked into them so that it would be very difficult for anyone else to get through them.

For the rest, she and Remus were trusting that the ultimate desire to become completely human again would outweigh anything Greyback or Voldemort could possibly have offered the werewolves in exchange for sabotaging her efforts. That still left the possibility of Imperius and other coercion, but locking everyone down once they arrived minimized outside influence, and they would continue to monitor for suspicious behaviour.

Albus had enlisted Bill's help, saying he would feel more comfortable if Hermione and Draco weren't the only ones there, and Tonks had insisted on coming along with Remus. Hermione and Draco had carefully presented it to Harry as a deliberate choice on their part to invite an Auror with them, but they were pretty sure that he hadn't been convinced.

Whatever Draco had said—or done, but she wasn't going there—to Harry once Hermione had left had apparently given Harry enough equanimity to face the blond's going even with this reminder that Harry was the Boy Who Lived and subject to rules that didn't apply to everyone else.

When Viktor had learned that Hermione was leaving the school for the night, he had volunteered to accompany her even without knowing where she was going, but she had told him that she would feel more comfortable if she knew that there were reliable people back at Hogwarts in her absence. She had asked him to keep Harry company since her best friend was likely to be antsy out of both her and Draco's presence, and the Bulgarian had readily taken up that task on her behalf.

Hermione went out just before two on Thursday afternoon to pick Bill up at Grimmauld Place, give him the location to the safe house, and Side-Along him to the house in question. Draco was waiting to greet them at the door, and she wondered if he realized how much he was acting like the lord of the manor as he seriously shook Bill's hand.

"I hadn't realized Mr Malfoy was going to be here," Bill said with what she thought was a good effort at evenness given how well the Weasleys and the Malfoys got along.

"It's his house," she pointed out. "He volunteered it for this effort."

"That's very kind of him," Bill said, eyeing Draco curiously. "I hadn't realized you were making such an effort for the Order, Mr Malfoy."

Draco smiled at Bill. "Since Voldemort tried to kill me, I've turned over a new leaf."

Bill returned the smile, his face softening entirely and the Weasley charm showing through. "I see. That does have a tendency to convert one. Now, what exactly is it that you want me to take a look at? The full moon rises in a few hours, so there's not a lot I can do between now and then if I find problems with your warding."

She and Draco exchanged looks. "I don't particularly anticipate your finding problems," Hermione answered after a moment. "Albus said he would be happier if there were more Order members present, and he suggested you due to your skills in this area."

Draco smirked. "I'm not entirely certain if he's trying to put us in our place or shock you, but you'd better come downstairs."

Down they went into the dungeon where Remus was still puttering around ensuring that all the werewolves were comfortable and not in need of anything that he could provide while they waited for the moonrise.

As they entered the containment area, Bill sucked in his breath.

"Merlin's beard," he breathed. "I see why you didn't think you'd need any assistance. Who laid these wards?"

Draco cleared his throat, and when Bill looked over at him, he gestured with his head towards Hermione. Bill looked over at her.

"You set these?" he asked incredulously.

She nodded.

His mouth moved for several attempts but nothing came out. Finally, he managed to speak. "Nice job."

Remus joined them. "Hello, Bill," he greeted the eldest Weasley cheerfully before he took in the man's expression. He turned instantly solicitous. "You seem more than a little shocked. If it's too many werewolves, I'm sure we can get you outfitted somewhere upstairs, or I could find someone to replace you…."

Bill shook his head. "Since almost everyone I know would have difficulty getting through these wards, I'm not deeply concerned about the werewolves, Remus. How could I not know you can do this?" he demanded, looking at her with wide eyes.

"It's not exactly a skill I advertise. It would make me," she sighed at her own comment before it came out, "even more of a target for Voldemort. And it's … a comparatively recent skill."

Bill let out a snort of laughter. "Hermione, you've only been alive for eighteen years. This sort of skill comes about—for the lucky ones—after years of work. I can break wards like these eventually." He squinted at the nearest set of wards. "But that takes years of practice. Devotion to the art. What are you doing at Hogwarts? The goblins will be after you for sure when they find out."

She smiled. "Then I guess it's to your benefit that I don't have any particular desire to be a curse breaker, isn't it? I'm trying to help people here, and I'll use my skills to protect my loved ones, but I don't have a treasure-seeking bug. And you can't possibly be telling me not to finish my N.E.W.T.s."

He laughed at how appalled she sounded. "It's killing the swot in you, is it?"

Draco leaned towards Bill and said in a loud whisper meant to be overheard, "And that would be at least ninety-five percent of her. You had better watch out or she'll decide that you're a bad influence."

"I've survived years of association with Harry and Ron," she said with mock-haughtiness. "If I can survive them, I can certainly survive Bill." She smiled at him. "I've got some of the empty areas warded at the end of the room if you want to see about testing your abilities."

Bill cracked his knuckles theatrically, stretching his arms. "Right. My professional skills are now in question. Lead on."

The eldest Weasley child immediately set about to break through her wards. Remus continued to make sure the werewolves were comfortable, explaining once again to those who had never had access to the Wolfsbane before just what this transformation would be like. Both he and Draco also continued their talks with the first ten people who'd be taking the Weresbane on the twenty-seventh.

When Hermione needed to relax a bit, she read stories to the seven children who would be transforming and made sure that they weren't bored out of their minds as they waited for the moon. It would be the first transformation for two of them. It was a testament to how careful wizarding families were being on the full moon, as these two had been Voldemort's and Greyback's retaliation on the February moon after the mess Hermione and Harry had made of his and Voldemort's plans in January. They all knew that if Greyback had been able, he would have infected more.

Tonks joined them once the dinner hour started at Hogwarts. The werewolves who weren't too overwrought ate in their cages and the rest of them sat down to dinner together. Remus had already ensured that there was appropriate meat—rabbit and deer—tucked away in the cells under stasis charm, ready for when the werewolves became hungry later in the night.

Then it was a countdown with almost fifty increasingly restless about-to-become werewolves.

Hermione had put up Silencing Charms between the containment areas so that the werewolves wouldn't be bothered by their neighbours; they wouldn't have to worry about someone who liked to sing or who snored or who decided to howl at the moon for half the night. The entire dungeon was warded from the rest of the house so that any upstairs visitors wouldn't know what was going on down below and would be able to sleep in peace.

In order to ensure the safety of her charges, however, she hadn't put Silencing Charms up on the outside, meaning that those who were keeping watch could hear what was going on inside each cell.

Hermione convinced Bill and Tonks to perform a last-minute emergency tea run upstairs, but one look at Remus and Draco told her they would refuse to leave. This left the three of them to witness the heartrending sight and sound of forty-six humans transforming into werewolves.

There was the awful crunch of bones snapping and reforming, a pulling and rending sound as muscles and tissue were reshaped. Bodies hit the ground, nails scrabbled powerlessly against the floor. Over it all were the sounds of screams, yips, and howls of anger and pain being ripped from throats human and animal.

It was agonizing, and Hermione knew she would remember it for the rest of her life. Remus's face was pinched and Draco's had lost what little colour it normally had, his eyes haunted. He had only ever experienced the one horrid battle with the werewolf, and it had been in the process of getting cured. Until last month, all of these people had thought that they would be transforming as painfully as this each and every month until they died.

With slightly shaky humour, Hermione realized that she now desperately wanted the tea she had asked for as a distraction. The other two looked equally relieved when Bill and Tonks reappeared with laden tea trays, although none of them made the slightest move towards the sweets that had also been provided.

Hermione noticed that her hand had a fine tremor in it when she retrieved a teacup, so she hurriedly wrapped both hands around the china and took a reassuring sip of the hot liquid. She felt it slide all the way down her throat and pool in her stomach, and she fancied that she could feel its heat beginning to melt the block of ice that seemed to have taken up residence there.

"You all right?" Tonks asked with concern.

Remus, the most used to those sorts of sounds—though she supposed he was usually distracted by making them himself—managed a slightly wan but otherwise genuine-seeming smile.

"We're fine, 'Dora. Tea's a godsend. Shall we check on everyone?"

As far as subject changes went, it wasn't the most subtle one in existence, but Hermione was happy to take it, and as Draco looked just as eager, Bill and Tonks gave in.

All forty-six werewolves were able to respond to human questions and gave every indication of having all of their mental faculties intact. Remus and Draco strolled up and down the rows of cages to ensure that each and every one of the werewolves had the chance to see that they were perfectly human even though the full moon now rode in the sky. There were yips of excitement at this, which made Hermione smile.

Most of the werewolves went to sleep. Hermione read to the children, as she had promised, until they curled up in their wolf pup forms and nodded off as well. Once everyone seemed settled, the five of them sat down for their vigil. They would be doing rounds every half hour to ensure that there were no problems.

Bill's first priority was to continue breaking through her wards; he went back to that almost immediately now that the werewolves were contained and safe. It was almost eight in the evening when he gave a whoop of delight and turned to her triumphantly.

"I've done it," he said with a wide grin.

She raised an eyebrow. "Have you now?"

He opened his mouth to speak, his eyes now clouded with suspicion, but no words actually emerged because he'd tripped one of her safeguards—it was hard to keep trying to get past her wards when Stunned.

She Ennervated Bill with a smirk on her lips, and he smiled good-naturedly as he rose to his feet.

"All right," he said, brushing the escaped strands of his hair back from his face, "I deserved that. I didn't detect more wards."

"You weren't supposed to."

"But there are more." It wasn't a question.

"Of course. Layering on the outside, extra protection in the middle, and a whole other series of layering on the inside."

"I have to go through all of that again?" he asked, sounding both fed up and oddly pleased. She supposed it was like inviting her to a big library to research and then telling her just as she thought she'd finished that there was another equally large room that she hadn't seen yet.

Her smile deepened. "Well, it's not the same warding, of course."

"Of course," he agreed cordially. "Couldn't have that."

Normally, if there were multiple wards protecting a house, room, or area such as the ones she had cast, they were layered one on top of the other like the skin of an onion. Wards that were well-cast only revealed subsequent layers after the previous one was dismantled. One of the tricks Solace had taught her was putting the equivalent of air pockets between select ones, tricking the person trying to dismantle them into thinking that there were no more wards.

This didn't work for people like her and Harry who could see all sorts of magic, but fortunately, that wasn't a common talent. It was these sorts of tricks, along with an extraordinary amount of power, which had made the Hogwarts protections so successful and long-lived.

Not seeing any more wards, Bill had therefore inadvertently tripped the next level, which knocked him out and set off an alarm to alert her; without someone there to Ennervate him, it was likely he would have remained unconscious long enough to be captured.

Hermione had made the second half of the warding even more difficult, as this was the layer that anyone in the cell would be trying to get through first. She'd put some pretty strong deterrents in, as she was keen on keeping everyone as safe as possible.

Bill's eyebrows rose as he detected the first of her silver wards, which would be painful and poisonous for any werewolves who came into contact with it. He'd managed to pick apart her first name rune. That was what curse breakers were trained to do, after all, and they all had a solid background in ancient runes.

The second rune that she'd embedded, however, wasn't "Hermione" but "Berit", and she'd used the runes which Solace had employed in her warding from a thousand years ago. These were the woman's own modified runes, and Hermione was pretty sure that they were based on Parseltongue, though she had not yet checked with Harry.

"What are they?" Bill asked, finally. "I've never seen anything like them."

"I'm afraid I'm not going to tell you."

"Fair enough," he agreed. His eyes were very bright. "Whatever they are, they're brilliant."

"Thanks," she said happily.

"I'll get through eventually."

"I'm sure you will."

She doubted he'd manage it today, but she knew that he was good at what he did. The attempt had reassured her, though, that there was indeed little chance that one of the werewolves could get out. Even if they managed to sneak a wand into the cell and happened to be a professional curse breaker, the ward-breaking would take long enough that she would notice and be able to stop them.

She eventually convinced the others to sleep for several hours, able to force them off once they started yawning every few minutes. It wasn't as though there was a lot of excitement to keep the adrenaline pumping; they were all sitting here watching generally sleeping, human-minded werewolves, and most of them had been here all day.

Tonks and Draco had class tomorrow, and while she had no idea if Bill had to go to work on Friday morning, as she understood that curse breakers had creative hours, she thought that avoiding sleepless nights in general was sound advice.

Although they could all claim that she had to be as tired as they were, it was easy enough for her to point out that she wasn't the one yawning her head off. She looked far more chipper than any of the others, and she finally threatened to just knock them out with Stunners when they weren't looking.

They slept a little, therefore, but were all up in time for the same painful-to-witness transformations in the morning, apparently all feeling that it was something which they needed to bear witness to.

The transformation this morning, though, meant that at the end there were a large number of humans who knew that the cure was in sight, and many of whom had just experienced a transformation that was a great deal more pleasant than the one that they usually experienced.

They all thanked her, and she sent the group of happier werewolves up to the kitchen for breakfast. They'd taken a big step today getting everyone safely through the transformation, and in two weeks, they'd be ready for the first of the Weresbane trials.

Round about seven in the morning, she, Draco, and Tonks bid Remus and Bill farewell and headed back to Hogwarts. They now had time to shower, dress, and head up to breakfast. Harry was positively delighted to see them, flinging himself into Draco's arms as though he'd been absent for weeks rather than hours. If there'd been more time, Hermione was sure he would have shown the Slytherin precisely how happy he was to have him back; she assumed that was on the agenda for the next available opportunity.

Hermione hadn't been at breakfast for more than ten minutes before she wished that she'd stayed at the safe house. It was all of a few days since Viktor had been at the school, but the Daily Prophet informed them that it was now obvious to everyone that she had been hanging out for Viktor after all; sympathy was swinging back with sickening rapidity to Harry, who'd obviously been horribly used by her.

For the first time, everyone seemed to notice how much time he was spending with Draco—only showing how blind the Prophet and the students could be when they wished, she supposed—how close they were, and the blame was immediately laid at her door. How could Harry not be expected to fall for Draco, the nearest kind person, when she was such a horrid, cheating, sly, manipulative harlot? Who wouldn't be turned off her entire sex after dealing with her machinations over such an extended period?

It didn't help that Viktor immediately jumped to her defence; this simply confirmed the supposed facts in many people's minds. Round about the fifteenth time or so in all of three editions of the paper she'd been called a slew of awful names, she was finding it difficult to be entirely sanguine about the subject.

It was a nice bit of luck for Harry that they'd decided that she was evil because otherwise the fact that the Boy Who Lived was bisexual—or just really slow at working out that he was gay—would no doubt be extraordinarily newsworthy. She was pleased that Harry wasn't having a worse time of it but could have happily handled a little less harshness on her own behalf.

Draco found it absolutely hilarious, and when Harry threw down yet another libellous paper in their common room as they were having a nicely private breakfast Saturday morning, the Slytherin, seated next to Harry, smirked slightly as he said, "I just think it's about time some Gryffindors were vilified, that's all."

It was precisely the wrong thing to say. Harry's face clouded over instantly.

"You mean like Sirius was portrayed as a murderer and wrongfully imprisoned in Azkaban for years and years?" He glared at Draco with a stoniness worthy of Severus. "Or the way Remus was turned into a monster and effectively hounded out of his livelihood despite the fact that he was the best DADA prof we'd ever had? Or maybe the way Hermione was portrayed in fourth year thanks, in no small part, to you, simply because she was my friend and she was brave enough to make friends with someone from Durmstrang? Or perhaps you really mean like my fifth year, where I was labelled a lying lunatic simply for living my life and telling people the truth about my experiences? Is that what you meant?"

Draco had tried to interrupt at every full stop, but Harry was in a taking, and by the third question he was standing and looming over the blond boy, not letting Draco get in a word edgewise.

Harry continued, "She's covered for me and protected me, and she's letting people believe these awful lies instead of telling everyone that you and I got together before Viktor ever came to Hogwarts because that keeps us safer, because it means that you and I won't be attacked. You'd be in serious trouble right now, Draco Malfoy, if Hermione wasn't a great deal more understanding of you than you are of her."

Hermione didn't know what to feel now. She could see that Draco was struggling to respond without anger. She appreciated that Harry had come to her defence but now found herself once again in the awkward position of having come between the two of them. She agreed with Harry, too, and thought it had been a stupid comment for Draco to have made, but she was also aware that Draco hadn't meant it the way Harry had taken it, and she wondered if Harry wasn't taking out some of his frustrations with a different Slytherin on the nearest target to hand.

Draco also wasn't in the best of moods today because in a few hours, the Slytherin team would be playing their first match in years without him as Seeker; the team had made it clear that he was not welcome anymore. Flying with both the opposing team and his own team trying to unseat him would have been the height of foolishness, so he had reluctantly stepped down. Draco loved to fly as much as Harry did, though, so he was feeling about what Harry had in fifth year when Umbridge had grounded him and the twins.

Despite the fact that this argument was sort of her fault, she knew that she couldn't keep trying to fix all the disagreements in their relationship; that wasn't her job, it was theirs. Seizing upon her resolution while it held strong, she rose from her chair. She passed Draco on her way towards the door and leaned down closer to him.

She spoke quietly so that he would hear her but Harry wouldn't. "Just remember how much you care for him—and then think about how screwed up my relationship with Severus is. The two of you are doing just fine."

Raising her voice, she smiled back at the still irate-looking Harry.

"I have to go see a person about a thing. I'll be back later."

Harry shot her a look that was completely puzzled, but she just offered him an approximation of a calming smile and continued out the door.

There was really only one place she felt able to go, and she walked briskly to her destination and then knocked resolutely on the door.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Transformations

Viktor answered Hermione's knock promptly, his face lightening to something that was nearly a smile when he saw her.

"Hermione, vhat can I do for you?"

"You can serve me tea," she said with a smile. "I'm keeping out of Harry and Draco's way for a little while."

His lips twitched. "Of course. Please come in."

He served her tea as requested, and they had a very lovely chat. If she spent the whole time wishing she were somewhere else, she chastised herself thoroughly for it and was careful not to let it show. Viktor was a good friend, but for better and worse, he wasn't Severus.

It had now been almost a month since the Slytherin had thrown her out of his room, and she found herself missing him fiercely even when she told herself not to be so very stupid. It had been all well and good to say that she was going to try not to think about him, but it hadn't worked, not at all.

Still, it was nice to have a slightly grumpy friend who wasn't grumpy with her all the time. Viktor actually went out of his way to be nice to her, as far as she could tell. Despite the fact that he was now also nominally her professor, there was never a hint between them of his authority over her. It made for a refreshing change from her interactions with Severus when Severus was being a complete arse.

The fact remained, however, that Viktor wasn't Severus, and it was with Severus that she wanted to do a whole array of goofy things: argue potions theories, just look at him, go out to the Forest, snuggle with him…. She gave herself a mental eye roll. Ninety-nine percent of the school population would laugh her out of the castle if that came out, and Severus would be at the head of the line.

But somehow, she still couldn't help wanting him and wanting to be with him. It was rather depressing when she thought of it like that, but it didn't change the conclusions that she had reached, the unalterable facts as she had come to understand them. Unicorns mated for life, and no matter how much she was human, the transfer between the two forms seemed to very definitely include this detail.

She knew in her heart, in her core—in the same place where she knew she was a witch and a unicorn and a Pure Adult—that she had chosen a mate. The choice had really been made long before she had had sex with him, and although there was a possibility, perhaps, that she could have changed her mind before then, there was no going back at this point. Just starting to think the thought that if she'd known, she wouldn't have done it, she knew that wasn't true, either. She wanted him for her mate, and she knew that losing her virginity to him had been important for all sorts of other reasons, too.

While throwing the Cruciatus at her had been particularly low, his behaviour since then had been adequate, if not exactly delightful. He'd acted a prat in public, but that was to be expected, and they hadn't had so many dealings in private. He could have been hunting her down and trying to make her life utterly miserable, and at least he didn't seem to be doing that.

She didn't leave Viktor's rooms until he announced that he had to leave to prepare to referee the imminent Quidditch match. She told him she'd be joining Harry and Draco to watch, as she was certain that being escorted out to the pitch by Viktor would only cause extra fuss that she didn't want to put up with. Viktor therefore headed out to the pitch, and she headed back to her quarters.

She'd made it to within about a hallway when a voice spoke with an audible sneer at her shoulder.

"You spend a great deal too much time in Mr Krum's quarters. You can hardly be surprised at the rumours."

She turned to glare at him, waving up privacy charms so that she at least didn't have to worry that anyone else would hear such stupid accusations.

"Since I've spent more time in your quarters, I don't believe you're in a position to cast stones," she snarled.

"That seems highly unlikely," Severus answered loftily.

His tone of voice when he wanted to convey disbelief was really quite grating, and she felt her spine stiffening in automatic reaction.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're simply going to have to trust that I know how to count."

She had now been in Viktor's quarters twice; once for all of ten minutes so he could show them to her after he'd moved in, and now this second time. Severus could bugger off if he was going to start in with nonsensical insinuations.

He was staring at her intently as though carefully gauging her sincerity, and it suddenly drove her insane that she was explaining her actions to him. He was the one who'd thrown her out of his bed, he was the one who had no interest in pursuing her, and that meant that he didn't have the right to question her about her behaviour and actions now. She flipped her hair behind her ears—à la Lavender Brown—and offered him a bright and entirely false smile.

"Usually when we spent time together, Viktor comes to my quarters, not the other way around."

Severus's expression instantly darkened.

Her statement wasn't even untrue, she was simply omitting the small detail that Harry or Draco had thus far always been with them; the three meetings they'd had thus far were hardly the cozy tête-à-têtes that Severus was hopefully now imagining. She was strongly reminded of how Ron had behaved in her fourth year about Viktor, and she simply wasn't going to put up with it for a second time with somebody else who wasn't actually interested in her.

"If you'll excuse me," she said coolly, "I have business elsewhere. And it would be a positive shame for Slytherin to lack their leader during their match."

With a scowl, Severus stalked off, and she wished the whole encounter, out of which she had apparently come victorious, had made her feel better. She finished the trip to her common room reminding herself that Harry noticed if she looked too out of sorts, so she would do well to behave normally.

They'd apparently made up, and Hermione had arrived at the point where Harry was reminding Draco of the fact that he had been unceremoniously thrown off the Slytherin team so Harry simply refused to let the blond boy even consider sitting in the stands with his house members. They might not want him, but Harry most assuredly did, and he preferred that all limbs and body parts remained intact, so couldn't he pretty please stay with Harry this morning?

There were more of those puppy-dog eyes involved, so now Draco was sitting between the two of them in the Gryffindor stands looking rather faint. Luna had come to sit with Ginny and Neville, appearing not to be the slightest bit perturbed that she wasn't sitting with her own house while her team fought against Slytherin. Since the three of them, at least, were willing to converse with Hermione, Harry, and Draco, it wasn't horribly uncomfortable.

The only saving grace was that it wasn't Gryffindor playing against Slytherin today, but it still turned out to be witnessing Slytherin being hoisted by its own petard. They scored nine goals, beating out the Gryffindor's season high of eight goals, while Ravenclaw only just managed to score two; Slytherin had a more than adequate Keeper and good Chasers and Beaters. What they didn't have, however, was a particularly good Seeker, and an hour and a half into the game, the Ravenclaw Seeker ended the game one hundred and seventy to ninety.

The Slytherins were now in fourth place and had lost their chance at the Quidditch Cup. Hermione heard at least a dozen people point out the facts before they left the stands: the last match before the final would be played between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, and the latter would have to score at least twenty points to beat Ravenclaw out of the final. If the Hufflepuff Seeker, Phillips, found the Snitch before Ginny, the Hufflepuffs would take the lead for the Cup.

Draco looked a painful mixture of vindicated and upset for his house, and they dragged him back to their quarters before there was any chance he could have an unpleasant run-in with any of his angry house members. As far as Hermione and Harry were concerned, it couldn't be considered Draco's fault that he had been told to leave the team, but they knew not everyone would feel that way.

Viktor knocked on their door soon after, eager to get away from the mixed jubilation and upset that the rest of the student body was feeling in spades. There hadn't been any particularly controversial calls that he had made this match, but that was unlikely to stop the Slytherins from heckling him—or his legion of fans from pestering him with a great deal too much admiration. She couldn't really blame him if he didn't much fancy sitting next to Severus for this meal, either.

Hermione was perfectly content, once they'd finished their own lunch in their quarters, to allow them to continue their Quidditch talk while she got out her school work. Putting a Slytherin, Gryffindor, and International Seeker in a room together after a match where at least one Seeker had performed very poorly meant that there was a great deal of discussion surrounding the subject.

Once they'd clarified a number of times that she really didn't mind their talking this subject to death, she was able to tune them out and get several papers written while they had a lively discussion that culminated in three animated charts, two small conjured models, and one step-by-step breakdown of a manoeuvre that they had all physically half acted out—which had at least afforded her some amusement value.

They made an appearance at dinner where they discovered that, as they had hoped, everyone was moderately calmer than they had been earlier in the day.

Severus summoned them for a training session that went better than the three of them had anticipated given what had happened during the day. Fortunately, since the Gryffindors hadn't been playing and Severus had the common sense not to blame Draco for making the same choice that he himself had made years ago, Severus didn't appear to be particularly angry with any of them. So while he worked them hard, it wasn't as though Voldemort wasn't going to work them hard in a battle scenario, and they didn't feel as though Severus were making a concerted effort to wipe them off the face of the planet.

He didn't keep them terribly late, either, as the three of them wanted to perform extra rounds, given the events of the day, and Severus was perfectly happy to try to catch more miscreants on his own account. Since the Slytherins hadn't been trounced by Gryffindor to lose their chance at the finals, a whole level of potential nastiness was removed, but it was never particularly pretty when three quarters of the school were united against a lone quarter. With all of them patrolling, however, they could hope that nothing truly nefarious would occur.

The next morning, Hermione and Harry had barely finished their sparring session when the gargoyle announced the presence of Pansy at their door. Given that it was half seven on a Sunday morning, Hermione rather doubted it was a social call.

They ushered Pansy in and offered her tea, and once they were all seated in front of the fire, she got straight to the point.

"A number of Slytherins wish to shift their allegiances."

Harry—

I'll get him.

Harry rose. "Excuse me for a moment."

Pansy looked at Hermione with a slight smirk as Harry left the room.

"I'd actually assumed he was here, you know."

Hermione smiled back. "They like to pretend they don't spend all hours of the day together."

Draco was retrieved in short order, and Pansy and Hermione studiously did not look at one another when the two boys settled on the couch; the Slytherin had even allowed Harry to clasp his hand, and they looked the perfect couple.

Pansy cleared her throat and re-announced her purpose.

Draco regarded her with narrowed eyes that were a hard grey.

"Why?"

The blonde girl shrugged. "We're fed up. Being forced to take place in that daft ambush was bad enough, and our lack of tolerance as a house has now lost us any chance at the Quidditch Cup and probably the house cup as well. We're fighting fellow students in the corridors because we're told to, and before you know it, we're going to be out in the wide world with these same unreasonable expectations placed upon us, only it's going to be even more serious. I don't know about you, but I prefer to live my own life and make my own choices."

Harry snorted. "It's nice that you think that's what the lot of us do."

Hermione cleared her throat. "What Harry means to say is that while we don't believe our side will ever force you to act against your will like Voldemort—" Pansy shuddered slightly, and Hermione continued as though she had not noticed. "—does, that isn't to say that we aren't part of a group that sometimes acts in ways in which we might not entirely approve. If you choose to side with us completely, you will have to accept that."

"There are levels to siding with you?" Pansy asked with the appearance of idle curiosity.

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances, and Harry gestured at her to have the floor.

"We know nearly as well as you the problems that you'll face if you openly declare yourselves against Voldemort. You'll need protection, much as we've protected Draco. I imagine you've guessed that at the final battle, he'll be at Harry's side."

"Damn straight," Draco said fiercely, and Harry beamed at him.

Hermione continued. "While we'd certainly like to have more people assisting us, we're not going to force anyone to fight. We realize that it's especially difficult for many of you, as you'd likely be facing family, and we wouldn't require that of anyone."

"Would the headmaster?"

Hermione wondered if a Gryffindor would have thought to ask that question.

Harry fielded this one. "I try not to predict what the headmaster would or would not do. In this case, however, it doesn't matter. You came to us. There's not necessarily a lot we can do about finding you alternative quarters in the castle, say, but we can and will provide a safe location for any of you who do not wish to fight. No matter what Albus expects of you."

"So you ask for nothing in return?" she asked, sounding as though this notion were hard to credit.

"The more of you who choose us over Voldemort, the fewer people we have to face in a battle scenario. That's of material benefit, if that's what you're looking for," Harry answered.

Hermione smiled. "And if we can broaden the tolerance of just a handful of pure-bloods, we can hopefully diminish the chances of another dark lord rising after Voldemort falls."

"You're so certain that he won't win," Pansy said, eyeing them carefully.

She and Harry answered in unison with utmost conviction, "Yes."

They would do everything within their power to make sure that he did not come out victorious.

Pansy was looking at Harry curiously. "So you're really both like that? You're not out for blood."

"We're not at all," Harry said, sounding a bit relieved that he was getting to explain this and that Pansy might actually be listening. "There's been far too much blood spilt in this stupid war. You're looking at two people who have been judged by who our parents are and events over which we had no control. We're not about to do the same to you. Some of your parents or siblings might be Death Eaters, but that doesn't mean that any of you have to make the same choice."

"So you're just going to welcome us all with open arms?"

"It's not quite as straightforward as that," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "We have an obligation to protect a number of people, and that means that we have to be careful whom we trust."

"Most of you have attacked us at least once," Harry pointed out.

"As has Draco," Pansy noted immediately.

"In my foolish youth," Draco said loftily.

"In December," Pansy corrected.

All eyes focussed on Hermione as they remembered that less-than-stellar attack.

"Forgiveness has been granted him for that choice," she answered, not about to get into any of the reasons even if Pansy could guess some of them. "He has since taken a very clear stand, and we support that."

"It could have been a set up," Pansy observed. "To gain your trust."

"But he's proved himself," Harry said stiffly. "I don't have any doubts about him."

Draco was carefully uncurling the very tightly clenched fists that Harry was now sporting.

"There is always an element of risk in trust," Hermione conceded. "But Draco has never betrayed us since we offered it."

Pansy was looking at Draco now. "You made a good choice."

"Yes, I did," he agreed very seriously.

Hermione wasn't sure if they were talking about his choice to join their side or have Harry as a partner. Maybe the two really did go hand-in-hand in this particular case.

The Slytherin woman now seemed prepared to get to the heart of the matter.

"It's unlikely everyone will be willing to fight. Some may decide it is the price for changing sides; others may accept that you're not compelling us to do so."

"Who?" Draco asked.

"All of us." At Harry's puzzled frown, she continued: "It's the seventh-years who are in real danger right now. We need a plan because we know we're to be recruited straight out of school as Death Eaters or to other … positions. The Dark Lord has grown only more determined since events in January; hesitation or delays aren't going to be tolerated any longer.

"He has little interest in female Death Eaters unless they pique his interest in a particular way. Millicent has been allowed to forego the majority of the conflicts thus far, but that's unlikely to last. She's a pure-blood, and that means that she—like Queenie, Trace, and I—will be sold off like a trophy, a reward for the most loyal, as a way of strengthening bloodlines."

Harry looked troubled that Pansy could reel off the lives of her fellow students like this, their fates established based on something they had no control over, but Draco looked as though this was the sort of world that he dealt with on a regular basis.

"As I understand it," Pansy went on, "Blaise's mother struck some sort of deal a long time ago now, but if the Dark Lord decides that he is in desperate need of initiates, all deals are likely to be off. For the rest of us…." Pansy shrugged. "It's in our best interest to appear receptive to the cause. Generally, the tasks he assigns us have not been outrageous and are unlikely to land us in Azkaban. Vince and Greg were always doing what Draco and their fathers told them. Theo's more interested in girls than politics. However, we've all seen what it's been doing to our house and the school in the last few months, and we know it's only going to get worse once we get out there. We don't want a life of secrecy, torture, and death."

That really was the entire Slytherin seventh year. As one, she and Harry looked to Draco, who shook his head. He didn't believe they had all decided to support Harry or even that they were simply trying to get out of the conflict.

Hermione looked back at Pansy and asked her directly, "How many of those people do you think are sincere in their desire to switch sides?"

She could see Draco rolling his eyes from the couch, but Pansy answered the question.

"Vince and Greg have felt that they were in over their heads for some time now, but that's not to say that they couldn't be potentially swayed or forced back; they still have their parents to deal with, and they've lost the protection of the Malfoy name. You know that I've been civil for months." She smiled faintly at Hermione. "If that means anything."

"Well, you've been at least as polite as Draco, and I'm pretty sure you're not just flirting with me," Hermione managed with a straight face.

"Oh!" Pansy exclaimed dramatically. "My secret is out. I was desperately in love with you; I thought we could join together in solidarity against the men who have cast us off."

Hermione laughed as Harry looked at them with a furrowed brow and Draco regarded them with a faint sneer of disgust.

"I can see why you and Draco are friends," Hermione observed, still amused. "You're both very theatrical."

"I beg your pardon," Draco said with every appearance of being really offended.

Harry was seized with a sudden coughing fit that made Draco glare at him and attempt to pull away in a huff. The Gryffindor was having none of it, however, and kept his grip on the Slytherin's hand as he leaned up, nuzzled the blond's neck and whispered something into his ear which had the happy effect of calming Draco down almost instantly.

Pansy and Hermione exchanged looks, steadfastly refused to laugh, and praiseworthily refrained from asking what it was that Harry had said.

"What of the others?" Hermione asked before she or Pansy got the better of their good intentions and needled Draco some more.

"Queenie hasn't been much bothered by anyone; that sort of indifference is likely to come at high cost eventually. Tracey's like me. She was always expected to marry Theo just like I was expected to marry Draco."

"And Nott?"

"Fools around, as I said," Pansy said coolly. "Knows we're in the middle of a war and does what needs to be done but has never seemed terribly interested in the politics for their sake alone."

Harry drew the conclusion. "So, er, trust no one because any of you could betray us at any point to save your own skins?"

Pansy smirked. "It's not always easy to work out a Slytherin's motivations."

"You're telling me." Harry sounded very heartfelt. "Who knew six years of antagonism was trying to keep my attention because he was attracted to me?"

"Prat," Draco snapped. "You should have just accepted my hand in friendship when we were eleven, and you could have saved us a great deal of trouble."

"And you shouldn't have insulted Hagrid and Ron, or I might have taken your hand," Harry countered.

Hermione tried not to sigh as Draco launched into an elaborate response.

"We'll have to talk it over with Albus," Hermione told Pansy over the sound of the two boys talking in what was not quite an argument but had a little more tone than a regular discussion. "It might take a couple of days before we can come back to you with any official arrangements. I assume you will be able to pass all the necessary information on to the others?"

"Of course," Pansy said. She regarded Hermione speculatively as Harry and Draco paid them no mind. "It would be useful for you to know that there was at least one of us whom you could trust."

Hermione gave a half-shrug, half-nod. "But there's not a lot of time for us to establish that sort of trust."

"There are ways in which to … accelerate the process," Pansy pointed out.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't think you'd particularly want to undergo any of them."

"Perhaps not. Under the circumstances, however, it's the prudent course of action. I want you to know whose side I'm really on. It's safer for me in the long run, as I trust by this point that you know how to keep a secret."

She was eyeing Harry and Draco, still bickering.

Hermione smiled softly. "I do know how to protect those I care about, yes."

"Then that's that," Pansy said simply. "I don't want Draco or Potter in charge, but I know you won't go out of your way to dig up information that I don't want to share."

"Of course not. Goody two-shoes Gryffindor at your service."

Pansy smiled. "I said I didn't want Potter in charge, either. I'm sure Professor Snape has a store on hand, but it might be a bit difficult to—"

Hermione shook her head. "There's no need."

Pansy's eyes widened slightly. "I know you have the skills, but I hadn't exactly pegged you for carrying illegal potions on your person."

"I don't have it with me at all times," Hermione negated with a smile, "but I do like to make a great many potions for a great many different reasons. Suffice it to say that if I wanted to, I could question each and every one of you."

"Not that you're going to do that."

"Not that I'm going to do that," Hermione agreed blandly.

They'd really had enough of truth potions slipped into drinks. Pansy still looked determined, so Hermione rose.

"Come along, then, before they notice."

The Slytherin obediently followed Hermione to her lab, her eyes growing rounder once more at the sight of the well-stocked potions laboratory.

"This does rather explain why you have a great many potions on hand."

Hermione chose not to explain that the Veritaserum had been made long before she had the lab. It would be much easier if Pansy believed that the lab had come with the room.

She transfigured one of her stools into an armchair and got Pansy seated comfortably before she dosed her with the potion.

Hermione ran through some control questions, verifying Pansy's name, the classes she was taking, the first time she'd met Hermione, and then she moved on to the interrogation proper, such as it was.

She had seen Severus perform one just once—or rather, Fawkes had, and he had shared with her—the summer after sixth year when someone he had thought was awfully suspicious had come to the Order seeking asylum. It had taken him all of twenty minutes to discover the man's true allegiances.

Hermione had not been made privy to what had happened to the man, and she had decided that in this case, it was just as well.

Since Hermione had grown genuinely fond of Pansy, she didn't particularly want to pry into the other woman's personal life. But Hermione knew that Pansy was right, and this was the best way to protect her in the end. If she had Hermione and Harry vouching for her, then she was well on her way to being very securely placed indeed.

This wasn't to say that even Veritaserum was foolproof. Hermione and Harry had proved the lie to that, not to mention the fact that Severus was still successfully spying on one of the most suspicious wizards of all time. Pansy had known what she was coming here to do this morning, after all.

But Pansy wasn't the world's best Occlumens—wasn't really an Occlumens at all, in fact—and with the Veritaserum lowering her inhibitions and encouraging her to tell the truth, it wasn't difficult for Hermione to access her mind and ensure that no deception lurked as she answered the questions. It was invasive, but not outrageously so, and not really any worse than the Veritaserum itself.

Harry and Draco appeared just as she was retrieving the antidote for Pansy. Hermione couldn't quite believe that it had taken the two boys that long to discover that the two of them were missing. Unless they'd had spectacular make-up sex while she and Pansy had been here in the lab, and Hermione supposed there was a precedent for that.

"What are you doing?" Draco demanded.

Hermione administered the antidote, which Pansy swallowed it gratefully.

"We've finished," Hermione answered obliquely.

"You'd no right to do that," Draco said angrily. "It's not even legal for you to have that potion!"

"Please," Pansy scoffed. "As if something being illegal has ever stopped you, Draco Malfoy. I offered, and Granger accepted."

"Hermione, please," Hermione corrected.

"Pansy," the Slytherin responded with a smile.

"You shouldn't have done it on your own," Draco said, drawing the conversation back to the topic of his choice.

"I suggested it in the common room in your presence," Pansy pointed out coolly. "It's not my fault if you were too wrapped up in Potter to pay any attention to what we were doing."

"I would have come if you'd asked," Draco said stiffly.

"I know. But I trusted Hermione to ask the questions, and it's she and Potter whom I have to satisfy as regards my loyalty. No offence, Draco, but in this case, it doesn't really matter what you think."

"True," Draco conceded, although he didn't look particularly pleased. "But you might at least have had Harry involved."

"Potter would hardly be happy to be pulled from his time with you to listen to me being questioned. Hermione knew exactly what she was doing, and now it's over and done with. She's satisfied."

Hermione nodded a confirmation. "And now I believe it's time for Harry and me to go see Albus. Why don't you and Draco catch up."

Both looked as though they wished to protest, but Hermione was sure that this first meeting should not be between everyone.

"Very well," Draco acquiesced.

"Sit in the common room and serve yourselves tea," Harry suggested. "We won't be long."

"If you're certain?" Pansy asked. It seemed to take her by surprise that they would simply leave her in their quarters like this.

"I don't expect this initial bit will take too long," Hermione reassured the other woman. "Just make yourself comfortable, and we can discuss it in more detail when we get back."

As it happened, they ran into Severus before they made it to the headmaster.

"Where are the two of you headed in such a hurry this early in the morning?" he demanded suspiciously.

Because now it's against the rules to spend time in the corridors. Harry made a mental face. How did I miss the memo that states we have to Apparate from room to room?

Hermione's lips twitched, and she saw Severus's eyes narrow. He could guess that they were communicating because it was more fun to be obvious about it in situations like this, but there wasn't a darn thing he could do about it.

"We were on our way to see the headmaster, sir," Hermione answered.

"Apart from your belief in your own importance," Severus said with a sneer, "why would you bother the headmaster so early on a Sunday morning?"

She stressed the word carefully: "It's a Prefect matter, sir."

His eyes narrowed further.

"I am the liaison between the Head Boy and Head Girl and the staff, Miss Granger. If you have an issue that you cannot resolve on your own, it is to me that you should be bringing it."

She looked at Harry and clucked her tongue. "How could we have forgotten? I'm so sorry, sir. Of course we meant to come to you first."

This falsely apologetic tone garnered the felicitous reaction of their being dragged to Severus's office forthwith, and once the door was closed, she threw up some more privacy charms, just in case.

One dark eyebrow rose on Severus's face.

"We would have come to you, too," she said immediately, "but I told Pansy we were going to see the headmaster."

"And why were you telling Miss Parkinson anything?"

She smiled faintly at his tone. "Because she came to us this morning to inform us that the seventh-year Slytherins wish to change their allegiance."

"You believed her." His tone was expressionless.

"I believe that the Slytherins she's named are making a show of changing allegiances. I imagine that more than one of them is probably sincere in that choice. At the moment, the only Slytherins I know I can trust are you, Draco, and now Pansy."

She thought that maybe she needed to get to know more Slytherins, if those were the only three she could name, but then she realized that her list of Gryffindors wasn't that much longer. She trusted a fair number of them to a certain degree, but in the nitty-gritty details of the war, it was Harry … Ginny and Neville, if necessary, she supposed, and normally Ron, but that was a whole other matter.

Perhaps Slytherin wasn't doing too poorly after all. There were very few people that she trusted almost unreservedly, and since Albus wasn't one of those, she didn't think anyone else could get terribly upset.

"Why Miss Parkinson?" he demanded sharply, giving no indication that he had noticed that she'd listed him first.

"I questioned her, and her responses indicated that she was trustworthy."

His disapproval was clear. "The Dark Lord thinks I'm trustworthy."

She clarified: "Under Veritaserum and Legilimency; she's not nearly as good as you."

She wasn't entirely surprised when he observed, "Veritaserum is a controlled substance."

"And I'm monitoring every drop," she said sincerely since she thought it was rather beside the point of their discussion.

It looked as though he was going to take exception to this comment, but after a moment, he said only, "You may not have been asking the right questions."

"I believe I was," she said as diplomatically as she could. "At any rate, my Legilimency was more than sufficient."

"There is a great deal at stake," he answered.

"I haven't brought her to you."

"So I see," he said coldly.

She gritted her teeth. He could be such an arse when he wanted to be.

"Would you Obliviate her if it turned out I was wrong? You don't think that Voldemort might notice and discover what you've done?"

"Yet you say you're certain of her allegiances?" he asked with a sneer.

"As certain as I can be of someone whom I don't actually know that well. I don't repose absolute confidence in the fact that she could never side with Voldemort, but the number of people of whom I believe that can be counted on one hand. There is always an element of risk in such trust, and," she tried to think of a better way to put this, and then gave up, "I would not risk your life over it."

"How thoughtful of you."

He sounded anything but grateful for the consideration.

"Look, then," she said with exasperation, "and see if you are not satisfied."

She never unshielded her mind completely. She and Harry had had too many important secrets for too long for them to consider being unprotected at any point. Keeping information from the likes of Albus and Severus—not to mention Voldemort, but she didn't see him very often—meant that her guard was always up, even in her quarters where she was theoretically alone and wouldn't be disturbed for some time.

She and Harry didn't tend to lie to one another—although they sometimes kept information back—so there wasn't any need for them to be popping into one another's heads to gauge sincerity. And since they communicated mentally all the time, they could pop images one another's way whenever they needed to do so.

With Severus, there was plenty of information that she knew full well he would be delighted to take from her mind were the opportunity to arise. Fortunately, her Occlumency skills were entirely sufficient to keep him from seeing anything but what she wished, and she was relatively certain that he knew better than to attempt to wander; if he didn't, then she would feel no compunction about correcting his error in judgement.

He met her eyes, and she drew the scene of her interrogation to the forefront of her mind, keeping everything else locked tightly away. He scanned through the memory, frowning as he went.

"Where did you learn this technique?" he demanded.

Since he already knew about Fawkes and wasn't likely to accept another explanation, she allowed him to glimpse the session that she had witnessed.

In her mind as he was, he couldn't completely hide his surprise.

"You're far more of a pest than I'd realized."

She nudged him out of her mind, and since he had the politeness to go without protest or attempt at a detour, she decided he couldn't possibly be that upset.

Re-establishing her complete mental shields, she said with every appearance of earnestness, "I can't think how you failed to notice."

Harry made a strangled sound that she knew was his attempt not to laugh out loud.

Severus's lips tipped up ever so slightly, and Hermione narrowly forbore grinning, reminded of happier times. She restrained herself to a small smile. Probably she should be less agreeable, but that always seemed excessive when he was being halfway cordial.

Still, though, they had a job to do. "I take it Voldemort wants to ensure that you don't have any answers to give Albus when he asks about the Slytherin students?"

"The Dark Lord has not spoken to me on the matter, but he has a history of not telling spies about one another. It strengthens his network."

She nodded. "Unless you object strongly, Harry and I don't intend to test the loyalties of the others beyond verbal questioning without aids. I want those on Voldemort's side to think he or she has succeeded in infiltrating us."

If they thought this plan was successful, it might slow down any others.

Severus was regarding her closely. "What precautions will you take?"

"I'm sure it goes without saying that none of them will be inducted into the Order. Those who wish to join the DA may do so, as we already know that's likely been breached by sympathizers if not full supporters. Pansy is the only one we will inform of information that we do not fully anticipate Voldemort may be made aware of, but we will hardly be telling her our deepest, darkest secrets. If necessary, the others will be used to spread disinformation."

"You say Miss Parkinson came to you this morning?" he asked.

There was a small chance that he sounded ever so slightly impressed. Of course, if he was working from a "Gryffindors are complete idiots" standpoint, a slight improvement was hardly a stunning accolade.

"You've got two Gryffindors here who are eternal optimists, sir," she answered. "It's always nice to have these sorts of plans ready in advance, just in case."

Severus's look was assessing now.

"Albus may not agree with you."

"Then we shall proceed without him," Hermione answered firmly. "Between Draco, Harry, and me, we have enough capital, property, and magical skill to protect anyone."

The Slytherin considered her for a long moment and then gave a sharp nod. "Very well. You may speak to Albus about the matter."

Harry opened his mouth, but a sharp look from her made him close it again without actually saying anything. She rose, and Harry followed her lead.

"Good morning, Professor," she said politely.

"Sir," Harry managed. Mentally, he snarled, The man is impossible. As if we need his permission!

She offered no argument. The good moments came, and the good moments went.

At least there hadn't been any yelling or point loss.

Once they were up in the headmaster's office, had been plied with tea—and had neutralized the Calming Draught in the hot liquid—they informed Albus of both Pansy's news and their plan of support, presenting it as a fait accompli, which Albus didn't fail to notice. After a couple leading remarks about how helpful it would be to have as many people on their side as possible, he allowed them to have their way; no one would be "strongly encouraged" to fight.

Both she and Harry were of the firm belief that forcing anyone to their side wasn't much better than what Voldemort did. It definitely didn't inspire any sort of loyalty. As far as they were concerned, freedom had to be offered with no strings attached or it wasn't freedom.

Albus agreed that if it became necessary, alternative quarters would be arranged for those seventh-years who needed it. They hoped, however, that the fact that all the seventh-years were taking part in this scheme meant that such drastic measures would not need to be taken. Hermione was pretty sure that none of these Slytherins were going to be loudly announcing that they'd sided with Harry.

Back in their rooms, they explained to Pansy and Draco that Albus had accepted their proposition, and they detailed the changes he was willing to make and those which he intended to put off as long as possible. They left out any mention of Severus, although she agreed when Harry observed to her privately and with annoyance that he felt as though they had become messengers forced to constantly repeat the same messages between disparate groups of people who should have been able to meet but couldn't.

Their job wasn't over, either, because once they sent Pansy off to inform the Slytherins, they had to make sure that the core members of the DA weren't going to kick up a fuss if a bunch of Slytherins tried to join; so long as those members were in accord, the rest would come along eventually.

They checked the Map and then went out to retrieve Ginny, Neville, and Luna. Hermione still found it a cross between amusing and fitting that they all felt comfortable sending Draco after the youngest Weasley (who was in the library), while Harry went to get Neville (in the Gryffindor common room), and Hermione was tasked with retrieving Luna (who for reasons best known to herself was charmed to hang upside down in a broom cupboard in a deserted sixth-floor corridor).

Hermione was pretty sure that Luna would have gone with the flow without having been spoken to first, but she didn't want to leave the woman out; those three had become quite a team since fifth year, and they balanced each other out well.

Fortunately, Ginny was a great deal more reasonable than Ron, and she got on quite well with Draco, all things considered. Neville and Luna were willing to trust Hermione and Harry's judgement paired with Draco's overt behaviour in the nearly two months that he had been in the frequent company of Hermione and Harry. It wasn't long at all before they'd agreed to support whoever came to the next meeting while always remembering that any member there could turn out to be working for Voldemort.

Hermione and Harry heaved sighs of relief once the three of them were gone, as they were ready for their Sunday to unfold more naturally once again. Still, as Draco was quick to point out to them, could they imagine how it would have gone if it had been Ron they were trying to convince? They could, indeed, count their blessings.

The new week started with everyone still agog about the fact that Viktor was amongst them daily and actually teaching them. It seemed as though everyone who wasn't Hermione had developed a stronger or new-found interest in brooms and flying and Quidditch. Draco found it highly amusing that the person Viktor wanted to spend his time with was the one who was completely uninterested in those subjects.

"You don't see Harry being close friends with all the Boy Who Lived hangers-on, do you?" she asked. "Celebrities are real people on the inside, and they want to get close to people who are interested in the real them not what's made them famous."

Harry seconded this immediately.

Draco widened his eyes in an expression of mock horror. "You're not looking for someone who worships the ground you walk on, Golden Boy? Whatever shall I do?"

They both laughed, although it wasn't long before Hermione determined to make herself scarce that evening; from the side-long glances Draco kept casting Harry's way, she was pretty sure that at the earliest opportunity, Harry was going to be in for a rather pleasant demonstration of one of the ways in which Draco liked "just Harry" very much indeed.

They settled in with homework for the afternoon, continuing on for several hours after dinner before Hermione declared her intention of going to the library to do research for several hours. Harry stopped her at the door with a hand on her arm.

He eyed the giant pile of books that she currently had stacked next to the couch.

"You don't really need more books, do you?" he asked quietly.

She smiled at him. "I always need more books, Harry. In this particularly case, I also thought you might benefit from my not being around for a little while."

Harry blushed, but it was clear that he hadn't missed all of the glances that Draco had been giving him.

"You don't have to stay away, though," he reassured her. "It's your room, too."

"I know," she answered easily. "I don't mind."

"But you don't have to stay away long," he said anxiously. "I don't want you to feel as though you can't come back."

"Half ten," she suggested.

"Ten would be fine," he declared with assurance. "We can have tea before bed."

"Sure, Harry," she agreed, knowing better than to try to argue. She gave Draco a little wave. "See you later, Draco."

Draco nodded at her, and she headed off to the library.

When Hermione got back to her quarters, she was mostly amused by what she found. This was now the third time that she'd come across Harry and Draco having sex in the common room, and she still couldn't figure out why they couldn't use Harry's bedroom—or Draco's, for that matter.

It didn't completely surprise her that Draco was a bit of an exhibitionist or at least that he didn't much care who saw him; he had been raised a Malfoy, and Malfoys had a long history of doing what they wanted, when they wanted, where they wanted, leaving everyone else to get out of the way or accommodate them. Harry, by contrast, while not precisely shy, was a novice at relationships and had a positive abhorrence for his business being taken up by other people.

Given this, she would have thought that his prudence would counterbalance Draco's lack thereof when it came to the two of them being intimate in places where others could see.

This time, Harry had known full well what was likely to happen once she left, and she and Harry had decided on a specific time for her to return. Figuring it was about time that they learnt a lesson of some sort, she simply threw up a barrier that blocked sight and sound between her half of the room and theirs and continued her homework on an armchair as planned.

It was nearly thirty minutes later before Harry's head popped through the shield.

"I didn't expect you back so soon." He sounded out of breath and was already red-faced.

"What time do you recall my saying I'd return?" she asked.

"Half ten."

She was rather amused that he'd glossed right over the fact that he'd told her to come back at ten.

"And what time is it now?" she asked patiently.

He cast Tempus. "Nearly twelve."

She nodded, still working on her Runes paper. She'd managed a whole set of rounds after the library had closed for the evening. Helpfully, she suggested, "You were perhaps trying to indicate that you'd lost track of the time."

"Yes," he agreed, seizing this explanation obediently. "That must have been it. I'll, uh, try not to do that anymore."

She shrugged. "You're the ones who are showing me a great deal of your bare-naked bodies. If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me."

Which wasn't quite true, but near enough.

"No, it … We'll … I'll keep better track of the time," he assured her, tongue-tied.

"All right, then," she agreed placidly. "You can Finite the barrier once you're both decent."

Harry blushed a brighter red, nodded, and disappeared completely behind the barrier once more.

She figured she'd probably arranged for at least a week of good behaviour and sort of wished that she had a reason to desire it. Such as her bringing her own man home, which was, unfortunately, not going to happen any time soon. Still, it was amusing to contemplate Severus's reaction if she were to bring him back to her quarters to find Draco and Harry having sex in the common room. Harry would never live it down, and it would be awfully amusing to watch the two men interact in Potions class…. She shook her head, trying to banish the stray thoughts and return to her Ancient Runes. They were all lucky she didn't give in to her evil impulses more often.

N.E.W.T.s were now in less than three months, and their professors seemed very fond of reminding them of this fact at every opportunity. Wednesday's Transfiguration class consisted of Minerva reminding them of all the different types of transformations they needed to be capable of for their finals including what they were working on right now, which was transforming from human into an inanimate object.

They'd been preparing for the spell for multiple classes now, practicing wand movements, pronunciation, transformation of hair and even limbs, all working their way towards the full transformation. It was a difficult transformation for humans to maintain because it was so contrary to their natural, living state.

Even more difficult was transforming into multiple inanimate objects, which Minerva said that very few people could achieve; she didn't expect any of them to attempt it, as it could have very nasty results—in the nature of detached body parts—if it went wrong.

As far as Hermione understood it, it couldn't be a lot worse than Splinching, not that she'd ever done that, and the wizarding world asked its children to learn to Apparate at a younger age than they were now attempting these transfigurations.

She knew, on some level, that it wouldn't be especially wise to plan a particularly challenging transformation on her first attempt. But an image of what she wanted to be had appeared in her head as soon as Minerva had first broached the subject, and she couldn't really help herself.

Mentally, she made a production of cracking her knuckles.

Somebody has a plan, Harry said in a singsong voice.

She smiled at him. Maybe.

Let's see, then.

For an instant, she flashed back to a scene six-and-a-half years ago when she had demanded the same of the red-haired boy who had become Harry's best friend. Wryly, she hoped that this spell was about to go much better for her than his had for him.

Minerva had told them to pick a simple object, and Hermione told herself that she could have chosen something a great deal more complex, so planning to turn herself into a little wooden bookshelf complete with a set of books wasn't that ridiculous.

Really, after mastering the Animagus transformation—into a magical animal no less—any other sort of transformation simply didn't seem very daunting. She knew what it felt like to transform, and in this case, it was just into wood and paper rather than into the flesh and blood of a unicorn.

She visualised clearly as Minerva had instructed and cast with her wand in her hand since she was in the middle of class.

She found herself on the floor with no memory of falling, breathing in great gulps of air, chest heaving, and the unalterable, absolute certainty that what she had done was wrong.

It was in her top ten list of painful experiences, though it fell below Draco's Cruciatus, Dolohov's Cutting Curse, and probably Severus's Skin-burning Hex. It wasn't painful in the way that those had been, it was more … abhorrent, like every part of her body had rebelled against what she had tried to do, much as she had imagined that casting an Unforgivable would feel like until you killed enough of your soul that you didn't notice so much anymore—not that she'd actually asked anyone who might actually know.

Harry and Draco were crowded around her asking her what had happened and if she was all right, and her collapse had attracted the attention of Minerva—and the entire class.

Minerva's expression as she approached was a cross between concern and disapproval.

"Miss Granger, ten points from Gryffindor for failing to heed my instructions. I told you to start simply. Let's get you up."

It took the combined efforts of Draco and Harry to haul her to her feet because she couldn't seem to manage it herself. They helped her to the nearest desk and she sank onto the chair gratefully.

"I believe you would benefit from a visit to Madam Pomfrey," Minerva said, eyeing her appraisingly.

"Oh no," Hermione hastened to assure her. "I'm fine. I just need to rest a bit. I'd really rather not miss the rest of class."

"Are you certain?"

Really certain? Harry wanted to know. You don't look so good.

"I'm quite sure," Hermione said to both of them. "I promise I'll go if I need to. I'm really feeling much better."

Lies, all lies. She felt as though she'd been flattened by the Hogwarts Express, but she didn't want to be examined my Poppy and turn this into an ever bigger production than it already was. Harry and Draco were still looking at her with concern.

"Very well," Minerva said, and then she turned back to the rest of the class, voice pitching louder. "As you have just seen, attempting a transformation more complicated than your body is capable of can result in it rejecting the transformation with all the attendant magical backlash. Assuming that not all of you are quite as ambitious as Miss Granger, we should be able to avoid any more accidents."

Hermione's cheeks were burning. She'd just become an object lesson, and she couldn't think, off the top of her head, of an occasion where she had been held up as the failure and the standard not to emulate.

How utterly embarrassing.

Harry was still looking at Hermione worriedly, which was perhaps why Minerva chose him next. She tolerated inattentive classes pretty much as poorly as Severus did. "Mr Potter, what can you do for me?"

The Gryffindor boy looked at her almost as though he had no idea what she was saying, but presently, the words seemed to register, and he rallied visibly, though he cast another side-long glance at Hermione.

You'll be fine, Harry. You're not going to try to show off outrageously like me, and so you're going to get it perfectly right.

Hermione sincerely hoped so, anyway, but at least she'd done a good job of sounding certain since she still had no idea what had gone wrong with her. She couldn't quite wrap her brain around her magic being unequal to the transformation that she had planned, but perhaps that just meant this had been a necessary knock to her pride.

Harry drew his wand, took a deep breath, and transformed.

Hermione let out a little sigh that she told herself was all relief and not a bit of jealousy over the fact that Harry had transformed seamlessly into a three-branched wrought-iron candelabra complete with lit candles.

Hermione wasn't so sure that that qualified as the simple transformation that Minerva was looking for, but it had been successful and brilliant.

Minerva leaned in to examine the details of Harry's transformation more closely. "Very nice work, Mr Potter. Flames are notoriously difficult to manage. Ten points to Gryffindor."

At least it evened out with Hermione's point loss now. She couldn't think of the last time that Minerva had taken points away from her, either. First year and Norbert, maybe….

Hermione supposed a widespread Obliviate would be considered a misuse of her magic.

Harry transformed back into a human and was applauded for his effort. Hermione made sure to clap loudly because she was embarrassed with herself for resenting his success.

Draco was next, and he transformed into a table with attached lamp. Hermione was amused how he had skirted around Minerva's rules to show that he, too, possessed the coordination and control to achieve distinct textures and shapes. It looked to Hermione as though Minerva's lips twitched before she nodded her approval and moved on to the next student.

Harry came to sit with Hermione, and she spent the rest of the class reassuring him that she was just fine and watching her classmates transform much more successfully than she had. Even the ones who didn't get it right on the first go didn't nearly knock themselves out.

As the other students were packing up at the end of class, Minerva asked Hermione to stay behind.

"We'll wait for you," Harry said promptly.

Hermione rose to her feet, pleased by how steady she felt now. "Don't be silly, Harry. You two head down to lunch and I'll meet you down there."

"But—"

"Harry," she admonished. "I'm fine, and unless you want a demonstration of the fact that I am still perfectly capable of wiping the floor with you, go on."

One of Draco's eyebrows arched gracefully. "Because I'm sure Professor McGonagall would let you duel for supremacy in front of her."

"You're not helping," Hermione chided. "Take Harry to lunch."

Honestly, Harry, Hermione said with exasperation. It's only Minerva who wants to talk to me, and I can call a number of people for help at a moment's notice in the unlikely event that I suddenly require assistance.

He finally allowed himself to be persuaded.

Once the classroom emptied, Minerva cast privacy charms.

"How are you feeling now, Hermione?"

"Much better, thank you," Hermione assured the other woman.

"I have always considered you to be one of the brightest pupils I've ever had the privilege of teaching, Hermione."

"Thank you, Minerva," Hermione said hesitantly since she could practically taste the "but" that was hanging on the end of that sentence, and she really didn't want Minerva to call her stupid.

"I trust you were not attempting to transform into an entire room's worth of furniture or something equally unwise." Hermione shook her head hurriedly. "In which case, your reaction was rather extreme and suggests a block of some kind rather than an overextension."

Hermione nodded; the thought had occurred to her, but the notion of being blocked against books seemed sort of … absurd. Contrary to the laws of nature or something like that.

"It happens to the best of us," Minerva said kindly, having evidently not missed Hermione's struggle with her embarrassment and incomprehension. "We will always come across spells that we cannot perform for one reason or another; some obstacles are surmountable and others are not. I would like you to investigate, therefore, and keep me apprised of your progress."

"Of course." Ruefully, she added, "I am sorry I held up class so much. I was hoping to be a good example."

"If you inspired caution in even a few of them, that is quite useful."

Hermione sighed, and Minerva patted her on the shoulder.

"Go ahead to lunch, Hermione. But do see Poppy if you experience any untoward symptoms in the next couple of days."

"I'll keep my eye out for anything unusual," Hermione promised. "Thank you, Professor."

She left Minerva gathering up homework scrolls at her desk and headed for the Great Hall. She'd only just made it to the next corridor when her arm was seized roughly.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Apology

When Hermione whirled round to face her attacker, wand in hand, she was rather shocked to see that it was Ron.

"I have to talk to you," he said roughly.

The redheaded boy hadn't sought her out in months. In fact, it felt as though it had been far longer than that since they had stopped speaking to one another. Oh, they had had plenty of entirely civil conversation when they encountered one another in her quarters or at meals or in classes, but it had been quite a while indeed since he had asked to speak with her specifically about a problem that he was having which didn't involve school work.

Given that the grip on her arm was likely to leave bruises, she rather doubted that academics were on his mind at the moment.

She also didn't think that he was about to apologize. The look on his face was rather a dead giveaway, and she didn't understand why he always insisted on making a scene in a corridor.

"Ron," she said once he had dragged her off by her elbow down a deserted hallway, "now is not the time or place, although I'd be happy to speak with you should you wish it."

Happy was perhaps a stretch, but she wouldn't mind reopening the avenues of communication if he was truly open to the idea. She had learnt a long time ago that making an effort without him doing the same was an exercise in futility.

Ron let out a snort. "Happy to speak with me," he scoffed. "I know you're not. But you're going to listen while I speak to you!"

She let out a sigh, not even trying to suppress it, but she did attempt to make her tone level and reasonable. "Could we not do this in my quarters, then?"

"We're going to do it right here and right now!" he snapped. "Before you can slither off."

She clenched her jaw and didn't bother rising to that rather clumsy baiting. She knew it wasn't going to go well when he'd already started tossing out the snake metaphors at this stage in the conversation.

"Speak, then," she said. "I have other places to be."

His face grew red. "I'm sure you do, but you are going to listen to me and stay out of my business with Krum!"

He was being far too emphatic given the number of sentences he'd spoken, and it was starting to get on her nerves. If he wanted to chastise her for what she'd said to Viktor, then he had the completely wrong end of the stick.

"I assure you, Ron," she said flatly, "that you have every reason to be grateful for what I've said to Viktor on your behalf."

His mouth twisted into a sneer. "You and Viktor won't be so close forever. You can't control him."

"I'm not trying to control him," she responded, maintaining her even tone with an effort. "I did try to reason with him about you, however."

His expression darkened. "I knew it! They told me the two of you were arguing and that my name came up. You might want him all to yourself, but he's not interested in your stupid books. He loves Quidditch, and I'm the one who has the Quidditch knowledge! Stop being such a busybody, Hermione!"

She glared at him through narrowed eyes. "You should have asked them to eavesdrop a little more carefully, Ron, because that isn't what happened at all."

"Then what did happen?" he demanded, clearly disbelieving.

"It's none of your business," she answered. "My argument was with Viktor, and I'm not going to have it batted about the school."

His expression grew cruel. "But you'll have everything else about you and Krum batted about, I take it? Spreading yourself around a little thin, aren't you?"

She had to recite the Elder Futhark alphabet again and remind herself that she'd been friends with Ron for years and knew that he was hot-headed and bloody stupid when he was angry.

"I'm going to assume," she said stiffly, "that you're speaking of all the friends I have. And now I'm going to walk away so that I don't have to permanently cross you off that list."

She did exactly that.

"I'm not done speaking to you!" he spat angrily.

Her voice was flat and definite. "Yes, you are. You're entirely done, Ronald, and if you know what's good for you, you won't raise this subject again."

"I ought to—"

"You really should not."

She turned back at the new voice and found to her mingled dismay and pleasure that it was Viktor who had found the two of them in the midst of this argument. Judging from the angry look on his face, he'd heard a fair bit of the conversation.

Ron looked entirely mutinous, making it clear that he was going to attempt to brazen his way through whatever chastising he thought he was about to receive.

"Mr Veasley," Viktor said sternly, and Hermione saw the slightest wince go through Ron's frame. He'd been "Ron" before, she knew, and the step back to the unfamiliar form of address did not bode well. "You and I are going to go have a talk in my office about vhere not to argue, and then ve are going to have a talk about vhat a good friend Hermione is and how undeserving you are of her."

Ron opened his mouth as though to start protesting immediately, but a stern glare from Viktor made him close it again. Viktor gave her a look that intimated that this was going to be a long discussion. She mouthed, "Be nice," at Viktor, although it was likely more than Ron deserved at this point, and with a slight shaking of his head in bemusement, Viktor headed off with the redhead in tow.

What Ron was about to find out, she imagined, was that the two of them had been arguing about him—in the library, which was not, apparently, the best location for that sort of discussion—but only because Viktor had been made privy to exactly what had caused the split between the golden trio to begin with. Once he knew what Ron had said about her, he had been determined not to speak to Ron again unless absolutely necessary in a professional capacity.

Hermione knew how important Quidditch was to Ron and how much he idolized Viktor, so she had interceded and argued Viktor back into being civil to Ron. Viktor hadn't exactly been pleased, but he had capitulated.

It was far from flattering that Ron would truly believe her capable of sabotaging his relationship with someone he admired like that, and she wondered if he was ever going to grow up and learn to think before he spoke.

If they'd been on speaking terms, she could at least have harangued him about it in private and then this would all have been over and done with; instead, Viktor was now involved and with her luck, it would soon be all over the school. She only hoped that Viktor didn't subject Ron to much point loss or detention, or she'd be likely not to make it up with the redhead before they graduated.

Honestly, though, she would have thought even Ron would have learnt not to yell at her in the middle of the hallway by now. She was probably just lucky that Harry hadn't happened upon them as well, with Draco to heckle Ron. That would have made the horror complete.

She hurried down to lunch before Harry and Draco could worry that she really had been injured in some way. She reassured the two of them that she was fine, noticed that neither Ron nor Viktor appeared for the meal, ate hurriedly, and then headed off to Arithmancy with Draco. The Slytherin kept shooting the occasional glance at her, reminding her to Mask her emotions and stop thinking about what a prat Ron could be.

After class, she sent Draco off to get Harry and then tracked Viktor down to remind him why it would not actually be very helpful if Ron was made to suffer in too extreme a manner.

Ron came to dinner almost hunched in on himself, clearly expecting the worst. When it became apparent to him that it hadn't immediately become public knowledge that he'd been taken sternly to task by Viktor, the redhead appeared nominally chastened, a great deal relieved, and then he was back to his normal self, piling food onto his plate and eating as though he'd not been fed in a week.

That was one disaster averted, at least, and once she applied the bruise salve to her arm, she could put the incident out of her mind entirely.

The next day, Hermione left lunch early; she wanted to pop in and take a look at all her plants because she was starting the Weresbane on Sunday. Although both Draco and Harry would have helped, she knew they didn't find caring for plants the most exhilarating task ever, so she didn't mind telling them to stay where they were.

To her surprise, she hadn't made it far down the corridor before she was once again stopped with a hand on her arm. This time, Ron looked unexpectedly genuinely chastened, and he was polite when he asked to speak to her privately. She cast charms around the nearest empty classroom and perched on a desk as she waited for him to have his say.

He paced for a few minutes at the front of the classroom and then stopped and faced her, saying abruptly, "I'm sorry that I was so rude to you yesterday, Hermione."

She sighed. "Ron, thanks for your apology, but if you're saying it solely because Viktor has forced you, I'd really rather you didn't."

For a moment, he looked as though he was going to get angry, the tell-tale flush pinking the tips of his ears, but then he sighed loudly instead and leaned back against the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom.

"It was stupid of me to accuse you of sabotage," he admitted. "I can obviously do that well enough on my own. Our relationship has been pretty rocky for months now." Understatement of understatements. "And I let my imagination run away with me. I know you wouldn't intentionally hurt me."

"I wouldn't," she agreed, "but sometimes I'm not sure the same can be said of you."

He winced. "And I probably deserved that. You know me." He gave a shame-faced shrug. "Once my temper gets the better of me, I end up belching slugs."

She smiled involuntarily.

He continued slowly and reluctantly, "It … wasn't very easy for me, when you and Harry left me behind."

"Ron—" she protested, but he held up his hand to halt her.

"I know you didn't mean to, and I know it probably wasn't as bad as it seemed in my head, but suddenly it was the two of you spending all this time together, and then once both of you were upset with me—rightly so, I know—it just got worse. I didn't feel like I had much to fight back with when it was against the two of you, and by the time I was ready to admit that I was being stupid, I couldn't do it. Everybody knew that we were fighting, and I'm not very good at public apologies. I just kept making it worse." He grimaced. "And then Malfoy joined you, and I really felt like I'd been replaced, and I still hate the ferret," he said fiercely, ending more tentatively, "but it's pretty clear that the two of you don't."

"We've gotten to know him," she agreed. "We've spent a lot of time with him that you haven't. Neither of us is saying he hasn't been a complete prat." She eyed Ron, contemplating whether or not she could say what she was thinking.

His lips tipped up, and he added the words for her: "But so have I. And more recently than him, by the look of things."

She smiled slightly, although there was sadness in her voice. "We're not children anymore. It's not always going to be the same as it was then."

He nodded, but he looked unhappy. "I'm used to being Harry's best friend."

"And I'm sure he'd be happy to continue to think of you as such," she said earnestly. "But not when you're being a complete and utter prat."

"Malfoy—" he began.

She shook her head and said firmly, "He isn't Harry's best friend. Not like you. You must have noticed."

Surely even Ron couldn't be so blind?

He looked faintly ill, and she suspected that she'd just dashed his last hope that that particular fact was just another nasty rumour made up by the Daily Prophet. But there was really no point in their becoming friends again for all of a few days before Ron learned definitively about Harry and Draco with his own eyes. If he couldn't handle it when they were talking about it, then it was better to know now.

"I'm happy to be friendly again, Ron, honestly I am, but I have to warn you that we're not about to stop spending a lot of time with Draco."

He grimaced, scrubbing a hand through his hair as he pushed away from the desk to come stand beside her. "I don't like it."

"I know," she said simply. "But you need to at least be civil if you don't want to risk ruining your relationship with Harry entirely. Harry doesn't take kindly to anyone insulting his friends."

Ron drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can be civil."

Her top lip curled up, but she attempted to say very solemnly, "Of course you can."

His nose wrinkled, and he nudged her in the side with his elbow. "Oy! You're supposed to be supportive."

She broke down and laughed, and his face finally relaxed as he laughed with her.

"Remember to play nicely, then, and you can join us for dinner tonight."

He nodded. "Perhaps I'd better sit beside you?"

She smiled slightly. "I'll safely shield you from the horror that is Draco, yes."

He nudged her again, still clearly in good humour. She felt better than she had in a long time as the two of them separated, and she continued on to her conservatory.

As far as she knew, she was one of the only people in the school who was aware of the conservatory's existence, and since she had moved all her plants necessary for the Wolfsbane and Weresbane to it, it was warded to the hilt.

One of the techniques Solace's journals had taught her was how to ward extensively and then obscure the wards so that it wasn't immediately obvious to anyone in the vicinity that there was a highly warded area nearby.

Slipping through her wards, she found that everything was in good order, and she headed on to Herbology with a light heart.

Ron apparently took the scenic route from Herbology, because she, Harry, and Draco were already seated at the Gryffindor table and had their plates half-served when Ron arrived and slid into the seat next to her. The serving fork Harry was using froze before it had managed to pierce a piece of chicken and bring it to his plate. Draco's expression was a very haughty glare.

"Hey, Hermione," Ron said as he began to immediately shovel food onto his plate. She thought this was at even more accelerated speed than normal, perhaps due to his nervousness.

"Hi, Ron," she greeted the redhead, calmly spooning more mashed potatoes onto her plate. "Did you enjoy Herbology?"

"It was fine," he said absently as he added an obscene amount of gravy to the mound of food he was soon going to consume. "You, er, done with that chicken, Harry?"

Boys were stupid; Hermione knew that. Harry was clearly not done, but he evidently heard what Ron was really asking, because he looked fleetingly to her, and when she smiled at him, he passed the whole plate of chicken around her and to Ron.

"Yes, I have done," he answered. "Would you like some, Ron?"

Ron looked ever-so-slightly relieved now and nodded enthusiastically as he helped himself to several pieces.

"Yes, thanks."

Draco was still looking faintly disgusted.

She could see Ron steeling himself and was impressed with the mildness of his tone when he asked, "Did you want any, Malfoy?"

Surprise now showed on the Malfoy scion's face, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. She certainly didn't want to set Ron off, as that would without doubt be taken the wrong way.

"Thank you, Weasley," Draco managed with a praiseworthy attempt at evenness of his own. If that didn't clarify how he felt about Harry, she didn't know what could. "It seems that Harry hasn't actually grasped the concept of serving himself, so perhaps it would be better if I took charge of getting him some chicken."

"Hey," Harry protested, but there was general laughter from everyone else, and the overall tension eased on their end of the table; it had been months since Ron had sat anywhere near them, and it seemed that everyone else didn't know what to expect. Now they seemed to have agreed that no instantaneous fireworks would be forthcoming, and the meal resumed.

Hermione couldn't have been more pleased. Well, not unless Severus had arrived at the Gryffindor table, declared his undying love, and swept her off to his quarters, but that possibility seemed really rather remote.

This was still quite good.

Since they'd just been reunited with Ron, Harry invited him down for tea after dinner, and Ron immediately accepted. A half hour later, they were chatting nearly like the old friends that they were supposed to be.

Hermione remembered the same thing occurring when Ron and Harry had finally made up during the Triwizard Tournament, a reset as though the months of estrangement hadn't occurred. Given that they were also sitting in the room with Draco and had set aside years of animosity, Hermione supposed it wasn't actually that strange.

Since it was a Thursday, they were expecting Viktor. When he had first arrived, he had asked to arrange a time to speak to her and Harry, ostensibly because as Head Boy and Head Girl they would be in an excellent position to share with him the student body's opinion on his teaching technique. They weren't personally in any of his classes, and she knew little about brooms and less about Quidditch.

Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that what he really wanted to do was chat with his friends. Fraternization between professors and students was by no means officially forbidden, but it could cause problems if other students were jealous. Since they were talking about an international Quidditch star, that sort of went without saying, thus the quasi-official reason for the visits.

When the gargoyle announced Viktor, Hermione rose to let him in, and once he was inside the room, she threw her arms around him.

"Thank you," she murmured somewhere in the vicinity of his neck, hoping he could see Ron in the room and work out what she was on about.

But the entire Weasley clan had not been able to knock any sense into Ron, and whatever Viktor had said to the redhead in one evening had apparently worked miracles.

Viktor hugged her back. "You are very velcome, mila moya. I am only happy I could help."

She drew back and beamed up at him. "It means a lot to all of us."

"Then I am vell revarded."

"Come have tea," she invited warmly.

She left Viktor with one of the armchairs since Ron was in the other, and she thought it would be easier all round if she sat on the couch with Harry and Draco.

It took Ron about five minutes to gear up the courage to address Viktor directly in this informal setting, and then he was off about some Quidditch manoeuvre or other, and Hermione wondered if they'd ever remember that they were theoretically discussing Viktor's teaching practices. Given the group she was with, she thought fondly, it seemed unlikely.

No disasters marred the evening, and by the time Viktor and Ron left, it was clear that Harry had never been happier, and Hermione was quite sure that Draco was going to get a rather spectacular reward for good behaviour.

It was working out well for everyone all round, really, and Hermione gave them some sort of an excuse that she was pretty sure they didn't hear before she bid them goodnight—at all of nine in the evening—and headed into her bedroom and then into her lab.

She didn't have any intention of brewing at the moment, but she did have a very specific task that could easily occupy her no matter how much sex Harry and Draco were having even if they were having it in the common room.

Harry had been easy enough to put off yesterday because he had known that she was completely embarrassed by what had happened in Transfiguration and didn't want to talk about it. But Hermione needed very much to know what was going on, and she was taking Minerva's advice to heart; an answer was sure to present itself if she applied herself assiduously enough.

Although she still didn't understand why, she had quite gathered through empirical evidence that she was incapable of transforming into a bookshelf and books.

It galled a little, but she could see the sense in starting as simply as possible now and working her way up, figuring out where her cut-off point was.

This salutary plan suffered an immediate check when her attempt to turn herself into a small chair—one material, approximately her own size—failed just as spectacularly as her original effort had done.

Sitting on the floor, breathing hard, and once again sure that what she had just tried to do was viscerally wrong, she began to think that perhaps she needed a new strategy. She had the feeling that further attempts were not only going to have the same results but that they had the potential to be hazardous to her health. It didn't feel, at any rate, like something she could just push through. The feeling of wrongness lingered, and she imagined that it was probably with good reason.

When Minerva had spoken to Hermione on the matter, she had suggested that Hermione was experiencing a block. This hypothesis was becoming more and more likely, as far as Hermione could see, but she had the feeling that going back to Minerva and trying to explain about this "wrongness" wouldn't be very wise. Which meant that she thought—whether she'd made the decision consciously or not—that what was going on was related to Pure Adults. Which meant that there was a different expert whom she needed to go see.

Hermione drank a mug of tea as she waited to recover completely from the unsettling feelings that the attempt to transform produced, and then she Masked herself and headed out of her bedroom.

Harry and Draco had actually made it out of the common room, and she was easily able to make her way into the corridor, through the secret exit, and out to the Forbidden Forest.

Transforming into a unicorn once she was safely out of sight, Hermione cantered towards the unicorn's valley. She was unMasked enough that it was easy for Castina to sense her, and the herd mare arrived before Hermione had got halfway to her destination.

You are troubled, Berit.

Hermione wasn't sure if that was emotional leakage on her part or a fair guess based on her usual state when she came out to the Forest.

I'm having a problem with something that is rather routine for a wizard. I'm wondering if it's to do with me like this. With being a Pure Adult.

And what is your problem?

I cannot transform into inanimate objects. I tried a bookshelf with books, then a simple chair, and all I'm getting is this sense that it's wrong, that I shouldn't be doing it.

Ah.

Hermione eyed Castina and asked pointedly, Oh?

You are a living, breathing Pure Adult. You are not meant to be inanimate.

Hermione considered the many ways to respond to this comment. Regular wizards were living, breathing humans, and surely they weren't meant to be inanimate, either. But she had come to understand that Pure Adults tended to be a special case.

So I won't ever be able to transform into something that is not living?

Why would you want to?

Citing academic requirements was probably not the sort of answer that Castina was looking for, and Hermione kind of understood her point—certainly from a unicorn's perspective.

So I'll just have to avoid it?

Yes, Berit. Said as though she understood that Hermione was having trouble with this concept but thought it was as clear as crystal herself.

Hold on, Hermione said, frowning mentally. Harry transformed just fine. Is this one of those 'me as a unicorn' rather than Pure Adult things?

Fawkes?

The phoenix was brought up to speed on the debate and offered his theory.

Boy-bird transformed very specifically, perhaps by instinct. He chose to transform into fire, and that is always a close association for a phoenix.

This actually made a good deal of sense to Hermione; Harry usually did pretty well by his instincts. Unfortunately for her, she could think of no convenient equivalent inanimate object for her to transform into.

It was looking as though she was going to have to inform Minerva that she was permanently blocked and hope that the woman didn't ask for a more detailed explanation.

Maybe Minerva would let Hermione do some other extra credit task to make up for it.

Hermione spent several hours out in the Forest visiting her whole herd, enjoying the time to catch up as well as the opportunity to refresh in the light.

She made her way back inside with no one the wiser and found that she had not been missed when she got back to her common room. At the next available opportunity, she would mention the transformation problem to Harry, she decided, since it wouldn't do for him to appear blocked in class as well; two aberrations were likely to seem suspicious.

For now, though, she would get some sleep and hope that tomorrow would be a more successful day than the last couple had been.

On Friday evening, she, Harry, and Draco were gathered in their common room having a nice, quiet night in. Her bracelet heated, and she and Harry checked their wrists at the same time to see that Kingsley had arrived at the school. There had been no indication that there was to be a training session tonight or that the Auror would be attending it, so it seemed that he was here on official business—which tended to involved Harry when the head of the Aurors came to speak with Albus.

They rose in unison, causing Draco's eyebrow to rise.

"You know I hate it when you do that. Where are we going?" She and Harry exchanged glances, and Draco let out a longsuffering sigh. "It's a Gryffindor-only event, I take it?"

Harry smiled. "We'll explain as soon as we get back."

"Very well," Draco said very regally as he lounged back on the couch. "I shall be expecting you."

Given that this is our room, that seems a rather safe bet, Hermione observed with a bit of tartness.

Harry wisely chose to say nothing, and the two of them headed upstairs and "happened" to run into Kingsley in the entranceway.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger, how fortuitous. I wished to speak to the Head Boy and the Head Girl as well as the headmaster. Can you spare a moment?"

"Of course, sir," they agreed readily.

The headmaster was waiting for them in his office, and they were all seated with tea before the headmaster began, eyes twinkling brilliantly.

"Kingsley, what a pleasant surprise. I hope you're not having a problem with these two?"

Kingsley offered a slow smile. "Nothing that's come to the attention of the Auror Department, Albus. I ran into them as I was heading up and thought to tell all of you at the same time."

"What's happened?" Albus asked more sharply, sounding alert and powerful.

"Hopefully, nothing to be concerned about," Kingsley answered. "The Auror Department received two more orange-proof scrolls this morning. Stebbins informed me as well as the Minister; that's the protocol we now have in place to prevent any misappropriation of information."

Albus was now smiling faintly, eyes twinkling again. "What information did these scrolls contain?"

"The scrolls made us aware of a power augmentation indicating that there are no more Pure Adults. Now, if this were a result of Voldemort's handiwork, I feel certain we would already have been advised in a rather less pleasant way. Therefore, the danger is past, and you need not look so carefully anymore, Hermione, Harry, although it would still be beneficial to know who these two individuals are."

Albus was nodding, but his eyes were twinkling like mad.

Kingsley's eyes narrowed. "You don't seem terribly shocked by this news, Albus."

"Not terribly, no," the headmaster said smoothly.

It seemed in moments like these that nothing delighted the headmaster more than being one step ahead of the person to whom he was speaking.

Kingsley's head cocked to one side. "Will you be looking for these two powerful witches or wizards?"

The headmaster smiled. "There's no need. As it happens, they are—"

Hermione and Harry rose as one, the wash of power that emanated from them cutting off Albus's announcement, making the objects on his desk rattle, and pinning Kingsley and Albus to their seats.

"You forget yourself," Harry said sternly.

Hermione's tone matched his. "That is not information you have the right to disseminate."

Fortunately for his continued health and safety, the twinkle in his eyes was dimmed, but his words weren't exactly conciliating.

"You have just revealed yourselves."

"As you say," Harry said. "We revealed ourselves."

"And you mistake," Hermione said, not mincing words, "if you imagine that we could not Obliviate you so that you don't even remember that Kingsley came here tonight." She let that thought linger for a moment before smiling slightly. "Fortunately, Harry and I are generally fond of you and usually more forgiving than that. Despite your current behaviour, we trust that you can keep a secret, Albus, and we have no reason to doubt your word, Kingsley."

"You've known all this time." Kingsley sought confirmation.

"We've protected ourselves all this time," Hermione corrected. "As you can see, the more people who know, the more the information tends to get out. You're the fourth person to know besides Harry and me."

Kingsley could clearly do the math.

He cleared his throat, and declared, "Right. Officially, the Ministry considers the matter closed; you are now adults with the right to use your power as you will. Unofficially, the Ministry is somewhat more concerned, worried that Voldemort could still take advantage of all that power, even if he didn't get it for himself." He smiled. "I must say it's a relief to know there's no chance of that."

Harry's smile was fierce. "No, it definitely wasn't Voldemort's lucky day when it turned out to be the two of us."

"Unofficially on my front, then, I will naturally do whatever you wish to protect your secret and assist you."

"Thank you, Kingsley," they said together.

Although they'd been doing rather well on their own so far, it was nice to know that they had someone on the inside who could run interference as necessary.

Kingsley rose. "I guess that's everything. I confess this wasn't exactly how I thought this meeting would go, but you always seem to be well ahead of the rest of us."

Hermione was certain that he was including her and Harry in that assessment as much as Albus, so she responded with a smile, "We are privy to some interesting information."

He nodded. "The information has been leaked to the Prophet and will appear in tomorrow's edition. We want to make sure that everyone is aware there's no need to search for virgins anymore, as this keeps as many people as possible safe."

"Of course," Albus said, and she and Harry nodded their agreement.

"I must say," Kingsley added, "that the two of you did an excellent job of eluding detection by both Voldemort and the Ministry."

They smiled once again.

"It was all Hermione," Harry pointed out. "She's brilliant at protecting us."

"So I see," Kingsley said before she could voice a protest that looked likely to fall on deaf ears.

She supposed she really had become a bit of a mastermind when it came to the issue of Pure Adults. Since she had found Solace's journals, it was probably true that she knew details of the lives of more Pure Adults than anyone else in the world.

"I will leave it in your hands to inform those Order members who need to be informed?" Kingsley asked.

The headmaster smiled. "Of course, my boy, of course."

Hermione supposed that anyone who'd been taught by Albus qualified as a boy to him, but she did find it a bit of a stretch to address the head of the M.L.E. as such. Kingsley only smiled.

"Goodnight, Albus."

Hermione and Harry followed him out, neither of them wanting to be left alone in the office with Albus in case he did something creepy like ask them for details about the change in their status. She wasn't altogether convinced—despite how he had acted—that Albus had known for certain that they were no longer Pure Adults until Kingsley had told him. But she didn't want to start wagering on how much he knew about her and Severus.

As they began to descend the stairs, Kingsley observed, "I suppose I should check in with Tonks while I'm here."

"You might rather not," Hermione answered with a smirk.

"Oh?" he inquired mildly.

Hermione nodded. "Remus is here ostensibly visiting me, but despite the fact that he arrived hours ago, I've yet to see him."

A broad smile graced Kingsley's face. "She hasn't been this open to teasing in years. Now I'll have to go see what she's up to."

Harry smiled widely in turn but attempted to say with seriousness, "I'm sure I should really be monitoring Remus more closely, too. He's the closest thing I have to a parent, and look at the example he's setting."

Hermione shook her head. "Just think how you would feel if it were you who were having some much-needed quiet time with your significant other."

Harry made a face at her. "Now you're just taking all the fun out of it. You've got to admit it's amusing to see what excuses they come up with about what they're doing when you find them."

Tonks and Remus still had a tendency to act as though they were school children who weren't supposed to be engaging in carnal activities. As a result, there were all kinds of "teaching sessions" (because Remus had done this for a year, so he could give her pointers) and "grading sessions" (because any professor could use some help and Remus really knew the material) and "visits to an old friend" (because it would be rude not to stop by when he was in the area) and "defence training sessions" (because it was important for both of them to keep their skills honed).

Hermione personally had no problem with the two of them saying that they wanted some time to shag like rabbits, but after being caught in Room One, while they made no attempt to deny that they were together, they seemed to think it important to have "legitimate" reasons to get together in Tonks's quarters. Hermione sincerely hoped that on some level, they realized how ridiculous they were being.

Tonks's quarters, as well as her classroom, were in the Hufflepuff region of the dungeon. As though their descent into the lower regions of the castle had Summoned him, Severus appeared just as they stepped off of the staircase into the lower level. Hermione threw up privacy charms.

"Kingsley," Severus said politely. "What brings you to the dungeons?"

Hermione wished that she garnered that tone of address more often.

"I needed to see Albus," the man responded, looking at them fleetingly and saying no more.

"I would tell him even if Albus did not," she answered the unspoken question.

Kingsley gaze was very sharp, and then offered her a nod. He, it seemed, had fully accepted that the details of this information were hers and Harry's to disseminate at their discretion.

"Tell me what?" Severus demanded.

Not so polite a tone for her. She toyed for an instant with the notion of demanding a respectful tone before she answered, but knew she'd still be waiting for it when she got out of detention three months from now.

"The Ministry has been advised that there are no more Pure Adults," Hermione answered. "It's going to be in tomorrow's Prophet."

"Who advised the Ministry?" he asked, his tone icy.

She gritted her teeth. As if she would have made that information public without at least informing him beforehand. It hadn't even occurred to her to consider making some sort of anonymous announcement. She didn't think it likely that the Ministry would have believed them without more proof than she was willing to give.

At her side, Harry stiffened and answered, "No one advised the Ministry. It was orange-proof scrolls, just like the first time."

There was no hint of apology in Severus's tone. "How fortunate for the Ministry that a previous employee actually knew what he or she was doing. That fails to explain what you are doing down in the dungeons. Albus's offices are in the opposite direction, as I recall."

Hermione's loud cough mostly drowned out Harry's "well spotted".

Kingsley was looking at them oddly, but all he said was, "No trip to the castle is complete without a visit to the Auror Department's own, although it's looking to be more intrusive than I'd originally intended."

Severus made a face of distaste. "Don't tell me the wolf is here."

Hermione managed to keep her tone almost entirely earnest-sounding. "Unless you know something we don't, I doubt he's in wolf form at the moment."

Harry stared at her blankly and then dissolved into laughter.

"'Mione," he spluttered. "I've now got this completely horrible image in my head, and it's all your fault. You're evil."

From the look on Severus's face, he had a horrible image in his head as well, and she didn't much regret that she'd put it there. If he was going to continue to call Remus by names that he meant derogatorily, then she was going to fight back.

Kingsley's lips had curved into a smile again. Well, Hermione had always thought that Tonks was quirky.

"It's so delightful to visit you, Hermione," Kingsley said with relish. "Life remains entertaining. Shall we?"

She nodded, as she wasn't the one who had stopped them in the middle of the corridor, and they headed on. They hadn't made it more than a few steps along before they were interrupted once more.

"Is there a party and I wasn't invited?"

Draco had joined them. Harry nodded solemnly.

"It was one of those 'No Dracos allowed' parties. Sorry, love."

Draco offered his most haughty expression. "I suspected as much. I will, naturally, attend anyway."

"I rather suspected you would," Harry conceded easily. "Kingsley is on his way to see Tonks. I think we've announced it to nearly everyone."

"Except Remus," Hermione observed wryly.

Draco made a face. "Oh, don't tell me they're still at it? Honestly, how much time do they need?"

Harry pressed his lips together, and it was hard to tell whether he was stopping laughter or an expression of distaste given the mental images he was still stuck with.

"We could always go back to our rooms and never find out," Hermione suggested.

Harry shook his head. "I have to know now."

Hermione laughed. "If you say so. You're the one who might be scarred for life."

"It doesn't bother you, I take it?"

She shrugged. "I've had plenty of practice catching people I don't particularly want to see naked in flagrante delicto."

As she had known would happen, Harry coloured, causing both Severus and Kingsley to look at him sharply. Draco shook his head.

"I think you're going to have to have that looked at, Harry. It's getting to where I can't take you anywhere without risking all my secrets getting out."

"Miss Granger is in the habit of finding the two of you without your clothing on?"

Hermione wondered how it was, exactly, that this fact had been reversed to being her fault. Harry had noticed the shift, too, and was frowning at the Potions master. There was even a slight furrow in Draco's brow. She chose to ignore the lot of them and turned to Kingsley.

"Are we going?"

It was hard to tell exactly how much he'd understood of the exchange that had just occurred—probably more than she wished—but he gallantly offering his arm regardless.

"Of course."

She and Kingsley headed down the corridor. It was only a few steps before the others fell into line, and she was relieved when Severus didn't immediately raise the topic again. She should have guessed, she supposed, that mention of naked Harry would be her fault somehow.

Kingsley was the one to knock on Tonks's door when they didn't find her in her office. Hermione wondered if she was only imagining that she heard several muffled bangs and thumps from within. It took a good thirty seconds before the door was answered, and the pink-haired Auror looked distinctly dishevelled when her head appeared in the six-inch gap between the door and the frame.

Her eyes widened slightly when she saw who was on the other side.

"Kingsley. Wotcher, everyone. What brings you?"

She even sounded slightly out of breath, and Hermione knew that they were all wondering just what she had been doing a moment ago to get her into precisely that state.

"Kingsley's just been to see Albus," Harry informed her.

Kingsley went next, voice very bland. "It would hardly be polite not to visit you, too."

"Right," Tonks said, looking completely flustered as she no doubt realized that she should invite her boss in. "That's very thoughtful of you. I, er…."

"All right," Hermione said sternly, "that's enough. We're just headed to Room One. If you feel up to it, you can join us there later."

Since Kingsley still had her arm, she simply started off down the hall with him in tow, and she soon had a bemused following.

"You're a spoilsport, Hermione," Draco protested.

"I would not wish to be hassled in a similar situation," she repeated, not that she could really imagine even Harry and Draco being stupid enough to give Severus a hard time like that. She smiled hopefully at Kingsley. "You can't leave the castle without at least a short training session, can you?"

Kingsley smiled down at her, agreeing obediently, "Of course not." He leaned closer to say softly, "Although I begin to wonder who is benefiting from them."

"Perhaps it is a mutually beneficial arrangement," she responded with an answering smile. "Power is useless if you can't use it properly."

They were uneven numbers once they reached Room One, and Kingsley immediately suggested Severus, Draco, and himself against her and Harry. The two of them immediately accepted, although Draco was shaking his head.

"It never works quite as well as you hope it will," he pointed out.

This continued to be true today. Hermione could tell that Kingsley was putting more force behind his spells than he had on his previous visits. The look on Harry's face said that he'd noticed, too.

He's not here as often as the others, she pointed out. He mightn't have wanted to demoralize us.

Harry half-nodded, half-shrugged. I guess. I suppose we're a bit young to be going up against the head of the Aurors under normal circumstances.

I don't think most people put every ounce of power they have into training; better to have a reserve for the real battle.

But now he's curious.

Seems like, she agreed.

They'd managed to Stun Draco when Tonks and Remus arrived; they'd at least had the sense to arrive together and not pretend that they hadn't just been in Tonks's rooms. Tonks immediately identified just what kind of session they were having, and she joined Kingsley and Severus. Remus, bless his Gryffindor heart, tried to join Hermione and Harry and make the two sides even, but he had to leap out of the way of a spell shot his way by Severus. Tonks called him over, and Hermione and Harry were polite enough not to attack him before he'd switched sides.

"They don't need any help, trust me," Tonks told him with certainty.

Their four opponents immediately tried to surround them, and Harry and Hermione threw up a shield in tandem.

"No shields!" Severus admonished.

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks.

He's trying to create a battle scenario? she said, her disbelief sounding clearly even in her own mind.

Harry snorted. Right, he said sarcastically. You and I are brain-damaged and can't remember how to cast shields, just every other spell we know. That's an entirely likely scenario.

She smiled at him. That leaves Masking, doesn't it?

And do we get to tell him to bugger off if he tells us not to do that? Harry asked hopefully.

We can think it loudly, she responded with amusement. I've reached my quota of detention threats for the year.

Very well, Harry agreed. On three?

On three, both they and their shield disappeared.

Tonks swore. "I hate it when they do this."

Severus also evidently remembered the last time she'd Masked herself for training because he straightaway backed himself into a corner so that she couldn't sneak up on him as she had then. Seeing the wisdom of what he'd done, the other three moved to do the same. She and Harry were back to back in the middle of the room.

It had taken them some practice before they had been able to detect one another when they were both Masked well enough to function in a battle scenario. She thought it had something to do with the MindSpeech and that connection on the upper range of magical activity that Fawkes had explained to her so long ago. Perhaps it was simply practice. Or the fact that they were more powerful now than they had been before. Whatever it was, they could appear completely invisible to others and still see one another when they wished.

I'll get Tonks, and you get Kingsley, Harry suggested.

Then drop, Hermione added, because Severus and Remus will be casting at the origin of our spellfire.

Harry nodded his understanding, and an instant later, the two Aurors went down; she'd used a Stunner and Harry the full Body-Bind. Exactly what Hermione had hoped occurred; since Remus and Severus were in opposite corners, their spells missed her and Harry and headed towards one another, forcing them to block and leaving Hermione and Harry plenty of time to get out of the exposed area and creep to a wall.

'Mione, Harry complained. How can it be fair for him to shield himself if we're not allowed?

You expected him to be fair? she asked with amusement.

He was silent for a moment. Right. Never mind.

She laughed softly. Fortunately, Severus wasn't terribly precise in his wording. He didn't say anything about warding.

You're going to put up wards? Harry sounded confused. What good will that do?

You'll see, she said mischievously as she placed her hands against the nearest wall and began to cast. You may not want to be touching the wall, though.

Harry moved away from it with alacrity, and as Hermione finished casting, she pulled her hands away and rose.

Shall we show them up entirely?

Harry immediately nodded, and she realized that she was still feeling a bit bitter about Severus's behaviour towards her. He could be almost decent for a little while, but then he got all snarly again, and the vindictiveness, while a regular part of these training sessions, was beginning to wear on her.

There were only so many times that she could excuse him.

To the middle of the room, then, and unMask on my sign.

He sent her a mental look of confusion but did not question her. She waited until the delay on her ward had just about elapsed.

Now.

She and Harry appeared in the middle of the room, but even as Remus and Severus were raising their wands, they slumped, unconscious, to the floor.

"I love you, Hermione," Harry said happily. "I don't think I say it enough."

She smiled at him. "Love you, too, Harry. Now, go wake up Draco."

He immediately obeyed, and Draco's eyebrows rose as he took in the scene around him.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

"We were up against everyone and not allowed to use shields," Harry answered.

Draco's lips tipped up into a smirk. "Of course. It's so clear from this scene that you were at a disadvantage."

They smirked back.

"Although, to be fair," she admitted, "we probably couldn't do that in an actual battle scenario. There'd be too many people and we'd only get trampled by someone inadvertently or some such."

"Don't you dare say that when Snape is awake," Harry admonished sternly. "He doesn't need something else to cross off the list of spells we're allowed to use."

"So long as we're still allowed to cast spells, I think we'll always have a fighting chance," Hermione said philosophically, since she wouldn't put it past Severus to just keep eliminating all the methods that had been used to defeat him in the past.

They revived all their victims.

"What on earth was that?" Remus asked as he climbed to his feet. "You weren't casting from the middle of the room, were you?"

They shook their heads.

"How did you get past my shield?" Severus demanded.

Remus opened his mouth, no doubt to protest the shielding double standard, but she just shook her head slightly, and he closed it again, although he was frowning at her.

"I didn't," she responded easily. "Your shield was still in place when you were Stunned." She smiled. "You were Stunned from behind."

"The wall was behind me," Severus said with the tone of voice that indicated he thought she was being stupid.

She nodded. "A long expanse of wall, even. A wall that stretched all the way over to where I was, and a wall that was perfectly amenable to warding."

"You warded the wall to Stun us?" Remus asked, repeated the words as though they didn't make adequate sense.

She nodded.

"You did it just now, while we were hunting you?" She nodded once more. "God, that's brilliant."

Her smile deepened. "Thank you, Remus."

"You'll be all set if we battle in a building somewhere." Remus seemed quite pleased by this aptitude.

Harry was grinning widely now, too. "She won't have a problem if it's in a forest, either."

"Oh?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "We did some training in the Forbidden Forest. It went quite well."

Remus's lips curled. "Quite well by Hermione standards? Like curing lycanthropy was good?"

Hermione flushed slightly, and Harry laughed.

"Just like that," he agreed before she could respond.

So much for not saying anything that might annoy Severus. Of course, that seemed to happen when she came up no matter what, so perhaps there wasn't any hope for it. Especially given that she'd just Stunned him again.

"Do you really think you'd have the opportunity to set up wards in a battle scenario?" Severus asked.

"Severus, that isn't fair," Remus answered, and Hermione tried not to wince. Of course it wasn't fair. When had that ever mattered? "She was legitimately fighting us, and she had time to do it. That counts for a battle scenario, especially since she'd have the opportunity to use shields normally."

Oh, goody, throw more of what he was doing in his face. Severus was glaring at the whole group of Gryffindors stonily, and she almost managed to be amused that Harry was included despite the fact that he hadn't done anything in particular in this instance. Been present, she supposed, when Severus was Stunned.

"It's important that I use differing methods to disable my opponents," she said, wondering why it was she who was always defending him, especially when she was upset with him. "I could be injured in some way and need other options."

She studiously didn't look at Harry, because she knew he would be thinking of his earlier brain injury comment.

"Warding is impractical in an outdoor setting," Severus said coldly.

"Funny," Harry immediately responded, "given that they're used outdoors all the time."

He had a point, really, but she rather wished that they'd all stop trying to defend her. Hadn't they learnt by now that Severus was always right when it came to issues of his authority? Even if he was wrong, he wouldn't concede that he shouldn't have restricted her as he had nor that she was right to have been able to get around it and Stun him again. They could argue about it for hours, and it wouldn't make a difference.

It simply didn't matter that much.

Severus's eyes were hard. "She could hardly set up wards outdoors that were supposed to Stun everyone."

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was no call to go referring to her as though she wasn't even in the room. It was an interesting premise, though; perhaps she could start experimenting outside. When she was far away from all these friends of hers.

"She continues to be in the room," she said with an edge to her voice. Why did he have to be such an utter prat? "I worked with the environment that I was currently in, as I believe all of you did."

"Yeah," Harry agreed immediately. "Outside, there wouldn't be any corners for you to—"

Don't you dare end that sentence, Hermione interrupted sternly. You don't want to be in detention for a month, and neither do I.

"There are less corners outside," Harry ended lamely.

Severus looked as though he were still going to take umbrage, as he could no doubt end that sentence as easily as she could, but Draco interceded.

"Did you work that out all on your own, Harry? After seven years of schooling at the best school of wizardry in Europe? There are fewer corners outside?"

It was a comment that would have positively infuriated Harry if it had come from Severus, but from Draco, it made Harry smile.

"Maybe you should talk to Albus about fixing the curriculum," Harry suggested. "As a matter of fact, I did have to work it out on my own. I don't remember any classes about the layout of interior or exterior settings. Not everyone's as clever as the Boy Who Lived."

If that wasn't an invitation to cast aspersions on Harry, she didn't know what was. He had apparently decided that the way to get Severus to leave her alone was to draw the man's fire, and he'd picked the most viable target.

Remus leapt in with his own comment before Severus could do his worst.

"It's really quite impressive that you were able to cast the wards like that, Hermione."

He was trying to return the topic of discussion to their training session and get it out of less personal waters. In this case, however, they were back to talking about her again, which was not exactly ideal.

He hadn't seen her set the wards for any of the werewolves' cells, although he had witnessed Bill's struggle; it would have taken her more than thirty seconds to get comparable wards up here, but the one ward to Stun had been child's play, especially putting it up in Hogwarts.

"I have a talent with wards," she answered with an approximation of a smile, hoping that her statement wasn't taken by Severus to be tantamount to Harry's Boy Who Lived cleverness comment.

Remus responded before Severus could.

"You were up against some of the best the Ministry and the Order has to offer, and it didn't look as though you were ever worried. Even handicapped, you managed to defeat all of us soundly without injury to yourself. You and Harry are the only wizards I know besides Albus who can make yourselves invisible like that, and you obviously timed your reappearance with precision. You display an astonishing amount of power, but I can see that it's all in a day's work for you. I know you were only a child when I taught you, but it really is quite extraordinary how much the two of you have progressed."

She looked over at Harry as she wondered how much of that Remus had originally intended to say. She was guessing that the essence of the thought had been brewing for a long time, and he had finally decided to just up and comment. She knew that he wanted an answer, and there was really only one honest one that would make sense.

Well? she asked.

Harry gave a mental shrug. Yeah. If there's a time, this is probably it.

That was what she'd been thinking. Draco, Severus, Kingsley, and Albus already knew. Tonks and Remus were two of the most likely to put the answer together eventually given the training they witnessed. Hermione knew that the two of them could be trusted and would protect her and Harry. She hadn't had any delusions that she and Harry would be able to keep their status a secret forever; as the situation changed and developed, it became inevitable that the truth would come out. They weren't going to make it through the battle without some of their allies knowing what they were capable of.

She therefore smiled at the man who was as close to proper family as Harry had. "Kingsley came today not just for the pleasure of our company but to make an announcement to Albus. The Ministry has received news that there are no more Pure Adults."

Remus, Tonks, and Draco all looked startled, although Draco was looking more smirky than anything else. It was an expression very similar, in fact, to the one that Albus had worn when Kingsley had guessed that he was already aware of this fact.

Hermione drew a deep breath. Here went nothing. "Since the news was becoming public, we decided that it was time to confess—"

She cut off abruptly as she was wrenched around by her arm.

"Don't you dare!" Severus hissed, glaring at her with narrowed eyes and a fierce expression on his face.

She'd thought she had a handle on her emotions, she really had. But they'd already been stirred up by Albus and then poked and prodded by every stupid comment that Severus had made this evening, and now the last fragile strands of her control snapped.

For the second time, a golden wave of raw magical energy burst out of her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Journals

Severus went flying through the air even as Hermione fought to react quickly enough to minimize the damage. He hit the wall with an audible "thump" as she reached wandlessly for her magic and tried to ground it out into the stones of the castle.

There was a deafening crack and an explosion of blinding light that made Hermione close her eyes tightly. When the light diminished once more, she opened her eyes again and found that everyone else was staring around the room in varying degrees of shock.

Many of the stones in the wall, ceiling, and floor had cracked end to end.

There was another flash of light, and Fawkes arrived with a cry of distress. The phoenix alighted on her shoulder, and it was only then that she realized that she was shaking.

Berit, he said, sounding thoroughly distressed, what has happened?

She didn't even know how to answer but tried to force out words that made some sort of sense. He … forbade me to speak of what I am.

Fawkes turned unerringly towards Severus and let out a cry that wasn't the sort of sound she had ever heard from him before. It wasn't gentle, mournful, uplifting, or soothing. This was a cry of anger, and it actually caused Severus—despite the fact that he looked as though he'd nearly been knocked unconscious by his impact with the wall—to scramble further away from the phoenix.

The phoenix's anger served to ground her, and she faced off from the Slytherin, trying to ignore the rest of the group of shell-shocked people in the room because she couldn't possibly deal with them as well.

Her voice shook with suppressed emotions, thick with tears and anger. "Don't you ever try to control me like that again. This is my life, and you have no right to interfere."

She was breathing heavily and knew, suddenly, that she had to get out of the room. She didn't think that it could handle another explosion like the one that had just occurred—and she was certain the people couldn't.

Whirling for the door, she found that it had melted out of the way to permit her departure. It was a door, she distantly recognized, that wasn't supposed to do that. Fawkes dug his claws lightly into her shoulder.

This way, Berit.

It didn't hurt so much to think if she simply followed the bird's instructions, so that's what she did.

It took her a moment to ask, The others?

They won't bother you out here, he answered immediately. Harry's made sure they don't follow.

Fawkes had to think her in a bad way indeed if he was calling Harry by his real name.

It was only when they hit the edge of the Forest that she realized that they'd left the castle. Castina was waiting for her. At some point in the future, she would no doubt have to be horribly embarrassed by the number of people who had witnessed her breakdown.

She didn't even feel up to transforming, which was a first, but Fawkes and Castina seemed to understand this without her needing to say. Castina knelt down.

Come here, child.

Hermione wasn't a child anymore. She was a stupid, bloody Pure Adult, and that was what had caused this mess in the first place. But she felt a bit like a child at the moment, and she found herself curling up in human form next to the unicorn, resting her head against the whisper-soft flank and giving in to her tears. Fawkes settled himself on Castina's back and trilled a soft song that was exactly what Hermione needed to hear. It was very soothing, and her eyes drooped closed without any direction from her.

When Hermione opened her eyes, it took her a moment to orient herself because she was seeing from the sides of her head; while she had been sleeping, she had apparently shifted into unicorn form. This should have been alarming, but she found herself feeling curiously calm after the storm of emotions from earlier. Her magic or her body had apparently known just what she needed, and so she had been given the opportunity to experience some peace and quiet while she basked in light outside.

Both Castina and Fawkes had remained with her, and she appreciated their show of loyalty. And their protection, given that she didn't normally sleep in the Forbidden Forest, especially on the ground and un-warded, where anything could find her. It was full dark now, just past midnight.

How many times have you had to reassure Harry that I was fine? Hermione asked a bit timidly.

Fawkes sent her a mental snort. Only a dozen or so. But he's been quite calm when he's told the others you're fine.

Which others? she asked pointedly.

Boy-bird's mate, Golden Wolf, and Skin-Changer, Fawkes answered.

Great. Remus and Tonks would definitely want answers.

No one else? she asked, just to be sure.

Your mate was not welcome and would not have stayed. Shiny One had to go back to London.

She forbore asking if Kingsley was "shiny" because of his bald head. It seemed like it would be better not to know if Fawkes's mind really worked like that. Of course, he was Albus's familiar….

Very well, she said, giving in to the inevitable, rising and changing back into her human form. I can't stay out here all night.

You could, you know, Castina answered immediately. We would be happy to have you.

She smiled at her herd mare. I know. But I don't think Harry would put up with it.

This wasn't really an answer, and they all knew it.

Be well, Berit, they said in unison.

Thank you, she answered before she turned, Masked herself, and began to make her way back to the castle, Fawkes perched once more on her shoulder.

They'd made it about halfway across the grounds when inquired, What did you tell Albus you were doing all this time?

He felt the magical discharge and the castle's distress. He understood that I was going to look after it.

I appreciate that you kept him from coming, she said honestly.

His tone was one of wry amusement. I knew it would not assist.

Decidedly not, and it was already embarrassing enough that she had simply bolted after wreaking such havoc. Severus was the only one who'd seen her lose control like that before, and she still wasn't sure if everybody could see the golden glow of her magic or if that was just her. It was entirely possible, given her magical abilities, that he hadn't even realized what had happened the morning he had thrown her out of bed.

Today, though, it was impossible to miss the damage she had caused, and he must surely have realized how close he'd come to being permanently damaged himself. It was rather disconcerting to imagine what the magic that had broken all those stones could do to human bodies. All of them who had been in that room had seen what she was capable of, and she really didn't want a confrontation with them.

Still, it wasn't as though she could put off seeing these people for too terribly long given that they lived in the same building or visited on a regular basis, and time wasn't going to make the problem go away. She owed them all an explanation, especially Tonks and Remus who still might not know why she had been so upset.

It infuriated her that Severus could make her so angry, make her lose control as she had done. She'd thought that she had herself mostly under control, that she'd been dealing with his rejection and everything that came with it, but the events of today had been a pretty clear indication that she was not nearly as rational about it or as reconciled as she wanted to be.

She'd spent most of the evening trying to be pretty damn conciliatory towards him. Despite the fact that he spent most of his time being a complete arse, she had tried to keep the peace and not let Harry overreact in his presence. But then Severus had actually had the gall to lay a hand on her and chastise her about an aspect of her life that was absolutely none of his business. He hadn't wanted a thing to do with her ever since he had taken her virginity and the power that came with it, and now he was trying to control her.

It was he who'd as good as declared his involvement with her; why else would he have tried to stop that announcement? She just knew that he was going to blame her for anyone finding out. It made her want to stamp her feet or do something equally childish—and she'd already had the equivalent of one tantrum today.

This was not exactly mature and collected behaviour, and that only made her more annoyed.

I can feel you stewing over there, Berit.

And she was broadcasting again. She tamped down on her emotions, cutting off that upper registry that Fawkes had no doubt been reading like a book.

Do we have to turn around and send you back out into the Forest? he asked.

She smiled at him, tension easing in her slightly. If I went out every time I was upset with Severus, I'd have to start living out there. It's better that I try to get these thoughts out of the way as we head in; I suspect Harry's going to be upset enough for the both of us inside.

No doubt, the phoenix agreed.

They re-entered the castle.

She drew a deep breath. All right. You can go back to Albus now.

Are you sure? he asked. I don't mind staying.

You can't follow me everywhere I go, she answered firmly, although the fact that he was willing to do so was reassuring. I need to face this on my own, I think, and Albus will be anxious for news.

Not that I'm going to tell him anything.

She smiled again, sending her appreciation more in a fleeting impression of emotion than words. No, she agreed. But he'll want to hear you prevaricate.

As you say, Girlicorne. I am a thought away if ever you need me.

She bundled all her gratitude and love into one word: Fawkes.

The phoenix was gone in a streak of crimson; since it wasn't an emergency or Hermione having a mental breakdown, he flew through the castle the ordinary way. Hermione began to make her solitary way through the dungeons, still Masked to prevent anything unfortunate from happening; the last thing she needed to make her night complete was an ambush from the Slytherins or a run-in with Severus.

The former, at least, was moderately less likely than it had been; since Pansy had declared the defection of the upper year of Slytherin, there hadn't been much in the way of nasty incidents. Everyone seemed to be behaving and attempting cordiality, but Hermione didn't really want to test anyone's limits if she was found wandering in the dungeons alone at night in a less than optimal state.

She'd intended to go straight back to the common room where she knew that everybody was waiting for her, but she found her steps slowing as she neared Room One, and without really thinking about it, she entered the room that she had left so precipitously earlier in the evening.

The room was untouched, and she wasn't certain if that was because no one had attempted to fix it or because no one had been able to do so. It looked broken and wrong and it was that, even more than Severus's likely reaction if it was still in this condition the next time he wanted to train, that made her want to fix it right now.

She pressed up against the nearest wall, letting the stones take her weight as she rested her forehead against the cool surface and laid both palms across the two nearest cracks. Lowering her shields enough that she knew Fawkes, at least, would be aware of what she was doing, she closed her eyes and sent her most sincere feeling of apology and sorrow to the building that had been home for almost seven years.

Dipping down into her magical core, she amassed a ball of that golden energy and slowly and carefully fed it out through her hands and into the castle. She felt the stone heat slightly beneath her fingertips and waited until it felt as though all the magic she had released had swirled away and was no longer right beneath her hands. Then she opened her eyes.

She smiled at the sight before her. The stones in front of her looked perfectly solid. In fact, if she wasn't mistaken, they looked in better condition than they had earlier in the day before this debacle had occurred. Pulling back from the wall and turning round to survey the whole room, she found that her magic had been put to good use and her intent had been more than met by the castle; everywhere she looked were clean and whole stones.

She thought her gratitude at the castle, wondering as she did so why it had taken her so long to realize just how sentient the castle was. The more time she spent in close proximity to it now, the more convinced she became that its sentience was quite advanced. It didn't speak—so far as she knew—but it had quite a well-developed understanding of its inhabitants' emotional needs.

She could almost swear that for a brief instant, the room responded to her, pulsing with a magic that was not her own, but then the flicker was gone, and she was left in an ordinary room.

As she surveyed the results one last time, she realized that the magic she had fed back into the stones had even been used to reinstitute the cushioning charms she had placed there at the beginning of the year.

Feeling much better for what she had just accomplished, she left the room with a last caress to the stones of the wall nearest her. She made herself continue to walk resolutely down the corridor, not allowing her feet to lag as she realized that the only other place to go right now was back to her quarters.

She could go on patrol, and it was more or less the time for that sort of activity, but if Harry, Draco, Remus, and Tonks were all sitting and waiting for her, it really wouldn't be polite. Harry would understand where she had gone and why she had gone there, but there wasn't really an excuse for wandering around the castle for a few more hours; she had kept them waiting long enough.

The gargoyle melted away at her approach, and she stepped through the doorway, unMasking herself as she crossed the threshold, the gargoyle reforming behind her.

Harry looked up instantly, though she had made no noise. Draco, who was more attuned to Harry than he would likely want to admit, immediately noticed the Gryffindor's change in attention, and he looked from Harry to Hermione.

Remus and Tonks had at some point wisely settled down to do some grading, and they were seated together on the floor by the fire. They looked up as one a moment later, and since they were both trained in defence, she didn't suppose that was terribly surprising, either.

"Hello, everyone," she managed with what she thought was a pretty even and normal-sounding tone.

Harry rose immediately, crossed the room, and pulled her into a hug.

"'Mione," he said, sounding desperately relieved. "You all right?"

"M'fine," she managed, muffled against his shoulder. "M'better."

He pulled back so that he could look her in the eyes and apparently gauge the sincerity of this statement. He gave a slight nod and kept a hold of her arm to pull her further into the room. Remus and Tonks had risen to their feet and were looking at her intently, and she couldn't decipher the expression on Draco's face as he slowly rose to his feet as well so that he wasn't the only person sitting down.

Silence descended for a long and awkward moment.

"You know," Draco drawled in the tone of someone who'd just worked something obvious out, "I always thought Harry was the unstable one with the uncontrolled magical outbursts, but now I see that it's a Gryffindor trait in general."

As Harry started to protest on her behalf, Hermione laughed, feeling more at ease now that she knew that Draco was willing to continue insulting her just like any other Gryffindor. Business as usual.

"What little control I managed was a little tardy," she agreed honestly.

He grimaced faintly. "I didn't much fancy my chances against magic that can do that to an entire room in an instant; the thought of Draco pieces is curiously unappealing."

She smiled faintly at him, adding earnestly, "I'm very glad I didn't hurt any of you. That was never my intent."

"I still think you should have squashed Snape like a bug," Harry groused darkly. "Nobody would have minded."

"I would have," she answered quietly.

He gaped at her. "You can't possibly—"

"Not want anyone's blood or injury on my conscience?" she interrupted slightly curtly, as she knew exactly what he was going to say, and she most definitely did not want to go there right now. "I most certainly can."

His ire vanished as precipitously as it had arrived. "Oh. Right."

"He, er, is all right?"

She so should have asked Fawkes this so that she didn't have to embarrass herself now. But all Fawkes had said was that he wasn't welcome and wouldn't have stayed, and that didn't mean he wasn't ... bleeding from some horrible head wound or concussed or something.

"Fine," Harry said to her relief. "Well, you know, walking and talking, if you consider that fine, although he—"

It looked as though Draco got Harry in the side with his elbow at the same time that Remus pulled her into her second hug of the night. She hugged him back, pleased that she was receiving comfort rather than a lecture for putting everyone in danger and then running off.

She was pretty sure she hadn't wanted to know how Harry's sentence was going to end.

"I'm sorry," Remus said as he let her go.

She frowned. "I think that's supposed to be my line."

He smiled slightly at that, but shook his head. "I know what happened was a result of my questioning. I hadn't realized why Harry was steering the topic of conversation away from you or what would happen when attention refocused on you."

She shook her head. "You couldn't have realized; you didn't know all the facts, and at worst, what happened tonight was really only a catalyst." Possibly the straw that broke the camel's back. "I'm just pleased you're all okay. Besides," she said with a smile, "you must have gathered that I was trying to tell all of you anyway. So it came out a little differently than I'd intended; you still got the important information, right?"

He nodded, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips, golden eyes bright. "Right. I haven't seen Severus that out of sorts in a long time."

Harry's face darkened, and she knew which event he was now thinking of. She hastened to speak again.

"Do I need to elaborate, or did you completely grasp what I was going to say?"

Remus smiled again. "That display of power rather gave it away, and I can connect the dots eventually, although I must confess that it's quite embarrassing that it took this long."

"I agree," Tonks said. "The number of comments I've made about your strength and this sudden increase in your magical power, you'd think that I'd've considered…. But I remember you being tested by the Ministry; Kingsley was quite clear that the two of you weren't virgins."

Hermione and Harry smiled.

"That's a secret for another day," Harry said with a laugh.

"Making sure no one knew but the two of us was the most effective way to protect ourselves." Hermione took over the explanation. "Now that the secret is being … selectively disseminated, we wanted you to know. We both trust you will be able to keep it."

"Of course," they agreed solemnly.

"I admit to being slightly confused," Remus added with a bit of hesitation. "Why did Severus already know?"

She exchanged looks with Harry. Apparently, Remus had not inferred the finer details of her not being Pure anymore. Harry gave a shrug to indicate that it was her life that was being discussed.

Tonks was regarding Hermione with a knowing look in her eyes, and as Hermione watched, her hair went jet black with emerald green tips. Tonks had been doing more training sessions with them than anyone else.

Or maybe she just got the appeal of an older man. Remus looked between Tonks and Hermione.

"What?" he asked.

Tonks looked at him, looked back at Hermione, and shook her head. It looked as though she didn't feel this was a piece of news that she would be the one to share, either. Hermione appreciated that none of them were trying to interfere with what she said about her life.

Of course, given what she'd just done to Severus, this could have been self-preservation more than thoughtfulness, but she appreciated it anyway.

She sighed. "Remus, Harry and I are no longer Pure Adults. We can't get there on our own, right?"

Remus nodded. Severus would have told her to get to the point.

"Before today, there were only three other people who knew we were Pure Adults. Draco knew."

Remus looked fleetingly over at Harry and the blond Slytherin and nodded his head. He'd clearly already gotten over any shock about that.

"Albus knew."

Remus nodded again, not looking surprised that Albus was aware of something that was a secret to the rest of them.

"And Severus knew."

Remus started nodding once more, and then his head froze as the full import of what she was saying apparently registered. His eyes flew to hers, wide with shock.

"I'm telling you," Hermione said carefully, "because Tonks already figured it out, and I think you would have worked it out on your own in fairly short order." She paused for a moment to decide how best to say what she wanted to say next. "This is how it's going to work. You're not ever going to speak to him about the matter without his directly opening the topic first and inviting you to comment." They surely all knew how likely that was to happen. "If you wish, you may speak of it to Tonks when the two of you are alone and can't be overheard. You may speak of it with me when I am alone or when I am with Harry or Draco. You may not, under any circumstances, speak of it with anyone else. You may not communicate it to anyone else using any other method. Understood?"

Remus just kept staring at her.

Tonks began, "Hermione—"

Hermione shook her head. "If he weren't a daft berk and hadn't spoken out of turn, you hopefully wouldn't know at all. But it's still because of me, because of this completely insane situation in which Harry and I have found ourselves that this is being discussed right now, and that means that it's my responsibility to ensure that our privacy is properly maintained. Do you understand?"

Tonks nodded, and Hermione decided that she definitely understood loving someone even if the rest of the world didn't think that person was appropriate for a variety of reasons. She was only a few years older than Hermione, after all.

Remus was coming at it from the other side of that relationship, so if there was anyone who'd understand where Severus was coming fr—

With a snarl that was astonishingly reminiscent of the werewolf he had been for so many years, Remus flung himself towards the door. Hermione froze him to the spot without a thought.

"Remus John Lupin," she pronounced in a voice of ice as she magically turned him back towards the interior of the room so that he could see her as she stalked closer, "I had hoped you had better sense than that. My words are never spoken in idleness, and I tell you in all solemnity that you do not want to find out what happens if you go out this door and break any of my terms. My restrictions have been laid upon you, and you would do well to heed them. I am going to let you go now, and if you find that you still cannot behave in a civilized manner, you will find yourself removed from the grounds." She released her magical hold on him. "Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

Silence reigned. The others made no attempt to speak, waiting for Remus to respond first, perhaps because they didn't want to draw her fire.

Rather than answering her question, he chose to make a protest. At least it was to her and not to Severus.

"He's a professor! You're his student!"

This wasn't said with quite as much vitriol as it no doubt could have been, but it wasn't the warmest of accolades, either.

She had to wonder what people thought of her judgement when they were all so unsupportive of her choice—especially given that she had been fully supportive of their partners. Instrumental, even.

Not that Severus had been showing himself to best advantage recently, and if she sometimes doubted her choice, she supposed it wasn't unreasonable for them to do the same.

She just really didn't want to argue about this right now.

"You know full well," she answered, "that such relationships are permitted at Hogwarts as long as the student is of age." Not exactly encouraged, but not downright forbidden, either. She had, of course, been through the rules and regulations of the school to verify this. "If it helps your squeamishness, there's no chance that anything would have occurred had it not been for my Pure status."

Remus didn't appear to have an immediate answer to that, since she was pretty certain that it wasn't really the fact that she was a student that was bothering him; it was the fact that she had slept with Severus Snape. She had to wonder how much of his feelings from childhood had lingered. He had spent years surrounding by James, Sirius, and Peter, and Severus was their least favourite person as a child. Remus had always been cordial towards Severus in their dealings as far as she had seen, but now that it involved Severus's personal life, now that it involved her, the good will seemed to be at an end.

Tonks, however, took a step towards her. She apparently heard exactly what Hermione hadn't in particular been trying to say when she had used those words to explain the situation. "Hermione," she began. Her sympathy was plain, and Hermione had to wonder whether it was because of or in spite of Severus's identity.

Hermione shook her head. "Now is hardly the time. You understand what I've said to Remus?"

Tonks smiled faintly. "Message received loud and clear. He has a good friend."

Hermione knew that she was talking about Severus, and she wasn't ready to go there with a ten-foot pole because she was pretty damn certain that Severus would not consider her a friend. In a million, bezillion years.

"Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

She directed this at Tonks, too, because she seemed to have adequate processed everything Hermione had said and wasn't about to suddenly fly off the handle and attack Severus. Hermione wasn't making any bets about Remus at the moment.

Tonks shook her head, having heard the dismissal that Hermione hadn't worked very hard to keep out of her voice.

"This has been a very long day," the Auror said agreeably as she Summoned all the scrolls they had been grading, collecting them neatly in one hand.

Hermione was not going to disagree, and Harry and Draco had remained remarkably quiet through the entire discussion.

Remus started up again. "Hermione—"

"I think it would be better if we didn't discuss this right now, Remus," she said coolly. "You can owl me if you find you have something pressing to say."

He blinked at her, seeming a bit at a loss. "But the Weresbane—"

"Will keep. I'll be starting it this weekend, and you need to get back to all the werewolves. I've got my end under control, and I trust the same is true of yours?"

He nodded, but his expression was still one of confusion. "But—"

Tonks linked arms with Remus and began to tug him to the door.

"It's been nice to see you Hermione, Draco, Harry. We'll catch up with you later, all right?"

Hermione nodded, and Harry and Draco bid Tonks and Remus farewell. The latter finally gave into the inevitable and allowed himself to be led, but he couldn't seem to prevent a last attempt at speech. "I—"

"Goodbye, Remus," Harry said loudly. "I'll see you soon!"

Hermione narrowly forbore laughing, a warm feeling in her chest that there was a set of people who seemed to be on her side. She could do without more stressful confrontations for a while. This one that had been nipped in the bud had been more than enough for the current state of her nerves, and she could only imagine what would have happened if Remus had gone after Severus.

It was almost the slightest bit tempting to leave the two of them to it and just see who came out on top, but she had a fairly strong suspicion that it wouldn't be Remus, and she wasn't feeling charitable enough towards Severus to give him someone to take his frustrations out on.

She let out a huff of air. This was a great big mess. Once Remus and Tonks were out the door, Hermione looked over at Draco and Harry.

"Well?"

Draco shrugged elegantly as he settled back onto the couch. Harry settled at his side. "I already knew about you and Severus and how he's been acting. There weren't any surprises tonight, just an affirmation that sometimes he has the sense of a Flobberworm."

Hermione smiled faintly, nodding in appreciation of the way in which Draco had decided to handle the evening, as though she hadn't wrecked an entire room without thought. She looked to Harry.

He raised both shoulders. "No show of power will come as a surprise to me, Hermione. I already know that you're amazing."

Her smile deepened. "Thank you," she said, feeling it sincerely all the way down to her toes.

She knew that when the two of them had found out about Severus they hadn't reacted particularly well, either, but it was very nice to have a good response from them now. Maybe that was a reason all on its own to stagger people's being let into the secret of her Pure Adulthood; she wouldn't be able to handle everyone being upset about Severus all at once. This way, she'd have a few people on her side each time.

The thought of Ron's potential reaction was very sobering, and yet she couldn't realistically hope to keep this from him forever; it wouldn't be fair, given the divide that had separated them for so long this year. If the two of them were going to cease to be friends, it might as well be in one swift blow. But, she suppressed a sigh, it wasn't going to be tonight. She'd had too much excitement already. Maybe tomorrow. Or Sunday. It could wait until Sunday.

If he decided he was never speaking to her again on Sunday, then they'd head back into a school week where it would be back to business as usual. They'd only been cordial for a couple of days, and she didn't think too many people would be surprised if everything fell apart again.

She was tired of living with this much uncertainty.

She flopped down onto the couch on Harry's left.

"I could sleep for a week."

"You're all right, though?" Harry asked, sounding slightly alarmed by this uncharacteristic declaration.

She gave a slight nod. That was a very relative term at this point. "I've been worse. Fawkes came with me and made sure I was all right."

Harry nodded. "Don't think I didn't pester him with information every couple of minutes."

Her lips tipped up. "So he told me when I woke up."

Harry was looking at her a little funny. "You fell asleep out there?"

She nodded. "Cried myself to sleep against Castina, yes. She and Fawkes were both very understanding."

Draco shook his head, saying wryly, "Only you could go out and find a unicorn to cuddle up with. I wish I had your connections."

She let out a soft laugh, although it was more pained that she had meant it to be. "You don't wish to have my reasons for going out there, I assure you. You're much better off where you are."

She looked at the two of them cuddled up on the couch together, and they exchanged glances, seeing what she was seeing. They were part of a happy couple, and she was not.

"Have you tried talking to him?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Both she and Draco gave him incredulous looks, and he shrugged as he said defensively, "Well, whatever you said to Draco worked great for him and me."

Her expression softened. "That's a very nice thought, but talking to Severus results in only one thing. Well," she conceded, "two: detentions and point loss. I don't think any of us are in the mood for any of that today. You know he was … very clear the last time we did speak."

Harry made a face of distress. "Yes."

She suppressed a sigh and said gently, "Some facts of life can't be changed or fixed, Harry, even if they're not as you want them to be."

If there was anyone who would understand that, it was Harry. He nodded reluctantly, and she knew that he was thinking of all the events in his life that he would fix and change if he had been able to do so. Sadly, that wasn't how life worked.

"And," she smiled as brightly as she could, which was probably a pretty sad imitation of her usual smile, "at least I didn't bring the whole school down on us."

Both their faces broke into grins, and Harry nudged her with his elbow.

"Yeah, good show there. I approve of your restraint."

"Hey," she protested. "I don't think the person who blew up his aunt is allowed to cast those sorts of aspersions."

"Blew up his aunt?" Draco repeated with theatrical astonishment. He turned to look up at Harry. "You blew up your aunt?"

Apparently, there was at least one story that Harry hadn't shared with Draco. Probably one of a thousand, actually, but she didn't think this one was too horribly intrusive.

Harry evidently agreed because he immediately launched into a long and detailed story about his horrible Aunt Marge and the insults that she had flung at him that had culminated in the accident that Hermione had mentioned. Draco found it both funny and appalling that Fudge had let him get away with it.

"Golden Boy," he teased with mock distaste.

Harry shook his head. "He was just saving up his ill intent. You do remember me being tried by the entire Wizengamot when those Dementors almost got me and my cousin?"

Draco remembered and conceded that that was, indeed, slightly less accommodating of Albus's Golden Boy than the previous occasion had been.

When she yawned for the third time, they decided to turn, and it was only just before she made it to her bedroom that it occurred to her to ask, "How did they take it when they worked out that you were the other Pure Adult?"

Harry huffed a laugh. "They were happy because it was something to talk about while we were waiting here."

Draco nodded. "It was amusing to see the two of them reminding one another of all the signs that they should have taken note of sooner."

"Rather like a table tennis match," Harry added, mimicking the rapid back-and-forth head motion.

Her lip curled up. "At least you had some entertainment."

"A fair bit, yes," Harry agreed with a smile. A bit solemnly, he added, "Have a good night."

She smiled at the sentiment. "I'll do my very best. Good night, Harry, Draco."

It hadn't escaped her notice that Draco wasn't making much of an effort to leave. Especially over the weekends, Draco could generally be found underfoot at all times. As far as she was concerned, they might as well abandon all pretence and have him officially move in with Harry. Well, officially amongst the three of them, anyway, since even Albus couldn't turn a blind eye if they announced it to everyone.

That did actually give her a notion, though. She wasn't entirely certain how the castle felt about her at the moment, although it had seemed to her as though warmth was predominant when she'd left Room One for the second time this evening. She'd try tomorrow, though, as today had been harrowing, and she needed to go to bed.

She even went right to sleep, but she woke shortly after three feeling fully rested and knowing that she wasn't going to be able to fall asleep again anytime soon. Not desirous of simply lying in bed and contemplating aspects of her life which she could not change, she rose and performed her morning ablutions.

She reminded herself of the good aspects of this revelation. While she wasn't ready to tell anyone but Harry the whole story about her being a Pure Adult and a unicorn, if she claimed her odd sleep patterns were related to her being a Pure Adult, the others who knew that secret would likely accept that. Since so few details were known about Pure Adults, she could probably pass most of her biological quirks off that way.

She and Harry would just have to be firm about the fact that Pure Adults didn't have the samequirks; especially since Draco had started spending so much time in Harry's bed, the Gryffindor had spent a lot more time there.

It would therefore answer some of the questions that had cropped up in Remus's mind over the course of the Weresbane trial, and if he felt he now had a solution without asking her for more details, that was all to the good. This way, they had controlled how the information came out and minimized the chances that someone would put two and two together and, just as an example, yell about it in the corridor.

It was better this way.

She made herself tea and then settled down with one of Solace's journals. For her reading convenience, she had slowly transferred the journals to her lab. She had some of her best wards protecting that room, given what she made in it, and it hadn't been difficult to set aside one cupboard for the journals and ward it with complete paranoia. She hoped that she would soon be able to ward well enough that she could create as hidden a recess as the one in which Solace had originally put the journals.

For now, though, no one had access to her lab without her being present, and since she was one of the most powerful wizards in the castle, she wasn't overly concerned about the journals' safety. Since she was a very compulsive person, she was doing everything within her power to protect them anyway. They were fighting against people who were very devious, and a school of budding witches and wizards was just the place for odd and unanticipated streaks of brilliance to pop out.

In this particular case, however, not only were the journals protected with wards that had taken a great deal longer to set up than those used in the safe house, the journals themselves were blood-bound to her. That was Solace's doing, and Hermione didn't think there was anyone alive who could break that charm. This meant that even if someone somehow stole the one that she had out to read, they'd only find a blank journal.

Hermione transfigured one of her stools into a comfortable armchair and settled down to read. She only had a few pages left in this journal. It detailed some of the political manoeuvring that had gone on as Solace's father was leaving Hogwarts for good. Despite what everyone thought today, Godric and Salazar had not only once been fast friends, but even to the final days, Godric had done his best to convince Salazar to stay.

They had had argument after argument as Godric had tried to temper Salazar's views and come to a compromise that would allow the man to stay with his friends and in the school that he had helped found. But they were both stubborn men, and Salazar would not be swayed. Godric was equally adamant that there could be no casting out of Muggle-born students and Muggles, and no agreement could be reached between them.

Solace had offered to leave, but Salazar would not hear of that, either. It had seemed clear to him, in the end, that the others wanted Solace more than they wanted him. She had been his only daughter and daddy's little girl, but she had believed strongly enough in her ideals that she could not side with him in this matter. It was clear in the journals, though, that Solace had never stopped loving her father—nor had she stopped blaming herself for his departure.

Hermione closed this journal with tears prickling in her eyes. Families torn apart by intolerance and misunderstanding a thousand years ago, and what the hell had they learnt since then?

The next journal, one of the last, was a small thick book which turned out to detail the wards that protected Hogwarts. It looked to be even more informative than the journal which had detailed Solace's family tree. It left Hermione wondering just how many surprises Solace had in store for her.

The wards were almost exclusively designed by Solace; as she stayed on at the castle, she had become more and more adept at warding. Like her father, she was skilled with potions, but she had refused to take over the classes that had belonged to her father, and so she had become a wards-mistress, a speciality that had dropped out of vogue some years ago. Hermione supposed that the curse-breakers were a remnant of that profession.

Solace had personally crafted many of the protections that were used for Hogwarts; she had felt that creating new wards that had never been used before would best protect the school full of vulnerable magical children. The journal outlined which information she had passed on to the next generation of headmasters and professors and what periodic renewals the wards needed to keep them running in peak condition throughout the years.

It was only in this journal—this journal that she'd left for Hermione to find—that Solace had detailed everything she knew about the wards. With this journal, Hermione realized, the wards of Hogwarts could be brought down with a few well-placed words. It was a sobering thought. If Voldemort somehow got his hands on this knowledge, he would be able to bring Hogwarts to its knees even with Albus to defend it.

Hermione's grip on the journal tightened. If it held a means for Voldemort to access Hogwarts and attack them, perhaps it also held a means for them to lure Voldemort here. She had said herself that it was powerful knowledge. Of course, they needed to work out what to do with him once they had him, but surely they could figure out something.

She read on, taking in each row of tiny, perfectly legible script, ideas percolating rapidly through her brain. It would have to be something clever to pull Voldemort, but that wasn't to say it couldn't be done. It would be sort of poetic after all the times he had tried to trap and trick Harry...

Although the wards had been modified and added to by generations of headmasters at the school, it was really a case of superficial additions and changes rather than renewal. The base layer that Solace had cast remained unchanged; she had designed them to last for a millennium with certain qualities inherent in them. She had made sure that no overzealous wizard could destroy them in his or her attempts to make improvements. Nor could they be used to, say, prohibit the entrance of Muggle-borns, if Hogwarts ended up with a headmaster who had leanings in that direction. Solace's wards were laid into the bedrock of the castle. They went deeper than any other wards, and they remained the foundation upon which all the subsequent wards rested.

As she continued to read, Hermione learned more about blood wards and found, finally, the information which Solace had left for her. Thoughts began to fall into place. She had to wonder if it was a coincidence that so many close members of the Order had just found out about her and Harry's status; the plan that she was hatching would require their knowing. It was rather disconcerting to be reading the words of someone who even Hermione had to admit was a bona fide Seer. The fact that Solace knew so much about the situation Hermione was currently in was kind of terrifying given that the woman had lived a thousand years ago.

Although Hermione would be the first to admit that she had hardly studied Divination in depth, she hadn't ever heard of a Seer who could see so far forward into the future. There were sometimes old prophecies, of course, but not information simply laid out in the manner that it was for Hermione. Of course, Solace hadn't gone and written them in a book for anyone to see, and she hadn't labelled everything "plan to defeat Voldemort". Hermione was simply certain that that was what it was, or at least that that was how it could be used. But then, she read everything with an eye to defeating Voldemort. It came from being best friends with Harry and hating everything that Voldemort stood for.

At all events, she nearly had a plan, however it had come about, and she would have to be careful as she decided what information about Solace she could pass on to the others.

Hermione realized with a start that it was already half six, and it was about time for her to be up for the day for real. Given that this had been a "sleepover" evening, she didn't expect to see Harry so early. Since sparring with her absentee partner wasn't an option, she decided to take a run on the grounds—all aboveboard in human form since it was a little late to be going into the Forest and hoping that no one would notice.

Her goal today was to ignore Severus completely and not get into any confrontations with the snarky prat. It would help, then, if she wasn't doing anything out of bounds as she wanted to have a leg to stand on if she did happen to run into him. Quite frankly, she wanted to be able to tell him to bugger off.

The run was invigorating, even in non-unicorn form. It helped to be out in the open air, to feel the breeze on her face as she passed all the familiar landmarks that comprised her home. It wasn't quite as good as the Forest and her herd, but it was still a place which she loved. For a little while, as she guided her body in the repetitive motion, she could forget all the troubles that were weighing on her mind.

Sweaty but content, she headed back into the castle. It was nearing breakfast time, and there was that hum of activity to the castle now, although she didn't actually run into anyone as she ducked down the stairs and into the cool dungeon corridors. If the Slytherins were stirring at this hour, they were doing so quietly. Hermione had taken to subtly shielding herself, especially when she travelled the corridors alone; whatever Harry thought, she really wasn't taking any unnecessary risks.

As she headed back to her rooms, she remembered to implement the plan she had conceived of the night before, communicating her request to the castle as directly and respectfully as she could.

There was no immediate response, so she supposed she would just wait and see what resulted. She suspected that between her desire and the castle's fondness for them, there wouldn't be a problem.

Back in the common room, she found that the two boys still hadn't made an appearance. Fondly thinking to herself that they must really have tired one another out the night before, she headed to the loo for a shower.

She was dressed a few minutes later, and it was now nearly eight o'clock and time for breakfast. There wasn't any regulation stating that the Head Boy had to be with the Head Girl for breakfast on Saturday morning, so Hermione shrugged to herself and left Harry and Draco to their rest.

In the Great Hall, she found that she was the first Gryffindor to arrive. She sat down at the table and began helping herself to toast and fruit in fairly large quantity because her run had made her hungry.

She was joined shortly thereafter by Ginny, who looked round a bit when she didn't see Harry and Draco.

"All alone this morning, are we?" She joined Hermione.

Hermione smiled brightly at the other girl. "Harry doesn't seem to have made it out of bed yet."

"Draco neither?" the redhead asked with a smirk.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" Hermione said innocently.

Ginny laughed outright. "A great big one. Actually, I'm a little surprised it hasn't been happening more often."

Hermione laughed as well. "They've been relatively restrained, yeah."

Abandoning the topic of Harry and Draco's sex life before it could get anymore involved, Hermione asked about Ginny's classes, a topic that occupied them until Ron staggered in a few minutes later, looking as though he'd just rolled out of bed, as was doubtless the case.

"Morning," she and Ginny chirped cheerfully, and he gave them something that might have been supposed to be a smile but definitely came out as a grimace as he sank heavily onto the bench and began to pile food onto his plate.

"Morning a bit early for you this morning?" Hermione asked with amusement.

Ron made some sort of noise of agreement, and Ginny filled Hermione in.

"They had a party in the boy's dorm last night for Paul. Ron's got Quidditch practice this morning, though, so he's got to be up and functional now."

"At least he's halfway there," Hermione observed dryly.

"Oy," Ron protested.

She revised her estimate slightly. At least he'd realized he'd been insulted.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Ron suddenly said, "Where're Harry and Malfoy?"

And down with the estimate once more.

"You think you're going to be able to spot a Quaffle with that eyesight?" Ginny beat Hermione to the punch.

"Hey, leave a poor boy alone," Ron said with a frown, shovelling more food into his mouth and speaking through it. "I've not had my breakfast yet."

By Hermione's reckoning, he'd already eaten roughly three times what she had and was even well on his way to doubling what Ginny had eaten. She couldn't really complain about their metabolism now that she had this odd one of her own, but it was always a little astonishing to witness firsthand.

"They're having a lie-in," Hermione answered and waited for the Knut to drop.

Ron nodded absently and kept eating. Ginny was grinning, clearly waiting as well. It took perhaps thirty seconds, and then Ron's fork froze halfway to his mouth.

"Oy!" he protested again, grimacing. "I didn't need to know that!"

Hermione and Ginny laughed, and Ron, still shaking his head in disgust, went back to his meal.

It was a quarter of an hour later before the two boys arrived. Harry slid onto the bench almost sheepishly, whereas Draco sauntered in looking cool and collected. They both looked relaxed, and everyone in the near vicinity knew it was because they were well-shagged.

Ginny was eyeing Draco speculatively as he greeted everyone without a hint of embarrassment and served himself a large helping of food without any indication that there was anything unusual in that. Harry already had red-tinged cheeks and seemed to know full well that everyone knew what he'd been doing—and was finding it difficult to function as a result. Without a word, Draco simply took over serving the other boy, and Ginny shook her head.

"You know," she said quietly to Hermione, "there's something to be said for good breeding."

Hermione smiled. "Poise in all situations. Yes, I'd noticed. I think it would help if Ron wasn't looking at him as though he were contagious. Ron, did you notice there were more kippers over here?"

Ron hadn't noticed and seemed happy to have his attention diverted from a best friend who had recently had sex with Draco Malfoy. Harry seemed to relax once he wasn't being scrutinized so carefully, and Draco carried on as though he hadn't noticed any of it, although she imagined that he'd been well aware of exactly the looks he had been receiving.

There was no chance of Ron going back to concentrating on Harry and Draco, either, because the post arrived next, and with it came everyone's subscription to the Daily Prophet. This year had a record high number of subscribers amongst the students because they all knew that crazy events were occurring in Britain at large; not reading the paper could leave drastic holes in one's knowledge. Some of the students were even aware of how much nonsense was in the Prophet, but like Hermione and Harry, wanted to be kept apprised of that, as well.

The headline this morning was enough to have even the younger years talking in short order: *Pure Adults Are No More!*

Chapter Thirty: The Reactions

Hermione narrowly forbore rolling her eyes at the headline, wondering who had been responsible for making it sound as though the Pure Adults had died. Harry made a mental face, but then they mentally shrugged at one another. Those who worked at the Prophet felt it was their job to sensationalize every bit of news that they spewed across the front page. Although she'd have thought that the actual story was eye-catching enough as it was, every extra little bit of shock and amazement that resulted from the headline was what the Prophet liked best.

The increase in noise and expectancy in the room was palpable as all the students went on to read the article and exclaim at whatever particularly struck their fancy.

The article explained that a high-placed anonymous source at the Ministry had exclusively informed the newspaper the previous day about the scrolls that declared that the Pure Adults no longer held that status. Hermione was amused to note that no matter how sensational the newspaper normally was, its phraseology was suddenly skirting around the fact that the Pure Adults had now had sex and were no longer virgins; she supposed she should be impressed that the headline hadn't been "Pure Adults Score" or something equally crass.

The questions of when, by whom, and what this meant were abandoned in favour of highlighting the fact that the wizarding world was now materially safer because Voldemort could not profit directly from the Pure Adult power. The paper nevertheless admonished the wizarding world at large—and the Hogwarts students in particular—to continue observing everyone in order to try to work out the identities of these two people. Hermione was surprised that the article didn't go into more detail about the power the two ex-Pure Adults now presumably wielded, and she wondered if someone from the Ministry had had to lean hard to keep that suppressed.

Or, she considered cynically, perhaps it was the headline for tomorrow's edition. Voldemort would still benefit from having two very powerful wizards on his side, after all. Or, for all the anxious readers of the Prophet knew, the two of them could be planning to take over the world and rival Voldemort. They therefore needed to be found and questioned at the earliest opportunity. Blah, blah, blah.

You're looking awfully jaded over there, Harry observed.

Ginny was currently theorizing that the information must have been leaked deliberately to improve everyone's safety, and out loud, Harry agreed that it would be nice if the Ministry was being as prudent and thoughtful as that. Draco was nodding and looking mildly impressed that Ginny had worked this out on her own, though Hermione would have liked to think that he'd noticed by now that the youngest Weasley was not stupid.

I'm imagining when the Prophet is planning on dropping the bombshell about all the power we have, she answered with a smile.

"Do you think the Ministry actually knows who it is?" Ron asked.

Harry sent a mental nod. If they miss it, you could always send in a nice editorial.

She sent mental laughter to Harry. "I think," Hermione answered Ron out loud, "that if the Ministry actually knew, they'd have trouble keeping it to themselves."

Mentally, she composed, Have you adequately considered what I can do with all this power that I now wield….

Ron snorted, and said, "They are pretty rubbish at keeping secrets, aren't they?" at the same time that Draco said, "They can't keep a secret to save their lives."

The two boys looked at one another askance, and Harry and Hermione grinned at the sentiment and the fact that it had been shared.

Harry added a special mental grin for Hermione. Oh, can we? I think the Prophet needs to have its collective mind messed with on a regular basis.

"I suspect it's much safer for everyone if the Ministry doesn't know anything about it," Harry told Ron and Draco, struggling to keep a straight face with their continued confusion on agreeing like that.

Her lips tipped up. The Prophet would no doubt dismiss anything I said as lies and balderdash. Nothing like the truth to make the Prophet ignore it.

The Ministry was often good at that, too. Or maybe that had largely been Fudge.

Yeah. Harry sighed. We could send our entire history from September and relax knowing they'd bin it.

Ron rose to his feet, apparently deciding that that had been enough scary bonding. "And since the Ministry couldn't find Voldemort until he showed up in the bloody Atrium and destroyed half of it, unless the two ex-Pure Adults show up there, too, Voldemort's not going to get any information from leaks that way. Nice to see you all this morning, share the shocking news and all that, but we've got to be off to the pitch. Gin?"

Hermione was pretty sure practice didn't start until ten, which meant that they still had plenty of time to get changed and get outside, but it still amused her to see the one thing that Ron was reliably eager about.

"Have fun," she told the two of them, a sentiment which Harry echoed.

Ginny nodded, although her expression was a little wry. Ron was already on his way down the table, encouraging the rest of the team to get a move on and never mind about the Prophet headlines because the newspaper wasn't going to help them win the final.

"It's good that he's enthusiastic about something," Harry said before she had the chance.

She laughed at her oft-repeated words coming out of his mouth. "Yes, it is. Sleep well?"

Now that Ron and Ginny were out of earshot, Harry managed a nod without his cheeks looking as though they were about to light on fire. Of course, she'd seen them in positions a great deal more compromising.

"Yes, thank you."

Draco smiled. "You didn't have to let us sleep in, you know."

"I know," she answered, shrugging. "But it's nice when someone around here is sleeping soundly. I don't mind."

The two of them nodded their agreement and then made their getaway before anyone could further solicit their opinion of the shocking news that the paper had brought this morning. Hermione thought it was lucky that it had arrived right before a Quidditch practice, or Ron might have had more questions than they particularly wanted to answer.

They headed back down to the dungeons. Hermione didn't have to start the Weresbane until tomorrow, but Poppy had requested more Calming Draught and Headache Reliever for the hospital wing, and Hermione wanted to get that brewing out of the way before her attention was taken up with her pet project. Draco had volunteered to help, so Harry had declared his intention of sitting in the lab with them and doing his homework—since, he pointed out with a grin, this was the best way he could assist them given his potions skill.

He was quite a good student, of course, but first-year Potions with Professor Snape and a grudge had pretty much cured any chance of Harry loving them, and neither she nor Draco were going to try to force Harry to brew when he didn't need to.

They hadn't made it all the way down the stairs, however, before they were intercepted.

"Good morning, mila moya. Harry, Draco."

She smiled up at the Bulgarian who had jogged down the steps to walk at her side.

"Good morning, Viktor. How are you?"

"I am vell, thank you. I thought that you vere going to be all alone this morning vhen these two did not arrive vith you."

"I'm not physically attached to them," she observed with more good humour than she would have had anyone else made the observation. Viktor had been here for less than two weeks, after all, and she, Harry, and Draco did spend a great deal of time together.

"Of course not," he agreed with every indication of complete earnestness. "I vas vondering if you vould like to spend some time vith me this morning?"

"Oh." She waffled for a moment. "Well, that's very nice of you, Viktor, but there's some potions I have to work on, and—"

"And she'd be happy to have some company," Harry finished for her.

"And unfortunately," Draco chimed in right on cue, "Harry and I have to go to the library this morning to do some research. I'm sure Hermione would be pleased if you were willing to sit in with her, wouldn't you, Hermione?"

She tried not to look as exasperated as she felt; she could see exactly what the two of them were doing. But Viktor was looking all hopeful, and she wasn't about to accuse the two of them of inventing an excuse for her and Viktor to be alone because Viktor wouldn't understand what was going on.

That was completely unnecessary, she told Harry. We could have spent time together later.

No time like the present, Harry observed cheerfully, not seeming the slightest bit repentant.

She gave in, smiling at Viktor. "I'd be happy with some company. The two of you just need your book bags, I take it?"

They nodded their agreement, and the four of them headed back to the common room. Harry and Draco grabbed up their bags and headed out after admonishing her and Viktor to have fun. She rolled her eyes as she waved them away and then turned to escort Viktor through her bedroom—with the bed she was very grateful she made every day even if she wasn't expecting company—and into her laboratory.

Potions were definitely not a speciality of Viktor's, but he appeared quite content to praise her lab and ask her about the different areas and shelves and ingredients that he could see. She conjured a comfortable chair for him, made him tea, and then set to work on her potions, conjuring flames beneath two cauldrons and pulling out the necessary ingredients.

"You are very good at this," Viktor observed after nearly fifteen minutes of silence.

She smiled absently at him as she continued with her work.

"Thank you. I've always liked potions."

"Is this the one for the volves that vas in the paper?"

She shook her head. "I'm starting that one tomorrow. These are just for the hospital wing. Very straightforward, really."

"It is more than I could manage," he observed. "And your potion for the volves is very clever."

"Thank you," she repeated before she waved her knife at him. "You're not allowed to spend this whole time giving me compliments."

He smiled at her. "I vill keep that in mind."

He seemed content after that to simply watch her work, and since he wasn't like Ron, impatient and restless after all of five minutes, she found it easy to tune him out and brew.

It was at moments like these, though, that she once again regretted that she wasn't on speaking terms with Severus. The two of them could have made very short work of the potions she was brewing today, and it would have been marvellous to have him here when she was working on the Weresbane tomorrow.

She realized with surprise that she hadn't actually had the chance to give him back her notes for the potion since he had been Summoned on the thirteenth of February. It had been five weeks since then, and she hoped that didn't mean he thought she didn't trust him. Then she wondered why the thought bothered her so much. Because really, they'd barely been on speaking terms since then long enough for her to consider handing them over. It wasn't as though she was about to pass over her notes after he had snarled at her, belittled her, or attempted to manhandle her.

She sighed. At this rate, he'd be lucky to ever see her notes. Maybe once she left the school and they didn't actually have to have any contact with one another. Maybe she could mail them to him. She snorted. Why did her life have to be so muddled?

She wanted Severus to see what she'd done, to actually read the whole step-by-step process, not just the truncated bit that he had been given in order to grade her work. But she could not bring herself to take them to him right now, not for the life of her. He might regard that as some sort of peace offering after what had happened yesterday, and she had no intention of apologizing to him for what had happened—at least not unless he apologized first. He should have known better.

Once the two potions were completed and cooling, she refocused her attention on Viktor.

"There we are." Her smile was a little wry. "Can I trust that you're not going to want to spend lab time with me in the future?"

"I am happy to spend any time vith you, mila moya," Viktor negated politely. "It does not need to be full of talking. It is very … calming to vatch you vork. Peaceful. I like it."

"Thank you, Viktor." She was pretty sure that she had received more compliments from Viktor just now than she had from Severus in the six and a half years that she had known him. The thought was a little sobering, but she forced herself to put the thought out of her mind and smiled again at Viktor. "Proper tea?"

He agreed, and they retired to the common room, where Winky was only too happy to bring them more tea than several sets of Hermione and Viktor could possibly eat. Fortunately, Draco and Harry returned from the library, and they were happy to consume some of the extra provender.

"How was your morning?" she asked them. "Did you get a lot of research done?"

Mentally, Harry stuck his tongue out at her, but Draco launched into a long and detailed—and entirely false, if Harry's mental expression was anything to go by—story about the book they had been hunting for, the problems with the Hogwarts cataloguing system, and their finally tracking the book down only to discover that it did not contain the information that they had been looking for.

"I'm very sorry," Hermione said with false sympathy. "What a wasted morning."

What were you actually doing? she asked Harry.

The Gryffindor smiled. Spent a few minutes in the library because Draco had to return some giant book he'd been reading for something or other, and then we went out for a walk on the grounds down by the lake.

That sounds more profitable by far. I'm glad you had the chance.

Harry nodded. It beats out the library any day of the week.

She got all ready for a mental protest but realized that Harry's opinion was unlikely to be swayed after years of these sorts of disagreements. Plus, she had to agree that while she often preferred the library, the thought of taking a walk by the lake with an agreeable Severus was very appealing. In fact, she'd definitely take it over a visit to the library every time it was offered to her, but it seemed doubtful that she would have to worry about her scholastic future as a result of such a resolution.

It was nearing lunchtime before they saw Viktor off, as he needed to check in with Ron and his Quidditch team. She was pleased to see that he was taking his job seriously and didn't seem to be terribly bored even though his life here couldn't possibly be as exciting as the one he had left in Bulgaria.

Between people like her, who could care less about his being a Quidditch star, and people like Ron, who genuinely admired his skill and really wanted to talk Quidditch, Viktor seemed to be content and not really miss the trials and joys of being the Bulgarian Seeker. She was certain that he'd be heading back there once this term was over, but it was nice to know that he wouldn't likely be miserable in the meantime.

Once he was gone, she eyed Harry and Draco disapprovingly.

"You really don't need to interfere in my life like that. I'm sure Viktor was bored out of his mind sitting there and watching me brew. It's just not very interesting for a non-brewer."

"I didn't notice him complaining," Harry said with a grin that Draco shared.

She rolled her eyes at the two of them. "He's too polite to complain to my face about being shut up in a room and having me ignore him for two hours. But you can be sure he's put it down on his list of things not to do again."

No matter what he'd said about it being relaxing. Although she was more used to Severus telling her whatever was on his mind even if it was unflattering, she'd encountered plenty of polite people, too.

Harry and Draco shook their heads.

"I bet if you invited him back tomorrow, he'd come," Harry pointed out.

She regarded them with amusement. "He's a good friend, and I'm not going to make him suffer through more of that. I don't want to hear that either of you have issued an invitation on my behalf, either, understood?"

When she didn't get an immediate response, her gaze took on a more glare-like quality, and the two of them finally nodded.

"All right, all right," Harry said in a conciliatory manner. "No need to get your knickers in a twist."

"Shall we brave the masses for lunch?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "It can't be worse than this morning."

They headed up and found themselves once again seated next to Ron, who was gushing about the discussion he'd had with Viktor and his plans for the Quidditch team. Hermione had to wonder if he felt comfortable talking with Draco present because the Slytherin team was out of the running for the final or if he was so excited that he honestly hadn't noticed that the blond boy was there and listening. Draco, thankfully, appeared to be minding his tongue and didn't make any snide comments about what he could do with the information that Ron had just given him.

She'd really like their civil behaviour to last for at least a week.

The afternoon was spent doing the homework that had been neglected during the morning. She was working on projects that weren't due for weeks; despite the ribbing that she received from Harry, the fact remained that her life was very full at the moment, and she didn't want to risk falling behind if any of those other commitments suddenly took up more of her time than she had anticipated.

Because really, of course she was ahead; none of the other students were in the middle of brewing a complex potion ten days out of the month and spending an additional two with a houseful of werewolves.

The fact that she had tended to be well ahead on her work years before she had started the Weresbane just meant that she had good time management skills. She intended to stay in good shape for her N.E.W.T.s. The Weresbane was more important, ultimately, but if she could manage it all, she was darn well going to do so, and that meant staying on top of everything. Harry gave it up as a lost cause.

Dinner wasn't a horribly noisy affair, thankfully. Although students had been quizzing friends and house members all day, no one had suddenly discovered who the Pure Adults might have been. Giving that no one from the Ministry through Voldemort had had any luck in finding them at the school, many of the students seemed now to genuinely believe that the Pure Adults had not come from within the castle walls.

It was awfully nice, from her point of view, to see the search fizzling before it had even begun. Hermione didn't think that she and Harry were likely to be exposed at this juncture even by a careful search, but there were more people than ever who now knew the truth, so there was no saying for certain.

In the evening, since they had not managed it in the morning, the three of them decided to have their own training session. She could see that both Harry and Draco were careful not to raise the possibility of Severus joining them, and she decided to simply appreciate their circumspection and not comment upon the obviousness with which they were avoiding the subject.

"There's more space in Room One," she pointed out when they looked ready to begin in the common room.

They looked shocked but exchanged glances and then trailed after her obediently without asking if she really thought that was a good idea.

Harry let out a soft huff of breath once they were in the room. Draco, at least, had managed not to let his surprise show. Instead, he matter-of-factly moved further into the room, wand in hand. When Harry stayed stuck at the threshold, he raised an eyebrow.

"Are you coming in, Harry, or are you going to gape like a fool at the door all evening?"

There were moments when she was very grateful to have Draco as a friend. Harry managed to get into motion, coming all the way into the room, although he continued to turn in circles taking it all in as though he had never seen it before. Draco was watching him with some amusement.

"That's very subtle, Harry," he said finally, "but do you think we could see about actually training?"

Harry finally stopped staring. "Oh, er, of course. It's just … a very nice room. I hadn't really noticed before," he ended rather lamely.

If he wasn't so darn cute, she'd have to smack him up the side of the head. It looked as though Draco were having much the same thought.

"I came here before I went back to the common room last night," Hermione explained. "The castle was very forgiving."

Harry nodded, although she wasn't entirely certain he really understood, and Draco just rolled his eyes and readied his wand.

"What are our teams today?" he asked.

"Let's make it all or nothing," she suggested. "Each of us trying to be the last one standing."

They didn't usually train in quite this manner, but she didn't particularly feel like having the two of them gang up against her, and she imagined that Draco and Harry felt the same way. They nodded in immediate agreement, anyway, and then the three of them got to work.

Two hours later, they'd each had a handful of victories using a variety of strategies. Harry had been taken in by Draco going down, seemingly badly injured; he'd been unable to prevent himself from going to make sure the other boy was all right. By chance or design, Harry and Draco had hit her shield at the same spot with two of their strongest spells, making it buckle under the onslaught; Harry had been able to Stun her before she'd erected another shield. Unconscious, she hadn't seen whether they kept fighting one another or shared a joint victory.

Taking Harry down had been difficult, as he was in very good form and utilising the entire room to stay away from them and let them fight one another as he waited for openings to fire at them when they were distracted. He'd finally made the tactical error of touching the wall, though, and she brought him down with the same type of ward that had got Severus last time.

When he'd been Ennervated, he'd made her and Draco promise never to tell Severus that he'd fallen for it, too.

It had been a good work out as well as being good-natured, and Hermione wondered why they couldn't repeat that sort of experience when Severus was in the room. When he was here, it always seemed to become a battle in earnest and there were losers and winners and gloating and what seemed to be serious attempts at injury. They all knew that they would be in life and death battle situations, but Hermione was certain that what she and Draco and Harry had just done had still been good training.

They all knew that in a battle they weren't simply going to be Stunned. Watching their friends find devious ways to get around their shielding meant that they had new techniques to keep an eye out for amongst their real opponents. She sighed. It seemed as though the problem lay more in Severus's nature than anything else, and yet she knew that he could be cordial when he wished.

They spent the remainder of the evening back in the common room. Hermione had Glamoured Solace's journal on warding and was continuing to read it while the boys cuddled on the couch and pretended to read. Probably a Potions text, given Harry's utter inattention to it. Since Draco had become Harry's boyfriend, she'd handed the responsibility of getting the Gryffindor through Potions over to the blond boy; it would be up to him to ensure that Harry actually retained the material at some point. Experience had indeed taught her that it was useless to try to teach Harry much of anything if he wasn't in a receptive mood, and she was pretty sure that Draco had learnt the same lesson.

It was nearing midnight when they called it a night. From the way the two boys had been glued to one another all day, Hermione knew that Draco would be spending another night in Harry's bed, and given how dismally her own love life was going right now, she didn't really mind if they hastened off to that bed and left her to wallow in peace. She was happy for them, she really was, but there was only so much cute coupleness she could take before she got a bit mopey about her own life.

She reminded herself that although the situation with Severus was not ... ideal, there were plenty of other things to be grateful for. Harry and Draco were happy. There was no chance that Voldemort could gain any power from them. Not only were the seventh-year Slytherins continuing to be well behaved, she was pretty sure that they were exerting an influence over the younger students, either by example or by actual control. Whatever the reason, the number of altercations in the hallways as well as the number of students caught out after curfew had diminished, and that could only be regarded as a good thing.

Those Slytherins who had joined the DA were integrating themselves rather quietly, although it would still be a stretch to say that they'd been assimilated; they tended to partner one another and congregate in a group. But they had been accepted; as Hermione had predicted, once it was clear that Ginny, Neville, and Luna weren't upset, the others had acquiesced without too much of a fuss.

Hermione really hoped that the majority of the Slytherins were sincere in their desire to get away from Voldemort. She didn't want to see a lot of lives wasted because they made the wrong choice. Harry was going to defeat Voldemort, Hermione believed that firmly, but it was important to the longevity of the wizarding race that they didn't decimate another generation winning the war; they needed to convince as many people as possible to choose the right side before it was too late.

The boys had been gone for perhaps half an hour when she was drawn to the Marauder's Map. Since she and Harry had their bracelets to alert them to strange presences in the castle, they didn't examine the Map itself with a lot of frequency unless they were looking for something specific.

By the third time Hermione had scanned the entire parchment, she knew exactly what she was looking for and exactly what she wasn't finding. Severus wasn't on the Map. Much as she didn't want to admit that she was looking for him, she knew she was.

Despite the many places he could be, she was nevertheless certain that there was only one place that he would be if he wasn't on the grounds. And no matter how upset she was with him, she couldn't bring herself not to care that he was at a Death Eater meeting.

Although she hadn't thought about it consciously, her instinctive perusal of the Map told her that she'd been worried. This morning, news had definitively reached Voldemort that the power of the Pure Adults was beyond his reach forever, and it was Severus whom he had tasked with finding the Pure Adults. It was Severus who had failed to prevent her from making the Wolfsbane last week. She had not heard of Severus being Summoned in the meantime, and if that was true, it would mean that he was now facing a very displeased power-hungry maniac.

Hermione wasn't nearly hard-hearted enough to want him to suffer for any of those reasons despite how horrible he could make her feel—especially since a fair portion of the reason for him being injured related directly back to her. She felt responsible, even if part of her knew that was nonsense.

There was nothing that anybody could do to fix this, so she wouldn't go to Harry and Draco for reassurance and comfort; she would let them have their enjoyable night while she gave in to the inevitable.

She Masked herself, cast warming charms, and made her way out to the gates. It was a vigil that she hated the necessity of. But if Severus could go, she could wait for him even if it meant that her stomach was tied up in knots and she spent the whole time imagining dreadful things happening.

She wondered why it was that she never encountered anyone else down here after Severus had been Summoned. If she were being brutally honest, she knew that there were no doubt plenty of Order members and supporters of the Light who really didn't care about Severus beyond his position as a spy, but she was not one of them. She didn't think that Albus was, either. Or Minerva. Or Hagrid. Or Draco. Or Harry—although that one often seemed to depend on how the older man was treating Hermione, but that was beside the point. Why was it just she who came out here? Was it Albus's doing? Was it to strengthen Severus's position as a spy by making it look as though none of them cared for Severus's well-being, just the job that he did?

Well, she would sacrifice his position in a heartbeat to keep him safe, and she wished that Albus felt the same way. The Slytherin had more than atoned for any past failings, and she was sure that no information he was bringing back was worth his life. Unfortunately, she wasn't the one calling the shots.

She ended up quietly pacing for a half hour before it occurred to her to transform. She could Mask herself in either form, and as a unicorn, she would at least be absorbing some light and hopefully growing a little calmer. Currently, she was very much on edge and wondering why Voldemort had to keep his Death Eaters so damn late when they all had other calls on their time. After all, it wasn't supposed to be known that they were Death Eaters, so they really shouldn't be out at all hours like this.

Of course, she didn't suppose that Voldemort was known for his consideration and thoughtfulness towards others.

Which left her waiting impatiently, despite her unicorn form.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning before three Death Eaters Apparated in front of the gates. Two were masked and unrecognizable, and they were supporting the unconscious third. There was some ill-natured joking about what would happen if no one came out and found Severus, but their orders had been to dump the man at the gate, so that was what they did.

Hermione listened to them Disapparate and gave them thirty seconds to ensure that they weren't coming back before she changed back into human form, opened the gate, and hurried over to Severus. He was deeply unconscious, and a quick scan told her that he needed treatment immediately. She bandaged him up, cast Mobilicorpus, Masked him, and took him back into the castle through the dungeon entrance.

She broke through the wards on his quarters in four minutes flat—when stealth was not an issue and the man himself was unconscious practically in her arms, she was very motivated—and had him in his bedroom thirty seconds later, where she unMasked them both. She Vanished his bloody and torn clothing, cast a cleansing charm, and spelled nightclothes onto him. Pulling back the bedclothes, she settled him in the bed.

The Cruciatus potion was where she'd last seen it in the bathroom, and she grabbed a general pain potion, a Bruise Salve, a Burn Potion, and a potion that aided mending bones as well. She should probably be taking him to Poppy, she realized, but she was quite sure that the reason he had all these potions stocked in his loo was because he avoided going to Poppy as often as possible, so she was going to do the same on his behalf.

Returning to the bedroom, she considered Severus lying on the bed and then cast a low-grade Healing Sleep charm. Severus had been the one to teach it to her, and though he had not said explicitly, she had been under the impression that Poppy had taught it to him once upon a time. Children growing up in wartime learnt the strangest things.

There'd be no worry about him waking for at least twelve hours, now, which would ensure that he didn't get up before it was wise for his healing body to move. He'd no doubt be annoyed when he woke up on Sunday afternoon, but it would be ever so much better for his health.

She climbed into the bed with him to support him and ensure that he swallowed all the potions he needed. And then, grumbling to herself, she snuggled up next to him and tried to absorb those involuntary shudders that meant he had been, once again, subjected to the Cruciatus.

It felt especially weird to be assisting like this when he didn't even know that she was here, when he was in a Healing Sleep and had no control over what was happening, but she knew that he hadn't really been in better shape when he was conscious for the few minutes before the potion took effect on those previous occasions. This way, since she'd be leaving long before he would wake, she wouldn't be yelled at or attacked or whatever it was he was going to do to express his displeasure with her, never mind that she was in here carefully healing his battered body.

Lying cuddled up next to him, both of them fully clothed, she wished—yet again—that it wasn't because he was suffering from nerve damage. Why couldn't the two of them have the lovely sorts of experiences that Harry and Draco were having on a regular basis? Why did they only end up in bed when disasters were occurring?

She couldn't even say she'd take what she could get without feeling guilty because she was here right now because Severus had been badly tortured; if she got to choose, she'd have to prefer his being uninjured and there being no need for her to be here. What was really frustrating was the number of times she'd been forced to have that thought. She knew that Severus would probably kill her if she tried to talk Albus out of sending him back to Voldemort. Albus would probably spout some nonsense about the greater good, anyway.

Given that she had recently flipped out on Severus for trying to control an aspect of her life, she knew it was a piece of interference that she could not truly consider. But she still wanted to try. She wanted him to be safe.

She wasn't sure how she had ended up in this situation, wanting impossible things and loving someone even when he could be the stupidest, most arrogant, most annoying and hurtful man on the entire planet. But she couldn't simply turn off her feelings for him, and despite the fact that yesterday she had been angry enough to nearly do him harm inadvertently, here she was today, doing her best to put him back together.

She had to wonder what would have happened to him had she not been out there. Did Albus not understand the severity of the position he had put Severus in because she was always patching him up before Albus got to see him? But no, the headmaster had to have known at the end of her sixth year, at least, just how dangerous Severus's position had become. He still sent Severus, and it was only the once that she had been able to help him, so Albus had no excuses.

She knew, in the logical part of her brain, that Severus had theoretically chosen to take this risk, but she also knew that Severus's "choice" was really the result of a childhood mistake. He kept going back to those meetings, but Lily and James were still dead. Severus had spent years and years working for Albus and sabotaging Voldemort when he could. The debt that he felt he owed was all in his head where he would never believe that he had done enough. She wished with all her heart that he could forgive himself.

Perhaps that forgiveness could come once Voldemort was dead; this only strengthened her resolve to ensure that the madman was stopped. Solace's journals had begun to instil in her a hearty respect for real divination. It seemed more likely to her than it ever had that Voldemort had indeed chosen Harry and that it was by Harry's hand that Voldemort had to die. The prophecy didn't explicitly state that no other hands could be assisting, however, so Hermione intended to be there every step of the way to ensure that none of the people she loved were injured in the process.

Tomorrow, she intended to make her first attempt to see all of the school's wards. She needed to be sure that she could do what Solace had indicated was required before she declared to Harry, Albus, and all the others that she had a plan. For now, she would do what she could to make sure that Severus was in fit shape to teach and torment—both her and everyone else, sadly—come Monday morning.

She realized that Severus's shaking had stopped and he was lying quietly beside her. He was very warm, and she fought the languor that always seemed to creep over her when she was in bed with him like this; she wanted nothing more than to curl up and go to sleep beside him. He was in a Healing Sleep, though, and she could not bring herself to steal any comfort.

Reluctantly, she rose, made sure that the quilt was covering him fully, and observed him for a moment. She watched the rise and fall of the material covering his chest as he breathed much more easily than he had earlier in the evening. She had done what she could, and now it was time to leave before she became positively maudlin. He was alive, he would be all right in a few hours, and that was what mattered.

Out in the sitting room, she found the set of papers that he'd clearly been in the midst of grading when he'd been Summoned. They were second- and third-year work, and she knew that he would probably be able to mark them when he woke up in the afternoon, but she didn't want to give him another reason to be upset with her. If she was forcing him to spend this time recuperating, the least she could do was get this work finished for him; it wasn't as though the grading would be a challenge.

Making herself tea, she set about to work her way through the scrolls armed with a quill charmed to mimic Severus's handwriting. She was not, perhaps, quite as harsh as he would have been, but given that she was passing herself off as him, it was the perfect opportunity for her to let her inner critic out; anything she would have wanted to say to these children but which she would have to bite her tongue over because it would have been "mean" and "inappropriate" for the Head Girl, the Head of Slytherin was perfectly free to say.

As she went on, she found that it was rather liberating, really, and she could see why he sometimes got a bit carried away with himself. He'd built a reputation that allowed him to speak his mind and which declared that his mind was a deeply critical and impatient one. Everybody expected him to be harsh, and if he was sometimes harder than even the most experienced student had anticipated, it was still on the anticipated end of the spectrum. It wasn't as though Filius had suddenly started calling them a bunch of idiotic, incompetent fools. She tried to maintain Severus's style and decided that although it probably wouldn't be healthy for her to insult people with quite the regularity he employed, being able to do it every once in a while felt rather cathartic.

Once that task was completed, she sternly refused to let herself snoop. He was already likely to be angry that she'd broken into his quarters and touched his ink, even if it had all been with good intentions.

Speaking of good intentions.

Fawkes, she said, rousing the phoenix. Severus will be unavailable until he wakes from my Healing Sleep this afternoon around three. Albus is not to bother him before then.

Understood. He's all right?

If she got started on an actual answer, it would turn into a rant that the phoenix did not deserve to have directed at him. Instead, she repeated, He'll be as healed as I can make him by three this afternoon.

I'm sorry, Girlicorne.

In his voice, there was the wealth of emotions which Albus overtly suppressed. Here was the grief that this was asked of Severus, that the man went out to Voldemort time and time again and came back bloodied and battered and leaving a portion of himself behind.

She was concerned in ways that no one else seemed to be that at some point he'd lose his whole self and there'd be nothing left when he came back. She cared so much about him, but there didn't seem to be anything that she could do about any of it.

While Harry had had a very difficult life, he still seemed to have better choices than Severus had ever had. No matter what Harry had been through, he'd still been able to find Draco and was somehow living a somewhat normal life. Severus, on the other hand, was vilified by their side and mistrusted by Voldemort's, and he was stuck constantly balancing between them without a safety net to catch him if he fell.

It was enough to drive her insane; she didn't know how he could stand it.

She found herself repeating her words yet again to Fawkes because she was so sorry it made her heart break. He'll be awake at three.

What else could she say? He could be Summoned back at any point, and she couldn't prevent him from going. Fawkes and even Albus could be as sorry as they liked, but Severus was still going to go when his Mark burned.

The most she could do was console herself a little with the knowledge that he would not have done well left outside and unconscious all night. Thanks to her, he was warm, dry, and healing, and he would have two fewer sets of papers to grade when he awoke. It had to be better than nothing.

Masking herself once more, she headed back into the hallway and carefully warded Severus's door. From the inside, it would open simply to his touch, and from the outside, there wasn't a person who could get in apart from her without a lot of work. He'd be able to fix the wards as he wished when he was better; this had seemed a safer option than trying to rebuild his wards. She knew he would not take it well if she left them such that he couldn't tell she had been through them in the first place.

It was now approaching five in the morning, and Hermione admitted that it would probably be wise to grab an hour or two of sleep before she faced the new day. She was on edge as it was.

She slept from half five until almost seven. After a brief stint in the loo, she emerged into the common room to find that Harry and Draco were up before her, seated on the couch with the fire crackling merrily in front of them. Ever since Harry had become a phoenix, he was especially happy to be near fire.

Their heads twisted round as they heard her emerge.

"Never thought I'd see the day," Draco said happily. "Sleepyhead."

Harry was looking at her through narrowed eyes as he asked perceptively, "When did you go to sleep?"

She offered him a slight smile as she walked over to that side of the room and sat in one of the armchairs. "Half five."

Draco's smile froze into place. "Half five?" he repeated. "Woman, are you out of your mind?"

"I don't sleep very much," she said simply.

"I know you don't sleep very much," he answered, sitting up to stare at her closely. "I've been spending time here for months. But that's ridiculous."

"It's been that way for a long time."

Draco looked to Harry, who nodded solemnly in confirmation, although she thought he was actually rather amused that she was suddenly getting the third degree from his boyfriend.

"So why is it you haven't keeled over from exhaustion yet?" Draco asked.

"Because this is as much sleep as I require."

Harry stepped in as Draco was opening his mouth for what looked to be another stupid question.

"Why were you up so late?"

"I was busy," she hedged.

"Busy with?" he asked more pointedly.

She sighed. "Yesterday, the Prophet reported that there were no more Pure Adults. Can you not think of anyone who'd be upset by that news?"

They were both silent for a moment.

"Is he all right?" Draco asked.

Hermione wondered if Harry hadn't been able to bring himself to ask.

"I've put him in a Healing Sleep. He'll be up by this afternoon."

"And what did he say," Harry demanded, anger clear on all his features, "when he found that despite what he did to you on Friday, you were still there to help him when he was hurt?"

"I'm sure he would have come up with something appropriate." Appropriately scathing, probably. "But he was unconscious when he was dumped at the gates, so I didn't get the chance to find out."

"So you've not spoken to him at all?" Harry asked, being all perceptive again. "He's going to wake up in the afternoon with no idea why he's not still unconscious outside?"

"What would you have me do?" she demanded. "Leave him out there? Wait until he woke?"

Harry let out his own sigh. "No, I don't suppose you'd do that. I just … wish it wasn't so difficult for you, that's all."

"Life is difficult," she answered flatly. "It could be worse."

Severus could be dead. He could have woken up while she was lying next to him and cursed her out of the room. Instead, he was alive, and she was still in one piece.

"It should be better," Harry said stubbornly.

Meet the Gryffindor Golden Boy, proponent of justice and happy endings for all.

"And I confess that I should like it if it were," she answered as gently as she was able. "But it's not, and there's no point getting into a muddle about it."

Draco rescued them from what looked to be a never-ending argument.

"Breakfast?" he said cheerfully. "How lovely. Let's head up, shall we?"

Hermione took her cue from him, and Harry was compelled to follow their lead or be left alone in the room.

Ron didn't make it to this meal until it was nearly over; there was no practice this morning, so he had wanted as many extra minutes of sleep as he could manage. Since this was Ron they were talking about, he also wasn't willing to miss a meal, so here he was at the last minute.

The Prophet had already been delivered, and since it wasn't a Quidditch morning, Ron was able to devote a little more of his attention to it now.

"Bit crazy about the Pure Adults just being gone all of a sudden now, isn't it?" he said as he masticated too much sausage and egg at once. "You'd think whoever it was would've got it over with when all this started. Why'd they wait until now?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks. Draco once again came to their rescue.

"But you might notice, Weasley, that the paper doesn't say how long it's been since they ceased to be Pure Adults. You may recall that when the news about the Pure Adults was first revealed, the Prophet noted that there was no way to tell how long the two people had been in that state. For all we know, it's the same now; they might have had sex when they read that first article back in November, but the time delay means we aren't hearing about it until now."

This was pretty good for being a complete lie. Ron was even well-mannered enough to actually take this as a possible explanation rather than an aspersion on his intelligence for having suspected something else. Draco was getting much better at his tone when he was at the Gryffindor table. This was a relief to her and Harry as there was only so much damage control that they felt they could safely do. Ron and Draco could both be hot-headed and short-tempered, but so far, their minor miracle was continuing intact.

The more Hermione considered it, though, the more she decided it really was her duty to speak to Ron. If this was going to blow up in their faces, it needed to do so in a controlled manner, and that meant she couldn't risk him yelling at her in the middle of a corridor again. The truth about the Pure Adults was being revealed to more and more people in the Order and that meant it needed to be explained to him sooner rather than later.

Resolution made, she managed to convince Harry and Draco that she needed some alone time after the traumatic night she had had, and then she found Ron in the Gryffindor common room. Deciding that they needed complete privacy and a protected environment, she brought him to the Room of Requirement.

He was gazing at her with more perception than she had anticipated in his bright blue eyes. "I get the impression this is a discussion I'm not going to like."

The room was cozy, the chairs comfortable, but she didn't think the Room had much more in its arsenal—unless it released a Calming Draught in gaseous form—because Ron was absolutely right.

She gestured him into a chair and sat down as well as she tried to figure out where to start.

"If Harry knew I was here, he'd want to be here, too," she explained. "It's my decision to come here alone because I'd rather that if everything falls apart, it's just between you and me."

He frowned as he crossed his arms. "And is everything about to fall apart?"

"Probably," she answered honestly. "I let matters go on like this for a long time. Probably too long. But you see, since we weren't speaking at all, it wasn't exactly that I was omitting this topic especially."

If they'd been on speaking terms, if they'd seen him more than once in a blue moon, she thought it likely they would have told him or he would have figured it out a long time ago. Probably in January, at least, when it had come out to Draco and Severus and Albus.

Ron's face was troubled, but he tried to muster a grin to say, "You know you're only making me more anxious."

She nodded. "But I suspect this will be the only chance I have to explain myself."

"That bad, eh?" he asked, seeming to be bracing himself for the worst.

"That bad," she agreed.

His face settled into grim lines, the freckles standing out dark against his pale skin. "Just tell me."

She swallowed nervously. "It was my idea of a way to protect ourselves. We didn't tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what?" he asked roughly.

She spoke in a rush. "Harry and I have never had sex with one another."

Ron blinked at her, this clearly not having been what he was expecting. There was silence until the import of her words sank in, and then Ron's eyes flew to hers.

"What?" he demanded. "You have! You told me in the corridor!"

Hermione sighed. "You assumed in the corridor. To protect ourselves, we let the assumption stand."

"To protect yourselves from what?" he asked, ears beginning to get very red.

"To prevent anyone from finding out that we hadn't had sex—not with anyone."

Ron was out of his seat and yelling all of two seconds later. "The two of you are the Pure Adults? How dare you not say anything! How dare you use me like that!"

She rose, too, so that he wasn't towering over her quite so much. She struggled to keep an even tone, knowing that yelling back at him wouldn't help matters. "It wasn't me who wanted to have that conversation in the hallway. You made a scene, and we had to react accordingly."

"So, it's my fault, is it?" he snarled as he took a step closer to her.

"We made our own choices," she conceded, "but so did you."

"You kept it from me for months!" he accused angrily.

"We kept it from everyone," she corrected.

"I'm not everyone," he said belligerently.

"No, you're not," she agreed sadly. "But I decided we were safer if no one knew."

"Including one of your best friends."

She nodded.

He began to pace the room, whipping furiously back and forth for several long strides.

"I would have helped," he said finally, biting the words out.

"Would you have?" she asked, staring at him intently. "Or would you have tried to take care of the 'problem'?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, voice ugly as he turned to stare at her.

"Be honest," she admonished. "If you'd found out that I was a virgin, that I was a Pure Adult who would get all this power when I had sex for the first time, and who would give power to my partner, can you honestly tell me that all you would have done was help protect my secret?"

"Of course—" he started furiously.

"Ron," she said, "you wouldn't. You know you wouldn't have. You would have made all sorts of assumptions about why it was that I hadn't had sex yet."

He opened his mouth.

She cut him off. "Remember how you acted about the people you thought had to be virgins when we first found out?"

Some of the angry flush left his cheeks as he recalled those words.

"I didn't mean it," he said weakly.

"But you did," she said gently but implacably. "You might not have said it quite like that if you'd known it was the two of us, but that was your honest opinion. You assumed that it was two people who were undesirable enough not to get very many offers. The whole entire school was trying to find out the truth, was queuing up for that glory, and we couldn't risk that you'd be one of them."

His voice was dark with an edge of hurt behind it. "You didn't trust me."

"We didn't trust anyone," she tried to explain. "I know you might not be able to forgive me for that, but it was all I could think to do under the circumstances."

"Why are you telling me now, then?" he asked, suddenly suspicious. "What's changed?"

"You know what's changed. It hit the Prophet."

"I'm not the first person you're telling," he interpreted flatly.

"Albus interceded and others found out," she explained. That bit really hadn't been her fault. "I didn't want you to find out from someone else."

"You're afraid I'll make a scene," he said with a sneer.

She bit back her first comment, which was to say that she had good reason to be afraid of that, and said instead, "I wanted to be the one to tell you. You deserve that. I'm sorry it had to work out this way."

He turned his back on her. "Sure." The single word was full of anger.

"Ron," she protested, "you as good as called me a whore in the corridor for everyone to hear because you thought I'd had sex with Harry. You have an awful temper. We had to be very careful."

He swung back to face her. "Who else knows, then?"

She let out a breath slowly. "It was just the two of us until January. Then we went to rescue Draco from the werewolves."

His brow furrowed. "I thought that was a bunch of unicorns."

"It was," she said. "Unicorns who helped because I asked. So Draco knew, and Severus knew—because he was out there as well, trying to rescue Draco—and Albus knew when we came back. That was it."

He heard what she wasn't saying. "But there're more now."

She nodded. "Kingsley brought the news that there were no more Pure Adults. Albus told him." More or less. "We visited with Tonks and Remus that night, and they found out as well."

"But that's it?" he said. "Malfoy, Snape, Albus, Kingsley, Remus, and Tonks. And the last three didn't find out until you weren't Pure Adults anymore?"

She nodded again, reluctantly, knowing exactly where he was going with this. But this was why she'd brought him here. Sound-proofed walls.

"But—but you're not Pure Adults anymore," he said with confusion.

"No," she agreed.

"That means," he stared at her, stunned. "You and Snape?"

She let out a huff of breath at how disgusted he sounded, made herself speak normally. "You worked it out more quickly than Remus or Tonks."

His face was headed straight towards brick red. "Snape? You had sex with Snape?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to remind herself why blowing up at him would not be beneficial to their relationship.

And it wasn't as though anyone else had reacted much better. Well, Tonks and Kingsley had been all right, but it seemed like the better she knew the person, the worse they reacted.

"Yes."

Ron flung himself at the door, but she froze him and repeated the warning which she had issued to Remus and Tonks.

"I understand if you're angry with me." The words came out clipped but level. "I understand if you won't speak to me again. But it's really none of your business whom I have sex with. Severus will not learn that you know as a result of anything you say or do, or you will suffer the consequences. I am sure I do not need to remind you what happened to Marietta Edgecombe."

She released him. He shot her a venomous look and fled, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Thirty-One: The Wards

Hermione sank onto a chair feeling as though a vacuum had been left in the wake of the angrily exiting Ron. Well. He had needed to learn the truth, and now he knew. He seemed to be angry with her, not Harry, and that had been her purpose. Her threat of dire harm would hopefully prevent him from saying anything stupid to Severus; at any rate, the head of Slytherin was out of the way for most of the day, so there was little chance that they'd have to interact when Ron was freshly angry and hadn't had time to cool down—although that was often a slow process when it came to the redhead.

The only places she wanted to go now were either to the Forest or to Severus's quarters, but she made herself go back to her common room since the former wasn't wise at this time of day and the latter didn't seem to be wise ever. Harry and Draco were there, and Harry frowned as soon as he saw her.

"You don't look as though you've just had some nice alone time."

"I'll try to do better now," she said, not feeling up to answering any questions that would result in somebody storming after Ron. "I have to work on the Weresbane."

"Hermione," Harry protested as she made her way to her bedroom door.

"I'll see you at … dinner," she said as she made a split-second decision, turning back to face them and giving an approximation of a smile. "You can hold down the fort for that long, can't you?"

Harry stared at her intently.

You all right?

I'll be better by dinner. It's all right. She infused her mental tone with as much certainty as she could scrounge up.

"I'm sure we can manage," he said aloud, and she nodded her thanks and disappeared into her room.

The Weresbane couldn't actually be started until three in the afternoon, so she worked on more potions to restock the hospital wing in the meantime; the more trouble there was in her personal life, the better stocked the infirmary seemed to get. At least someone was benefiting.

In the moments when the potions were simmering or otherwise didn't need her attention, she revised her course texts, forcing her mind to review each and every spell, charm, and potion in detail, because that way she wasn't thinking about anything else.

She reappeared in time for dinner, mildly amused by how relieved Harry looked to see her again; she supposed that she wasn't quite as good at hiding how she was feeling as she wanted to be, and she had indeed been upset.

They went up to dinner with her having no idea what to expect. They sat at their usual place at the Gryffindor table, Harry and Hermione opposite one another at the end and Draco next to Harry, and served themselves. Severus hadn't instantly hunted her down when he woke in the afternoon which left her with three options which she thought were most likely. He could be pretending it hadn't happened, didn't know it was she who had helped him, or was biding his time until he could pounce and cause the most damage.

She cast a fleeting glance at the High Table and saw that he was sitting there looking about as grim as usual, attention not focussed on the Gryffindor table, so she had no clue as to what was going through his head. Asking seemed unwise, so she supposed that she would just have to wait and see.

Ron arrived a few minutes later and sat down next to Draco rather than next to her. He didn't greet her, but he also didn't publicly denounce her, which was a big plus as far as she was concerned.

It didn't seem to surprise anyone that he wasn't being a big conversationalist since food was always his first priority at a meal, but it was clear that both Draco and Harry were puzzled about why Ron had chosen to sit next to the Slytherin. They were going to want reasons for this behaviour; once she found out if Ron was going to give them his version, she would decide how much to tell the other two about what she'd done this morning.

Since Ron was sitting next to Draco, he ended up speaking more to the blond than he had at any of the other meals they'd eaten together, and despite how confused Harry was on the one hand, the cordiality clearly pleased him.

It didn't surprise her, although it wasn't best-timed from her point of view, when Harry invited Ron back to their common room. Ron acquiesced, and Hermione wondered if she should beat a hasty retreat or tag along to ensure that Harry wasn't about to be ambushed with a confrontation that he had no reason to expect.

"Hermione and I can show you some of the training we've been doing," Harry offered hopefully.

"That's fine," Ron said, not looking at her.

Right, then. No ducking out for her, and she'd just have to play referee as necessary. They all headed downstairs, Draco shooting her curious glances as he seemed to be picking up on her uncertainty.

They reached their quarters without, thankfully, running into Severus or any of the Slytherins. Hermione imagined that Ron must have been at least peripherally aware that many of the seventh-year Slytherins had overtly changed allegiances and were now studying defence with their peers, but she wasn't entirely certain that now would be a good time to test out Ron's feelings towards them or their feelings towards him.

The rest of them were quite full from dinner, so they didn't have tea straightaway, although Ron, as he settled into one of the armchairs by the fire, observed that he was looking forward to seeing if Winky still made creampuffs as good as those which he remembered from his visits at the beginning of the school year.

Harry shook his head in bemusement, and some good-natured ribbing about the bottomless pit that was Ron's stomach ensued.

Harry and Draco had taken the couch again, although seemingly in deference to Ron's sensibilities, they weren't sitting nearly as close as they normally would; since this was sometimes in one another's laps, she was sure that Ron would thank them for their consideration if he knew of it. She had taken the other armchair, although she was perched on the edge of it, unable to bring herself to just relax in case the situation were to go suddenly pear-shaped. She wanted to be ready to leap into the fray and break up any fights.

They made it through the obligatory Quidditch remarks that seemed to fuel so many Hogwarts students' discussions, and then Ron looked at her directly.

"Stop it," he admonished. "I'm not going come out with wands blazing. You can relax, Hermione."

She smiled sheepishly at him and tried to settle back into her chair. "Sorry."

Ron sighed. "You probably have good reason, but I'm on my best behaviour, I promise."

She nodded at him, wondering where this sudden restraint had come from.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

She looked at Ron, offering him the first chance to explain the situation.

"Hermione told me the truth this morning."

Harry looked at Ron blankly for a moment, and then his head swung around so that he was facing her.

"You did what?"

She nodded, corroborating Ron's story.

"What were you thinking, doing that on your own?" he demanded.

Ron answered before she could do so. "She was trying to make sure that I was mad at her and not you. Blamed herself for the whole situation."

Harry snorted. "Idiot."

"It was me," she protested. "It was my idea."

"That I chose to go along with," Harry argued straight back. "It's not like you forced me. It made the most sense, and I agreed to it."

Ron frowned. "I'm not happy with the fact that the plan that made the most sense involved not telling your best friend the truth about you. But given how I've been acting these past months, I can't really blame you for being worried."

"But you seem to be taking it really well," Harry said, sounding unflatteringly surprised.

Ron, fortunately, only laughed a bit.

"'Mione knew what she was doing. Dragged me off somewhere private, gave me a target for my anger, made sure I couldn't fly off half-kilter and do myself more harm than good. Kept out of my way long enough for me to get my head on straight again."

He focussed directly on her again and said, "You didn't have to tell me now. It's true that it might come out to everyone, but by then, it wouldn't matter if I made a big fuss about it. You knew that there was a good chance I'd go completely mental on you again, but you told me anyway."

"We're friends," she said with a somewhat wan smile. "I don't mean to do poorly by you."

He nodded. "And that's where I'm at. You all know what a prat I've been. This morning, I was angry when I left you." He rolled his eyes, and added a little sheepishly, "Obviously, I'm sure you got that. I thought about yelling at the both of you or not speaking to you again, but I realized there're only a few months of school left. You gave me a second chance, and this is it. I don't want not to see you any more."

"We don't want that, either," Harry agreed.

Draco was at least being very quiet, and there hadn't been much more than the slightest grimace at this declaration on Harry's part for his need of a Weasley.

Ron looked at her again.

"You were right," he admitted, looking highly uncomfortable. "I would have tried."

She was hugely impressed that he had not only admitted this to himself but had the decency to admit it to her.

"Thank you," she said very seriously.

"Tried what?" Harry asked in confusion.

It was possible that he'd work it out on his own in the context of what they were talking about, but there was no way they needed to have that discussion right now. In fact, the two of them ought never to have that conversation. Visions of the horrid disaster that was most of the Yule Ball reminded her that the less the three of them were involved in any discussion of Ron and her love life, the happier they would all be. She cast about for a way to change the subject.

She cleared her throat loudly. "So, what's going on with those Canons?"

Harry looked at her incredulously for an instant, exchanged glances with an equally stunned Ron, and then the two of them dissolved into laughter. It did a great deal to dispel the last of the tension in the room, and it warmed her heart to see the two of them giggling like much younger school boys. Even Draco was smiling.

They passed the rest of the evening quite enjoyably. Hermione and Harry showed Ron a number of the moves that they'd been practicing in training including some of what they could do with shields that wasn't exactly normal. Draco was very circumspect, not pushing forward his knowledge or trying to make it clear to Ron that the Slytherin had been present for all of the training while the redhead had been having his fit of distemper and ignoring them.

For his part, Ron seemed to mostly ignore Draco but not in a horribly obvious way. The fact that Draco had taken Harry's virginity wasn't being alluded to in the slightest way, and that meant that Ron was being hugely mature about the issue, which was a nice surprise. If he really had decided that this put the two of them in different categories—best friend versus lover—then that might be safest for everyone.

Ron had always had jealousy issues, but if he was being even the littlest bit sensible, then he didn't want to compete with his best friend's gay lover; that wasn't a position to which he was aspiring. When it had come to her and Harry, the girlfriend/best friend mix had been the problem. It had left him feeling that she was more important, and especially since Ron had been working out whether or not he had any feelings for her, he must have been left imagining that she had picked Harry over Ron as well as Harry picking her over Ron.

When it came to Harry and Draco, Ron knew this was a new development, and he still retained his status as first friend and best friend. The matter of the power transfer remained, but either Ron had decided to be mature about every aspect of Draco and Harry's relationship or he was still living in as much denial as he could manage.

She had no idea what Ron now thought about her and Severus. She suspected that no matter how calm he seemed to be about Draco and Harry, he was not so sanguine about her choice. If it made the normally even-tempered Remus—who was no longer a werewolf—want to rend the man limb from limb, she didn't think it boded well for Ron's reaction.

There was still their nebulous past, too, where Ron had fancied her—or thought that he fancied her. If he had been upset when he thought she had chosen Harry over him, he might well feel worse that he had lost out to his least favourite professor, who was almost two decades Ron's senior and an ex-Death Eater. It was all nonsense as far as she was concerned, of course, since she was quite sure that nothing would have induced her to get involved with Ron, but she could see why he was unlikely to see it that way.

But there was no way that she was going to sit down and discuss it with him, so he was going to have to work it out on his own.

Since Potions was, unfortunately, in the morning, she didn't let Ron or Draco stay too late despite the fact that as eleven drew near, they showed no signs of wanting to leave. Draco continued his circumspection and rose to leave with Ron without indicating that this was often not how his nights with Harry typically came to an end.

Draco gave Harry the lightest of busses on the cheek—and she couldn't blame him for wanting to assert at least a small measure of their relationship—and then he followed Ron out the door. The gargoyle reformed, and Hermione flopped back onto the couch.

"Remind me never, ever to do that again."

"What were you thinking, silly girl?" Harry asked as he sat down next to her. "That's why you needed all that private time today, wasn't it? To confront him and then hope that he cooled off?"

She nodded. "I know I should have talked to you first, but you would just have wanted to come, and I didn't want him to get angry with you or feel that we were ganging up on him. I saw how happy you were when he came and apologized." In that weird boy speak of theirs. "Until he knew the truth, that was just borrowed time. I can still count on my fingers how many people are aware of what we are, and I think he appreciates being near the top of that list."

Harry shook his head. "It was still insane. You take on a great deal that isn't yours to suffer."

She shrugged. "He's always been your best friend."

Harry opened his mouth but closed it again without trying to rehash that old argument. Although they had all become friends in first year, Harry and Ron had been best mates for months before she came into the picture by way of a troll. Given how little she had in common with Ron, this had never really bothered her, but she had seen what a toll not having Ron around at all took on Harry. He needed someone to chat about Quidditch with and do all those boy things with and just have fun with sometimes. That person wasn't her—although she had actually performed some truly bizarre and rule-breaking actions over the years.

Harry's bedroom door opened and Draco appeared. Harry sat up, and Hermione was confronted with one of those dubiously rule-abiding moments.

"The strangest thing just happened," Draco announced. "I was in my bedroom trying not to feel cheated out of a real goodnight kiss with Harry when I realized there was another door in the room, a door that had never been there before. After performing all the proper scans because it's not every day a door just appears out of nowhere with no notice, I went through. And where did I find myself? In Harry's bedroom. What are the chances of that happening accidentally?"

Since Hermione was listening to Draco, she was unprepared when Harry tackled her, expelling the air from her lungs as she had an unexpectedly full-body encounter with the couch. Harry was giving her a big, awkward hug, she realized after a moment, and she struggled back into a sitting position once he'd lessened his grip a little.

"You're the best." He was beaming at her.

"You're welcome."

Draco sauntered fully into the room. "You convinced the castle to connect my bedroom with Harry's?"

Smiling, she nodded. "The castle's a great big romantic, really."

"S'a good thing the rest of the students don't know that," Harry observed. "Or don't know how to communicate with the castle, I guess."

She momentarily contemplated the grief that would cause.

"Can we invite the headmaster down to see our architectural changes at the end of the year?" Draco asked hopefully.

He sounded as childishly excited as Harry would if that had been his suggestion; perhaps they were rubbing off on one another. She thought both of them needed happier and more normal childhoods, and she didn't mind if they got some moments of fun now. Not that she wouldn't be cursing their boyishness at other moments, of course, when it seemed inappropriate to her….

She really was a bossy know-it-all, she realized.

"If that is your wish," she answered agreeably.

Once the year was over, there was nothing the headmaster could do about it, and if her plan succeeded, he would probably have a good understanding of what sort of a relationship she had with the castle by then.

There wouldn't be any cause for concern unless she used her powers for evil, rather than good, and that wasn't currently on her agenda. Although it was quite amusing to momentarily contemplate removing the door from Severus's quarters. Just as a thought.

She wondered how long it would take him to blast his way out—and if she'd be the first person he thought of to blame for the occurrence. Probably.

Harry and Draco bid her good night and disappeared back into Harry's bedroom. She doubted her connecting door was going to get any more use until the morning; it looked like Draco was going to be getting a lot more than a goodnight kiss. If they wound up sleep-deprived over the long-term, she supposed that was their business. At least she'd know they were having fun.

Retiring to her own room, she slept until almost four. Having decided that there was no time like the present to discover if her warding plan could actually be successful, she quickly performed her morning ablutions, dressed in jeans and a jumper, checked the Map for likely obstacles to her goal—but Severus was in bed—and headed out to find the precise centre of the castle.

The magical centre of Hogwarts was by no means the only location from which someone with adequate knowledge and power could view the wards, but Solace had written that it would be the easiest and least disorienting way for Hermione to do it the first time, and she intended to follow the woman's advice.

The stone initially felt cold beneath her bare feet, but she also felt more connected to the castle, just as Solace had indicated she would. Somehow, it was now easy to let her feet direct her to the focal point that she was searching for.

It turned out to be at the base of the stairs that led up to the headmaster's office, which answered for her the question of why the entrance was on the second floor with the large stairway up to the useable area at the top of the tower. Wanting to have direct access to the magical centre of the castle and to be able to protect it behind the griffin that protected the office made perfect sense to her. It was actually quite reassuring to know that when Umbridge had been barred from the headmaster's office for her short-lived tenure as headmistress, she had also been barred from the focal point of the castle's magic.

It didn't seem to be altogether under the headmaster's jurisdiction, though, between Hermione's magic and the castle's anticipation, there was no nonsense about guessing sweet names; the griffin simply moved out of her way without activating the stairwell or, she trusted, alerting the headmaster to her presence.

The stone returned to its original position quietly behind her, protecting her from sight and surprise attack while she attempted to access the school's wards. Closing her eyes, she slipped into a light meditation, letting all her worries slip away along with her normal awareness of the world. She completely unMasked her core—another good reason to be hidden behind stone—and reached out with her magic and her mind with the intent to join with the castle and feel its magic and its protections.

Breath left her in a rush. Not only could she sense the magic all around her, she could feel it, almost as though it were her magic. Her awareness stretched higher and lower and wider and further than she had ever felt before.

She opened her eyes.

It was like what she'd seen before had only been shadows and afterimages and it was only now that the real magic was displayed before her. Despite the fact that she was simply one little person enclosed in a stone tower on the second floor, she could see and feel the wards around the entire castle. Walls or no walls, she knew exactly how the entire castle was protected, knew the intricacies of all the entrances to Hogwarts, every window and door, including the dungeon passages, every secret passage that the Map displayed and several more that it didn't. She was aware of the approach that could be made by water, the cliffs that had to be scaled, the exact line through the entire Forest where the grounds ended, and the height that would have to be reached above the Quidditch pitch to go beyond the wards.

She was standing here in the middle of the castle, but she was everywhere else, too, spread out across the area that comprised Hogwarts and its grounds.

Sinking to the floor, the castle cradling her, she examined what was laid out before her in detail. She knew where everyone was, could sense concentrations of magic, could feel the strengths and weaknesses of all the wards that were in place, could see where there were areas of wear and damage.

If Hermione had been able to do this in second year, they could have avoided a great deal of grief because she could have told everyone straightaway where the Chamber of Secrets was. Parseltongue had not been one of the talents that Solace had inherited from her father, but that didn't mean she hadn't known of the area that he had created. She had woven what protections she was willing to around the area, but she had left it accessible to his Parseltongue-speaking heirs, as he had designed it.

Once Hermione was certain that she had all the information she needed concerning the state of the wards, she moved on to the next step, the slightly insane part that would actually tell her if the plan had any chance of success. Since it was also the part that could probably seriously injure her if she did it wrong, she had decided to give herself some time to get used to the castle and the wards before she attempted it.

She needed to find out if she could support the wards by herself as Solace had been able to do once upon a time. For all the description Solace had tried to give her in the journals, Hermione knew that she wasn't prepared for what this was going to feel like, so she'd determined to try it only for a short period. She thought a minute or two would give her a good idea of what it felt like and whether she would be capable of sustaining it with practice.

She drew a deep breath and followed Solace's instruction, performing this odd combination of pulling the magic to her and pushing herself out into the wards. It should have been completely contradictory but it felt right, somehow, as she was doing it.

Afterwards, as she lay slumped against the stone wall and tried to catch her breath, she was aware of several facts. This plan could work. She needed some backup if she didn't want to kill herself when she did this for real later. And her actions just now had woken Albus, Minerva, Filius, Severus, Draco, and Harry.

She supposed it was good news that there were that many people in the castle who were aware of a magical disturbance of the magnitude of the one which she had just caused.

Fawkes, she said, clearing her throat mentally and starting over. Tell Albus not to worry. That was me, and I'll be happy to explain myself this evening if he's free.

There was a moment of silence as Fawkes no doubt relayed her message, and then he said, Understood. I think it will need to be a good explanation, Girlicorne.

It is, she said simply.

Eight o'clock? he suggested.

She nodded mentally. We'll need Severus, Harry, Draco, Ron, Remus, Tonks, and Kingsley for this meeting, I think. The parts of Harry's group whom she trusted and who knew the truth about her and Harry. People whose input she valued, and maybe a bit of an attempt to tell enough people that there was less chance that Albus would try to dismiss her out of hand. Once plans are finalized, we'll need all the heads of house.

You're not going to tell Albus what you're planning before you tell everyone else, are you?

She smiled slightly and offered him a mental headshake with the consolation, But I'm not going to tell Harry, either. This story is best told only once, I assure you. Hopefully you'll be amused.

Whatever you say, Berit, he agreed, apparently already amused by her intention to run this meeting as she saw fit.

She made it to her feet after several attempts, feeling rather as though she'd been doing hours of hard labour or a couple days of strong magic instead of her couple of minutes' effort.

As she made her best attempt to walk entirely steadily back to her common room, she also realized that she had completely lost track of the time. For all she had been able to tell, she'd spent a few minutes examining the wards and getting used to the feel of accessing them. According to the Tempus spell, which she had never known to be wrong, it was just before half six. The activity in the hallways seemed to confirm it because she passed three students. That wasn't likely to be the case at half four in the morning, but at half six, it wasn't unreasonable to see two Ravenclaws heading to the library and a Gryffindor attempting to sneak back to his dormitory.

Since there wasn't precisely a morning curfew, she pretended not to see any of the other students. She couldn't blame the Ravenclaws for wanting to work in the library when it was particularly quiet, and she was sure that the Gryffindor would have had some sort of ready excuse. She wasn't in the mood for arguments.

Her time gap made her wonder, however, if she'd really spent only a few minutes handling the wards. At this precise moment, it seemed uncommonly difficult to summon her mental recollection of the time and carefully assess it, but perhaps she'd be able to do so later.

Back in the common room, she found that Harry and Draco had gathered and were looking expectant when she stepped through the doorway.

"You didn't answer your door," Harry accused.

"I wasn't behind it," she answered.

Draco snorted, and Harry shot him a nasty glance.

"I'd gathered, actually, thank you," he said with a slight edge in his voice for both of them. "Where were you?"

"Causing a disturbance strong enough to wake the both of you and several others," she answered evenly.

Harry blinked at her. "Right, then. What did you do?"

"I'm not at liberty to say at the moment," she answered. "We're meeting with Albus tonight at eight."

Harry and Draco exchanged glances.

"Okay," Harry said, sounding bemused. "I admit this conversation didn't go quite as I envisioned it would."

Hermione smiled. "Better not to have such expectations when you speak with me."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said with pretty good humour, although he rolled his eyes. Then he frowned faintly. "You all right?"

"I'll be fine," she said, wondering what she'd done to give herself away. "I'm just going to change and maybe do a little reading before breakfast."

His gaze narrowed. He couldn't possibly have missed the fact that she was getting herself out of the possibility of training, and the fact that she was coming in at half six to change the clothing she hadn't been wearing the night before sort of gave her words away as the excuse that they were.

But Harry wasn't her keeper, and she'd already promised him an explanation, so he let her pass with nothing more than a rather suspicious glance. Since there was no way he could look at her and divine what was going on, this didn't much bother her.

Once she'd made it to her room and shed her sweaty clothing, she decided that she needed to get properly clean. She was trembling a bit, as though her muscles had overexerted themselves, so she headed into the bathroom and filled the tub with very hot water and sank gratefully into it.

As the heat of the water soaked through her, she felt tension leaching away. He muscles relaxed and she went pleasantly limp. Steam curled up around her and she was able to forget, for a little while, all the worries that were waiting for her beyond the bathroom door. Right now, she could just rest and be calm.

It turned out to be fortunate that the bath was charmed; she awoke to the sound of the alarm spell as she was slipping beneath the water and came up spluttering. Right. This was going to be an interesting day.

She climbed out of the bathtub and got herself ready for the day for the second time that morning. The lassitude that she had felt in the bathtub seemed to be staying with her. Realizing that attempting to read in this condition was probably not the wisest course of action if she didn't want to wake up around dinner time, she checked on her Weresbane instead. The next step in the brewing process didn't need to begin until the evening but ensuring that it was still the appropriate colour and consistency took an adequate amount of thought without her actually having to do too much.

She joined Harry and Draco a few minutes before eight, and they headed up to breakfast together. Having to concentrate in order to put food on her plate, successfully use utensils to get the food to her mouth, and then chew the food adequately before swallowing it served to keep her awake, functional, and not likely to garner too many questions.

Potions class was the nearest she'd been to a conscious Severus since she'd nearly injured him on Friday. The unconscious healing lay between them as well, and she kept thinking that she should carefully examine him for signs of distress or particular anger towards her. Unfortunately, her concentration was entirely shot. It was all she could do to process the words he was speaking during his lecture, let alone observe any minute indications of discomfort on his part, and there seemed to be no way for her get her quill to move….

Hermione!

She started awake, and it took her a moment to realize what had happened; she had just fallen asleep in class. In Potions class. And Severus was now coming to a stand in front of her, and it was clear that he not only knew what had happened, he fully intended to embarrass her completely as a result of it.

May I do something rather rude? she asked hurriedly.

Go for it, Harry said cheerfully.

She wasn't entirely certain that he'd grasped that she meant to him rather than to Severus, but she didn't have time to be more explicit. As Severus stared down at her impatiently, she reached into Harry's mind and pulled to the forefront the minutes that she had missed. She scanned them at record speed, offered Severus what was probably a rather manic smile, and answered the question he had asked, even managing to make an explicit connection to the part of the lecture that she had also missed.

Since Severus was standing right in front of her and everyone else was further away, it was clear that no one could have given her a verbal hint. Severus could suspect that she and Harry had communicated mentally, but he couldn't openly accuse them of doing so in a public setting. While her hesitation may have been a little longer than usual, it wasn't outrageously so.

Severus appeared to reach the same conclusions, snarling, "Ten points from Gryffindor for your … lapse in attention, Miss Granger, and you will see me after class."

"Yes, sir," she murmured.

It was less than she deserved, really, and she hoped that she wasn't about to get a whole bunch of detentions once they were alone. That wasn't usually his modus operandi since he liked to make a student suffer the humiliation of the full punishment being assigned in front of all his or her peers but that didn't mean he wasn't about to make an exception in her case.

Her embarrassment and the knowledge that certain death awaited her were she to fall asleep for a second time kept Hermione awake through the rest of the lecture, and by dint of absolute concentration and frequent mental nudges from Harry, she managed to make her potion.

It helped that she'd made the Draught of Living Death before and also that she'd done all her assigned reading weeks ago, with a refresher on the weekend. She didn't think she would have been up for anything unexpected, but she was still capable of following directions and achieving an anticipated outcome.

It would have been highly embarrassing to fail at the potion after almost failing to answer a question in class. Severus had definitely seen her sleeping, she realized, because it was rather atypical for him to have sought a response from her at all.

She had a little bit of trouble with her coordination bottling the potion and getting it to the front of the classroom to submit it, but she managed it through sheer force of will. It felt as though she'd been dosed with her own potion and was desperately trying to fight it. Given her experience with sleeping draughts in general, it suggested this was a losing battle, but despite the fact that her limbs felt leaden, her eyelids had ten-pound weights tied to them, and her brain felt as though it was stuffed with cotton, she was determined not to make this situation with Severus worse, and that meant forcing herself to function correctly.

Once the class was over, the rest of the students filed out, although Harry, Ron, and Draco left with serious looks of misgiving. She remembered a day when just this occurrence would have made Draco positively gleeful; they'd come a long way since then.

She looked up at Severus with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed as he positively glared at her impatiently from the front of the classroom. Well, some of them had come a long way.

Are you sure you're going to be all right? Harry asked at the door.

I'll be fine, she lied as positively as she could. Really, Harry, if you refuse to leave, you'll just earn yourself a detention, and he'd dismiss you anyway.

Harry offered a mental shrug. I'd do it anyway.

Thank you, love, but it's for me to fight this battle.

With a last reluctant look, Harry was out the door, and Severus made sure it slammed shut on his heels. She propped herself up against her desk and waited for the lecture to start.

"Your personal business is none of my concern, Miss Granger," Severus began in a scathing tone.

If she were more awake, she was certain she'd have a smart comeback for that. As it was, she simply nodded.

His gaze narrowed in a manner remarkably similar to how Harry's had this morning. Severus stepped closer to her.

"As such," he hissed, "I expect your personal life not to come into my classroom, and that means curtailing whatever activities are preventing you from sleeping at the appropriate time. Do you understand me?"

There was an insult in there, she was sure of it, but it seemed rather out of her reach.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"You could at least have taken a Pepper-Up," he ground out.

Huh. Some fuzzy part of her brain told her that might not help in the particular condition she was in, but it hadn't so much as occurred to her until he suggested it.

"Hadn't thought of that," she answered honestly.

It was apparently an unwise confession to make because it resulted in Severus's glare growing even more ferocious.

"The possibility of rendering yourself functional for my class slipped your mind, did it?" he demanded silkily.

Even in the state she was currently in, she recognized that answering that question in the affirmative would be unwise. With an effort, she pulled herself together enough to get a relatively long sentence out.

"I hadn't realized the extent before I got here."

Although, really, falling asleep in the bath should probably have been an indication. If she hadn't been so bloody tired, maybe she would have been in a fit state to notice that she was in no fit state to go to class.

"You don't really think I can let your falling asleep go unpunished, do you, Miss Granger?" he demanded.

Did she have to think about it? And, she frowned, he had punished her. He'd taken away points, and that was a punishment last time she had checked.

Blinking up at him, she found that he was staring at her expectantly, and she realized that he had asked her a question.

"I answered you," she said slowly as she managed to cobble the words together. "I made the potion. I was correct."

"You answered the question," he said angrily, "because Mr. Potter told you what to say."

He'd told her what Severus had asked, not what to say. But surely the man knew that even in the state she was currently in, Harry wouldn't be telling her Potions answers. So really, that was just semantics, and she didn't have the energy to argue semantics right now.

Severus was doing that looming thing. And that glaring thing, the one that turned people to stone. If only she wasn't about to nod off, it might have had some sort of effect on her.

"You fell asleep in my class, Miss Granger," he pronounced fatefully. "No one has ever had the temerity to do so before."

Oh, for heaven's sake. It hadn't been temerity. It had been mental and magical exhaustion, but just the thought of explaining that to him was exhausting, so she remained silent and tried to look politely curious.

His expression informed her that she hadn't succeeded. His face twisted into a smirk.

"You are entirely correct, of course, in that you did answer my question and brew your potion correctly."

She blinked. Even her desperately sleep-yearning brain knew this couldn't be as good as it sounded.

He continued: "So I'll leave it up to you once more as to whether or not you are further punished for your infraction."

Um, her vote was not.

He explained the catch. "Without falling asleep, you must sit quietly at your desk without aid of any kind until the end of the lunch hour."

She wanted to cry. The only chance she had had to be functional in Charms this afternoon was to crash at lunch. There was no possible way that she was going to be able to stay awake doing nothing but sitting at her desk. She was pretty sure Severus was well aware of that fact, so there was no reason to waste energy pointing it out to him.

"Very well, sir," she managed as she sort of slid into her desk.

Asking what would happen to her when she failed didn't seem that worthwhile, either; it wouldn't change anything, and it would take unnecessary mouth movements.

Severus, still smirking, sat down at his desk and set about grading. She wished she were grading. The job she did of it would probably not be very satisfactory, but forcing herself to attempt it might keep her from collapsing.

Harry, she said, even the minor mental exertion making her feel more lethargic, I'm going to be in the Potions classroom until Charms.

What's he done? Harry demanded, sounding instantly aggrieved.

I just have to sit here, that's all, she said as soothingly as she could manage.

You don't sound so good, he said worriedly.

I'm fine, she reassured him, infusing every bit of energy she had into her tone. I'll see you in Charms.

If you're sure…. he said with clear reluctance.

A mental nod, and then he was gone. She reached out again.

Fawkes, Castina, I have an impossible task for you. I need to spend the next sixty minutes awake.

She felt the mental connection with Castina form.

Berit, what did you do to yourself?

Overextended a little, she admitted.

Yes, if by little, she means she disturbed the magic of the entire castle, Fawkes put in.

That was you? Castina let out a huff of laughter. I see. And why is it you cannot sleep now?

Hermione hesitated for a moment, and Fawkes beat her to an explanation.

Bat-man has imposed this punishment.

There was something funny about that, but the thought trickled away before she could fully grasp it.

I will come and explain matters to him!

Hermione was momentarily frozen by the image of her herd mare galloping into the castle and down to the dungeons in order to do this.

If there's anyone who's going to put him in his place, it will be me, Fawkes declared. I'm already in the castle, and I can be there momentarily.

No! Hermione exclaimed when she'd recovered from her shock. No unicorns in the castle, and no flying down here, Fawkes. That's the last thing I need, because he'll—

Severus spoke very sharply. "Granger, you will tell Potter to mind his own business if he does not wish to find himself in detention with me."

She thought it was a bit much to be telling her what she could do with her own mind.

"Not Harry," she corrected looking over at Severus with an effort. "Fawkes 'n Castina."

"You've got a phoenix and a unicorn helping you stay awake?" he asked, sounding nonplussed.

Hermione nodded, speaking with difficulty. "'Stina wanted to come tell you to let me sleep, but I told her no unicorns in the castle."

Severus frowned. "Miss Granger, what has brought you to this state?"

Hermione shook her very muzzy head. "Can't say."

"Can't you?"

Oh, dear. That was the arctic tone of voice. She shook her head again. "Meeting with Albus. Tell you then."

This was apparently interesting enough to get Severus out of his seat. He was suddenly right in front of her, and her head flopped back on her neck as she tried to look up at him.

"Hermione, did you cause the magical disturbance that woke me this morning?"

Her head wobbled a little in her attempt at a nod.

"You've not gotten any rest since then?"

It seemed to her as though her attempt to shake her head produced about the same movement as her attempt to nod had done, but Severus seemed to understand her.

"Up you get."

He wanted her to stand up? At this precise moment, that task seemed beyond monumental, but she did her best. Which amounted, she found, to a movement of all of about an inch in the upward direction before it became too much for her.

Suddenly, hands were on her arms, pulling her to her feet, and when she stumbled, the world wobbled completely and then she was no longer standing on the ground.

"What you doing?" she asked, finding it even more difficult to keep her eyes open now that she was horizontal.

"You need to sleep." His voice was low.

Yes, she did. How nice of him to point this out. And here was something solid and black that she could set her head against. She allowed her eyes to fall closed, relieved beyond measure that she was no longer being told she couldn't give in to unconsciousness, and it rushed up immediately to meet her.

Hermione opened her eyes, fully awake in an instant but with, momentarily, absolutely no idea where she was. It was dark, but all her senses kicked in at once, informing her that she was in Severus's office. Looking down, she found that she was on a transfigured couch, and a Tempus confirmed what her internal clock was already telling her: she'd slept the afternoon away. It was now almost a quarter to five in the evening, and she'd missed Charms and dinner.

On the plus side, she was feeling brilliant from a magical and mental perspective. The world felt sharp and in focus again, and it only took her all of ten seconds of contemplation to realize that she'd supported the wards for almost thirty minutes in the morning. It had been self-preservation rather than intention which had caused her to release them, and it was the awkwardness of that release which had resulted in the disturbance which had woken those attuned enough to notice.

Sitting up, she found that the blanket which had been covering her slid down to her lap. She stared down at the black fabric, letting out a soft huff of laughter as she realized that Severus conjured black blankets. A little harder to mentally wrap her brain around was the fact that Severus had conjured a blanket for her at all, let alone carried her into his office and let her sleep there for hours. Alone, to all appearances. Of course, given that she had fallen asleep in his arms after becoming incapable of articulating grammatically correct sentences, perhaps he had good reason not to be too worried that she was going to run amok in here.

She rose and nudged the blanket with her magic, letting it unravel back into nothing since it was conjured rather than transfigured. Examining the couch she had been lying on, it didn't take her long to transfigure it back into the straight-backed chair that it had once been and return it to its position in front of Severus's desk.

Masking herself, she slipped out of the door and into the deserted hallway. She wanted to go straight to Filius and apologize for her truancy, but since she didn't know what, if anything, had been said to him on her behalf, she knew it would be wiser to wait. Since Severus had surprised her by letting her sleep, it seemed equally possible at this point that he had made excuses for her.

She therefore went back to her quarters and found that Harry and Draco had returned from dinner. As the gargoyle reformed, she unMasked herself, and Harry grinned at her immediately as he rose to his feet and came to greet her.

"'Mione, you're all right, I'm so glad."

He pulled into a hug, and over his shoulder, she saw Draco rolling his eyes.

"I told you Severus didn't kill her and hide the body," the blond Slytherin said haughtily. "It's not his style."

Her lip curled up into a smile of her own as Harry finally released her.

"It's hard to tell with that man. I'm sure he could have used the body parts for potions ingredients, and I'm pretty sure that's the only excuse he needs."

Neither she nor Draco tried to argue this point.

"He said you were fine when I demanded to know what he'd done with you," Harry continued, "but he wasn't exactly forthcoming on the details."

She eyed him with wry amusement. "If that's the attitude you used when you confronted him, I can see why."

He looked ever-so-slightly sheepish but mostly defiant. "You do seem better, though. He said we might not see you until the meeting tonight. What happened?"

Unless she made up a really outrageous lie—and it would be impossible for her and Severus to have had wild and crazy sex while he was teaching in the afternoon—Harry wasn't going to let this go, so she gave in to the inevitable.

"Nothing very extraordinary. He let me sleep."

Harry waited a beat, blinked. "What?"

She nodded, smiling slightly. "Told you. I was very run down, and what I desperately needed, as you might have gathered by what happened in Potions class, was to sleep. Severus allowed it."

"But." Harry was spluttering. "He kept you after class to let you sleep?"

Her smile deepened. "Essentially, yes. And now, if you don't mind, I need to continue with the Weresbane."

They let her go, Draco's rising to tug Harry back to the couch probably what prevented the dark-haired boy from coming after her.

She wondered what the chances were that she had woken in the perfect time to get back to her quarters and work on the next stage of the crucial potion. But if it was her subconscious which had woken her, perhaps it had all those details worked out.

At least she had had the forethought to test her plan out before she presented it to anyone, or before, Heaven forbid, she actually needed it. She could just imagine how disastrous it would have been had she fallen asleep in the middle of what she fully intended to be the final battle.

She was hungrier than normal, too, and she realized she was going to have to spend the night out with her herd once this was all over. Her magic levels had been improved a great deal from earlier in the day, but just as her stomach was informing her that there was a big hole in it that required food, she was also getting that itchy feeling that told her that it had been too long since she had last been outside as a unicorn. She needed to stock up on all her usual forms of nourishment.

She finished with the potion just after seven and rejoined Harry and Draco in the common room. She asked the house-elves for a meal, and the boys had tea so that she wouldn't be eating all on her own. Plus, as Harry pointed out, if they were going to a meeting with the headmaster where there was going to be a big revelation, they all needed to fortify themselves. Given the group of people who were going to be together in one room and the news she was going to relay, she couldn't disagree.

They headed up to Albus's office once Kingsley's arrival was announced on their bracelets. Hermione refused to be the last person to arrive but also didn't want to be sitting and chatting unnecessarily with Albus since she knew he'd try to get answers out of her before the others arrived so that he could maintain his appearance of omniscience. She thought he'd do fine with his usual method of nodding, twinkling, and making wise-sounding remarks.

Harry and Draco looked at her funny when she paused for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, caught fleetingly unawares by the hum of magic there. She didn't understand how she couldn't have been aware of it before this morning. Taking the revolving staircase up, they found that Kingsley was not the only one with the headmaster; Minerva was there as well.

The look in Albus's eyes said he was prepared to do battle on this issue.

"She is my deputy," he said solemnly.

Right now, the Gryffindor head of house would be the only person in the room who wasn't aware of her and Harry's status. Given what she had to talk about, that would be a serious handicap.

"You're not trying to force my hand again, are you Albus?" she asked with deceptive mildness.

Harry had shifted slightly away from Draco and closer to Hermione so that they presented a united front.

Albus's eyes were rather twinkle-free, and Minerva, Draco, and Kingsley appeared to have decided to stay well out of it.

"I think you would do well to take her into your confidence," Albus said gravely.

"We might not disagree with you," Harry answered, "but the choice is ours to make."

"Is there a better time?" he inquired mildly.

Hermione crossed the room, Harry at her side, until there was only the width of Albus's large wooden desk separating them.

You are very old and very wise, she said in his head, using a combination of Legilimency and MindSpeech that allowed both her and Harry to communicate with the Headmaster. But you must not cross us in this.

She and Harry conferred hastily, and Harry announced their agreement: We will not insult Minerva now by excluding her, but that is for her and not for you.

She finished with what amounted, she knew, to a threat. Do not force us to make a different decision next time; we don't want to fight you on this issue, but that does not mean we will not.

He tried to pull his mind away from theirs, but she did not allow it until he gave a reluctant mental nod of concession.

Out loud, she admitted, "Now does seem to have worked out to an appropriate time."

Hermione smiled at Minerva and gestured towards a small couch that the headmaster had evidently conjured for this meeting, as there would be a fair number of people in attendance. It was placed at an angle in front of the fireplace and looking towards Albus's desk.

"Have a seat," she offered.

The older woman sat, and the two of them joined her as Hermione threw up protections so that the rest of the room could not hear or see them. Everyone else might basically know what they were going to say, but Minerva deserved to hear the information as cleanly as possible given that the timing had been taken out of their hands.

Hermione was momentarily distracted by the fact that Draco had sat down next to Kingsley and struck up a conversation about, improbably as it seemed, Malfoy Dark artefacts. She had to give him points for his nonchalance. Resolutely, she turned away from the rest of the room to face her head of house.

"Sorry about that," Hermione said. "I thought we could do with a little privacy."

"Albus has gone and done that thing," Harry contributed, "where he puts people on the spot to find out really important information. It's better this way."

And then she and Harry explained.

The Scottish woman took the news stoically, not batting an eyelash over Draco or Severus, certainly behaving better than Remus and Ron, and not reacting with the glee that Albus had displayed, either.

Minerva considered the matter for a long moment and then pronounced, "I see why you chose to keep the matter private. You've done an exemplary job of protecting yourselves. I take it you wish the secret to be contained as long as possible?"

She and Harry nodded. "We wouldn't have kept it from you forever, but we prefer to disseminate the information at a time of our choosing."

Harry grinned. "And right before this meeting was kind of ... dodgy timing."

Minerva's lips quirked. "Albus has always liked to make his point ... dramatically."

Harry frowned faintly. "And we will match him as necessary."

Minerva eyed them shrewdly, and then gave a sharp nod.

"Severus doesn't appear to be here yet."

They looked up and found that that was indeed the case. Tonks and Remus had arrived, though, and Tonks had taken up the seat next to Kingsley which Draco had vacated presumably because he wished to sit next to Harry, or perhaps because this allowed Tonks to sit next to Remus. Draco had moved to the small couch on other side of the room from the one that Harry and Hermione were currently on.

"Are you anxious for the meeting to start?" Harry asked.

Minerva's tone was quite close to gleeful for the normally stern woman. "I think Severus really needs to be here when I give you fifty points apiece for protecting yourselves and your fellow students."

Hermione knew that this was Severus's New Year's attack on her and Harry coming back to bite the man. Minerva looked positively devilish, and Hermione was reminded that crossing her head of house could be almost as bad as crossing the Slytherin one. When it came down to it, they were both very opinionated and fierce, and it amused her how much they liked to enact their die-hard rivalry.

"You could do it now and see how long it takes him to notice," Harry suggested with a sly smile.

Hermione laughed softly. "We all know he'll notice the moment he passes the hourglasses when he heads back down to the dungeons."

Harry adopted an innocent expression. "We could time him and see how long it takes him to get back up here and fly off the handle."

Minerva's lips twitched, and Hermione shook her head in amusement at his disingenuousness.

"Behave," Hermione admonished. "We're all going to be stuck in this meeting together, and it will go better if we're all on our best behaviour."

"I feel properly chastised now."

Hermione blushed faintly, for she had not intended the comment in question to be directed at her head of house, though she realized now that it could be taken to apply to either of them.

She cleared her throat, and said as breezily as she could manage, "Then my work here is done."

She released her spells and saw that while she had not been paying attention, Ron had arrived, and he and Draco were awkwardly sitting on either end of the couch, leaving a clearly defined space for Harry. Exchanging an amused glance with her, Harry sat down in the vacant area.

There doesn't seem to be room for you. Unless you'd like to sit on my lap?

Tempting, she said wryly, but I think I'll be spending this meeting on my feet.

The only person missing now was Severus, and as the clock on the wall began to chime the hour, he swept in.

As he passed Remus, Hermione distinctly heard a low growl. Looking at Remus in astonishment, she saw from the glare he was sending Severus's way that there was every chance it had indeed been he who had made the noise.

Without thought, she smacked him up the side of the head magically. His head had almost rebounded to its original position when Tonks smacked him again, winking at Hermione as her hair went green.

Hermione hid a smile as Severus continued without any indication that he'd noticed anything amiss. Seeing the seats that were vacant, he ended up joining Minerva on her couch, although he looked entirely disdainful of the pink floral pattern it was composed of. Hermione made a mental note to arrive early enough in the future to do the furniture conjuring.

She took up a position to the left of Albus's desk, far enough back that she could see him as well as the rest of the room. She wasn't about to ask him to vacate his seat, but she wanted to be in a good position to share the necessary information with everyone.

He went through the obligatory offer of tea and lemon drops, followed by the usual small talk as Albus ensured that those Order members who didn't live in the castle were still in good health. Then he checked in with the castle members, just in case something had gone awry when he hadn't noticed, Hermione supposed, and they suddenly wanted to share this information with him before this very important meeting.

Hermione took the opportunity to cast extra wards around his office, knowing that he was likely noticing but hardly going to interrupt his own speeches to call her own it.

It was twenty-two minutes after Albus had officially begun the meeting that he finally turned to her with a smile.

"Now, I believe Hermione wanted to speak to all of you."

It was hard to miss how he'd distanced himself from those others who were in the office, as though he knew what she was going to say while the rest of them remained in ignorance. She nevertheless smiled at him in thanks before looking to the rest of the people facing her.

She spoke very seriously. "A number of factors have conspired to bring us to this point, and most of what I have to say is so wrapped up in itself that there is no clear beginning. I'll start, I suppose, with how I mean for us to end. The wards surrounding Hogwarts are the original ones that were cast a thousand years ago. They have suffered centuries of damage, and the last several decades have been particularly difficult. Their current status is unacceptable. The wards must be re-cast."

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Meetings

Complete silence greeted Hermione's pronouncement. Albus was the first person to find his voice.

"The wards have held for a thousand years; they were designed for longevity, and they are strengthened when necessary."

"It's true that they were designed to be self-sustaining for as long as possible," she answered, "but nothing lasts forever. They have held this long, as you have said, but that does not mean they are capable of continuing indefinitely. You test periodically to ensure that the wards have not been breached because those instructions were passed down through the ages from headmaster to headmaster. There are still areas that are worn, significantly weakened over the years, or badly damaged. I suspect that Voldemort may have made some effort at sabotage when he was here. If he were to attack at the right place with sufficient numbers, there is every chance he could break through."

Albus was regarding her with narrowed eyes that were not twinkling. "You are speaking with a great deal of certainty."

Hermione inclined her head. "I know more about the Hogwarts wards than anyone alive."

"What makes you think so?" Minerva asked mildly.

Hermione wondered if Minerva had felt it her duty to ask the question as the deputy headmistress, saving Albus the effort.

"The full information on the wards was hidden," Hermione answered. "It was revealed to me."

"You just happened across the full details of the school wards."

She had to actually stop herself from smiling. Severus's question was as dry as the Sahara; if this were a moment of school discipline, any student would know that it was about to go very, very poorly. Fortunately for Hermione, it had happened just as she said, and for all intents and purposes, she was in charge of this meeting.

"Essentially, yes," she admitted. "I saw some hidden wards that intrigued me, and when I investigated, I found the information."

No need to tell everyone about that minor "seeing magic" detail.

"Could it be found by just anyone?" Severus asked, still sounding as though he didn't believe the events or the manner in which she was saying they had occurred.

She supposed it did sound a bit like the old "A hippogriff ate my homework" excuse.

Hermione shook her head. "There were a number of requirements tied into the wards that prevented the vast majority of the population from getting through them even had they found them—which would be unlikely. To get past the first layer of the wards, you need to be a Pure Adult. Based on how they were hidden, though, and what was hidden…." Hermione sighed as she admitted, "They were left for me—specifically—to find."

The look on Severus's face was one of outright doubt. Varying degrees of scepticism were painted across the other faces in the room. Even Harry, Draco, and Ron looked rather puzzled.

"It sounds unlikely, I know," she admitted. "But when you're addressed by name when you open a thousand-year-old document, it tends to be rather convincing."

Remus and Severus started to speak at the same time, and rather than conceding to the other man, as Remus would normally have done in Hermione's experience, the Gryffindor just kept talking. Loudly.

"Isn't it possible that the document was addressing another Hermione?"

The mild tone at the overbearing volume was a little disconcerting.

"No," she denied. "They were addressed to me."

She glanced at Fawkes, and she didn't even have to say anything for him to understand.

The journals named you Berit.

She nodded mentally. I suppose I'll have to talk with Castina.

It had never occurred to her before that perhaps Castina had named her for a reason.

"They identified 'Hermione Granger' specifically?" Albus inquired shrewdly.

She gazed assessingly at Fawkes. I don't need to have a talk with you, do I?

Fawkes streaked across the room and perched upon her shoulder.

"They identified me directly, yes," she said to Albus, though this did not, of course, quite answer his question.

I was not at Hogwarts at that time, Girlicorne, Fawkes answered her.

She would accept that for now, although it did not precisely answer her question, either. Smiling at him, she asked wryly, Did I look as though I needed some support?

He shrugged. The view is better from over here.

Hermione chose to accept the support rather than correcting that ridiculous statement.

"How is it that you explain this miraculous occurrence?" Severus demanded.

With a slight grimace, she said reluctantly, "Loathe as I am to admit it, I have to concede the existence of some legitimate Seers."

Ron let out a guffaw. "Think we could get Trelawney out of her tower to hear that?"

She couldn't help grinning at him, although she refrained from making any of the comments about legitimate Seers which she was thinking very loudly.

The huff of amusement from Fawkes, the slight cough from Albus, and the wide grin from Harry said that it was entirely loud enough to broadcast to other MindSpeakers. She was sure that Severus had got it, too, he was just better at hiding it.

Oops, she thought unrepentantly.

Harry spoke up. "So you're saying one of the Founders was a Seer? And you found letters addressed to you from them?"

"I found journals," she corrected, "from the creator of the wards, from one Pure Adult to another. None of the Founders were Seers."

Albus, Severus, and Minerva spoke in union. "The Founders created the wards."

"No, they didn't, though you can see that they were successful in perpetuating that myth. In fact, none of them had a particular affinity for warding, and they accepted that an expert would be beneficial."

"They wouldn't trust someone off the street to cast the wards that were going to protect Hogwarts for centuries," Severus said dismissively.

She was beginning to seriously prefer Kingsley and Tonks's style of meeting attendance, silently listening to all the information she had to share before offering commentary of any kind.

"Nor did they," she responded. "The wards were cast by Salazar's daughter, Solace."

"He didn't have a daughter." This was Draco.

"Salazar had only sons." Severus.

She shook her head. "Solace was his youngest, his only daughter. His sons were all in their teens, and she was a late baby. He and his wife had been travelling, I do not know the precise details, but he was away when she went into labour. She died giving birth to Solace while attended by a Muggle midwife. He was … distraught, but his daughter was a solace to him. He'd always wanted a little girl, and he spoiled her tremendously. They were very happy."

Solace had conjured very strong images of that time, and Hermione wondered if she had known that she would have to counter a millennium of misinformation and the ingrained prejudices of a Gryffindor. It had at least worked so far in preventing any of the Slytherins in the room from telling her off further.

"She wished to stay at the school with her father, and he indulged her, considering no marriage contracts. But once she became a Pure Adult, he began to contemplate the unions she could make that would strengthen two pure-blood lines and which would bring his family glory and power."

"That's barbaric!" Harry couldn't seem to contain himself.

Draco stiffened at his side, as did Severus across the room. The former, Hermione was pretty sure, had been bound in a similar contract until he broke with his family, and Severus no doubt saw Harry's words as an attack against Salazar in particular.

You're going to owe Draco an apology for that, Hermione told Harry quietly.

She hurried on, struggling for a diplomatic explanation since all her feminist hackles had been raised when she had read about it, no matter all the mitigating circumstances she also understood. "It was an established practice at the time. Unfortunately for all Salazar's plans, Solace fell in love with a Muggle. She squandered her gift, as her father saw it. He forbade her to marry, but she did so anyway. He disowned her, striking her from all records." She eyed Draco and Severus. "This left even those who proudly live in his house to believe he had no daughters, for Solace left the castle and went to live with her husband."

Hermione noticed that Harry's hand had curled around Draco's, and the blond had allowed the contact.

"Solace had four children, three of whom were magical. Years passed, but even a decade didn't reconcile Salazar to this desertion, and he wasn't prepared to admit the suitability of his daughter's choice even in the face of his clever, magical grandchildren. In his bitterness and anger, he tried to have them barred from the school. Since Solace had been disowned, she had ceased to have any status in the wizarding community."

Severus was the first to catch on. "Leaving Salazar free to argue against the inclusion of Muggle-borns at the school."

Hermione nodded. "The resentment that had started with the death of his wife burned only brighter because of the Muggle who'd stolen his daughter. The other Founders refused to be swayed by his arguments, and Helga and Godric invited Solace back to the castle with her husband and children, the safest environment for such a magical family. Salazar resented this and eventually broke with the school completely."

"You're saying the entire issue of pure-blood is based on a ... misunderstanding?" Draco said, sounding horrified.

"Yes," she said, "and no."

Harry had a sudden coughing fit, and she realized exactly who she sounded like in that moment. It was turning out to be quite handy that she'd taught Harry Occlumency because she wouldn't otherwise have understand half of the things he found funny. Albus was looking awfully twinkly.

She resumed. "Salazar did have a strong belief in the superiority of wizards; this was exacerbated by what happened to his wife and daughter. Blaming Muggles was the easy way to assign fault. He may well have decided to try to block Muggle-borns from the school without further prompting, as he saw it as weakening strong wizarding lines and important wizarding traditions. Solace was a catalyst."

Severus broke in. "If any of this is true. The person whose journals you were reading claims to have been conveniently disowned, allowing her story to rely on the fact that no information about her exists. Very clever."

"Although it is true that there is room for doubt," she agreed, "I would not bring this information to you if I did not believe it to be true. You might like to know, as a point of interest, Severus, that everything she said about you has been perfectly accurate."

There was no damn way she was going to call him "professor" when everyone in the room knew that they'd slept together. Solace's prophetic remarks about her difficult "mate" had, indeed, been spot on.

She had to wonder what it must have been like for the woman, seeing events and people this far into the future. The Slytherin hadn't written much about the experience itself, just included those details which made Hermione, however reluctantly at first, believe in her.

Severus's eyes had narrowed to slits, and Kingsley spoke up. Hermione was pretty sure it was solely so that Severus didn't manage it first.

"Perhaps it would be beneficial for others to examine these journals."

She shook her head. "That's not possible."

It was Severus who snarled, "And why not?"

"The journals have a variety of protections on them. Only Pure Adults can touch them and—"

"Mr Potter, then," Severus snapped.

As though hearing it from Harry would convince him.

"That was only one of the protections," she said sharply. If he'd let her finish a sentence, he would know that. "None of you can read them."

As she'd understood the spells, she could, in fact, cast the proper inclusion charms—and it would be especially easy to do for her "mate"—but she wasn't about to go there right now.

"We've come across some charmed belongings in our line of work," Tonks said, indicating herself and Kingsley, "possessions that can only be accessed by certain people. But normally it's either charmed to the owner or charmed to a family line. I've never heard of a possession being charmed to a person who doesn't exist yet."

She looked to Kingsley, who shook his head in agreement, and they both looked to Hermione, who tried not to sigh, because she was pretty sure this wasn't going to go over terribly well.

"As I told you, Solace had one unmagical child. This was her youngest, Serenity. Serenity married a Muggle, just as her mother had done before her, but since she wasn't magical herself, she eventually chose to join the Muggle world rather than remain in the magical one. Serenity had only one child, who possessed no magical talents either, and so it continued down and down the line, with only one child, one daughter, who was always born without magic, until the fact that there was ever any magical blood in the line was lost completely." She smiled faintly. "Many pure-bloods would no doubt tell you that the tainted Muggle blood had obliterated all magical ability forever."

Severus looked as though he wanted to ask what the hell this spurious history lesson had to do with anything.

"But they would be wrong?" Harry prompted.

"But on September nineteenth, 1979, they were proved wrong," Hermione answered.

Harry blinked. "When you were born."

She nodded.

"You're descended from Salazar Slytherin," Draco repeated flatly.

She nodded again. "With the veriest fraction of a percent of Salazar's blood in me."

Without warning, Draco dissolved into laughter. They watched with surprise as his aesthetic features gave way to complete and utter mirth, and Hermione found herself grinning stupidly just like Harry was doing. Ron looked stunned.

The Slytherin finally wiped tears from the corner of his eyes and sat up properly again. "Sorry. But please tell me we're going to let the Dark Lord know that before he dies."

"I'll put it down on the list," Harry promised as solemnly as he could.

Hermione resumed her explanation feeling considerably better than she had done before Draco's attack of laughter. "There are blood protections on the journals excluding those without Slytherin blood. The Pure Adult qualifier, as you might have guessed, ensures that Voldemort couldn't have accessed them."

"About that," Harry spoke up, sounding confused. "I thought Voldemort was the last of Slytherin's line. That was the whole point about Parseltongue and his being the Heir of Slytherin, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, but you forget that Solace was disowned."

Draco, Ron, and the other pure-bloods in the room were nodding faintly. They understood a magical disownment better than she and Harry ever could.

"On top of that, Serenity went to live in the Muggle world. They were always daughters and thus being married into other families with names changing every generation. They were never prolific, and they … slipped between the cracks, I guess you could say, beyond the observation of the wizarding world and out of memory really."

"Then how did you gather this family tree?" Harry questioned.

Hermione smiled. "Solace outlined it in her journals."

"But how could she possibly write down her entire line after her when she was the beginning of it?"

Hermione smiled. "Because she was a witch. Because she was a Seer. You've seen magical family trees before."

"It can't be wrong?" Harry asked.

"It's not impossible," Hermione conceded, "but these sorts of spells are usually pretty accurate. I can attest to the fact that she got my name right, as well as those of my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great greats. I haven't had the chance to investigate further than that yet. I know it's a lot to accept, but you can't really doubt that she cast the wards because she outlined exactly how they were made, how to access them, and how to re-cast them; if I wished, I could bring them down right now."

"Impossible," Severus said, and Albus looked as though he were thinking it.

"Unlikely, I know, but what do you think happened this morning? Before I came to you, I wanted to verify that I could do what would be necessary. I can. Therefore, once all the students have left at the end of the school year, we'll prepare to re-cast the wards."

"You mean to leave Hogwarts completely unprotected? Are you insane?" Severus asked.

Hermione smiled brightly and answered, "Yes. What better opportunity for Voldemort to attack than that?"

Even Severus didn't immediately rally, and she was able to continue with no interruptions.

"Voldemort will arrive with his Death Eaters and all the foul creatures he's dragged into the fight. He'll find all the wards down. He'll find that he can reach the grounds without resistance and will think he can take us by surprise or at least overpower us with his numbers."

"The castle wards can't be re-cast quickly enough to protect us," Albus pointed out.

"No, they can't," she agreed. "But if I buffer them and render them inert, then they will appear to be down. They will be in abeyance rather than actually removed, but no one will be able to tell the difference. I can then restore the wards, trap everyone, and we can defeat Voldemort once and for all."

Severus sneered a question once more. "In the midst of reading these outdated journals, you've come up with a way to defeat the Dark Lord, have you?"

"This is why I've brought you here," she said, ignoring the tone in which the question had been asked. "This is why I risked accessing the wards. When we get Voldemort here, we will defeat him once and for all."

"How?" Harry asked.

She faced them bleakly. "Using a spell that was hidden immediately upon its creation a thousand years ago. I shan't explain to you how it works, but I assure you that it will defeat Voldemort."

Solace had been certain that it would.

"You can't know that," Albus said, eyes piercingly blue. "I have searched for years for such a spell."

"And did not find this one, for it was hidden for me. Fuelled by our magic and our intent, the spell will pass judgement on one of our family members. And when Voldemort is found wanting, he will be destroyed utterly."

"What 'our'?" Draco asked. "You're the only one related to Voldemort."

Harry gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs, which Draco protested with a hissed, "It's true."

"You're mostly right," she answered with a sad smile. "It takes the blood of three magical blood relatives to enact this spell. She left me enough of her blood for the spell."

"That's two, then," Draco pointed out. "You said you needed three, and as Harry pointed out already, Voldemort was the last of the Slytherin line bar you."

She nodded. "And this is where Voldemort has spelled his own doom."

"My blood," Harry said suddenly. "You mean to use my blood."

Hermione nodded at him, and there was a restless shuffle around the room as everyone else seemed to remember just how Voldemort had resurrected himself.

"So that's what I've asked you all here for," Hermione summarized. "I have a plan, and I believe it will succeed. I put it before you."

She had every intention of going through with the plan whether they agreed to it or not; she could manipulate the wards without them if she had to, and she was certain that she could convince Harry to go along with her. But she believed that there was a better chance of success with everyone's support.

Albus was still regarding her with eyes that were much sharper than normal. "This certainly gives us a great deal to consider, Hermione. I'm sure you'll understand if we need some time."

"Of course," she said agreeably.

He wasn't going to refuse her; he'd been looking for a way to completely defeat Voldemort for years, and she was presenting it to him.

The headmaster continued. "I'm sure we don't need to tell anyone that this information is extremely sensitive and must be kept strictly confidential."

There was a murmur of agreement around the room as the meeting broke up at the clear dismissal. Kingsley and Remus left together, the latter man not even trying to come with a reason to stay with Tonks under the circumstances.

Ron was the next to go, rather apologetically, because he had Quidditch practice the next day. He thanked her and gave her a squeeze on the arm on the way out, and she was not sure if this was for being included in the meeting or to reassure her that he didn't mind that she had some Slytherin blood in her.

She supposed if there was anyone she'd thought would react really badly to the news, it would have been him.

Minerva stayed to speak with Albus, Fawkes flew back to his perch, and that left Hermione, Draco, Harry, and Severus to leave together and head down those long stairs. She was caught again in the hum of the centre of the castle but didn't have the opportunity to seriously consider pausing because Severus took hold of her arm and simply pulled her past the griffin and on down the corridor.

"You and I are going to have a discussion," he snarled.

Erm, should I be cursing him for you? Harry asked, confused by the sudden turn of events.

She sent him a reassuring smile. It's all right. I was fairly certain this was going to happen, and I'm prepared for it. It wouldn't go better if you decided to curse him first; I'd like to leave his quarters with all my limbs attached, thank you.

If you're sure.

Of course, she answered reassuringly because protecting Harry and Severus from one another had become second nature by now.

Severus didn't even say goodbye to Draco when the younger Slytherin and Harry stopped at their quarters; Severus just kept going with her in tow.

Once they were inside his quarters and he'd flung her in the direction of a chair, he began to pace with frantic energy.

She stood there and watched him, and he whirled on her finally. "Are you completely out of your mind?"

"It's a good plan, Severus," she argued. "It's going to work."

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"It's not foolproof," she answered, making sure her voice remained calm and serious. "No plan that we come up with that's the least bit realistic would be impervious to problems and errors. But I've come up with the best realistic plan possible. Voldemort's not going to be prepared for it; it's using 'power that the Dark Lord knows not', and I believe, in my heart, that we can do this."

"It's dangerous. Don't you realize what could happen to all of us? What could go wrong? What you could do? Look at how you were this afternoon!" he snarled. "You nearly killed yourself, and that was your 'little test'. I don't see how you could declare that successful."

She cleared her throat, embarrassed again. "I spent longer with the wards than I'd originally intended, but I was also doing it on my own. I need support for the real effort; I need someone to ground me. With help, I believe I can function without the deleterious effect that I experienced this morning."

"You don't think Mr Potter will be a little busy worrying about the Dark Lord to ground you?" Severus asked snidely.

She swallowed but forced herself to answer. "He was not the person I intended to ask."

For the first time that evening, Severus really looked at her, his dark eyes boring into hers.

After a long pause, he said flatly, "You think I'll agree to this mad scheme."

"I think my chances of success are greatly diminished without you," she admitted. "You're crucial to my plan, Severus."

He turned away from her, resuming his pacing.

"Do you realize what could happen if you stretch yourself too thin when you're accessing the wards?"

She nodded, realized he probably couldn't see her with all his whipping back and forth in front of the fire.

"I could burn out my core," she answered matter-of-factly. "If that's the price I have to pay to help defeat Voldemort, then so be it. I'm hoping that I'll have enough assistance that that chance becomes rather remote."

He turned round to face her again. "And if I refuse? You'll do it anyway?"

The smile she offered him was twisted. "You know me. You know what I am."

"Foolish Gryffindor," he swore, finishing the thought. "You're one hundred percent certain that this woman, Solace, is who she says she is? Her information is good?"

"I believe her," Hermione confirmed. "I know it's a lot to ask all of you to believe in her based solely on what I've read, but she left extensive journals, Severus, and everything she's written rings true."

"But you say she not only came here with her father, she came back and, what, stayed for years and designed the wards for the entire grounds?" She nodded. Severus frowned. "How can we not have heard of her? She should be recorded."

Hermione sighed. "She was. She was well aware of her father's temperament when she was invited back by Godric and Helga; she knew Salazar did not want her to return. But she loved her family, her new one, not just her old one, and this school that had been her home was the best protection for them. Her father had done a thorough job of erasing all record of her and, for better or worse, she respected that.

"It had only been a decade, so there were those who could have recognized her. So she wore a Glamour, and she went by her married name. She was brilliantly talented and very strong magically; no matter what her father thought, I do not believe her gift was in any way squandered. She—"

Severus interrupted. "She was a Pure Adult who married a Muggle. How does that even work?"

Hermione considered a snide comment given the asinine construction of the sentence, but she knew what he meant, and she didn't actually want him to get more explicit because this was wandering into dangerous territory.

"If you believe her father, they were incompatible, and she squandered her gift."

"But you believe differently."

"Yes," Hermione confirmed. "I'm not sure, but ... while she couldn't make her husband magical, I think the magic went into the genes, into the family line, the part of him that could be rendered magical, if you will. One unmagical girl after one unmagical girl, over and over down the line, never dying out for a thousand years." She shrugged. "That's my guess, anyway."

Severus considered her silently for a moment, before saying, "You were explaining how Solace's presence was recorded."

She would take his lack of argument as acceptance of the hypothesis for the moment.

"Yes, it was as a wards-mistress that she remained in the school. She also became the head of Slytherin once her father left."

"There was never a Solace who was a head of Slytherin. The head of house after Salazar was—" He stopped abruptly, and she saw the details come together for him. "It was Sorrow Planctus. Wards-mistress. One of the best heads of house Slytherin has ever had."

Hermione nodded. "She remained Solace to herself, in her journals, but to the world, ever since she was disowned, she was known as Sorrow."

Severus let out a huff of breath. "Sorrow Planctus was Salazar's daughter? You might have said."

"You would still have disbelieved me," she said simply.

His eyes narrowed slightly, as though he were going to protest, but to her surprise, what came out was, "You would have made a fine Slytherin."

Her lips tipped up. "I suspect the Hat considered putting me there, though it didn't say it in so many words."

She would not have understood, at the time, not given everything she'd read in Hogwarts: A History.

An eyebrow rose sharply. "The Hat seriously considered putting you in Slytherin?"

She shrugged. "Nine billionths of Salazar's blood does a bizarrely large amount to counter the astronomically high quantity of mud-blood."

"Don't use such terms," he said with quiet intensity.

And the parallels suddenly became too precise. Knowing how the last such scene had played out in this room, she realized she needed to get out.

"I have to go," she said, heading straight for the door. "Decide whatever you want, Severus."

"It has a hope of success only if I'm working with you," he pointed out coldly.

She couldn't even blame him for his tone, given the abruptness of her departure.

"Then make the right decision," she said shortly. "Goodnight."

Outside, she took a moment to regroup. She hadn't thought that being back in the room would affect her like that, given that she had managed to spend time in his bed without freaking out quite so much, but apparently consciousness for all and echoed words were enough to make her panic.

Damn. That reminded her that she had wanted to thank him for letting her sleep. There was a childish part of her that felt that since he hadn't thanked her for taking care of him, she shouldn't thank him, but she was determined to behave better than that. There was a chance he hadn't realized it was she who had helped him, and in the end, his behaviour didn't dictate hers; he had rendered her a considerable service, and she needed to acknowledge that.

Nevertheless, there was no way she was going back in there now. She pushed herself off the wall and made her way slowly back to her quarters.

Perhaps she could send him a note.

It had to have occurred to Severus—although she'd somehow got sidetracked and not mentioned this in there, either—that they needed him to make sure Voldemort became aware of their secret plan. It was no good their organizing this whole event if the crazed snake man didn't actually show up.

She should have said it, though, and she didn't suppose it should really be put in a note.

Draco and Harry were waiting up for her. She was moderately surprised that they hadn't immediately leapt into bed to work off all the tension from the meeting—or perhaps it was only she who was feeling so tightly coiled.

She was heading straight for the Forest once everyone else was sleeping, that was for sure.

"Well?" Draco demanded as soon as he saw her.

"He wanted to discuss the brilliance of my plan."

Harry was regarding her doubtfully.

She smiled at him, sitting down on the side of the couch that wasn't occupied by the boys.

"It was a lot to take in. It's not surprising that he had more questions."

Harry started grumbling about stupid Slytherins, and both she and Draco tuned him out. There were moments where both Severus and Harry were simply going to be prone to over-generalizations and bitter complaints when they were annoyed with one another, and it was sometimes better simply to allow them to go at it.

Ron had actually been a surprise; she hadn't expected him to be so agreeable about it all. On the other hand, he'd had years of her coming up with far-fetched plans that he had obediently followed. So far, they'd all turned out pretty much all right, and she was touched that he seemed to be trusting that the same was true for this plan. She snorted to herself. Or he was too wrapped up with those thoughts of the upcoming Quidditch practice to yet give much attention to Hermione's information.

Given that she'd been ready to fall over and die of exhaustion earlier in the day, the boys didn't put up a fuss when she indicated rather early that she needed to go to bed. There was plenty that they still needed to discuss, but it was clear that the boys also wanted to be in bed, so they called it a night. Explanations would keep for later.

Given how much sleep she had already had today, she didn't manage more than a couple of hours before she was awake again. Despite the fact that it was barely one in the morning, she Masked herself and sneaked out. She felt better simply upon getting outdoors even though she hadn't reached the Forest and wasn't in unicorn form yet.

Transforming the moment she was safely beneath the eaves and out of sight of the castle, she began to gallop through the darkness, feeling as though it had been an age since she had last done so.

Castina was soon at her side even though Hermione hadn't requested her presence. She always sensed Hermione in the Forest, and Hermione was touched that her herd mare seemed to genuinely enjoy spending time with her in this manner. They did not head straight towards the valley but looped around the perimeter of the Forest, Castina easily sensing that Hermione needed some time to stretch and absorb light and be free without any questions.

It was nice, Hermione reflected as she ran, not to have anyone demanding answers of her. Castina was being completely non-judgemental, and it let Hermione forget for a little while that she was trying to run off her human problems.

If she thought about it, she would no doubt find a hundred problems that she needed to address. If she dwelled on Severus, she'd become entirely morose and need to be cheered up. But she wasn't spitting mad or horribly pained or otherwise in emotional agony, and that allowed her to enjoy the fresh smell of the air as it whipped through her mane and the leaf-strewn ground that she disturbed very little despite her speed.

There were already slight signs that spring was on the way, hints of green poking up through the ground. It might be the middle of the Forbidden Forest, it might be in the middle of a horrible war, but these plants had no knowledge of that; life went on and continued to grow, and tonight, Hermione was receiving this message loud and clear.

She slowed to a trot and Castina matched her as they began to wend their way at a leisurely pace back towards the valley of the unicorns.

Castina, Hermione said, I've a question for you.

Ask, Berit.

Did Solace tell you to name me?

Castina didn't pretend not to know who Solace was, which Hermione appreciated, and her answer was immediate and honest-sounding. I am not so old as that, Berit. But my mother passed down from her herd mare the knowledge that it would be my task to name a Pure Adult. I was not given the name, but when I saw you for the first time, I knew.

So Solace really did See my name? She didn't contrive that it should be mine? Hermione wanted to be absolutely sure.

Castina whinnied. You are Berit. There is no more or less than that. I did not impose a name upon you that was not yours.

Hermione nodded, accepting that. It had felt right when Castina named her, although she had noticed that no one seemed to be naming Harry. There was Fawkes's joking name of "boy-bird", but Hermione had one of those, too. Still, Harry had tried for so long to be "just Harry", so perhaps it was part of his magic that that was the only name he was on the inside.

Hermione had never been hugely enamoured of the mouthful that was her name, and she didn't know now if she was Berit because she'd disliked Hermione, or if she disliked Hermione because she was really Berit. It was a moot point in many ways, because she had every intention of remaining Hermione to the world and leaving Berit as a secret that would die with her and the unicorns. It didn't feel right when she imagined other humans calling her by that name.

They reached the herd where she found everyone pleased to see her. They were a close-knit group, and while they could travel solitarily and not live in the company of their fellows if they had to, they liked the community. It was always a bit puzzling to them, she knew, that she would leave them for such extended periods of time. She wondered, sometimes, what she would do when she left the castle for good. She could always Apparate back to visit, of course, but it wasn't the same. This felt like home.

Having arrived so early, Hermione was able to stay with the herd for hours. She listened more than she talked, simply enjoying being in their presence. While Castina fought for the side of light and her herd would follow her, the war impinged personally upon them only when Voldemort was foolish enough to involve the Forest. They did not spend their nights discussing it.

Instead, Hermione heard tales of long ago, back to the herd as it had been when Hogwarts had first been founded. Hermione suspected that Castina had chosen the topic for Hermione's benefit, and she listened eagerly.

Twilight had begun to edge out the dark of night as Hermione headed back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest to resume her human life. Since it was now nearing six in the morning, it was getting a little late for her to be sneaking back in, but she Masked herself and made quick and careful use of the secret entrance. She'd not made it more than a corridor or so away from that entrance, however, before Severus came looming out of the darkness of the hallway.

She hadn't made a sound and she was still Masked, but he said, "A word," and turned on his heel.

She considered not following for a brief instant because he surely couldn't prove that she'd been there and ignored him, but since that had been a positively civil request, she trailed after him.

They ended up in his office with him holding the door open for longer than it would take for simply his own body to pass through. Once the door was shut and privacy charms cast, she unMasked.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"Taking my morning constitutional," she answered. It had been after midnight the whole time, so it technically qualified, as there had also been exercise involved, and it had been very beneficial to her from all perspectives.

"You were in the Forest again," he said flatly.

"And if I were?" she responded coolly.

"It's forbidden," he growled.

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sir, I know that students aren't supposed to go wandering in there because it is home to many dangerous creatures and there's every chance that they could be badly injured or worse. But you've seen me beneath its trees. I know what I'm doing, and you know I'm with company that will keep me protected. I'm not in any more danger there than I am in the corridors in Hogwarts. In fact, I can say with certainty that I've been attacked far more frequently in the latter than the former."

That was a bit of a sobering realization, actually. She had more to fear from her fellow students than the scary denizens of the Forbidden Forest.

"Does anyone know when you've gone? Would anyone sound the alarm in time if you did not return?"

This sounded perilously close to concern for her well-being, and Hermione tried not to show how stunned she was.

"Harry knows that I go out, and if there were a problem, Castina would alert Fawkes or Harry, and they could alert Albus and anyone else who needed to know."

"And if your unicorn were injured?" Severus asked.

"Castina has an entire herd who would take up her part, and before you ask, if the entire herd were gravely injured such that they could not communicate with the castle, you'd have a great deal more to worry about than my disappearance. They're very solicitous of me, I promise."

His face was unreadable as he gazed at her. "You're only human. They might not be careful enough."

Her conscience squirmed a little at this. He seemed to be quite solicitous, but she knew full well that in thirty seconds he could be assigning her detentions; their relationship was far too broken for her to trust him with this knowledge.

"They're always very careful," she assured him.

His lips tightened. "You realize that if something happens to you, your plan to lure the Dark Lord here will fall apart."

With careful deliberation, she let a breath out very slowly. She should have known that it was not she he was being so careful of. He'd never really cared before, after all. First it had been the desire to punish her for being out of bounds, then the upset that she could navigate the Forest better than he could, and now he was worried about her plan for the final battle.

"Nothing will happen to me," she answered flatly. "I'm safer there than anywhere else. The plan will move forward."

"Have you also come up with a plan for getting news of this scheme to the Dark Lord?"

She faced him squarely, her face expressionless. "I would never presume to tell you how to do your job, Severus. I leave it to your discretion."

"You do not wish to be informed of my plan?"

It was already apparent to her that he had no intention of telling her.

"I think that you have been a spy for almost longer than I have been alive, and you are best left to your own devices in these matters."

He seemed to be trying to find something as he gazed intently into her eyes, but whatever he saw there warranted only a curt dismissal. Still, he hadn't even actually threatened point loss or detention, so maybe that was an indication of some smidgeon of concession on his part.

Back in her room, she showered and dressed before checking to ensure that her Weresbane was settling nicely and would be ready for more work that evening. It was, and she was ready at the normal hour to see if Harry was going to make any attempt to rise early enough for their morning workout. To her surprise, he appeared right on time.

It was in the middle of their practice—use of combative shield charms—that it occurred to her that she had very forcefully reminded him yesterday that they were in the middle of a war and that he would need to defeat Voldemort. They hadn't set a precise date, but she had narrowed it down considerably: the final battle would be in the middle of June, once school was out.

It didn't really matter that she'd also provided a plan for defeating Voldemort. That was good, certainly, but there was no way Harry wasn't feeling that the pressure was now on, and that meant less lie-ins and more training sessions.

Sadly, she couldn't really fault this philosophy. There was the beginning of a plan, but they were still likely talking about a pitched battle. Their reflexes and skills needed to be in prime working order to optimize their chance of success.

Draco had chosen to sit this one out, and it was only as she and Harry both landed on the floor on opposite sides of the room, reeling from what they had just thrown at one another, that Hermione realized Draco had had the sense to get out of harm's way. Harry had started it, she thought, pulling out all the stops and mustering all the power he had at his disposal, and she had responded in kind. Harry had evidently needed to work an edge off, and that was better done without his worrying that he might seriously injure the man he loved.

She and Harry rose to their feet, and she saw that Harry was sporting a great big grin.

"You're in good form this morning," he observed happily.

Well, at least blasting him off his feet had worked him into a good mood rather than a bad one.

They moved to sit on the couch next to Draco as she said, "So are you."

Draco immediately shifted further down the couch as he was immaculate and they were all sweaty. She imagined he worked Harry into this sort of state on a fairly regular basis, but that didn't appear to matter when it was sweat achieved through another activity.

"I'm not the one who fell asleep in Potions yesterday," Harry pointed out.

It seemed likely that she was going to be trying to live that one down forever. She groaned. She'd forgotten to thank Severus again. "Don't remind me. What I didn't sleep off, I ran off, and I'm feeling just fine now."

"Do you ever spend time in your bedroom?" he asked.

She smiled. "You think I should perhaps have followed Severus's suggestion and just turned it into a lab?"

His smile grew broader. "I'm just saying—"

"I don't have nearly as strong a reason to spend time in my bedroom as you have to spend in yours."

Draco smirked happily and was absolutely no help to the embarrassed Gryffindor. She nudged Harry's shoulder.

"It's not a bad thing, you know," she pointed out wryly. "I wouldn't mind a reason like yours."

"I am eminently desirable," Draco observed haughtily with every appearance of earnestness.

Hermione's lips twitched. "To some."

Draco looked immediately affronted.

She shrugged. "Look at the man I've chosen."

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "There's no accounting for taste, I suppose. Although experience has taught me that most everyone else is not as undiscerning as you."

Hands on his hips, Harry was suddenly in Draco's face.

"Everyone else had better keep their hands, eyes, and all other body parts to themselves," Harry said fiercely. "They can't have you."

There was a sudden smash-up on that end of the couch, hands and lips all over the place, and Hermione suspected clothes would be shed any second. It was looking as though charms were going to have to get both of them out of a sweaty state.

She announced to people who were no longer listening that she was going to shower. Giving them until just before eight, she returned to the common room and found that they were sitting demurely on opposite ends of the couch, both properly dressed, hands folded neatly in their laps.

She let out a huff of laughter.

"Very cute. I'm convinced you've been sitting that way the whole time. Shall we go up to breakfast?"

The two of them rose and obediently escorted her up. She couldn't seem to stop smiling, pleased that everyone was now in such a brilliant mood.

After dinner, they finally sat down to discuss what had happened the day before. It was hard to think of it as an entirely serious meeting when Harry and Draco were stretched out and cuddling on the couch, but she would prefer that the light-hearted mood be retained for as long as possible.

She took one of the armchairs. As seemed to be custom for difficult discussions, there was tea. She'd made a whole pot and suspected that they'd go through all of it before they finished.

Legs tucked under her, she stared into the depths of her mug as though it held all the answers to the universe.

It caused an ache in her chest, looking at the two of them sometimes. They were so very adorable, and she and Severus couldn't seem to even be in the same room together without fighting. And here was the Slytherin Ice Prince letting Harry sprawl all over him, sliding his hands through Harry's hair as the Gryffindor sighed with contentment. She knew that Harry was more than deserving of some happiness, but wished that it could be shared around a little.

Since she was wrapped up in contemplating the two of them, and Harry was blissfully lost to Draco's ministrations, it was the Slytherin who spoke first.

"Are you sure that Weasley should have been present at the meeting?"

Hermione was abruptly reminded that it wasn't all sunshine and roses for Harry and Draco, either. The Gryffindor pulled himself out of Draco's grasp, turning to look at him reproachfully as he snapped, "Draco!"

The Slytherin rolled his eyes. "I don't mean it as an insult." He frowned slightly. "Well, I don't mean to insult him without reason. But he's been civil to the two of you for less than a week. This is very sensitive information; are you sure he wouldn't give it away if he were suddenly upset with you again? That's an awfully dangerous game to be playing with this sort of information."

"Ron knows a great many of our secrets now," Hermione answered. "I don't believe we've got a lot left that would shock him enough to upset him into such stupidity. He understands what we've done by choosing to trust him." She smiled at him faintly. "And you're losing your touch if you think that being a Gryffindor makes me stupid."

Draco opened his mouth but didn't seem to know what to say that wouldn't make the situation worse, so he closed it again without speaking.

"Do you really think I let that many people walk out of that room knowing that one misspoken word would destroy our chances of getting Voldemort?" There was silence, and she shook her head. "Trust me when I say that the information is safe."

"But," Draco spluttered slightly, "you didn't say anything."

Hermione laughed. "I don't have to say anything before I work my magic, you know. I'm generally polite enough to give warnings, but Albus reminded everyone, and I'd like to think that you all knew already that the information wasn't to be spread. Should you prove untrustworthy, then I have no sympathy for you if you fall prey to my spell."

"But what happens if we say something?" Draco asked.

"I shall say only that you don't want to find out. And you may now consider yourself lucky to be warned, if it will help you keep your mouth shut."

"I wasn't going to say anything." Even Draco only rolled his eyes because he knew that she did trust him. "I'm just curious."

"But I'm still not telling."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "You're not bluffing, are you?"

She smiled at him. "You would have to try to tell someone and find out, I guess, but personally, I wouldn't recommend it. I think Harry likes you just as you are."

Since she was the only person who could reverse her spell, she'd know right away if anyone attempted to betray them. Since her spell—considerably more advanced than the one she had used in fifth year—would ensure that the person in question didn't get further than the attempt to tell anyone, she knew that she didn't have to worry about the safety of the knowledge.

Harry frowned. "But, if nobody can tell the information to anyone else, how are we going to lure Voldemort here?"

She inclined her head. "I was imprecise. There are only two people who can freely disseminate the information."

"You," Harry said immediately, and she nodded. He sighed. "And Snape?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"But he's Snape," Harry protested. "He shouldn't be able to do what he wants with the knowledge when I can't."

She laughed. "That's a very mature attitude, Harry. Unfortunately for your argument, you don't have Voldemort's ear quite the way Severus does."

"But if he'd fallen victim to a curse, it would have added authenticity," Harry grumbled. "Made it look like he really wasn't supposed to say."

Since he still wouldn't have been able to say if she'd cursed him, it would rather defeat their purpose, and it would hardly be inconspicuous if he came back from the meeting and was violently and comprehensively ill, turned an unpleasant shade of orange, and couldn't speak again until he had confessed what he had done.

"It would have been insulting," she pointed out.

Harry frowned. "I think it would have done him some good to be insulted by you. You've noticed that he doesn't have any problem insulting you at every opportunity?"

Her lips pressed into a thin line, fingers clenching around the mug in her hands, good mood rapidly evaporating.

"Harry Potter has a disease," Draco jumped in. "It's called 'open mouth, insert foot'. He's suffered from it for years and years, and just when we think we've got it under control, it flares up suddenly and violently like this. I'll make sure he starts taking his potions again."

Her face softened as she smiled appreciatively at Draco even as Harry realized what he'd said.

"I didn't mean it like that," he exclaimed. "I just … I was trying to point out that he doesn't treat you—"

Draco clapped a mouth over Harry's mouth. "Stop talking now," he hissed in a loud whisper. He looked at her despairingly. "Is this what I'm going to have to expect when I take him to parties?"

"Probably," she answered. "But since he's Harry Potter, everyone will forgive him."

"Lucky for him," Draco observed as he removed his hand.

Harry was now giving her his wounded puppy dog expression, the one that she thought probably worked on everyone except Voldemort and Severus.

"Sorry. I'll stop trying to say what I mean, but I really didn't intend to hurt you."

"I know," she answered with a sigh. "It's probably best if we try not to discuss Severus and me in anything but a professional context, all right?"

He looked like he wanted to protest, but instead, he gave a reluctant nod.

"You had questions other than Ron's suitability, I hope?" she said, opening the field up again and trying to get them onto some other topic.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I don't really understand the bit about the wards. Explain to me what you'll be doing?"

She set her mug down. She had the feeling this was going to involve Severus again, by the end, but Harry didn't know that, and he'd made the effort.

"You know that wards are self-sustaining. If you cast them somewhere, around this room, for example, they'll stay like that until you remove them, until the power dissipates, or until someone breaks through them." Harry nodded. "The more powerful you are, the stronger the wards you can cast. The stronger they are, the more difficult it is for someone else to break them. It also means that they will last longer; when a strong wizard casts good wards on rooms or a small piece of property, they can often last lifetimes.

"On a larger estate, say, a reasonably talented caster can usually establish wards that will last for approximately his or her lifetime. Since it would be inconvenient—and downright dangerous in some situations—for wards to fall every generation or so, property wards tend to be designed so that they can be accessed easily by subsequent family members and infused with new magic. This also assists in transferring ownership from the previous family member to the new head of house. This person may also decide to layer new wards on top of the old, and in rare cases, may do away with the old wards entirely and cast fresh ones. Still with me?"

Harry and Draco both nodded. Hermione imagined that Draco had personal experience with this. There were probably very old and strong wards on Malfoy Manor. But now was not the time to get distracted with such questions. She appreciated that he wasn't making Harry feel stupid by telling her to get to the point. Hermione resumed her explanation.

"In the case of very large areas being warded, it becomes that much more challenging to ward properly. Since the area is so much vaster, it takes a great deal of magic simply to set the wards to cover so much space. Then there's the complexity of the wards required for a place like Hogwarts. The school wards keep Dementors and other evil creatures out, prevent us from being detected by Muggles, prevent dangerous creatures who live in the Forest from wandering onto the grounds, prevent people from Apparating onto the grounds, from flying over it, from deliberately harming themselves, from—"

"They prevent people from harming themselves?" Harry asked, seemingly involuntarily.

"They do," she answered, distracted in spite of herself. "And don't think you didn't come very close to getting a whole book about it at the end of fifth year, but I didn't want to give you the idea that you'd be unprotected once you got home."

Harry was looking very uncomfortable now but suddenly found himself hauled into Draco's lap, a kiss pressed to the top of his head. Draco wrapped his arms around Harry and showed no inclination to let him go. Harry remained stiff and unresponsive for a moment and then melted back into the embrace. It was mildly alarming that Harry didn't even try to defend himself, but she'd always known that those were very bad times, and they were lucky to have gotten through them as unscathed as they did.

"There are all kinds of wards on the castle," she resumed after clearing her throat. "Not to mention all the little ones inside that prevent students from going where they shouldn't, that protect the individual rooms so that some sort of accident or explosion in one won't harm any others, that soundproof the rooms, that protect the professors' quarters, that keep ghosts out of the common rooms and dorms, and so on and so forth. There are any number of wards throughout every inch of the castle."

Harry nodded, seeming to feel that he should keep showing input lest they start worrying about him.

"Many of the lesser or more minor wards can and have been modified and updated by subsequent headmasters. As Muggles improved their technology, for example, wards had to be added that would prevent Hogwarts from being detected by satellites and radar equipment and so on and so forth. Individual professors will often add their own wards to their quarters to make it more secure or to add features that they feel are necessary which others in the past may have not."

"Like we warded here."

"Exactly," she agreed. "We need more privacy than even some of the paranoid Slytherins of the past have needed."

Over Harry's head, Draco stuck his tongue out at her, but he knew that she was just trying to distract Harry, and he therefore let the slur on his house's name go. She wondered if it helped that he now knew she had Slytherin blood in her and so was kind of insulting a part of herself.

"Hogwarts is really a special case all its own. The building itself is magical to a degree that most buildings are not. Students have learnt here and practiced magic here for a millennium, and that has left an impression. Nevertheless, it required an extraordinary amount of power—the help of many—to cast and set wards that would last this long even with periodic deliberate influxes of power. As I said in the meeting, there are areas that are now damaged, and we're coming very close to a point where some of the wards will begin to fail."

"Just as you're here to rectify the problem. Interesting coincidence, that," Draco observed dryly.

She shrugged. "I don't try to work out everything that Solace knew anymore. I think it's safe to say that I'm here to do this when it needs to be done. As you may be able to guess from the state of the wards now, there's only so much that patch jobs and new power can do to help the wards. Especially when those who are doing the job aren't experts on the magic that's involved, the wards aren't perfectly calibrated. They've not been topped up to full strength again, just increased a little so they don't fail completely. Add to that the fact that they're often modified or tweaked in not totally compatible ways over the years, and you see the problem we're now facing.

"The only real way to rectify this situation is to completely re-cast the wards, and until I found Solace's journal, that didn't seem like a viable option to anyone, certainly not at this time. We've lost some of the skills involved, and it's a huge undertaking that will require a great deal of magic. Casting wards of this strength and over the area that Hogwarts comprises takes time. Once the wards are down, there would be no way to re-cast them quickly enough for us to protect ourselves from Voldemort should he choose that occasion to attack."

"But that's what we're trying to get him to do?" Harry questioned.

"Because I'm here," she said with a nod, "and Solace has told me all anyone would ever need to know about the wards that she designed for the castle. I can access the wards as others can't."

"What exactly does that mean?" Draco asked. "You weren't very clear at the meeting."

She considered how best to explain. "The headmaster knows all the wards that are at Hogwarts. He can manipulate them if he wants to be able to Apparate on the grounds. He did modify them when the Ministry forced him to entertain the Dementors in third year. This is on a larger scale but similar to your deciding to ward your room against anyone but you getting in. You could then modify it so that Harry's allowed in but not me and so forth, right?"

Harry and Draco nodded.

"I could do the same to my room, viewing it externally and modifying it just as everybody modifies wards. What I also know how to do now," she continued, "is to … become the wards, I guess. To modify the wards from the inside, because my magic and theirs have become intrinsically linked."

Draco's eyebrows rose. "Seriously?"

Hermione nodded. "In the case of the wards in my room, there's simply no need, because I can easily manipulate them externally. I could easily manipulate your wards externally, for that matter," she added with a grin, and Harry made a face at her. "I could do the same with the Hogwarts wards, too, but I'd be limited by the usual sorts of restrictions; if I were on the Astronomy tower, given enough time, I could get by the wards that permitted me to jump off, but I'd have to go down to the grounds to permit myself to let the Acromantulas head up to the castle. It would all take time, and while I was working, the other wards would still be in place and would be entirely detectable to Voldemort."

"Which would ruin our plan because the Dark Lord would know the school couldn't be breached and we were expecting him," Draco summarized.

"Exactly. If, on the other hand, I take control of the wards from the inside, then there's no question of not being able to get them up and down quickly enough. I'm not one little human on the outside trying to access them, I am the wards, and I can ... Mask them, I suppose you could think of it as, can stop them from having any effect without actually having to shut them down one by one.

"Once Voldemort is in a position where we can trap him, then I'll be able to unMask the wards. Voldemort and his followers will suddenly find that they can't Apparate away. They'll discover that the Dementors and all the other evil creatures can't get closer to the castle. And then we'll have the perfect opportunity to fight Voldemort on our own terms for once and for all."

There was silence for a moment as they considered this.

Harry drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You've spent this whole time saying how big and extensive the wards are and how much power it takes to cast them and keep them working for as long as they're working. We've got Pure Adult powers, I know that, but how can you just … support them all for that long?"

She nodded. "I have enough power to do it for a limited amount of time. The disturbance that woke you Monday morning was me releasing the wards; it was a rough transition because I hadn't quite realized what I was doing. When the time comes, I'll do what has to be done." Harry opened his mouth to protest, and she said sternly, "We all will. But I'm taking every precaution. If I have someone with me, keeping me grounded and sharing power with me, then I will be able to sustain the wards that much longer without any danger."

"I'll do it," Harry volunteered immediately.

"I'm sure you would," she said with a smile. "But you're going to need all your wits about you for another battle. I've already asked, and I'm just waiting on an answer."

Harry's sigh was huge and long. "Why Snape?"

"Because, outside of you and Draco, he's the most powerful wizard in Hogwarts with whom I'm compatible. There's no way that Albus and I would work together. Severus has the right to consider his answer. It's a big undertaking. It will be fine."

It would probably be fine like Harry being stuck with the Dursleys for a decade was fine, but there was no need to be openly pessimistic.

"This is really going to work?" Harry asked.

"This is really going to work," she confirmed. "We're keeping everyone protected by waiting until the students are out of the castle. Those who wish to and are able to participate in the battle will stay. We have the perfect excuse because we'll need people to cast the wards, so Voldemort will expect us to be keeping those who are powerful behind."

"Are we actually casting the wards?" Draco asked. "It didn't seem as though that was actually part of the plan."

"Once the battle's over," she answered. "I wasn't making up any of what I said about the wards being damaged. I'll do what patchwork I can while I'm connected, but I'm afraid the majority of the damage needs to be rectified for real."

The look on Harry's face was difficult to decipher, and it took her a moment to realize that he appeared mildly surprised and possibly a bit touched.

"What?"

He shook his head as he realized that she was scrutinizing him. "Nothing."

What? she pressed.

He shook his head again mentally. It's just … nice to hear someone matter-of-factly discussing what we're all going to do after the battle.

It was easier to suppress tears mentally, for which Hermione was grateful. Don't you even think of going anywhere—no victory trip around the world for you until you've stayed behind and helped me with the wards.

Harry nodded, seeming to be having that same tear problem that she was, and she knew he knew exactly what she wasn't saying.

Draco Summoned the nearest pillow and bonked Harry over the head with it.

"Hey!" Harry protested. "Bugger off!"

"Then stop communicating like that when it's just the three of us in the room. You know it annoys me."

Harry twisted his head up so that he was facing Draco, albeit upside down. He kissed the nearest body part, which was Draco's chin.

"Sorry, love. Hermione was just being polite and not dragging a moment of insecurity of mine into the open."

"I'm probably going to regret saying this," Hermione said, "but have you tried MindSpeaking to Draco, Harry?"

There was surprise in both eyes and then Harry's eyes grew slightly unfocussed as he made the attempt.

Draco?

The Slytherin's eyes grew comically large. She wasn't sure if Harry was being polite in his inclusion of her, if he'd wanted to broadcast loudly because he wanted Draco to have the best possible chance of hearing, or if he couldn't help her being able to hear; their link was an unusual one.

Draco, however, couldn't respond mentally. She knew he had to have more than enough mental concentration for the task because he had learned Occlumency from Severus, but the more the blond failed to be able to speak mentally now, the more frustrated he got. And the more frustrated he got, the less likely he would be able to master this new ability.

This wasn't working out to be the happy bonding experience she'd been trying to orchestrate, so she stepped in once more.

"Draco," she said, since it looked as though he was mere moments from leaping up and storming off in a huff, "look at me."

He was frustrated enough to do it and not thinking clearly enough to be completely prepared; it made Legilimency particularly easy. Once she was connected to his mind, she mentally grabbed up Harry's mind and pushed the two of them together before pulling away from them.

Looking across the distance between them with her physical eyes again, she found that Draco looked as though he'd been hit with some sort of Confundus Charm, and Harry was looking at her in shock, as though he hadn't though she could still surprise him and yet she had done.

"That … felt a little strange," Harry admitted.

It felt, she imagined, the same as when Fawkes had connected her and Harry's minds back in October. She supposed that Harry hadn't been in much of a position to notice given the amount of pain he'd been in and the fact that he'd already been in the midst of a Voldemort-induced vision.

"But let's see if it did the trick, shall we?" she proposed briskly. "Harry, why don't you greet Draco again and see what happens."

Hey, Draco, love. Let's try this once more, all right?

I don't see why trying this now that I have a killer headache will make any difference from the last time I tried it when you couldn't hear me, and— He caught the look on Harry's face finally. Can you hear me?

Loud and clear. Such a charming first thing to hear from your mind, too.

Draco's face relaxed and a smile graced his features. I don't make any promises about the content of my mind, Harry, you should know that.

Hermione Summoned a potion for headaches and waved it over to Draco. He looked at her quizzically.

I don't think the two of you will be keeping very many secrets from me, at least not if you share them mentally, she answered the unspoken question.

Draco quaffed the potion.

No deep dark secrets shared mentally. Got it.

He could have done that on his own eventually, Fawkes contributed.

One look at Harry and Draco told her that this statement was for her head alone.

She shrugged. I don't think Harry's ready for that sort of manipulation yet. But I certainly don't intend to bridge the two of them forever. I suspect they'll grow out of it.

He sent her a nod. Once they become more confident in their own abilities and more used to what they are doing. He'll catch up to your head start.

There we are, then. Until then, we'll just have to be a mental trio.

As you say, Girlicorne. Better than a threesome, I suppose.

Hermione made a mental face of disgust, and Fawkes laughed at her discomfort before fading out of her mind.

Harry and Draco were talking rapidly back and forth, Draco appearing anxious to practice, and she considered whether it was worth curtailing their talk to get back to the topic of warding.

Before she could decide, they were interrupted by the announcement of a visitor at their door.

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Conversation

The gargoyle announced that it was Viktor at the door.

"That would be for you," Harry said with something that was remarkably close to a Malfoy smirk.

She waved the gargoyle open and made a face at Harry—mentally, since she was rising to greet Viktor with a smile.

He smiled back at her. "I thought you might like some more company in your lab vhile you vork on your potion."

"You have excellent timing, Viktor. I need to head into the lab in a few minutes, and you're welcome to join me."

Leaving Harry and Draco to their own devices, she led Viktor to her workspace and soon had him installed in another comfortable chair. While she worked, he asked after her classes and commented on how busy she had been recently, which she told him was entirely typical of her years at Hogwarts.

"But we're not going to spend the whole night talking about me," she said, cutting that possibility off while the night was young. "Tell me about the most ridiculous thing your fangirls and fanboys have done recently."

Viktor didn't like talking about his fame, but he appreciated that she thought all the attention he got was as ridiculous as he felt it was, and he was happy to share absurd anecdotes with her while she chopped, measured, mixed, and stirred. This process was put momentarily on hold several times as she was giggling too hard to properly brew.

It was shortly after nine when the potion was simmering merrily again and needed no more work. In four hours and twenty-six minutes she would bank the heat and allow the potion to sit undisturbed for twenty-one hours.

Viktor rose as she was cleaning up and offered to help, but she told him it would be easier if she did it herself, as she knew exactly how she liked the cleaning and storage to be accomplished.

Alone back in the common room because Harry and Draco had made themselves scarce, she offered Viktor tea, which he accepted, and they settled onto the couch together.

"Thank you for letting me sit vith you, mila moya."

"I'm happy to have you," she answered. "I can't think it's especially interesting for you, but you make a very amusing lab partner."

"I am pleased I can keep you entertained," he answered honestly. "That is reason enough for me to be here."

Pansy arrived shortly thereafter for the evening rounds, and since Harry and Draco had apparently lost track of the time, she offered to go with the Slytherin girl.

Viktor obediently rose and escorted the two of them out, ensured that they were happy walking on their own, kissed Pansy's hand and not Hermione's—showing that he had plenty of pure-blood breeding and knew when to use and when not to—and then headed back to his own quarters after securing permission to spend the evening with her in the lab the next day. She'd warned him that she didn't start working on the potion until half ten, but he'd persisted in his desire to keep her company.

Pansy stared after Viktor for a moment before transferring her gaze to Hermione. "You realize Draco is perfectly aware of the time?"

"He's shamelessly exploiting my thoughtful nature," Hermione said with a smile. "But somebody should be having lots of happy sex, and since it's not me, I don't mind patrolling."

Pansy laughed softly. "You're a little hard on my self-esteem."

Hermione shook her head. "You could be having plenty of happy sex, but I trust that you understand how to employ time management skills."

The Slytherin girl snorted.

Companionably, they made it through two floors and fifteen points before Pansy spoke again.

"Mr Krum seems very nice."

Hermione offered a genuine smile. "He is. He puts up with me even though I know nothing about Quidditch or flying."

"Which is rather shocking, given your two best friends. And Draco. And Gryffindor House."

"I tune them all out as soon as they start," Hermione admitted with a laugh.

"This probably explains why you're top of the year."

"Shall I lobby to stop Quidditch for the sake of the students' academic achievement?"

Pansy managed a very serious expression. "Oh, absolutely." She leaned closer. "I'll take over as Head Girl once you're run out of the school."

Hermione's lips tipped up. "Very thoughtful of you."

After Transfiguration on Wednesday, Hermione skipped lunch in order to get a head start on research for the essay they'd just been assigned on defensive conjuring. Draco might have been willing to join her, but it was clear that it was not Harry's preference, so it hadn't taken much effort for Hermione to convince the two of them to go on to lunch without her.

She'd been in the library for less than ten minutes, however, when the stench of Dungbombs greeted her nose, and there was a sudden mass exodus. Irma emerged shortly after the students, closing and sealing the doors behind her and then announcing that it would be a quarter of an hour before her spells had finished their work.

She followed this up with the equivalent of a death threat to whoever had set off the bombs. When she saw that Hermione was there, the older woman confirmed that the Gryffindor would be willing to let the students back in once the charm had done its work. This allowed the librarian to go inform the headmaster of the crime, lips pinched into an even thinner line than normal.

Several of the students had left, but since it was mostly Ravenclaws who were in the library on a lunch break anyway, the majority hunkered down to wait. Hermione contemplated speeding up the odour-removing spell, but since Irma had already announced the time it would take, she resisted. Being with a group of Ravenclaws ensured that they settled down with books, anyway, so it wasn't a hardship for her to keep an eye on them while she was waiting.

They'd been there for about ten minutes when the arrival of Viktor pulled her out of her book.

"Mila moya, may I speak with you?"

She explained about the Dungbombs, matching his smile with one of her own. "We're allowed to go back in a few minutes; until then, my time is yours."

They moved a little further down the hall, since she knew how annoying it could be to have two people chatting while others were trying to read.

"I have had a thought."

"News so exciting you thought you'd have to announce it to me straightaway?" she teased.

He offered her a theatrical frown. "Do not be a pest, mila moya, or I vill not be able to speak vith you any longer."

She grinned at him, assuming a poise of perfect attentiveness. "So sorry. I'm listening very carefully for your brilliant thought."

He was looking very happy as he said, "I vould like to teach you to fly."

Hermione didn't like where this seemed to be heading. "I know how, thank you."

He stepped closer. "But you do not enjoy it."

"Not so much, no," she admitted.

"Then you do not really know how it is done," he answered simply. "If you do it vith me, you vill enjoy it."

"I appreciate the offer," she said, shaking her head, "but no."

"You say this because you do not know how to do it properly."

"No," she corrected. "I can do it, I just don't like to."

"Vell, then, come vith me. Just the two of us. I can show you how it is meant to be done if you really don't vant to do it on your own."

She shook her head again. "I did that with Harry, thank you, and that was more than enough."

"I vould really like to," he said earnestly.

Looking into his very serious face, she knew that he really wanted to do this.

He scanned her face carefully and apparently saw just how equally she didn't want to do it. "I vill not force you."

She reached out to touch his arm. "I really appreciate the offer, but I know what I should and shouldn't be doing."

He captured the hand on his arm with his own hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Of course you do, mila moya. It vas only a thought."

"A very generous thought. But I'd think it would be the last thing you want to do in your spare time."

He shook his head, saying very seriously, "For you, I always have time, Hermione."

"I appreciate your saying so." She saw that the waiting students had risen and realized that the quarter hour was up. "I've got to go, but I'll see you later tonight, all right?"

"I vill be there," he agreed.

She spent an uneventful half hour in the library, and Irma arrived as lunch ended, so Hermione had no concerns about heading off to class and knowing that the library was in safe hands.

After Arithmancy, she and Draco headed down to dinner together where they met up with Harry. It didn't take her more than a few minutes in the Great Hall to realize that there seemed to be a larger than normal amount of whispering going on. Since periodic bouts of this were not unusual, she began to eat dinner without inquiring into the nature of the noise.

Harry cleared his throat very loudly and very falsely. Twice.

"What?" she asked.

"I heard the most interesting rumour this afternoon while you were in class."

"O-kay," she said, not particularly in the mood to hear more rumours.

Given the luck they'd been having with rumours this year, she wondered what sort could put Harry in such a good mood.

Harry's lips twitched. "I have it on good authority that you and Viktor were arranging your sex life right in the middle of the corridor for anyone to hear."

She rolled her eyes as she said sarcastically, "Of course we were. We do it regularly. How can you be so behind on the news, Harry?"

"So you didn't see Viktor today?" Harry asked pointedly.

"No, I did. But we didn't talk about sex, we were—" She cut off as she realized exactly what they had been talking about and how it could have been taken.

She burst into laughter and couldn't answer any of the questions that Draco and Harry were now tossing at her in rapid succession, waving them all away until she'd got herself under better control. She'd garnered a fair bit of attention at this point, but she paid all the gawkers no mind.

"He's the flying instructor," she said when she thought she wasn't simply going to lose control again. "He was offering to give me lessons or to take me up himself. In retrospect, I can see how some of that might have been misconstrued."

They were both looking at her.

"You had a protracted discussion about his flying you on his broomstick and you're surprised that was misconstrued?" Draco asked.

She rolled her eyes again. "It would be completely illogical for him to be forced to use other words than the proper ones because they can also be taken sexually by immature prats. Did any of your gossipmongers think to mention the fact that I turned him down?"

Harry shook his head. "I think it made a better story when you were making successful assignations right in front of everyone."

"You'd think the grapevine could be a little more accurate. Given that we weren't shielding our conversation, someone should have been able to pick up the entire conversation and get the details right."

Honestly, those Ravenclaws should have been either paying more attention to their books or listening carefully to her and Viktor.

"But then it wouldn't be gossip," Harry countered. "It would be an accurate transmission of the details of someone's life, and the gossipers of the world don't like that notion."

Hermione sighed and went back to her meal.

After dinner, she returned to the library. She wanted to get in more research time, especially given how interrupted her lunch break had been. The information she needed was in one of the reserved books that couldn't be removed from the library, so she wanted to get the paper work out of the way before all the seventh-year Transfiguration students were trying to access it.

Of course, had she wished, she could have gotten around both the spell that prevented the book from being removed from the library and the one that prevented its pages from being copied directly, but she had restrained herself. She didn't want to invite trouble.

It was almost ten before she was recalled to the time and realized she needed to get down to the dungeons; she'd agreed to meet Viktor on the hour so that they could have tea with Harry and Draco before she had to work on the Weresbane again. Quickly returning Conjuring Defence or Destruction to the reference shelf, she hurried down to the dungeons.

She was within a corridor of her quarters when she was interrupted.

"Keep your personal life to yourself."

She turned to face Severus, throwing up privacy charms without a second thought, since his words had practically been spat in her face.

He continued darkly: "How does it look when the Head Girl is making assignations with a professor in the corridor?"

"According to at least half the school, it makes me damn lucky," she snarled back, fed up with his attitude. "You know there's no prohibition against students who are of age having relationships with professors."

"There is such a thing as basic decency—which one would hope you would employ and thereby not flaunt your relationship with that jumped-up broomstick rider."

Hermione stiffened, drawing herself up to her full height as she glared at Severus. "Viktor may not be the most brilliant man in the world, but at least he's a decent human being. I'm not ashamed of the relationship I have with him!"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "There are a great many students in this school, Miss Granger, and the majority of them are under the age of consent. You will therefore do well to modify your behaviour before I have to take this matter to the headmaster."

If she had been capable of growing any stiffer, she would have done. For an "offence" as trivial as this, based on hearsay especially, going to the headmaster was highly insulting.

"If that is what you feel you must do, sir, then I can hardly stop you," she answered coldly. "I make no apologies for my behaviour."

She didn't care if Severus dragged her to Albus; there was no way she was going to tell him what had actually happened when he was behaving in this manner. She hadn't done anything wrong, and she was pissed off enough that she wasn't afraid to say so.

Severus's lips had pressed into a thin white line, and she knew that he was not impressed with her militant stance. Truthfully, it was more like what Harry would have done under these circumstances; normally, she would have been conciliatory. Apologetic was the last thing she was feeling, though, especially now that he had insulted Viktor.

"The headmaster's office. Now." His voice was arctic.

It was perhaps possible that she could squeeze this meeting in before she had to start the Weresbane, but she wasn't going to take that chance.

"Even if you're under orders again to ruin my brewing, it won't work. I'm not finished until midnight."

His nostrils flared, and it looked as though he was actually going to lose his temper with her. At the last moment, however, he reined his temper in and growled, "Seven o'clock tomorrow morning, Miss Granger. Do not be late."

He stalked off in an angry swirl of robes.

Hermione drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Severus would no doubt take out his anger on the next students he came across, and at this precise moment, she was rather regretting that that option was not available to her as well.

Continuing her deep breathing, she made her way back to the common room where she found that Viktor was already there with Harry and Draco; her run-in with Severus had made her late. She squelched more anger. She hated being late.

They'd been talking when she arrived, but the flow of chatter died off and Harry's eyebrows rose as soon as he saw her. He jumped to his feet.

"What on Earth happened to you?"

Viktor had risen as well, and an amused-looking Draco followed suit. She immediately waved them back down, but Draco, looking even more amused now, was the only one to go.

"Nothing that ten minutes in this room won't cure," she snapped, her attempt at an even tone not materializing. She was pretty sure her attempt at a smile had come out looking like she was grimacing, too.

"What's Snape done now?" Harry asked, coming to her side to usher her into a seat.

It was rather sad that not only did Harry immediately assume that it was an encounter with Severus that had upset her, he was right. She also had to wonder how she looked that he had decided he needed to be so solicitous, given that this was her common room, too, and she knew perfectly well where all the chairs were. Only once she was settled did Harry and Viktor sit back down.

"He heard the rumour about me and Viktor, too, and had some choice comments to make about the inappropriateness of my behaviour."

Viktor was out of his seat so quickly, it looked as though he'd been ejected. She jumped up as well, hurrying to his side to lay her hand on his arm and restrain him.

"Don't worry about it, Viktor. We're going to see Albus first thing in the morning, and I'll get everything straightened out."

"I cannot believe that … man vould try to insult you in such a manner!" Viktor sounded truly incensed. "It is not to be accepted."

"We're not accepting it," she answered soothingly, amazed at how much better she felt now that someone else was supporting her. "I'll explain everything to Albus."

"It is a bit much, though," Draco interjected, "taking you to the headmaster over a misunderstood conversation in the corridor."

Hermione made a face. "I don't think Severus has quite grasped that the conversation was misunderstood."

"You didn't tell him?" Harry questioned, sounding puzzled.

She shrugged. "He didn't ask me what had happened, so I didn't feel any compunction to clarify."

Draco was staring at her with renewed respect. "But you're going to announce what really occurred in the headmaster's office in the morning."

She smiled a fierce smile. "When Albus asks me to explain, I'll be only too happy to do so."

Draco smiled back. "Remind me not to make you angry."

"I thought you'd learnt that lesson already," she said with a softer voice and more teasing smile.

"Hmm... I guess I really should have been the one to warn Severus, eh?"

"Too late now," Harry said gleefully, giving Draco a warning look.

"Oh, don't worry," the Slytherin said easily. "I'm not about to get in Hermione's way at this point. You're working on the potion again?"

She nodded. "But I think we have time for a quick cuppa before I have to get started. Viktor?"

He allowed himself to be coaxed into tea rather than going after Severus, which it still looked as though he were considering, no matter what she said.

Draco and Harry kindly kept up an innocuous flow of conversation, and she happily drank the very hot liquid and tried not to think about a very cold man. It looked as though Viktor was doing much the same, though she doubted his thought processes were identical.

Then it was time to get to work, and she and Viktor bid farewell to the boys and passed through the bedroom into the lab. She was soothed almost instantly by the familiar routine of this room and what she did in it.

Viktor let her work in silence for several minutes.

"I do not understand vhy you put up vith that man."

On days like this, she didn't altogether understand it either, and there was so much more to the situation than Viktor was aware of.

"He's a Hogwarts professor, Viktor. Even if I decided not to put up with him, there isn't a lot I could do to avoid him completely. I … might not always be happy with exactly what has occurred, but I generally know what to expect from him and how to deal with it."

She certainly had preferences as to what would occur, but she had learnt to live with disappointment by this point.

"You are a very understanding person, mila moya. I believe I vould have cursed him by now."

"I have no doubt you would have tried." She'd seen him quite ready to try. "But it's better to let these sorts of occurrences sort themselves out. Severus doesn't take kindly to people attacking him."

"And you are concerned about how he feels?" Viktor asked with a frown of confusion.

Better not to go there at all, really.

"I know the likely outcome if you were to go after him in that sort of temper," she corrected. "I don't much fancy having to try to put you together again once the cursing stopped."

He was still frowning at her. "You think so little of my skills?"

Oops. She was currently immersing the roots of the Weresbane in a silver cauldron, charm-cleansed arms covered in water to the elbows, so she could hardly put a hand on his as she would have done otherwise.

She made a bit of a face as she said in a conciliatory tone, "I've seen him duel more than once, Viktor, and I know his temper. He would give Filius and Albus a run for their money, and you know that's saying a great deal."

Viktor seemed to settle at this mention of Severus's prowess being equal to Albus's; the headmaster was known to be a more-than-proficient dueller, and thanks to Viktor's correspondence with her, as well as the Prophet articles, he knew that Albus had duelled Voldemort and won. Being wary of anyone with those skills was wise, and now the Bulgarian seemed to accept that Severus fit in that category.

"I would still have done it."

She was fairly certain there was a "for you" lingering, unspoken, after those words.

"I'm sure you would have," she agreed, knowing it had come down to a defence of her honour in his mind. Harry would have done the same. "But I'm capable of defending myself, you know."

Finally, he seemed to relax fully, a smile tipping up the corners of his lips. "I'm entirely certain that is the case, mila moya."

Fortunately, that seemed to be the end of that part of the discussion. Amusingly, he did seem to find it necessary to apologize for the discussion in the hallway that had led to this problem, and she reassured him that she didn't object to anything that he'd said. They knew their discussion had been entirely innocent, and she refused to be limited in what she could say in the corridors because idiotic gossips might misunderstand and spread wild rumours.

This seemed to reassure him that she really didn't feel any lingering resentment towards him for the incident, and he was even good enough not to make any additional attempts to pressure her into flying with him now that the topic had been raised once more.

By the time the Weresbane roots had been soaked for thirty minutes in the still water which had been exposed to the light of the previous full moon, her fingers had turned into little prunes. Unfortunately, no wrinkle-preventing spells could be used on her skin, as they would interfere with the finished potion. Her potion had turned out to be rather finicky, and it was necessary that the roots be immersed in the water by the potion-maker, not by any implement. The water was chilly, too, so she was more than glad to be able to pull her arms out.

She drained the roots using a silver colander, grateful anew that her needs for the potion were being underwritten by Harry and Draco. She used a silver cutting board and silver knife to dice the Weresbane into fine, evenly cut pieces and added them to the potion. She stirred briskly for five and three quarter minutes clockwise and then five and three quarter minutes anticlockwise before she put out the flame under the cauldron and covered the cauldron with its matching silver lid, sealing it with a wordless charm.

The Weresbane roots had to mix with the rest of the potion for twenty-four hours without being disturbed. At the end of that period, she'd be able to add the final ingredient, the Weresbane leaves, which needed to be fresh but ground up with a small quantity of birch sap into a paste and partially dried the day before it was added; she began that process now as she and Viktor continued to chat.

They spoke of problems he'd been having with discipline in some of his classes since the students often wanted to gawk at him more than they wanted to actually listen to him. She suggested that he could start glaring, stalking, and taking points for the smallest infraction, and he made a face at her, knowing exactly whose behaviour she was suggesting he imitate.

By the time she was finished spreading the paste in a thin layer on a roll of cotton spread across the steel table, it was nearing half twelve. She cleaned up and escorted Viktor to the door. It was a little late to be offering him tea again, although Harry and Draco were both sitting on the couch, having returned from their rounds.

"Vould you like me to accompany you in the morning?" Viktor asked.

She thought Severus deserved to squirm a little for his assumptions, but she knew he'd only take it out on Viktor if the Bulgarian were there to witness it, and she wasn't going to put him through that.

"Thank you, Viktor, but I can handle this one on my own."

He looked as though he wanted to protest further, but given her phrasing, he couldn't do so without impugning her ability to take care of the matter, and she'd known he wouldn't do that.

"I'm to bed," she announced once Viktor had left.

"Bed, bed?" Harry asked.

She smiled. "I'm going to sleep now, yes."

Harry snorted, knowing exactly what she wasn't saying.

"Very well, then. I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'm always up in the morning," she answered with a laugh. "You're certain you don't intend a lie-in because you don't have History of Magic in the morning?"

"But Draco does," Harry answered. "I'll be up."

She suspected Draco's bedroom could be turned into a lab even less inconveniently than hers could.

"In which case, I'll see you then. Sleep well."

By four, she was awake again, slightly antsy, and knew that she wasn't going to be able to sleep any longer; there was the Weresbane and the meeting with Albus and Severus, and her head was abuzz with thoughts.

Once she was clean and dressed, she checked the Map to make sure that Severus wasn't also awake and lurking.

Since no irate Head of Slytherin was in sight, she went to check on all the plants she was growing in the hidden conservatory. Even though this batch of Weresbane appeared to be going perfectly, she would have many more batches to produce, as well as more Wolfsbane. It seemed that all she was doing was brewing, recently; it was a good thing that she enjoyed it so much. The more she brewed the Weresbane, at any rate, the more comfortable she was becoming with it, and she now felt as though she could brew the Wolfsbane in her sleep.

It made her think about what Draco had said about an apprenticeship. She had considered it—as she had considered many possible jobs—but she always wondered that Severus had never once mentioned the idea. She knew that he didn't give compliments freely, especially to Gryffindors, but they worked privately—or at least they had done—with relative frequency, and if he saw that merit in her, mightn't he have mentioned it at least once? She sighed. Here she was trying to avoid Severus and thoughts of him followed her wherever she went.

Assured that everything green was in perfect health and didn't appear to have nearly as many worries as she had, she gave the corridors a quick patrol, since it was always possible that someone would be up to mischief of some sort at five in the morning, and then made her way back to her common room.

Harry was true to his word and was up at six so that they could train before her meeting. They managed to knock each other unconscious several times, which helped her equilibrium, before she ventured up to the headmaster's office.

The griffin still opened without requiring her to name any sweets, but the headmaster bidding her enter as she arrived at the door informed her that her presence had been announced. She discovered that Severus wasn't there yet, and she guessed that he once again intended to storm in on the hour. At least he couldn't accuse her of being late, although she'd no doubt get yelled at for insisting that the meeting be postponed. The headmaster offered her tea, which she declined, and he actually went so far as to confirm that she didn't want any.

"Severus seemed quite … perturbed when he informed me of this meeting yesterday evening."

"Severus no doubt is quite perturbed," she responded evenly, "but that doesn't mean I have any intention of taking a Calming Draught. I'm entirely in possession of my emotions, I assure you."

Albus waved the teapot back to its spot on the tea service.

"How long have you known?" he asked mildly.

"When's the last time I had any of your tea?"

He smiled slightly. "I wish only to ensure that meetings go as smoothly as possible. The topics being discussed are often very contentious."

She nodded her head in acceptance of this explanation—such as it was. "As long as you don't force it upon those who refuse, what you do is your business."

"Harry knows too, I suppose?"

"Of course."

Albus nodded, seemingly to himself. "I thought Severus was the only one who knew."

"You've grown yourself a whole new generation of paranoid Order members."

Albus smiled. "Splendid."

She would never understand the man, that was for certain.

Severus came in, door coming perilously close to slamming behind him. He was usually a little more circumspect in the headmaster's presence. Albus blandly offered him tea, and Hermione had to hide a smile.

"I don't have time for such frivolities," Severus said curtly.

Tea was a British staple taken seriously by a great many people, but she bit her tongue and refrained from saying so. Someone had to be mature in this conversation, and it looked as though it wasn't going to be Severus.

Albus opened his mouth, but he was not given the opportunity to speak because Severus immediately launched into a long-winded and comprehensive harangue upon all the indecencies of her recent behaviour.

Albus had as good a measure of Severus's current mood as she did, and he simply let his Potions master go on until he ran out of steam. Then he turned to her.

"Hermione?"

Succinctly, Hermione explained the conversation that had actually occurred in the corridor.

Severus was staring at her incredulously.

"You can't seriously expect me to believe that's what the two of you were discussing."

"He's the Quidditch coach," she said acidly. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you that flying is not my favourite activity in the world." She didn't like admitting this, especially to him, but the rational part of her knew it was a relatively well-known fact. "Viktor was hoping he could change my mind."

"But—" Severus began to protest.

She faced him seriously. "Consider carefully before you accuse me of lying, Professor."

His eyes narrowed as he regarded her. "You consented to come this morning knowing your conversation was only about flying."

"You ordered me here," she corrected sharply, "and as soon as Albus asked,I told him what happened."

Severus opened his mouth, but Albus intervened.

"I'm so pleased we got that straightened out. Was there anything else you needed to discuss, Severus?"

In Hermione's imagination, steam was pouring out of Severus's ears; he looked that irritated with the two of them. He actually rose and left in a huff without speaking another word.

She and Albus exchanged glances.

"You do realize—" the headmaster began.

"That discussing sexual relations in front of a corridor full of students would not be the wisest course of action?" She made a face at him. "I'm not an idiot, Albus."

There was an even more pronounced twinkle in his eyes than usual. "Of course not, Hermione, of course not."

She rose. "If that's everything—?"

"There was one other thing."

She sat back down once more. In her experience, "one other thing" tended to be substantial.

"You have not been very forthcoming when it comes to the spell you and Harry intend to use against Voldemort."

Deciding a "See how you like it" on behalf of Harry would not be very mature, she said instead, "I believe I made clear already that it is information I do not intend to disseminate."

"And do you truly believe that the information would be in danger were it revealed to me?"

"Not as such," she admitted. "I trust you, Albus, but I think you understand better than most people do about keeping very important information very close to your chest."

"It makes it difficult to make an informed decision."

It contributed to winding up in the Department of Mysteries looking for a "weapon" that Voldemort wanted. Hermione sighed.

"It would be breaking a confidence to tell you everything; the ability to perform the spell will die with me. But I can give you a few more details, if you wish."

They were details that she was going to give Harry and Draco, and Albus was in charge of the Order.

"I do."

She met his eyes and offered him as much information as she hoped would convince him of the feasibility of the plan without revealing too much. She didn't think that he was suddenly going to start handing out instruction manuals, but the only way she could be absolutely certain that she was living up to the trust Solace had placed in her was to be the only one who knew how to work the spell.

Albus was polite enough—or wise enough—not to hunt for more, and when they were both Occluding fully once more back in their own heads, she spoke aloud.

"I trust I do not need to tell you that this information is not to be shared?"

"I trust that your ability to ward my door remains uninhibited?"

She smiled faintly, deciding that it was probably a good thing that the headmaster was so aware.

"Thank you, Hermione. Enjoy your classes."

Unsure whether this was supposed to be a reminder that she was only a student or if she was reading too much into a rather standard statement, Hermione bid the headmaster farewell.

She headed back to the common room to reassure Draco and Harry that she had survived the encounter unscathed, and she gave them the short version of what had occurred, omitting everything that had occurred after Severus had left.

Draco shook his head, informing her that she was either brave or stupid for grappling with Severus in that manner—but she had style. Harry, unsurprisingly, wholeheartedly approved of anything she did to irk the man who he didn't think was treating her particularly well at the moment.

They all resolved to do their best to stay out of Severus's way today, and they went up to breakfast together. It was after the meal and before History of Magic that Hermione pulled Ron aside and give him a quick explanation about how her cure worked; he hadn't understood why the three of them were so worked up, and even her short explanation of it having to do with her cure hadn't worked on him because even the redhead knew that it wasn't anywhere near the full moon.

Now he had a slightly better understanding of what they were doing, and she had practically seen him resolve not to bother her for the next couple of days; he knew what she was like as she approached a deadline.

Despite the relatively exciting morning, the rest of Thursday passed with annoying slowness. Tomorrow would be the day that Hermione found out if her Weresbane had a chance of curing ten strangers of lycanthropy. She'd find out if a random sampling of the wizarding world was capable of turning into Animagi under strange circumstances. She'd get more proof that she was capable of brewing her potion, that this was all worthwhile, that there was yet one more way that they were winning the war and Voldemort was losing it…. Friday had a lot to live up to, and that seemed to leave Thursday in a particularly awkward position.

Hermione still had to finish the Weresbane. Draco was getting nervous about the coaching that he was going to be doing the next day. Remus wasn't even in the castle, and she could swear that she was getting vibes of anxiety from him … or maybe that was the fact that Tonks was in the castle, and the Auror knew how important the next day was for all of them.

Hermione had Herbology in the afternoon, and Pomona had offered to let her and Draco off, but since that would result in the two of them sitting anxiously in their common room, they'd elected to stay. Ron thought they were daft, but Harry didn't even try to argue.

After dinner, Viktor did his best to distract them all. Thursday evenings were still scheduled as the particular time to have tea with him and discuss his classes, and he arrived with both Ron and Ginny, having evidently decided that they would be a better distraction in force. Together with Harry and Draco, they proceeded to have one big friendly argument about she wasn't sure quite which Quidditch match.

Hermione pasted on a "You all know I'm not interested, but I'm politely paying attention" expression and proceeded to mentally dissect the potion that she would be working on again shortly after half eleven that night. There was always a chance that she would catch some sort of problem in one of her revisions. There was a lot of pressure on her right now, and she got through life ensuring that she had checked and double-checked facts, figures, and theories.

Periodically, Ginny, sitting next to Hermione, would nudge her when she got completely lost in introspection, and she'd smile reassuringly at the girl before lapsing back into her contemplation. She ran through the plan for the next day, including the contingencies she'd set up should any of the werewolves fail to make the transformation into Animagi.

It was hardly the end of the world if this occurred, as she intended to have them take the Wolfsbane on the intervening full and then simply try again, but she suspected that, psychologically, it would be a blow. She'd been thinking about what Fawkes had done to assist Draco during his new moon, and she was relieved that he had agreed to offer his services again should they be needed.

Viktor, Ginny, and Ron finally left at ten, and she roused herself enough to politely see them off. She had an hour and a half left before she could work on her Weresbane, and she couldn't seem to concentrate well enough to revise or do anything useful, so Harry finally sent her out to the Forest to recharge with her herd.

An hour later, she slipped back into the castle. She greeted Harry and Draco in the common room so that they would know she was alive and well and then told them that she would see them in the morning. They bid her goodnight, and she continued on into her lab.

She gathered up the dried Weresbane leaves, brushing the substance off the cotton into a golden bowl. A moment's thought set a hot fire underneath the cauldron, and she removed the lid and set it aside before sprinkling the contents of the bowl into the potion in an anticlockwise spiral.

As the last of the leaves hit the surface of the potion, it went completely still before it began to boil furiously. She let it boil for six and a half minutes, stirred clockwise for thirty seconds and then let it boil again, repeating this pattern until twenty-eight minutes had passed. As she removed the silver stirring rod after the last stir, she lowered the flame.

The leaves were the last ingredient before the one that she had designated the "very last" in her head, the one which, for safety, wasn't recorded anywhere. In five hours and twenty minutes, she would add the very last ingredient, and the potion would be complete and drinkable. It would be finished at a quarter to six, although the werewolves wouldn't be drinking the potion until she arrived at noon after DADA. That was nearly five hours before the end of their drink window, so they would be good and ready when the time came.

After she had tidied up, she spent the next five-odd hours ensuring that the temperature and consistency of the potion remained stable as it reacted with the open air. She tweaked as necessary, adding minute portions of Weresbane or sap to maintain the proper consistency until the brewing time elapsed. Precisely as the last second ticked away on her timer, she allowed the very last ingredient—one of the brewer's tears—to fall into the potion, which turned instantly blue.

Grinning, she acknowledged exultantly that she had a viable batch of Weresbane in front of her. There had been a small part of her, the part that would always worry that she was going to suddenly fail her exams, that had concerned that this version wouldn't succeed; apologizing profusely had really been her only back-up plan, so it was a great relief that nothing had gone pear-shaped so far.

She decanted the potion into twenty single-dose, spell-proof vials before moving to clean up her cauldron and all her equipment. The ten extra doses were back-ups which would stay here at Hogwarts; if the first set was somehow compromised, she'd have more to use.

She didn't feel she was being overly paranoid because when she had tested the ingredients that were in the common greenhouse before she started making her potion this time around, she had found that the Wolfsbane and the ginger already showed signs of being poisoned again. Whoever was trying to thwart her was nothing if not persistent, and she was just glad that she had other sources. She kept Pomona apprised—which resulted in the Head of Hufflepuff muttering darkly about lack of integrity and the fact that they had never had a problem like this before—since some of those ingredients could easily be used by other students to deleterious effect.

When it came to the Weresbane, it actually had few ingredients in common with the Wolfsbane, and whoever was doing the poisoning didn't seem to be aware yet that she needed to work on the new moon as well as the full; the poisoning would only botch the potion right now, but it would be deadly in another two weeks. Sometimes, it amazed her that they functioned as a school at all, and she hoped that a lot of the sabotage and ill-will could be laid at Voldemort's door, not simply on the nature of children and the house system. She'd be happy when she didn't have to deal with it anymore, and she really hoped that the destruction of Voldemort would help restore a general tolerance, though that was perhaps too much to wish for.

She placed the back-up doses into one of the cupboards and warded it so that only she, Harry, Draco, or Severus could get into it, and then she Masked herself and hurriedly sneaked off the grounds and to the safe house so that she could tuck the Weresbane in the dungeon cupboard before anyone was the wiser.

She was back at the castle in time to emerge from her room as though no extracurricular trips had occurred, warm up with Harry and Draco (they were all in top form and shielding well enough not to let anything through on all sides), and make it to DADA feeling certain that she should have talked to Tonks and skived off class. She felt as though she could bounce right through the walls.

Tonks, fortunately, was seeing Remus, and if there was anyone nearly as anxious as Hermione was about the rest of the day, it was him. As a result, the Auror had a pretty good idea of how Hermione—and to a lesser extent, Harry, Draco, and even Ron—was feeling right now, and the Auror didn't bother with a lecture of more than a quarter of an hour before she got them fighting with one another.

It somehow ended up that she, Ron, Harry, Draco, and Daphne became one big group, and despite Tonks instructing them to be sure that they shifted the teams around so that it was fair, Harry and Draco simply made her and Ron a team and then tried, with Daphne's assistance, to beat them. Ensuring that they weren't able to do this, even with their advantage of numbers and with the added handicap of not being able to reveal too much power in front of everyone, kept her well enough occupied until the end of class was finally signalled.

She was the first out the door, and Harry, Draco, and Ron were close on her heels. Harry had won the argument against Albus and would be accompanying them today; when he had asked to come along, she had told him that he needed to clear it with the headmaster. Since it wasn't the full moon, he wasn't in particular danger from the werewolves, and since few people knew that the potion needed to be administered on the new moon, there was no reason for anyone to suspect he'd be off the grounds.

And even if Voldemort or his followers had been alerted to the fact that Harry wouldn't be protected by the Hogwarts wards today, he was going to a location for which she was the Secret Keeper. Not only would she be there to defend him should events go pear-shaped, half the Order was there as well. How could he be safer?

Albus had used the permission for this visit to bargain for Harry's exclusion from the next one, and since they had all known that it would be over Albus's dead body that he would be letting Harry spend an evening with nearly four dozen werewolves on the full moon, this had seemed a strategic concession on Harry's part.

Tonks would once again be joining them as soon as her classes were over for the day, and Albus had agreed on the loan of not only Bill but also Minerva; she had expressed an interest in witnessing the transformations, and Hermione had consented.

Not wanting Ron to feel left out now that they were finally getting on again, she'd invited him to join them. Since his mother was at the safe house, Albus had stayed out of the argument entirely. Hermione had decided not to ask what rearrangement of all things Quidditch had needed to occur to make this evening spent with them possible. Given her current temper, any such comment was likely to come out even more snidely than she meant it, and now was not the time to alienate Ron. He'd seemed happy to take part in this with them, and that was what mattered.

She Masked him while Harry took care of Draco, and as per the arrangements they had made, Albus decided to visit Hagrid just as they needed to get out the main door; while Albus would certainly make their excuses if it became necessary, it caused far less problems if no one officially knew they were gone.

Since neither Harry nor Ron had been to the safe house before, she and Draco needed to get them there, and there had been no contest about which pairings would be Apparating. Hermione imagined it was just as well that Ron couldn't see the two boys' Apparition, because she knew full well that they were hugging and might well have been getting in a snog or two.

The redhead wrapped his arms around her and she wondered how long it had been since he had last done that—given her an actual hug. Living with Harry had been good for that, at least. The newly more tactile boy had been happy to give her a hug or three, and they spent half their mornings sparring and touching. Ever since Draco had come into the picture, though, she been more on her own, and that was just another adjustment she had to make. Nothing to be done about it, really, because it remained quite clear that Severus wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. She let out a soft sigh and Apparated.

They reappeared in the lobby of the safe house, Hermione unMasking Ron and herself as she saw that Harry and Draco were visible. She moved to step away from Ron, but he hadn't let go. She looked up at him.

His face looked unusually troubled. "I'm sorry. I never meant it to be so bad. I care about you, 'Mione, and I really don't want to lose you as a friend."

He tightened his grip on her, turning their pseudo-hug into a real one, and she hugged him back fiercely, blinking away tears. Every once in a while, Ron was very right.

She stepped back again, and this time he let her go. She smiled up at him, nodding, and his face softened. Eventually, they might be able to let the stupidity of this entire year go.

Remus, Bill, and Molly appeared to greet the newcomers, the latter in an apron and looking happier than Hermione had seen her in some time. She now had a whole houseful of "children" to care for, and she seemed to be thriving. Hermione supposed that the woman was still suffering from the "empty nest" syndrome given that Ginny was the last of seven. Hermione couldn't personally fathom raising that many children, but she could understand how the absence would likely be draining to someone who clearly enjoyed it so much.

Agreeing to come here, though, was another reminder of how big Molly's heart was. She'd taken to all of the werewolves as though they were a big extended family despite the fact that this was one of the largest gatherings of social pariahs outside of the Death Eaters. Oh, Hermione knew that Molly had known Remus for years and had always treated him better than most people did, but knowing and liking one werewolf wasn't quite the same as accepting all of them.

Molly and Arthur were very forward-thinking and liberal for a pure-blood family, but it was nice to see that this open-mindedness extended as far as it did. Wonderful as Molly was, she was also extremely stubborn, and every once in a while, Hermione ran up against very firm opinions that had been formed in Molly's youth which nothing had shaken. Yet here the woman was, spending all her time with almost fifty werewolves so that they were safe and cared for until Hermione could cure them—while the Ministry stood carefully back and waited to see what happened.

This largesse on Molly's part also appeared to include accepting the son of her family's biggest rival, too, because Molly gave them all hugs, including, to his evident surprise, Draco. Of course, Hermione had already seen plenty of examples of how much Molly cared for Harry—both the good and the less fortunate for Hermione personally. But given that Hermione suspected the woman had been hoping that Ginny's childhood crush on Harry would grow into something more permanent for both of them, accepting Draco was a mark of how much she cared for Harry himself.

One look at Harry told her how much it meant to him, and she knew that no matter what Draco felt about the Weasleys he wouldn't be doing anything to jeopardize Harry's happiness.

Molly gave Ron a larger hug than normal, too, clearly pleased that he had finally made peace with his two best friends. If the woman found it strange that Hermione and Harry seemed to be getting along fine after their apparent break-up, especially with Draco tagging along, she didn't make mention of it, for which Hermione was grateful. The fewer people she had to lie to, the happier she would be.

All the werewolves who wouldn't be taking part in tonight's trial were on the ground floor or above, while the chosen ten were down in the dungeon waiting for their arrival. Once the reunion was over, Hermione, Harry, Draco, Ron, Remus, and Bill headed downstairs to greet the anxious group.

Although they had books and several had been making an attempt at a game of wizarding chess or cards, it was clear that they were as nervous as she was and wanted to get this day over with. A couple others, she saw, were reviewing notes or books on Animagi; it seemed that they were all being as careful as they could be.

Going to retrieve the potions, she found that the group of people she'd come downstairs with were looking at her strangely.

"What?" she asked as she began to un-ward.

"I thought you were bringing the potion now," Harry said. "Isn't that why we came so early?"

"We're administering the potion now," she answered as the wards fell, and she removed the vials.

"But this is the potion that you were working on until last night?" Harry clarified.

"Which I finished just before six this morning. That would be the one," she answered with amusement.

"So what's it doing here?" Harry demanded.

She laughed outright. "It didn't walk on its own two legs, if that's where you're going with this, Harry. I brought it, of course."

"When?" he demanded.

"This morning."

Remus looked surprised. "I didn't know you'd been."

"Of course not," she answered, a smile playing at the corner of her lips. "This might be Draco's house, but it's my safe house. You know I did the warding. How can you be surprised that I may come and go as I please?"

They clearly hadn't considered it quite like that.

"But you did imply, at least, that the potion was coming with you this afternoon?" Harry pursued the original topic.

She nodded. "On the off chance that anyone worked that out, the potion wouldn't be in any danger."

"What about the danger it was in when you brought it here all by yourself?" he demanded.

"I'd challenge you to have found me and stopped me," she said lightly, "but I'd worry you'd put yourself in danger next time trying to do exactly that. I know how to keep myself and the potion safe, thank you, and I don't think you are in a position to lecture."

Harry looked as though he wanted to argue but was suddenly finding it difficult given the number of "unsafe" activities in which he had engaged over the years. Given that she had been Masked and Apparating straight from Hogwarts to a location for which she was Secret Keeper, there wasn't an extraordinary amount of danger involved. She probably had a better chance of getting hurt while on a Hogsmeade weekend. Or walking through the corridors at Hogwarts.

Remus was staring around their gathering and appeared to have noticed that he was the eldest and should perhaps remonstrate on principle—only he couldn't cast stones given what he had got up to during his school career; her well-reasoned, brief excursion didn't really compare.

She saw the moment he conceded defeat and grinned at him, and he gave her a rueful smile in return. Bill didn't look as though he were going to be taking on the mantle of responsible adult, so Hermione figured she was safe.

They distributed the potion, ensuring that each of the ten werewolves drank it. This was it. The moon set at five fifty-three this evening; the trial was about to begin in earnest.

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Attempt

Hermione observed the ten werewolves for an hour and a half, letting them chat or sit quietly as they preferred while she made sure that their blood tests held true and that none of them had become allergic or reacted in an unanticipated way once the potion was actually ingested. Everyone seemed fine, and Hermione recorded all the vitals and initial reactions in her Weresbane journal, which already listed such information as their names, ages, weight, sex, pertinent medical history, and how long they'd been werewolves. She wanted to be sure that she had all the proper records should there be a problem at any point, and if she ever published or shared her research with others, she'd need all the facts at her disposal.

Then she tried to convince them to get some rest.

"I know it might not seem right now as though you could sleep a wink, but I'm betting that most of you were up last night. You all need to be in top shape for what we're doing tonight. Since you've all been working on meditation techniques, try lying down and meditating and see what happens, all right?"

She was in charge as far as their cure went, so they all made the attempt for her. Given how little she'd wanted to sleep last night, she sympathized with their restlessness, but not only was it important that they were well-rested, as she'd told them, it also kept them occupied for the afternoon. Especially if they meditated before they slept, they would hopefully be unworried in slumber.

In preparation for this test, they'd screened off one section of the dungeon. Since there were so many fewer werewolves down here this evening and since they weren't dangerous on the new moon, she didn't mind having them as one large group rather than in individual cells. She wanted them to feel as human and un-werewolf-like as possible when they were finding their Animagus forms. She and Remus had agreed that not being caged would go a long way to calming that subconscious awareness that every werewolf retained.

The ten of them made their attempt at sleep, several of them dropping off immediately, and Hermione unobtrusively warded when the snoring became loud enough to bother some of the others.

In this group, the youngest was eighteen. Gary had come back to his family in England upon graduation from Beauxbatons the year before only to be bitten by a werewolf almost straightaway. Remus had been keeping an eye on the boy whenever possible, and he was one of the first to sign up for the cure. He'd made no bones about not agreeing with Voldemort, and he'd been one of the angriest when the werewolves were used by Voldemort in January. Before he'd been bitten, he'd been a gazelle Animagus.

Heather and Roger were ex-Aurors, attacked in the line of duty and quietly bundled off by the Ministry. They were somewhat bitter, but they'd spent their life fighting darkness and didn't seem willing to change that even now that they were classified as "dark creatures". Heather had been a bluebird Animagus before she had been bitten, and Roger had come top in Transfiguration in his year and had been looking into learning how to transform as a result of his partnership with Heather.

Alexander had a son who was an Animagus; he had been so proud of what his son had accomplished. Though he hadn't understood the theory very well at first, he had been reading up on it on his own when the call about the cure had come through, and he was happy to put his new theoretical knowledge to good use now.

Liam and Varda were fraternal twins who had turned into identical looking bats—as unregistered as Gary had been—and who had left the country when they were bitten five years previously. Remus had known of them and had called them back as soon as the Weresbane trial became viable.

Willow, Rafe, and Justin had received excellent Transfiguration N.E.W.T.s and had maintained their skills in the workplace; once they had been classified as not completely human, jobs had become harder to come by. They had been some of the happiest when the lessons by the Order members had been proposed, and they were thrilled that the subject they enjoyed so much was part of their cure.

The last candidate, whom Hermione and Remus had waffled over including in this first trial, had been a healer before her disease had rendered her unemployable. Mary had no particular Animagus training, but she knew a great deal about the human body and was deeply interested in the cure. Hermione and Remus had finally agreed that she would be one of the better people to explain to those who had never tried to be Animagi before what it felt like and how to go about learning to do it in as condensed a period as was required for this cure.

Remus had been working with the ten of them extensively, and he was pleased with their progress. He and Hermione were both hoping that these ten people would be in a good position to aid the other werewolves once the cure was complete; the more people they had working together on this, the better the chance of success.

The afternoon passed slowly. They'd not made it more than a half hour into the napping before she knew that Ron was regretting he'd come. He didn't complain and was, in fact, on his best behaviour, but it didn't mean it wasn't easy to read the boredom in his restless movements and to know that he was considering all the Quidditch-related activities he wasn't involved in so that he could be here.

She moved over to sit next to him. "You realize that you're one of the people our test group is most anxious to talk to?"

"Huh?"

She smiled at him, leaning closer to whisper, "You're an Animagus. You've already completed the transformation that they'll be desperately trying to achieve today."

It was clear that Ron hadn't considered this, and he sat up a little straighter.

"Of course, it's mildly inconvenient that you're not registered with the Ministry, but I'm sure if you keep everything general, no one here will cause any problems. And just remember, if all else fails, you learnt how to do it three days ago."

"Three days ago?" he repeated with confusion.

She nodded. "The Ministry offers a three-day grace period before a new Animagus has to register. That way, if you achieved the form on a Friday, you could properly register it on Monday. The Ministry has been known to make exceptions under extenuating circumstances, of course, but it's better to be safe than sorry wherever possible."

He grinned at her. "Do you have all the laws memorized?"

She shook her head, smiling back at him. "They've got a few too many, even for me. But when it concerns me or my friends, I try to know how the Ministry feels about it."

She'd informed all of them of that detail last year, in fact, but it didn't really surprise her that it had gone in one of Ron's ears and out of the other.

Mary awoke soon after the discussion with Ron, and Hermione was amused to see that he actually approached her and struck up a conversation. The fact that the healer was twenty-seven, blonde, and quite pretty probably didn't hurt, of course.

As she sat back down in her own place, Harry raised his eyebrows at her.

"He was bored."

"I could see that," Harry answered. "What exactly was it you said that made him get up the nerve to go talk to her? You know how he is with pretty women."

They all spent a moment fondly recalling that aspect of the events surrounding the Triwizard Tournament.

"I just reminded him of why they were all here and what special skills he had that they might find useful."

Beside Harry, Draco groaned.

"Don't tell me Weasley is an Animagus."

She nodded, managing with an effort to say very solemnly, "Learnt three days ago."

Harry's expression was confused, showing that his retention skills weren't always better than Ron's, but Draco smirked at her.

"On the way to the Ministry, is he?"

"I'm sure they'll understand how he couldn't ignore the call of all these people in need."

Draco snorted. "I'm sure. At least he's stopped twitching. That was getting rather annoying."

"You could give it a go, too, if you're bored."

"What, chat up a handsome bloke?" Draco asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Help explain the transformation to someone else, idiot."

Draco leaned back in his seat. "That doesn't sound nearly as entertaining."

She laughed, and Harry excused himself to make tea. Watching his very stiff back as he came near to stomping up the stairs, she sighed.

"Might have asked me if I wanted any," Draco grumbled absently.

"Draco, I think you need to head up to the kitchen to chat up a handsome bloke."

His expression was disdainful. "I'm not going to chat up anyone. Harry—" His words stopped as his eyes rose to the ceiling, as though he could see straight through it to the room above. He stood. "Harry is in a snit in the kitchen. Excuse me."

She inclined her head and watched him go, hoping that Harry would become more secure in their relationship the longer it lasted. Being mistreated throughout his formative years hadn't exactly done wonders for his self-esteem, but she had faith that Draco genuinely cared for Harry—and Harry for Draco—and that they would therefore manage everything in the end.

It was three quarters of an hour before the two of them returned. Neither had tea, and while Draco looked immaculate, Harry looked distinctly dishevelled. Both looked quite happy. Smirking to herself, she didn't say a word, despite the temptation to make Harry blush.

It grew later. The werewolves ate their meatless dinner. The moon set, and Minerva and Tonks arrived, having put in an appearance at dinner at Hogwarts. Hermione broke the werewolves down into smaller groups, working on whatever their biggest weakness for the upcoming transformation was. Minerva was happy to discuss the Animagus transformation, and Tonks settled in by Remus's side as he discussed the wolf in depth.

Finally, it was nine o'clock, the time which Hermione had set for the beginning of the transformation process. As she had successfully done with Draco and Remus during their cure, she got each of the werewolves sitting comfortably and then lulled each into a wolf-oriented trance. Silencing charms ensured they wouldn't disturb one another or be distracted as the five unafflicted humans sat back to wait.

Ten minutes in, Draco wanted to know what she'd done while she was waiting for him and Remus to get on with it, and she was amused by the fact that Ron had to actually close his mouth, expression indicating that he had intended to make a similar observation. Every time they behaved in a similar manner, she wanted to grin like an idiot, especially as she knew that pointing it out to them would only annoy them. She could see Ron practically swallowing his tongue so as not to agree with Draco on this; cordiality only went so far, apparently. She told Draco she'd sucked it up and been patient, and he was going to have to do the same.

Periodically, Hermione spent a moment listening in on their mental state, as Fawkes had done last time. From what she could tell, they all appeared to be deep down towards their core and none were exhibiting obvious signs of distress.

Once an hour had elapsed, she checked their mental status one last time and judged them ready to move on to the next step. She moved to stand in front of Heather and gestured the rest of her helpers with her. The werewolves had been seated in order from those they hoped would have the least trouble—the previous Animagi—on down to the ones they thought would have the most—Mary being at the end of the line.

"Please observe me carefully. It's my hope that it won't need to be me casting each of these spells. If we work together, I've every hope that we'll be able to help more people for the next transformation. Paying attention?"

They all nodded their assent; at the very least, it gave Ron and Draco more to do than to just stand there and be bored. She knew that Harry would be happy to contribute any way he could.

She breached the wards and smoothly cast.

Everyone watched as Heather's eyes opened. Like Remus, she was clearly shocked, lips spreading into a smile as she felt this painless transformation.

Hermione moved to the next person. Liam, too, took to the spell immediately, and she tried not to think about why they were both so happy with this transformation. She was helping them, she knew, and they were nearing the last of the horrible transformations they would ever have to make, but it still hurt Hermione to know what comparisons had to be so vivid in their minds.

When Remus assured her that he'd grasped what she was doing, she allowed him to cast the spell for Varda and Gary, Minerva for Roger and Rafe, Draco for Justin and Willow, Harry for Alexander, and finally Ron for Mary.

This was not, in retrospect, the wisest of moves, as Harry and Ron had the least experience; while she'd concentrated on giving them more time to see what she and the others were doing, she'd ended up having them work on the end of the line that was likely to have the most trouble. They nevertheless made it through every person until they reached Mary. Ron cast the spell, and one look at Mary told them that it had been ineffective. One look at her, and she and Harry were forcibly reminded of how he had looked when his spell had had no effect when they were trying to become Animagi in sixth year. Probably how Hermione had looked when she realized that she was not supposed to do it, either.

Mary was instantly disconsolate.

"It's no good. I can't do it. I—"

Hermione nudged Ron out of the way and stepped right up to the other woman.

"Mary, look at me," she ordered sternly.

Mary's eyes met Hermione's. The Gryffindor formed an immediate mental connection, soothed the worry and self-doubt that she saw there, and spoke without breaking the connection.

"Känn Förvandlingen."

Mary gasped. Hermione could feel the sensations and fleeting images stream by her and slowly removed herself from the other woman's mind. Everyone was staring at her.

She shrugged. "I have an interesting skill set."

"Apparently," Bill said, looking quite impressed. "Now I know who to call in an emergency."

By now all the werewolves had come out of the spell, and Hermione congratulated them warmly on taking the first and most important step.

The rest of the night unfolded much as it had with Remus and Draco. She and all those assisting cast the spells the first time on the werewolves, and the latter practiced until they could do it themselves. They rested and ate as she instructed.

It was almost like a great big party because as each spell was successful, everyone grew more excited. They compared fur colours and snout length after they'd used the spell to see their transformation, and it was a riot seeing all of them prowl about the room in human form as they accessed their wolf senses for the first time.

To Harry, Bill, Tonks, and Minerva's alarm, Hermione performed the blood test again at this phase, but none of the werewolves suddenly leapt at her, trying to tear her into shreds, so she marked it down in her journal as a complete success.

It was the precise new moon at three fourteen, and she began the transformations at a quarter to the hour, as she was sure it was close enough for the more experienced werewolves.

She let Heather, Gary, Varda, and Liam cast the spell themselves, as they had already been Animagi, and she watched with delight as they turned into wolves who were practically prancing with joy. This filled the remaining six with visible enthusiasm and hope, and they set to work.

Rectifying her earlier mistake, she had Ron, Harry, and Minerva casting with the three who had top Transfiguration skills, and that left her, Draco, and Remus with the three who might have the most trouble: Roger, Alexander, and Mary.

One by one, each of them was able to transform, although the further that Hermione got down the line, the more power went into the spell, a boost of magic and direction for the werewolf. Still, it didn't take more than a reassuring smile from Hermione along with that borrowed power to lead to successful first transformations for even these last. Given in what a rocky manner the evening had started for them, this was a feat in and of itself.

But after what she had been able to do to get Mary to transform, the woman seemed to have no doubts about Hermione's abilities to help her at any point should she need it, and Alexander had trusted to that as well. Since it made both of them more confident, she hadn't discouraged the thought.

After several minutes of wolfy chaos, she got them all back into line, and she and her friends transformed them back into human form. Hermione had just begun all her dire warnings—which she thought needed to be drilled into their heads once more now that they had the actual ability to transform and have a horrible accident—when things went horribly wrong.

Part of the line disappeared.

A quick look around revealed that Roger was, in fact, halfway to the stairs. He had his wand in one hand, and with his other, he was using Ron as a shield, a wicked-looking knife at the redhead's throat. People started reaching for their wands, which resulted in the ex-Auror pressing the knife more closely to Ron's neck. A small trickle of blood snaked down his especially pale skin, and everybody froze.

Hermione thought a Vanishing charm at the blade, but it continued to glint solidly and malevolently, evidently Spelled to resist destruction. Bugger.

"Roger, what are you doing?" Heather demanded, complete incomprehension in her voice.

"What needs to be done," he answered coldly. "You don't honestly think I'm going to stay here with you bunch of freaks and misfits, do you?"

There was a rumble of dissent and movement, but the knife twitched, and everyone stilled once more.

"Roger." Remus had taken a step forward, voice pleading. "This isn't the way. We can still resolve this peacefully if you let him go."

"Oh, I think it's gone a little beyond that," Roger drawled. "I have somewhere I need to be, and a little bit of insurance is good company policy."

"And what are you going to tell him?" Hermione demanded, voice carefully cool and calm. "What will you say when he wants to know why you've left your post?"

She stepped forward, past Remus, glad that Roger couldn't see her heart, which was pounding fit to leap out of her chest. Fortunately, although there wasn't much she could do about her internal panic, she knew how to appear a good deal more rational. She and Harry and Ron had faced worse situations when they were younger and far less experienced. She held out her hands so that he could see that she was unarmed.

"I will tell him that I have the cure," he answered triumphantly.

Hermione laughed unkindly. "When you turn into a werewolf on the full moon, I doubt he'll believe you. That was only half the cure."

"I have your potion in my veins," Roger said, although he looked the slightest bit shaken.

She took a step closer, correcting in her best bookworm voice, "You've metabolized my potion, you mean. By the time someone draws your blood, there won't be a trace of my potion left."

"You're lying." A trickle of sweat slid from his forehead down his nose.

"You wish I were lying," she answered definitively. "Nobody on this planet knows that potion but me, and I'm telling you, you've metabolized it."

"Then I'll take him your journal," the man sneered. "Bring it to me."

She went to get the journal, though she could have Summoned it easily. She wished she could guarantee that she could Stun the man before he could injure Ron, but he had been an Auror, and they tended to have very good reflexes. She couldn't risk it.

Take-downs in hostage situations, she decided, were something they needed to cover in training as soon as possible.

She approached him slowly.

"Don't do it!"

It was Remus who'd admonished her, and she could hear a murmur of agreement from behind her. She stepped closer still to the man with the knife and paused just before she handed over the journal.

"Of course," she said conversationally, "it won't be a lot of good to you, since I'm the only one who can read it."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a record of my cure for lycanthropy. It looks blank to everyone but me."

She opened it and held it up for his inspection.

The hand holding the knife to Ron's throat jiggled a little, and she watched the trickle of blood wending its way down his throat grow a little thicker. The ex-Auror held out his other hand for the book, and she passed it over. He clutched at it.

"I'll find someone else who can read it, who can get past your charms."

"You won't," she answered with certainty.

Roger shook Ron's shoulder. "Then I'll take him. Harry Potter's best friend. I'll be rewarded for that!"

She shook her head, expression pitying. "You really think the Dark Lord will reward you for bringing one little boy when you were tasked with bringing him the cure? You're going to show up with no potion, with a book that no one can read, with no idea what happens on the full moon, and you think he's going to reward you? You'll be dead before the sun rises."

The knife dug a little deeper. "So will your friend."

"Then let's make this very simple," she said reasonably. "I wish my friend to live. You wish similarly to measure your life expectancy in something longer than hours. Take me instead."

He regarded her narrowly. "You're offering yourself."

"Yes."

"Hermione!" Harry yelled.

What hurt was the fact that when she looked in Ron's eyes, she knew he was feeling the same as those standing behind her: he was more expendable than she was.

What the hell are you doing? Harry demanded.

Trust me.

The beginnings of a smirk had edged its way onto Roger's face.

"The creator of the cure for lycanthropy. You'll come with me."

"I've said so," she said flatly.

He looked at her, carefully assessing, and she knew that he saw no lie in her. He gave the briefest of assents, she stepped closer, and in an instant, he'd flung Ron away, and she was pressed up against Roger with a knife blade at her throat.

She could feel the pounding of his heart through the layers of clothing between them and imagined that he must be able to feel hers, as well. Now they both knew that the other wasn't as calm as he or she looked, but given that she could feel the sharp bite of steel—steel, moreover, covered in a friend's blood—pressing against her neck, she doubted this came as much of a surprise to him.

She could feel the heat radiating off of him as well, giving herself a mental shake when she realized that she was disconcerted because she'd expected him to be cold. Every time he exhaled, his breath rushed by her ear and moved her hair. It was really annoying and her hands itched to tuck her hair behind her ear, but she crushed that insane impulse before it could get her killed.

"Gryffindors," he sneered. "So selfless. So righteous. It's going to cost you, this time."

She felt him shift slightly and peered up at him, feeling the knife slide marginally down her throat, to find that he was staring at Harry, and she knew what he was suddenly considering.

"They'll let you kill me before you get anywhere near him," she said, trying to make sure that her jaw and neck moved as little as possible.

As one, Draco and Remus moved to stand in front of Harry.

The ex-Auror made a face but quickly decided to cut his losses. Hermione was very relieved that Voldemort generally seemed to have a "he is mine" policy that meant that neither Roger nor anyone who was on Voldemort's side at the school actively tried to kill Harry, just make periodic attempts to deliver him to their master.

"Let's go," Roger admonished. "I know I need one of you to Apparate."

"I can't Apparate from here," she volunteered, injecting what she hoped was the right amount of nervousness into her tone, of an attempt to accommodate him now that she was at his mercy. "Only from the lobby."

"Up we go, then," Roger said, sounding much more cheerful than he had a moment before.

They hobbled their way up the stairs after the usual threats about what would happen to her if anyone downstairs tried to so much as move before he was gone.

Harry, you can still sense my core, right?

Yes. He sounded even more frantic than he had when he had yelled at her aloud. You realize we're going to bugger up your brilliant plan if I have to come rescue you from Voldemort now?

She offered him a mental smile. Which is why you're going to unMask just a bit, and on the count of three you're going to do your best to pull my core to your core.

Huh?

They reached the lobby and managed to shock a scream out of Molly, who was passing by in the living room and froze in shock at sight of them.

I know it sounds a little odd, but just do it.

But—

One.

Despite his protest, he was obeying her; she could now feel how much easier it was to sense his core in the basement beneath her. She unMasked her core more, too, moving from the regular partially Masked of the everyday wizard to something that was a little more visible to those who knew what to look for.

As Harry did.

"Ta, Molly," Roger said before whispering fiercely in Hermione's ear, "Hogsmeade, the Shrieking Shack."

Two.

The knife pressed tighter. "I'll Apparate us from there, and you won't have a neck left if you try to double-cross me."

This house was surrounded by her wards, and she'd built safeguards into them. She'd designed them to have a very specific reaction when she moved through them under duress.

She'd just have to hope she didn't slit her throat in the process, as this was not the precise scenario that she had imagined during construction.

Three.

She felt the pull of Harry's magic and flung herself towards it while pushing Roger away as hard as she could in that in-between moment where they weren't in real space and she could therefore hope that a knife was no longer pressed up against her neck.

Breaking up Side-Along Apparition mid-Apparition was not exactly recommended, but it seemed preferable to her other options.

When they reappeared, they weren't in the Shrieking Shack. Roger had fallen to his knees in a locked cell in the dungeon out of which he'd dragged her a moment ago, and she had collapsed onto the ground on the other side of the bars, halfway between Harry and Roger.

He went for his wand, and she magically reached through her wards and snapped the wand in two. She rose to her feet, mostly steady, and stepped closer to the bars. He scrambled marginally away from her.

"This is my safe house," she ground out. "These are my wards. These are my friends. If you thought for a second that I would let you injure them, you are out of your mind. You are going to stay there, and you are not going to speak until you are next spoken to, and then we are going to have a very long discussion."

She didn't wait for a confirmation that he had understood what she had said, just slammed up a Silencing Charm to go with all the other wards that were already in place. Then she turned back to face the rest of the room.

Ron was still on the floor and everyone else was standing where she had last seen them, still frozen in shock. She flung herself at the redhead and burst into tears. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Don't you ever look at me like that again," she whispered fiercely, and he held her closer.

Her emotional breakdown was brief, and then she drew back to take a better look at him. She wordlessly cleaned the blood off his neck and followed this up with a healing charm. Since it was a shallow cut, it was easily accomplished.

"You're bleeding, too," he said, voice gruff.

She reached to touch the spot on her neck that he indicated and found that her fingers came away smeared with blood. She was apparently still on an adrenaline high; she still didn't feel it and couldn't have said exactly when Roger had cut her.

They climbed to their feet together and turned to face the rest of the room.

"Anybody better at healing than Ron?"

There was a sudden group hug that involved pretty much everyone in the room. The commotion only grew louder when Molly came thundering down the stairs to report what had happened, gasping when she saw Hermione was there and crushing her against her bosom.

"Praise Merlin, you're all right," Molly breathed.

They'd dose her up with a Calming Draught, Hermione decided, before they told her what had actually occurred.

With an effort, Hermione extricated herself and got everyone's attention. Although her body was starting to feel a bit like a limp noodle, her mind was curiously clear. There was no way on Earth that she was going to let Voldemort's plan ruin her cure for the men and women standing in front of her.

"The night's not over. We're not finished with our transformations, so this is what's going to happen: brand new Animagi, you are going back to that end of the room, and I'm going to be warding you in there with me, Ron, Draco, Harry, and Remus. The five of us are going to ensure that you learn everything you need to learn before the moon rises. Bill, Tonks, Minerva, and Molly, you're going to go upstairs, where I trust the Order members are keeping an eye on everyone." Molly nodded. "You're going to escort the other werewolves down here into the cells. Minerva, please go back to Hogwarts to inform Albus of what has occurred. Tonks, contact Kingsley, who'll want to be here, I think, because you're going to question everyone under Veritaserum." She Summoned a bottle from the warded cupboard where she kept all the potions she thought she might need here and handed it to Tonks.

None of them attempted to gainsay her, those she had named heading straight for the stairs. She turned back to those assembled in front of her.

"You'll all be questioned after the moon has risen and the Weresbane has worn off."

They all nodded, none of them protesting her autocratic decisions. Her trust in them had been forcibly shaken, and she needed to get the situation back under control with the least damage done possible. En masse, they moved back to the location she had indicated, and she threw up a barrier so that the nine of them wouldn't be distracted by all the other werewolves and the commotion behind them.

"I thought you said the potion had been metabolized already," Harry said quietly at her side.

"I did say," she agreed.

His eyebrows rose. "You sounded very convincing."

Draco and Ron nodded their agreement.

"Good. That was the goal."

"How did you—" Ron started, but she held up her hand.

"I'll answer questions later. It's half four, and we still have work to do."

"You don't care," Heather asked, "that one of us just tried to kidnap you and one of your friends? Hurt you? Nearly kill you? You don't care that he supports He Who Must Not Be Named?"

"Greyback is one of the most loathsome wizards I have ever known," Hermione answered, "beaten only by Voldemort and some of his closest Death Eaters. I've not given up on werewolves or pure-bloods or wizards because of a few bad individuals, and I don't intend to start now. I knew it was possible something like this could happen, although I'd hoped it wouldn't."

She sounded very assured when she said this, apparently, because tension eased out of most of the bodies in front of her.

"I can't take your wands away from you because that will make it impossible for you to transform on your own. I'd hoped that you'd all be able to travel throughout the entire dungeon to get a feel for your form, but that's unfeasible right now. I'm going to put up wards between everyone, wards that I can cast through, while you cannot. I'm sorry."

It was still Heather who spoke, as though the fact that Roger had been her partner in the Auror Department meant that she shouldered some of the blame now. "It's we who are sorry, Hermione." There was nodding and murmurs of agreement from the eight other people. "Whatever you need to do to keep everyone safe is fine with us."

Hermione nodded and drew back so that she could cast, dividing the end of the room into ten sections that were as large as possible: one long skinny rectangle that stretched the length of the other nine for her and the others to keep an eye on everyone's efforts, and nine other areas for the Animagi. She made the wards shimmer visibly so that everyone could easily see the delineations of their area.

I can cast through it as well? Harry asked.

She sent a mental nod.

As unrelaxing as it had been, they'd now all had some time in human form, so she moved ahead with their attempt to transform back into wolf form all by themselves. She resumed her aborted warnings about what would happen if they stayed in animal form, reminded them that they would need to be one hundred percent comfortable in this form and in getting to this form by the full moon, and made sure they were all aware of the likelihood of losing their clothes at first. After a moment's further consideration of the problem, she had them conjure robes that they set to the side. Each time they lost their clothing and had to don the robe before the next transformation, they could simply conjure another robe to be waiting for them in case they needed it.

Although Harry and Ron blushed again at just the mention of this fact, all of the people in front of her had been through monthly transformations that resulted in them waking up naked, injured, and sometimes in an unknown location, so they were far less self-conscious than her friends. For these werewolves, the idea of transforming and retaining clothes was a novelty, and as Hermione watched them successfully transform into wolves and back into human form, she realized that they were so used to transforming unclothed that it was affecting their transformations now. Of the nine people facing Hermione, only Varda was still dressed the first time human form was re-achieved.

Three quarters of an hour passed quickly and agreeably, all things considered; no matter what had happened previously, these werewolves had more hope than they'd had in a long time. Although the Animagi didn't get to reclaim their old forms, they got to be animals once more, and all of them were glorying in the pain-free transformations. Like Remus, those who had been werewolves for some time remembered the bits that had been enjoyable, and now they were getting the chance to experience only these positive elements.

Since Hermione's friends were now doing little more than watching the werewolves in front of them, they were starting to fade. Draco was resting his head on Harry's shoulder, while Ron's chin jerked up periodically as he woke from a light doze and then started to nod off once more.

Hermione was just starting to feel as though her adrenaline high was gone and she might, therefore, be able to sleep sometime in the next week when she heard the commotion behind her. She'd set the barrier to block all sight and sound for everyone who wasn't her because she'd figured someone needed to be reachable on her side of the barrier in case of emergency. Someone had screamed, and Kingsley, Bill, and Tonks were crowded around Roger's cell.

Hermione rose, admonished those in front of her not to worry but to stay where they were, and passed through her barrier. Though Kingsley had looked as though he wished to prevent her arrival, he allowed it. Reaching the cell, all the breath left her in a rush.

The blood had spread all the way to the edge of the cell on the right-hand side. Were it not for her wards, it would have leaked further, and they might have noticed sooner.

Roger was very pale, and it was clear that he hadn't wasted much time once she had banished him there. In her drive to ensure that he wasn't a threat to anyone else, she had destroyed his wand, but she'd forgotten all about the knife, which was completely useless to attack others when he was trapped in the cell.

Her throat worked, and it took her a moment to remember how to swallow properly. Achieving this, she found it hadn't done much for her ability to speak, but she forced the words out anyway.

"May I Vanish the blood?"

Her voice, she was mildly surprised to note, sounded utterly calm and dispassionate. She was being as logical about the matter as she could, and although it was the new moon, they had almost fifty werewolves in this room, and a dead body and a pool of blood wasn't likely to cause pleasant associations for any of them.

Kingsley assented. She lowered her wards and did as she had said, leaving a frail-looking, lifeless corpse where an angry, hurtful man had been so little time ago. There were long gashes on either arm and he'd managed to take a swipe at his own throat as a last act, leaving him sprawled awkwardly, but ensuring, she supposed, that they couldn't have rescued him before he bled out.

She stared down at the body of the man who had tried to betray them even though she had offered a free cure.

"Those behind the barrier," she indicated the ward she had cast, "are the only ones who were down here when he tried to escape with Ron and then me. Molly saw the two of us when we got up the stairs. Once we've finished for the night, we'll answer any questions you might have."

Tonks had probably told him most of this already, but it seemed necessary in this moment for Hermione to say it all.

"Could he have been killed?" Kingsley asked, voice low.

"Only if you wish to blame me," she answered evenly. "He was sealed behind my wards, which are intact. I did not think of the knife, which he had on him when I put him in there. I've been with the other werewolves since that time."

"Very well," he said seriously, inclining his head. "Go finish."

She moved away, but turned back and indicated the body. "Don't let the children see."

He offered a very grave nod. "Of course not."

Her own nod in response was slightly shaky, but she still managed it before forcing herself to walk back through her ward. The werewolves, fortunately, were occupied enough not to have noticed. Her friends were looking at her expectantly.

She sat down slowly, feeling a million years old. She exhaled, carefully drew air back into her lungs, and gave in to the inevitable.

"Roger is dead."

They stared at her in shock.

"He killed himself. I left him with the knife."

Harry leapt up and rushed over to her, pulling her into a hug. "Don't talk like that. We were all there. None of us thought of it."

But she was the one who'd put him in there. She should have thought of it. She only nodded, though, because there were other concerns right now. It was crucial that she not allow anything to jeopardize the chances of the nine people in front of her, and that meant she couldn't fall apart. They were going to get through all of this.

The moon finally set, and she released the wards that had separated the nine new Animagi. Apologetically, she Summoned all their wands and then congratulated them once more.

"Remus is going to be working closely with you over the next two weeks, and you're all going to be paying complete attention to his warnings and rules, right?"

They nodded agreement.

"Okay." She let out a sigh she couldn't seem to prevent. "Some questions are going to be asked."

"I'll go first," Heather said immediately.

"Having a problem with Roger doesn't mean we have a problem with you," Hermione said gently.

"I need to go first." A wealth of emotions tight in her voice.

Hermione nodded. She could understand that desire. She swallowed. "I can't let you go out there unprepared, so I have to tell you one more piece of … unsettling news."

Gary spoke. "Haven't we reached our limit for the day?"

She gave him a wan smile. "If only. Roger killed himself."

Heather's breath caught; Hermione met her eyes with compassion. "I know. It's a horrible end to a very long night."

"But we're all going to get through it," Remus said bracingly. "We're all going to be here for each other."

Again, they all managed to nod, though this time it was with varying degrees of complete shock still painting their features. Hermione lowered the wards and turned the nine new Animagi over to Kingsley, indicating that Heather was volunteering to go first to get the ball rolling.

Kingsley accepted this at face value, and off they went.

As the morning progressed, he continued to show his thoughtfulness, coming to speak to Hermione, Harry, Remus, Draco, and Ron all together in the library once the nine first trial subjects had been questioned. If this were a proper investigation there'd be separation and likely Veritaserum for the lot of them. Kingsley was really here, though, in his capacity as an Order member and because she wanted to know if there was a chance that anybody else was in danger. They both knew that she trusted these friends.

Collectively, they explained what had happened, Ron starting with how Roger had pulled the knife and grabbed him and how Hermione had noticed. She followed up with her bid to protect Ron and a quick explanation of one of the details of her wards, and the rest finished with any impressions they'd had as observers.

"That's what I've got from everyone so far," Kingsley agreed. "Testing under Veritaserum shows those nine to be with us."

Hermione nodded. She hadn't thought there'd be another traitor in that group, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"Good," Ron said fervently. "I don't think I can handle another night of excitement like this one."

Harry snorted. "I don't think your mum's going to let you anywhere near any situation that might be remotely dangerous ever again."

Ron groaned. "Don't remind me."

Harry and Draco chuckled slightly, and Hermione tipped up her lips into a slight smile. She'd put a Calming Draught and a shot of brandy into the tea that she'd given to Molly, and it was still a minor miracle that the woman had let Ron out of her sight so that he could join the rest of them in the library now.

There was no use wishing it, but Hermione did anyway. Tonight would have been so triumphant if Roger hadn't pulled out that knife. Right now, they'd all have been happily eating breakfast, probably. Instead, everyone was on edge and confused, and Hermione felt as though her triumph had burnt to ashes in front of her.

"You can head back to Hogwarts, and I'll apprise you as soon as I have any information," Kingsley said. She just looked at him, and his mouth twitched. "Or you can stay right here, and I'll still tell you right away."

She offered him a tired but genuine smile. "There we go, then. I think we'd better head to the kitchen for a stimulant of some kind."

Kingsley nodded, rising. "I believe Molly's started on breakfast."

"Thanks, Kingsley."

"Don't mention it," he replied immediately. "There is every reason for me to be here, Hermione."

He went back to complete his duty, and they rejoined Molly in the kitchen. Ron, Draco, and Remus went straight for the coffee. Harry and Hermione perched on chairs at the table but didn't make any particular move towards the food and drink. Hermione was feeling a little queasy and didn't think that adding anything to her stomach right now would be a good plan.

She wasn't suffering from the effects of the sleepless night to the degree that the others were, so caffeine was unnecessary. Phoenixes slept more than unicorns did, as far as she'd gathered; Harry still seemed to require a more or less regular allotment of sleep, but it had been years since he'd slept quite like a normal person, and one day of being kept up all night was hardly going to do him in.

Ron weaseled his mother out of any food that she'd already started preparing, despite the fact that she'd greeted their arrival in the kitchen with an announcement that food wasn't being served until everyone was there to partake of it. Hermione had the feeling that at the current moment, Ron would be able to convince his mother to send him daily food care packages to Hogwarts if that's what he wanted.

The worried mother was shooting glances at him far more frequently than normal as she continued to make the food, quick little looks as though to ensure that he was still there and still unharmed. One beseeching look with an empty plate, and Ron had found the china loaded with eggs, bacon, sausage, kippers, tomatoes, and potatoes. Toast was set out already.

Hermione backed her chair away back from the table and managed a smile for the concerned-looking Harry.

You all right?

Fine, she answered shortly. He sent her a very pointed mental look. She responded with a sigh. I don't think I could eat right now if you paid me. Fortunately, it looks like Ron has me covered for the next week of meals.

Harry snorted. He has the metabolism of a hummingbird. I don't understand where the food goes.

Hollow leg. Weasley family trait, I think.

Harry laughed.

Hey! You can't give me this cool power and then not include me when you use it.

Fortunately, Draco didn't sound truly offended, just mildly annoyed, as he often did when this topic came up.

Maybe it was a conversation that wasn't any of your business, Hermione proposed evenly.

Draco pshawed. Everything concerning Harry concerns me, Hermione.

She raised mental eyebrows, especially at Harry's bemused expression.

Did you remember to tell him that?

It goes without saying, Draco said regally.

Hermione shook her head. I'm glad you think so, Draco.

She let their conversation fade to the back of her mind as they mentally bickered. It was closer to play fighting than actual arguing, as she didn't think Harry really minded that Draco felt that proprietary about him; in fact, given his upbringing, she would wager that Harry enjoyed having someone he cared about take such an interest.

Despite the caffeine, by the time Kingsley came upstairs, Remus, Ron, Draco, and Harry had all nodded off at the table. Hermione suspected that Harry had been happier to cuddle with Draco than anything else.

She rose at Kingsley's entrance as the tension eased from his face at sight of all of them resting around the table like that. She'd made sure that none of them got faces full of breakfast, and proper beds would be achieved soon enough.

She and Kingsley stepped into the lobby; she would catch the others up afterwards.

"Well?"

"I've come up empty. According to all the evidence we could gather, Roger Statten was the only active supporter of Voldemort or person intending to betray or harm you or your cause."

Hermione felt the big knot of tension inside of her ease slightly. "That's good news."

He nodded.

"It would be better if we could have questioned him," she said with frustration.

Kingsley offered a slight nod but accompanied it with a shrug. "He was an Auror. He knows all about interrogation techniques, and he cared enough about his secrets to kill himself quickly. I know you blame yourself about the knife." He looked at her intently. "It's really not your fault. If it hadn't been that, he would have managed it in some other way. He didn't want any of us questioning him."

"I could have Stunned him," she said, still angry with herself. "Bound him until you arrived."

"And he could still have killed himself before we were able to question him," Kingsley said, face very serious. "We're all trained in what to do if we're captured by the enemy with sensitive information in our possession and no hope of escape."

She let out a breath, saying slowly, "I guess I can't compete with that."

He shook his head. "Much as this is your cure, you're also not the only person here, and you know as well as I that there were other Aurors and Order members present. It's not your job to think of everything. You had other concerns, and you did what had to be done."

It would certainly be going down in her memory as one of those memorably disastrous nights with which her life was peppered.

"All right," she agreed, almost convinced. "So far as we can establish, everyone is now on the level and genuinely desirous of the cure."

"So far as we can establish," he agreed blandly.

She knew that both of them were thinking of Severus, who'd survived for years as a spy, no matter who doubted him and what tests were performed to prove his loyalties. There were no absolute certainties in this.

"Thank you for coming," she repeated. "It's been a relief having you to take charge of all of that. Interrogations are not my favourite pastime."

Kingsley closed his eyes briefly, opening them to say with a shake of his head and a wry smile, "I'm not even going to ask. I think we're done here for now."

Hermione nodded. "I hope you'll make it back to your bed."

"For a little while, perhaps."

They separated; he Disapparated, and she headed down to the dungeon, first to retrieve Tonks, black-haired and looking dead on her feet, to rouse the others in the kitchen, and then to let the werewolves out of their cells.

Hermione thanked them for cooperating, apologized for the horrible night they'd had, and promised she'd be back in two weeks' time.

They were a very sombre-looking group.

"This has been an ordeal for all of us, I know." The edge of horror and sorrow in her voice wouldn't quite disappear, but they'd all been here and had shared the experience. She made sure her tone was still firm. "But I'm looking at a group of the strongest people I know. Life has thrown some of its worst at you, and you've all kept fighting. We're in this together, and I know that setbacks aren't going to stop us. Te—" She faltered and started over. "Nine of your fellow werewolves have taken the first step today that will lead to their cure, and all of you will be following in their footsteps. We've had a rough first night of it, but that just means there's plenty of room for improvement. Thank you all for being so patient and understanding."

They offered her a round of applause, and she sniffled a little, thanked them again, and sent them upstairs for breakfast. Arriving in the lobby herself, she witnessed Remus give Tonks a hug and gentle kiss and Molly smother Ron. Farewells were exchanged all round, and then the Hogwarts contingent Apparated back to the gates of the school.

It was, somewhat unbelievably, ten in the morning. They'd all known that the moon had set and the sun had risen, but they'd spent so long in the dungeon and then mired in such dark circumstances that, from the looks on the others' faces, she wasn't the only one who was taken aback by the bright blue sky and streaming sunlight. Pathetic fallacy was not in operation, and it was rather disconcerting.

Now that Tonks was with them and it was so late in the day, they gained the entrance openly. It was well past breakfast time, so the entryway was not populated with students. Tonks headed upstairs at once, saying that she'd promised Minerva an updated report as soon as she got back.

Almost as though he'd been lying in wait, Severus appeared the moment the Auror was gone, stalking up to them at his most bat-like, crossing his arms to glare down at them.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "We were to have a meeting this morning."

Hermione didn't remember them making any sort of arrangement for a training session, but given her current state it was entirely possible she wouldn't remember—and equally possible that he'd made the decision that morning before setting out to find them.

She looked up at him and meant to say something about them needing a few minutes to prepare or to sleep but what came out was, "I killed someone."

At her side, Harry took her elbow and squeezed, voice trembling with emotion. "You didn't kill anyone! He killed himself."

Dark eyes bore into hers. "By all means, listen to Mr Potter, Miss Granger. He's always been good at blaming others when someone dies."

Harry took a step forward and had to be restrained by Draco on his other side, and she realized peripherally that the blond had also taken a hold of Ron, which she was sure should be funnier than she was currently finding it.

She had hoped without even realizing, it now became apparent to her, that she would receive support from this quarter, not condemnation.

She managed a shaky nod as she felt her eyes tear up.

"Severus," Draco hissed, censure plain in his voice, "that was uncalled for."

She'd said she'd never cry in front of him, she remembered distantly. Sniffing, she swiped at her eyes and fought for control, wondering why it still felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach.

"Mr Malfoy—" Severus began, voice icy.

"Draco." She knew interrupting was bad, but it was better than letting Severus finish his sentence and making Draco suffer for something that wasn't remotely his fault. "It's fine. Professor Snape is entitled to his opinion, and we all know that he's always been brutally honest with me."

"Hermione, it's not true." Harry sounded close to frantic.

She looked back to Severus. "I'd like to change out of these clothes, but we can be ready in a few minutes."

He sneered at her. "You've kept me waiting for hours already."

Harry was flushed and looked about to fling Draco's restraining hand off and attack. Ron was brick red. Hermione felt her own blood pressure rising, and it really didn't mix well with the pain and queasiness that she was already feeling.

With a growl, she made an impatient and furious wave of her hand that disrobed Ron, Harry, Draco, and herself and conjured new and clean clothing too fast for the eye to see.

The three boys were now too stunned to do violence to Severus.

"Did she just—?" Ron asked.

"Yup," Harry said.

She stared challengingly at Severus. "You said there was a meeting?"

Without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked off, and the rest of them followed. The last time Ron had been to a training session was months ago, but he made no attempt to declare Quidditch practice or any other commitment that might prevent him from joining them now.

Once they reached Room One, Severus curtly ordered them into teams, he and Draco against the three Gryffindors. It was unlike him to stagger them unevenly out of his favour, but in the mood he was in, she didn't even contemplate asking him what he was thinking—especially as he launched his first spell almost as soon as he'd declared the division between them.

None of them were in the mood for fighting or violence, but Severus was throwing spells at them, so they were forced to respond. With Ron on her side, neither she nor Harry could cast a sympathetic shield unless they didn't want the redhead to be able to fight. The longer Severus maintained his attack, the more tempting this option became.

Then Severus cast a Cutting Curse at her, and she froze. The wash of red light sped towards her, and she contemplated how different they were, a steel blade and that arc of light, yet they both caused the same damage, sliced through the skin and made blood flow, let people die….

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Declaration

“Hermione!"

The shielding that had very narrowly prevented her from getting hit with the cutting curse was Harry's, she realized, as was the voice which had yelled at her.

As were the arms that were now wrapping around her, which was convenient, as her legs didn't seem to want to support her anymore, and Harry's help meant that she at least crumpled to the ground slowly.

"There was so much blood," she said, the long-suppressed tears deciding that they didn't care about her resolution about their not being shed. "It was so horrible, and it was my fault."

Harry only held on to her more tightly. "It wasn't."

She sobbed into his shoulder, breathing almost inaudibly, "He said."

"That's it," Harry snarled. "We're getting out of here."

"Is that so, Mr Potter?" Severus began darkly. "I—"

"That is so, Severus."

None of them had ever heard Draco take quite that tone with his godfather before, not even earlier when he had been annoyed outside the Great Hall.

"You have no idea what kind of a night we've had, Hermione especially, and she doesn't need this right now."

"If she can't react properly under all circumstance—" Severus started once more.

Draco stalked up to his head of house.

"She helped ten people gain their Animagus form so that they could be cured of lycanthropy. She watched one of them nearly kill one of her best friends in a bid to escape to rejoin the Dark Lord. She took his place, let herself be dragged all the way up the stairs with a knife to her throat so that she could Apparate him back to a cell so he couldn't harm anyone else. She went back to helping the werewolves transform so that all their hard work wouldn't be in vain, and she found the traitor dead in a pool of his own blood. She then came back to the school," Draco ended, nearly yelling now, "and put up with you being a complete arse. So I would say that yes, she can react properly under all circumstances, and now we are going to go get some much-deserved rest. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you take it up with the headmaster or with the head of Magical Law Enforcement."

Ron was staring at Draco as though he'd never seen the boy before. Severus looked caught between flabbergasted and incensed beyond all reason. Harry merely hoisted her to her feet and guided her out of the room without waiting to see if Severus was going to react or if the others were following.

Once they hit the hallway, he paused.

All right, love, he said gently. I don't want to see you again until Sunday evening.

What? she asked uncomprehendingly.

We're going to hold down the fort, and you're going to go out to the Forest. You're not going to come back until tomorrow evening.

She exhaled sharply. Go out to the Forest. That was so exactly what she needed and it meant the world to her that Harry had identified that fact and was making it happen.

Are you sure—? she began to clarify.

Hermione. He smiled kindly at her. Go. If there's any sort of emergency for which we desperately need you, you're only a thought away. I don't want you to worry about anything, all right?

She nodded in agreement with him, the movement becoming increasingly assured as she realized that he really was correct. He'd identified what she needed, he was helping her get it, and he'd promised to call her back if there was any disaster that required her attention.

Stepping closer, she hugged him again, reassured by the solidness of his embrace. Pulling back marginally, she kissed him on the cheek before moving away completely. With the ghost of a smile, she Masked herself and hurried away, not even pausing when she heard Ron, now evidently out in the hall, demand, "Where's Hermione?"

She'd never spent as much as twenty-four hours in the Forest before, but once she was safely beneath the trees, she shifted into unicorn form and didn't look back. Somehow, when she was a unicorn, the weight of guilt about Roger was lessened. She couldn't say if it was because she was less human, because she was absorbing all that soothing light, or because she could perhaps see the situation more objectively now. Whatever the reason, it was a relief.

A couple of hours running about out here, stretching her legs, and she felt as though she'd had the equivalent of a full night's restful sleep in human form.

When she felt able to support company, she joined Castina and the herd and found that their knowing what she'd done didn't shake their feelings for her in the slightest. Castina was quite firmly on Harry's side, as it turned out, declaring unequivocally that the ex-Auror's death was not Hermione's fault. It was the conclusion that Hermione knew she should get to on her own, but it definitely helped to have others whom she cared about and respected declaring those beliefs.

It soothed an ache inside her that had existed from the moment that she had realized that Severus was against her on this one. She respected his opinion, and it was a blow that he thought her culpable here. Since there was an unshakable part of her that felt the same, however, she couldn't entirely blame him. It was similar to the part of Harry that would always blame himself for Sirius's death—or for Cedric's. Much as she came down on the other side of that divide in that case, not wanting Harry to feel responsible for events that were far more the fault of Bellatrix and Voldemort and Pettigrew and Crouch Jr., the guilt lingered now.

The longer she spent with her herd, however, the more contained and manageable the guilt became. She did have a part in the death, but others did as well, and she had many people who loved her either regardless or while holding her blameless.

It wasn't perfect, but it was better.

By the time she headed back to the castle so that she could make an appearance at dinner on Sunday evening, she was in pretty good spirits, all things considered. She wasn't going to have an emotional breakdown every time Roger was mentioned, anyway, or when she saw a knife or a cutting curse. She would never hold herself completely blameless, but Harry carried his ghosts around as well. She had now done a slightly better job at laying the traitorous ex-Auror to rest next to her neighbours who had died when Voldemort couldn't find her parents.

She imagined it was the same place where Severus laid the deaths of those children on Halloween and all the others who had died when he was involved—although it was always hard to tell with Severus. Maybe he didn't have a place where he laid them to rest and that was why he could be such an arse.

Outside of Harry and maybe Albus—with whom she didn't much desire discussing the matter—Severus was the person most likely to understand what she was feeling. He had not. He had been everything that was not supportive. Though at this point she had not exactly had a rosy outlook concerning how that relationship was going, the further examples of its dysfunction were rather depressing.

When she tried to remember instances of his being kind her, it took rather a long time for her to finally recall that he had let her sleep after she had accessed the wards for the first time. But then he had ridiculed her and not agreed to help her and accused her of behaving inappropriately with Viktor…. She couldn't think of any more kindness, and then there was the looming cruelty of throwing her out after taking her virginity in February…. Was that really it?

She loved him. She was in love with him, with moments that she remembered and glimpses that she caught and a part of him that she felt as though she never saw any more. In moments like this, it felt as though caring for him was killing her.

But she couldn't choose whom she cared about, and she couldn't make Severus a different person than he was. She'd thought he regarded her as a friend, at least, or as near to a friend as anyone was with him, but the longer the year progressed, the more she was forced to admit that that seemed to have been an erroneous assumption on her part.

She kept saying it, but now she thought it really was time to retrench and try to survive the rest of the year without anymore emotional disasters. N.E.W.T.s were coming, and Severus wasn't going to become a new man and suddenly declare his undying love for her, so she was going to concentrate on her schoolwork and on curing the werewolves. And defeating Voldemort. And re-warding the school. She let out a sigh replete with wry humour. It looked as though she had plenty to be getting on with, so she should probably be grateful that she didn't have another call upon her time.

Since Ron's reactions were usually not the most subtle in the world, she advised Harry that she was returning. She arrived a couple minutes into the dinner hour, able to slide inconspicuously into the seat Harry had left open for her as everyone was busy serving themselves.

"Get your essay done?" Harry asked immediately.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Must you badger me, Harry? I already explained to you why I was shutting myself up in my room all weekend. Would I be here if I hadn't finished?"

He made a face at her. "Well, you have to eat sometime, 'Mione. Not go quite as well as you'd hoped?"

She brushed her hair behind her ears as she looked at all the unappealing food in front of her.

Fawkes, could you—?

The request has been made. Welcome back, Berit.

Thank you.

"It went all right," she answered Harry aloud. "I finished the essays for Transfiguration and Charms, but I'm not completely happy with the conclusion for the latter."

"So you'll be getting one hundred and two percent instead of one hundred and three?" Harry teased.

She made a face at him. "And I really thought I'd have time to get further on my Potions essay. I don't know where the time went."

Draco chimed in. "So now you're only four weeks ahead of the rest of us instead of five?"

"All right, all right." She knew the status quo had been maintained when she was forced to roll her eyes multiple times in a five minute period. "Are you all done having a shot at me?"

"I didn't get a go," Ron protested.

She smacked him in the shoulder, and he subsided with a grin. Alibi now firmly established, Hermione settled in to dinner. Fortunately, no one appeared to have noticed that food had appeared on her plate without her assistance. It seemed that the house-elves hadn't expected her back quite yet, so they hadn't stocked the table as they normally would. What had become the customary array of fresh produce was now before her, and they seemed to have decided that she was hungry, as it was rather a large allotment of food.

For once, at least, they seemed to have chosen rather wisely because she felt rather hungry; despite all the light that she had absorbed in unicorn form, it seemed that her human form was feeling a bit deficient. Had she not been sitting next to Ron, the amount of food she was consuming might have been worthy of comment.

She noted with amusement that the elves were also keeping Harry well supplied with hot sauce, and he poured it all over his food. Draco still grimaced faintly although the complaints and questions had tapered off. He'd seen Harry consume enough of the spices to be forced to concede that it was what the Gryffindor wanted.

Fawkes relayed the news that Albus would like a word, so after dinner, she made her way up to his office. Ron had a Quidditch strategy session which he actually offered to cancel, but she assured him that she would be fine—especially as she had Draco and Harry shadowing her, despite the fact that the invitation had not included them.

Albus did not seem terribly surprised that she hadn't come alone.

"Harry, Hermione, Draco. Thank you all for coming. Please have a seat."

They sat. He didn't offer tea or lemon drops, and she was uncertain if that was because they'd just come from dinner or because he'd accepted, finally, that none of them were going to risk drugged refreshments. He knew, at least, that she knew about the tea, and maybe even he grew tired of the ritual when everyone knew what was really going on.

"I've been giving a great deal of thought to your information, Hermione."

Right. She'd almost forgotten they needed to do this formally.

"Have you reached a conclusion, sir?"

She didn't want to drag this out any longer than necessary. Albus smiled faintly.

"That's why I asked you here, Hermione, yes. What you're proposing is very dangerous both to the school and to you personally." He paused for a moment, as though waiting to see if she would protest, but she knew full well that the plan wasn't without its risks. "I have discussed it at length with Minerva, and we have agreed that while it puts you in more danger than we would like, it is currently our best hope of success."

The same conclusion she had reached.

The headmaster continued. "You will have to coordinate with Severus." Harry shifted noticeably in his chair at Albus's words. "Together, you can ensure that the information is properly disseminated." He eyed Harry. "Will that be a problem?"

"I've already broached the topic with him, sir," Hermione said, ignoring Harry as well as Albus's question. "I will discuss it more thoroughly now that your decision has been made."

"Excellent." Albus smiled at them, blue eyes all twinkly.

Hermione had to wonder whom he thought he was fooling. She didn't take kindly to his attempting to interfere in her life. It wasn't like him at all to voluntarily allow her to coordinate this crucial detail with Severus away from the headmaster's control, and that meant he was trying to mend fences that it wasn't his business to be fussing with in the first place. She was probably lucky, actually, that he'd stayed out of it for as long as he had, and she knew that there were times where arguing with him only made it more embarrassing when he got his own way regardless in the end. She had to wonder which event, precisely, had attracted his attention.

Albus's expression grew more serious. "I also wanted to commend all of you for your behaviour on Friday. You handled a difficult situation very well."

"Thank you, sir," she said, echoed by Harry and Draco. The time in the Forest had done her good; she didn't feel more than a slight twinge as she said it.

"Minerva and Kingsley have both reported to me, and as I understand it, despite this setback, you intend to move forward as planned for the next phase of your cure."

"That's correct," she said firmly, squaring her shoulders as she faced him directly. "There are a lot of people counting on this cure, and I won't let Voldemort stop it."

"Very good." Albus seemed quite content about the whole thing. "I'll leave it to you and Severus to iron out all the details, then?"

Scheming old man. As if she'd forgotten.

"Of course," she answered, rising and trying not to roll her eyes too noticeably. She didn't want him to decide he should be more explicit in his prodding.

Harry and Draco followed her example, Albus allowed the meeting to adjourn, and she and the boys headed back to their common room. They hadn't been there for more than ten minutes before Viktor arrived, and Draco and Harry actually ducked into Harry's room without saying a word to her. She rolled her eyes now, contemplated calling them on it, and instead just let Viktor in, smiling at him.

"Hi."

"Hermione," he greeted her warmly. "I vas beginning to think I vould not see you again."

"You didn't speak to Harry?" she asked, gesturing him to the couch.

He sat. "I did, but 'She is unavailable' is hardly a reassuring answer."

"I needed some time alone."

"Vith not even your friends for company?"

"Not for a little while." She was not feeling up to the doublespeak that would be required to explain that she had, in fact, spent time with other friends. Instead, she added cheerfully, "But absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? You've had almost three days to remember what your life is like when Harry, Draco, and I aren't in it. Bit boring, is it?"

He nodded. "It is very dull vithout you for company."

She laughed. "It must have occurred to you that a school in the middle of Scotland wouldn't be as active as your Quidditch circuit."

Making a face of distaste, he said, "I do not need that sort of attention, mila moya, you know that."

"The life of a star," she said with a commiserating smile. "Would you like to have tea, then, and I promise not to ask a single question about Quidditch?"

He snorted. "Very generous of you, mila moya. I vill take you up on the offer, though."

Winky was delighted to bring them tea, complete with the foods friendly to her diet as well as all the scones, biscuits, jams, and creams that Viktor could possibly want. It seemed likely, however, that the single tall glass of mousse was for her. Despite the time she had spent in the Forest, she felt the lure of the chocolate confection even more strongly than usual and was happy to indulge.

Viktor stayed and chatted with her for an hour or so before she had to do her rounds. Given that Harry had covered her for all of Saturday, she wasn't about to shirk another evening's work, even if Harry was ready to be all noble and Gryffindor-ish because she had company. She sent Viktor on his way, agreeing to their established Thursday tea.

The rounds were painless, thankfully, and since Harry and Draco retired afterwards, she did the same. Given that she had spent about thirty hours in unicorn form, she didn't feel the slightest need to go to sleep, however, so she moved to her lab and did a series of Arithmancy equations.

Ever since Roger had tried to run off with only half a cure in him, she had begun to seriously wonder what would happen to someone like him on the full moon. The only scenario she had previously imagined was that someone might fail to achieve the Animagus form on the new moon. Her equations had indicated a high probability of a regular reaction if the werewolf moved back to the Wolfsbane for the full moon. The cycle with the Weresbane could then begin once more on the next new moon.

If, however, a werewolf had achieved the Animagus form on the new moon but then didn't take the Weresbane on the next full moon, what exactly would happen? She assumed that the Were would beat out the Animagus wolf and thus the afflicted person would cease to be an Animagus in that moment. But it wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility that they would become a werewolf Animagus, which would be undesirable, to say the least.

It would mean that they posed far more danger to society than usual, and the Ministry would throw a fit, she knew, if that possibility ever reached their collective ears. Another possibility was that the werewolf would defeat the Animagus resulting in a werewolf who could now beat her cure. If new werewolves were made by the werewolf who'd beaten the Animagus, it was possible that all of those future werewolves would be immune to the Weresbane, another outcome which she would like to avoid.

The results of her equations and calculations, unfortunately, weren't conclusive. She needed to do practical tests, and she did not intend to put a werewolf through such an ordeal. Her equations suggested that the possibility of making a werewolf Animagus were slim, which was a relief; just as the successful battle on the full moon meant that a werewolf became solely an Animagus, the theoretical equations told her that a failed battle would result solely in a werewolf.

Since she still wasn't sure about the possibility of this new werewolf being immune to her cure, she was simply going to have to be as assiduous as possible in ensuring that all werewolves engaged in both parts of the cure. It was another reason to have the safe house, she now realized; the werewolves might have come voluntarily, but once they were there, there was a minimum stay and a required course of treatment before anyone was released. As far as she could tell, there was only one dead traitor who had not been reconciled to that fact.

Once she'd tucked her work safely away in her journal, she turned her attention to her homework. Given that she'd been away for more than two days and that she had declared to the entire Gryffindor table, thanks to Harry, that she was finished several papers that she had not, in fact, completed, she work that needed to be completed as soon as possible. Besides, her compulsive nature was starting to prickle; she liked to be well ahead of her school work whenever possible, as this weekend was an excellent case in point of unanticipated events very much getting in the way.

By next Sunday, she'd have to get started on the Weresbane again, and she was hoping that the intervening week would be largely werewolf-, Voldemort-, and Final Battle-free. If it didn't pertain to school work, she decided, she didn't want to discuss it.

She spread all her books and scrolls and notes out in front of her. Surely she was allowed to have one week of the school year that was devoted solely to academic pursuits?

She made it until Tuesday. Potions had consisted of everyone glaring at one another, so that was basically business as usual, and it seemed as though, for the moment at least, Severus was avoiding them as much as they were avoiding him, so that was perfect. Charms was much more pleasant than normal, since Ron was back to being friendly, and they could hold a civilized conversation even with Draco in the group.

Tuesday, she had Runes with Draco, followed by Muggle Studies, where the blond would not, of course, deign to tread, despite the fact that she thought it would do him a world of good. While she was occupied during the afternoon, Harry and Draco were left to their own devices. At least one of the things that they did was discuss the information she had given them because after dinner, they brought to her attention the fact that she still hadn't explained exactly how Voldemort was going to die as a result of her warding lure.

That had been part of the discussion that had been truncated, she realized; she'd explained about the wards in some detail but hadn't made it past that. And since Harry was a big part of the destruction of Voldemort, she could hardly tell him that he couldn't know.

If she explained her "I want a normal week" philosophy to him, he'd probably humour her and wait a week for the details, but here they were on a Tuesday evening with no disasters, nobody calling a training session, and some time on their hands. Given how their lives tended to go, it was foolish not to seize that moment.

They settled onto the couch in the common area, and she wondered just how many serious and strange discussions the walls of Hogwarts had witnessed over the years.

"Voldemort has gone to great lengths to ensure him immortality," she started. "He is immune to many conventional weapons and has labelled you, Harry, as his only means of destruction. Unfortunately for him, his continuing efforts to kill you have resulted in his making his own death possible.[27]

"Solace, as I told you, was a Wards-mistress. She designed a great many wards, and she made some discoveries that she hid, as she knew how dangerous they could be. The spell that we are going to use on Voldemort is one which she never published. She wrote it in her journal."

"So that you could find it," Harry pointed out, perhaps just so that he could hear her admit it.

"So that I could find it," she agreed, not even trying to deny it. "She knew that I would have need of it, and she knew that I wouldn't misuse it. Many wards, as you know, incorporate blood. It's what allows Malfoys to cross their property wards when others cannot, and it's what protected you at the Dursleys', Harry. These are blood protections, of a sort, often woven into the wards that surround an area."

Harry nodded to show his understanding; Draco clearly knew all of this already.

"There are, in fact, very few delimiters for how wards can be cast. They're usually done around property of some sort, be it an area including grounds, a house, a room, or an area within one. Since most people don't study wards as they used to, the difference between wards, shielding, and other protection spells has been somewhat lost. Nowadays, people often speak about them interchangeably, when they really aren't." She conjured a pencil and set it on the table in front of them. "If I wanted to prevent that pencil from being picked up by anyone but me, I have a number of options. I could put a Repelling Charm on it or a Stinging Charm. I could make it invisible to everyone else. If I really loved that pencil, I could use a blood spell of some sort to ensure that only I or someone of my blood could pick it up."

"Or you could ward it?" Harry asked.

"Or I could ward the area around the pencil," she specified. "Wards can be cast virtually anywhere, as I've said, but they need to be anchored to the ground." It was part of the reason, she was sure, that she had such an affinity to them, because she was a unicorn, and unicorns were strongly terrestrial. "That's why it's impossible to ward a pencil and carry it around it my pocket. It's why property wards are generally so strong; they're cast directly against the ground. Properly cast indoor wards connect to what amounts to an immovable structure that has its foundations in the ground, and it comes to nearly the same thing. My wards would be strongest if I warded around the pencil while it was on the ground outside. I could ward around the entire table, and the wards would still be very strong, because that connects to the stone of Hogwarts, which is very deeply connected to the earth."

Harry's head tilted to one side. "So if you warded just around the pencil on top of the table—?"

Draco answered for her, demonstrating his clear grasp of the topic. "If you could manage it, the ward wouldn't be very strong; the table is easily movable and not strongly connected to the castle and then the ground."

The Gryffindor boy nodded once more. "But I could shield the pencil, right? Just the pencil?"

She nodded.

"But—" He broke off, considered, and began again. "How is that really different from warding? Someone can toss spells at both—or a physical attack—and be repelled. It's my magic that's powering the spell in both cases."

"Shields and wards are related," she agreed. "Shields could perhaps be considered a less complex form of warding. They're wards made portable, and they can be raised quickly by most everyone. Their job is generally to repel magical intrusion, which is the base of most wards. Since they don't have to be grounded, they can be used in the air—on a broomstick, for example. Part of not being grounded and not needing nearly as much time or skill to produce however, means that they're not self-sustaining. They last only as long as the caster maintains them. So yes, you can shield that pencil, but only so long as you maintain the spell, and even you could only get so far away from it before your shield would fail."

All things that Harry had known, but it didn't appear that it had ever been laid out for him quite like this before.

She got to the heart of the matter for this discussion. "People are even more particular than objects. You can't ward them."

"How about when you have one of the werewolves in a cell in the safe house?" Harry asked. "That's basically warding the person."

She shook her head. "That's still warding an object; it's the cell that has all the wards around it. A person like me can get through those wards, and the person who's inside the cell can be removed with the wards remaining intact and ready to be used the next time I lock the cell door. Wizards might be contained within the wards for a period of time, but it's not they, themselves, who are warded."

"But you said you could cast a ward right around an object, like that pencil. Why not the same with a human? Why not ward an area right up close to them?"

She nodded. "You're thinking of shields, and you've asked a very good question because shields can be cast very near to the skin when necessary."

Harry interrupted excitedly. "If you could cast one that doesn't allow magic past, it would be like having a perpetual shield that doesn't have to be maintained and which protects us from magic. Why wouldn't you use it?"

She smiled. "Because you're forgetting what you know about wards. You've mentioned the positive aspects, but wards are grounded, remember? So if I could cast them on you, you wouldn't be able to move from the area that I'd cast without destroying the wards. You'd be stuck in place. And although you can cast through my shields, even your magic can't indiscriminately pass through my wards unless I specifically spelled them to allow it."

He nodded.

"So imagine I didn't. Imagine I confined you to a small area and permitted no magic in or out. A cell without bars, if you will."

Harry was frowning now, and he obviously saw where his beautiful image faded into an unpleasant reality.

"Now," she said, "if I simply warded the area around you like that, you'd still have your magic available to you inside the wards. Theoretically, you would be able to attack my wards, and given your relative strength, you'd get through eventually, and then you'd be free."

He nodded, shadowed eyes saying that he was imagining all the people who'd like to make use of that sort of spell on him and take away his wand first.

"But if I actually warded you, Harry, you wouldn't be able to cast any magic whatsoever. If I could ward you, there'd be no room for you to manoeuvre. You couldn't move your wand, your core would be stifled; there'd be nowhere for your magic to go. If you can't get any magic through the wards, you can't make any magic whatsoever."

He stared at her before asking, "Why doesn't Voldemort do this all the time?"

He meant, she know, to ask why Harry wasn't already dead.

"It doesn't work like that," Draco said. "It just … doesn't."

One of those moments where the wizarding upbringing was so apparent; Draco knew even if he didn't know why.

"Because wizards developed a defence mechanism against such an action," Hermione said, nodding her head at Draco. "It's as if our cores have a repelling force. The more powerful the wizard, the stronger the emanation they have from their core. It's why wizards of strength," she said, indicating the three of them, "are more likely to feel the presence of wards and shielding; our magic is bumping up against that magic, and we're repelling each other slightly. Wards can't settle flush against the skin because our magic is pushing it away, always giving us enough room to be able to use our magic. The smallest area that can be warded with a person in it is the size of the person plus a half metre or so on every side. Cozy enough, but plenty of room for the wizard to still use magic. The stronger you are, the larger that external margin will be."

"I'm not going to ask how you know that," Draco said dryly, clearly curious.

She ignored the implied question; the experimentation had not been the most enjoyable ever.

"But you've said you have a way to defeat Voldemort," Harry pointed out. "You've found a way to get around it?"

She corrected him. "Solace found a way. The exception that proves the rule. It's a very specific form of blood ward which she named Cognatio Consilium.[28] As she designed it, when the person's magic recognizes the blood in the ward, it accepts it as a part of the wizard himself or herself. It therefore allows the warding to be placed."

Clearly remembering the unpleasant fate she had suggested would result, Harry made a face. "That's … horrific."

She nodded. "The spell is very complex. It requires the blood of three family members, and that's why it's only possible with Solace, me, and you, Harry. If Voldemort hadn't chosen to use your blood to resurrect himself, we wouldn't be able to get him now."

Harry's smile was a bit more of a grimace, but she knew he understood her point.

"But if he's all warded and no magic can get through him, what are we doing next? Didn't you say in the meeting that he would be destroyed?"

She nodded. "Because the Cognatio Consilium ward has a purpose. Solace didn't design it to slowly kill people of inanition; it's a judgement spell. It takes the judgement of the casters and applies it against the person they have warded. If they find the person acceptable on a moral level, I guess you could call it, he or she will be unharmed and the warding surrounding him or her will collapse. The person has been judged and has passed the test. If, on the other hand, the three whose blood has been used are morally opposed to the person they are judging, that person will be deemed unacceptable."

"And then they'll be destroyed?" Harry prompted when she trailed off.

She nodded once more. "The wizard has been found wanting by his very blood; the wards that surround him which his magic has accepted as a part of himself is now turned against him, funnelling the power of the casters. The wizard is obliterated; he ceases to exist."

"That's insane," Harry said, staring hard at her. "Why would she ever try to create something like that?"

Hermione contemplated that facile line about it being one of those things that had been discovered accidentally and which Solace had wished, in retrospect, to uninvent, but she told the truth instead.

"When she detailed the spell in her journal, it was the second time she wrote it down; she did give it to one person."

"Who?" Harry asked.

Draco's expression was very blank, and she knew that he had guessed. She wondered if he'd ever tell her about his childhood, if she asked.

"Her father."

Harry's face twisted up. "She gave that spell to her father? But I thought they weren't speaking. I thought he was angry—" He stopped abruptly, looking at her with horror. "You can't mean—"

Her nod was very stiff this time, her voice grave as she explained. "Her children were all grown up. Her husband had died. She felt as though she had driven her father out of the home that he had built, and she wished to reconcile with him. He was so angry with her, and she felt that this would be the way to remedy that fault. He could judge her, and she would die knowing that she had submitted to his punishment."

"But." He couldn't seem to get any more words out than that.

"He burnt the spell," she continued quietly, "and told her never to reveal it to anyone. He quietly died without anyone being the wiser that he and his daughter were reconciled in the end. He even offered to officially reacknowledge the kinship, but she refused, saying it was better that she retain her anonymity. I believe this is why. Today is why."

"How do we know that Salazar didn't really pass the spell down to someone else?"

Hermione was amused by the glare that this earned Harry from Draco, as though merely suggesting that the Founder of Slytherin might not have done exactly what Solace said he had done was blasphemy.

"If knowledge of it had leaked out, it would have been used by someone. If Voldemort had that spell, he would not have hesitated," she said with certainty. "Have you thought of what it could do? All you'd need was Narcissa, Bellatrix, and Sirius's mum or his brother together, and they could have destroyed Sirius and Andromeda and Tonks. Finding three wizards in a line would have enabled Voldemort to wipe out any dissenting members that he wished."

Harry had gone ashen, his quick glance at Draco saying that he had realized what Voldemort could have done with Lucius, Narcissa, and Bellatrix if events had unfolded differently. Draco didn't make any protest when Harry clutched at his hand rather tightly.

"You're the closest blood tie to Voldemort by far," she resumed. "Solace's spell indicates that it will work more easily with closer ties, but it is designed to work regardless. Actually, that probably means that it could wreak complete havoc in the wizarding world nowadays given that all the pure-bloods are interrelated."

She considered this with a frown but was snapped out of her introspection by Harry, who asked, "It won't matter that Solace is dead?"

"Between the two of us, I think we have a great deal of judgement on the matter," she answered matter-of-factly, "and the spell isn't really sentient. I know Solace better than anyone alive right now. I've read her journals, and I've read her condemnation of the evil that we face. So when the spell assesses if we are all in accord, I know it will find that we are, because I believe in her assessment, and you believe in mine."

"Right," he said, somewhat blankly. "You know I never imagined anything like this?"

"I know," she said softly. "And I believe that's why it's the 'power the Dark Lord knows not'. It's going to take everyone by surprise, and that's why it's going to succeed."

"Solace has explained to you how to cast the spell? All the details are there" Draco asked.

Hermione nodded. "I know all the proper incantations."

He regarded her with very sharp, narrowed eyes. "And you aren't going to say."

She shook her head. "This is information that's going to die with me. Harry and I are the only people in the world who need to know it right now, and we are never going to speak it out loud."

The two boys nodded solemnly because it was too easy to see how the spell could destroy the wizarding world in a matter of years, if not sooner. It would be an utter disaster if it became known to the general populace.

"We're going to say this spell," Harry pursued, "and that's going to be it? Voldemort's just going to die because we know he's a complete wanker?"

"More or less. It's not going to be easy," she admitted. "Although we have all the necessary blood, it's true that we're only working with two magical people instead of three; it's going to be one hell of a power drain. I don't think we could do it if we weren't both Pure Adults. Voldemort can't use his magic in a wand-wielding sense, but he's not going to want to be destroyed, and on a certain level, his magic is going to understand that, even if it can't properly defend against the connection that's already been made."

Draco frowned. "You're going to be doing all this while you're maintaining all of the Hogwarts wards?"

"I'll have re-established the wards by then," she said, hoping that she sounded as convincing as she wanted to and not like this was a completely insane plan that required her throwing far more magic than was even remotely wise into the project.

Since Draco now brought up a different problem, she trusted that she'd succeeded well enough.

"People are going to want to know how he died."

"And we're going to make something up."

He let out a short bark of laughter at this prompt but utterly uninformative answer.

"Right," he said, eyes dancing. "Of course we are."

"I'm not sure exactly when I became the pessimist of the group," Harry said, "but this can go wrong, right? It's not foolproof? We don't start casting this spell and have a guaranteed success."

She shook her head. "No. If we don't have enough magic between the two of us to power this spell, we stand a chance of burning out both our cores. If this occurs in the first phase, then the wards won't even set. I don't think that's likely, but it could happen. If we don't have enough power to properly pass judgement and kill Voldemort, then we'll burn out our own cores and bring the warding down with us in the process, since it's tied in with the judgement. Then we'll both be powerless and Voldemort will be … wounded but magical and pissed off."

"Not a nice way to die," Harry observed.

"Not particularly, no. So we're going to make it work."

Harry nodded very solemnly. "It's the best plan I've ever had going up against Voldemort, so I'm all for it."

Hermione wondered if she was just being paranoid that that statement suddenly sounded ominous when he'd triumphed in all his unplanned meetings with Voldemort. She gave herself a mental shake. There was no way that anyone was condoning going into the final battle without any sort of plan. Which reminded her.

"Draco—" she started.

"No need to say," he said immediately. "I can fully imagine what sort of horrid fate awaits me if I attempt to breathe a word of this to anyone else. My lips are sealed."

She smiled at him, especially as he went to the effort of actually miming sealing his lips, locking them, and throwing away the key.

"Might make it difficult for you and Harry later on."

She'd said it so deadpan that it took the two of them a moment to realize what she'd been implying, and this was followed with Draco's snort of laughter and Harry's usual crimson flush.

"Right, then," she said, rising. "My work here is done. The two of you have hijacked enough of my evening, which was supposed to be devoted to educational pursuits. Are either of you going to attempt to do any school work, or shall I adjourn to my bedroom?"

They both agreed that there was some work that they could probably consider doing; it didn't appear that they'd used any of their afternoon off in that sort of productivity. But they seemed happy, and she knew that was worth a great deal.

The week progressed. She got as much school work out of the way as possible on Wednesday, and Thursday evening was devoted to tea with Viktor.

Ron had apparently finally recognized that the end of the year was looming closer, meaning he wouldn't be coach of the Gryffindor team for much longer. Although Ginny was only a year beneath him, she was widely regarded as the logical choice for team captain for next year, so Ron wanted her to be in Viktor's presence as much as possible.

Somehow, adding just one more Quidditch-crazy person made the discussion exponentially livelier, and despite the fact that Hermione was completely uninterested in the topic, she greatly enjoyed their enthusiasm, especially as it was far away from the war and impending doom and destruction. Though she made sure never to tell any of them this, the mindlessness of the activity for her was rather soothing.

By Friday, the chiding looks she was getting from Albus were starting to become annoying. It was true, too, that given how busy the next week was likely to be, delaying any longer was foolish. She waited until the evening when the Map informed her that Severus was in his quarters, and then she went to see him.

He looked … less than pleased to see her, but he didn't send her packing straightaway. He also didn't offer her a seat or tea, just crossed his arms and glared at her, so she made do with what she had and addressed him from her position not very far inside the door.

Since it never did to make assumptions where Albus was concerned, she started at the beginning. "I don't know if he's said, but Albus has decided that you and I are supposed to coordinate Voldemort's being informed of the plan to ward the castle."

"I hardly think," he said coldly, "that you need be involved in any part of the process."

Making sure to keep her tone very even, she said, "I'm sure that's the case, sir, and if you want to inform the headmaster that you know better than he does, be my guest."

A scowl darkened his features. He knew as well as she how well that tended to go, but he seemed determined to stress his point anyway.

"Do you have any experience in the art of espionage, Miss Granger? Are you even marginally aware of the care that is necessary, the nuances of behaviour that separate life from death?"

This was hardly fair. She was nineteen years old and she'd spent virtually all the time since she'd known she was a witch at Hogwarts. She was part of Gryffindor house, and the Muggle-born best friend of Harry Potter. There weren't a lot of spying activities involved.

"I thought not," he drawled acidly, as though it were a conclusive and damning bit of proof that he had just uncovered. "Do not presume to tell me my job."

"That was not my intention, sir," she said stiffly. "I believe the headmaster only wanted to be sure that you knew all the necessary details from me and that I was aware of when the information would be shared. It's important that I know what lies are being told; we need to agree if there's anything that's going to be corroborated, that sort of thing."

He sneered. "I am more than capable of taking care of such details on my own."

"I'm quite sure that's true, but—"

"He'd only know I hadn't discussed it with you if you told him," Severus snapped.

That hadn't been her next point at all. Severus had been a spy for decades, and the fact that he was still alive and uncaught attested to the fact that he knew what he was doing; but that meant he should know to utilise all the tools available to him. The more she knew, the more she'd be aware of when he was in the most danger. She worried, dammit, and if she was going to be putting him in danger with transmitting this information, then she should at least be aware of the details.

She didn't have far to go to get back to the door, and she had her hand on the handle before he asked, "Where are you going?"

"It was quite clear you've finished with me," she answered, craning her neck back but not bothering to turn around completely. "You've chosen to trust me with one secret, and I'll keep that one. Tell Albus whatever you wish."

There was no response before she'd opened the door and closed it quietly behind herself. She walked back to her quarters with a heavy tread. She'd known that the conversation mightn't go well, but she hadn't anticipated it going quite that poorly. Had she not made it plain that she didn't want to interfere? A half hour would likely have been all the time they ever had to spend on the matter, if that was his wish. But he'd gone and made it such an issue, as he had done so frequently in their acquaintance.

She was tired of that. And it still hurt that he'd branded her a killer. Maybe that was it; he simply didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore. Certainly, he got enough of that with the Death Eaters, so maybe he'd decided only to spend time with spotless people at Hogwarts. It might explain why he didn't seem to have any friends, anyway.

She flopped onto the couch in the common room with a groan, glad that Harry and Draco were elsewhere. What did it matter, anyway? He'd taken care of Albus's manipulation by the simple expedient of telling her to bugger off and keep her mouth shut. Now there was no particular reason for them to interact outside of the classroom and training sessions—which didn't really require that much speaking, just hurling spells at one another, and that could easily be achieved by two people who were trying to have nothing to do with one another.

It wasn't exactly how she wanted it to go, but it was becoming more established, and she was just going to have to become more reconciled. It wasn't the end of the world.

Hermione started revising at mealtimes as so much of the rest of her time was taken up with non-academic pursuits. Sitting at the Ravenclaw table on Saturday morning, she reviewed her agenda of pending activities. She had to supervise yet another visit to Hogsmeade, make both the Weresbane and the Wolfsbane potions, no doubt suffer through another training session with Severus, work on the mountain of Easter hols homework, and see her nine Animagi wolves through an excruciating transformation that would hopefully change their lives forever.

Once classes resumed after Easter, there was all of a week and a half left of April, and before they knew it, it would be June and there would be N.E.W.T.s. She wasn't sure that anybody quite grasped how much more studying she'd done in years previous. It had all been with the goal of getting extraordinary scores on her N.E.W.T.s, and this was the year that she was insanely busy. It was rather panic-inducing when she thought of it like that.

Still, she reminded herself, she'd had the whole of this year without needing to sleep as much as normal. Yes, she was plotting to overthrow an evil would-be dictator, and yes, she spent half the month brewing a complex potion that she had spent part of that year designing, but there was no reason to panic. Unless she dropped dead of exhaustion, she would surely be fine; it didn't seem as though there could be a lot that any Ministry-appointed tester could assign as a potion, charm, or defence task that she wouldn't be more than able to manage—without a wand and half asleep, as Harry had pointed out when he'd seen the worry edging in. She knew this, but she hated the thought of imperfection, of error.

So, since she knew how to multi-task, she was revising at mealtimes, and she'd make sure she crammed more study time around the edges of her crazily busy days so that she didn't feel completely unprepared. It wasn't ideal, but very little about her life was ideal right now.

Hermione, Harry, Draco, and Pansy spent the rest of the morning supervising small children running around a small town buying too much candy and too many stupid joke products. Viktor was one of the professors supervising this visit, and he joined them partway through the morning, for his protection, he said with a smile, since he tended to be mobbed by giggling girls when he was on his own. Fortunately for him, declarations of adoration and love were slowed down somewhat when he was surrounded by seventh-year students who looked as though they might hex any approaching adoring fans.

Since wandering around with a professor also meant that they weren't bothered by students who wanted to gawk at the Boy Who Lived or ask impertinent questions about their collective love lives, they were all happy to have the Bulgarian, and they spent the second half of their morning quite calmly. Hermione was still relieved when they were allowed to head back to the school, although she admitted that she was not looking forward to lunch with a huge group of sugar-high children.

"Then have lunch vith me," Viktor proposed immediately. "I have not had an excess of sugar, I promise you."

She smiled at the offer and the teasing tone, but said, "I'm not sure the Head Boy and Head Girl should both be absent."

"Draco and I will keep everybody under control," Harry offered promptly.

Draco looked less than thrilled to be drafted to this task, but he nodded his head when he saw her looking at him.

"Are you sure?"

They nodded at her once more.

"In that case, I accept," she said happily. She looked at Pansy. "Do you think the Slytherin table can do without you for a meal?"

"I think I can do without the Slytherin table," she corrected. "I'd be happy to join you." This last was directed, questioningly, at Viktor, as though she weren't sure that the tag-a-long Slytherin had really been included in the invitation.

He smiled at the two of them. "It vould be my pleasure to host both of you."

When they moved to follow Harry and Draco inside the castle, Viktor caught their arms and shook his head.

"Ve are not eating in there. Come along."

Waving goodbye to Harry and Draco, they followed curiously as Viktor led them across the grounds. It was the beginning of April, but it was still a little nippy to be eating outside.

Viktor proved to have thought of that, though, as he ushered them into a greenhouse which had a temperature that approximated a very pleasant Scottish spring day.

"I spoke to Pomona," he explained. "She vas happy to let me borrow her space for this afternoon."

He led them down a corridor of plants until they turned the corner, and Hermione found that the lunch was premeditated; a picnic had been set up. There was a giant picnic basket that looked as though it would feed the entire seventh year, a genuine red-and-white checked tablecloth, and a profusion of flowering plants around them.

"Viktor," she exclaimed. "How lovely!"

He smiled at her as Pansy echoed the statement, although Hermione thought the Slytherin girl seemed slightly ill at ease. She hadn't spent a lot of time nearly alone with Viktor, Hermione realized, so it was possible she was feeling a little out of her depth. Hermione knew that Pansy paid far more attention to Quidditch than she herself did, so she might be a bit star struck, too. Since the Gryffindor girl was genuinely fond of the Slytherin, she did her best to put her at ease, joining Viktor on the tablecloth and gesturing Pansy down with them.

The ensuing conversation as they ate their meal was a little odd. Since Hermione didn't want Pansy to feel left out, they were restricted to topics in common with the Slytherin. Viktor wouldn't let her get away with just introducing the topic of Quidditch since that didn't include her. The only other year Viktor had been here was their fourth, and in that particular year, Pansy had been making a nice effort at destroying Harry and Hermione's lives.

In Viktor's defence, he didn't know that fact when he raised the topic. After all, they were evidently friends now, and although Viktor knew that Slytherins and Gryffindors were traditionally rivals, he wasn't privy to any of the details of Pansy's fourth-year "bugging" work; he therefore had no particular reason to suspect they hadn't gotten along in the past.

Had Draco and Ron been having this discussion, it wouldn't have gone well at all. She and Pansy, fortunately, were a great deal more mature and were not eager to ruin the perfectly lovely picnic that they were having, so they both picked carefully through the events and rustled up what common ground they could—and laughed through whatever couldn't be got round in any other way.

Viktor finally caught on to their verbal discomfort, and once they'd confessed the cause, he immediately cast around for a safer topic.

Hermione thereby learned that Pansy was looking at becoming a Weather Witch once she graduated, and they were all delighted when they were able to amicably discuss this. Viktor was very interested in weather prediction because it had such practical applications for Quidditch matches. A reliable prognosticator could give a team a definite edge, working out where practices and matches should be held and allowing the team to focus on the sorts of moves that would be most useful for upcoming matches.

Using her Astronomy and Divination background, Pansy was working on a theory that she thought would revolutionize accurate predictions; Viktor was effusive in his praise, which made Pansy nearly glow with pride. Hermione got the feeling the Slytherin didn't get to share these sorts of details with people very often.

What followed was a rather less satisfactory discussion about Hermione's career indecision. Viktor and Pansy readily agreed that she pretty well had her choice of fields (with the notable exception of Quidditch), and since that gave her far more options than most people had, they seemed to think it entirely reasonable that she hadn't made up her mind yet.

Hermione had, in fact, a bit of an idea about where her future might lie eventually, but she thought that she'd still have some time to fill with other career options, and with the wide world calling, it was very difficult to narrow her desires down.

Once a larger portion of the food had been eaten then Hermione had initially thought possible, they packed up and headed back to the castle. Since she and Pansy were already together, they agreed to do a quick set of rounds just to ensure that the sugar-high children weren't getting up to any visible mischief.

They bid Viktor farewell and hiked up to the top floor and worked their way down, reminding a great many students that they couldn't misbehave in the corridors and ignore the warnings of a Prefect and the Head Girl. Hermione wanted to know how on Earth they could forget those pertinent pieces of information from day to day, but Pansy theorized that the huge quantities of sugar had brought about some form of memory loss.

They spent two floors coming up with a sugary potion that could have that sort of effect, and two more floors-worth of miscreants went by as they worked out an antidote. By the time they reached the dungeons, they were considering mass production and dispensing it to all Prefects for use in just these sorts of situations. They'd just about reached the hallway that led to the Slytherin common room when Draco suddenly appeared and seized Pansy's arm.

"I'd like a word," he said as he began to haul her back down the direction they'd just come.

Hermione waved goodbye and heard just before they passed out of her earshot a defensive-sounding, "Because she asked me!" from Pansy.

Puzzled, Hermione headed back to her common room to find that Harry was sprawled on the couch with a Transfiguration textbook.

"Do you know what's going on with Draco?" she asked.

He glanced up briefly but then looked studiously back at the book. "He just wanted to talk to Pansy."

His forced casualness hadn't been the slightest bit convincing, but since she could easily ask Pansy later, she shed her outerwear and returned to the common room with her own school books.

Now that she'd done her duty with both chaperoning the visit to Hogsmeade and rounds, she felt that she had definitely earned the rest of the afternoon and evening for her own studies.

Draco rejoined them shortly thereafter, and she was unable to decipher his expression. It was sort of exasperated, but she thought there was more to it than that. Harry's presence cured him of the expression almost immediately, however, and they all went back to their books.

She worked quickly and efficiently until dinner, reread several sections of her Potions text during the meal, and returned to her papers as soon as she was back in her room. Others might think she was insane, but she knew that they'd be regretting their work ethic by the time they hit the hols. The professors had absolutely piled homework on for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students.

She saw it every year when she was here over the holidays, more and more students working more and more frantically as the holiday progressed; she didn't intend to be one of those people. If they had any sort of sense, they'd be working hard now, in the last week before the holidays started, but most of them seemed to be glorying in their supposed free time.

It was almost ten o'clock at night when Viktor showed up at their door, and Harry and Draco didn't have the opportunity to perform their vanishing act because they had too many supplies in evidence in the common room.

It turned out not to matter, as Viktor invited her out. She finished off the paragraph she was working on and rose to join him.

"Decided I can't live without you today?" she asked once they were in the corridor.

"I vanted to see you again," he said simply. "This seemed the most expedient vay."

She raised an eyebrow. "Asking generally is."

Viktor let out a huff of breath. "I vanted to talk to you earlier, but that vasn't possible vhen you asked Pansy to join us."

She frowned. "You invited us to lunch."

He shook his head. "I invited you to lunch vhile the others vere there."

"Oh." If he'd just wanted to have lunch with her, why hadn't he invited her by name? "I'm sorry," she offered finally, since it was her assumption that had apparently forced Pansy along.

"It does not matter," he said offhandedly. "I know that you meant it kindly, and ve had a very pleasant discussion. She is a nice girl."

Hermione smiled, relaxing slightly. "I'm glad you think so. Where are we going?" she asked as they continued to climb up numerous flights of stairs.

"Ve vill be there soon."

Several more staircases, and she was pretty sure she knew where they were headed, and an uneasy feeling had begun to blossom in her stomach. She wanted to stop and refuse to go any further but realized that wasn't entirely rational—and it certainly wasn't polite.

They emerged into the open air on top of the Astronomy Tower. It was a clear night, the stars shining brilliantly, the moon half full. She said as much, as she walked to the balustrade and leant against it, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt.

"It is very beautiful," he agreed, but he wasn't looking at the sky.

She threw up privacy charms.

"Viktor," she said, a slight tremor in her voice, "why have you brought me here?"

"Because I could not speak to you at the picnic as I had planned."

"What could you not say in front of my friends?" she asked heavily, dreading his answer.

He stepped close to her, forcing her to look up to meet his eyes. His gaze was very intense and his voice thick with emotion as he said, "Mila moya, you must know how I feel about you."

She wrapped her arms around herself.

Although he had denied it the only time she had brought it up—several years ago now—she supposed there had always been a niggling suspicion in the back of her mind concerning how he felt about her. Since he had denied it overtly, she had hoped that could make it true. She didn't want to destroy their friendship.

He was staring so carefully at her, and she knew that a response was required, a good response because that was what he deserved, but her tongue felt wooden.

"Viktor," she said softly, finally, because the silence had stretched far too long. "We've talked about this."

"I know ve have, Hermione," he agreed, stepping closer to coax her arms out of their tight position so that he could clasp her hands, his fingers radiating heat. He smiled a little at her as he asked, "But has nothing changed? Have your feelings not changed?"

This was an impossible question to answer, because her feelings had changed a great deal since her fourth year, but not in the way that he was hoping for. She had fallen in love. Just not with him. And she now knew exactly what it was going to do to him when he found out that she didn't return his feelings.

She wasn't convinced that he should really be in love with her given how little time they'd actually spent together, but then she asked herself if she really knew Severus; she was forced to concede that if Viktor thought he was in love with her now, she could not tell him that he was wrong.

And she felt absolutely, completely wretched because she couldn't pretend. Given her own experience, she was most definitely in a position to say that leading him on, giving him false hope, would be worse.

"Viktor," she answered softly, "I don't want to be the one to break your heart."

He moved closer still so that they were practically touching, and she could see how pale his skin was and how dark and intense his eyes. She wanted so desperately for him to be someone else that it actually hurt. He squeezed her hands gently.

"Hermione, you could never do that."

Looking up into his earnest face, she remembered how sullen he had been when they had first met. Now she could recall myriad images of his smiling at her, laughing with her, even, soliciting her advice and listening carefully to everything she said even when it was about potions. At this precise moment, he was deeply interested in her. Only her.

"But I could," she answered with a slight shake of her head. "So easily."

Because he didn't understand the tempting offer he was making. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Severus was her mate. He could be completely horrible and they would never have a future together, but that didn't change the one fundamental fact that sang in her soul. It also didn't change the fact that she desperately wanted to be loved, and here was someone who was professing his love to her.

Viktor's hands slid to her shoulders as he leaned down towards her. The kiss told her everything she could ever want to know. She could feel that he'd poured his emotions into that kiss. For an instant, she contemplated giving in, contemplated letting him show her how he felt about her on a regular basis.

And then she thought about Severus, and her devastation if he were to do to her what she was thinking about doing to Viktor, pretending to love when it couldn't be.

She remained unresponsive, and after a long moment, Viktor drew back.

"Hermione," he said softly, and there was pain in his voice now.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head away from him as she felt the tears well up. "Viktor," she breathed. "I like you. As a friend, I even love you. But I'm not in love with you, and I won't start what I can't finish. You'd hate me."

"I couldn't ever hate you, Hermione," he said, and he sounded so sure of that fact, despite all that she had said to him. "I love you."

The first of the tears began to slide down her cheeks. "Part of me wants quite desperately to love you," she answered honestly. "I can tell how sincere you're being, I honestly can." He'd begun to look hopeful again, and she hated to crush him, but she knew she had to do it now. "But I'm in love with someone else. Irretrievably."

His face grew expressionless, and she was reminded more than ever of the man she loved. She reached out and was mildly surprised when he allowed the touch. Severus wouldn't have, not if she'd dealt him such a blow.

"I know exactly how you feel," she told Viktor, shaking her head as the tears continued to flow. "You don't know how fully. But it doesn't change how I feel. And it would be horribly dishonest and … so cruel if I let you go on thinking that there was a chance that anything could happen between the two of us. I've let it go on too long letting you agree that we were friends when I knew in my heart that wasn't what you were thinking." She drew a deep, shuddery breath. "I would like to remain friends, but if that isn't possible for you, I understand."

"And that is all?" he asked, pulling away, and she let her hand drop uselessly to her side.

She nodded, having to work to find her voice. "I can't love you as you deserve to be loved, Viktor. I want better than that for you." Her voice broke. "I'm so sorry."

He took a step away from her, turned, and walked away. She wanted to go after him, to hug him to her and make him feel better, but she knew it could not be.

Sliding down the balustrade, she buried her face in her hands, giving in to the sobs that had been fighting their way up her throat since his declaration. There went the one man who actually loved her and with whom she had some chance of a relationship. And here she was, pining after the man she did love who couldn't stand her. Fate could really be a bitch.

Never had she imagined that she would be subject to the humiliation of sobbing her heart out on the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Absence

Hermione became aware that she'd been found when comforting arms wrapped around her. Harry had joined her on the ground.

"Hermione," he exclaimed in concern. "What happened?"

She forced the words out thickly. "Viktor's in love me."

Actually saying the words out loud seemed to produce more tears, and by the time she was just sniffling slightly, almost twenty minutes had passed. She conjured a handkerchief so that she could wipe her eyes, blow her nose, and regain some semblance of control.

Harry had weathered the storm very stoically, rocking her back and forth soothingly, petting her hair, and even coming up with a whole string of reassuring-sounding nonsense. Knowing how little he had been comforted in his life, she was touched by his effort and efficacy.

It was only as she was Vanishing the used piece of cloth that it occurred to her to ask, "What are you doing up here?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "The castle likes you. All the lights kept going out in the common room. Draco and I would relight them, and they'd just go out again. Draco thought maybe it was an indication that we were supposed to be engaged in activities that could be done in the dark." She left out a soft laugh, and he smiled at her. "But I didn't think that was likely, since I knew that it would take a hell of a lot to get through our wards. So we finally went out into the corridor, and one direction was lit and the rest dark. We're not completely stupid, so I put myself back on the Map and told Draco to keep an eye out and then I followed the lights, found that the staircases had all been rearranged for me, and ended up here."

She splayed her hand across the stone surface and mentally projected her gratitude.

"Actually," Harry added, "he's supposed to call out the guard if I'm not back in a half hour, so…?"

She nodded, and he sprang to his feet so that he could reach down and pull her up as well. She pulled him closer and held him in a proper hug.

"Thank you."

She felt him nod. She released her charms as they headed down the stairs, wondering what rumours were likely to be spawned by her and Harry's descent from the tower at such a late hour; she doubted that either of them looked happy and well-shagged, but the gods only knew what sort of daft theories could be invented about Harry leaving her miserable and in tears. It was a tragic love triangle in the making, no doubt.

Back in the common room, they found a twitchy Draco who leapt up as soon as Harry entered.

"Where have you been? I mean, I know where you've been because I saw you on the Map, but what were you doing up there?" He finally seemed to register her and winced visibly, asking, "What happened?"

Harry refused to let her answer that question until she'd been to the loo to splash water on her face and refresh herself. By the time she'd returned to the common room, he'd made her tea which he served to her as he insisted that she sit down. He was acting as though she couldn't take care of herself, but the solicitude was actually making her feel a bit better.

Trying not to think about it too hard in order to ensure that she didn't start crying again, she explained what had happened to Draco.

The expression on his face was a very strange one, but his feelings became clearer as he asked, "Why is it so bad that he's confessed he loves you?"

She stared at him incredulously. "Would you be happy if Pansy confessed that she was in love with you? Or if Ron confessed that he was in love with you, Harry?"

Harry and Draco made very similar expressions of distaste.

"That's just—" they began.

"Wrong?" she asked pointedly. "Then why on Earth would you assume that I wanted one of my friends to declare his love for me when you know I'm not in love with him?"

"I thought you could—" Draco started.

"What?" she demanded, tea sloshing over the side of her mug in the violence of her hand gesture, and she had to spell away the mess. "Lead him on? Pretend I loved him?"

"No!" Harry protested, jumping to Draco's defence. "Just—"

"Turn off my feelings for Severus?" she said more quietly, lips twisted. "Just decide that I was really in love with Viktor?"

"Okay, so it sounds daft when you say it like that," Harry admitted, "but we only meant—"

She let out a huff of breath. "To give me a happy ending, I know. But you can't force that. Some things are meant to be, and others are not; Viktor and I were never meant to be together."

"But he loves you," Harry protested.

"Maybe," she answered, shrugging slightly. Wondering rather frantically what he saw in her was something that she'd definitely done recently. "I suspect that he really loves the idea of me. I see past his status. I'm smart. We have a good time when were together."

"These sounds like good points," Draco noted mildly.

She nodded, realizing another tactic would be necessary to get her point across. "Oh, they are. And if we keep going, I'm sure we can think of loads of things we have in common. We could have long discussions about potion theories, Arithmancy equations, and the latest in Defence tactics. I would attend all his matches and host his Quidditch friends since I'm so enamoured of the sport. I'd move to Bulgaria, obviously, because I've always wanted to live there, and maybe I could even travel with the team because that's what every supportive wife who loves Quidditch and her husband would do."

Two identically blank stares met hers as she finally wound to a halt. The two boys exchanged glances, looked back to her, and spent a long moment making various shapes with their mouths that didn't involve words emerging.

It wasn't quite as bad as she'd made it seem, of course; it was true that opposites could attract and make fine and happy matches. But she'd needed a strong image to get this notion out of their brains.

"You're totally wrong for one another," Harry finally managed.

She nodded. "It might sound romantic, opposites attracting, but there still have to be points of commonality and strong feelings, or I don't believe it's going to work. I'm happy to spend time with him, but I'm not in love with him, and we'd drive one another out of our minds in short order. He wouldn't always want to sit and watch me brew. I couldn't put up with night after night about Quidditch. We were never supposed to be anything except friends."

Draco was frowning fiercely. "I made this worse."

Shrugging faintly, she made a slight shake of her head. "It needed to happen. He built me up into something I wasn't back in fourth year, and it's better he knows once and for all now. It's time for him to move on." She offered Draco a smile. "You'll have to apologize to Pansy, though; I did invite her."

The Slytherin winced, and Hermione privately hoped that Pansy chewed his ear off for his scold. Given that Hermione had been the one to drag the Slytherin girl off to be a third wheel in a romantic meal for two, there was at least one more apology that needed to be made. No wonder Pansy had looked so uncomfortable as Hermione had lived in her world of denial.

But it was better this way, she reminded herself resolutely. She'd been brutally clear, and it was safer for both her and Viktor that there was no possible room for misinterpretation or a change of heart. If it meant the loss of their friendship, she would simply have to accept that. She honestly hadn't meant to string him along, but she realized now that the situation had continued for too long; she had been greedy for his friendship, had been complacent when she should have faced facts and let him cut his losses before it got this far.

It wasn't much later before she called it a night, assuring the boys that there were no hard feelings for the part they had played in setting her and Viktor up. They hadn't meant it maliciously, and what was done, was done.

Five hours later, she'd slept for a bit and visited her herd where she had been soothed by their incredulity that even a human could be stupid enough to think that anyone but Severus could be her mate. Castina might not have entirely approved the choice, but she understood that it was Hermione's to make—as much as falling in love was anybody's choice, anyway.

Sunday evening at seven, Hermione began the next batch of Weresbane and tried not to think about how different this batch would be without her nightly visits from Viktor. There was no doubt in her mind that they would not be repeated, and she tried to remind herself why it had never been necessary for her to have company before.

She was halfway through making the base when she realized that what she wanted wasn't company but a partner, preferably in the form of a snarky, sarcastic git. Since getting Severus into her lab to work companionably with her was impossible, she had settled for the next best thing. Letting out a gusty breath, she resolved that she'd do everything she could to ensure that Viktor never found out the degree to which she had made him her Severus substitute; he deserved much better than that. It would be brilliant if Severus never found out, either, as she was certain he would mock her mercilessly.

Fortunately, over the next few days, she didn't have too much time to think about Severus or Viktor and the great big mess that was her love life. All she did was brew, study, and attend classes. She was as determined as she could possibly be that the second part of her Weresbane trial go much more smoothly than the first one had. Given how pear-shaped the first had been, she was equally determined to get all her work done before the full moon arrived just in case. Since she was about to try to cure nine werewolves and assist thirty-odd werewolves in retaining their human minds while they transformed, she was working with a lot of variables.

The break started on Thursday, and Harry and Draco made sure to tell her that that was no doubt why Viktor hadn't come for their regularly scheduled tea and discussion. It hadn't helped that Ron had asked after the Bulgarian multiple times.

Viktor hadn't spoken one word to her since Saturday. It was less than a week since she had rejected him, and her knowing that she'd made the right choice didn't negate Viktor's feelings. Unfortunately, there was no reasonable way for her to point out to him how fortunate he was that she'd tried to make it as painless as possible instead of shagging him and then tossing him out on his ear—but she wasn't supposed to be thinking about Severus.

She hadn't had any contact with him over the last week, either, beyond the regular attendance in class. There had been no training sessions since the one that had ended with Harry saving her from her own stupidity, and since she'd walked out on Severus over the plan to inform Voldemort, there were no more private interactions. Apparently, he really was going to make his own plan to inform Voldemort and not consult with her at all.

She still thought this was stupid, but taking a calming breath, she reminded herself yet again that he'd been a spy for years and knew what he was doing. If there was information that the Order needed to know, he would inform them. Or for all she knew, he was making sure that any instances of corroboration were being given by Draco or … Neville, even, just not her. It was clear that he didn't want her involved in anything that had to do with him.

Besides, she had plenty of stress in her own life without borrowing any from his. The Weresbane and Wolfsbane potions were done by just before ten o'clock Friday morning. The drink window didn't actually begin until twelve hours later, but this schedule had been the only practical one to work around her classes.

She drafted Draco to distract Harry and then hurried the potion over to the safe house as soon as it was done. She was going to be back Saturday morning to actually administer the potion and monitor for side effects.

Minerva had asked to attend once more, and although Hermione had made a half-hearted effort to dissuade her, she had given in at the Scottish woman's insistence. Harry and Ron had both been barred from attending; between what had happened last time and the fact that there were transformed werewolves on the full, Molly and Albus were particularly firm in their resolve to keep them out of harm's way.

There had been the beginnings of an effort on Molly's part to keep Hermione and Draco away, as well, but Hermione had merely crossed her arms, raised her eyebrows, and said that of course if they didn't actually want the werewolves to be cured, she could sit at the castle and wait for the moon to set. That had been the end of that argument.

Remus had made a similar effort with Tonks, apparently, but since she was an adult and an Auror and not subject to anyone's rules but her own, she'd just told him to bugger off. Hermione and Draco had grinned at her, and Minerva had sniffed, her disapproval of Remus's attitude clear. But it was hard sometimes, Hermione knew, to care about and want to protect courageous and independent people.

The werewolves were all in their cells when the Hogwarts contingent arrived, prepared to settle in for the day once they'd taken their potion. The tension in the air was palpable, and Hermione knew that it was more than just the normal pre-moon jitters. Between actually seeing the cure occurring in front of them and remembering what had happened on the new moon, there was a lot of worry going around but people were on their best behaviour.

The children were quiet and obedient. No one was arguing or complaining that they couldn't spend a few more hours upstairs. There wasn't a single mention of how bad the Wolfsbane tasted.

The nine werewolves who took the Weresbane didn't complain, either, sitting down obediently for Hermione's test period, minutely detailing what they felt in an apparent effort to prove to her that there wasn't a single thing that was wrong or that might delay the next step.

It was a little bit stifling, actually, but Hermione understood what they were trying to do and was unwilling to chastise them for it. Given how many hours there were until the moon rose, she made sure to spent time with both groups of werewolves, reading again to the children and showing them how to play Muggle games like "I Spy" or "Animal, Mineral, Vegetable" which could go on even through their separate cells as long as Hermione suspended the wards that prevented sound from travelling between cells.

She checked on the comfort of the adults, discussed books, career choices, favourite memories at Hogwarts, anything that seized their imagination and didn't directly relate to what was going to happen tonight.

Remus and Draco spent most of their time with the nine Weresbane testers, reminding them of what it was going to be like to be trying to transform into their Animagus form rather than their werewolf one at six forty three that evening.

Bill made it in at dinner time having had to work during the day. Hermione rejoined the Weresbane group after that, the eldest Weasley having agreed to keep an eye on the werewolves who were making the regular transformation.

Settling herself in front of the nine, she asked for them to change shape so that the Animagus transformation would be extremely fresh in their minds when they transformed in all of an hour.

Hermione smiled at them, preparing to explain everything one final time. "I'm sure Remus and Draco have said already." Minerva and Tonks were listening closely. "This hurts a great deal. Worse than any transformation you've experienced before. I'm not telling you to frighten you," she continued, "but because I want you to be prepared for what's coming.

"The Acuity Charm will help you become more sensitive to minute changes, so you feel the difference between the wolf and the Were. It's necessary psychologically to help you fight off the Were which the wolf and your magic are trying to do anyway. It's going to take every bit of effort of which you are capable to accomplish this. The unfortunate part is that the Acuity Charm makes everything sharper, and that includes the pain of the transformation.

"What you need to remember is that this will be the last painful transformation you need ever make. You're feeling this pain and suffering because you want to be cured, and this is the way to accomplish it. I'm going to be right here with you every step of the way."

Me, too.

She'd wondered just how long he was going to pretend he wasn't there.

You really shouldn't let Minerva, Remus, or Molly see you.

He sent her a mental nod and brushed an invisible hand across her back fleetingly. Or Draco.

Probably, she agreed. I don't think it'll surprise him, though.

Really?

He knows you very well. Just keep hidden, and then no one can complain that you were in danger; no one else will know that you're here.

You've got it, he said cheerfully.

But you're staying on this side of the wards where no werewolf can get at you no matter what, right? she cautioned.

He nodded. I don't actually want to be in danger, I just can't let you and Draco and Remus keep going through this when I don't really know what it's all about.

She moved her head fractionally in agreement. She did know, and that's why she'd not said anything when he had followed them. In his place, she would likely have done the same, a fact which he had probably guessed.

"You're all going to be caged," she continued to the werewolves sitting around her. "I have every faith in my potions and my abilities, but I've got a lot of people to keep safe here, and that means we're not taking unnecessary chances."

Given the freedom that had been exploited last meeting, they all understood this.

"Unlike at the new moon, this can't be done in stages. As the moon rises, you'll all feel as though you're being forced to change just like normal. The crucial difference, however, is that when you fight the transformation this time, you will succeed." Some of them looked surprised that she knew that they fought regularly. But her heart had broken the first time she had seen Remus transform back in her third year, and she knew how much every one of them here hated it. "You are going to fight back successfully against the Were as you've all wanted to do for so long, and you're each going to change into you Animagus form: it's as simple as that."

They all nodded at her, wanting to believe it as desperately as she did.

The minutes ticked by, everyone growing more jittery.

"I wonder what Harry's doing right now," Draco said, seemingly offhand.

"Probably waiting anxiously just like us," Hermione answered with as straight a face as she could manage.

Remus took up her comment in the obvious way. "It can't be easy for him, stuck at the castle while we're all here."

"Hmm," Draco agreed, a slight frown marring his brow now, and she wondered if he'd already guessed the truth.

After all, when did Harry ever stay home when his friends were in potential danger? She didn't particularly want to deal with the type of explosive confrontation that would result if he were found out, however, so she would hope that the rest of them remained clueless.

At six, they got the nine werewolves sorted away into their cages. Kingsley arrived, and Hermione made certain that he and Bill felt they could handle watching all the werewolves. They assured her once again that they would be fine, and she cast all the final protective barriers. The stairs were now warded so that no one could get up or down without her express permission. The Wolfsbane and Weresbane werewolves were separated with a soundproofed barrier because Hermione didn't want either group to be distracted. She was once again the only one who'd be able to hear through the barrier from this side, but she had respected the wishes of the others and not put up barriers for those they were standing in front of; they were here to assist where they could and witness what they could not share in.

She activated the full wards between the nine Weresbane candidates and the people she needed to protect. In the unlikely chance that any of the werewolves escaped their floor-to-ceiling cages, there would be extensive wards that they would have to get through before they could harm anyone who was standing on the outside with her. Everything was in place.

The hairs on the back of Hermione's neck rose as she heard the whine go up behind her. The moon was upon them. Bodies stretched taut and vocal chords were abused; howls swept through the room. It was still the most terrifying noise Hermione had ever heard, made even worse because the nine in front of her were fighting for the rest of their lives as they experienced especially horrendous pain.

She wasn't sure if it was the fact that there were so many more of them or maybe that she didn't know them the way she had known Remus and Draco, but just looking at them, she couldn't sense their progress very well. Without hesitation, she reached out mentally for their minds.

The pain drove her to her knees, and she distantly heard the exclamations of the others at about the same time that she realized the only reason she hadn't fallen right over was because she was being bolstered by an invisible person.

Desperately drawing in deep lungfuls of air, she demanded with power that could not be ignored, Look at me!

One by one, the writhing bodies twisted until they could peer at her through bloodshot eyes.

You are Animagi, she told them with all the strength of her magic and her conviction behind the words. You are wolves. You are humans!

They clung to her mentally, and she watched them fight, felt them fight, heard Remus and Draco chanting out loud and joined in the refrain that they had used last time.

Wolf, wolf, wolf, wolf.

As suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Nine wolves were on their bellies in front of her. Feeling as though she were a hundred years old, she rose unsteadily to her feet, aware that Harry was helping her once more, a reassuring presence at her back. Tonks and Minerva still looked horrified.

She smiled proudly at those in front of her. "Congratulations." Though her voice was faintly unsteady, the emotion behind it was rock solid. "You've done it."

Slowly, the nine rose off the ground as well, shaking themselves off and looking rather stunned, even in wolf form.

"I'm going to give you a few minutes to recover from that ordeal, and then you're going to change back into humans, all right?"

They nodded, the motion very human. All partook of the water from the dishes in their cages. Several curled up to rest for a few minutes, but most stayed on their feet. She took the opportunity to look back through her wards and ensure that the werewolves were all right. Bill and Kingsley were speaking quietly. The freckles stood out clearly on Bill's skin, and she knew they weren't going to forget what they had witnessed tonight anytime soon.

Harry helped her into a chair, and she recuperated marginally. It was all mental and magical for her rather than agonizingly physical as well, but it had left her feeling drained.

Still, though, she didn't feel much worse than she had when she had helped just Remus and Draco with Fawkes's assistance. She suspected she now knew why Fawkes had thought she'd be fine this time, though she probably didn't want to know how he had theorized when she would sleep with Severus and come into her power.

When it was time, she rose to her feet, and the wolves who'd been resting did the same. Draco and Remus stood up as well, and Minerva and Tonks followed their example.

"Alexander, Gary, Heather, Justin, Liam, Mary, Rafe, Varda, Willow." Hermione intoned their names solemnly. "It's time to become human."

They all met her eyes, and then she was no longer facing nine wolves but nine grinning humans. She grinned back, and Remus let out a whoop of delight, very like the one he had made when his own lycanthropy had been cured. Minerva's indulgent smile said that she remembered it, too.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she declared as she beamed at them, "congratulations. You're no longer infected with lycanthropy."

There was a spontaneous round of applause, and then she explained to all of them what was going to happen next as they made sure the change had taken hold.

Everyone was too wired to sleep while they waited through the testing process, but the new regular humans were happy to chat about what it felt to be sitting there in human form. Several wanted to know about the mental connection that Hermione had made, and she explained as best she could without actually explaining why she could do it. Tonks and Minerva were amazed anew at the cure; the fact that they knew Hermione was one of the Pure Adults didn't appear to lessen their assessment of the achievement.

When the last person tested negative for lycanthropy, Hermione lowered her wards and fourteen humans—plus the Masked Harry—greeted Kingsley, Bill, and all the werewolves who'd stayed awake to see this outcome. There was immediately a resounding chorus of joyful yips, howls, and barks, and Hermione knew that they'd just provided a whole lot of hope to every person in the room. Standing here right now, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that all she had gone through had been worthwhile.

She suggested that everyone who was now human head upstairs to either eat or sleep but was not terribly surprised when they rejected this plan. It was now almost one in the morning, so there were less than five hours left until the moon set; the others agreed unanimously to wait until they could eat with their friends who were still bound to the werewolf form.

Couches, chairs, blankets, and pillows were conjured as desired as everyone settled down for the rest of the night. They performed their periodic rounds to ensure that all the werewolves were in good shape. There was plenty to talk about now that eleven people had been cured of lycanthropy. Hermione, Remus, and Draco were quite happy to give further pointers to the Animagus wolves in preparation for their helping the next batch of test subjects; everyone was delightfully eager to assist.

Given the positive outcome of this trial, Hermione decided to be ambitious and go with her shorter timeline; she informed everyone that they would be curing the remaining werewolves in only two more trials. That would mean that they would all be cured by the tenth of June, and she'd have one less responsibility when it came time to kill Voldemort. Although she didn't make this point out loud, if she were killed, she'd like to die with the knowledge that she'd given assistance to all the werewolves—British werewolves, at least—who had asked for it.

She'd make sure to leave her notes in order should the worst happen, but she'd like to know that she personally hadn't left any loose ends that involved people's lives. Her cure was dangerous and involved patience and multiple steps, and she couldn't simply hand it out to anyone who asked; it would be much safer if its dissemination remained in her hands. Besides, she'd got to know these people, and she wanted to help all of them right now.

This meant that, with thirty-six people left, there'd be two groups of eighteen, which Remus and Draco took care to point out was twice the size of any group that she had attempted so far. She countered with the fact that there were now eleven people who'd experienced the cure plus Minerva and Harry who were Animagi and who had witnessed it. She was feeling very positive about their chances.

They were going to divide the children up, as they were the ones who would need the most help, and Hermione didn't want to have the seven of them making up more than a third of the last group. There were now plenty of people who could work one-on-one with them, and Hermione was going to attend to them especially for the actual transformation. It would be wise, she realized, to convince Albus that Harry should come along on the next full moon, as she might well need someone who could MindBond with her in case she couldn't handle that many people at once.

She was amused to find herself, as the night progressed, in an extended conversation with Mary about Ron. It seemed as though the redhead had made quite an impression on the woman, and since Hermione rarely knew the status of his and Lavender's relationship, she didn't discourage the Healer. She privately thought that they wouldn't be a particularly compatible match, but for all she actually knew, Mary was mad about Quidditch, Ron was ready to be grow up a bit, and they'd be perfect for one another.

Everyone remained downstairs at five thirty-four when the moon set to once again endure the pain of that transformation, even if it was by proxy. The nine who had ceased to be under the moon's sway had looks of shock on their faces; they were standing outside the cages, human and whole, while the others suffered.

Hermione was sure that she was not the only one who was relieved that they were on a countdown to when they wouldn't have to hear the sound of that transformation ever again.

Now that the Easter hols had begun, she and Draco—and Harry, theoretically, if not really in practice—were officially allowed to be away from Hogwarts, so there was no need for them to hurry back to the school. They happily agreed to stay for the large communal breakfast.

By the time they were digesting, those who had been up all night were done in. All the adrenaline rushes were long over, tension had dissipated, and exhaustion had therefore set in. Since those who had come from the school preferred unanimously to return to their own beds, the students and professors Apparated back to Hogwarts. It mattered even less that they returned openly now because while there might still be Voldemort sympathizers at the castle, it was giving nothing away to reveal that they had been at their safe house on the full moon.

There was no sign of Severus as they returned this time, which pretty much figured since Hermione wasn't about to keel over from stress; naturally, he couldn't possibly demand her presence when everything had gone well or when she was in the presence of Minerva as well as Tonks.

The Head of Gryffindor made her way upstairs while the rest of them headed down, Tonks separating from them for the Hufflepuff territory while Hermione, Draco, and the invisible Harry headed towards their common room.

She dragged her heels a little, Draco looking at her a little oddly but politely slowed down, allowing Harry to get ahead of them and into the room first so that Draco wouldn't see the gargoyle disappear and reform around someone who wasn't supposed to be there.

It would really have made more sense for Harry to have headed back before breakfast, but he had wanted to stay to the end, and since it was generally better when he was not travelling on his own, especially off the grounds, here they were.

Another half a corridor, and she and Draco arrived. Harry was sitting on the couch with a book in his hands.

He looked up and almost managed to look surprised before he said brightly, "Hi."

Her lip curled. "Hello, yourself." Mentally, she added, Your book is upside down.

He closed it immediately and tossed it aside as he rose to his feet.

"How are you, Draco?"

Draco was unbuttoning his cloak and eyeing Harry.

"I'm fine," he answered as he sent the cloak to hang on the hook by the wall with a wave of his wand.

"Good, good," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "Everything went okay last night?"

"Fine," Draco answered in the same tone as before. "What were you up to while we were gone?"

For an instant, Harry looked nearly alarmed, but then he smiled and said, "Didn't get much useful done, I'm afraid. Kept thinking about all of you and couldn't really concentrate on much. Didn't want to bother anyone else, though, and get them all worked up about something that should go perfectly smoothly, so I mostly spent my time down here alone."

Hermione wondered what Harry had said to Ron to make sure that he didn't come down here last night.

"And yet you learnt how to read upside down?" Draco asked mildly.

Harry actually managed a relatively decent lie for this one. "Truthfully, I've been assuming you would come home for the last hour or so; I didn't want you to think I'd been totally desperate and pathetic, so I was trying to look occupied when you got back."

Draco shook his head slightly. "There's no need for you to pretend with me, Harry; you should know that."

The beginnings of guilt had sneaked onto Harry's face, but he merely nodded, seeming to feel he was a little deep in his story now to simply back out of it, even after a line like that.

"Right," he agreed. "Did you, er, need tea or anything?"

Draco shook his head. "What I need right now is a bed. We didn't get any sleep and I'm beat." This was accompanied by a yawn that Hermione noticed Harry had to physically lock his jaw to keep from duplicating. "Do you mind if I sleep in your room for a few hours?"

Harry shook his head, but Hermione didn't have to be reading his mind to know that he was really wishing he could be in his bed sleeping with Draco. Unfortunately, since Harry had supposedly spent a normal night here, there was no need for him to have a nap this early in the morning.

Draco made it all the way to Harry's bedroom before he paused.

"For future reference," he drawled, "that would have been more convincing if you weren't wearing yesterday's clothes."

It took a minute for the words to sink in, and then Harry looked down at himself and the clothes that he'd been wearing since Saturday morning. He looked up with huge puppy dog eyes, ones that indicated that he knew he'd done wrong but was really, really, sorry and really didn't want to be punished.

"You're angry with me?"

Draco rolled his eyes and crooked a finger. "Right now, I'm tired. Come to bed, idiot, and I'll yell at you later."

Harry bounded up, reminding Hermione of nothing so much as his godfather in that moment. She could practically see a tail wagging with frantic happiness.

Draco remembered to say goodnight to her, and Harry quickly echoed him. She waved them off before they could be any more idiotic and adorable. She wondered just how much Harry would get chastised once they'd slept.

She'd given up on the notion of having words with him herself. He'd made it home safely, and the fact of the matter was that they were the closest matched in terms of power and efficacy with MindMagic, though he still lacked much of her practice with the latter. If there was going to be someone at the safe house who could help with raw magic if she were incapacitated in some way, he was it.

Besides, she'd much rather he be in her safe house than that he be feeling left out and reckless at Hogwarts. Hopefully Draco would recognize this, although it probably wouldn't be a bad thing if Harry were chastised a bit by his boyfriend. Now that Harry's safety involved Draco's happiness and well-being, it was bound to have added value in Harry's mind.

Hermione hadn't been out to see her herd in over a week, not since Viktor's declaration, and she was beginning to feel a little drained. There were still plenty of upper-year students at Hogwarts studying for N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s, however, and between wanting to ensure nothing remarkable in her behaviour was noticed by any of them and wanting to be available should anyone have any problems—since Harry was definitely out of commission—she decided that a shower and a quick nap would do her for now. She'd go visit her herd tonight, once everyone was safely sleeping once more.

She felt as though she'd been in the same clothes forever, despite periodic Cleansing Charms, so she showered first, and it did much to revive her and make her feel human once more. She optimistically thought she was even awake enough now to do some useful work, but one look at her large, comfy-looking bed told her that what she really needed was some sleep. Being a unicorn Animagus didn't mean that she could give up on it entirely. Especially when she used a lot of her magic, she could still feel entirely sleep-deprived and desperately in need of a warm blanket and a pillow.

Two hours later, she awoke feeling refreshed. She moved to the common room to revise since all her Easter break papers were done. Ron still thought she was crazy, and even Harry had looked at her a little strangely, but she was just pleased that the work was out of the way now. As it was, there was every possibility that she would be counselling panic-stricken students who had decided they were going to fail at all their classes, and she wanted all her personal responsibilities to be well out of the way.

Harry and Draco returned to the land of the living shortly after two in the afternoon. They looked well-rested and happy, so Hermione gathered that they'd moved past Draco being angry with Harry and straight through "Harry and Draco have make-up sex".

"How can you possibly have more work to do?" Harry asked when he saw the books that were spread out around her. "There isn't a year of school after this, you know that, right?"

She made a face at him. "I'm aware of that fact, thank you. There are, however, these big tests you might have heard of called N.E.W.T.s. You might also have heard that they're at the end of this year. I'm revising. They're less than two months away."

Harry grimaced. "I know. I don't know what happened to the time."

"It's called life, Pure Adult status, and fighting Voldemort," Draco answered promptly.

The dark-haired boy sighed and flopped down onto the couch. "Yeah. Have I mentioned recently how most of those annoy me?"

"Yes," she and Draco answered in unison, and they all grinned at one another.

"Get some work or go away and stop bothering me," Hermione instructed. "I need to revise."

Thankfully, Harry gave up his whinging, and they were able to pass a quiet afternoon of homework and revision with an early dinner; none of them had eaten regularly today, and the chance to eat on their own schedule and avoid the Great Hall also appealed.

Hermione found herself continually wondering what Severus was doing. Since he hadn't been there to pounce upon her as soon as she got back, she had no idea what was occupying his time. Had he not come because he hadn't known the precise time of their return? Had he not cared? Or had he noticed that she was righteously pissed off with him and he was keeping his distance? It was hard to tell with the Slytherin, and even if she found him, she knew that she couldn't simply ask him and get a straight answer.

The Head Girl in her felt mildly guilty for not attending dinner and failing to make sure that all the students were all right, but it was the hols, so there were fewer students, and she knew that Fawkes would have informed her if anything disastrous had occurred. Minerva had no doubt reported the night's events to Albus, so Hermione washed her hands of all those responsibilities.

It was almost eleven o'clock in the evening before she could admit why she was feeling so restless. She'd at first attributed it to coming down from the emotions of having cured nine more people of lycanthropy. But by eleven, she knew it was concern for a certain snarky man whom she wasn't supposed to be thinking about. It was the day after the full moon, and recent experience had taught her that Severus didn't weather those well. The Order had kept Roger's death quiet which meant that it was only now that Voldemort was learning of the man's failure. Hermione had an awful feeling about who was likely suffering as a result.

Since Harry and Draco had slept so much of the afternoon away, they weren't exactly ready to go to bed in a timely manner this evening. Hermione tried not to show her nervousness, but Harry twice asked her if she was all right. Despite her assurances that she was fine, the truth of the matter was that she wasn't feeling particularly all right at all. She knew that she'd decided to take a step back from Severus and be professional, but that resolution was crumbling in the face of his current absence. She could recite all the recent occasions where he had been less than polite to her, but they seemed to be nothing in face of the mad butterflies dancing in her stomach telling her that something was wrong.

As she'd clarified so forcefully with Harry and Draco the other night, she couldn't simply stop how she felt about Severus whether that meant refusing other men or caring about what happened to him. It didn't even matter that if their situation were reversed he wouldn't worry about her.

He was in danger. Even without being able to look at the Map to verify that he was not on the grounds, she knew it. She had no idea which instinct was telling her this, but she felt absolutely certain, and no matter how woolly she thought Divination was as a subject, she wasn't about to discount what she was currently feeling.

She was well aware that Harry had not had a Voldemort-induced vision in months. Given that there was all of a week's difference between when he had attained his Animagus form and when he had begun sleeping with Draco, Hermione wasn't sure which factor was the deciding one. Perhaps the two contributed equally. If Harry thought about it, he would surely realize that Voldemort was awfully unhappy right now bit it wasn't impacting him as it had done in the past.

Hermione thus found their situation curiously inverted; Harry and Draco were awake and untroubled, and she was worried out of her mind thanks to Voldemort. She was still a novice when it came to connecting with the wards, but perhaps that was contributing to her certainty that Severus was absent. She wanted to yell this at them, wanted to make them search or help or worry with her … but the logical part of her recognized that there was nothing she or they could do even if Severus had been Summoned. And now was definitely not the time for a possible lecture from Harry about her caring for someone who didn't care back.

It did occur to her, lamentably late, that there was someone who would likely know for certain whether or not Severus had been Summoned. Fawkes confirmed for her that Severus had felt the burn of his Dark Mark and advised the headmaster before leaving at seven that evening.

The hours stretched on, Harry and Draco appearing only to get perkier but finally deciding that if they had any hope of rising the next morning at a halfway decent hour, they needed to go to bed.

It was half two.

The moment they had retired, Hermione Banished her books to her room; she'd spent the last hour unable to do more than reread the same paragraph over and over again.

Theoretically, as far as her experience had taught her, Severus would be back any time around now, but she couldn't bring herself to stay in the common room. As soon as it seemed likely that Harry and Draco weren't going to pop back out of Harry's bedroom because they'd forgotten something or had a last question for her, she donned her cloak, Masked herself, and headed outside.

It was a clear night, the moon glowing brilliantly, the stars shining brightly. Not three steps from the stairs, Hermione transformed into her unicorn form; it would keep her warmer as well as ensuring that she was getting the secondary benefit of light absorption.

Moving down to just outside the gate, she waited.

And waited.

She was still there when the sun rose at a quarter past five.

She was still there at half seven when she knew that even on holiday, people would be stirring in the castle, getting up so that they'd be ready for breakfast on the hour. By then, she'd worked out how to access the wards and keep tabs on Severus's presence or lack thereof. The restless unease that had driven her outside in the first place had only grown, an itch beneath her skin, blossoming into a gut-wrenching certainty that Severus was in trouble, that her mate was in distress while she was here, unable to help him.

Trying to trace the feeling and come up with a logical reason for it had proved that there was no sense behind what she was feeling, but no matter how many times she replayed all the rational counterarguments in her head, her heart simply insisted more loudly that disaster had struck.

It was a few minutes later that Harry spoke with the attempt at mental quietness that she knew indicated he didn't want to wake her if she were asleep.

Hermione?

Defeated, she slipped back through the gates and regained human form.

Yes, Harry?

You having a lie-in?

I'll be there in a minute.

She passed through the main doors, down into the dungeons, and back to her quarters. Harry's and Draco's heads swivelled from where they'd been directed at her bedroom door to the main entrance.

Harry frowned. "You were out early."

She nodded.

His frown deepened. "What's wrong?"

She licked lips that seemed suddenly dry and spoke through a throat that felt equally parched. "Severus was Summoned yesterday evening. He still hasn't come back."

The two of them stared at her without saying a word, and she decided it might be better if she sat down, so she stumbled slightly to the nearest chair.

"You've been out there all night?" Harry finally asked.

That was hardly the point, but she nodded.

"Sometimes he's Summoned for longer than just a few hours," Draco offered.

This was slightly more on topic, but she shook her head definitively. "That's not what this is."

Harry's head tilted to the side as he considered, her certainty apparently not lost on him.

"I've not had any problems with my scar."

She sighed. "I know you haven't. But can you think of the last time you have? The last time you've had a vision?"

From the look of it, this wasn't exactly a question that he was anticipating, and it was only now that he seemed to realize that he couldn't come up with an immediate answer. He'd been through years of living in the moments between Voldemort-caused havoc, and the habit appeared to be second nature now.

Draco was the first to make the observation. "You don't have bad dreams when you're with me, do you?"

Harry shook his head, but it took a moment for the connection to stick.

"I haven't had a vision since I started sleeping with Draco?"

She managed a smile. "Is that a question?"

He grinned back as he realized the truth of the assertion. "No."

"You became even more powerful, and you found your mate, the person who grounds you."

Harry managed to recall the actual topic of conversation on his own.

"So you're saying that even if Voldemort was really angry or really happy, I wouldn't know anymore?"

"I don't think so," she agreed. "As far as we've ever been able to tell, the connection between the two of you is unique, so anything we conclude is based on observation and conjecture. But I don't think you're connected to him like you used to be, or at least, I think you've learned how to completely suppress the link."

"About bloody time," Harry grumbled, and Draco smiled.

"What it means right now, however," she noted, "is that we have no indicator for what Voldemort is feeling; in this case, we're stuck with my feelings as our only guide."

"Last I checked," Draco said, "you don't have a connection to the Dark Lord."

"But I do have a connection to Severus." Somehow. "It's nothing so strong that I can actually feel what he's feeling or communicate with him." Although she was now wondering why the hell she hadn't tried to learn how to do that. She could connect with perfect strangers for curing lycanthropy, so why hadn't she made more of an effort to connect with Severus? Oh, right, because he didn't want anything to do with her. She shrugged a bit helplessly. "I have a very strong feeling that something is wrong."

"Says the person who thinks Divination is complete nonsense."

What was up with Draco this morning?

"Yes," she ground out. "Says the person who thinks Divination is complete nonsense except for that bit where I've been reading the journals of a millennium-old Seer."

"And now you think you've inherited her genes?" the blond asked.

She made a face. "In point of fact, as I think you would have grasped from the issue of my having blood in common with Voldemort, I did inherit some of her genes. But no, I do not believe myself to suddenly be a Seer. I do believe, however, that I'm connected to Severus, as I've said."

Draco looked sceptical, and she rose.

"I'm going to go see Albus."

Harry stood up as well. "I'll come with."

"I'm not sure either of you would be very helpful right now, thank you," she said curtly.

Harry didn't have to say specifically for her to know that he believed her as little as Draco did; she could pick that up all on her own without any gifts of Sight.

Harry cast an uncertain look between her and Draco, and she turned on her heel and stalked back out of the room and up to the second floor. It was nearing breakfast time but a quick glance at the wards informed her that she'd catch the headmaster in his office before he'd quite made it down.

The griffin was still polite enough to jump out of the way, and she climbed the steps even as they were winding their way upward. Since the normally uniform speed of the stairs increased as she ascended, she guessed that the castle was being sympathetic to her anxiety.

Ten minutes later, she'd determined that the castle was the only one. Albus was of Draco and Harry's opinion. He wasn't convinced that Harry's connection with Voldemort had really been suppressed. He thought that Voldemort must not have been feeling anything strongly enough to cause Harry distress recently. Like Draco, he brought up the numerous occasions in the past where Severus was kept at meetings for days.

"I know that, sir," she answered, not bothering to suppress all the frustration in her voice. "I've been at Grimmauld Place for enough summers to know full well how long he can be Summoned for outside of term time."

"It's not term right now, Hermione," Albus pointed out.

"I know that," she repeated. "It is only the beginning of Easter holidays, however. Severus regularly spends the entire break here, and he has duties as head of Slytherin. N.E.W.T.s are less than two months away, and Voldemort, for all he's an egomaniac, wants the Slytherins he can control to score well so that they can be put into good positions when they emerge from your school. He wants them to be useful. Do you really think that he would pull Severus away from that when this break is the perfect time for him to coach all of them?"

Albus's eyes still twinkled, and he didn't look overly troubled.

"Your point is not invalid, Hermione, but Voldemort's concern over anything except his own satisfaction and the destruction of Harry has been dwindling steadily in recent years. I don't believe he would be much bothered by a few days' study time for students who aren't even Marked yet if he has a potion that he suddenly wants Severus to brew. Severus invariably goes to these meetings without being certain of what will be asked of him, and he can rarely contact me to advise me of longer commitments. If he is not back in several days, then we will have cause for concern."

Hermione bit her tongue so hard that she felt the tang of blood in her mouth.

"In several days, he could be dead," she said as calmly as the violence to her tongue had allowed.

Albus rose and came round his desk to pat her on the shoulder and begin guiding her towards the door.

"There's simply no reason to believe that right now, Hermione. I know you're concerned, but Severus has done this countless times. You don't have anything to worry about."

Hermione was singularly uncomforted by this. She did have a reason to be worried; no one might believe her, but she knew Severus was suffering. It didn't matter if Severus had done this a million times before if last night was the night that he'd been caught, and all her instincts told her that it was.

But she had heard exactly what Albus wasn't saying; she had been relegated to "unduly worried lover" or some such category. She wasn't being taken seriously, she thought savagely, because they thought she was overemotional about the absence of the man who had been her first.

She had to practice her deep breathing to avoid cursing Albus as he led her down to breakfast.

"What did he say?" Harry asked as soon as she sat down at the Gryffindor table.

She threw up privacy charms of the muffling variety, staring down at her empty plate for a moment and making no effort to put anything on it.

Her voice was very flat. "He said that you were right and I am wrong. That you know what is going on and I do not."

"Hermione—" he started to protest.

She met his eyes evenly, and whatever he saw there made him close his mouth with an audible clack of teeth. Draco, employing the sense that had been bred into him by years of Malfoys who'd been in tense political situations, said not a word.

Ron, unfortunately in the instance, did not possess this breeding, and he stumbled into the hall at almost nine, managing to make up for his late start by heaping his plate and showing one of those odd moments of perception by asking what was wrong.

Draco and Harry both looked at her, so the next time Ron's eyes rose from his plate, they came to rest on her as well.

"Nothing that there is any pointing discussing right now." Frostily, she added, "According to most everyone who's involved, it's not something worth discussing at all."

He looked as though he wanted to ask more but sense of some sort kindly reared its head and induced him to keep his questions to himself.

Hermione made no attempt to lighten the mood or offer innocuous topics of conversation. She happened to be quite annoyed with Harry and Draco—the former especially—for not even making an attempt to trust in her judgement. Ron didn't even know what the situation was, however, so it wasn't fair to take out her distemper on him.

In apology, she told him about how Mary had asked after him extensively, and she watched as he perked up visibly in front of her. She had a sudden image of him in his Animagus form, running around in crazed excitement, yapping like mad.

Ron invited himself back to their common room, ostensibly to hear more about the lovely Healer but really to ask about what had been going on at breakfast. She perched on one of the chairs, steering clear of the couch and its occupants, and Ron sat in the chair opposite.

Not looking at Harry or Draco, she explained briefly since she really didn't need someone else to go to great lengths to tell her why everything she'd just said was very wrong.

Ron looked at her with surprising seriousness. "So what are we doing about it?"

She stared at him, surprised speechless, and it was Draco who spoke first.

"There's nothing to do. Even if Hermione's right," and he made it sound as though this were a very big if, "we have no way of getting to Severus."

Ron looked over at Draco and said flatly, "How many times have you known Hermione to be wrong?"

She could have kissed him. His support was even more welcome for being so unexpected.

"That's true," Harry agreed, "but usually we get a little more to go on than 'just having a feeling'."

"Hermione's one of the last people I know to put stock in simply feeling things," Ron argued. "For her to bring it up, it's evidently strong enough and important enough that we should take notice."

"The headmaster doesn't think it's anything," Draco noted.

"Albus didn't think it was anything when a twelve-year-old fought a Basilisk," Ron replied dryly.

If she'd been in a better mood, this would have made her laugh. Ron was right on the ball with his observations today. He looked at her.

"I don't like Snape," he said with a slight grimace. "But if you're worried, I'm worried."

She blinked back unexpected tears.

"Thanks, Ron," she said, clearing her throat huskily. "Unfortunately, Draco's right; even if I knew for sure that Severus was being tortured, we don't have any information on his whereabouts."

All three boys nodded at this. Part of the reason Hermione had conceived of the entire warding idea was because of the set-up required for the destruction of Voldemort to be successful. They couldn't wander over haphazardly with vials full of blood and hope that Voldemort stood still long enough—and his Death Eaters behaved long enough—for them to cast a complicated and lethal ward. They didn't even know where to wander to. Voldemort had been growing more rather than less paranoid over the years, and in recent months, Severus rarely even recognized the location where the man was hiding out. This left them with precious little to go on right now.

"Let's do some revision, then." This, too, was from Ron, and Hermione looked at him in complete astonishment. He shrugged. "It's got to be done, even by me eventually, and I know it stands the best chance of distracting you."

They all acquiesced, although Hermione found that it was helping Ron revise that did more to distract her than revising herself. When she was supposed to be doing that, she simply stared blindly at whatever books or notes she was reading and thought of all the horrible ways that Severus could be dying while she sat here.

When, by contrast, she was wading through the horror that was Ron's class notes or reminding him of what books he needed to read straightaway if he had any hope of passing any of his N.E.W.T.s, it took her marginally away from her worries.

Periodically, Harry and Draco seemed to feel it necessary to point out that they were sure Severus would be back at any moment. She put very little stock in this belief, and they seemed to know that, but they kept saying it, as though the more times they repeated it, the more true it was likely to become.

"Don't you want to keep an eye on the Map?" Harry asked.

"I don't need to," she answered. "If he comes back, I'll know."

Harry frowned. "But he's not a guest."

"I'm not tracking him on the Map," she answered. "I'm tracking him through the wards."

In the act of reaching for another book, Draco froze. "You can use the wards to track whether or not people are in the castle?"

She nodded absently, running through the connection in her head one more time even though she knew that she'd be aware the millisecond Severus crossed the wards.

"You realize that's insane?" Draco added.

She looked at him blankly, finally saying, "I have a talent with wards."

Draco shook his head. "There's talent, and then there are, I don't know, super powers. The wards on this school are massive. And they weren't cast by you. You shouldn't just be able to know, from here, when someone crosses them."

She shrugged. "But I do."

There was no point rehashing the details that Solace had left in her journal. Without a far more detailed explanation than she was willing to make at the moment, it was impossible to properly explain the connection that she felt to the wards. It was a bit as though a little part of her had stayed with the wards and a bit of the wards had stayed with her ever since she had accessed them. Desperation had aided her experimentation, and she could connect to them as an observer when she wished.

"So you'll let us know if Severus comes back?" Draco said in an attempt at a recovery from his earlier shock.

"Of course," she said shortly, knowing full well that he would not be coming back under his own power. She'd kiss Filch and profess her eternal belief in Trelawney if Severus came waltzing back today after a long meeting.

By dint of superior numbers and a great deal of cajoling, they got her up to the Great Hall for lunch, where she spent a fair bit of time glaring at the headmaster who clearly still thought she was overreacting.

She'd spent so long recently ignoring the High Table recently because Severus was at it and they were cross with one another that it was only now that she twigged to the fact that she hadn't seen Viktor in several days.

Fawkes, she asked, is Viktor still here?

He went back to Bulgaria for the break. The phoenix's tone was indecipherable, so she didn't know if he found it weird that she didn't know or if he'd heard about the whole Astronomy Tower debacle. He will return.

Thanks.

She wanted to ask Fawkes's opinion on whether or not she was crazy believing what she did about Severus's current fate, but she decided there was no point. If Severus was injured, Fawkes had as little access to him right now as they did, and as annoyed as she was with Albus, there was no reason to try to breed dissension between him and his familiar. And she wasn't sure she could take someone else she trusted telling her she was crazy.

The afternoon was spent in the same tedium as the morning. Harry and Draco convinced her to do some afternoon rounds, just to make sure that the students weren't using the supposed benefit of decreased numbers to get up to any mischief. It was lucky for the students that trouble-makers were at a minimum because her temper right now wouldn't have held for any foolishness.

They'd picked up a fourth for the occasion, and Pansy had caught onto the tension immediately. She was a Slytherin, and she kept her mouth shut, well aware that there was an issue in contention about which she was uninformed. Hermione was very grateful for the circumspection.

The later it got, the worse Hermione felt. It was an indefinable ache all over, the prickle of hairs perpetually raised on the back of her neck, a sense that she should be somewhere else right now and the futility of not knowing how to get there.

She'd had more time to think about it, and she wondered now if this was because she was a Pure Adult, because she was a unicorn Animagus, because of the level of power she currently had, or a combination of all three. If this was the type of feeling that unicorns had when their mates were in trouble, she'd truly begun to understand why they mated for life and didn't long outlive their partners.

She believed what she was feeling indicated that Severus was alive and suffering; she was horrified by the prospect of how she would feel if he were to die. Would the feelings get exponentially worst? Or would she feel nothing at all, a complete void? She wasn't sure she could stand either, and that meant she had to find a solution. No matter what anyone else thought, no matter what information they were lacking, she had to solve this.

It didn't take someone of her perception to know that she hadn't convinced the others that she was fine, but by sheer force of will, she'd not let any of them see just how unfine she was. Since it would be unconvincing if she appeared completely emotionless, she blocked the upper ranges of her emotional output to take the edge off and then did her best to appear as though she were coping with her upset.

Even in her own mind, she could recognize that it should impact her at least a little that Severus couldn't stand her and had been horrible to her for months. All she knew with her heart, however, was that it didn't matter. He was her mate, and she needed him to be safe and happy and alive. She shivered. Alive was really important, and she knew that with each passing moment, the chances of that remaining true diminished steadily.

She needed to know where the Death Eaters were, or she needed a Death Eater who could tell her where the others were, or she needed a Death Eater who could take her there—

Hermione's thoughts stumbled to a halt. She did know where one Death Eater was. Or, rather, she almost knew. She checked the wards and determined where her quarry was located.

She forced herself to sit still for ten more minutes to regain a modicum of calm; she needed to have a plan and this had to be done properly.

Rising with more force than was necessary, she exclaimed suddenly, "I can't just keep sitting here! I need to take a walk and stretch my legs."

They eyed her with varying degrees of suspicion.

"I'll go with you," Ron offered, gesturing at his books with a grimace of distaste. "I could use a break from that."

"Sure," she said with a slightly tight smile. "I'm not sure I'm the best company right now, but it's probably better if I'm not alone."

The redhead rose to his feet, and Harry looked immediately happier than she'd acquiesced so readily to being accompanied.

"We could come, too."

She shrugged, making sure her voice was calm. "Only if you want to. Three people following me around the castle might be a little excessive, as last I checked, I was fully able to take care of myself, but if you need to get out, be my guest."

Harry and Draco exchanged looks, and she could see that they didn't particularly want to join her, not when they knew full well that she was still annoyed with them. Draco shrugged, and Hermione suppressed a smile as she saw Harry give in.

Ron followed her into the hall, falling in step with her wordlessly.

They made it down one corridor before he asked, "What are you really doing?"

"Visiting Tonks," she answered promptly.

He actually froze for a moment and had to take an extra long stride to catch her up.

"Tonks?" he said incredulously. "Seriously?"

"She's an Auror. She might have some ideas. I can't just sit around and do nothing."

"But why didn't you just say so?" Ron asked, frowning in confusion.

She made a face and asked disparagingly, "Do you think I wanted everyone tagging along telling her how crazy I was to be worrying? Insisting that there was no need to bother anyone else because they and Albus are sure it's nothing?"

"They don't think you're crazy," Ron protested. He evidently saw her doubt, because he continued: "They just have a hard time believing what they haven't seen. It's been a long time for Harry since he wasn't aware of what Voldemort was doing before everyone else. And given that it's taken Malfoy until this year to be hit over the head repeatedly with the fact that You Know Who is evil, he's evidently a concrete evidence sort of person as well."

Since when had Ron been the reasonable one?

"I know what you're thinking." She raised an eyebrow. "I've always been like that, too. I fly off the handle and don't make amends until I've been dropped from a tall building into the evidence." Her lips quirked at this image, and he shrugged, the pink tingeing the tips of his ears indicating that he was more embarrassed than he let on. He shrugged. "Even I have to grow up sometime."

She'd be awfully happy if he really had done, or at least that he was managing this show of maturity at a moment which was really important to her.

They'd reached Tonks's classroom.

"I appreciate your support," she said honestly as she knocked on the frame of the door.

The pink-haired Auror looked up from her desk where she appeared to be grading papers and smiled at the sight of the two of them.

"Come in."

"It's just me, I'm afraid," Hermione said. "Ron was walking me down."

"You're sure you're all right?" the redhead asked.

"I'm fine," she answered firmly.

Ron's look was close and assessing, but he had never made the slightest attempt to become a Legilimens, and the mental shields she had up right now would give Severus, Albus, and Voldemort combined a run for their money. Ron finally shook his head, although a slight furrow continued to mar his forehead, bid farewell to Tonks, and headed back the way he had come.

He was by no means stupid, but it seemed that he was choosing to let her get away with her plan. It was for the best that he didn't know the finer details.

Hermione entered the room, closed the door, and warded it. Tonks's eyebrows rose slightly as she took in the complexity of the protections the Gryffindor was putting up. She rose and moved to prop herself up against the front of her desk.

"What's up?" she asked.

Hermione didn't waste any time.

"Where are Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy?"

Surprise showed on the older woman's face. "They're in an Order safe house, the same place they've been since January."

"I know that," Hermione said impatiently. "I need to know where exactly."

The Auror frowned and answered slowly, "There's no reason for you to know that, Hermione."

"Severus was Summoned," Hermione explained. "Yesterday evening. He's still not back. Albus and Harry and Draco will all tell you that I'm overreacting, but I'm telling you that I know he's not come back because he can't. He's been caught, and if we don't rescue him, he's going to die."

"Even if I told you where the Malfoys were, it wouldn't do you any good." Tonks sounded as though she was actually taking Hermione's words into consideration but had found holes in the plan. "They were questioned extensively about their knowledge of Death Eater activities, and they've no idea where Voldemort is currently located."

"Be that as it may, I need to know where they are."

Tonks shook her head, but offered, "I could talk to Albus and Kingsley. We could question the Malfoys more specifically."

Hermione drew in a breath sharply through her nose. "I've asked nicely twice."

Her Defence professor's eyes narrowed sharply. "I don't like the sound of that."

Hermione stepped closer and said very calmly and very clearly, "If you force me to take the answer from you, I will."

It might have been the instinctive action of an Auror, but Tonks's hand inched towards her wand, and Hermione Summoned it without a word.

"Please don't," the Gryffindor said. "I have no desire to injure Remus's favourite professor."

Some of the tension eased from Tonks's form.

"I need an answer. Time is of the essence," Hermione added intensely.

Forcing herself to stand patiently and not fidget as she waited for Tonks to come to a decision was almost more than she could bear, but Hermione stood still as a statue until the other woman announced abruptly, "Look, then."

Hermione met the other woman's eyes and immediately saw the location. She probed only long enough to ascertain that this was the truth, and then immediately removed herself from Tonks's mind.

"Thank you," Hermione said honestly, although she was already itching to get moving. "You may want to sit down."

Tonks sighed. "Dare I ask why?"

"Because you're about to be Stunned, and I'd hate to leave you on the floor," she replied candidly.

"Is that really necessary?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm afraid I can't have you giving me away."

The pink-haired woman tried to reason with her. "Whatever you're planning, you shouldn't do it by yourself. Even Kingsley and me—"

"I'm going alone," Hermione interrupted flatly. "It's the only way. I'll time the spell."

Looking resigned, Tonks stumbled into the chair behind her desk. After a moment's consideration, Hermione modified the chair so that it looked like a Muggle recliner.

"Wouldn't want you to fall out," she said with a smile that was forced. "I am sorry, but I think you're a little too Auror to let me go if I left you to your own devices."

Tonks lifted one shoulder in concession of this point.

"I'm going to lock the door behind me so that no one can come across you in a vulnerable state. Remus will be able to get in, regardless, and you'll be fine in thirty minutes or if he finds you sooner. Your wand will be sheathed once you're under the spell."

The Auror's hair turned green as she nodded in understanding.

"Good luck."

Hermione smiled more genuinely this time. "Thank you."

She followed this up with the Stunner, time-limited as she had promised, and made sure that Tonks was comfortably reposed. She tucked the other woman's wand back into its sheath, Masked herself completely, and slipped out of the room, warding it as she went.

In what was probably all of a minute or two but felt like an eternity because of the giant clock she was racing against, Hermione was out of the castle and across the grounds. She crossed the wards and Apparated to her destination.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Mission

Hermione appeared in a nondescript hallway that she was sure in no way resembled the sort of entryway to which the Malfoys were accustomed. From what Hermione could see—brown floors, cream walls, furniture and décor serviceable but slightly worn—it looked like the sort of three-bedroom home that wouldn't be out of place in the neighbourhood where she'd grown up. That was probably, oh, a hundred or so rooms less than the Malfoys were used to? Of course, without house elves to labour for them, they'd probably have difficultly maintaining a home the size of a small castle, so perhaps they saw the benefits to their situation as well as its disadvantages.

Hermione might disparage their lifestyle, but she knew that it had many fine or useful points, and it couldn't be an easy transition to make.

Not that she'd come to talk to them about that.

The doorway behind her was covered in wards; it looked as though Apparating with Order members was the only way in or out.

UnMasking herself, she strode down the hallway, peering into doorways—den, kitchen, dining room—until she found Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy in the sitting room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, the curtains were shut against the night, and two of the most pure-blooded and snobbish people Hermione had ever met were seated on a settee to one side of the fire, reading.

Hermione wondered if they would ever have allowed anyone to see the two of them curled up as affectionately as they currently were, Narcissa nestled up against Lucius, head resting on his shoulder as she read the book in her lap. Hermione was momentarily stunned by this image and chided herself for nonsensically assuming that they were completely inhuman. She stepped into the room.

Lucius looked up and froze, his absolute stillness alerting his wife who lifted her head, eyes widening at sight of Hermione. They didn't appear to get a lot of visitors.

As Narcissa recovered slightly from her shock, she sat up properly and moved far enough away from her husband that no one could accuse them of impropriety. Hermione had been much more affected when they were seated affectionately.

They were watching her with wary eyes, and Hermione wasted no time.

Imbuing her voice with the strength of her convictions, of a feeling she knew even if she could not name its source, she said, "Voldemort is torturing Severus to death. Will you help me rescue him?"

They could not have looked more stunned than if she had announced that she had pledged her allegiance to the Dark Lord and was here to break them out.

She stared back impatiently, knowing the importance of giving them a chance to offer her a verbal response.

"There is nothing we could possibly do," Lucius said flatly, his voice not quite the cultured one she remembered from the World Cup nor the angered one from the Department of Mysteries. The edge of disdain was still readily apparent, however, as though she had missed the obvious, as he added dryly, "We aren't allowed to leave."

"The assistance I require does not necessitate your leaving the building."

They exchanged a long look, and she quashed the urge to impatiently tap her foot as she waited for their verdict. She didn't let herself clench her hands into fists, either, making sure they rested casually against her legs so that the Malfoys wouldn't feel as though she were threatening them into making a decision.

That was step number two, after all, the one which she hoped she wouldn't have to take.

They looked back at her. Narcissa spoke, the gracious tone of the hostess despite the circumstances. "Would you care to take a seat?"

There was a time and place for manners, and Hermione swore that this wasn't one of them, but she supposed it was their very proper contrast to their other possible response, which would likely have been something in the nature of "get out of this house, Mudblood whore".

Hermione therefore swallowed all of the invectives that were boiling up her throat and said politely, "I don't really have time."

They allowed the niceties to be abandoned, Narcissa speaking once more. "You rescued our son."

Hermione gave a curt nod, though she wondered who had made sure those details got to the Malfoys. Albus, she supposed, but it simply wasn't important enough to verify right now. It looked as though it had been helpful, anyway, and as though trying it the nice way first was going to work for the second time today. The Gryffindor in her was paying off.

"In what manner can we assist?" Lucius asked, tone carefully neutral.

"I need to see your Dark Mark."

And she'd managed to stun them speechless for the second time, three times if she counted her arrival. Lucius looked ready to protest, but Narcissa laid a hand on his arm, and he restrained himself with a visible effort.

They rose to their feet together and then Lucius shrugged out of his expensive-looking robes. He unbuttoned the cuff of his equally costly silk shirt and pushed the sleeve up, nearly grimacing as the fabric crumpled together at his elbow. They dressed well, apparently, in captivity, and being under house arrest didn't appear to have lessened his sense of what was owed his position.

She knew that her request seemed like a particularly daft one. For someone who had spent so long as an important political figure at the Ministry while pretending he wasn't a willing Death Eater, she was sure that this was more exposure than he was comfortable with—especially in front of her.

But she had known he was a Death Eater since the end of her fourth year, had seen it firsthand at the end of fifth year, and she was in too much of a hurry to explain herself now. Whatever Lucius and Narcissa were thinking, they evidently believed in paying back debts, even to people who they believed were normally beneath their notice.

To ensure that they didn't suddenly try to back out, she wasn't going to tell them any of the details of what she was about to do. She had simply decided that what she was about to attempt would work despite the fact that it was untested. She wouldn't recommend that anyone ever try it, but it was Severus's life hanging in the balance right now, and she would willingly give her life if that's what it took to save him.

She now felt precisely what had driven Harry to the Department of Mysteries at the end of fifth year, and she knew with a certainty that would have astonished her then that he would have gone even if he had known for sure that it was a trap and even if he knew there was no chance of his making it out alive; she and Harry cared more about their loved ones than themselves.

And this was what had brought her here, staring at the one object that linked all of the Death Eaters to Voldemort. Normally, of course, it was only when he Summoned them through the Mark that they were able to Apparate to his side. That connection enabled them to Apparate blindly, not knowing where they would be going but programmed to appear within relative proximity to their Lord once the Mark began to burn.

The assumption that she was operating under currently was that since the Mark was on their arms at all times, the connection was therefore actually there at all times. Voldemort activated it when he Summoned them, but it was never gone, they were never unconnected. And this meant, theoretically, that in the presence of Lucius Malfoy, Hermione had access to Voldemort's location.[29]

This knowledge would be of no particular use to most people, but Hermione was a Pure Adult, she could see and feel magic, and she'd had more than her fair share of practice with various sorts of MindMagic. Tonight, she was going to use that to her advantage. Hopefully.

She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, and reached out to grasp Lucius's left arm, ignoring his flinch. She couldn't tell if it was caused by the fact that she was touching him or because he was being touched on that arm, and she had more important things to worry about right now. She pressed three fingers into the dark tattoo, pressing until she could feel bone.

Closing her eyes, she slipped into the mental state which allowed her to fully view all the magic around her. She thinned out and then banished the shields that protected her core and barely heard the gasped, "Merlin," that had come out of the mouth of one of the other people in the room. She didn't have time to worry about that, either.

Withdrawing further inside herself, she concentrated all her energy and focus on her fingertips and the Dark Magic that they touched. She could feel it pulsing in Lucius's arm, mostly quiescent but still foul, binding to his magic and feeding off it to ensure that the link remained strong between him and his master; Voldemort, selfish and greedy as he was, obviously wasn't going to use any of his own magic to sustain the connection.

Opening her eyes, she saw Lucius only through the corona of his magic.

She was unsure if he deserved what she was going to attempt, but she believed in repaying her debts as well.

"Do you wish to be bound to him?" She didn't recognize her own voice, and whatever he saw when he looked at her, there was no mention made of the impertinence of such a question.

"No," he answered, almost voiceless, but steady.

"I've never done this before. I don't know what will happen."

He nodded.

"This may hurt," she warned a final time, but his gaze did not waver.

Closing her eyes again, she followed the strands of magic that led from the Dark Mark. These strands were internal rather than external; just looking at Lucius, she couldn't see the magic stretching off to Voldemort. It did so, however, and wherever she was that she could communicate mentally and see magical cores, she could see that connection, too.

Though she wasn't sure what made her certain, it was immediately obvious to her when she was beyond Lucius but not yet at Voldemort. She couldn't say where she was, but it was effectively a limbo between the two magically connected people. She'd been guessing that she needed to reach this point to ensure that she didn't pull Lucius along with her. If she entered Voldemort, she imagined that she'd be stuck in the visions of what he was doing, just as Harry had been so frequently in the past, and that would be of no use right now. She stopped where she was.

Gathering her magic to her, she prepared to Apparate, hoping her mind was still connected firmly enough to her body to make this possible. Her destination was the end of the magical link that she was following, which was more than the Death Eaters knew; if they could manage it, she could. In the frantic moments since she'd thought up this mad scheme, she'd been deliberating on it constantly, and she was certain that there was no one in the world right now who was more determined to get this right than she was.

She Apparated.

As she felt the squeeze begin to compress her body—or maybe it was her mind—she reached back and with all her magical strength, sliced through the bond that she had just made use of, severing the connection between Voldemort and Lucius. She couldn't stick around to see what happened, but with the Mark no longer connected to Voldemort, it didn't really exist, so she hoped that it would simply fade away, leaving Lucius unbound and with access to all of his magic.

Several immeasurable heartbeats later, she was back in her own fiercely aching body, gasping for breath on her knees on what felt like grass. Not, then, a form of travel that she would recommend.

It was dark, but she appeared to be on the grounds in front of the hulking shape of a building that looked rather like a Tudor manor house. She had been a little worried that she was going to end up right in front of Voldemort; from what Harry had described in the graveyard at the end of fourth year, the Death Eaters had arrived in a nearby inner circle.

Fortunately, the wards that Voldemort had erected at this location appeared to direct incoming Death Eaters to the edge of the grounds; she supposed it was less disruptive for him if they didn't pop in nearly on top of him, and making them trudge across the grounds and admire the splendour of the home in which he was hiding spoke to his status as well.

She paused to get her bearings. Her hurried assessment of the wards indicated that the manor house was Unplottable and had many wards to keep Muggles and Muggle-borns out (or at least make sure that they told no tales) as well as other wizards. All of the traps were fatal; it didn't seem that Voldemort cared much about rumours of disappearances.

She crept across the grass, fully Masked and silent as the night. There were two bored-looking Death Eaters at the main entrance. They clearly didn't expect anyone to breach this location.

The wards, she noticed as she continued past the indifferent guards in search of a better entrance, were well-constructed, strong and fortified and slightly opaque, preventing the Death Eaters from getting a glimpse of more of the countryside to try to locate themselves. It seemed that Voldemort remained an untrusting individual.

She supposed that after losing all the Malfoys, he might have a reason to be a little paranoid. It also suggested that he'd chosen this location for a long-term stay, and she hoped that by the time she'd finished tonight, he would be forced to find somewhere less comfortable.

Closer to the building now, she could feel the weight of its history. It was authentically Tudor if she could trust that sense of age, and this made it as much as five hundred years old. It represented an old family gone wrong or a recent murder; Voldemort had not come by it honestly.

After a moment's indecision, she made no attempt to modify the wards and figure out where they were. Her priority was finding Severus, and she wasn't about to risk tipping Voldemort off to her presence; it would take too long to make the adjustments with the proper discretion. Besides, assuming she was successful today, Voldemort wouldn't be sticking around.

She found a back entrance that was heavily warded but had no human presence. Working frantically, it took her fifteen minutes to tweak the wards such that she could get in and out without trouble and without easily advising Voldemort that any tampering had taken place; it was safer than disabling them, which would have tipped anyone off to an unwanted presence.

Given what she had seen so far and knew of the man, she doubted he would be performing his own rounds to ensure the impenetrability of the house. This meant her alterations should remain undetected for a little while, hopefully long enough for her to find Severus. Once she got him outside, she didn't care if she had to wake the entire house to break through the wards to Apparate them away; until then, every bit of caution was necessary.

Creeping inside, she wondered if the Death Eaters found the place as creepy as she did. The place positively oozed gloom. There was a heavy darkness, and she was left with a certainty that even full sun outside wouldn't help. It reminded her of how Grimmauld Place had been, especially that first summer; this house belonged to an old pure-blood family.

If she'd been in Hogwarts, she could have accessed the wards and found Severus in a trice. This was a foreign location, however, and given what she had learnt thus far, it was likely that the wards would object to Muggle-born interference. Wandering around in an attempt to find the magical centre of the building and hoping for the best seemed unwise at this juncture.

Instead, she followed the magic and the wards, heading for the larger concentrations of magic that existed downwards, believing that Severus had been tortured with spells that would be leaving traces and suspecting that such torture would take place in the dungeons. Her heart quailed at the thought of what he must be suffering, but she forced herself to concentrate as impersonally as possible on the task at hand. The lower levels were truly labyrinthine, or at least that was how it felt; she needed to concentrate not lose her head with worry.

It remained eerily quiet as she traversed the building. Most of the hallways weren't lit, but she followed wherever the tug of magic led her, knowing that the route that she was compelled to follow was unlikely to be the one normally used by the inhabitants of the house.

She'd begun to grow rather used to having access to the wards at Hogwarts, and it was highly disconcerting to be in this large unknown house and not be able to feel how many people were here with her. She didn't have the slightest idea of the size of the force that Voldemort kept at his disposal at any given time. While it was possible that the two out front were the only others present, she had her doubts. From what Severus had indicated, Wormtail and Nagini tended to be around, at the very least, and Hermione imagined that Voldemort would want plenty of witnesses for the punishment that he was currently inflicting.

Periodically, she cast the softest of alarm spells and tacked them to out-of-the-way areas of the ceiling where people were unlikely to notice them so that she would be alerted if anyone was blocking her route of escape. This was one of the moments when she was most grateful that she was a unicorn; she didn't have to worry that she wouldn't remember how to get out of the bloody house again. If she thought of the exit, the twists and turns that she needed to follow rose up in her mind.

She crept around protrusions in the darkened hallways, dimly able to make out tapestries and pictures on the walls but sparing them no mind. The further underground she went, the more barren the corridors became until she finally hit unfinished stone which led to the dungeon proper.

The wards at the end were the brightest and strongest of all the wards she'd encountered save those surrounding the entire house. The stones here were dark with age and grime, rough-hewn, some covered with mould and decay that she could not immediately identify. Thick, close-fitting metal bars, rusted with age, guarded the entrances to all the cells. It seemed that whoever had designed this area had thought much as she had when she designed the containment area for the werewolves: it was safer to have both wards and bars.

Thankfully, none of the nearer cells appeared to have active wards, suggesting that Voldemort didn't have any other prisoners; now Hermione didn't have to battle with her conscience to work out whether she could really leave anyone else behind in her single-minded desire to save Severus.

The closer she drew to the far end of the room, the noisier it became and the more spell-light she could see and feel. She found quite suddenly that she was running though she had told herself that it was essential that she keep the element of surprise if she didn't want to risk joining Severus instead of rescuing him.

There was an unmoving body on the floor being attacked with a fury of spells, and Hermione didn't think, she just reacted; there was a flash of gold and the seven attacking figures were suddenly unconscious and piled up against one another in an untidy heap against the wall on the far end.

She knew it was Severus on the ground, but it couldn't be through recognizing him physically. He was a mass of lacerations and broken bones, and she took in the inventory of injuries with a sort of detached horror. He was barely wearing clothing, as most of it had been cut or whipped off of him or forced into the wounds in his skin. His fingers were all at crooked angles, his legs sprawled uncomfortably, and his hair matted to his skull in clots of blood and dirt. The odd patches of clear skin that she could see were pale as parchment. His bottom lip was fat, a cut beginning on his chin and slicing up to it. There were bruises all across his cheeks, and his eyes so swollen that it was unlikely he would have been able to see her even if he had been in a condition to try to open his eyes.

He was apparently deeply unconscious because even the shaking from torture by Cruciatus was minimal, and given what else they had done to him, she was sure that they had to have held him under the curse for a long time. The smell of blood, vomit, and excrement only got stronger as she flung herself down at his side, but her only concern was finding his pulse. She was shaking so badly that the task was made even more difficult, and when she finally managed it, she felt her own heart skip a beat at how irregular and faint his heartbeat was.

Her breath caught in her throat, little black spots dancing in front of suddenly burning eyes as she realized that he could die right here and right now in this horrid little cell. There was blood all over the place, he had more injuries than she could count, and if she wasn't the stupidest person on the planet, she would at least have thought to bring healing potions with her. But she had spent the whole bloody day with Harry and Draco and Ron trying not to make them suspicious. She had been concentrating on how to ditch them and get to Severus. And now she couldn't even see Severus's chest rising and falling, and she fancied that she could actually see his magic draining out of him, and she knew damn well what was happening.

"Don't you die on me, Severus," she snarled brokenly, tears starting to fall even as she tried to fight them back. "Don't you dare."

She had to get him out of here, had to get him back to Hogwarts where he could be treated, but it didn't look as though she had even that kind of time. He was mere moments from death, and—

"It will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death."[30]

She let out a sob of mingled relief and fury at her own stupidity, never more happy than in that moment that Harry had been crap at Occlumency and she had seen most of his memories before he learnt to block her out. Without hesitation or regret, she tore the necklace that she had worn for over a year from her neck.

She scooting behind Severus and propped him up against her so that he was in a position to swallow the priceless liquid stoppered in her hand. He didn't want to open his mouth, and she finally had to force it. He made a particularly violent twitch as his jaw parted, and she suspected that it was probably broken and that what she'd just done had really hurt. She'd apologize to him later.

Her hands were shaking worse than his were, so she used magic to uncork the vial. Forcing herself to go slowly, she dribbled the silvery blood slowly into his mouth so that he wouldn't choke on it. Tears slid down her cheeks and dropped onto his face as she massaged his bruised throat as gently as she could to get him to swallow the unicorn blood that she willingly sacrificed for him as it had been willingly given to her. The last drop slid into his mouth, and she Vanished the vial.

She wanted a clear indication that the blood had done its job, but she knew that she wasn't really going to get one. Unicorn blood wasn't like phoenix tears; it didn't heal humans, it simply kept them from immediately dying. It was more like a sort of stasis, and it was temporary. That was why Voldemort, trapped with Quirrell, had been forced to feed more than once on the unicorns, and that was why he hadn't considered it a permanent solution. She had absolutely no idea how long it lasted.

Severus still had that weak pulse; the blood was working at the moment. He wasn't dead right now, and she had to make that advantage count and get them out of here. She'd never Stunned this many people at once before—if an uncontrolled burst of magic could be called Stunning—and she needed to make sure that she and Severus weren't still here when the Death Eaters woke up.

Taking out her wand since her control was shot to hell and something on which to focus was useful, she used the same spell she'd employed when she'd found Draco tortured in the Forest; it assessed the injuries and bound any that were in need of it. When the bandages had settled, even thinking really bad mummy jokes didn't help because she knew exactly why Severus was covered in so much cloth.

For a fleeting moment, as she rose to her feet and remembered the rest of the cell, she contemplated the other occupants. Then she cast a Mobilicorpus on Severus and pulled him gently out of the room. He was too important, too time-sensitive.

She hated every single one of them for what they'd done to Severus, but she didn't think she had that many Killing Curses in her, and she didn't believe that she could single-handedly kill Voldemort. She and Harry had a plan, and since she couldn't execute it right now, wreaking some petty form of vengeance that might ruin the good plan seemed unbelievably daft. She'd no doubt get yelled at by someone later, but that seemed immaterial right now. Sensible or not, it was another one of those feelings; it wasn't supposed to be her, not like this.

So she re-warded the cell once she and Severus were on the other side, weaving in a sloppy name rune for Severus that meant the Death Eaters would have a lot of work to get out again and would be left hopefully very confused as to who had trapped them in there in the first place.

She hovered Severus at the appropriate height and then shifted into her Animagus form. Speed was now of the essence; Severus needed medical attention hours ago.

With a combination of wandless magic, luck, and desperation, she got Severus lying across her. Down several corridors, she felt the first an alarm trip. Bugger. Why did they have to notice now?

She took off down the nearest corridor that went around her alarm and Masked herself so that she'd appear only as a dark horse, moving with all the silence that her equine species possessed, as well as its speed. She flew through the hallways, and she didn't pause when she crossed the path of another Death Eater and saw him blink at her in shock. Not risking a look back to see if he was pursuing because she already knew the answer, she just increased her speed.

Diving through the back door, she took off like a shot for the edge of the wards even as she felt the house wards behind her flare up in alarm, a sudden blaze of lights. Voldemort and those with him might still be unconscious and imprisoned, but the other Death Eaters were apparently hard at work trying to catch her.

She couldn't Apparate as a unicorn, so she shifted back into human form, somehow managing to get an armful of Severus and keep holding him. He was a dead weight sprawled across her.

The wards had grown even stronger when the alarm had gone off, and she was no longer travelling with the power of the Mark.

It didn't have finesse, but she was in a hurry; she gathered her magic to her in one big fiery ball, concentrating it down into something hard and lethal, and then she threw it at the wards that were blocking her exit.

They crackled and sheared away, the edges catching at her. She nearly went down in the backlash, but she couldn't let herself; she had to get Severus to safety. Throwing herself and her burden through the space she had created, she Apparated the second she was in free air.

Forgoing all the social niceties, she came directly to the Infirmary, knowing exactly which wards to manipulate thanks to Solace. She didn't care if Albus was angry or her secrets revealed. Severus needed help.

Poppy, who'd been crossing the room with a thankfully empty tray, let out a little scream and dropped what she was holding as they arrived with an audible pop.

"Hermione? What? How?" She seemed to realize, then, who was in Hermione's arms. "Merlin. How did you—?"

"Now is not the time," Hermione said, managing another wandless approximation of a Mobilicorpus so that she could carry Severus over to the nearest bed and lay him down as gently as possible. She tried to arrange his limbs into the least painful-looking position, but it looked as though everything hurt, and there was a thick constriction in her throat. "Right now I need you to save his life."

Poppy switched, thankfully, to professional mode and hurried over to cast her diagnostics, her expression growing graver with each passing moment. Suddenly, shock painted her features, and she turned to look at Hermione sharply.

"What have you done?" she demanded.

Confused, Hermione looked at her questioningly.

"To heal him," Poppy breathed.

"Everything I was able," Hermione said impatiently, thinking that now was really not the time to discuss her technique. "But he needs help."

"Does the headmaster know you're here?"

Hermione could have bashed her head against the wall; she was getting stupider by the minute.

Fawkes, she sent out urgently.

I come.

The phoenix arrived soundlessly but let out a musical cry of distress as soon as he saw the man in the bed. Poppy froze.

Berit. His voice was full of grief.

Please, she begged. I can't lose him.

The phoenix landed gracefully on the edge of the bed and walked several steps so that he was level with Severus's face. Her own tears started to fall again as she watched a big, pearly drop grow at the corner of Fawkes's eye before it dripped into Severus's mouth. Two more drops followed.

You should still do everything you can.

As Poppy started, Hermione realized that this was a prod for the mediwitch, not for her. Hermione's heart was still somewhere in her throat, and she felt that she had done pretty much everything of which she was capable.

Spurred into action, the mediwitch hurried away. The phoenix's tears had begun to take effect, and Hermione could see that Severus's visible injuries were already healing. His magic also seemed to be beginning to stabilize. The darkness surrounding his left arm dissipated slightly, which pleased her to no end, and she no longer felt that indefinable drain that told her she was losing him before her very eyes.

Poppy came back and administered the bone-mending, bruise-fading, burn-healing, and pain-relieving potions that she had on hand. Hermione had a renewed appreciation for all those detentions she had spent with Severus brewing potions for the Infirmary. It was lucky they weren't all contraindicated, or Severus would be in quite a difficult spot at the moment.

She wondered if someone had worked that out on purpose so that it was possible to heal people who had been tortured various ways without waiting for each potion to run its course. Part of her recognized that this was a totally ridiculous thought to be having right now, but she was keeping it together by a pretty tenuous thread.

Albus arrived at Severus's bedside, his expression very grave. He looked down at the healing Severus with a completely twinkle-free gaze.

"You should not have gone."

It took her a moment to realize that the headmaster was speaking to her and not the unconscious man he was looking at.

Her voice shook with suppressed emotion. "I would do it again in a heartbeat."

"It was dangerous." The headmaster sounded very disapproving.

"I don't care," she said flatly. How could she care more about her own safety than Severus's?

"Harry has been frantic."

Hermione thought this was a bit of a low blow and replied with an edge of sharpness that she had forborne earlier: "He would have done the same for Draco."

Almost as though speaking of them had summoned them, Harry and Draco were the next to arrive. She wondered, in actuality, if they'd been keeping an eye on the Map or if the phoenix had announced her arrival when she had failed to do so. She really should have alerted Harry on her own, she realized, but she'd had a little too much on her mind.

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed the second he caught sight of her. "How could you just leave like that? How could you do it?"

"I had to save Severus," she answered simply. "I couldn't have brought anyone else."

Apparating as she had done had been difficult enough without adding a Side-Along into the equation. It wasn't as though they had a queue of Death Eaters to try her insane new technique with.

Draco was speaking now, but although she was aware of his mouth moving, she didn't hear a word of what he was saying as she saw a pulse of Dark Magic clouding around Severus's left arm just before he started to convulse in pain.

Voldemort, apparently, was awake and not best pleased. And unfortunately, he'd had the clever idea of torturing Severus through his Mark.

Without thought, she dropped into her core and reached out for Severus mentally and physically, wincing with him as he shuddered at her death grip on his Mark. She waded hurriedly out past the magic and energy that was Severus until she was in that metaphysical space between Severus and his master. She could see the link much more clearly now that Voldemort had activated it, dark strands of the same putrid colours that the Cruciatus had been comprised of. It might, she realized, be more difficult to break now that Voldemort was actively Summoning his minions.

This only served to make her more determined. There was no way that she was going to let Voldemort keep hurting Severus. It felt as though she was interposing herself between the two of them and then she attacked the link with the mental equivalent of a really powerful Cutting Curse.

For the second time that day, she severed the bond between Voldemort and one of his Death Eaters.

Whereas last time she'd been heading on towards Voldemort when the bond was quiescent, this time she'd deliberately put herself between Voldemort and Severus and tried to sever what was ahead of her; she'd wanted to protect Severus from as much of the magical backlash as possible.

As she was hit with what felt like the magical equivalent of a freight train, she hoped she'd largely succeeded. She was distantly aware of Severus's shudder but was concentrating on clinging to her body and not allowing her mind or magic to be torn away in the wake of the magical explosion that she had just caused.

She felt another presence wrap around to her and clung gratefully, reminding herself that it was far safer for Severus this way. It was over now, whereas Voldemort would no doubt have kept torturing him with the Mark forever had it remained on his arm.

She rather vindictively hoped Voldemort had difficulty explaining to all the followers he had just Summoned what he was doing locked up in a cell with no prisoner.[31]

Of course, depending on how he took the severing of the bonds, he might expect that both Lucius and Severus were dead, but that would serve her purposes for the moment. She looked very much forward to disappointing him one day.

"Hermione Jane Granger!" Hermione's eyes snapped open as she was recalled very abruptly to the physical here and now. "How dare you do that to 'Dora?"[32]

She didn't regret any of her actions that day, and she wanted to tell that to the raging Remus who'd just barrelled into the hospital wing, but she found as she opened her mouth that she'd reached the end of her magical and physical reserves.

She barely felt the impact of her body with the ground as the world went dark.

Hermione opened her eyes, blinking up at a momentarily unfamiliar ceiling. Then her time as a half cat came back to her and the medicinal smell of the place impinged, and she knew she was in the hospital wing.

Sitting up, she was pleased to find that all her body parts were in working order and that she was dressed in clean clothes that smelt nothing like the decay and death of the last robes she remembered wearing. She might not have been injured, per se, but lingering around the edges of her mind was an awareness that she had very much overexerted herself.

Her senses told her that almost thirty-six hours had passed, and she cast a Tempus to confirm it. It was a little hard for her to believe that she'd slept so long, given her current physiology, but she had to admit that she felt considerably better than she had before she'd knocked herself unconscious. Adrenaline must have been pumping through her veins like anything for her not to have noticed back when she'd first freed Lucius just how much magical power she'd expended, and she'd spent the rest of the evening doing so over and over again.

There were warning spells on the bed to alert Poppy to when Hermione awakened and if she tried to leave, but she simply disabled them before she climbed carefully out of bed and went to find Severus.

The Infirmary floor was cool against her bare feet, and she felt as though there were emanations of relief washing up over her. The castle, it seemed, was glad that she was functional again. So glad, in fact, that it led her in the right direction, and Hermione didn't have to search at all to find the private room where Severus had been tucked away. There were plenty of students still here over the holidays, and it wouldn't do for the wrong one to see him lying vulnerable in the hospital wing.

No one was with him when she got round the protective wards and into the room. He was still very pale, and she could see that he'd been put into a magical coma to ensure that he had time to fully recover. He was not, Hermione could well imagine, the most patient of patients. If she was assessing the spell correctly, he'd remain unconscious until shortly after ten o'clock that evening.

She didn't really think anything was going to go horribly wrong at this point, but she knew she was now going to be stuck worrying horribly for a good twelve hours. She conjured a chair and sat down at the head of the bed. Reaching out with gentle hands, she brushed dark strands of hair off his face.

She swallowed heavily, wondering why on Earth she felt like crying again when he was clearly so much better. Seeing his hand above the coverlet, she couldn't help clasping it gingerly. The bones were completely mended now, and it didn't look as though any permanent damage had been done. He wouldn't have been able to function properly as a Potions master without the use of his hands.

From what she'd seen herself and from Poppy's diagnostics, there'd been plenty of Legilimency attacks and bouts of Cruciatus. The physical wounds looked largely spell-inflicted, and she suspected that they'd spent a while hoping they could break him before they'd decided that it was a futile effort. Cutting off limbs didn't appear to have the appeal that driving someone insane with the pain from a spell did. She had a feeling it was a good thing that Bellatrix hadn't been there to take part.

Severus's Occlumency barriers had been damaged but intact when she found him, and he'd had the benefit of the unicorn blood to stop the deterioration as well as phoenix tears and most of the healing potions that the two of them had ever made. Plus he had the benefit of all his magic now that she'd severed the Dark Mark—and he had a lot of power, especially since February. Poppy'd had the good sense to put him in that coma, and that meant all of those factors could be working together to ensure that he was healed properly without him trying to do something daft like brew a complicated potion.

His face was very relaxed in this sleep. She railed yet again at the fact that the only time she got to see him relaxed and sleeping was after he'd been horribly tortured.

"You've got to stop doing this," she told him quietly, a smile that was edging into tears on her lips. "I keep seeing you this way, and I'm sure you must be annoyed with what it's doing for your reputation." She sniffed. "If only you wouldn't go and get yourself tortured, there'd be no need for me to help you heal."

Hard on the heels of this thought were two realizations: he would never have to go back to Voldemort and risk being tortured like that again, and without that reason for her to see him while he was sleeping, it was likely not an opportunity that she'd be getting in the future.

She stared down at him, memorizing his face as it slowly regained its colour, leaving her hands clasped in his because she was certain that when he was awake, he would curse her into next week if she attempted any such thing. Sniffing again, she reminded herself that all that mattered was that he was safe. If he still didn't care for her, at least he was alive.

His feelings weren't going to change overnight, and she'd be as loathe to accept forced gratitude as he would be to extend it. So he would wake up and be about as scathing as usual, and she would rejoice as best she was able and remember that a world with a disdainful Severus in it was much better than one with a dead Severus in it.

It was about two hours later when Poppy came to check on Severus and once again let out a squeak at sight of Hermione.

"What are you doing in here?"

Hermione frowned slightly, thinking it was perfectly obvious. "Waiting for Severus to wake up."

"He's in a magical coma," Poppy said shortly.

"Until ten o'clock this evening; I know," she answered and saw the woman's surprise. Hermione didn't much feel like explaining herself in wake of the aggressive stance that the matron was taking, so she remained silence.

"You shouldn't be out of bed."

"I'm fine," Hermione answered.

"I should have—"

"I disabled them."

The older woman's voice was stern. "You shouldn't be here."

Hermione was pretty sure that if anyone had the right to be waiting here to ensure that Severus was all right, it was her.

"I want to make sure he's all right," she offered quietly.

The woman's eyes were impassive. "You've done enough. I need to ask you to leave."

Hermione frowned. "I just want to sit here."

"Don't make me call the headmaster," Poppy threatened.

Hermione rose so that she could stand at equal height to the woman who was telling her she couldn't stay with her mate. "And what is it, precisely, that you think he could do?"

From the look of it, the woman was only just now recalling what Hermione had done the night before.

"Would he want you here?" she asked, indicating Severus with a nod of her chin. "Will he be happy to see you when he wakes?"

Hermione's chin came down as she contemplated this. No. She knew he wouldn't. He was always annoyed when he found her with him like this; if he felt he had to acknowledge what she'd done, it came out abysmally wrong. He didn't like anyone to witness his weakness, as he saw it, and he'd be much happier if he could quietly slink away and pretend that it was a miracle that he'd appeared healed in the hospital wing when the last thing he remembered was being tortured to near death by Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Slowly, Hermione shook her head.

"Then I think you should go."

Hermione spared one last look at the sleeping Severus, glad that she could now see his chest rise and fall. She'd felt the steady pulse of his heart, too, and knew that this would have to sustain her for the rest of the day. She could look in on him privately once he was released from hospital. Coming to see him after he'd recovered had to be perfectly acceptable because they could both pretend that she didn't know what had happened to him if that was his wish.

She nodded to the mediwitch, wondering why the woman wasn't being a little more sympathetic. Poppy had always been strict with her patients, it was true, but it wasn't as though Hermione was a boisterous Quidditch team who was going to wake up the patient and disturb his healing process. She'd had every intention of sitting there quietly and not getting in the way.

It was only as Hermione left the hospital wing under the flinty glare of the mediwitch that it occurred to her that perhaps she had given too much away concerning how she felt about Severus. She hadn't given a second thought to it until now, but it had probably been as clear as day to everyone from the moment that Hermione had brought Severus back that she loved him. Everyone else had already known, but it must have been a shock to the mediwitch to see Hermione displaying such obvious affection for one of her professors. Perhaps Poppy didn't approve of such relationships.

Since Hermione could hardly go back and explain all the circumstances surrounding her feelings, she forced herself to keep walking away from the hospital wing. At least Severus had been unconscious. He hadn't been awake to see her blunder, and she was sure that she could trust that he'd make it abundantly plain to everyone in the near vicinity when he woke that he had no tender feelings for her.

Poppy probably had plenty of experience over the years with students who had crushes on their professors, and there was nothing in the behaviour Hermione had displayed that would have revealed that more had passed between them. Really, Hermione snorted sourly to herself, it might as well have been an unreciprocated crush that she was feeling because what had happened between them in February hadn't really counted, as Severus had told her very plainly.

She'd try to talk to him once he was awake, though, and see if they could be civil now that he was no longer a spy.

Her feet carried her to her quarters which seemed the most logical place to go under the circumstances. She wasn't in any fit state to revise, and she couldn't bear so much as the idea of having an ordinary conversation right now with any of the students that she might meet in the library.

Her quarters were safe from the intrusion of the vast majority of students, and she was perfectly prepared to simply sit there for ten hours until Severus woke up. It was all she would have done seated at his bedside, after all, and she really didn't feel up to much else.

She should, she realized too late, have had a better plan and hid herself in her bedroom. Poppy was not the only one to be displeased with her, and when Harry and Draco returned from lunch, they made no effort to hide this fact from her. She was recovered from her collapse now and in perfect health as far as they could see, and that meant that it was time for a free-for-all of questions and accusations and their collective list of all that she had done wrong when she'd left without telling anyone on Tuesday.

It only got worse as the day progressed because she was subjected to all the rest of them as well: Albus, Remus, Ron, and Tonks. Kingsley in his official capacity was even used as a threat with what she gathered was supposed to cause a great deal of alarm in her. They all demanded answers but didn't seem to be willing to give her time to actually respond; they had opinions that they wanted to share with her in elevated tones of voice, and she was becomingly increasingly uninterested in listening to them.

Given what she had just been through, she finally just stopped talking entirely and let them argue all over one another. It was chaotic and noisy, and she could feel her temper fraying by the second.

Draco and Remus had started arguing because each felt their significant other had been treated worse by her. Albus and Harry were arguing about who should have known that she was going to make a run for it. Ron and Tonks, who were furthest from her and hardest to hear, seemed to be arguing about what had happened when he'd left her at Tonks's office.

Finally, they were so distracted by what they were saying to one another that although there was still the occasional emphatic gesture in her direction, they weren't looking at her at all. Without regret, she Masked herself and slipped out of the room.

She headed straight for the nearest exit, needing to get out of the castle before the atmosphere choked her to death. None of them seemed to have recognized that she was still worried out of her mind about Severus, that her magic was still recovering, and that she couldn't bloody well talk when they were all screaming at her.

Given that her magical reserves still weren't in tip-top shape, she doubted it would be wise to change into her Animagus form. Instead, she just went to sit at the edge of the Forest, and it wasn't long before Castina came to join her.

You are troubled, little one, the herd mare said softly.

Hermione nodded. I have to wait until tonight to find out if my mate has survived, is going to recover properly, I mean, and everyone in there is busy being angry that I went out to rescue him on my own. I was not allowed to sit with him.

Castina frowned. Humans are very strange.

Hermione couldn't really argue with that one.

It was peaceful out here under the eaves of the trees where there were no other humans and no unreasonable expectations to plague her. Castina, unlike all of Hermione's human friends, didn't make the slightest attempt to force her to speak. The herd mare was a calming presence, and the lack of judgement was once again exactly what Hermione needed; everyone else she knew possessed judgement in spades when they hadn't even heard what had actually happened because they hadn't given her the chance to speak.

Hermione?

They'd finally noticed, it seemed, that she was no longer in the room.

Fawkes, Hermione said stiffly, I know how annoying this was when Ron asked me to do it, but would you please tell Harry that I'm fine but that if they think I'm going to go back into that room, they're out of their bloody minds?

Fortunately, Fawkes, like Castina, seemed to be on her side in this matter, or at least not against her, and he acquiesced without complaint and relayed the message to Harry.

Harry didn't miss the significance of Hermione choosing not to speak with him, and he sounded somewhat chastened when she caught his response.

Tell her that we'll behave.

Fawkes didn't bother to repeat the message.

I'm not talking to any of them until I can stop worrying about Severus.

This news, too, was duly relayed, and Harry, although unhappy, decided that pushing her further at this point would not assist matters.

She wasn't really sleepy, but there was a lingering lassitude that she hadn't felt immediately upon waking up. Compared to yesterday's magical exhaustion, she was great, but the longer she was conscious, the more she realized that she still wasn't up to her old strength. Although she'd hardly done anything all day, she still had plenty of emotional anxieties that were gnawing at her with very sharp teeth.

It took her a good hour to get back into the state of peaceful relaxation that she had begun to attain before Harry interrupted her. She couldn't garner all the benefits of being in unicorn form, but it remained beautiful and peaceful outside, and she allowed that to soothe her.

Although Hermione wanted to run back to the castle as soon as ten o'clock arrived, she knew it would be imprudent. If she found Severus awake in the Infirmary, she'd be liable to do something daft, like fling her arms around him in front of everyone, and he wouldn't want that. If everyone else was waiting to see if he was all right when he woke, it would also be crowded, and she'd risk the same sort of scene she'd been subjected to in her common room.

She would wait, as she had originally planned, until he was relocated to his chambers and alone.

Time slowed to a crawl, and she was very grateful for the wards which informed her of the inhabitants movements within the castle. Severus finally got out of the hospital wing and she rejoiced, but Albus followed him, and they spent over an hour in his quarters together. By the time midnight rolled around, Hermione was positively itching to see Severus with her own eyes. She tracked the headmaster all the way back up to his quarters to ensure that she wasn't ambushed. Everyone else seemed to be in their proper locations, as well, so she bid Castina farewell and braved the castle once more.

Her plans were immediately derailed when the castle put out all the torches that lit the way to Severus's quarters. Hermione tried to step in that direction anyway and could actually feel the castle's reluctance.

Why? she demanded.

The castle didn't communicate in words, and it could only reiterate what it had already sent her: gross reluctance for Hermione to visit Severus right now. She desperately wanted to see him but knew that if anything was terribly wrong, if he was dying or something, Fawkes would have said. The castle had never done her wrong, so Hermione reluctantly bowed to its wishes, turning, instead, in the direction of her quarters. The relief the castle felt was palpable.

Harry and Draco weren't in the common room, and she was uncertain whether this was a courtesy or if they'd simply gone to bed.

Despite her entire day of non-activity and her worry about Severus and why the castle didn't want her to see him, her weakness lingered, and she fell asleep quickly.

Hermione awoke shortly after five and didn't need the castle to tell her that waking up Severus to ensure that he was all right was not the best of plans. Instead, she showered and went back out to the Forest. If she stayed in her room, she'd likely only be cornered by all the people who still wanted to yell at her, and she refused to go through that again.

Castina rejoined her, and Hermione thanked her for taking so much time away from her herd to cope with the upset human.

You are herd, Castina answered with a trace of amusement. Right now, you need my assistance, so I am here to offer it to you.

Hermione chose not to argue with this outlook, and they lapsed back into comfortable silence.

She felt better this morning. She still wasn't sure that she should transform, but she felt a little more connected to the world. She'd probably been in shock yesterday, she realized, still reeling over how close she'd come to losing Severus completely and all the horrid things she had seen and all the crazy things she'd done to get him back. It was starting to sink in now, which was probably a good thing, or she wouldn't be in any condition to get back to classes on Monday.

Less than an hour later, the peace of the morning was shattered.

"Hermione Jane Granger!"

She wondered why everyone seemed to feel it necessary to remind her that they knew her full name. She was quite aware of it and was perfectly able to answer to "Hermione" all on its own, as there weren't any others around with whom she might get confused.

She scrambled to her feet as she saw who was bearing down on her like a bat out of hell. It was such a relief to see him striding along just like normal that she actually felt dizzy with relief.

Severus still looked paler than usual, the bright spots of colour on his cheeks indicative of the anger that she was just now starting to process had been in his tone when he addressed her. His lips were compressed in a thin white line as he glared at her.

She saw the tendrils of the wandless spell reach out for her, and she was so surprised that she didn't make the slightest attempt to prevent her wand from being snapped out of its sheath and sent flying to land in the grass near Severus's feet.

Then he'd opened his mouth and was yelling at her again. She now fancied she had an inkling of what the castle had been trying to save her from the night before.

"I might have known I'd find you out here consorting with that beast! Was it punishment, is that it, for taking you up on your offer?" He levelled his wand at her, face contorted in rage. "I ought to kill you right now."

She lost control of her emotions in the onslaught of all that fury directed at her from the man she loved, and Castina reacted instantly.

Hermione did the only thing she could think of; light magic had very little effect on unicorns.

She threw herself between Severus and the charging Castina.

The world ground to a halt.

Castina reared back, and it was only as Hermione saw the blood on the end of the herd mare's horn that she realized what had happened. Being shorter than Severus had a material advantage today; if they'd been the same height, the horn would have pierced her through the heart.

Though the horn had not pierced anything fatal, something less tangible inside of Hermione had snapped.

Albus was angry with her for disobeying him and leaving the castle. Harry and Draco were upset that she hadn't informed them of her plan and had gone without them. Ron had been tricked by her and had sort of become an unwilling accomplice. Remus was spitting mad because of what she'd done to Tonks. Tonks had revealed an Order secret and had wound up Stunned and imprisoned in her own classroom.

Viktor had left without even saying goodbye because he was still so upset with her. Hermione didn't even know why Severus was angry, but after everything that she'd done for him, he had actually said to her face that he wanted to kill her. And now Castina had just tried to kill Hermione's mate and had, instead, wounded her. Looking down, she could see the blood that was beginning to soak through her robes. She was sure that it hurt, but her brain could only process so many pains at once, and it was overloaded with Hermione's emotional distress.

More than anything, she wanted to get away from all of them.

She wasn't sure whether Castina or Severus moved first, but Hermione stumbled back and away from them.

Stay away from me!

Given how close they both were, there was no need for that sort of mental volume, but she didn't care, she didn't care about any of it anymore.

She transformed. For an instant she stood there, flanks heaving, barely taking in Severus's shocked expression and Castina's troubled one. She could feel the blood oozing down her skin, knew that it would be silver now.

One of them was going to try to speak any second now, and she couldn't bear it.

She turned tail and fled.

Hermione had never seriously tried to outrun Castina before. Logically, she knew it was unlikely she could, but she wasn't really concerned about logic right now. Her only goal was to reach the limits of the Forest and keep going. She had never done so before, but she knew that Castina would not abandon her herd, and that meant that once Hermione made it out of the Forest, she would be beyond reach.

Berit—

She threw up all her mental and magical shields, blocking out Fawkes and anyone else who might try to contact her, Masking herself so that she was invisible and moving as silently as she had when she had sneaked in to rescue Severus. Castina and Fawkes had taught her well.

The speed with which she ran out of forest was mildly surprising; it seemed that in the past, no matter how much fun they had been having when they had run around and through it, they hadn't been putting nearly all their effort into traversing it as she had just done.

Without hesitation, Hermione emerged from the woods and continued to gallop away from Hogwarts.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Runaway

It was almost twenty-four hours after she had fled the castle that it first occurred to Hermione that she was in her Animagus form while her wand was back at Hogwarts. For all she knew, it was still lying in the grass at the edge of the Forest.

The notion that this could be the case felt instinctively wrong, but she shrugged off the lingering sense of loss. She didn't need a wand as a unicorn, and for that matter, she didn't really need one as a human, either. If she decided to regain human form at some point, she could get a new one. As it stood right now, she didn't even have a destination; a wand was simply not that important when four hooves effectively accomplished her sole goal of "away from Hogwarts".

It was much easier to travel as a unicorn than a human. She drank from running water as she encountered it—with a unicorn horn to purify it, there was no worry about parasites or contamination—and paused for minutes at a time if she encountered something particularly beautiful. She had never seen so much for so long in unicorn form before. The trees and sight of the sky in the Forbidden Forest were like a second home, beautiful but now familiar. Everything around her currently was new.

Once she had put a number of kilometres between the school and herself, she slowed her pace considerably and turned west to head through the Grampian Mountains and towards the Highlands. She would run out of land too quickly if she continued north running like the wind. Since there was nowhere that she was running to, there was no need for such haste.[33]

She appeared as a horse again, figuring that unless she ran into problems with predators, she would be safer visible. She trusted her skills of evasion, but she couldn't be looking in every direction at once, and it would be horrid if, say, low-flying birds smacked into her or something. Ron would find that hilariously funny, she realized, and then remembered that she was trying not to think about anyone at the castle.

She skirted any towns that she came across, avoided roads and people—as these only made her think of those she had left behind—and otherwise enjoyed the wilderness, the weather, and the peace and quiet. Her wound had stopped bleeding and appeared to be healing as far as she could determine; it hurt less, anyway, and she didn't seem to be leaving a trail of silvery blood as she went. She refused to think about it more than that.

She didn't tire easily in this form, since she was constantly reenergising from the light of the sun and the moon and the stars, but from time to time she found a sheltered area and closed her eyes for as much as a couple of hours. It was closer to meditation than sleep, really, because she was never completely unaware of what was going on around her; given that she appeared to be a horse and there were humans and other predators around, it wouldn't do to be taken unawares.

Visions of The Last Unicorn danced through her head from time to time and seemed to inspire her to be vigilant. She wasn't the last, but she would be much sought after if Voldemort knew to look. If there had been someone with her, they could have slept in shifts, but of course, she was happier alone.

Masking herself fully once more, she visited Loch Ness at night; it had been somewhere she had always wanted to visit, especially once she started spending the school year in Scotland, but she had somehow never managed it. It was quiet at night, and she listened to the water, curious about the kelpie which lurked in its depths and liked to tease the Muggle population so. As a unicorn, she was hardly in a position to investigate further, however, so she skirted the loch to the south and then began to travel north again through the Highlands.

Her favourite times were sunrise and sunset when there was just the right amount of cloud cover that the bright wash of colours would be displayed gloriously large across the sky. At night, the stars would follow, and she would be delighted anew by their proliferation in the darkness. This far north, there was little light pollution, and the bright pinpricks of light seemed more brilliant here than anywhere else she had ever seen them. Unicorns and centaurs had the right of it, she was sure, watching these celestial bodies. Why couldn't everyone be like the unicorns and simply admire the beauty that was in front of them?

Then she'd find herself wondering if Severus would admire the beauty if he were with her, the thoughts creeping in whether she wanted them or not. She wished that it was a perfect world and she weren't so conflicted and he weren't angry with her and they could just be out here for no reason at all, admiring the beauty together. This was nonsensical because she was running away from him and the peace and the beauty would certainly be shattered if he tried to kill her again. She was better off without any of them, that was all there was to it.

It was peaceful and calm and quiet, and she was very much in need of that.

It was a shock when she felt the nearby presence of another magical core. Immediately finding ground cover, she Masked herself completely before trying to figure out where it had come from, scanning the area in every direction and relaxing only when she spotted the bird in the sky. He'd clearly left himself unMasked so that she'd know it was him. She had no idea how he'd gotten this close to her, but the chances of him happening to be flying out here for any other reason were extraordinarily remote, especially given the promise he had made her. A daft rescue mission would be just the sort of reason he thought justified his going beyond the wards in his Animagus form.

Although he was heading in the right direction, it didn't look as though he were aware of her precise location. She silently debated with herself. Since she was still shut off mentally and magically, he had no access to her. If she stayed still, he'd eventually pass over her, and she could head in a different direction. Of course, she didn't know how he'd found her in the first place, so there was nothing to say he wouldn't continue dogging her.

And if she didn't let him find her now, Harry Potter, hope of the Wizarding World, would continue to fly around, far away from Hogwarts, in phoenix form. She'd feel awful were an accident to befall him or were he to be captured.

With a sigh, she unMasked enough that he could see her. He flew down until he was at her side, scarlet plumage brilliant in the setting sun. He alighted on the ground.

Please come back, were his first words to her.

Why? she demanded, suddenly angry and wondering why she hadn't remained hidden. For what possible reason? So that Severus can attack me again? So that you can all yell? I have better things to do with my time.

Come back for us, Harry answered, voice pleading. We all love you. We all need you.

She let out a verbal whinny, swishing her tail irritably. You don't need me. I'm more trouble than I'm worth, apparently.

We were all on edge, he tried to explain. We were worried about you, just as we're worried about you now. We didn't react as well as we could have, but you have to admit that the events were rather extreme, and you didn't give us the chance to explain.

It was easy to detect the note of censure.

You had the chance to explain, she snapped. You chose to pick continuous fights instead. You'll have to forgive me for not sticking around to see which one of you got angry enough to switch from a verbal to a physical attack.

I can't really speak to that. Harry sounded suitably chagrined, and her ire eased slightly. Snape won't talk about what happened, but he did seem … well, I'd say chastened, but that doesn't really suit him, does it? He wants you back.

Her lip curled up in a sneer, mentally and physically, although she had no idea how the expression translated onto a unicorn's face. Unless he's been practicing his Unforgivables, there's no reason for him to desire that in the slightest, Harry. I have no desire to go back to that. He doesn't care about me. He got angry with me for saving his life, and I don't have to put up with his behaviour anymore.

Harry's eyes were very dark in bird from, and he stared at her intensely. He's sad.

Frowning, she muttered, I don't care, and wished it sounded more convincing. Knowing that Severus was sad made her sad, damn it, but she tried to shake the feeling off, wondering when Harry had learnt to hit so low below the belt. It has nothing to do with me if he's sad. Maybe he's just upset he doesn't get to visit all his Death Eater friends anymore.

Hermione, Harry laughed his protest, that's nonsensical.

She knew it was childish, and if she were human she'd probably be crying while she considered laughing. He said I was 'punishing' him for sleeping with him because I saved him. What the hell does that mean?

I don't know, Harry answered very seriously, looking nearly as confused as she felt. But neither you nor I are going to find out while we're out here in the middle of nowhere. You need to go back.

I don't want to go back, she said fiercely, trying to find that grim resolve that had fuelled her thus far.

Come back anyway, he said persuasively.

She knew his words were having exactly the effect that Harry had intended, draining the anger out of her, smoothing away the sharp spikes of hurt, soothing the—

She stumbled several steps backwards, away from Harry.

What are you doing to me? she demanded.

The pull of those new feelings ceased immediately.

Oh, God. I'm so sorry . Phoenixes didn't blush, but Harry's mental voice expressed his embarrassment. I really want you to come back, and so I guess I was, uh, using every ability at my disposal.

What the hell ability was that?

Well, you know how if a phoenix sings a soothing song, anybody hearing is soothed by it?

She nodded.

Fawkes has been teaching me. So I can soothe people, bring them comfort when I'm a phoenix or a human.

That's amazing.

It really was. She was glad that his training with Fawkes was going so well and wondered if that was why she seemed to be having more uncontrolled magical outbursts than he was currently having; perhaps Harry was learning to control and channel his emotions effectively.

For someone who had never wanted to be at the centre of a war, the ability to instigate peace rather than fighting was a potent gift.

She wasn't going to let those feelings he had instilled be the end of the discussion, though.

I still don't want to go back, she admitted in a voice that was smaller and probably more petulant than she wanted.

What about all the werewolves who haven't been cured yet?

They'll be just fine with Remus and Draco and Severus. They can take care of it all.

Despite her words, she felt her resolve weakening further. Yes, she'd left her notes, but she hadn't actually given them to Severus, didn't know that he'd know exactly what she meant and could follow her directions exactly as he ought. Her notes didn't include the necessary information about the very last ingredient, and—

Harry's next question interrupted her train of thought. And when people ask you if you've done your N.E.W.T.s?

It's hardly going to come up in this form, she answered shortly.

She'd always wanted her N.E.W.T.s. Their attainment had been a driving force for the last seven years.

His surprise was evident. You intend to stay a unicorn?

Why not? She offered a mental shrug. What reason do I have to be human?

You'd really just abandon us? Let us fight on our own?

She frowned, hurt by this but trying not to be swayed. I've offered about as much of myself as I feel able. I've been through one of your visions and seen Voldemort in the flesh. I've rescued someone who's being tortured. I've helped you find Draco. I've found a cure for lycanthropy. What else do you need of me?

We need you to come back and support us, he answered immediately, as though the answer were obvious and of sufficient weight to sway her completely. We need you because you're the only person Solace trusted with all the information on the wards.

Hermione's lips twisted up into a horrible smile. Ah.

Harry nearly snarled in frustration. Not like that, he snapped. More calmly, he added, It was your idea to re-cast the wards, remember? We can find another way to get him there and defeat him if you really don't want to do it anymore, but what we have right now is your plan, and you are an integral part of it. She trusted you, and I trust you, and we need you. He needs you.

She swallowed, glad once more that unicorns didn't cry. Her mental voice was nearly steady. What he does not need above all else is me, Harry. I can't even say he doesn't care if I live or die because he clearly has a preference. Don't drag him into this.

But what do you think he's going to do in this war now that he's no longer a spy?

God, is that my fault, too? she asked incredulously.

Of course it's not your fault! he shouted.

She was apparently beginning to frustrate him; perhaps his emotions weren't so much in control after all. Or perhaps when he turned off the phoenix mojo, it didn't work for him, either. She wondered if there was a chance he'd shove off if she annoyed him enough. But this was Harry she was talking about; he could be the most stubborn person she knew when he wanted to be.

He continued. But he needs to feel productive. You don't want him to end up like Sirius, do you?

She was amazed that the comparison had come out as evenly as it had. It was pointed, though, because she really didn't want anyone to turn out like Sirius had, stir crazy in that old house and ready to end his life when prudence might have saved it.

No, she admitted softly. I don't want that.

He can help with the wards, Harry continued persuasively, and given how little they talked about Severus, given what the man had recently done, how could Harry's words be having such an effect on her? Yet they were. The feelings were one which she could not turn off, even if they were sometimes bumped out of primary position by the hurt that followed whatever asinine thing that Severus had most recently done.

She could tell herself that she'd come out here to forget all about him, because she'd reached her absolute limit and this was the end, but she'd kept thinking about him, and Harry was wielding the man's well-being like the most effective of weapons to convince her that she needed to come back.

The unicorn part of her—surely especially strong right now—was certain that being separated from her mate was bad, and the circumstances didn't seem to matter. The human part of her kept conjuring up the happier images, the ones which it was easier to see when he wasn't in front of her being an arse. It felt like so long ago now, but they had had amazing conversations about potions theories and Defence and various and sundry other topics because he was brilliant. He had let her natter on about her childhood, narrow that gap between them a little bit—and this was Severus they were talking about, so if he had found it utterly boring, he would simply have told her to shut it, wouldn't he have?

He made her laugh, fed her tea, challenged her, gave her all the chocolate mousse, let her through those chinks in his armour so that she could connect with more of him than most people ever got to see…. He was so damn brave, and when he kissed her, everything that was bad had been swept away.

Harry spoke again. Draco, you, Snape, and I are four of the strongest wizards in years and years, and together, we can make this plan work. We all need to be a part of it, you most of all.

The problem, of course, seemed to be that everything bad wasn't swept away for very long. And too much of it seemed to be connected to Severus because he could be petty and cruel and malicious. It was very confusing.

But she had known that Harry was wearing her down, bit by bit, and she suddenly found that she'd reached her breaking point. Part of her had known from the moment that the phoenix had swept into sight that this was the end of her jaunt into the unknown.

Her conscience didn't normally sound like Harry, but then, she didn't normally have what amounted to a temper tantrum like a two-year-old, and it was getting harder to deny that she hadn't exactly made the most mature choice, not given the wider circumstances.

Some things needed to be faced.

It was difficult to explain how much this hurt.

Unicorns mate for life, you know.

He sounded surprised by what he perceived as a non-sequitur. I didn't know.

And I've chosen my mate.

Immovably. Unalterably. For the rest of her life.

It took him a moment, but then he understood. And you don't think there's a reason to go back to him.

She shook her head. He disarmed me, pointed his wand right at me, and threatened to kill me, Harry.

She sucked in a breath at the sudden flash of anger the emanated from Harry, but it was tightly reined in an instant later. There was a moment of stilted silence, and then Harry offered a shrug and a typical smile which flashed across her mind though it did not show at all on the bird face. Well, so long as you can swim, we could just keep going even when we hit water. I've always wanted to visit somewhere with lots and lots of snow.

She laughed, knowing that she'd be crying in earnest if she were in human form. There was so much that still needed to be done. She'd known she was running away from her responsibilities, but it had been so nice to lay them down for a little while and pretend that she could abandon them. It would annoy the perpetual swot in her if she had to tell someone that she hadn't taken her N.E.W.T.s because she was running around in her Animagus form being all angsty.

She sighed and unerringly turned back to where Hogwarts lay over kilometres and kilometres of land.

Do you trust me to Apparate back on my own, or must we Side-Along? she asked.

He ruffled his feathers and said conversationally, You know, I never said anything about taking you back in the quickest manner.

Oh?

She was treated to another grin. I haven't ever gotten to fly for so long. You're not getting tired, are you?

Laughing and feeling truly mirthful for the first time in what felt like ages, she immediately began to gallop the most direct route towards Hogwarts.

I feel as though I could do this forever.

Harry paced her, flying low by her side.

I was getting that impression.

She wondered what anyone would think if they saw the two of them. She would appear as a light-coloured horse and Harry as a bird rather nondescript and falcon-like according to Fawkes. The both appeared in their true forms to one another. Just one of those Pure Adult quirks, apparently. Although non-magical was good for everyone else, it still probably wasn't everyday that someone had the chance to see a horse and a falcon running together throughout Britain.

After several minutes, she gathered the wherewithal to speak, though her throat felt tight, which translated into a slightly choked mental voice. Thank you, Harry. For coming after me.

There was never any question, he responded immediately. It just took us a while to work out a manner in which to do so.

How did you find me? she asked, curious now. I thought I Masked myself completely.

Gods, woman, Harry swore, you were Masked until Merlin himself couldn't have found you for looking. We had to use blood magic.

Using blood magic to track someone, she understood, but it didn't make sense in this context.

I was under the impression that blood magic required blood.

Harry seemed to be picking his words with care. And Snape brought us some of yours.

Ah. She'd forgotten she would likely have left blood in her wake, nor had she imagined that he would make that much of an effort on her behalf. Unless he really did want to take another stab at her.

Harry continued. Albus was certain that you'd return in time for classes. Snape was … equally certain that you weren't coming back unless we found you, bound you, gagged you, and dragged you back.

Her lip curled. Was that Plan B?

He smiled, and she knew that if he hadn't been able to reason with her, he would have at least made some sort of other attempt. Perhaps an attempt in earnest with those phoenix-induced emotions.

Albus forbade us to perform the location ritual until it was clear that you weren't just taking a belated trip during the holidays. A mental eye roll accompanied this theory. Snape helped me perform it this morning anyway.

Did he. Her voice was carefully expressionless.

Harry nodded. But with all the protections you had on you, the spell didn't work like it was supposed to. It wouldn't precisely pinpoint your location, and then you kept outrunning our grid. There was no way anybody was going to be able to Apparate to your actual location, so Snape Side-Alonged me as close as we could manage, we performed the spell one more time, and then I transformed and came after you.

Given that he was out here because she had run away, she knew she wasn't in a position to tell him how foolhardy his actions were, so she swallowed the words that wanted to escape anyone. She didn't like to be a hypocrite.

Albus isn't going to be terribly pleased, she restrained herself to pointing out.

He smiled. But this way, his annoyance will be shared between us.

She snorted. How generous of you. Fighting and losing an internal battle in which she tried to tell herself she didn't care, she asked, Severus really came with you?

It was like being stuck in the middle of a tug-of-war, pulled back and forth in two opposing directions constantly.

Harry nodded. If he could have kept up, he would've come all the way with me, I think. But … I thought my chances were better if I came alone.

His voice made it plain that he wasn't simply speaking of his speed and flying capabilities.

She wasn't quite sure what she would have done if she'd seen Severus bearing down on her again, but there was a good chance that she wouldn't have chosen to reveal herself.

You're probably right, she conceded with as much mildness as she could muster.

She found herself fighting against feeling touched that Severus had made such an effort. She didn't know, she reminded himself, why he'd chosen to help Harry, and he'd made a habit all year of doing horrible things to her and then making it up (at least partially) later. She couldn't keep living like that, she really couldn't. As they'd all just witnessed, it made her self-destruct.

I punched him, Harry suddenly admitted in a rush.

You did what? she demanded, astonished.

He gave her a mental nod, letting out a huff of breath. I know. But he came in and told us all you were gone, and without actually saying anything—you know how he is—he made it clear that you'd fought and you weren't coming back. The next day, when he admitted the bit with the blood, I just … punched him. I guess it's a good thing I didn't know about him threatening to kill you, because it was kind of close as it was, but Draco Summoned both of our wands, told me he'd knock me out if I attempted even a bit of wandless magic, told Snape he deserved it, and then asked if we could get along long enough to get you back. Harry's smile was sheepish. We, er, both agreed.

And Gryffindor still has points left? she asked incredulously.

Against all expectation. No detentions, either. Of course, Harry added with a grin, he might just be waiting 'til I get back so he can lay it all on me at once.

That does seem distinctly possible, she agreed, still rather stunned. You're certain that we're headed in the right direction?

He laughed. Don't forget about Albus. And Remus. And Ron. And probably Draco, by this point. Oh, and then there's Tonks. And Kingsley, who doubtless knows something's up. And Molly, if she's caught wind of the problem….

Shut it, she said, unable to hide the hint of a smile.

He grinned at her again.

I love you, she told him. A staunch defender and someone who'd stick by her no matter what. Sometimes she needed that.

I love you, too.

They travelled on in companionable silence, resting and stopping for refreshment as necessary. They both agreed that it was an awesome way to travel, and Harry swore up and down that he would finagle ways to travel as a phoenix rather than by Portkey whenever possible for the rest of his life.

As the distance narrowed between her and the castle that she had run away from, Hermione began to wonder about the fact that she didn't feel the slightest bit inhuman. She'd transformed without a wand, and she'd been in unicorn form now for over one hundred hours.

How long a period had Sirius ever managed it at once? How much had he practiced before he had wound up in Azkaban? How much of it had been necessity at that point? How much had he been altered? She had seen him as somewhat immature, sort of stunted as the young man he had been when he had gone into the prison with layers of trauma added on top. Were some of his behaviours less human than they had been?

Wormtail had spent even longer as a rat without changing into a human, as she understood it. While a large part of her railed at the fact that she hadn't practiced in a safe environment under controlled circumstances before this, another part of her was certain that if Wormtail had managed it, it was surely something that she could do, too.

But then, he had never struck her as the best example of a rational, decent human being. Given that he was a devoted servant to Voldemort and had let the man chop his hand off, Hermione could see that maybe the wits were a little addled in that one. Perhaps eat/sleep/(appear) loyal to the hand that feeds you worked really easily both ways.

There could even be a link between the age at which the transformation had been attained and the ability to integrate the two minds without deleterious effects because Sirius, Wormtail, and she had all attained the Animagus form at a younger age than was the norm—or at least at a younger age than people tended to admit to. Studies showed that it was easier to learn a variety of tasks at a younger age. Perhaps the body and mind accepted both forms and one wasn't in danger of losing oneself in either as a result….

She didn't suppose it was a study she could ever conduct since she couldn't admit she was a unicorn, Sirius was dead, and Wormtail was working for Voldemort.

It could also be human worries which had kept her human-minded even though she was in a unicorn body. Much as she had tried to run from them, she had effectively brought them all with her, much as she imagined that Sirius had been constantly plagued by his own worries in Azkaban, and Wormtail had evidently been keeping up on the news in the wizarding world, constantly on the lookout for news about Voldemort, the Death Eaters, and Sirius.

Frankly, much as she tried to ignore Severus completely, it seemed that she'd need a really strong Memory Charm before she'd have the slightest chance of forgetting him.

The closer she got to Hogwarts, the more true she realized this was. She hadn't managed to leave anything behind, and now she would be stuck with the stigma of having run away along with all her old problems still weighing down her shoulders.

She had had three and half days of freedom, and she no longer felt as though she were going to snap like a twig in a stiff breeze, so her outing had done some good. But she had spent too much of it thinking about the one person in particular she had tried to leave, dwelling on the events that had driven her away even as she tried to concentrate on the beauty and the perfection of nature around her. She had been trying so hard to dwell on the unicorns' loves, she realized, that it probably was beneficial that she had an anchor as strong as Severus to draw her back.

There was also the possibility, she realized, that the advanced brains of the unicorns helped with this transition. Unicorns had oral history and long lives and much intelligence; if she shifted into their brain patterns for a while, she wasn't entirely certain that she would notice much of a difference from how she thought normally. It was entirely possible, in fact, that she was thinking as a unicorn right now, and she didn't even know it.

That thought gave her pause, but she eventually decided with a grin that if that were the case, there was no going back at this point. If she suddenly failed all her N.E.W.T.s or Harry found her out at all hours in the Forbidden Forest refusing to come in for her lessons, then they'd know there was a problem; otherwise, she was doing all right. She wasn't in danger of ending up rat-brained, and, well, that was really enough thought about Peter Pettigrew for anyone.

The closer they got to Hogwarts, the more reluctant she was to actually return. She didn't particularly want to face all the people who had driven her away, but she'd known they weren't all going to be happy with her actions, and while she might not have been able to anticipate exactly how Severus was going to react, her problems weren't going to be solved in flight. She had responsibilities.

They entered the grounds by way of the Forbidden Forest and after a moment's consideration, Hermione unMasked herself sufficiently so that Castina would know. Ultimately, this was her herd mare's Forest, and Hermione would not be so rude as not to reveal herself. She had left when she was hurt and angry, but the edge had worn off both emotions.

Eventually, they would have to have a conversation that she was not looking forward to, but for now it sufficed to make her return visible.

It was probably her imagination, but it seemed as though the place where she had been wounded ached a little now. Injuries of this nature on unicorns healed quickly and painlessly, normally; there shouldn't have been any residual pain or scars of any sort. The last thing she needed was a phantom pain every time she re-entered the Forest or thought about Castina. The Forest already seemed like less of the haven than it had always been for Hermione, and she didn't need this added reason not to venture into it as often as she might otherwise like.

Hermione knew when the mare was pacing the two of them, but as Castina made no attempt to interrupt or speak to them, Hermione maintained the silence. She didn't want to fight, and she wasn't sure that she could handle even kindly worded recriminations right now. If Castina just wanted to take a look at her or make sure that she was headed up to the castle, then that was fine with Hermione.

Are you going to let the others know that you've come back? Harry asked.

She appreciated that he had asked rather than announcing their presence himself. Calculating in her head, she realized that she and Harry had been travelling for twenty-four hours. It was now half seven on Monday evening, and the two of them had missed the first day of classes.

It had been days since she had been shut indoors, and she did not relish the notion of being shoved into someone's office and questioned. Perhaps more of the unicorn mentality had rubbed off on her than she had initially thought. But she saw no harm in getting an initial confrontation out of the way in the open air. She'd have more ground cover if curses started to fly, anyway.

She answered Harry by allowing him to hear what she was saying. Fawkes, we're back. Any chance the welcoming committee could come out before I go in?

I will make the request.

He said nothing else, and she stilled the urge to question whether or not the two of them were all right. If the phoenix didn't want to speak any further to her, then that was his business. At this precise moment, he was not her biggest concern. She had to confront all the humans she had left behind, and she was quite certain that Fawkes wasn't going to try to kill her, take points, or assign detention.

She and Harry crossed the wards and entered the grounds proper. Harry had been flying well over her head to ensure that he didn't hit any branches. He now landed, and a moment later, the human Harry was in the bird's place.

Idly, she wondered how many people were now aware of her transformative capabilities. Severus could keep a secret when he wished, but she knew full well that he could be equally loose-lipped when it suited him. There was no saying precisely how he'd come out of their last encounter, although she was certain it wasn't happily. Whether or not it was vindictively gossipy, she simply didn't know.

She came to a standstill with only a few layers of trees obscuring her from the grass and view of the castle. For the first time, she needed to transform without a wand being anywhere on her person. A useful skill, and she was an idiot not to have thought of trying it previously.

A stray thought informed her that if Severus had known she was an Animagus, he would have had her train wandlessly. She pushed this notion away. Such a plan had occurred to her too late, and she had to make do with what she was feeling currently.

Since she had been using very little magic and had been consuming a great deal more light than normal, her energy levels were optimal for attempting the transformation. Given how adept she was with wandless magic, there was no reason to imagine that she couldn't do it if she believed she could.

Besides which, it would be very embarrassing not to be able to transform back into human form with Harry watching her—quite curiously, but without comment, so perhaps Severus had been circumspect—and there was no way she could face Albus or Severus if she was stuck as a unicorn because of some failing on her part.

Closing her eyes, she focussed on her core of magic, which was the same in human or animal form.

I am human.

In the next moment, she was on two legs again and felt as though there had been nothing abnormal about the transformation she had just made.

She smiled at Harry who continued to forbear asking what had taken her so darn long, and they came closer to the edge of the Forest just as she became aware that two figures had crossed the grounds and were entering the line of trees.

They met where they were nominally screened from prying eyes. It felt to her as though it had been an eternity since she had viewed these two men. She was torn between conflicting emotions. The old feelings of tiredness and pain lingered around the edges, leaving her feeling ill-equipped to cope with what was to come. But she also felt curiously energized and ready to face absolutely anything. She now knew that no matter what, she always had a place to escape. Even if it was to nowhere in particular, and even if her path had eventually led her back here, she had left when she had felt she needed to; it had been her choice. In retrospect, it might not have been the safest or most mature choice, but it had felt like all she could manage at the time.

She had survived perfectly well without the network of people she had built up around her, although the world did feel friendlier overall when she had their support. At least she had Harry now. Looking up at the man she loved who had tried to kill her, this didn't seem quite as comforting as it had when she and Harry were on their own in the wild, but a lingering sense of peace remained.

The two older men were looking at her very strangely, and she couldn't for the life of her identify the expressions on their faces. She had expected anger or disappointment, but she was reading an emotion closer to surprise or perhaps even awe, which seemed nonsensical.

"What?" she finally demanded, speaking aloud for the first time in days, the single syllable harsh in her mouth.

Harry looked over at her, and a small smile played at the corner of his mouth.

"I don't think you shielded like normal when you transformed."

She looked down at herself and saw that he was completely right. When she had transformed in so unplanned a manner on Thursday morning, her hair had been pulled back into a braid, and she had been wearing a light cloak, jeans, a jumper, and trainers. All perfectly serviceable and ordinary.

Now, she was wearing a flowing white robe that didn't make up part of her wardrobe. It had an abundance of sleeves and a wide scooped neckline. Now that she paused to consider, she realized that she was also barefoot in the grass, the connection to the Earth amazingly reassuring to her. Her hair was flowing down her shoulders, and if she wasn't completely mistaken in the twilight, she might even have been faintly glowing just as the unicorns did.

In front of Albus and Severus.

She fought the urge to blush. Here was another indication that the line between human and unicorn was fuzzier than she'd realized, or perhaps that she had read too many books or seen too many films in childhood or something. Woman with long flowing hair dressed in flowing white robes. Glowing. Honestly.

Still, at least she hadn't wound up naked. She'd take the robe, all things considered.

"I don't recall you owning anything quite like that." Harry was still indecently amused.

"I don't," she replied shortly. Carefully, she moderated her tone even as she concentrated on removing the overall skin glow and transfiguring her clothing back into something that resembled normal. "My concentration may have been a little off."

Severus then very solemnly held out her wand, defeating the circumspection with which she had been speaking. Taking it from him, she felt warmth curl through her, the same warmth she had felt the first time she had held the length of wood.

"You transformed without a wand?" Harry said just as Albus opened his mouth. "You're the one who's always telling me how dangerous that is."

She nodded. "It seemed necessary at the time. As you can see, I've turned out just find."

"You shouldn't have taken such a risk," Albus said, and now she could hear the censure and disappointment that she had expected from the beginning.

She tried to gather all her thoughts into a coherent opinion on the matter. "Overall, I can't apologize for what I've done because I don't regret it. Getting to Voldemort's lair was dangerous and kind of foolhardy, and I put people at risk, I know. I'm sorry that I caused concern and worry for so many of you, but I'm honest enough to admit that I'd do the same if the circumstances warranted it once more. My actions were the only ones that I could rely upon to have at least a fair chance at the correct outcome. After that, leaving when I did felt like a necessity."

"It sounds as though you are saying you could leave again at any time," the headmaster said, tone deceptively mild.

"I was pushed beyond endurance earlier, and I needed some time to recover. I did not feel then that I could do so in the castle. I realize, however, that there is still a war to fight, and there are many reasons why I should stay at Hogwarts. I guess I'm just trying to note that I don't think any of us reacted terribly well to the events of last week, but they were awful enough that perhaps it is excusable that we reacted poorly."

"You missed a day of classes, and you caused Harry to miss the day as well," Albus pointed out.

Harry opened his mouth, but she laid a hand on his arm, and he subsided. Severus was curiously silent.

"You told Harry he could track me if I missed classes, so you can't hold him responsible for his absence," she stated smoothly.

Harry looked mildly incredulous that she'd brought this up so brazenly when they all knew that Harry had in fact contravened the headmaster's orders.

She continued. "I will certainly apologize to Filius for missing his class."

"Am I not owed the same courtesy?" Severus asked.

It was said mildly enough, but she could well imagine that she was teetering on the edge of his fury; this didn't seem to bother her as much as it once had.

"I regret that my personal affairs have interfered with my academic ones," she answered, phrasing her sentiments carefully, "but I can't say that it would have been wise for me to sit in your classroom for three hours this morning. If you disagree, you are well within your rights to do so."

He regarded her through narrowed eyes, and she wondered what he was thinking. Harry and even Albus looked surprised by the straightforward and unapologetic tone she was taking, but she didn't suppose they quite understood; Severus had held her at wandpoint and upset her herd mare so badly that the unicorn had charged him. So long as they were speaking more or less civilly, what was she going to be afraid of now?

"You don't think you should be punished for your truancy." The silky voice.

"You may punish me as you like," she answered without hesitation.

They were all staring at her again.

"What?" she demanded, reminded quite sharply of the peaceful moments without other humans that she had had while she ran. "Exams will be over in less than seven weeks. I will get my N.E.W.T.s no matter how many detentions I get between now and then, and then I will be gone from here, so the matter of my current punishment is really quite immaterial."

From the looks on their faces, this explanation hadn't entirely helped but she did not care, and merely waited to see what sort of doom befell her.

"A week's detention," Severus pronounced finally. "Starting this evening."

She thought this was a bit rich, given the reason she'd run, but given the weeks he'd had to work with before the end of the year, it could have been much worse.

"Starting next week," she responded.

Harry let out an incredulous cough.

"I have to brew the Weresbane," she explained. "And attend the werewolves this weekend. It's impractical for the detentions to be this week unless you want to risk their health and the viability of my cure." She addressed this halfway between Severus and Albus and knew she'd won before Albus even opened his mouth.

"I'm sure you can wait a week, can you not, Severus?"

The head of Slytherin didn't even try to protest, simply gave a curt nod and looked disgruntled.

"Besides," the headmaster continued, "I believe this evening could be better spent in a discussion of recent events."

She shook her head. "Tomorrow, if you wish. As I said, I have to start the Weresbane tonight for it to be ready in time to be administered to the werewolves."

Severus looked mildly less displeased now that Albus's plans had also been thwarted.

"Tomorrow, then," Albus said with more grace that Severus had displayed.

They headed back into the castle together, Albus looking momentarily as though he were considering following them down to the dungeons. Thankfully, he thought better of it. With Harry and Severus both going down with her, there was no chance she wouldn't make it to her quarters.

Severus waited to see that she actually went into her room, and she reflected sourly that if they all kept an eye on her like that, she'd be tempted to run again sooner rather than later, which she imagined was the opposite of their intent. On the other hand, one never knew with Severus; he could well be looking to see how far he could push her. Imagining that he could cut her a little slack given that she'd so recently saved his life was clearly expecting a bit much of him.

Draco pounced the moment they were through the door, plastering himself to Harry as though he had been away for years rather than a day and a half.

What little she caught of the stream of words out of his mouth was a cross between bitter invective that Harry had gone and great rejoicing that he was back.

"I'll let the two of you get reacquainted," she said, not really expecting an acknowledgement of her words. "I'll be working on the Weresbane."

The other thing that was nice about travelling as a unicorn, she reflected, was that there was no need to unpack when she returned. Although it was much easier to accomplish as a wizard than as a Muggle, there was still a certain amount of work required when there was clothing and books and toiletries and whatnot going from a bag back to the areas in a room where they belonged. In her experience, most wizards unpacked by hand rather than risking the unpredictable unpacking charm, which took a lot of concentration and often resulted in items not being returned to their original location.

Hermione had run away without premeditation, but travelling as a unicorn, she hadn't needed a single item that she had left behind. Her sustenance was provided in transit, and her wand had been an abstract loss only.

Now, as she passed through her bedroom, which was exactly as she had left it, she barely felt as though she had been gone.

Her lab was similarly untouched, and she was pleased that no one had been desperate enough to go through her space; she supposed Severus had been an adequate witness to the fact that she was gone, and if he had admitted to Harry that they had fought, he had probably done the same to Albus, so it wasn't as though her room needed to be searched for motivation as to her behaviour.

There had been a time, she remembered with some amazement, when she would have been pleased to have Severus in here brewing with her. She would even have trusted him to brew on his own.

Her mouth twisted into a frown. Given the current situation, such an invitation would no doubt result in her stock being destroyed or maybe a poison or two being slipped into her Pepper-Up. She sighed. Still, there'd been no open hostilities since her return, and he'd even returned her wand. She didn't absolutely require it, but its absence would have crippled her in class unless she wanted to display all her abilities to her classmates. Since Severus was the only one to know that he had her wand, he could have made her suffer for it, and she hoped it wasn't merely the presence of Harry and Albus which had prevented him.

It didn't take her long to get the base of the Weresbane going. The sugar cane that formed the largest part of the base could be dry, rather than fresh, so she had sufficient quantities of it in her storeroom to keep her in sugar for months. It always took a large cauldron—or in this case, three fairly large ones—to begin the Weresbane because the potion spent a long time reducing. By the time the second day began, it looked like nothing so much as a jelly of some kind, but she didn't suppose she could convince anyone except perhaps Remus to consume it.

There was some fine chopping of the sugar cane required along with some intricate stirring as the fluxweed was added, but Hermione was beginning to feel as though she could make the Weresbane in her sleep, too, not just the Wolfsbane. She'd been working on it and worrying about it and tweaking it for months and months, and since she was actively brewing it for a third of each month now—and gathering ingredients and consulting with Remus outside of that time—it had become a pretty integral part of her routine. She rather felt as though she had an internal chronometer set to the Weresbane potion which happily made it easier for her to brew.

She had to wonder if the chronometer would have gone off if she'd still been in unicorn form in the wilds of Scotland if Harry hadn't found her. Would it have forced her back? Could she really have stayed out there not knowing for certain if anyone else even knew exactly when she started the potion?

Staring down into the simmering cauldrons, she rather suspected that she would have come slinking back on her own, despite her cavalier certainty with Harry earlier that Severus and Draco and Remus would have been fine on their own. That was another reason to be thankful to Harry for coming to get her. Returning because someone had cared enough to come after her made her feel a little better about the whole debacle.

First thing in the morning, though, she'd have to go see Filius and apologize. Or maybe she'd just see if he was awake when she'd finished here. She didn't know what he might have been told about her absence, but the more she thought about it, the more she believed he deserved a truthful accounting—or at least as truthful as she could be under the circumstances.

This resolution brought her a measure of comfort, and she was able to concentrate more fully on her Weresbane so that by eleven o'clock the three cauldrons were simmering merrily and ready to continue reducing for the next twenty-four hours.

She tidied up and then checked the wards. Filius was in his quarters but as he was in his sitting room rather than his bedroom, it seemed safe to assume that he was awake. She gathered up her holiday homework, wondering if there was any point trying to hand it in late to Severus or if she should just burn it and watch all her hard work go up in ashes and have done. The latter would probably be more pleasant than watching him do the same.

Draco and Harry were no longer in the common room, and she could well guess what they were up to. They hadn't been separated for this long since they'd got together and Draco had been worried and Harry could have been in danger … and what she was really thinking was that it was sweet that they cared about one another so much and she wished that she had someone who had been waiting to greet her similarly.

Sniffing, she pushed the thought out of her mind and made her way resolutely down the halls to her destination. Knocking softly on Filius's door in case he really was sleeping, she was relieved when the door was answered promptly.

"Hermione," the small man exclaimed. "Thank goodness you're back. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said with a small but genuine smile. "I wanted to apologize formally for missing your class. I seem to be doing far more of that recently than I'd ever intended."

He shook his head. "If there's anyone who doesn't need the classes, it would be you."

"But that doesn't exempt me from attending. I think you deserve an explanation. And I've brought my holiday work, which I hope you will still consider accepting. It was all done on time, I swear."

He ushered her in, offered her tea, and listened gravely as she explained the fact that she had run away and a broader picture of why that had happened. He offered her the perfect excuse of N.E.W.T. pressure, but she was careful not to accept it, citing personal pressures which she regretted had come to interfere with her studies. She was also careful to explain that the only reason that Harry had been absent was because he was the one who had come to retrieve her, and she would appreciate it if any punishments meted out were directed solely at her.

The Charms professor was fully sympathetic, telling her what they'd worked on and giving her the homework assignment. She could, of course, have gotten it from Draco or Ron, but she not only preferred hearing it straight from her professor, she knew it mean that the head of Ravenclaw really had forgiven her.

He also took her holiday homework, saying he didn't even need to check with Albus or Harry to confirm that she hadn't worked on it today, saying with a wink that she had no doubt finished it weeks ago. She had an even better alibi than he knew, because unicorns couldn't hold quills and didn't do human homework while they were on the run, but it was nice that he trusted her word.

"You also missed Severus's class, as I understand?"

She nodded, making sure to keep her face expressionless.

The diminutive man smiled. "Then I really don't think you're in need of any additional punishment, my dear. You've apologized, and there's no harm done. Now, you'd better get a good night's sleep so that you're in good condition for tomorrow's classes."

He patted her arm, she thanked him again for his understanding, and she found herself back out in the hall.

There was no way that she was going to rouse Harry and Draco from their cozy bed, so she stopped by the Slytherin common room and discovered that despite the late hour, Pansy was still up and agreeable about an extra set of rounds.

She was also delightfully Slytherin and didn't ask any awkward questions about where Hermione had been and why she was back now when it became clear that Hermione did not want to talk about it. Since Hermione's sudden reappearance continually took people by surprise, it actually made it quite straightforward to send everyone on their way.

The few who questioned her on her whereabouts were ignored. Patience was not a virtue that she was in possession of at the moment, and if they felt as though she had been short with them, it mattered little; they were going to make up stupid rumours about her anyway.

It was after midnight by the time she had left Pansy and returned to the common room, and she thought she might finally be able to sleep until she saw her Potions homework sitting in her bedroom. No, despite the imprudence of the action, there would be no rest for her until she got rid of it.

Since she didn't actually know for certain that Severus was going to burn it, she decided to leave it for him. Not wanting to be diced up into little pieces for potions ingredients, she chose not to bother him in his quarters even if he was still awake; instead, she headed to the staff room, bypassed the wards that protected it from students wandering in—better she do it here than in Severus's office—and left her work complete with note in a clearly labelled envelope for Severus to find.

If he lit it on fire right there, it would no doubt be entertaining for the rest of the staff.

Once she'd returned to her room, she realized that although being in unicorn form tended to keep her feeling cleaner than she did as a human, she hadn't washed in days. She showered, therefore, spending plenty of time under the hot water and soaking out anxieties that seemed to have grown into her muscles in the few hours that she'd been back. Practicing her deep breathing, she finally decided that she ought not to test just how inexhaustible the magical supply of water was.

She changed into her pyjamas, realizing she felt wrong-footed when it came to her usual routine now. She had abandoned it utterly, even if it had only been for a few days. Although, really, she'd been chastised by Albus, had a punishment assigned by Severus, and handed in several sheaves of homework; the normal routine was sucking her back in by the second, and no doubt it wouldn't take long before it felt completely natural once more.

Climbing into bed, she closed her eyes and actively reminded herself that there was now no need to keep half an eye open for predators; she had good wards for that here.

Hermione was up like normal in the early hours of the morning. She ensured that her Runes and Muggle Studies homework were in order, checked on the Weresbane, and was ready for breakfast as though it were business as usual even if this was not quite the case. As far as the majority of the student body and at least half the faculty were concerned, she had been unexpectedly absent from school yesterday, and that was rather unlike her.

It was clear from Ron's enthusiastic and surprised greeting of her that he hadn't known where she'd gone, so the fact that Draco and Harry seemed unsurprised only added fuel to the fire of gossip. Rolling her eyes, she wished that someone could have worked out that the person she lived with would know she was back sooner than anyone else, and his boyfriend was likely to be similarly advised.

Despite the fact that the many students who'd stayed over the holiday had seen Harry for several days after she'd disappeared, the rumour that the two of them had run off together had somehow firmly established itself. They'd been caught and brought back, it was said, because it wasn't safe for the Boy Who Lived to be wandering the countryside with a paramour.

Every mention of this idea resulted in Draco's glaring crossly which only fed the gossip. Why would he look so upset were it not for the fact that she and Harry had recently rekindled their broken romance? It didn't help that Viktor was looking disgruntled as well, and since he actually was a spurned lover, if not quite in the way everyone thought, she couldn't really blame the students for coming to that conclusion.

Glares were being sent her way by a fair few faculty members, in fact. Severus went without saying, Albus was regarding her with more seriousness than usual, Viktor had gone from happy to scowling, and—Hermione sighed. She should have considered speaking to her head of house the day before, although she had assumed that Albus had spoken to the woman at some point. The stern expression Hermione was currently receiving from the fierce Scottish woman suggested that Hermione had some explaining to do. Well, she already had plenty of other people annoyed with her, and since she was Head Girl and a Gryffindor student who had run off and missed a day of classes, Minerva had every right to feel as she did.

For their sanity, she and Harry had taken to not commenting on the entire event; those seeking confirmation for what they believed were completely willing to misunderstand, misinterpret, and mishear each and every word that the two of them spoke.

It was nearly enough to make her regret leaving. Or at least returning.

Since she was on time and ready to go in today's classes, there was at least no questions that could be immediately raised by her professors, and she continued to ignore any of the students who wanted to get the "inside scoop" on just what was going on between her, Harry, and Draco. She wondered what they were going to do when they left Hogwarts and didn't have her to gossip about—but then she remembered the Prophet and realized that they'd likely have material for the rest of their natural lives.

She made time at lunch to speak to Minerva who did a pretty good job of both chastising and commiserating with Hermione since she had so much to deal with that had nothing to do with scoring really well on her N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year. Like Filius, Minerva had worked out which class was Monday morning, and Hermione was sourly amused that her own head of house forbore any sort of punishment because she knew that the Slytherin was taking care of it.

It once again felt as though they were all under a microscope but since that was true so frequently, it almost felt like a return to the norm—not that it was a welcome one. At times like this, Hermione really wished that standing up and declaring the truth to the world at large could have a beneficial effect. If it would actually work, rather than backfiring spectacularly, she would have seriously considered doing it by dinner time.

Harry seemed to be taking it equally poorly, and as he commented on how quiet it had been in the Highlands, she patted him on the arm in sympathy. She almost froze in astonishment when she heard what she was quite sure was a growl emanating from the blond Slytherin on Harry's other side. She'd been around enough werewolves and wolf Animagi to know that sound, and while there wasn't a great deal of wolf in her, she was severely tempted to growl back.

However, she didn't have the slightest interest in engaging in a battle of dominance over Harry Potter. Draco was his lover and she was his friend, and that made perfectly good sense to her. It was one thing for Draco to be pouty and for the students to make daft suppositions; it was another entirely for Draco to start believing these suppositions and acting them out on her.

Harry was looking at Draco with a slight frown, as though he had heard the noise but couldn't quite credit it. Hermione drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, making sure that she retracting her hand in a normal manner, since she'd now had to still the urge both to snatch it away and to clutch at Harry's hand and bare her teeth at the daft blond Slytherin.

Did he just—? Harry asked incredulously.

It looked as though her day was destined to get stranger rather than more normal.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Blood

Eat your meal, Hermione admonished Harry, mildly amused that he had asked her about the growl rather than Draco. We're going to have a nice discussion when we get back to the common room.

Can I go visit Hagrid? Harry asked hopefully.

She gave him a mental smile. Nice try. If your boyfriend and I are fighting over you, then you're going to be present.

But— he started to protest.

Eat, she repeated.

Draco was mashing his food into an unidentifiable paste on his plate in an entirely undignified manner, and she imagined he had worked out that she and Harry were talking to one another and excluding the Slytherin. No doubt he was busy making all sorts of stupid assumptions.

The meal resumed rather quietly. Since those in close proximity kept craning their necks and keeping an eye on them, they couldn't talk about anything important, and the type of casual dinner conversation they might have had was rather ruined by the fact that Draco was having a fit of the sulks. Ron was always one to prefer eating to talking anyway, and if just she and Harry struck up a conversation, she could probably save everyone the trouble and write an official love letter to the Prophet and have done.

As soon as Harry had cleared most of the food on his plate, the two of them rose as one but made sure they didn't move from the table until Draco was on his feet as well. He'd looked as though he was considering being rebellious and not getting up, but even in his temper, he seemed to realize how that would look; he wasn't about to let her wander off with his man.

Hermione bid farewell to Ron, whose puzzled frown showed that he'd picked up on some of the tension but likely had no idea what had caused it. Her wave at Ginny resulted in a commiserating glance that showed that even that far down the table, the youngest Weasley had picked up more of what was going on than her brother. No surprise there, really.

Draco actually tried to go to his own room, but Hermione told him in no uncertain terms that he was coming with them. This had resulted in a martial light glowing in his eyes, but she'd simply added that if he preferred to arrive in the common room Stunned and Mobilicorpused, she'd be happy to accommodate him.

It would probably have been a little more diplomatic to have Harry request the other boy's presence, but it was too late for that now; Harry seemed to have taken up a silent and as invisible as possible policy.

The three of them marched to their common room without further conversation. Harry immediately flopped onto the couch, and Draco stood there with his arms crossed and the look of disdain on his face that she remembered so well from years previous.

Reminding herself that there was no reason for her to lose her temper just because Draco looked in danger of doing so, she recited the Elder Futhark once more, glad she'd hit upon this method of anger management; she seemed to need to employ it rather frequently when it came to Slytherins and stupid best friends. Since she didn't particularly want a screaming match, she carefully sat down in an armchair as per usual, leaving the rest of the couch wide open for Draco.

"Draco," she began, "I'm doing my very best to love you like a friend."

Surprise chased away the disdain on his face; this was not the opening gambit that he had anticipated. There was still tension in his frame and he hadn't sat down, but his expression had tempered slightly.

"As a friend," she continued, "I'm going to tell you quite plainly that if you try to tell me that I'm not allowed to touch my best friend Harry anymore, we are going to quarrel."

Draco's lips tightened. "Why would you think I would say such a thing?"

If he hadn't looked so damn combative, it might have worked better.

"Because you growled at me at dinner today when I touched him."

"I would never do anything so uncouth," he protested.

Looking at Draco, Hermione couldn't decide if he was bluffing really well or if honestly hadn't noticed what he'd done. The only other person in the room who could corroborate her story was Harry, and she preferred not to make him take sides.

She sighed. "All day, people have been challenging your position with Harry. They're daft and stupid beliefs on everyone else's part. They're not true."

"Of course not," he said dismissively.

The Malfoy hauteur had come out, and she knew that Draco wasn't going to let this one go. She rose and stepped right up to him and saw him nearly go for his wand, but she stopped when there was all of six inches between them.

He's yours, she said, cutting Harry out of the conversation and speaking straight to Draco. He doesn't want to be anybody's but yours. Do you mean to tell him whom else he may have contact with?

Of course not.

He sounded moderately less brazen in his own mind but still as though he was maintaining the fiction that he had done nothing peculiar at dinner.

I'm going to tell you something, Draco Malfoy, she said intently. If Harry had to choose between you and me, I believe he'd choose you. But if you force him to make that choice for no reason, you'll hurt him very badly. He was finally regarding her as though her words were worth considering, and she stepped back from him as she offered a final, The decision is yours.

"I have to work on the Weresbane," she said, not looking at Harry as she passed him.

It was a relief to close the door behind her. She knew that Harry hadn't wanted to be there, and she hadn't wanted to drag him into the middle of it, but she hadn't been having that argument with Draco for her own health. It was Harry's happiness that had concerned her, and if he'd decided to interject—with an assertion of his feelings for Draco, even, as that could hardly be misconstrued—she wouldn't have taken it amiss.

She continued on her way through to the lab to see how the Weresbane was doing. It would be too bad when others actually knew the schedule of her potion-making because then she wouldn't have such a ready-made excuse. The cauldrons still had almost six more hours to simmer, and she wouldn't be able to work on it again until after she made it through the meeting this evening. If it looked to be going later than half ten, though, she really would need to cut it off to get back here.

The three cauldrons looked to be in fine order, so she sank onto one of the stools and stared blindly out the window. The Forest looked shadowed as always, but the grounds were still full of light.

Making herself some tea, she hoped that Harry and Draco were doing something constructive in the common room that didn't involve sex. Not that sex wasn't lovely, but given what had happened today, it was clear to her that actual discussion needed to occur, not just a physical affirmation of affection.

She sipped at the hot liquid, feeling absurdly comforted as it slid down her throat. To be fair to Draco, she supposed Harry did have a history of choosing her; their earliest arguments in the new year had often consisted of Harry taking her side over Draco's. She hoped some calm reflection made him realize that those were moral issues over which Harry couldn't compromise. When it came to picking people as an overall life choice, she was sure that Draco would win.

Still, since that was the one choice that she'd admonished Draco not to try to force Harry to make, he was probably feeling insecure, which was one thing that a Slytherin would almost never admit to. It was she whom Harry had come after despite the possible danger, and it was Draco who'd been left at the castle to worry.

People were most emotional and least rational when it came to those they cared about dearly. Expecting perfect behaviour from either Draco or Harry was an exercise in futility. And, she snorted to herself, given that she was the one who'd just run away because her emotional issues had become too large to handle—after rashly rushing off to rescue the man she loved—she wasn't in a position to cast stones.

As the evening grew later, she realized that they hadn't actually set a time for the meeting, but eight felt like the default, and she hoped that everyone else had formed the same opinion. Her running away had left important information up in the air for longer than was pleasant for anyone. She still had no idea how Severus had been found out, nobody but she knew how she'd rescued him, and at some point she'd really like to find out why her rescue warranted Severus's attempting to kill her.

She emerged from her lab shortly before eight and found that Harry and Draco were seated on the couch. If they'd been unclothed during any part of her absence, it didn't show now.

"Better?" she asked, figuring there was no point in pretending that they hadn't had a row last time they'd seen one another.

"Much, thanks," Harry answered.

Draco rose to his feet and came to stand in front of her so that he could formally offer his hand.

"I apologize, Hermione. I will endeavour to behave with more decorum in the future."

She shook his hand immediately, smiling faintly at him.

"I don't expect you to be perfect, you know. But Harry's my best friend, and I can't pretend otherwise."

"Understood," he answered. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Harry had come to stand with the two of them, sliding an arm round Draco's waist to give him a sideways hug, and the blond relaxed against the Gryffindor. She was relieved that there appeared to be no hard feelings between them.

"Are we going up?" he asked.

"You're sure this is a meeting you want to be at?" she asked.

Harry looked at her incredulously. "I've been waiting ages for answers. You don't honestly think I'd miss it, do you?"

She shook her head, conceding that there might even be some safety in numbers. After all, she didn't think Harry and Draco were about to attack her, and that just left Severus and Albus, and as far as she knew, the latter hadn't threatened to kill anyone recently. This meant she was now facing better odds than she had been a few minutes ago when she had been potentially going on her own.

Given Harry's protective streak, he would probably defend her if necessary, and Draco had a habit of defending Harry, so she was probably covered. It would be nice to have some friendly faces, anyway, and she was pretty sure that no matter how annoyed they might have been with her for leaving, Harry had gotten over it, and Draco was now on his best behaviour.

They left the common room together and made their way up to the headmaster's office. She wondered how many huge and important meetings she'd be participating in within this office before the end of the year. Those early years at Hogwarts, she'd barely seen the room. This year, it seemed as though it were at least once a week that she was popping up there and being chastised or learning important information or sharing crucial news…. She wouldn't mind taking a break and ceasing to warrant the notice of the headmaster of Hogwarts for a little while. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to happen until after the Final Battle, and she'd be leaving Hogwarts then, anyway. She'd gotten mixed right into the very centre of the war.

As the griffin opened for them, still not insisting on a password, she realized that the headmaster's office was important for other reasons as well; she couldn't avoid it if she wanted to access the magical centre of Hogwarts.

They rode up the steps in silence, and she tapped lightly on the door, despite the fact that she knew that Albus knew that they were there; it would still be rude to barge in, and she waited until they were given permission to enter.

"Harry, Hermione, Draco," Albus greeted them, sounding that infuriating mixture of pleasantly surprised and omnisciently aware. "How nice to see you. Tea?"

Since Hermione figured she'd want to be doing something with her hands and would likely get thirsty with the amount of talking that she was going to need to do, she accepted the liquid, and Harry and Draco followed her example. Waving her hand over it, she neutralized the Calming Potion, watching Albus's eyes twinkle, almost as though he had put it in there just to see her get rid of it. It wasn't she, after all, who was in danger of losing her temper.

Severus arrived in his normal flurry of black precisely as the last toll indicating eight o'clock died from the clock Albus kept on his mantel. This meant that the head of Slytherin had his ascent from the dungeon to the Headmaster's office timed to a tee, and Hermione hid a smile.

She was seated in an armchair on the right-hand side of Albus's desk with Draco and Harry a little closer to the fire, since Harry would take any opportunity to bask in front of an open flame.

Severus, unsurprisingly, sat as far on the other side of the room from her as he could physically get. They were all nominally still facing the headmaster's desk, leaving him in charge of today's little encounter. Albus offered Severus tea and was curtly refused.

"Thank you all for coming," the headmaster reiterated now that they were all present. "There are a few questions that have been raised as a result of the events of last Monday. Hermione, if you could please outline the events as they occurred for you." He smiled at her encouragingly.

"I will answer what I can," she corrected, not daft enough by half to suggest that she'd tell them everything that had occurred, "but I believe it would be more logical to hear first why my actions were necessary. The rest of you may have heard this story, but I have not."

Severus did not look pleased at the prospect, but she looked at him implacably. If he wanted answers from her, he had to reciprocate. Given how their last private meeting had gone, Hermione felt the only way to safely ask was in the presence of others.

The Slytherin let out an irritated huff, but he spoke. "When the spy the Dark Lord had placed amongst the werewolves failed to return to him after the full moon, he was … deeply displeased. As I was the mostly likely Death Eater to be aware of the man's fate, I was questioned extensively. I disavowed all knowledge of what had occurred. Although I had maintained all along that I had been deliberately excluded for obvious reasons from anything to do with the Weresbane, the Dark Lord was desperate for answers and chose not to believe me. He tried to take by force the answers that I would not give, and I had the misfortune to utterly resist his intrusion."

It took her only a moment to work out where this was going. "You displayed too much power."

"Just so," he agreed. Harry blinked at him, looking confused. She didn't much like the fact that a bit of cordiality on Severus's part caused such shock, although she had to admit that such moments were starting to surprise her, too. "He immediately realized that I had a higher level of power that he had previously been aware of, and it didn't take him long to surmise the cause. His anger was … immoderate. I'd taken what he thought of as his, and I'd hidden the fact from him. He wanted to know who the Pure Adult had been."

She swallowed but did not ask, and his lips curled up slightly.

"I did not enlighten him. I imagine he realized when you came to my rescue?"

He asked even the question sourly, and she wondered if he would have sounded happier if it had been someone else who had performed the rescue.

Shrugging, she responded, "He may well have guessed that it was one of the Pure Adults who came after you given the amount of power that I expended in order to liberate you, but he did not see me."

"My last recollection is of being tortured by the Dark Lord and a group of Death Eaters." This was said with the hint of a question, as though he doubted the reliability of his memory.

She nodded, trying to banish all the horridly clear images that immediately came to the fore of her mind. "They were still at work when I found you."

"Yet you say they didn't see you?" he pursued suspiciously.

"I Stunned them all," she answered, swallowing around the lump in her throat. "And then I got you out of there."

There was a moment of shocked silence. "You Stunned the Dark Lord?" This was from Draco.

She gave a short assent. "They were preoccupied. I had other priorities."

"But the Dark Lord was Stunned? In your power, and you just left him there?" Draco asked again, his voice rising an octave.

She looked to Harry, who was staring at her without anger, a fact for which she was rather grateful.

"Voldemort survived the rebounded Killing Curse when Harry was a baby. We don't know everything he's done to keep himself alive, and I don't know about you, but I don't exactly have any stronger-than-the-Killing-Curse spells in my arsenal for everyday use. Solace's spell is the only spell I believe can kill him, and it couldn't be performed in that dungeon."

To even have a chance, she would have had to consign Severus to death, and she had been unwilling to do that.

"I didn't know how many Death Eaters were in the house. I didn't know how long Voldemort and the Death Eaters I Stunned would remain unconscious if I went for reinforcements. And given the power I had expended to get there, it is unlikely I would have been able to perform Solace's spell properly. Solace left enough blood to perform the spell once; we're not getting any second chances."

The plan they had was a good one. A mostly good one that had a bit of a flaw in the getting the information to Voldemort part at this point, but she believed they could figure something out.

"Right," Harry said definitively before anyone else had the chance. "So no, Hermione couldn't have killed Voldemort because killing him requires the plan we've already come up with, the one that couldn't have been carried out last week. So that's all there is to it, understood?"

It didn't look as though it were altogether understood, but with Harry being altogether collected and rational about it, it looked as though no one else was going to fly off the handle.

"Whatever you say," Draco said, managing to sound mostly resigned.

Albus, too, looked relatively understanding, although Severus's expression was much harder to identify. Did he think that she should have tried to strike Voldemort down while she had the chance? It was not something he had ever attempted in his years of being a spy, not even recently when he had more power than ever before. So maybe he understood some of her reasoning even if he didn't want to admit it.

At least Harry understood. There were days where she almost wondered why they weren't a couple, except then she saw him with Draco and she thought about how she felt about Severus, and she remembered that she wasn't the least bit attracted to Harry romantically. Oh, well.

"There is no point in discussing what cannot be changed," Albus said diplomatically.

Snorting to herself, she wondered how he'd feel if she agreed with that argument and therefore refused to say anything more about what she had done.

"Let us discuss something rather more pertinent," Severus said darkly, perhaps sensing where her train of thought had led her. "Do you realize what he would have done to you if he had caught you?"

Hermione thought this was a particularly stupid question, but she reminded herself that she wasn't going to lose her temper in this meeting and forced herself to respond calmly. "Tortured and killed me much as he was doing to you. I took every possible precaution to ensure that didn't happen."

Harry, Severus, and Albus all opened their mouths to protest.

She overrode them flatly. "You can't tell me that I've made myself more of a target because we all know that's not possible. I'm Harry's Muggle-born best friend, I've helped thwart Voldemort for years, I'm one of the Pure Adults he was searching for, and I've cured lycanthropy. You also can't tell me we could have waited for one of you to come up with a better plan; I assure you that there was no time to spare."

"Has it not occurred to you that Severus may have preferred to die?" Albus asked.

She frowned fiercely at him, able to detect nothing but seriousness in his question. She had trouble finding her voice. "If only one of you had informed me that he was trying to kill himself, I could have spared myself a great deal of trouble."

"Of course I don't want to kill myself," Severus snarled. "I would not be here if that were the case."

"Then I have no idea what you are talking about," she said, letting honest confusion colour her tone.

It was Albus who answered, his expression very grave. "Poppy informed me that you gave Severus unicorn blood."

"Yes," she agreed.

"What?" To her surprise, it was Harry who protested. "You gave Snape unicorn blood?"

"Professor Snape, Harry," she corrected automatically, "and the answer is the same 'yes' it was five seconds ago."

"But you—" Harry cut himself off with a visible effort and seemed to have to work for a long moment to rephrase. "You want him to live 'a half life, a cursed life'?"[34]

Hermione let out an astonished huff of breath. After everything that happened, she had somehow managed to forget that she was the only one who knew that detail. She couldn't quite bring herself to forgive Severus utterly, but at least she better understood his anger.

"Of course not," she answered. "This does not leave the room."

They all nodded their agreement, at least half of them fully aware of how seriously she was binding them to this fact. She had the spell cast wordlessly and wandlessly with barely a thought; when it came to the secrets of her herd, she needed more than a simple assent to secrecy.

"The blood that I gave you, Severus, was a gift from my herd mare for a service that I rendered her. Unlike that which is taken by force, freely offered unicorn blood has no negative side effects."

"You have unicorn blood that has no negative side effects?" Severus repeated, voice very flat.

"Had," she clarified.

"You used all that you had on me," he said blankly.

She shrugged. "You had need of it."

He recovered enough to say sourly, "I don't think your herd mare approved of that choice."

Her response was biting. "You didn't make the best impression. She was defending someone she considers a member of her family from what she believed to be mortal peril."

Albus interceded. "It is a shame she misjudged the situation, but clearly no one came to any harm."

Hermione and Severus stared at one another, neither of them venturing a comment out loud about Castina being wrong or no one being hurt.

The headmaster interrupted their staring match with a change of subject.

"You have not explained what you did to Lucius Malfoy."

Everyone else looked at her with surprise, especially Draco. It was he who demanded, "What does my father have to do with this?"

It appeared that despite the week that had passed, all the known details had not been shared between all the interested parties.

"I went to Lucius to ask him for his help in finding Voldemort," Hermione answered somewhat evasively. "He agreed to assist me."

"He was in a coma until yesterday," Albus prodded. "Tonks found him in that state when she went to check on him following your visit."

Hermione swallowed. Putting Draco's father in a coma had really not been one of her goals. She understood a little better how Albus felt sometimes, though, because even knowing that he'd been in a coma, she doubted she could say that she wouldn't have made all the same decisions if she had it to do over again.

If there had been better options, she would happily have chosen them, but she believed she'd done the only thing that could be done to save Severus under the circumstances. And it was hard to claim that she would have at least better-informed people when she was aware that doing so would likely have led to them trying to stop her.

She said what she could, visions of Harry being stuck with the Dursleys for a decade dancing through her head. "I'm sorry that he was injured and very glad to hear he has regained consciousness."

Draco's and Harry's eyes had gone similarly large, and it was Harry who finally said hesitantly, "You didn't torture him, right?"

"Of course not," she answered, more amused than hurt because if she were being honest with herself, she knew full well that she'd been teetering on the edge of using force if questions had not garnered her the answers she sought.

She was very happy that it hadn't come to that because there really seemed to be very little she wouldn't do for Severus.

He was looking at her with a funny expression now, and she wondered if she'd just let too much of her Slytherin side show. She resumed her narrative. "I asked for his assistance, and he consented. He knew what I was doing was unprecedented and could have unpredictable results."

"And what is it, precisely, that you did?" Albus queried.

"Death Eaters are connected to Voldemort; I capitalized upon that connection."

"Come again?" Harry said, brow furrowed in confusion.

"I used Lucius Malfoy's Dark Mark to Apparate to Voldemort's location."

Harry's jaw actually dropped, and Severus's eyebrow rose sharply.

"You did what?" Draco gasped.

"But you couldn't—" Albus began.

She shrugged. "As impossible as it seems, I did." She gave them a brief outline of her theory and how she had been able to follow the link between the two men.

"You are forgetting one point." The headmaster offered her another verbal nudge.

She nodded. He was clearly in the sort of mood to show that he knew more than anyone else. Nothing new there, really.

"I asked him if he wished to continue serving Voldemort. He said he did not."

"What did you do?" Draco demanded.

"Severed the connection as I Apparated," she admitted.

It was that, she was sure, which had put him into the coma.

Harry was staring at her uncomprehendingly again.

"Lucius Malfoy is no longer a Death Eater," she responded to the unspoken question. "At least, inasmuch as you're not a Death Eater if you don't have the Dark Mark. I removed it."

"You removed Lucius's Dark Mark."

This was Severus, and she looked up to meet glittering dark eyes.

"I did," she answered. "It's how I knew it was possible to remove yours."

"You didn't ask me first."

She couldn't help scoffing but managed not to laugh incredulously. "You made your desire not to be one of Voldemort's minions clear years ago, Severus. I probably would have asked for the sake of politeness, but you were unconscious on the verge of death, and he was torturing you through the Mark. It was interrupting your healing process."

"That's what drained so much of your power and knocked you out," Harry exclaimed suddenly. "I didn't understand what was happening."

She nodded. And thank you, rather belatedly, for that boost in power.

Running about Scotland in unicorn form had given her plenty of time to realize that the influx of power she had felt as she had fought not to be crushed in the backlash of severing the link had to have come from somewhere.

You looked like you could use it. You realize I'll have to kill you if you try anything like that again?

You realize I'll have to try something like that again if I, er, have to try something like that again?

Fortunately, Severus only had one Dark Mark, but she couldn't stop being who she was.

Yeah, Harry admitted with a sigh. He knew her rather well.

"You'd already expended a great deal of energy that evening," Severus put in, bringing her back to the verbal discussion. "Why would you do that, too?"

"He was hurting you with it," she tried to answer. "I had no intention of rescuing you just to have him kill you from a distance."

It was that response or screaming, "I love you, you complete prat!" and there were far too many other people present for the latter option.

"Are there any other astonishing displays of power which you should share with us now before it takes us badly by surprise later?" Severus asked.

Barely managing not to roll her eyes, she was glad she hadn't been holding her breath for even a minimal show of gratitude.

"Nothing that immediately springs to mind," she answered the question as he opened his mouth to no doubt ask it more persistently. "I went to Tonks to get the location of the safe house. I went to the safe house to use Lucius's Dark Mark to get to Voldemort's location. I went to Voldemort's location to rescue you, and I brought you back here to be healed."

Harry coughed loudly.

"What?"

"You forgot to mention how you got back to Hogwarts," he said, clearly amused.

She didn't think it was such a big deal, personally, but from the expectant look on everyone else's faces, it was clear that Severus hadn't been informed of this little detail. She wondered who had taken the time to inform Harry since he hadn't even been present when she arrived. Poppy must have told Albus, and Hermione supposed it had done the rounds from there.

"I Apparated," she said flatly. Harry cleared his throat yet again. She continued reluctantly, "To the hospital wing."

It took a moment for the import of what she'd said to fully register with Severus. "You went through the wards."

She nodded. "You needed assistance as quickly as possible."

Fawkes appeared from Albus's quarters and alighted on her shoulder, rubbing his beak against her cheek. She couldn't help smiling widely at him, pleased that she'd evidently been forgiven. Sharing the limelight right now was definitely her preference.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up at everyone else. "I shouldn't have left Fawkes out. He came to the hospital wing to offer his assistance as well."

Severus blinked at her. "You're saying I was given unicorn blood and phoenix tears?"

She nodded. "And virtually every healing potion Poppy had on hand, and we still weren't entirely certain you were going to make it."

Severus looked at Albus accusingly. "I believe your summary left much to be desired."

"I hadn't realized," the headmaster answered. "Poppy felt it was her duty to inform me about the unicorn blood, but I thought Fawkes had gone to see with his own eyes that the two of you were safe and sound." His tone was almost apologetic as he looked at Hermione.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Severus demanded, not missing the look exchanged between the two of them.

"It means he's almost sorry that he told me I shouldn't have gone," Hermione interpreted. "He's saying he didn't realize how badly you'd been injured."

Albus sighed. "When I saw you in the hospital wing, Severus, I hadn't realized the amount of care that you had already received."

"You mistook my half-healed body for freshly tortured?" the Slytherin said sceptically.

Albus didn't quite meet their eyes. "I don't think you realize quite what a state you must have been in when Hermione found you, Severus."

Harry and Draco nodded, for they, too, had been in the hospital wing when Severus was partially healed.

"How did I look when you found me?" he demanded, turning to her.

She regarded him very soberly, not wanting to answer but realizing that it wasn't a truth she could reasonably keep from him. "Broken. Tortured to death."

The room suddenly seemed stiflingly quiet, and Fawkes let out a soothing musical trill. She was reminded of the ability that Harry had confessed to her while they were out in the Highlands. There were times where it really was helpful.

She brought her hands up to stroke Fawkes's feathers gently and was able to continue. "By the time we got back to Hogwarts, I'd done my best to stabilize and bandage you, but given how extensive your injuries were, I had no idea how long the unicorn blood was going to last. I asked Fawkes to come straight away, and then Poppy began to treat you." She smiled suddenly. "At least I understand why Poppy was being so weird now."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "She wouldn't let me stay to ensure that Severus was all right. Threatened to call Albus and everything."

Draco opened his mouth, the look in his eyes indicating that he was clearly going to challenge such a threat having any effect on her, but Harry took pity and spoke first.

"I wondered why you weren't there in the evening."

Mentally, he was much more inquisitive. What actually convinced you to go?

Something else. There was no way she was getting into that—even mentally—right now.

Out loud, she answered, "I thought I'd wait until you were out of the hospital wing, Severus, so I could see with my own eyes that my efforts hadn't been in vain."

"You appear to have got over that desire rather quickly," Severus said snidely.

She shook her head slightly. "The castle interfered. Wouldn't let me go see you."

Albus eyebrows had risen almost to his hairline.

"It kept turning out the lights. I imagine it was right after you told him about the unicorn blood, Albus," she pointed out and had the pleasure of seeing him squirm slightly. She looked back at Severus. "I don't think the castle fancied my chances alone with you."

It would remain a mystery, she supposed, what would have happened if she'd gone to see him in his room and he'd snapped as he had when he'd found her on the grounds. After all, his last memory before he woke from the healing sleep was of being horribly tortured. To awake against all expectation only to be told that he'd been horribly cursed for the rest of his life right before Hermione came blundering in to verify his health would probably have been disastrous.

"I'm sure Severus didn't mean you any lasting harm, Hermione," Albus said, and she wondered how many years it had taken him to perfect a reasonable mixture of chastisement (for what he evidently viewed as an exaggeration on her part) and conciliation (for her ruffled feelings).

Albus, of course, hadn't been there. She knew Severus had had every intention of causing her harm, and she noticed that Severus still made no attempt to defend himself.

She felt particularly stupid for having failed to realize why Poppy was so upset, and she wished that she'd thought to clarify a great deal sooner about the freely offered unicorn blood. But she was still sitting in a room full of the people who had at least some idea of how much she cared for Severus, and she would have hoped that at least one of them would have believed that she would never injure him like that.

She desperately wanted him to live, but she knew that Severus would willingly die before he became like Voldemort; Severus had never fled from mortality as far as she could tell, and she would never damn him just so that she could selfishly keep him with her.

Severus, especially, hadn't been operating with all the facts, and she knew that he had a bad temper on him, but it hurt that he had assumed so readily like the others that she was trying to do him harm. But then, he was rarely the sort to look for the positive interpretation of events. He'd had a long time to see the worst in people and to see them act out the worst on him.

And everyone else had been angry with her for reasons that had validity. She had left without Harry and Draco, she'd used Ron and Tonks, she hadn't kept Albus advised of what she'd been doing, and she'd breached the castle's wards without a second thought.

They all knew that she'd been rescuing Severus and were annoyed with some of the details of the way she'd done it. But Severus hadn't asked any questions. He had assumed that, rather than saving him, she'd actually been trying to horribly punish him in some way. And really, how stupid was that? If she'd been trying to punish him, she'd have bloody well left him to be tortured to death by Voldemort; she would never have risked life and limb to come get the daft prat.

It was actually so illogical that she was having trouble grasping that Severus had thought it for so much as a moment, let alone long enough to find her and storm out to actively try to injure her.

The more she thought about it, the more upset she got, but discussing it right now wouldn't help; it was clear she wasn't going to get an apology from Severus.

"We're all fine now, and that's what matters," Hermione said as dismissively as she could.

She knew that their relationship had been really quite bizarre this year, but it had never been she who'd started them fighting, and everything that she'd done for him had been kindly meant. The fact that he'd seriously entertained the notion that she'd destroy his life in some petty revenge told her that he didn't know her at all.

All this time being wrapped up in thinking about him, of being affected enough by him that she actually ran away from Hogwarts and the entire war, and he didn't trust that she wasn't trying to torture him for the rest of his life. Really, that as good as said that she'd decided that Voldemort was killing him too quickly for her tastes so she'd come rescue him in order to make him suffer for a long time. That was … asinine!

Severus and Albus had to have been thinking something along those lines, and it was really very insulting. Harry, from his reaction earlier, hadn't known about the unicorn blood, and if Harry hadn't known, Draco probably hadn't, either. That meant that the two of them and the castle were the only ones who'd retained any faith in her, and that might well have been only because they didn't know about the blood.

"It was, indeed, the best possible outcome," Albus agreed blandly.

She tried not to grind her teeth, reminding herself that she'd wanted to end the conversation, so she had to let the matter be dismissed.

In the interest of not losing her temper, it was probably better to end the whole discussion sooner rather than later.

Rising to her feet, she offered Albus a forced smile.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a potion that needs minding."

"Of course," the headmaster answered immediately. "We wouldn't want to interrupt your important work."

Harry and Draco rose as well, but Severus remained in his chair, and she was relieved that she didn't have to worry about an immediate confrontation. She and the boys trooped back down the stairs to their quarters.

As soon as they reached the common room, she bid Harry and Draco goodnight and headed to her lab. She still had a little while before she needed to get started on the Weresbane, but she preferred to be lost in her own thoughts than stuck ruminating on someone else's.

Although both she and Severus had been forced to reveal more than they had wished, at least they had managed to keep that awful final confrontation to themselves. That it was likely because Albus thought she had overreacted and the situation was not nearly as serious as it had actually been was an annoyance, but it was likely still worth it in the end. This way, she didn't have to worry that Harry would attempt anything worse than a punch nor that Albus would be forced to discipline one of his staff members. She hadn't gone to the trouble of saving Severus so that he would be sacked.

Sinking down onto one of her lab stools, she thought about making tea, but it seemed like a lot of effort at the moment, so she continued to sit with her feet propped up on the metal rungs, knees supporting her elbows as she considered what she had learnt this evening.

Although no one, not even Severus, had said so, it had essentially been her fault that he'd been caught. It was her potion and Roger that Voldemort had become suspicious about, and it had been her choice that had given Severus the extra power that had confirmed to Voldemort that there was something wrong. Between all those factors, there wasn't really any way around what she had done, inadvertent as it had been.

She was now left feeling rather surprised that Severus hadn't decided to stand up at meal time and announce her culpability to the world. He probably felt that rescuing him was the least she could do as repayment. Maybe that was why no one had thanked her.

There was still the matter of his helping fetch her when she'd run off rather than washing his hands of her entirely, but she supposed he must have wanted her brought back because he'd needed these questions answered. It would have been annoying, she had to concede, for him to have to spend the rest of his life believing he'd been cursed.

That was no doubt reason enough to enlist Harry's aid to come after her. Severus had made no attempt to speak with her himself, after all, just used her best friend to get to her and then assigned her a whole bunch of detentions. That was pretty much business as usual when it came to Severus.

Now that he had the information he sought, he could spend the rest of the term being annoyed with her. She would serve detentions that she didn't feel she deserved, and no one would notice anything amiss.

If he'd really decided that rescuing him didn't cancel out getting him caught in the first place, then it would be a miracle if this upcoming week of detentions was the last she received. As blasé as she had been about the prospect of seven weeks of detention, she didn't want to suffer through them. But she would do what needed to be done.

Right now, that meant completing the next stage of the Weresbane potion.

It was a relief to know that this part of her job, at least, was straightforward. She didn't have to be concerned that the potion was going to turn on her or assign her detentions. All she had to do was follow the procedure that, by this point, she knew by heart, and at the end of five days, she would be able to bring hope to some sorely afflicted people.

The Weresbane, at least, she could get right, even if she seemed to be making only mistakes as far as everyone else was concerned. So she would concentrate on her cure and ensure that these people, at least, were brought happiness.

At breakfast Wednesday morning, she realized that although Viktor was back from his sudden holiday, he hadn't spoken so much as two words to her. She'd been missing for the entire first day back from break, and he hadn't even stopped by to check and see how she was. He was looking at least as surly as he used to as he sat up at the High Table, and sitting as he did next to Severus, it was like they were a little cabal of ill-intent directed at her once more. Hermione began to avoid so much as glancing at that end of the table.

It was her fault, she knew that; she had rejected him. But she'd done her very best to be kind about it. She'd been honest with him, and surely he couldn't really have wanted her to pretend? They needed to continue to function together for the rest of the year, so couldn't he see his way to being polite? She sneaked another look at his glowering countenance. Not, apparently.

The gossip mongers would no doubt soon work out that she and Viktor were on the outs, and that would surely be linked to the holiday fiasco. For all she knew, she realized, Viktor might think that she had run off with Harry. He might think that Harry was the one whom she was in love with.

She barely resisted the urge to bang her head repeatedly against the table and see if that made her feel better. If he actually thought that, then she supposed there was every reason for him to glower; she'd been living with Harry for months and Viktor probably felt that she'd led him on.

What happened to common sense when she was in need of it? Severus was enough to drive her mental, but now she had Viktor and Draco acting weird, too. She could only hope that what she'd said yesterday really had some permanent impact on the blond Slytherin. She could avoid the two professors to a certain degree, but if Draco was determined to make her life difficult, he had a lot of access to her, and she needed some peace.

You all right? Harry asked.

Hmm?

You don't look very happy, he said gently.

She offered him the barest of sad mental smiles. I'm not terribly happy, Harry, but it's nothing for you to worry yourself about. Although... Do you think you could start gearing Ron up for the possibility of not meeting with Viktor on Thursday?

Harry's eyes went first to the redhead and then past him to the staff table.

Uh, sure. You really think that's going to be necessary?

She let out a huff of breath. I'd prefer he didn't loudly broadcast to the entire school on Thursday his shock and incomprehension as to why Viktor isn't joining us, yes.

But—

Fortunately, she didn't even have to look at him pointedly before he let go of that question. Glare at him pointedly enough, and he eventually realized she didn't want to discuss the topic.

Right, he agreed hurriedly. I'll make sure to talk to Ron after Transfiguration.

Thank you.

Harry could tell the other boy the truth if he really wanted; Ron would probably find it funny after all these years that Viktor had declared his feelings for her only to be turned down. It might balance out his annoyance that he didn't have personal time with one of his idols. He might be quite upset, but as long as he vented those feelings privately, she didn't care. What had happened with Viktor was a debacle that she would just as soon never speak of again.

Although…. Pansy was over at the Ravenclaw table today, as these were the students least likely to ostracize her simply because of the house she came from. She was always welcome to join Hermione and Harry's group, but as it tended to make at least a portion of the Gryffindors jumpy, the Slytherin girl didn't like doing it terribly often. Since so many of the Slytherins had joined the DA, relations had improved, but old prejudices were difficult to shake. Pansy was rather prudently maintaining her habit of sitting wherever she liked as a Prefect; if she had to more permanently cut herself off from the Slytherins, it would take everyone else a little while to notice.

Hermione had observed before how well Pansy and Viktor had gotten along at the picnic. If she could convince Pansy to pursue this interest, it might end happily for everyone. Viktor was a pure-blood and had plenty of international renown, so it would probably even be considered a good match for those who cared about such things. Hermione knew how much it mattered to most pure-bloods, even if it seemed like complete nonsense to her, and if it gave her an extra edge when she tried to convince Pansy that it was a good idea, then she'd make use of it. She could probably manage to talk to the girl after Arithmancy if she sent Draco off to find Harry, which he'd want to do anyway if Harry had spent the lunch hour with Ron….

There were moments where she was certain that she'd become Albus's apprentice without even noticing. She wondered if meddling with the goal of the other people's happiness made it more forgivable.

The Weresbane didn't need work until just before midnight, so when Harry asked to speak with her that evening after dinner, she didn't feel as though she could refuse him. Heading into her lab nearly seven hours early was a bit much, even by her standards.

Now she knew why Draco had made himself scarce the moment dinner ended.

They sat down on the couch, Harry fidgeting with his hands, and Hermione waited to get properly yelled at for leaving Harry and Draco behind. She wasn't going to apologize again, but she did understand that she had worried her friends, and if it made them feel better to yell, then she could probably handle it.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, eyes wide and guileless.

She blinked in surprise, no longer certain what it was they were discussing.

"For a particular reason?" she asked. "Or just in general?"

He smiled at her, the skin crinkling around his eyes as he said self-deprecatingly, "I ought to have been a little clearer when I started, oughtn't I? I know Snape wasn't the only reason that you ran."

She grimaced, not wanting to discuss this at all.

"I need to get this out," Harry said a little desperately. She sighed and nodded, and he continued. "We were all angry with you, and the last memory you had of pretty much all of us was of us yelling and being really quite daft. We were upset, which I think you've realized we had some right to be, but we didn't handle it sensibly. We didn't give you the chance to explain, and no matter how annoyed you've been with me, you always let me tell you what I'm thinking."

She appreciated that he'd noticed.

Harry sighed. "Mostly what I'm sorry about is not believing you when you said he was in trouble. When you were laying everything out in Albus's office, I realized how much we all just dismissed you."

She hadn't actually talked much about that part of the rescue from what she could recall, but Harry had thought about it anyway, apparently.

He ran a hand through his hair, making it even messier than usual. "I never realized just what it's like to be the person who doesn't have a connection to Voldemort, to be the one standing there not knowing where this information is coming from and having no reason to believe except that it's a friend who's saying it."

He frowned fiercely for a moment, but met her eyes firmly as he said, "I should have trusted you. You might sometimes have doubted the things that I saw—and rightly so—but you always supported me because I was desperate and I needed help." He swallowed, and she knew he was remembering his godfather's death. "I didn't try to help you, I just came up with reasons why you were wrong. I assumed that I had to be right because I wasn't feeling anything, and I left you feeling like you had to do this by yourself. I'm very sorry."

She smiled warmly at him. "Thank you, Harry, for the apology." It was likely the only one she was going to receive, so she'd have to savour it. "But you shouldn't feel too guilty. No matter how supportive you'd been, I would still have gone alone."

"But it was dangerous," he protested. "I'm still upset about that, you know."

Her lip curled. "I'd be very surprised if you weren't. I know just how dangerous it was, Harry, but think about what I did. There's no way I could have Apparated through the Mark with another person. There would have been a better chance of our being caught if lots of people had gone, and if you'd tried to go, Ron and Draco would have wanted to come, too, and before you know it, it would have been a positive army trying to rescue Severus.

"There would have been a debate over what to do with Voldemort if we'd even got that far, with people wanting us to try to kill him on the spot without preparation. My concern was that Severus be got to safety, and that was best done as I did it."

Harry let out a gusty sigh which she took to mean that he didn't like it but he accepted what she'd said.

"So," she asked, amused, "do you want to tell Draco it's safe to come in now?"

Harry grinned at her. "I did tell him to wait in the bedroom. Wasn't sure how annoyed you were going to be."

"Given that you started with an apology, you took me completely by surprise," she answered. "I thought we'd begin with you being upset with me."

Harry snorted. "It's a pleasant surprise for both of us, then." Mentally, he added, You want tea, Draco?

There was the impression of surprise, and then, Sure, and Draco appeared by way of Harry's bedroom.

"That was fast," he said brightly.

She and Harry laughed, and Harry summoned Winky to ask for tea.

A few hours later, as Hermione worked on the Weresbane, she couldn't help but lament once more that she was working on it alone. She had nearly lost Severus to Voldemort, and she had never managed to share this potion with him. He was alive now, free of Voldemort's influence for the first time in nearly twenty years, but there was so much bad blood between her and Severus that she didn't suppose she could tender an invitation that he would consider accepting.

It wasn't really practical for this batch of the potion, anyway. Because she had started when she returned on Monday rather than working out the optimal time to brew, this batch's schedule was a little off. She'd be working until three in the morning tonight, and she'd be starting work again at half four on Friday morning. If she needed to sleep like a normal person, she'd be in trouble.

A reminder of her unique sleep requirements made her think about her herd. She still hadn't been out to see Castina, and until that meeting was accomplished, Hermione didn't feel that she could go out in unicorn form at all. No matter what had passed between them, it was her herd mare's Forest, and Hermione didn't even want to Mask herself and walk around the grounds, given how close they were to the Forest itself; it felt too disrespectful.

Fortunately, she'd recently spent days in her Animagus form, so she wasn't physiologically obliged to transform; she simply desired to do so. She craved comfort, she wanted to get out of the castle, and she rather fancied telling her herd about the week she had had. Having never spent that long in unicorn form nor travelled that far, it was an experience she would like to share. Harry had grasped the idea of stretching his wings, but he couldn't fully comprehend what it felt like to be a unicorn or how her experience had differed from what he understood as either a human or a phoenix.

As she continued to chop, grind, mix, and stir, she reflected that she didn't really have time to spend with the herd, given that large chunks of her night were being taken up with the potion, but the desire was still there.

Mouth screwed up into a thin line, she reflected that she'd had plenty of practice this year repressing her desires; this would simply be one more urge to add to the list. She needed to get the Weresbane sorted, and then she could deal with the next problem.

It was nearly four before she made it to bed, which meant that she got up to a regular person's schedule. She missed the alone time that she normally got in the morning but didn't have anyone to blame but herself, so she shrugged the feeling off. She continued to hand in her holiday homework. She was sure that there were students in the Gryffindor dorm this week who were trying to finish the assignments that should have been done long ago, and she was glad that she was not counted amongst that number.

Many of the N.E.W.T.-level students were beginning to stress in earnest about their bonus projects which had to be handed in by May first at the latest. All her professors had reiterated to her that curing lycanthropy in February more than equalled all the projects she could have handed in.

Those students who were at all logical—which meant most of the Ravenclaws and some of the Slytherins, predominantly—had already submitted theirs. The Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, by and large, were beginning to look a little harried. She knew that Harry intended to present his modified shield to Tonks for DADA, but she had no idea what else he was doing and trusted that if he'd needed any assistance from her, he would already have asked for it; she wasn't going to take on any other tasks voluntarily, so she was leaving everyone to their own devices on this one.

Taking the opportunity to not meddle from time to time was surely good for her.

Whatever Harry had said had done the trick; Ron didn't look happy, but he also didn't look surprised when Viktor didn't attend their get-together on Thursday, and the redhead didn't ask why the man was absent. Since they were now all of five weeks away from N.E.W.T.s, there was plenty they could be doing instead of discussing Quidditch, and Harry even made an adorable effort to suggest that that was why Viktor hadn't come.

Not even Ron looked as though he'd bought this excuse, but everyone was too polite to say anything. She knew how much Ron would have preferred Quidditch over the N.E.W.T. prep, but even he made a praiseworthy effort to get some revision done. She sometimes wondered if this had solely to do with the fact that Molly would never forgive him if he failed them all, but she knew he'd be nothing but insulted if she asked. He was trying, finally, and that was what mattered.

Friday at half four, with her arms one again immersed in still water as she submerged the Weresbane, she found herself thinking that although there was no way that Viktor would be here now, if it was a potion made by someone other than her, she was sure that Severus would be present. Even if it meant that he'd be a complete terror in class, he'd want to watch this process. He'd be asking picky questions and probably have criticism about this or that choice that she'd made…. She sniffed, reminded herself that contaminating the potion at this point would wreak complete havoc, and did her best to put Severus out of her mind completely.

By a quarter to six she'd sealed the potion for its twenty-four hours of uncontaminated wait time. She spent the next hour preparing the Weresbane leaves and birch sap, and by the time she'd cleaned up completely, it was time to begin the day just like a regular person. When Harry saw her, he didn't even bother to ask how long she'd been up, just shook his head.

Draco actually inquired, so she explained a little about the timing of the potion. It amused her how the Slytherin simply refused to accept that she needed so little sleep. She knew it was abnormal, but as far as she was concerned, he'd accepted far more bizarre facts.

It was seven o'clock in the morning and perhaps not the best time to pursue the topic, but Hermione'd been up for hours, and she decided to do it anyway.

"What is it that bothers you so much about this?" she asked, sitting down next to him on the couch.

"It's inexplicable," he answered immediately, turning to her with a particularly dramatic arm gesture. "You and Harry are both Pure Adults. He sleeps more or less regularly; you don't. It doesn't make sense."

"You're assuming that my being a Pure Adult is why I don't sleep."

"Isn't it?" he demanded.

"Not directly," she answered. She looked over at Harry.

Time to reveal another one of our deep, dark secrets?

Mentally, Harry grinned at her. Yes, please.

Chapter Forty: The Second Trial

Hermione knew that Harry had been waiting to tell Draco the truth because their two revelations went hand-in-hand; Harry would never deliberately force her to reveal a facet of her Pure Adulthood. No matter how much she'd reassured him that her choices were her own, she knew that he still felt guilty that he and Draco had been something of a catalyst back in February for the mess that was her and Severus.

Draco was clearly aware that he'd missed an exchange between them, but his expression remained calm, his body relaxed; he really did try to take lessons learnt to heart.

She smiled at him. "Let's go stand over here."

Clearly confused, Draco nevertheless obeyed. A smile lurked around the edges of Harry's mouth as he moved to stand next to Draco, and she backed away so that there was plenty of room for her to transform in a wide section of the training half of the room.

"You're half right," she admitted to Draco. "I don't need as much sleep because of one of the abilities that came with being a Pure Adult."

"But it's a different ability than Harry possesses?" the Slytherin queried.

She and Harry exchanged looks.

"We have different manifestations of the same ability, I guess you could say," she clarified. "Harry's not said anything about himself because he knew you'd guess about me."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So as always, blame her for my decisions, not me."

Draco snorted. "I've seen a trend in that direction, yes. I'll try not to be cross with anyone, shall I?"

"That would be the ideal outcome," Hermione agreed, smiling at their antics. "You and Remus both guessed that I'd become an Animagus." Startled, Draco nodded. "And you both wondered why I never revealed myself to you." Another nod. "This would be why."

Draco positively gaped at her transformed self, his gaze affixed to the golden horn that now came out of her forehead. Experimentally, she moved her head and watched as Draco followed the horn without seeming to be aware of what he was doing. She did this for several passes before Harry, unable to stop chuckling slightly, admonished her to stop.

She sent them a toothy grin, and Draco finally seemed to realize what he'd been doing. His look of annoyance wasn't very effective given that it was still tempered with a great deal of awe.

"In the interest of thoroughness, I'd just like to confirm that there's a single horn coming out of Hermione's very horse-like head." His voice was slightly faint.

"A golden horn," Harry contributed.

A spiralled golden horn. Whispering, she added, And I'm not really a horse, in case you'd not got there on your own.

Draco was nodding slowly, his voice lacking adequate scorn when he said, "I'd come to that conclusion, thanks. I had no idea it was possible."

For Pure Adults it is, she answered. We can Mask ourselves as ordinary animals.

This seemed to recall Draco to the other half of the equation, and he turned to look at Harry.

"And just what are you?"

Smiling at the mixture of aggression and curiosity, Harry took a step back from Draco, and a moment later, he was fluttering in the air.

The Slytherin looked completely flabbergasted.

"You're a phoenix."

I am, Harry confirmed.

"You're a phoenix, and Hermione's a unicorn."

Well spotted, they agreed in tandem.

Draco was looking a little faint, so Hermione transformed back into human form even as she was conjuring a chair, which Draco sank into without seeming to notice that it hadn't been there a second ago. Harry re-transformed as well, hurrying over to perch on the arm of Draco's chair.

"You all right?" he asked, the concern evident in his voice.

"Mm hmm," Draco mumbled.

The two Gryffindors exchanged glances. Harry summoned Winky and asked for tea. The house elf took one look at Draco and nodded emphatically before disappearing with a pop.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, at a bit of a loss. "I really didn't think it was that big a deal, or I'd not have sprung it on you like that."

Draco rallied slightly. "I'm fine. I thought I'd grasped the extent of your powers; I knew you were both more powerful than I, and I guess I just didn't think it went beyond that."

"But this is an extension of that," Hermione said as reassuringly as she could. "You have the power to turn into an animal; we have the power to turn into magical animals. It's only a question of degree."

1She could see the Slytherin processing this, and it seemed to have a positive impact. Winky arrived with the tea, and Harry gratefully served it to Draco.

The pure-blood heir would have been well-versed from a young age in all things magical, Hermione knew, but she had never really considered how much more of an impact being able to turn into a magical Animagus form would have for him rather than for her and Harry. For the two of them, the "no magical animal" rule was a recent and arbitrary one, not a fact that they had grown up knowing was incontrovertible.

"That's a good point," Draco declared finally. "I should have expected the extraordinary from the two of you. I take it unicorns don't sleep?"

Harry heaved a sigh of relief at this casually accepting return to the topic, and Hermione explained, "They don't sleep as humans do, no. They sleep less than I do, but I am able to sleep less than regular humans."

Draco turned to Harry. "But phoenixes sleep, I take it?"

He nodded. "They do."

"And they like fire," Draco added.

Hermione tried not to react to that, but Draco noticed. He rolled his eyes as he clarified. "I know, of course they like fire. But what I mean is that ever since the beginning of February, he's wanted a fire lit all the time, and he can sit in front of it for ages while I'm roasting."

She nodded. "He's a bit more sensitive to the cold than he used to be, but that's nothing a Warming Charm can't fix when necessary. And he'd survive happily in a desert a lot longer than we would."

"What else?" Draco demanded imperiously.

Harry smiled at his enthusiasm. "I'm not as strong as Fawkes, but I can carry one, maybe two humans if they hold onto my tail feathers."

Hermione swallowed heavily as she remembered that experimentation, which she had done her best to block from her mind forever. She had vowed then and there that she would never, ever do it again. Fawkes had been the one to guess that Harry could carry two, as they hadn't had another human whom they could test with at the time. She'd have to quash the idea if either Harry or Draco brought it up now.

The Gryffindor boy continued to list abilities. "I can't heal anyone with my tears, the same with 'Mione's blood, but both of us seem to heal more quickly than we used to. I like spicy foods." Draco's eyes lit up as he finally understood the obsession with hot sauce and spices. "When I concentrate on it, I can sort of soothe people who are in distress, just like Fawkes does when he sings; I'm still learning how to do that one. And, uh, that's about what I can think of at the moment. 'Mione?"

She nodded. His life expectancy would likely be extended as hers was, but they had no specifics, and she doubted that it was knowledge that Draco needed to be burdened with right now.

"Thank you," Draco said very deliberately, looking at her squarely, "for letting me know."

She smiled. "You're very welcome. Now you'll understand what's happened if you find feathers in the bedroom."

Draco smirked while Harry protested indignantly, "I do not moult!"

They headed up to breakfast in a collectively good mood, and the rest of the day passed agreeably. Tonks was nearly as anxious as they were for her first set of O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s as a professor, so she was planning an extensive series of revision that was very beneficial for the students.

After lunch, they managed a quick visit to Hagrid. With O.W.L.s coming for his class, he was also frazzled; having done it for several years now didn't seem to help.

She, Harry, and Draco spent the rest of the afternoon in their own revision, Hermione, as always, having more courses to cover than anyone else. Draco was still a good influence here, as his being determined to sit down with Potions meant that Harry did it, too, and with less complaining than would have occurred if it had been she who obliged him to do it. Of course, she had no doubt that he would be rewarded for his good behaviour later, but that was their business. Whatever worked.

By the time dinner arrived, it was chaotically loud; the match that would decide who played in the finals was tomorrow, and Quidditch was on everyone's minds. She supposed she should be grateful that Harry and Draco hadn't regaled her with Quidditch stories all afternoon, but five minutes in the Great Hall at dinner time made her want to run off as quickly as she could and not come back.

It happened every year, and it was one event that she would not miss when she left the school at the end of the year. She'd supported her house team as a matter of course, but she had mostly been there for Harry, and now that he wasn't playing and she was in the middle of fighting a war, curing lycanthropy, and revising for N.E.W.T.s, the game didn't fit into the top ten calls upon her time—hell, it probably didn't fit into the top thirty.

Knowing that no one was interested in her opinion on the matter, she kept her mouth shut. They thought Quidditch was important, and she didn't need to get into an argument. She sighed.

"You doing all right over there?" Harry asked with some amusement.

"Positively delighted by the charged atmosphere," she answered dryly.

Harry laughed. "I'll bet."

"I'm going to make a break for it," she said conversationally.

"Duly noted. I'm sure Draco and I can keep an eye on the masses."

Pleased that Harry wasn't being difficult, just indecently amused, she had a very brief dinner and then escaped back to the blissful quiet of her quarters. No, she wouldn't miss that aspect of Hogwarts one bit.

The Weresbane was ready shortly before noon on Saturday. She'd buried herself in her lab all morning, refusing to go out, even as Head Girl, for the match. The potion had to be monitored at this stage, and she knew where her priorities lay. Since everyone knew she didn't really care about the sport, what was the use in her going?

Harry's assertion that it would be good for her moved her not at all, and he finally seemed to be convinced that she hadn't simply invented her need to stay with the potion to get out of seeing the match. No one would care that there was one fewer viewer, and she thought Draco more than made up her place; how many matches had the Slytherin Ice Prince as an honorary Gryffindor?

It was blissfully quiet when she was in her lab. No one was trying to visit or help or bother her, and she could work on the potion in peace. Once it was complete, she bottled it, Masked herself, and made her way to the gates so that she could Apparate without stepping on any toes. Well, no more toes than usual, anyway, as there would no doubt still be those who thought she shouldn't travel to her safe house like this on her own. But their disapproval hadn't stopped her yet, and was unlikely to start any time soon.

UnMasking, she headed downstairs and found the eighteen werewolves who would be transforming that evening ready and waiting. She greeted all of them cheerfully and set about administering the potion.

There was one aspect of today that she had been dreading all week, but she'd vowed to deal with it once she'd provided the potion to the werewolves in need. Once they were all seated and ensuring that no one experienced any adverse effects, then she would have plenty of time to deal with one irate ex-werewolf who felt that she had attacked his mate.

Remus appeared while she was partly through, but he stood to the side and waited for her to finish. This was either a deliberate insult, as he usually offered to help, or he thought that it would be safer if they didn't try to interact when there were sensitive potions involved. She'd hoped that nearly two weeks' hindsight would have improved the man's outlook on the event, but seeing his behaviour now, she wasn't convinced.

She announced her intention to monitor the werewolves closely for the first half hour, and Remus disappeared back upstairs while she made sure that all the information in her Weresbane journal was perfectly accurate and then updated it with current stats.

At the end of the half hour, Remus reappeared with tea, which she hoped was a gesture of good will rather than an excuse, and she informed the werewolves that she and Remus needed to have a private discussion but she'd only be a name call away if any of them suffered any side effects. Sternly reminding them that the slightest change could be important and that she wouldn't hesitate to feed the antidote to anyone who lied to her, she was fairly certain from their expressions that she'd got her point across just as she had managed to do each time in the past. She didn't want to take anything for granted.

These eighteen had to stay downstairs as per her rules, but since this was the new moon, they wouldn't be locked up until right before moonrise. It was important that they be comfortable enough to achieve their transformation, so she preferred that they did what made them happiest, whether that was congregating in a large group, forming a small study group, taking a nap, or anything else that struck their fancy and wouldn't inhibit their chances of transforming.

She and Remus withdrew a short way so that she could still see all the werewolves but she wasn't so close that she'd be too easily distracted by their chatter. She put up privacy charms that blocked sound so that her conversation could not be overheard.

Taking the teacup, she made an attempt to break the ice: "Should I be checking to see if it's been tampered with?"

Some of the tightness left his face. He'd been a Marauder, after all. He shook his head.

"It's just tea."

Nodding, she took a sip, not sure if he'd noticed that she'd checked anyway, but she always checked, even with food brought by Harry or the house-elves, so it wasn't a sign of mistrust.

She conjured chairs, figuring they'd be less likely to get in one another's faces if they were seated, and gestured him into one.

"I assume you have an opinion that you'd like to share with me." He was looking at her strangely, so she elaborated. "I've had a great many people share their opinions of what I did in order to rescue Severus. I've not heard you except when I wasn't in a position to reply or when it was difficult to differentiate voices, so I give you the floor now."

He nodded, face shadowed. "I did not intend to exacerbate the problem in the Infirmary. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Your arrival had very little to do with my collapse, if that's what's worrying you," she responded. "I had greatly overtaxed myself, as you no doubt guessed, and wouldn't have lasted much longer whether or not your voice recalled me to the physical world."

"You hurt my mate." There was pain in his voice. "I feel as though I must act, but I don't know what to do."

"I think hurt is a strong word," she answered carefully. "I put her in an uncomfortable position, certainly, but I let her make a choice, and I ensured that no harm could come to her as a result of it."

"You Stunned her," Remus protested.

"As I've done countless times in training and even in class," Hermione pointed out mildly. "I informed her of exactly what I was doing and minimized any risks; you were the only one who could get to her, and if you didn't arrive within a half hour, she would have woken on her own. I even told her where her wand was."

"If she cooperated voluntarily, why did you have to Stun her at all?"

"I said I gave her a choice," Hermione corrected. "Since she may have felt that she was picking the lesser of two evils, I had to take precautions." She frowned slightly. "Didn't Tonks mention any of this?"

She knew the Auror hadn't been precisely happy, but she'd thought the woman had understood.

Remus wouldn't meet her eyes, but admitted after a moment, "She was rather annoyed that I'd burst into the hospital wing, and she really wasn't pleased that I went to see you once you were awake again."

"She was there, too," Hermione objected.

Remus shook his head before amending, "Well, yes, but she came because she knew I wasn't at my most rational. She ended up reassuring Ron that despite what everyone else said, what had happened was in no way his fault, so she didn't notice when you disappeared until it was too late."

"I suspect," Hermione answered as circumspectly as she could, "that Tonks has worked out what she would have done had it been you who were captured by Voldemort."

"Are you certain that Severus would have done the same had it been you?" Remus asked pointedly.

She rose very slowly from her chair, spine stiff, mug clenched in a white-knuckled grasp.

"No," she answered clearly and icily. "Unlike you and Tonks, who have been blessed with unity and happiness, Severus and I are not in a relationship. In fact, recent events suggest that his feelings are ones of dislike rather than indifference. Happy as that may make you, Remus John Lupin, it does not alter my feelings for him or in any way impact the sequence of events that led to my rescuing him."

"Hermione," he began, tone much altered.

"We've finished discussing this," she said flatly.

"I—" he tried again.

"I can't leave," she interrupted authoritatively, "because I have more than a dozen people who are depending on me right now. Don't make me ask you to go."

His mouth snapped shut abruptly, and she seized the opportunity to cancel her charms and turn back to check on the werewolves. She was reasonably certain that Remus wouldn't make a scene in front of them.

For her part, she was getting very tired of people assuming she didn't know who Severus was. She knew exactly what sort of a man he could be, better than they did, some of them. And really, often times Severus made her feel bad enough on his own without anyone needing to exacerbate the problem by pointing it out time and time again.

There were still no untoward symptoms being exhibited by any of the werewolves who were taking her potion today; each and every time another person reacted well to it, she was delighted. Eventually, she was bound to get someone who was allergic to one of the ingredients that went into the brew, but so far, her luck was holding—or the changed physiology of the werewolf was working in their favour for once, which would be a slightly more scientific take on it.

She continued to take down the vital information of all today's subjects; since there were nearly twenty of them, it took some time. If it also made it difficult for Remus to follow and speak to her privately, that was a happy coincidence.

Harry, Draco, and Fawkes all took care to announce to her when the match ended three hours after it had started when Ginny caught the Snitch. This meant that Gryffindor won the match one hundred and seventy to twenty; they would go into the final with four hundred points, and they would be playing against Hufflepuff, who only had two hundred and twenty points.

Hermione had been at the safe house for over an hour and a half at that point and was just relieved that she hadn't had to sit out on the pitch and wait through it; fortunately, it hadn't occurred to anyone to demand her attendance as soon as the potion was done, so she had been able to spend her time much more profitably here.

Do you actually take an interest in Quidditch? she asked Fawkes curiously.

He sent her a bird-like shrug. Albus enjoys how much the children enjoy it, and I find it best to enjoy what he enjoys whenever possible.

She couldn't recall Fawkes ever attending a match in the past, but given the nature of the bond between a wizard and a familiar, she imagined he still saw much of the sport as well as hearing all about it on numerous occasions. Her imagination failed at the thought of Fawkes and tenpin bowling, so probably Quidditch was a wise choice.

It was almost four before Harry, Draco, and Tonks arrived; there had been a late lunch at Hogwarts after the match, and it had been deemed prudent for them to attend. Minerva was staying on at the school until the evening; although she would have liked to be at the safe house through all the preparation, she had decided it was her duty to monitor the Gryffindors in order to ensure that the celebration didn't get out of hand. Bill had a big job that he couldn't easily get out of for Gringotts, and she had assured him that they would be fine on their own.

To the surprise of no one, Molly had kicked up such a fuss at the notion of Ron visiting again that despite the fact that he was one of the most stubborn people Hermione knew, he would not be attending this evening. It was almost a month to the day since he had been attacked, and the Weasley matriarch was a formidable woman.

Fortunately for continuing family relations, it didn't hurt that in this particular case, coming to assist would have meant missing out on some "basking in glory" time. Ron had only let in two goals, which demonstrated extraordinary keeping skills for a three-hour match, as Harry had pointed out to her twice. Ron was feeling pretty good and ready to enjoy the adoration of his fans.

There were now nine more Animagi who could assist those transforming tonight, so while Ron could still have helped, they weren't at a horrid disadvantage without him. To be fair to Molly, Hermione wasn't actually sure how hard the woman had had to push to get him to stay behind; between Quidditch and the fact that the last time he had been here, he'd been cut up and nearly dragged to Voldemort, Ron probably felt that there were other activities that would better occupy him at this time.

Hermione hoped that he was having fun and behaving. Eventually, if Ron wished, she would attempt to persuade his mother that he should be allowed to return. After all, those at the safe house had now all been questioned under Veritaserum as to their allegiances; all of the students and staff at Hogwarts had not. Then again, if Molly took that the wrong way, it would probably result in Ron getting pulled out of Hogwarts to be home-schooled rather than allowed to visit the safe house, so perhaps Hermione had better just let events unfold on their own.

They might have been missing some of the usual instructors, but Hermione found that the nine ex-werewolves from the first trial had stepped into the breach admirably. With so many new and enthusiastic teachers, it was very easy for them to split into small groups with someone who knew exactly what they were talking about. If they didn't get the technical details of an Animagus transformation as they would have done with Minerva, they got a great deal of incident-specific information. Technical questions could wait.

Once the others did arrive, they immediately broke off into groups to assist, Harry and Draco moving as a unit since Harry had never been a werewolf or transformed into a wolf Animagus, nor did he have the technical training that Minerva did. He was a beacon for the light, however, and hugely enthusiastic, so he was handy to have around.

Tonks immediately sought out Remus, making another good unit to wander around and assist where they could, and this left Hermione alone. She briefly wished that Severus could have been at her side but ruthlessly quashed the thought; there was no point in hoping for what wouldn't come. Severus would not volunteer to spend time with her, not even for the Weresbane, and that was all there was to it. She was a unit of one, and she was simply going to have to learn to like it.

It didn't take long for most of the new arrivals to notice that she and Remus were not getting along. Given that she avoided him as much as possible and maybe sort of glared when she couldn't avoid him, she wasn't really surprised.

When verbal communication got them nowhere, Harry and Draco tried MindSpeech, but she still told them to bugger off. She had enough to worry about with the transformation of eighteen werewolves into wolf Animagi without hashing out a completely unrelated argument. Besides, she was next to certain that Harry agreed with Remus about Severus, and she didn't want them to join forces.

Dinner was still a relatively pleasant affair; the moon, invisible though it was, didn't rise until five thirteen in the morning on Sunday.[35] The actual new moon occurred shortly before noon at eleven forty one. It was therefore still early for the worst of the nerves to have set in, so the atmosphere wasn't nearly as horribly charged as it would grow to be eventually. There were several cracks about vegetables and martyrs, but it was all in good fun, and she assured them with a roll of her eyes that they would be able to eat meat again, just not for the next twenty-four hours.

The evening was full of last-minute instructions and coaching. The nine wolf Animagi from the first trial were constantly changing into their wolf forms so that everyone could see the transformation firsthand and be reminded of the subtle physical differences between a wolf and a werewolf. Given that the nine of them had only been wolves for a couple of weeks, she suspected that they didn't find showing off much of a hardship.

By ten in the evening, Harry and Draco had taken to buffering her from Remus, who kept attempting to talk to her. They had no idea what was going on, but in spite of the fact that she had refused to answer their questions, Harry had evidently decided to side with her against his de facto godfather. She suspected this was an attempt to make up for not trusting her judgement previously, and she was too grateful not to accept.

They were sitting at the kitchen table while she was at the counter boiling water for tea when Tonks approached and asked cheerfully, "How would you like to wander over to the sitting room on the first floor?"

Hermione snorted and Tonks smiled, dropping her bad pretence immediately.

"He didn't think you'd come if you knew he was there."

"And you disagree?" Hermione asked.

The other woman shook her head. "I think the chances of his getting cursed are diminished if you know the truth, and I'm relatively certain he doesn't deserve to be cursed. This is your safe house; of course you know who's in which room."

Hermione smiled. This was very true. Remus had made an effort, though, so she waved the boys back when they rose as if to come with her. She fell into step with Tonks, and they made their way up the stairs.

"What did he do," Tonks asked curiously, "to upset you so?"

Hermione's lips thinned at the memory. "He reminded me that Severus would not have come to rescue me if our situations had been reversed and it was I who were being tortured."

The Auror was silent for a moment. "I take it back. He deserves to be cursed. Please, be my guest."

Hermione's lips tipped up. "I appreciate the sentiment, Tonks, but I'm doing my best not to curse anyone today. Besides, if I started cursing everyone who insulted Severus, it would become a full-time job."

Tonks laughed softly, observing, "You know exactly what you're doing."

"I may not always like the situation, but I'm not as blind as everyone seems to think."

"Being underestimated can have its advantages," Tonks pointed out.

Given Tonks was known far and wide for being accident prone but was also a top-notch Auror, Hermione could see how that could be the case.

"It gets tiresome sometimes, though," the Gryffindor said with a sigh.

"I'm sure it does," Tonks agreed. "Like I said, if you want to take it out on Remus, you have my approval."

Hermione smirked. "Won't that put a crimp in your love life?"

The Auror shrugged pragmatically. "I can handle a couple more nights alone for a noble purpose."

"I appreciate that," Hermione said with genuine feeling. "I've not apologized to him for what I did, but I am sorry that I put you in an uncomfortable position. I imagine you know, though, that I'd do it again in a heartbeat to save Severus's life."

The other woman nodded, taking this information in a stride. "Oh, I'm entirely certain that you would, Hermione. I believe we discussed as much as needed to be discussed about the matter on the day."

"I heard that Kingsley might be called in," Hermione said, her tone inquiring and apologetic. That was really not one of the outcomes or intentions that she had had when she had involved the pink-haired Auror.

Tonks shrugged this off. "I was working as an Order member, not an Auror. It doesn't fall under his jurisdiction, and since you're also an Order member, it wasn't as though I was really telling someone I oughtn't. To be honest," she said, offering Hermione a commiserating look, "I think the lot of them were saying whatever sprang to mind without reference to reality or logical sense. They were venting their feelings."

"I'm not saying they didn't have a right to be upset," Hermione interjected.

The other woman nodded. "They just took it too far. I swear, by the end of the conversation, you'd've thought they'd all agreed to help you but you took off secretly without them. And they kept nattering on as though they were all in the room when you came to speak to me and I was the one who was confused about what had happened."

The Gryffindor snorted.

"We both know full well," Tonks continued, "that the Order is full of a whole slew of brave idiots who risk their lives for perfect strangers; it can't possibly surprise them that you risked your life for someone you care about."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you think so."

"Oh, I know so," she said easily. "I know just what I would have done if Remus had been the one who was being tortured."

Hermione nodded. "That's what I said to Remus; he didn't respond quite as I'd intended."

"He brought up Severus instead?" Tonks clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Daft men are like that. I'll be sure to be suitably outraged that he didn't immediately declare that he would come after me."

Hermione wasn't above a little bit of payback. "Would you?"

"It's less than he deserves." They reached the sitting room, and Tonks turned to face Hermione with a sombre countenance and very bright eyes. "And for the record, I think he would come after you."

Hermione nodded, not trusting herself to speak because she knew they weren't talking about Remus any more. Then she opened the door and entered the sitting room. Remus was seated at the far end.

"Remember what I said," Tonks said cheerfully as a parting shot before she closed the door firmly behind her.

This was the room that she had heard more than one of the children refer to as "the chocolate room". From its taupe walls to the black walnut furniture and the cocoa upholstery, it was all brown. Hermione did not know whether the Malfoys had actually bought that many brown knickknacks or if they had altered them afterwards, and she had never asked. The big squashy couches and armchairs were particularly comfortable, and she wondered how many people Remus had needed to kick out in order to see her alone.

She crossed her arms and faced the man defiantly.

"What did she say?" Remus asked.

Hermione smirked. "That I was free to curse you as much as I liked in an effort to teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

A wince crossed the older wizard's face and seeing that she wasn't going to sit down, he rose to face her.

"I realize how rude that must have seemed to you."

Her eyebrows rose.

"All right," he conceded, "it was rude." He stepped closer. "But you must understand, Hermione, that my only concern is that you're happy, and I don't believe that you can achieve happiness with Severus. I just want to make sure that you've thought this through."

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, reminding herself that cursing him wouldn't answer any of his questions and might annoy Harry. "Remus, I've been a Pure Adult since I was seventeen. I made my choice very deliberately, and my feelings are permanent. Tonks didn't give up on you when you tried to push her away, and I can't turn off my feelings for Severus even if he doesn't care for me as I want him to. When you come in and make assumptions about what he feels and what I understand, it's really very rude, and it is bound to make us quarrel, which I would rather we didn't."

"I don't want to quarrel, either," he said immediately, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that was very reminiscent of Harry. He sighed. "I'm not convinced he's the person that you need, though, and I just want to make sure that you've considered all the aspects of what Severus is."

"I know exactly who Severus is," she corrected curtly. "I'm a member of the Order, I've lived in the same school with him for nearly seven years, and I brought him back after Voldemort found out his true allegiances. I've seen enough, Remus, and you are just going to have to accept my feelings even if you do not understand them."

"I agree that they're there," he said, sounding frustrated. "It's just … there are other options that you could see if only you opened yourself up to the possibility. You're still very young to be making these sorts of decisions."

Hermione was not at all impressed with this argument, and she made sure that her tone expressed this. "I've hardly been hanging out for Severus since I was twelve; I've experienced some of my other options, and I assure you that I made an educated choice. James and Lily were younger than I when they began to date, and they married young and happily, as did Arthur and Molly. In fact, many witches and wizards marry young, and you know it, Remus. Besides, as far as age goes, I've seen a great deal more than many women my age, and I was pretty mature to begin with.

"I know what I want," she said implacably, "and for better or worse, Severus is it. I accept that you're concerned about Tonks's safety, but if you'd listen to Tonks, you'd know that she never felt particularly unsafe or endangered. If you're using my actions with regards to Tonks as an excuse to share with me your feelings about Severus, I can assure you that I've got the message, and we're just going to have to agree to disagree, because I know my own feelings."

Remus let out a sigh. "I know you think that what you're feeling—"

Hermione came extremely close to taking Tonks up on her suggestion and cursing the living daylights out of the man. "Remus!" she exclaimed, cutting him off. "This is none of your business. I have politely entertained a fair few of your doubts because I consider you a friend, but you are not someone to whom I am obliged to answer. I will not account for my feelings to you, and I will not have my feelings judged by someone who is so wholly unconnected to them."

He looked completely stunned. "I only—"

"No," she snapped impatiently. "You don't get to tell me that you don't think my feelings will last or that you don't want me to be hurt or whatever the hell you're about to say. My choices are my own."

He swallowed heavily. "I … I realize that. I just really don't want to see you hurt."

She could see the earnestness in those golden brown eyes, and it was her turn to sigh.

"And I appreciate that Remus, but to be honest, the only one who's hurting me right now is you. I'm a grown woman, and I can take care of myself."

"Right," he answered, and she could see him struggle to accept that and not immediately launch into another argument. "I'm sorry if I overreacted; I said some things that I regret."

"Thank you," she said carefully.

She noticed that he hadn't retracted everything, but she'd be unlikely to believe him if he suddenly did. His behaviour had been poor, and it was that which he was really apologizing for. They both knew that his opinion had not changed, nor had hers. With luck, he had finally been convinced that they needed to drop this topic, because she simply wasn't going to put up with someone continually bringing to her attention the fact that Severus didn't care for her.

The conversation was over, for which she was very grateful, but she realized that she wasn't sure at this point whether Remus had intended to apologize and gotten sidetracked or if his real goal this whole time had simply been to vent some more about Severus.

That he was more like the other Marauders than she had previously noticed was not a pleasant realization. Up to this point, he had seemed rational and as friendly as Severus would allow anyone to be, but ever since her feelings for the man had come out, Remus had seemed quite unreasonable about the matter.

She was sure that he didn't fancy her, and she was reasonably certain that he was straight and quite happy with Tonks, so she didn't know what his problem was. Had he really only maintained a façade of cordiality while Severus was making the Wolfsbane for him?

If that was the case, then Tonks was going to be waiting considerably longer than a couple of nights before her boyfriend was in full working order once more. Hermione suspected that out and out asking him would be ineffective, however, and if she brought up Severus again in order to properly gauge Remus's opinion, it would allow Remus to express his opinion about Severus. She'd had enough of that already.

Whatever his motivations had been, Remus had tried to speak to her again rather than letting his hurtful question be the end of it; that was nearly positive, and she was trying to scrounge as much positive as possible. If she squinted really hard, she could almost pretend what Remus had said was an apology, which would mean that she'd gotten more apologies than she had anticipated over the whole stupid event.

"We need to get back downstairs," she said finally, quite sure there had been an awkward silence in there and not willing to do anything else to fill it. "We've a job to do."

Remus nodded, and they emerged from the sitting room to find that Tonks was lounging against the wall outside. She looked as though she were either ensuring that they weren't disturbed or hanging about in case there were bodies she needed to deal with. She scanned Remus from head to foot.

"You let him off easy," she observed.

Hermione offered her a half-smile. "There are people counting on him."

Tonks shrugged, as if to say, "If you're sure," and the three of them headed back downstairs, detouring briefly through the kitchen to greet Molly and those congregating werewolves who weren't in this trial, and finally reaching the dungeons. The majority of its occupants were wisely trying to get some sleep.

This moon, Remus, Draco, Harry, and Minerva would be supervising the transformations of the adult werewolves while Hermione had assigned herself one very specific task; by the end of the night, four children were going to be able to transform into four little wolf cubs.

It was a relief for Hermione to be able to legitimately separate from Remus as he went off to see how the adults were doing and she went to look in on the children. She was hoping that time would ease the rest of the tension between them because she definitely wasn't going to be up for another discussion any time soon.

The children had been napping periodically throughout the day. Sophia and Dorian, the two youngest, were especially prone to nightmares that meant that they didn't sleep for that many hours at once, so the adults compensated by increasing the number of naps; it was crucial that they got enough sleep, as they were going to need all their wits about them to manage what most people seemed to think was impossible. It helped that the children weren't anxious in the same way as the adults; they didn't truly grasp how difficult or dangerous what they were doing was.

Thankfully, they had time at this initial stage; the children wouldn't need to be able to transform instantly, so Hermione could spend longer on them than everyone else if need be. Before the moon set at seven forty-two Sunday evening, all four children would be Animagi; Hermione was bound and determined. She had overheard Minerva telling Harry and Draco that she had never heard of a case of a child under the age of fifteen being able to achieve the Animagus transformation, and most people didn't even attempt it until they were well into their adulthood.

Hermione knew that she would have her work cut out for her. While Alissa, who was ten years old, sort of understood how to meditate, it was a difficult concept for the eight-year-old Lou to grasp. Sophia and Dorian, at five and six, didn't have any real comprehension of what they were being asked to do. It was for this reason that Hermione had determined to take complete charge of their transformation. She had an excellent grasp of MindMagic, and she believed that she could guide them successfully through the meditation; the question of whether or not she was right was soon to be answered.

The children did understand that what they were doing was important; having all transformed involuntarily and painfully into werewolves, they wanted it to stop at least as much as the adults did. The four of them knew that they would need to listen to her carefully, and she was confident that she would have their obedience at all points because she was going to be guiding them every step of the way.

Reaching the area where the children were gathered, she found that they were just being convinced to lie down once more before the moon. Draco was the one who was currently caring for them, and if their sleepy chatter was to be believed, Draco had been exceptionally patient, not only letting them stare at him and pet him in Animagus form, but letting them ride him as well.

Hermione was reminded, in moments like this one, that Sirius and Draco were related, and she imagined that Harry would have the same thought. Hermione didn't even care if Draco had tried to swear the children to secrecy (which she gathered from the look on his face as they announced the evening's activities to her) and would probably be mortified if Harry heard. As far as she was concerned, it was sweet and wonderful, and she was sure that Harry would agree and not consider it inappropriate to Draco's dignity.

The family name was important to Draco and always would be, but that didn't mean that he couldn't be human and play with children from time to time. She'd just have to make sure that the children mentioned it at least once in Harry's presence, and then Draco would have the opportunity to see the positive results for himself.

She looked down at her young charges, thinking that Draco would have to be far, far more hard-hearted than she knew him to be before he wouldn't be affected by them. Sophia was all golden curls and big blue eyes. When she had been bitten by Greyback, her parents had abandoned her outside of St Mungo's and as far as the Order or the Ministry could ascertain, had fled the country.

Dorian and Alissa were siblings; their parents had been killed last year in a Death Eater attack in which Greyback had been let loose to play. They were the only survivors of that night, but they had an aunt and uncle who had taken them in and who would be happy to continue caring for them if—when—Hermione managed to cure their lycanthropy.

Louis—Lou to everyone—was Muggle-born, his family finding out about the wizarding world in the worst possible circumstances as they learnt that their only son could be a wizard but had been turned into a werewolf years before he would even get his letter inviting him to join Hogwarts. His parents had tried their best to care for him; Remus had helped them set up a secure location in their basement, but it had been an imperfect solution at best.

It had been he who had received the extra Wolfsbane potion they had ended up with in October when she and Severus had both made it. Looking at the dark-haired, blue-eyed, intense little boy, Hermione wondered why on Earth she hadn't insisted that she be allowed to brew more Wolfsbane on the sly. There was no sensible reason why the potion couldn't have been slipped to isolated people in need like Lou.

His parents wrote to him every day, posting the letters to Hogwarts, and Hermione brought them with her to the safe house, taking away Lou's letters to send back to his parents. She had never met them, but she knew that they were desperately hopeful that this cure would be successful and they would get their little boy back. They had faced the prospect of his going off to learn to become a wizard bravely, but were hoping they could have him back whole and safe for several years first.

Hermione had to admit that it was a relief to see this example of loving parents; so many of the stories that she heard, especially relating to the werewolves, seemed to offer only horrible examples of human nature, as people were abandoned and marginalized for a disease over which they had no control.

All these children, Hermione realized, would be growing up with a very unique perspective. The Muggle-borns had been catapulted into this world by an act of violence, and even the wizarding children had witnessed one of their society's most horrible aspects at a tender age. Like Harry—and even her and Ron, to a certain extent—these children were being forced to grow up and face outrageous situations too early.

And that was why Hermione was here. She knew it would be a difficult task to change the collective minds of the wizarding population, but that only left her more determined. Marginalizing people created wizards like Tom Riddle, and Hermione didn't want to see the rise of another Dark Lord in her lifetime. She intended to see ex-werewolves accepted, and if she had her way, a great deal more care would be taken at Hogwarts so that no house was ostracized; she wanted everyone to feel as though they belonged.

So now she was trying to teach four children how to turn into animals. They might not understand how to meditate properly, but even little Sophia was fully enamoured of the idea of becoming a wolf. She was particularly fond of the "golden wolf" who had fur the colour of her hair, and Hermione knew that Remus spent a lot of time with her, making her giggle and forget for as long as possible how scary it was to turn into a werewolf once a month.

Hermione wondered if Remus, who'd been without proper human rights for decades, had considered just what being fully human again entailed. If he didn't make the proper inquiries soon, she might have to do it for him, or maybe raise the issue with Tonks, who hadn't had nearly as much exposure to Sophia as he had.

The children were impressionable, so Hermione and Remus had reasoned that the more frequently they were exposed to the "harmless" Animagus wolves, the better it would be for their chances. As a result, Remus and the nine wolves who had transformed on the full moon had spent a lot of time in wolf form over the last couple of weeks, allowing the children to be exposed to wolves who were friendly and gentle with children.

Hermione had made sure that there were also periodic lectures that carefully explained that not all wolves were friendly humans inside; although real wolves weren't native to Britain, Hermione was anxious to avoid potential disasters at zoos, say. If Harry could inadvertently release boa constrictors, she could only imagine what all these little witches and wizards could get up to.

When they had explained the bare bones of their requirements, Ollivander hadn't been certain that any wands would yet be ready to choose children so young, but whether it was luck or another force at work, all seven children had found wands more quickly than Harry had. Classes in which the children learnt how to properly use their wands had been added to their daily routine; they needed to feel comfortable with their wands in order to have any chance at successfully transforming.

Hermione had made it very clear to each of them that if they misused their wands, if they used them outside of class time without supervision, those so-important pieces of wood would be taken away from them, and they would be removed from the trial indefinitely. Had any of them misbehaved in a minor way, she would probably not have carried through with her threat, but she was trusting it would be enough to keep them in line, because it really was important that they didn't start running amok with wands years before most people thought they should have them.

More than once throughout the process, Hermione had been faced with adults who thought that she was insane to be even attempting this, but since most people would have thought that it was equally crazy for someone in her final year of Hogwarts to cure lycanthropy, there hadn't been too much overt interference or objection.

As far as she was concerned, there was simply no way that she could tell these children that they had to wait until they were at least fifteen to make this attempt. As several people had carefully pointed out, she could provide them with the Wolfsbane potion until then, but the thought of making them suffer through years of debilitating transformations every single month, not to mention being shunned by society, made her sick to her stomach. She was determined to do everything within her power to make this cure a success for everyone.

Once the children were all asleep, she took a moment to check on the adults. From what she could see of those who were currently awake, they possessed guarded optimism mixed with nervousness. They'd had months now to study how to become Animagi, and they'd seen a number of their fellow werewolves cured. Hermione and those already cured had made sure to be as positive as they could be about the whole experience. No one seemed to doubt that she was committed to the cause, but there were enough variables that everyone was at least a little on edge. If nothing else, there were the memories of the disaster of the last moon along with the triumphs. Veritaserum could only give so much reassurance.

The Order members were sleeping in shifts, for which she could not blame them. Beyond her being forced to fend off the well-meaning interference of Minerva, Molly, and Remus, the night thankfully progressed without incident. It seemed that those who did not know the details could not bring themselves to believe that she needed as little sleep as she told them she did. When she was threatened with a sleeping draught, she informed them that she had been checking her food and beverages for potions for years and that all one slipped in would serve to do was annoy her, and they finally let her be.

She appreciated that they were concerned for her, but she didn't need a plethora of parental figures. Draco, who had been awake and in the kitchen making a run for tea during the last exchange, smirked merrily, and she rolled her eyes and contemplated how childish she would look if she stuck out her tongue at him. Probably not the impression she wanted to make when she was trying to prove that she was an adult who could take care of herself. She collected her tea, made sure it was unaltered, and headed back downstairs with the blond at her side.

"You're reminding yourself how nice it is that they care, aren't you," he said with amusement.

"Trying to work out the most effective potion I can slip into all of their drinks at the earliest opportunity," she corrected dryly and watched as he nearly sloshed both mugs all over his front.

"Slytherin," he muttered.

Grinning, she returned to the children as Draco moved off to rejoin the sleeping Harry.

Hermione roused the children at five fifteen as the moon was rising. Though they more often worked for the new moon from moon set to moon rise, this month, the actual new moon occurred while it was in the sky—just between Earth and the sun and thus invisible to them—over England. When she'd first looked at the dates and times for the moon phases last year and this year, she had been uncertain when she should be attempting the new moon transformations. Whereas werewolves were forced to transform during the rise and set that was closest to the full moon, they were not similarly compelled during the new moon; it was her choice whether they worked from the closet moon set to moon rise or whichever time frame actually incorporated the new moon.

Wanting to be sure that she gave each werewolf the best opportunity possible, she'd run an exhaustive series of Arithmantic equations which had ultimately indicated that it would be better to work with the true new moon. In this phase of the cure, the most important aspect was that the werewolves were trying to achieve their Animagus forms when the Were was most suppressed, and that meant when they had imbibed her Weresbane and whenever the new moon was occurring.

The children regarded it as rather exciting that they needed to get up this early in the morning to do "special thinking" with Hermione, so she fortunately did not have to be concerned about disgruntled children. Dorian, Alissa, and Lou watched closely as she began with Sophia, although there was very little for them to see since everything was going on inside; Hermione lightly connected with the little girl's mind and guided her to her core. Once there, it seemed to be almost natural even for a child so young to close her eyes and just sit calmly.

Hermione spent some minutes carefully threading in the appropriate images of the wolf and the Animagus transformation so that Sophia would be considering the appropriate material during her meditation; coming up with it on her own was a little much to ask of a five-year-old.

When Hermione had assured herself that Sophia seemed quite stable, she moved on. Dorian and Alissa had become especially close since the death of their parents; they stuck together and Alissa showed more patience towards her younger brother than Hermione had seen some teachers manage. Hermione had therefore decided to join their two minds not only to hers but to each other. It would be a three-way connection for the duration of this exercise, a bit like what she and Harry and Draco shared, except that this one was of more limited duration and with the specific purpose of meditating on the wolf form.

Alissa had understood the basics of meditation, and once Dorian and Hermione were connected, the big sister was able to share her understanding with Dorian. The two of them reached their cores without too much help on the Gryffindor's part. Alissa was even able to concentrate on the wolf, and Hermione only had to give Dorian a little help to get him focussing solely on what Alissa was trying to project. Once this was accomplished, Hermione was able to withdraw and leave the two of them to their meditation.

This left only Lou. He'd heard of meditation before, but for all he was a quiet kid, he didn't really have any use for such a practice in his own life at this age. He also had the rudiments of natural shielding against Legilimency, she discovered, but it was nothing that she couldn't easily overcome. He was a very inquisitive child, and he wanted to ask her questions about what she was doing: How was it possible for her to be in his mind? How could they have an internal conversation like this when he knew that she was sitting opposite him not speaking? Why did it felt as though they were going deeper inside of him when this was clearly all a mental construct anyway…?

She finally had to promise to try to answer his questions at a later date because at the moment, they needed to concentrate on the Animagus transformation so that he was not left behind while his friends properly meditated. He agreed to this and quieted down, and she was able to get him to the necessary "mental construct" while privately snorting to herself and reflecting that she had probably made an equally endearing and annoying eight-year-old.

When she removed herself from his mind and came back to her own for the final time for this particular task, she found that Harry and Draco had appeared. Having been peripherally aware of them, even though she hadn't actively recognized it at the time, she didn't startle, just put up wards around the children so that all her hard work wouldn't be disturbed.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"That's our question for you," Harry answered with a smile. "We've had everybody meditating for a little while now. You realize how weird it is watching you and realizing that you're jumping about in their brains?"

She smiled. "Giving them a little boost, that's all."

Harry shook his head. "But you're so matter-of-fact about it. I think you might be even scarier than Snape."

Her smile faltered, but she forced it not to dim completely. "I'm doing what's necessary for this cure. I don't futz about in people's brains just because I can."

"Of course not," Harry answered hurriedly, although this may have been a direct result of the elbow to the solar plexus that he received courtesy of Draco. "I didn't mean it like that."

"They're not going to be traumatized like you were," she said stiffly.

"Neither of us imagined that they would be," Draco answered smoothly. "In fact, they'll probably be little Gryffindor brats like you and get up to all sorts of mischief because they don't have a care in the world."

Looking down at the children, Hermione found herself sincerely hoping that was the case. Even Draco had sounded as though that were a desirable outcome.

Harry and Draco stayed for a few more minutes in order to update her on the excellent progress of all the adults, and then they headed back to start the spells proper. They'd sworn up and down that they'd come get her if they needed her, and Hermione tried to forget that the adults were even transforming on the other side of the room. She had delegated to some responsible and powerful friends, after all, so she could trust that they could do their job or ask for assistance if they needed it; all her attention needed to be on her own task.

Fortunately, now that she'd got the children correctly meditating, there wasn't any reason for them to be distracted or get bored; they were lost to contemplation of the wolf just as they were supposed to be, so even Sophia wasn't squirming after five minutes.

Whenever Hermione peeked at their minds to check on their progress, they still seemed to be thinking right where they ought to at their core, and she waited for almost an hour and a quarter before she started with the first spell.

She began with Lou, as she wanted to give Sophia the extra time, and she intended to leave Dorian and Alissa joined together. Lowering the barrier for his spell only, she cast. His eyes flew open with shock as he experienced the feelings of a painless transformation for the first time. His grin was incandescent, and she returned the expression.

The spell worked just as well for the other three, although the youngest girl had a fit of the giggles when she felt herself transforming but found that she still had her human body on the outside. She wriggled around trying to peer over her shoulder as though to make sure that no part of her had transformed, which set the others into gales of laughter as well. Hermione conjured a mirror, since they'd need one later anyway, so that Sophia could see that she was still completely human. Trying not to grin too much herself, the Gryffindor explained patiently to the little girl that what had happened in the spell was just a feeling, like being hungry; it didn't make her look any different on the outside.

They rested for three quarters of an hour, Sophia falling asleep in Hermione's arms and Dorian leaning up against his sister. Lou and Alissa stayed awake, quietly trading facts that they remembered about wolves. This was indeed how Hermione had been at eight and ten, she was sure, if not more so. In fact, she'd probably have been quizzing the adults on other details that she might possibly need to know, so it was a good thing that that possibility hadn't occurred to these two.

They moved on to the second spell. Lou and Dorian thought looking partially wolf-like was really cool, and they'd probably have been happy staying like that, for they pouted a little when Hermione ended the spell and left them looking completely human.

Alissa understood that it was a necessary part of the process, although she looked about as happy to be sprouting fur on her human face as Hermione had been in second year following the disastrous encounter with a hair from Millicent Bulstrode's cat.

And then Hermione cast the spell on Sophia, and the little girl freaked out.

Chapter Forty-One: The Children

The only other time any parts of Sophia had been changing and covered in fur was when she'd been forcibly turned into a werewolf. Hermione had thought that they'd explained adequately to her that this was different, but it appeared that such was not the case, nor had the transformation of the other children made her feel any better; they were still werewolves, Hermione supposed.

Now the little girl was seeing herself covered in fur, was witnessing her arms begin to lengthen, and was feeling that she had a bit of a muzzle when she buried her face in her hands. Now, therefore, it was time for a full-blown tantrum complete with crying, screaming, and kicking of her little feet.

Hermione held on to Sophia throughout this storm, wanting to make sure that she knew that she wasn't being rejected. The Gryffindor was greatly relieved that she'd cast silencing charms between her children and the adults; Sophia's tantrum would almost definitely have broken everyone else's concentration.

Either Harry had the most uncanny timing ever or Hermione's alarm over the event had been broadcasted more widely than she had realized.

Everything all right?

Not exactly. She explained about Sophia's upset. I need a clever way to get her to accept the spell, and right now, we're more at 'upset all the other children so that they won't be able to transform'.

Give me a sec.

Since Hermione was holding a kicking, screaming child, she wasn't exactly going anywhere.

She felt him before she saw him, and she realized that this was a solution she should have been able to come up with on her own. She hoped it hadn't escaped her solely because it was an ability which Harry possessed and she did not. Still, that's what friends were for, getting one out of tight spots.

The worst of Sophia's reaction tapered right off in Harry's presence, and the visible alarm of the rest of the children diminished also. Hermione could feel her own worry ebbing away—in a much more natural-feeling manner than had happened when he had found her in the Highlands, so it appeared that he had been practicing.

Now that Sophia was calmer, she was able to realize that she was completely human-looking once more, which also improved her morale.

Hermione was pretty sure that Harry could keep up this emotional transfer, but she wasn't sure if they should attempt the spell again while Sophia was under the influence of it. Would she be able to transform on her own in the future, or would she depend on Harry's presence and develop some sort of a mental block? Would it interfere with Hermione's plans for the rest of the transformation?

Only it turned out that Harry had thought of that, too, because a moment later, Tonks appeared, looking worried when she saw the trembling Sophia.

"Wotcher," Tonks said mildly enough, seeming to know enough about children that sometimes the whole point was not to notice that they had been upset.

"Sophia's got a few concerns about this part of the transformation," Harry said with equal composure. "It reminds her a little too much of when she turned into a werewolf before on the full moon, doesn't it, sweetheart?"

Sophia nodded, still scrunched up in Hermione's lap, thumb in her mouth. She had yet to look up.

"But you know that Tonks isn't a werewolf, right?" Harry asked. "She didn't change even once, did she?"

The little girl shook her head.

"That's right," the Gryffindor continued cheerfully. "Because she's completely human. But she can transform so that she looks just like you do when you get to see what a pretty little wolf you're going to be."

This actually got Sophia to turn round and stare at Tonks, tears completely forgotten. She pulled her thumb out of her mouth.

"Can't," she said firmly.

Harry grinned, pleased at having fully regained the child's attention.

"If we cast the spell one more time, all you have to do is look at Tonks. Think you can do that?"

Sophia looked torn between burrowing back into Hermione and seeing if Tonks could really do what Harry was saying she could. Finally, she gave a hesitant nod.

"Good girl," Harry said, smiling at her.

Hermione cast the spell again, and as golden fur sprouted on Sophia's face and her mouth elongated into a snout, Sophia watched in astonishment as Tonks mimicked these exact changes.

"They're nothing to be afraid of," Hermione said softly.

The little girl climbed out of Hermione's lap and into Tonks's. The Auror looked a little startled by this and was quite awkward at first, as though worried she were going to have some sort of accident even sitting here on the floor and cause injury to the small child in her arms.

But Sophia grinned up at her, reaching out to pet the snout-like nose that matched her own. She seemed so delighted by the whole turn of events that Tonks really didn't have a chance of resisting her charms.

You're a life-saver, Harry.

Saviour of the Wizarding World and all that, Harry pointed out glibly.

Mentally, she stuck out her tongue at him, and he grinned widely at her before heading back to the adults.

Sophia didn't want Tonks to leave, so the woman settled in with them. The tiny blonde curled up and fell asleep on the Auror, and that was how Remus found them as Hermione was explaining to the other three children about Metamorphmagi even as she wondered how it was something they hadn't covered in all the time Tonks and the children had been at the safe house. But she supposed that Tonks often came during the busiest times when her brand of transformation was not the one which they were all concentrating on.

One glance told Hermione that Remus was completely enamoured of the picture Tonks and Sophia made, and Hermione suspected that her plan to find Sophia a home had just been jumpstarted without her needing to intervene any further at all.

Remus couldn't stay with them because he had his own charges tonight, but he spoke softly with Tonks for a few minutes and brushed Sophia's hair tenderly off her face. When it was time for him to return, he rose with obvious reluctance, bid them all farewell, and marched back to the other side of the room.

Tonks was staring after him with a very thoughtful look on her face.

"Do you think—?"

"Yes," Hermione said firmly without even letting her finish the sentence.

Tonks looked back at her in surprise.

"Yes," Hermione repeated with certainty, smiling at the other woman. "There's no question."

Tonks looked down at the little girl in her arms, smiled to herself, and nodded slightly.

The children were all able to experience the senses of the transformation without much trouble; unlike the adults, they had no qualms about running around on all fours even though they were still in human form. They had a riot sniffing and peering at all the objects that seemed so different now that they were appreciating them with a wolf's senses.

Hermione summoned them back, gave them snacks, and convinced them that they needed to rest again in the last hour and a half before the final transformation took place. Now that they'd gotten Sophia over her initial fear, she was very excited, and it had taken Tonks actually volunteering to lie down and rest with her for a few minutes to get the child to close her eyes. Fortunately, the little girl had fallen right to sleep. Tonks had nodded off as well, and since Hermione figured the Auror needed to rest, she left the older woman sleeping there until Remus came to find out what had happened to her.

Once Hermione had woken up all the children and given them the chance to drink some juice and perk up a bit, it was less than a quarter of an hour until the moment of the new moon. Since she was transforming the children one at a time, Hermione thought this was the best time she could start so that they were staggered quite close to the event.

She began with Lou, as she wanted Sophia to see what was happening and see how non-threatening it was before she was put under the spell herself. Hermione knew she wouldn't have to have the slightest worry about the little girl's reaction when she giggled like mad as Lou pranced around them, wagging his tail in a remarkably dog-like manner, tongue lolling out of his mouth, acting just like the other wolves had done and nothing like a werewolf.

The little girl's transformation occurred without a hitch, and Hermione let Sophia and Lou roll around together as she turned her attention to Damian and Alissa. They, too, changed with little trouble since Hermione was the one performing the spell; she simply put a good deal more power behind it than she had needed to with the adults.

Lou was a very dark grey and one of the rare wolves who retained the blue eye colouring which was normally lost within a few months of birth. The other three children all had yellow-gold eyes, and Sophia's fur was a similar golden brown to Remus's. Damian and Alissa transformed into wolves with identical reddish colouring.

Once all four children were transformed, they took off like four cannon balls, heading for the adults pell-mell, yipping their excitement. Hermione had to throw up a cushy barrier to prevent the children from barrelling into the adults, the majority of whom were still trying to achieve their own transformation; happy as the children were, now was not the perfect time for them to be sharing that news, especially since Remus, Harry, Draco, and Minerva were all assisting in the spell-casting that would allow the adults to transform for the first time.

Bounding into what amounted to fluffy air fortunately proved to be entertaining to the wolf cubs, and they all scrambled back onto all fours, bounded into it a few more times for good measure, and finally turned back to look at her with whines of query.

She explained that the adults were still trying to turn into wolves and that they couldn't be interrupted in the middle of that process. With a sympathetic smile for their impatience, she promised that once everyone knew how to turn into wolves under their own power, then they could mingle.

The little wolves all loped back to her, and she turned them back into little humans. Convincing them to rest now for even a few minutes was difficult, but Hermione was adamant. This next part required them to transform themselves, and that was going to take energy and concentration, neither of which would be achievable if the children were ready to keel over from fatigue.

This next part was the process that Hermione wasn't going to tell very many other people about. Possibly not anyone else. Because what she was about to do was perilously close to the Imperius Curse—or at least it could be used as such, and since Hermione wasn't going to be using her wand when she did it, it was also untraceable.

Children didn't have the mental skills or magical discipline to become Animagi. Even precocious children who'd exhibited symptoms of magic at a young age did so because of the opposite problem: they couldn't yet control their magic and this resulted in unpredictable outbursts.

It had now become necessary for seven young children to become Animagi. Since Hermione was determined to make this happen, she was going to assist them. During the previous moons, she'd been there to watch the most talented adults and to assist those who needed help, but she had done so externally. Even when she'd connected with Mary's mind, it had only been to put more force behind the spell and give the woman a boost.

When Hermione had helped the children gain their animal for the first time tonight, she'd been applying the spell. It had worked with their magic, but it had been her doing. That was why it was so important for the werewolves to subsequently practice making the transformation themselves until they could do it smoothly for the full moon, where it was crucial that the performance was a natural one done by them with their magic.

In essence now, however, Hermione was going to be the children when they transformed. Or perhaps more accurately, the children were going to be her. She was going to be fully immersed in their minds, and she was going to be making them do what she wanted. This was the only way she had worked out to allow them to be able to perform a transformation which children of that age would normally have no hope of achieving. It was what they wanted to do anyway, so she wasn't compelling them to do anything which they might object to, but it hadn't taken a genius to work out the horrible uses to which this sort of skill could be put by an unscrupulous someone. The Ministry, she had no doubt, would have a collective panic attack and throw her into Azkaban quicker than she could blink if her ability were to become known.

Hermione was going to be fully immersed in each child's mind and using his or her body and magic to turn into a wolf. The child would therefore be doing it, only while she was in there at the helm, as it were, literally demonstrating how it was done in the only truly effective way.

Since it was safest for everyone if no one knew what she was doing, she simply explained to the children that she would be there with them, ensuring that they were able to transform. They accepted this gratefully, as even Sophia was now hugely enthusiastic about being able to turn into a wolf at will and gallivant around with Remus and Tonks.

This time around, Hermione decided to start with Sophia. It would mean her transformation under her own power was happening closest to the precise new moon, and it seemed wisest to act while Sophia's enthusiasm was greatest.

Hermione had decided to start the children straight at the point of not needing to hold their wands; they would only need them sheathed and with them. Although it would mean that this change was that little bit closer to the werewolf transformation where they didn't need a wand either, Hermione thought this was balanced out by the fact that using the wand was not something that was second-nature to them yet; for their safety, the children had been admonished frequently not to use their wands outside of class time, and they were a long way away from having the necessary skills to use the wands for everyday activities.

She believed the focus would still be essential however, and she'd drilled into them as frequently as she possibly could the fact that they always needed to have their wands with them before they transformed. The transformation could hardly be counted a success if the children remained wolf pups forever, and she suspected this danger would linger longer for the less mentally disciplined children than it did for the adults who had all had years of magical training.

Hermione needed this transformation to become intuitive very quickly, so she'd come to the best compromise that she could, wands an important part of the process but other factors playing a part as well.

She settled Sophia into a comfortable position in front of Hermione and asked her to stare into Hermione's eyes. A moment later, Hermione had entered the girl's mind. It reminded her of what had happened when she had joined Harry in his vision; she had been fully immersed and outside of her own body, only then they had both been dragged to Voldemort's location, rather than her resting in Harry's mind.

Hermione had never tried to settle so fully into someone before, and she realized as she got oriented that it was really disconcerting to be looking out of someone else's eyes and seeing herself. She was still peripherally aware of her own body, but she was mostly Sophia, and Sophia, just as she'd been instructed, was staring unblinkingly at Hermione—or at least at the part of Hermione that was sitting across from them.

Hermione sternly admonished herself to get a grip. Although the Gryffindor had the upper hand in this mentality, Sophia was also conscious and aware, too. She was delighted by Hermione's arrival, thinking, Hermione could feel quite clearly, that Hermione was just doing what she'd said she would. She was here and she was ensuring that Sophia could turn into Remus's and 'Dora's pup.

Hermione's mental eyebrows rose a little at this. She hadn't realized just how much Sophia had connected to the two of them, and she hoped that the Ministry didn't kick up any sort of fuss when the two of them petitioned to adopt her. At least she'd seen tonight that Remus and Tonks were on the same wavelength, even if they hadn't discussed it with one another yet…. But she supposed that was really a problem for another time.

Concentrating on getting a feel for the little girl's magic, she found that her core hadn't grown to its full potential yet; this wouldn't occur until she turned seventeen. The problem in their current situation was that Sophia couldn't normally access any of the magic that was there. This was natural in magical children, protecting them and their parents; if children could use magic all the time to fulfill childish whims, there would be absolute chaos.

While Hermione was here, she had one specific task that she was enabling, and she made sure to restrict the connection to the core that she was forging accordingly. She then spent several more minutes ensuring to the best of her abilities that this wouldn't stunt the child's naturally increasing access to her core as she got older. It felt a bit like building wards inside Sophia, and since Hermione was quite talented with wards, she was as certain as she could be under the circumstances that this would work.

She'd have a few years, she supposed, before she found out how successful her attempt was. The wards were designed to dissolve with age, as wards tended to do naturally anyway, so within a few years, they would no longer exist; even if Hermione had miscalculated, nothing should impede the child's progress at that point. In theory.

Hermione had been given permission to move ahead with this attempt at a cure by all of the children's parents or guardians, and she only hoped that she would be able to live up to the trust which had been placed in her, be able to give them what they wanted so badly for their children.

She had always managed a great many things when she was determined.

Now that Hermione/Sophia had access to the girl's magical core for this transformation, it was easy for them to think the spell in unison, and Hermione was right there with Sophia as they transformed into a little golden wolf.

Here was another strange experience to add to all her strange experiences. Hermione hadn't really thought through the implications on her end of the transformation; she might be the only wizard who'd ever transformed as an Animagus into two different forms. If she'd thought about it more, she might have inadvertently tried to transform Sophia into a unicorn; it was just as well, then, that she'd been concentrating solely on what Sophia would feel.

Especially as a wolf pup, Hermione was a lot lower to the ground than she was used to. Both her eyes were still on the front of her head, and while her sense of smell was acute, it was very different from a unicorn's; smells that immediately intrigued the little wolf were ones which Hermione would barely remark upon in unicorn form, and she'd never, not once as a unicorn had the urge to pounce on someone, which was what Sophia wanted to do right now when she ran off to find Remus and 'Dora. Gently, Hermione restrained her.

Not just yet, love. We need to make sure that you can do this whenever you want first.

Sophia pouted a little but did want to be able to transform whenever she and Remus and 'Dora could spend time together, so she tried to concentrate again. When Hermione was sure that Sophia was paying close attention, she transformed them back into human, waited a few minutes, and then turned into a wolf once more before turning quickly back into a human.

Let's turn into a wolf one more time, Hermione suggested, and then we can go see Remus.

This time, Hermione didn't make any attempt to perform the transformation, and Sophia was so excited that she didn't even notice, just transformed as she and Hermione had already done and immediately bounded over to see Remus.

Hermione quietly lurked through Remus's praise, impressed when he asked if he could give Sophia a congratulatory hug when she was in human form as well as wolf. Sophia eagerly transformed back into human and gave Remus a great big hug. Sophia had now managed both parts of the Animagus transformation on her own, and Hermione felt as though her work was done.

Having debated with herself ever since she'd come up with this plan, she stuck with her resolution and performed the equivalent of a gentle Memory Charm. As Voldemort had proved when he'd broken Bertha Jorkins's mind, memories were never fully erased when they were Obliviated. They were blocked, and a strong enough wizard could break through that block, although it could destroy the mind that was being so attacked.

Hermione's primary concern was the children's safety, so she wasn't trying to put up any big blocks that screamed "Memory Charm here! Figure out what I'm hiding!". Instead, she relegated the clear memories of Hermione being in Sophia's mind to that place where hard-to-remember memories went. It was now one of those memories that was fuzzy and couldn't be easily recollected. If she ever needed to, Hermione could probably retrieve it, but she expected that this memory could be permanently forgotten.

Now, Sophia only had the memories of performing the transformation on her own, which was bound to be beneficial when she continued to try to transform in that capacity. These memories would stand her in good stead for the all-important transformation on the full moon. It did protect Hermione from being accused of futzing about in someone's brain, but it also protected Sophia. The Gryffindor hadn't believed it was fair to try to force the children to hide a big secret; they couldn't be aware of all the ramifications of what Hermione had done, and they were safest not possessing knowledge that others could want to gain.

Now, even should anyone find out enough details of what had happened to want to search the girl's mind—which Hermione hoped was unlikely—there would be nothing concrete for them to find. The fewer people who knew what Hermione had done, the safer everyone would be. She removed herself completely from Sophia's mind and returned her attention to the other three children she had in her care.

With minimal fuss, she once again repeated her efforts with the other three children, and soon Damian, Alissa, and Lou could all transform at will. The older two were markedly better at concentrating, and Alissa continued to help her brother, making less work for Hermione.

By the time the moon set, it was a quarter to eight in the evening, and the children weren't the only ones who were ready for bed. The mood was sleepy but ebullient as they headed upstairs, all the adults fiercely determined to be able to perform their Animagus transformation flawlessly in short order. They had two weeks to work at it, and given the focus that the group had displayed thus far, Hermione wasn't concerned.

She knew that some of them found it odd that the four children were able to transform more quickly and smoothly than some of the adults, but they all knew that the four of them had worked with her, and so far as Hermione had overheard, they seemed to be attributing the success to superior technique on her part. At some point, she was going to have to apologize to Harry, Draco, Remus, and Minerva.

They ate as light a meal as one made by Molly Weasley could be, the children looking in danger of nodding off into their plates, and then went their separate ways, the inhabitants of the house able to get to their beds more quickly than the Hogwarts contingent.

It was the evening, at least, when they returned to Hogwarts, so it wasn't unnatural for them to desire sleep, although most of them didn't usually make a habit of going to bed at all of nine o'clock in the evening. But it had been a satisfying and draining day, and even Hermione decided that she would call it a night.

Despite the fact that she was well rested by Monday morning, Potions class was not pleasant. It was a boon that the transformation had been so successful the night before; Hermione was still buoyed by the praise of the others who were so impressed that she'd been able to get the children to transform. The solid hours of revision she'd had when she'd woken in the early morning had helped, too, as she always felt more in control of her school life when she'd had the chance to get more N.E.W.T. preparation under her belt.

By the end of the three hour class, those accolades had withered and nearly died. Severus had spent the entirety of the time glaring, and she didn't think she was imagining that the particular special brand of venom was directed at her. As far as she could recollect, she hadn't done anything to deserve it. She'd been very busy brewing this past week, though, so she hadn't seen a lot of him in order to gauge his mood. She had noticed, however, that he and Viktor continued to maintain the dark and irascible area of the High Table.

If anything, she'd have thought that today Severus would be pleased—if not with her, precisely, then with the fact that her detentions started today. There was no reason for him to be this angry. Not, she admitted irritably, that that had ever stopped him in the past.

There was no doubt that he was angry. Seething, even, she would have said, because he sneered, snarled, glared, and demanded answers with minute details that weren't even in the Potions text, as though he were determined to find fault with everyone, but she was pretty sure that he was only really determined to find fault with her. He criticized her perfect potion, got in several digs about her absence the week before, and actually told her that her presentation of the potion to him at the end of class was shoddy.

She wasn't the slightest bit surprised when she didn't get her homework back at the end of class like everyone else did. She took what meagre comfort she could from the fact that he'd merely given her a scathing glare of disgust rather than announcing to the entire class why it wasn't being returned. The more time she spent in his company, however, the happier she was that she hadn't been in last week's class, when she would have felt less equipped to deal with his behaviour.

By the end of the third hour, she was tempted to ask the castle if it would ensure that Severus got lost all day, and that told her that she needed to leave before she unleashed her inner Slytherin, because then the snarky man would be in a great deal of trouble. She also didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he'd gotten to her.

She didn't have that level of control over her friends, however. By the end of class, Harry looked as though he'd dug permanent half moons into his palms with how hard he'd been clenching his hands into fists.

"What's up with him?" Ron asked, the direction of his nod indicating that he meant Severus and not Harry.

Hermione sighed. This meant that everyone had noticed.

"I swear," Harry snarled darkly, "I just want to—"

Draco tugged on his arm to get him moving further away from the classroom and prudently cut off the flow of insults that it would not be beneficial for the head of Slytherin to overhear.

"That was the sort of behaviour that I expected a few years ago when he was facing you, Harry," Draco conceded. "It seemed a bit over the top today, really."

Harry spluttered, clearly finding it more egregious than the Slytherin's description.

It's only going to get worse if you make a big deal out of it, Hermione pointed out mildly. If the students overhear you, it'll get back to Severus, and he'll keep doing it because he knows it upsets you.

Does it not upset you? Harry demanded.

There's nothing I can do about it if it does, she answered evenly, knowing that if she lost her temper, Harry would surely follow.

The truth of the matter was that it upset her more than it upset anyone else, and for all she knew, that was precisely Severus's point. If, on the other hand, he wasn't aware of just how much his behaviour could hurt her, then she didn't want to hand him a weapon. If he was trying to draw blood (figuratively speaking, she hoped), then her decision to not to show a reaction would only make him push harder, but at this point, she didn't care. If she spent all her time trying to work out what he was thinking, she had no doubt that she'd go stark raving mad.

Charms, thankfully, was the exact opposite of Potions. Filius appeared as happy as always to hear her responses and wasn't quizzing her as though determined to catch her out. She got her holiday work back with a quietly murmured compliment, and she wasn't left feeling as though she'd done something unforgivable. She was becoming convinced that every single one of her actions fell under that category when it came to Severus.

This second three hour period where she wasn't attacked in any way also had the salutary effect of giving Harry plenty of time to calm down. At dinner, even the fact that Severus was still glaring didn't make Harry too upset. In this environment, Severus was at a distance, and vitriolic as his look could be, it was harder to say it was directed largely at her.

After dinner, she spent several minutes convincing Harry that she'd be all right and then headed for Severus's office. He'd left dinner earlier than they had, and the wards had told her that this was his destination.

She knocked on the door and waited a solid thirty seconds before he answered, wrenching the door open and looming in front of her. His office was not that large, and she was entirely certain that he'd heard her straightaway.

"You're late," he pronounced immediately, displeasure etched in harsh lines across his face.

He had not, in point of fact, picked a time for the detention, but as it wasn't yet five and she'd come straight from dinner, his claim seemed even more spurious than usual. She'd actually come in the hope of ascertaining exactly when her detention would start, as she'd had the sense not to try to speak to him after class. As far as she was concerned, it would even have been logical for her to assume that she didn't have to be there until nine, because that was when the detention would have begun had it been possible for it to take place the previous week.

She thought all of these things but wasn't so foolish as to say any of them.

"I had no intention of being so, sir," she answered instead, keeping her voice carefully neutral. Saying that she was sorry would have been a bit more of a stretch than she could manage under the circumstances. "Where do you want me?"

His eyes flashed, and for a moment, she could have sworn that he was going to answer that question with every bit of the innuendo with which she had suddenly become aware her question had been inadvertently laden; she had only intended to hopefully skip over a whole bunch of insults and get straight to the business of the detention itself.

"You will be serving your detention in the classroom," he sneered, enunciating carefully, as though to be certain that she couldn't possibly misinterpret his response.

She'd gathered that he wasn't interested in her in any other way but sharply reminded herself that snappily announcing that right now would do her more harm than good.

"You may wait for me there," he said, staring down his nose at her, "since I now need to finish what I started while waiting for you."

"Of course, sir," she responded, knowing that this was designed to make her feel uncomfortable and refusing to be so. She offered him a bland smile. "You know where to find me."

Arriving at the classroom, she found that the door was warded. She contemplated the ignominy of sitting in the hallway, and then, smirking to herself, she bypassed the wards and entered the room. If Severus wanted a fight, then it was a fight that he could have.

In the classroom, she found ingredients that needed to be sorted, including a large quantity of rat spleens. She considered getting started but was willing to bet that if she did, he would announce upon his arrival that they were actually for his classes or other detentions and she was thus interfering and impertinent and other even less salutary adjectives.

Instead, she therefore took her customary seat in the front row and slipped into a light meditation, accessing as many of the wards as she could from here, seeing where everyone was. She thus had plenty of notice when Severus finally deigned to return his attention to her—forty-three minutes after he had sent her here.

She saw him hesitate for a moment outside of the classroom, un-ward the door, and then bang it closed with true ferocity. She didn't so much as flinch.

"There were wards on this door," he snarled at her as he came stalking all the way into the room. He stopped in front of her, arms crossed, looming again, making as imposing a figure as possible.

"Yes, there were," she agreed.

"You had no business breaking through them," he snapped.

"To the contrary, sir," she said coolly. "You told me to wait in the classroom, so that's what I've done."

There was a moment of very stilted silence as he no doubt recalled exactly what he'd said to her. His lips tightened, and she knew that she'd caught him out on it—not that he would ever admit it out loud, of course.

He gestured at the ingredients that were sitting out.

"You might have done something productive with your time."

She nearly laughed but was careful to keep her voice expressionless. "I was waiting for instructions, sir. I'd hate to do anything you disapproved of."

He was regarding her through sharply narrowed eyes, no doubt sensing the sarcasm that she was very carefully not allowing into her tone.

"You will mince all the rat spleens and sort through that crate of ingredients, disposing of any that are no longer active."

"Yes, sir," she said simply.

Rat spleens were quite difficult to cut; they were small and slippery, and mincing them evenly was no easy task. It wasn't one of her favourite chores, but if Severus thought to disturb her by assigning it, he'd gone wrong. She had an entirely well-stocked lab of her own, and she was quite familiar with a vast array of ingredients which were used in potions. She could handle the distasteful ones whenever it became necessary.

She Summoned one of her own knives, quite glad that she had learnt the trick—a combination of Summoning and Conjuring, more or less—that adult wizards had which allowed objects to appear without their having to actually come flying through all the intervening space, something it was always wiser to avoid when knives were involved.

Her own knives were very carefully sharpened and in tip-top condition, which could not always be said for the knives in the classroom; Severus had excellent equipment, but the students could hardly be trusted to take perfect care of what they used.

Without another word to her professor, she cleaned her hands, set out the containers into which she would be putting the spleens, cleaned them with a wordless charm—since he hadn't actually said anything about not using magic, she figured what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him in this case—and set to the task of mincing.

Making potions was an activity which soothed her, and it was easy to sink into that routine and forget that she was being punished in the Potions classroom while Severus was on the other side of the room glaring at her. In shorter order than rat spleens had likely ever been minced by a student in detention before, she had them all neatly bottled. Unlike the students who normally slunk desultorily into this room for their detentions, she didn't waste time complaining even in her own mind, and she knew the most efficient method to get this particular job done.

Looking at her work, she reflected that whoever got to use these would be quite lucky; pre-prepared ingredients were normally a good deal shoddier in her experiences. It had been a positive mound of spleens, and she couldn't help but wonder just what they were going to be used for or if Severus was trying to stock them for a very long time to come. Since the bottles she'd packaged them in had been completely sterile, and she'd sealed them once the spleens were inside, they would last for at least twelve months if properly stored. She wanted to ask but held her tongue.

She cleaned up after herself, aware of his eyes on her, but he didn't say anything, so neither did she. Instead, she wordlessly moved on to the next task, finding a very bizarre array of containers in the box which she had been asked to sort through. Most of these, she discovered, were full of very noxious, rotting ingredients. She had a heightened sense of smell from her unicorn side, so there was no need for her to investigate more closely before she knew exactly what she was dealing with and the necessity of its destruction—preferably as soon as possible.

Setting aside the ones which needed to be got rid of, she went through the whole box once more. There were a handful of bottles, it turned out, containing ingredients which hadn't turned or were usable in their new form, such as the newts' eyes, which had pickled. Staring at the mess in front of her, she realized that she could combine the outdated Darmon's Dust with the strong solution of ammonium hydroxide; the resultant solution could be distilled and used in potions which required both ingredients.

Making any other alterations that would save ingredients from being binned, she began to catalogue in her head, wondering if certain potions she usually made could be adapted to incorporate the imperfect ingredients she had here. Unfortunately, this was idle speculation, as the ingredients weren't for her, and such experimentation definitely did not fall within the scope of Severus's detention.

The man in question was currently glaring at her with particular sharpness, so she Vanished the ingredients that were beyond salvation and left the salvaged and new-made ingredients in neat piles next to all the rat spleens.

By the time she looked over at Severus, he was, of course, pretending to be busy doing heaven knew what at his desk. She waited until she saw his quill pause.

"I've finished, sir," she said deferentially.

"In your six and a half years at Hogwarts," he drawled coldly without looking up, "have you ever known ingredients to be stored on the students' desks?"

She suppressed a sigh. She'd walked right into that one. "No, sir."

"Then you are hardly finished, Miss Granger."

She spent a brief moment really loudly thinking all the imprecations that she could never actually say to him and then moved all the ingredients into the students' storeroom. This room was also warded since it was after hours and none of the students should be using it, but since Severus had not mentioned this fact, she assumed that he'd decided that if she could remove the wards for the classroom, she was capable of doing the same for the door here.

This was perfectly true, of course, but not particularly polite of him. She was tempted to rip the wards into shreds and see how he liked it, but as the most likely outcome would be his forcing her to mend them before he announced a dozen more detentions, she saved herself the work and did the job properly.

Once she had the wards down, it was another task to find room for all the ingredients that she had just bottled. She knew without question that he would never consent to her just putting them away haphazardly, and given that they were sorted alphabetically, she had to completely rearrange shelves when her giant influx of rat spleens displaced a whole slew of ingredients.

It took her nearly two hours to get through the sorting. The more she moved the ingredients, the more ingredients she found out of the proper order, and she could hardly pretend that she hadn't seen them when she was moving them all so carefully in order to get her own ingredients put away. She set to work without complaint beyond thinking that all the rest of the students needed to be given a sharp reminder on how to follow the alphabet and store ingredients.

When she finally emerged from the storeroom, she was tired and thirsty, and Severus was still at his desk.

"Has Gryffindor incompetence risen to new heights?" he asked. She assumed this question was rhetorical. "Not even my first-years take so long to shelve a couple of ingredients."

"I was taking a great deal of care, sir," she answered, still maintaining that even tone, "to ensure that they were in the proper place. Especially with the rat spleens, I'm afraid it took a little bit of rearranging to make sure that everything had the proper room and nothing was out of order."

He said nothing, which she took to mean that she'd chosen wisely but he didn't want to admit it. As he never wanted to admit it. She wondered if they'd speak more if she screwed up with more frequency.

Chilly silence descended for several long minutes during which time she contemplated all the other tasks that he could potentially assign her.

"You may go," he finally said, tone that of a lord dismissing his lowliest servant. "You will return here tomorrow evening at five o'clock."

"Yes, sir," she agreed. "Goodnight."

As expected, no pleasantry was returned, and she slipped out the door without another word. No doubt the detention could have been worse, but she wondered what other people's detentions with the Potions master were like. Did he really stare at them all the time unless they looked over at him, at which point, he appeared to be doing his work? Did he really make them work for five hours?

Sighing, she made her way back to her quarters, craving a shower to truly eliminate the dust and grime from the potions, not to mention the remains of the rat spleens.

On the plus side, Severus hadn't brought up Harry even once; perhaps she should be very grateful for the silence that had dogged the detention. If he'd spent the whole time needling her about the other Gryffindor, she wasn't sure that she would have been able to keep her temper.

Without conversation of some kind, the detentions would be rather boring, but that was probably the point. Plus she wouldn't have to worry about saying anything that Severus might get angry about. Silence was probably a good protection for both of them.

If all else failed, she could use the tried and true method that Harry and Ron attested had got them through years of detentions with Severus: imagining that Severus was the potion ingredient they were chopping up or that it was his face they were scouring as they cleaned cauldrons.

Harry was waiting in the common room, not as surprised as she might have hoped, given that this was her mate who was responsible, that five hours had passed and she looked as though she'd lost an encounter with a giant dust bunny.

If she and Severus had been on speaking terms, she would have wanted to know just where the ingredients that she'd sorted through had come from and why they suddenly had pounds upon pounds of rat spleens. Maybe he'd finally decided to put her natural curiosity to good use and torture her with unanswered questions.

There was also the chance that as the week progressed and she did more and more detentions, they would be able to strike up at least minimal conversation. He'd had clear "talk to me and die" signs up today. Perhaps he was daring her to try something so that he could assign her more detentions. Albus might have intervened if she'd been given weeks of detention at once, but if Severus kept assigning more as each week ended, there was very little that anyone could do to stop him. She smiled wryly to herself. Something for her to look forward to.

Harry took in her appearance with a raised eyebrow.

"Went that well, did it?"

She shrugged. "Sorted through ingredients and minced rat spleens, that's all."

He made a face of disgust. "I'd say better you than me, but that doesn't seem very supportive."

She laughed softly. "Not to worry. I deal with plenty of unpleasant ingredients in my own lab, and I can handle a few rough ones in his. He picked the wrong person if he thinks I'll be squeamish."

Harry shook his head. "I guess so."

"I'm for a shower. And then I think I'll call it a night. Revise in private and mentally prepare for tomorrow."

He smiled at her. "As you say. You're in for the same tomorrow evening, then?"

She shrugged. "Don't have the specifics yet, but I imagine so. He's no doubt wracking his brains for the most horrible task possible as we speak."

"You should sound more worried about that," Harry declared solemnly.

She snorted. "There's no point in being worried. He'll come up with what he comes up with, and I've weathered some horrors already."

The most recent of which was Severus's badly mangled body, and if he thought he could come up with anything worse than those memories, all of which could still assail her when she closed her eyes, then he was much mistaken. She wasn't about to be overcome by anything he could think up for the Potions classroom.

"You realize you're a little scary sometimes?" Harry asked, as though he were just checking in with her offhand.

"I thought you knew me by now," she said, shaking her head at him. "Goodnight."

Harry offered a half-shrug, half nod, smiling at her. "In the best possible way, of course. 'Night."

She showered quickly, feeling much better once she watched the accumulated dirt swirl down the drain. The hot spray also beat out the aches in her taut muscles. By the time she emerged from the bathroom, she felt entirely human again and much more equipped to continue on with her evening and put the detention behind her.

As she'd told Harry she would, she did some revision. She worked in her lab so that Harry and Draco could have some private time in the common room if they desired it. They always had his bedroom, of course, but she knew that they enjoyed sprawling out on the couch together.

Since she wasn't hugely desirous of starting her own potion after the evening she'd just had, revision with her books spread out the length of one of the countertops seemed a very valid option. She didn't often get pestered while in her lab, and this meant she could work quietly and efficiently. Harry was closest to the door if there were any problems that they needed to address as Head Boy or Head Girl, so she was hopefully done for the night.

Hermione slept for almost six hours, which told her that she was still recovering from the new moon and her night of labour. A night of relaxation would have been very beneficial, but instead, she got a week of detention, and then it was practically time to start the next batch of Weresbane and Wolfsbane.

Her life was currently a never-ending cycle of potions, really. She suppressed a sigh, reminding herself that she loved potions and that she wouldn't be Severus's student for very much longer. A few more weeks, and then, much as he might want to, he couldn't force her to mince or chop or sort or organize. She would be free to do as she wished.

Revising in the morning, she spent breakfast not looking at the glowering men at the front of the room before heading off to the next set of classes. Fortunately, since she wasn't being taught by Severus today or Viktor at all, there was very little actual antagonism directed at her, which she hoped would stand her in good stead for what was to come.

She showed up at the dungeon classroom after dinner, as instructed, making sure to be there a few minutes before five because there was no way she was going to be accused of being late for two nights in a row. This way, even if Severus's clock was faster than all the other clocks in Hogwarts, she'd still be on time.

Of course, this didn't mean he'd comment upon her timely arrival; with Severus, it was more a case of "if you don't have anything nasty to say, don't say anything at all". In another life, she might even have been able to make a joke out of it, but right now, it would only be inviting more detentions, so she once again kept her mouth firmly shut.

The classroom looked neat and orderly, so she looked at Severus curiously, wondering what task she would be assigned.

"It has been brought to my attention that the storeroom is in some disarray. All the ingredients have been removed from the shelves, which you will clean—by hand—before you put all the ingredients back in the proper order."

She nodded with a polite, "Yes, sir," knowing what she'd find before she entered. Her assumption was confirmed when she opened the door to the enclosed space. All the work she'd done yesterday had been completely destroyed; all the ingredients were now piled haphazardly on the floor.

Since the ingredients had been piled in the area on which she'd need to walk to be able to get to the shelves to clean them, she would have to pull everything out first and stack it along the walls of the classroom before she could even start her assigned task.

Looking at the complete mess in front of her, she wondered how long it had taken him to arrange it so that it was this much trouble for her. When had he found the time? The ingredients couldn't have been dumped on the floor because she could see that they were intact rather than badly jumbled or broken. Yet if they'd been taken down methodically, there would have been a great deal more order than was currently displayed. It looked as though small children had pulled them off the shelves. Or perhaps house-elves, who'd been told to arrange them decoratively on the floor….

She reminded herself that she wasn't going to let Severus see that he was getting to her.

Deciding that the only way she was going to finish before tomorrow morning was if she sorted as she went, she arranged the ingredients alphabetically as she stacked them in the classroom. If the man was feeling truly malicious, he could come by and destroy those piles, but there was nothing for it; he was going to make this as much work as he wanted no matter what precautions she took. For all she knew, tomorrow she could come back and find that the ingredients were in complete disarray once more. That was, unfortunately, his prerogative.

Frowning, she admitted to herself that it would annoy her more than working on different unpleasant jobs each night; with the rat spleens, she knew she'd done good work that someone would find useful at some point. She could say the same once the storeroom was clean. If she had to perform the same task over and over, no one would benefit, and she would feel that her labour was useless. Smiling grimly to herself, she figured she'd better put her very best face on and not let him know what she was thinking, lest he get more bright ideas on how to torture her.

The more containers she arranged in orderly rows in the classroom, the more she realized that there was work that needed to be done on that end, too; she set about cleaning the containers themselves as she removed them from the storeroom. The ones which she imagined had originally been at the very back of the shelves often had no labels, or at least none that were legible, so she had to open a fair few to ascertain what was inside. Some of the bottles and vials were so grimy it was impossible to see the contents, so she rectified that as well.

She set aside all the ingredients which had outlived their useful shelf-life or no longer working properly; he hadn't asked her to, but she couldn't bring herself to simply put them back. If he yelled at her later, she could always return them to the shelves at that point. Since she could similarly act out her obsessive nature and he could destroy it if he wished, she began a list of ingredients that they were growing short on or gaps that she found in the ingredients which she didn't believe were caused by their being stored elsewhere due to danger or expense.

In less than an hour, she'd determined that whatever work Ron and Harry had done on the storeroom back at the beginning of the year, they hadn't done a terribly careful job. Given how they'd been roped into reluctantly assisting, this didn't really come as a surprise, but she wondered if she could nevertheless give them a smack up the side of the head for the additional work that she had to do now.

The shelves were dusty and dirty, the degree of grime increasing exponentially the higher up and further back she went. Quite apart from the orders she had received for this detention, she couldn't imagine putting the clean and organized ingredients back on such shelves; she wanted the containers to be displayed as advantageously as possible, and she wanted to minimise the chances of contamination from dirt and other spilt ingredients.

She knew that most of the students wouldn't care, of course, but it was now a matter of pride for her. And while she might not have had Harry's home life, she had still had years of cleaning the Muggle way to ensure that she knew exactly what she was doing.

The ingredients went back shelf by shelf, and as she arranged them, she realized that they had been really quite disorganized before. There were vials, bottles, and bags that must have been stuffed in corners because she'd never seen them before. She also confirmed what she'd suspected when she was taking all the ingredients off the floor: all the rat spleens she'd minced last night were gone. She suppressed a sigh and hoped that he hadn't just binned the lot of them; she'd done good work.

She was still a bit puzzled by the fact that Severus had decided to leave the students' store cupboard organized alphabetically. It was certainly the easiest method for the students to remember, but she knew firsthand that it wasn't the way he organized his own stores. Had he actually decided to make it easier for them?

Despite the dismal state of affairs she had found this evening, she knew that an alphabetical organization had the best chance of staying organized for the longest period of time without needing to be completely overhauled.

Severus's normal modus operandi under those sorts of circumstances, however, would be to make the students fix it in detention or in whatever other manner he wished. On the other hand, having students constantly cleaning it out would afford them the opportunity to break or steal more of the stock than was perhaps wise.

The Potions master might like to watch and gloat during detention, but he was unlikely to relish the task of scrutinizing each movement for theft. There were also the detentions, like hers tonight, where he pretended the student didn't exist, and for students who weren't her, that might present an irresistible opportunity. It was mildly annoying that even in the midst of his insane punishment of her he knew she wouldn't try to steal any of the ingredients, but she couldn't bring herself to do it even to prove him wrong—and she supposed that he could always have an Accio Potions ingredients! ready in case he suspected that students had taken any liberties.

Disastrous accidents would be exponentially more likely, too, she supposed, if a first-year, for example, were put in the storeroom; although the most dangerous and expensive of the ingredients weren't kept in this cupboard, certain combinations of these ingredients could have explosive results, and some sort of whole scale mixing of ingredients was bound to be unpredictable. The same sorts of risks weren't involved if the student were obliged to scrub out some disgusting cauldrons. All in all, leaving the ingredients sorted alphabetically was probably the least likely to cause Severus severe headaches.

As she finally got the last of the vials back on the shelves and began to scrub the floor that she'd trekked across all evening, she reflected that he really should have had her performing a task like cleaning bedpans, as he had made Ron do for that memorable detention in second year which still made the redhead's ears burn. As unpleasant as this could be at times, a potion-oriented task was going to be one which she'd performed before—and probably in her spare time.

As she reached the door on her hands and knees, reflecting that if the choice were hers, this bit would have been done with magic even if it would be inadvisable to try to clean potion ingredients the same way, she found herself in the shadow of her looming professor, who'd been standing outside the door for the last ten minutes or so, if the wards were being as reliable as usual.

"Finally finished, have you?" he demanded.

"Just about, sir," she answered calmly, despite the ignominy of her position. "I need to clean my equipment."

She saw Severus's spell light wash over her as the scrub brush she'd been holding disappeared along with the bucket that she'd be dipping it in. So much for her equipment, apparently. She rose to her feet, not relishing having any sort of conversation with him while she was on her hands and knees.

Sadly, she didn't suppose he'd be likely to let a wordless, wandless cleaning charm on her person go unremarked upon, so she stood there in her grimy glory and waited to discover if she was going to make it out of a second detention unscathed.

He stepped all the way into the room, and she tried not to fidget as he surveyed it with a critical eye. She had no doubt that he would find things to criticize if he were looking into the Mirror of Erised, so she wasn't holding out much hope.

He caught her gaze with his own dark stare.

"What would you do, Miss Granger," he inquired silkily, "if you came back tomorrow night and found this storeroom in the same condition in which it began this evening?"

She offered the barest of shrugs, thinking this a particularly stupid question. His eyes narrowed, so she verbalized her reply. "I would do whatever you assigned for detention, sir; if that included cleaning the stores again, that is, of course, what I would do."

"Without complaint?" he pursued.

"I'm entirely certain, sir," she responded with a hint of incredulity, "that the point of detention is not for students to complain."

Whatever she was thinking, he would never hear it.

"You'd really start over from scratch."

"I really would," she confirmed, not rolling her eyes with an effort as she thought this had surely been established several sentences ago.

"I see you've left out some ingredients and a list," he said, changing tactics and moving out of the room to gesture towards the bottles and scroll on the desk.

"Outdated ingredients," she explained, following him, "and a list of what the storeroom looked to be growing short on or didn't seem to stock at all." He was staring at her very fixedly, and she shrugged. "Now seemed the most sensible time to do it."

"I didn't ask it of you," he pointed out.

A little bit of a sigh escaped before she could prevent it. "No, you didn't, sir, but I daresay you can burn the list and tell me to put the ingredients back with very little trouble on your part."

He was frowning at her, and pronounced suddenly, "I hadn't anticipated your being quite so Hufflepuff about this."

Her eyebrows rose. "I'm sure I can burn the list, if it's too much trouble for you, sir."

"Bugger the list," he snarled. "You've just told me you'll do it all over again tomorrow."

"If that's what you tell me to do, sir," she answered carefully. It wasn't as though she wanted to do it all over again.

He looked frustrated. "Just as you would have stayed in detention all year in February, is that it?"

She nodded, his comment finally making her wonder if he'd intended her to complete this task. She would have thought that he'd learnt, after that original fiasco, that she knew better than to contradict him when he assigned detention. In case he hadn't noticed, assuming he was joking when he was not was rather disastrous. Nobody would be stupid enough to assume he was joking when he was glaring "I want you to die a slow and painful death" all the time.

"Sit," he said, gesturing at a desk and stool.

She faced him squarely, ignoring the order.

"It's late," she said as firmly as she dared. "I believe I've fulfilled the task you assigned for this detention, have I not?"

"This is not a task for your detention," he answered impatiently. "We need to talk."

Crossing her arms, she didn't move. "If I've finished my detention, sir, then I'd like to go."

"I've just said we need to talk," he said dangerously.

"And I heard you," she answered, no longer caring if she was treading a very fine line. "But you also just said it had nothing to do with my detention. If my detention is over, then I should be free to go."

"Not before we talk," he said through clenched teeth, and she knew he was trying to keep his temper.

"I don't want to talk," she answered steadily.

It was, in fact, pretty high up on the list of tasks she did not want to perform. She'd just spent too many hours two evenings in a row completing tasks that he apparently didn't even care about.

If he'd bloody well wanted to talk, he should have asked straightaway. She would still have refused, but at least she wouldn't have been thoroughly pissed off—and kind of embarrassed, if it turned out that she'd just been had for the second time.

He was looming once more, his eyes glittering, the grating edge in his voice impossible to miss. "You can't possibly expect me to simply forget all the issues raised at that little meeting in Albus's office. There is a great deal that we need to discuss."

She spoke very slowly and clearly to be sure that he couldn't misunderstand her: "No."

Chapter Forty-Two: The Detentions

Hermione was fully aware that Severus had questions he wished to ask her, but since the majority of these had answers which she wasn't willing to give him—they would leave him with far too much power over her—she thought it better to state her intentions plainly up front.

He blinked at her, clearly taken aback by the abruptness of her answer. A frown furrowed his brow and then he said slowly, as though making a conscientious effort to speak calmly and rationally, "It is very much my wish to discuss this."

"I don't care how much you want to talk about it," she responded, allowing a degree of anger and frustration to leach into her voice. To hell with it. She was already in detention. "Every time we start a conversation like this, it ends with you throwing whatever I've said back in my face and reminding me forcibly that you're my professor and I'm only a student. I have no interest in doing that again."

"I won't do so," he answered immediately.

She faced him sternly, lips pinched together before she gained enough control over herself to speak, her voice strained. "A few hours after taking my virginity, you said I wasn't Pure anymore and used that as an excuse to throw me out and stop speaking to me. So you'll have to forgive me if I have very little faith in any assurances you give me now."

His lips twisted. "What would you have me say?"

"That's exactly it, Professor," she snarled, still incredulous that he hadn't noticed that he was using his power as a professor to hold her here, that he'd forced her to hold this conversation after the detention that he'd given her. "I wouldn't have you say anything."

"I only want to talk," he said with what passed as mildness for him.

"I know that's what you want!" she snapped. "It's always what you want. You appear to make some sort of concession long enough to convince me to tell you whatever it is that you want to know, and then you take it back. I'm not doing that anymore. I don't owe you any answers, not about this."

Not if she wanted to have a single shred of dignity left when all was said and done, anyway.

"The situation is altered now," he pronounced.

"How?" she demanded, her frayed temper snapping. If she were going to be stuck in detention until the end of the year, she might as well have the satisfaction of knowing that she'd spoken clearly. "I'm still your student. I still have to call you 'Professor'. I'm in detention. You can still take points, throw me out, and leave me with no recourse." Her voice had risen an octave or two. "How is that different?"

He was regarding her with some surprise, which she thought was a little rich given that he must surely have realized that he'd been pushing her to this point all night.

Despite her display of temper, he appeared to have retained his, for he answered quite calmly. "I no longer have to pretend to be a Death Eater."

"And you're telling me that your pretending to be a Death Eater in public impacted your private interactions with me," she said flatly.

"It affected my entire life," he answered.

She imagined that this was true to a degree, but she wasn't willing to let him use it as a catch-all excuse for his abysmal behaviour over the year.

"Then we can all be relieved that that time in your life is over," she answered coolly, refusing to be swayed.

He'd managed to successfully hide the fact that he was a spy from Voldemort for years; she shouldn't be surprised that Severus could turn any conversation around on its head.

He stared at her for a long moment, silently assessing with dark eyes, and when he spoke, his tone was very measured. "I give you my word that I will not remove or have removed any house points, assign or have assigned any detentions, or in any other way punish or have you punished for any reason for the rest of the school year. Nor will I punish your friends or your house in your place, although they are still open to the regular course of punishments for their own infractions."

She opened her mouth to rebut this, thinking that he was only doing exactly what she'd accused him of before, telling her whatever was necessary to gain her cooperation.

Fully processing what he had said, she closed her mouth again. Unlike all those other times, just now, he had specifically offered her his word. He had also laid out a clear time frame that truly exempted her from punishment by him; he had most definitely omitted to do so on previous occasions.

Of course, there was nothing concrete to say that he couldn't go back on this arrangement, too, but two deliberate decisions on his part made her think this unlikely.

First and most importantly to her, he had formally offered his word. Wizards of good repute didn't go back on that; if she wouldn't trust his given word, it basically meant that she didn't trust him. If she chose not to accept, she knew that was how he would take it.

Secondly, he had upped the stakes and actually offered not to punish her for anything, not just for all their personal issues. This meant that he trusted her not to take advantage of what he was offering and commit detention-worthy acts that he could no longer punish her for. For someone who had spent the length of her school career—and probably the last two decades—relishing his punishment of Gryffindors for infractions big and small, real and imaginary, this was a concession indeed.

"You give me your word," she repeated, stressing the last word, wanting to be certain that they both understood what he was saying.

He gave one short, sharp nod; from the tension in his body, it appeared that he was now expecting to be denied.

"Then I accept," she answered simply. "You have convinced me once again to trust you. But I warn you now, Severus; this is the very last chance I can offer you."

She prayed that they wouldn't need another one. Right now, it felt as though she'd risked too much too frequently to be able to withstand more uncertainty from him.

"Understood," he said curtly.

It was as though a giant weight had been lifted from between them, but there was a vacuum in its wake, leaving both of them uncertain as to exactly how to proceed.

It felt a bit as though the oxygen had been sucked out of the room, leaving her relieved, light-headed, and a little bit dizzy.

She tilted her head to regard him curiously and asked with some amusement, "You really thought it was best to broach this subject after making me clean the storeroom for near on six hours?"

More of the harsh lines on his face eased at the mild tone with which she had made this query.

"You were very quiet and efficient," he pointed out. "I lost track of the time."

She laughed lightly. "You're not doing yourself any favours. You sat at your desk for six hours, and you're telling me you didn't notice me slaving away over here?"

He shook his head. "You mean you didn't notice? I went back to my quarters for tea and ended up reading for several hours."

She looked at him incredulously, saw that he was serious, and dissolved into laughter. "I guess I did get rather involved in my work. Remind me to tell you later how appalled I am at your lax detention-administering skills."

His response told her how clearly he'd switched out of "professor mode", because she'd actually insulted his professional conduct, and his lips quirked up slightly.

"I'll be sure to make a note in my day planner," he promised.

"Would you really have scrapped it all?" she inquired suddenly. "Made me do it over again tomorrow?"

He shook his head, amusement dancing in his eyes, and she was delighted because it had been a very long time since she had seen that emotion directed non-maliciously at her. "I wanted to talk to you, not wake up six weeks later in the hospital wing with no idea what had happened to me."

She smiled at him, declaring loftily, "I'll have you know that I very rarely curse professors."

"I feel much better now," he said dryly.

"I felt certain that would be the case," she answered easily. She looked back at the storeroom. "You don't usually have students do this on detention, do you?"

He raised his eyebrows in clear disdain. "Are you insane? Let them into the storeroom and tell them to sort it through? There wouldn't be a storeroom left when they were done."

"I thought not," she answered, not bothered by his tone when she knew he was being scathing towards an equal, not a student. "Does that mean you wouldn't be averse to a little bit of assistance in assuring the students put the ingredients back in the proper place?"

"What sort of assistance did you have in mind?" he asked, wisely not committing before he knew her terms.

"Wards. They would encourage ingredients to find their usual spots which would result in plenty of students being guided."

"And for those students who are … particularly dense?" he inquired silkily.

She was pretty sure he was thinking of Neville, which really wasn't fair anymore. Of course, he might well be thinking of Tonks, too; those who caused the most explosions seemed to stick in his mind.

She smiled sweetly at him. "Assuming that you've told them to put the ingredients back in the proper locations, they're not following the school rules when they put them elsewhere. That's grounds for a certain level of punishment, wouldn't you say?"

His lips twitched. "I shall remember to be wary when I see that expression in future. What are you going to do to them?"

"They'll receive a mild shock every time they erroneously place a container," she said with relish.

He actually let out a short bark of laughter. "And all the blame will be apportioned to me, I suppose?"

Her smile deepened. "What would I have to do with the warding of the Potions storeroom?"

Shaking his head, he said, "Have a go, then. But if Albus complains, you're explaining it to him."

This seemed fair to her; especially given the crazy and dangerous stunts Albus had allowed Harry, her, and Ron to get up to, she didn't think the headmaster would have a leg to stand on. She was sure that she could counter any other objections that the man might have. It was far more dangerous to play Quidditch, for example, and this was only designed to encourage students to follow rules that were in place for their safety as well as for convenience; potions ingredients always had the potential to be volatile.

She set to work, pleased that she could cast wandlessly since Severus already knew that she was capable of it. If he wasn't aware that she could practice this level of magic without a wand, then it would be a revelation for him. Since they were trying to renew their relationship anyway, a show of trust in that regard was unlikely to go amiss.

It took her almost a half hour to complete the casting. Since many of the ingredients were magical in their own right, it was important that the wards were cast very delicately so that there was no contamination or unexpected results. The wards had to be able to identify the ingredients, sort alphabetically, and make allowances for differing container sizes and the move from one shelf to another, and then she had to work the maintenance charm into the wards which would attract the containers back to their previous locations but would allow for containers to be used up and new ones to be added in without forcing anything out of order.

Finally, she set up the shock charm with an increased severity if the same mistake was made again but with safeguards so that no one could deliberately continue to put a potion in the wrong place over and over and seriously injure themselves. She could just see students doing that on a dare or in order to prevent themselves from taking a dreaded test.

Given how some of the students felt about Potions, she was certain that even the fact that real damage would be done to their bodies wouldn't deter certain desperate cases. Since there was no way she wanted to explain to Albus why she'd been responsible for sending fellow students to the hospital wing, she was nipping that problem in the bud.

By the time she'd finished, Severus was looking at her curiously. Since she'd wanted to ensure that the wards would last and had worked them far more carefully into the existing wards than most people did, she wanted to assure him that it hadn't taken an unnaturally long time at all. She also hadn't been terribly explicit in what she was going to do before she'd done it, so the "mild shock" that she'd first mentioned might have led him to think that there were very few steps to the process.

She smiled at him once she finished and watched as he stepped into the storeroom, took a vial of powdered moonstone off the shelf and very deliberately moved it over next to the shredded squid tentacles and set it down. When nothing happened, he raised an eyebrow eloquently.

"You didn't really expect me to have it shock you, did you, Severus? You're exempt from the wards, of course."

He still seemed to be testing her. "I didn't feel a pull to put the ingredient back where it belonged."

"It's not supposed to pull your body there by your arm," she said, rolling her eyes—as discreetly as possible given that she was still dealing with Severus, and she supposed that she had not explained herself very clearly. "You have a great deal of magic and mental discipline, Severus; there's nothing for you to notice. A first-year student who was just a little careless, however, would find himself or herself far more likely to set the ingredient down in just the right place rather than over, under, or to the side. I'm doing this properly, I assure you."

"As you say," he said with amusement, moving the ingredient back to its proper location. "I suppose you're not shocking yourself?"

She smiled. "You suppose correctly. Like you, I hardly need any extra inducement to place ingredients in the proper location."

"So I'll have to wait until the little dunderheads try tomorrow?" he pursued.

"You'll have to wait," she confirmed. "But just think what a pleasant surprise it will be for all of them."

He smirked. "I'll be sure they need to retrieve and replace a number of ingredients."

She was entirely certain that he'd do just that, and she tried to hide her glee that she had pleased him, reminding herself that she probably shouldn't be getting so much pleasure out of the prospect of shocking her fellow students. But honestly, she'd wanted to do it for years when they were being completely daft, and this had been the perfect opportunity.

He stepped away from the door and was about to close and let it ward itself when she had a thought.

"If you wish," she said hurriedly, laying a hand on his arm to prevent him from closing the door, "I could add another layer to the wards so that all the containers stick in place and seal if the wards are ever breached. If someone other than you or an authorized person breaches the wards, they wouldn't get very far with anything."

He regarded her narrowly. "You are aware that I am a wizard?"

Bugger. "An extremely talented one. Sorry." She offered a nervous smile. "I get overexcited sometimes. Bit of a show-off, really."

A great big giant show-off, depending on whom you asked, and she should have considered that it would offend Severus instead of opening her big mouth and blundering into it like this.

"I suppose next you are going to offer to ward my private stores?"

Her eyes flew to his, and her smile became more genuine—she probably looked like an idiot—as she realized that by some miracle he'd decided to make a joke out of it.

"You wouldn't really have wanted to miss out on my being stuck as a half-cat for five weeks, now would you?"

He rolled his eyes, observing sourly, "I still find it incredible that Albus allowed you to get away with that."

She shrugged. "I had to suffer through five weeks of hair balls and paws that made it almost impossible to turn pages in a book. I suffered, I assure you."

"You could have been seriously injured had the potion been more flawed," he said severely.

"The potion worked just fine," she answered indignantly. "It was only the cat hair that was the problem."

"How can you be certain that it wasn't any other aspect of the potion?" he asked, frowning.

She cleared her throat and did not answer, remembering belatedly that the last time they had discussed this—back at the beginning of the school year—she had been careful not to implicate anyone else.

Severus let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Am I to understand that both Mr Potter and Mr Weasley had a successful transformation?"

She smiled faintly, saying circumspectly, "If they'd taken my Polyjuice, I imagine it would have been successful, yes."

There was an edge to his voice now. "I said I wouldn't punish you or them, remember?"

She shook her head. "You said you wouldn't punish them in my place; you didn't say anything about not punishing them for their … missteps if you learnt incriminating evidence from me. I don't fancy them being in detention for the rest of term, thank you very much."

"I suppose Albus was aware of what happened?"

She shrugged. "Albus knows a great deal, and while we weren't aware of his interference at the time, in retrospect, it seems entirely likely that he was keeping an eye on us, yes. We were trying to figure out who the heir of Slytherin was."

"Of course you were," he answered, sounding a mixture of annoyed and almost approving. "There's no other reason for noble Gryffindors to be performing such dangerous stunts."

"All in the name of the side of light and right," she answered with a self-deprecating smile. "We did exactly what we thought we had to do."

"As though it were your responsibility to find the Heir of Slytherin and close the Chamber of Secrets," he scoffed.

Her lip curled up into a twisted smile. "As though it were Harry's responsibility to defeat Voldemort and be the Saviour of the Wizarding World. Imagine that."

He grimaced and changed the subject, which she took to mean that he'd taken her point. "I don't expect any other ingredients to go missing from my private stores."

"While I don't have the slightest intention of taking any," she answered immediately, "I'm hardly going to issue a blanket statement for the rest of the student body."

Or devoted house-elves, but it was probably best not to go there.

"Mr Potter is one of the few who would dare," Severus responded, "and I feel quite certain he would look to you."

She laughed and decided to steer rather wide of finding out if he meant that comment to incriminate her. "He would if he had any sense. My potion-making abilities and ingredients should be more than sufficient for any of his potion needs."

"And the rest of the students will have to make do with the student storeroom."

This wasn't entirely what she had meant, but on balance, she decided it wasn't worth arguing with Severus about. Harry had bizarre needs that went far beyond the scope of what most of the other students had to face, and Severus was just needling her, really; if he actually thought that she was assisting Harry to get any of his actual potions brewed, they wouldn't just be casually talking about it now.

"They'll have to make do with the new and improved storeroom," she corrected blandly.

It would no doubt take several classes before rumour began to solidify into fact, and since it could hardly be expected that the Head Girl had any hand in the warding, she and Severus would get to watch the students leap to entirely the wrong conclusions. She imagined the other students would be quite shocked if they ever learnt of her involvement, let alone her amusement over the whole plan.

"Incidentally," Severus asked, "if Minerva were to come down here in need of an ingredient and happened to put it back in the wrong place when she was done…?"

Hermione smiled, and Severus's lips quirked up into a wicked smirk, his voice ripe with satisfaction as he pronounced, "Excellent."

The idea of her wards had just grown on him exponentially, she realized, and she made a mental note to drop a hint to Minerva that perhaps she should steer clear of Severus and all his ingredients for a little while. Hermione could practically see the wheels spinning in Severus's brain as he attempted to work out a way to get Albus down here.

"The storeroom is in better order than it has been for years," Severus declared. "I will be ordering new ingredients later this week."

She took this as the equivalent of a thank you, which she was more than willing to accept given that she'd been receiving death threats and glares instead of appreciation recently. This was a clear improvement.

"I'm glad you find it to your satisfaction," she answered. Lips quirking, she added, "Given that you missed out on so much of the preparation time, you might not appreciate just how much work it took."

"Given how careless and undisciplined the majority of the students are, I can well imagine."

It was not the students who had jumbled all the ingredients on the floor and made her wade through them to even get started, and he seemed to realize what she was thinking, because he asked rather abruptly, "Tea?"

She nodded gratefully. It seemed a little early in their reconciliation to begin arguing again. And she would like tea, although a shower and a change of clothes wouldn't go amiss, either.

To her surprise and pleasure, Severus led her to his quarters. She'd not been invited here in a friendly manner since December, when she had charmed the decorations in the Great Hall. He'd not been conscious when she brought him here in March, and the fact that he'd dragged her here two days later in order to yell at her about how dangerous her warding plan was rather negated any possibility that she considered her last visit here at all pleasant.

He wanted answers to question now, too, she knew that, but he wasn't yelling at her, and he was at least making a show of being actually hospitable, letting her sit down, actually making tea. The hour was rather advanced, but since he said nothing about it, neither did she.

She was even permitted to use the facilities, which meant that she had the opportunity to cast cleaning charms upon herself to remove all that grime, and the mirror above the sink informed her by the time she was done that she looked quite presentable. Wishing that it was Severus rather than his mirror that was giving her compliments, she nevertheless felt immeasurably better as she returned to the sitting room.

Armed with Earl Grey (strong, with lemon), she and Severus started small, both clearly aware of how horribly wrong their last several discussions had gone. She told him about her classes and her N.E.W.T. preparation. He responded with disaster stories from his own classroom, as well as insight into some of the research that he was hoping he would have time for in the future.

Now that Voldemort knew he was a spy, a dangerous and time-consuming occupation had come to an abrupt halt. He was no longer tied to a madman by a mark branded onto his arm. She only wished that she could have removed it from him sooner, but he was quite adamant, when he saw her staring fixedly at his arm, that what she had done was more than he had ever dreamt of, and he held her completely blameless.

Since the last time she had heard his opinion on the matter, he had been eager to curse her to kingdom come, this was very welcome news. She might have been able to infer that his opinion had changed given that he wasn't actively trying to kill her anymore, but it was nice to actually hear the words. It still wasn't an apology or a thank you, but it was more than she had really expected given that Severus, as she had learnt over the years, liked to ignore any occasion where he had been wrong, blame others, and otherwise pretend that the offending incident had not occurred as others recalled it.

Of course, raising this issue meant that they were now straying towards the topics that she was more nervous discussing with him. His rescue was often at the forefront of her mind, but that didn't mean she ever wanted to speak of it again.

Sadly, she knew that he was bound to feel differently, and if anyone deserved to know the truth, it was Severus. A Severus who wasn't cursing, threatening, or being unbearably snide, anyway.

Not talking about the matter left him with erroneous assumptions, and leaving others in the line of fire wasn't fair at all, which was what led to her explaining that it was not a vision from Harry which had led her to Severus.

She sighed. "Harry hasn't had a vision from Voldemort in months. Not since he started sleeping w—better."

Severus's pointed look showed that he knew exactly what she had been about to say.

"If not thanks to Mr Potter's gift, then how?"

This sigh was larger. "Through no way that you're going to like to hear."

His gaze narrowed sharply. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that nobody else liked it, and nobody else believed me. However, it doesn't change the facts," she snapped out with more bitterness than he deserved, but she was more than a little sensitive about this topic.

"Which are?"

"Which are that I knew something was wrong and acting on that feeling."

He sat there facing her, clearly expecting more for several long seconds. His mouth twisted into a line of disapproval when additional information was not forthcoming.

"That's it?" he finally prompted incredulously. "You had a feeling?"

"That's it," she said, voice strained, as this was very similar to the scene that she had had with basically every other member of the Order who had the slightest notion of what she'd done. Ron and Tonks were the only two, really, who had given her the benefit of the doubt, and Hermione hadn't really given Tonks much of a choice. Everyone else thought she was several crayons short of a box. At the very least. "I've heard all the cracks about me, Sybill Trelawney, and Divination, too, so you needn't bother."

His face softened. "Bit touchy about this subject, are we?"

"You would be, too, if you'd faced the inquisition I have," she said tartly. "I didn't say I had answers, just the feeling."

"You don't have any idea why you felt as you did?" he pursued.

She considered her response carefully. In point of fact, she did know why, or at least strongly suspected, but she wasn't entirely certain that she was ready for Severus to know. It would be as good as declaring what she felt for him, and given that they hadn't made it through a whole day of being civil to one another again, it seemed a little early to be so honest.

Neither did she wish to ruin the chance of their ever getting to the point where she could feel comfortable giving him that information, which meant an outright refusal to answer was also unwise.

She spoke slowly. "I don't want to go back to the way things were, Severus; I'm very pleased that we seem to be embarking upon a cordial relationship. But I don't feel comfortable telling you everything right now."

"You don't trust me." His voice was expressionless, his face dark.

"It's not an issue of trust, at least not the way you mean," she protested and tried to explain better. "This is my life we're talking about, and I need some of it to be just for me right now."

This might have worked, she thought, if he hadn't asked his next question.

"What you refuse to say to me, does Mr Potter know?"

She'd refused to answer his question to begin with because she didn't want to lie to him ever, not when it was personal like this, not when it was important.

He knew the answer to his question as soon as she didn't deny it immediately. Unfortunately for this conversation, she had explained to Harry why she didn't want to come back to Hogwarts after she'd run away.

"What a surprise." His eyes chips of ice. "Mr Potter knows, yet you cannot tell me."

"That isn't fair, Severus," she argued, refusing to back down even from the damn glare of death. "He's been my best friend for more than six years. He's supposed to know a lot about me, to know details that others don't."

"As you say."

Gone was all of the cordiality of earlier, the words tight and hard.

"You're not lumped in with the masses," she pointed out earnestly, lips quirking slightly despite herself. "Did you really want me to say that you and Harry are in a class of your own?"

He grimaced with distaste, but the words were softer. "I would sincerely prefer that you didn't."

"A closer relationship doesn't come instantly; it takes effort, Severus. I want to make this work, but it's going to take time."

She held her breath as she waited for his verdict.

"Very well."

At least he'd conceded her point, although she wasn't hugely impressed that he sounded as though he were shouldering a particularly onerous task. Time to find out if she could chivvy him into a better mood.

"You could consider not sounding as though you were being put in front of a firing squad," she said mildly.

Some of the dark cloud that had descended onto his face disappeared. "I should sound chipper and excited, should I?"

She smiled at him. "I'm not sure I'd go quite that far. You wouldn't want to startle me too suddenly with your drastic personality change."

"I shall try to contain my inner exuberance," he said dryly. "I assume the Boy Wonder will be worrying that I've killed you and chopped up your corpse into potions ingredients?"

Her lip curled. "No doubt eventually. He's not asked after me yet, though, so he trusts that I'm currently still in detention with, er, all body parts attached."

"A detention that's gone on for nearly … seven hours now?"

She pressed her lips together for a moment but then decided there was no way to get out of this one.

"He doesn't appear to be overly alarmed yet."

It was apparent from the way Severus's face went very still that he understood exactly what she wasn't saying. Harry had every expectation of her being made to suffer an absurdly long, not entirely appropriate detention when she was serving it with Severus.

Silence stretched uncomfortably, and then Severus asked, "Just when would he begin to worry?"

This was said mildly, and she was impressed by the fact that he didn't even appear to have come close to flying off the handle at Harry thinking the worst of him. Perhaps they'd both reconciled to thinking the worst of one another. Not exactly the progress she wanted, but better than the two of them being incensed all the time.

"If he didn't see me at breakfast, probably," she answered, considering Harry's protective streak versus his knowledge of how capable she generally was. "He's used to missing me at night, but if I hadn't turned up in the morning, he'd assume that something had gone wrong." She cleared her throat. "It's also possible that he'd worry in the next couple of hours. Depending on what he has scheduled for the evening, I guess, he sometimes sits up for me, no matter how late I am, just to make sure I'm all right. If he were doing that, he'd probably consider going to Albus round about three or four if he'd tried and failed to contact me."

"But you think he would contact you, not just react imprudently without making any effort to assess the situation?"

She felt it safest to simply answer the question and ignore the pointed insult.

"Harry knows how often I visit my herd. My not being around in the wee hours of the morning is not the most unusual of occurrences, so it would likely only be if he couldn't MindSpeak with me that he would become seriously concerned."

"You realize how rare that gift is?" Severus allowed himself to be distracted, asking the question on what sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

"I've been practically mentored by Fawkes since I became a Pure Adult," she answered, stating the details that Severus basically already knew. "If you have a phoenix who's communicating with you through MindSpeech frequently, you'd pick up some skills, too."

"If you say so." He didn't sound completely convinced.

Given that she had come from Slytherin's line and Solace had been a MindSpeaker and a Pure Adult, too, she couldn't discount the possibility that she had a genetic predisposition for it, but it was a moot point, really.

"I should get going," she said, setting aside her mug of tea and rising to her feet. "I really don't want Harry to worry excessively, and he seemed quite perturbed by yesterday's rat spleens."

Severus couldn't seem to stop the smirk of amusement on his lips, pleased, it seemed, that someone had been disturbed by the task that he had assigned her yesterday.

She barely restrained herself from asking what had happened to all her hard work. But she'd only be cross to hear that he'd binned it, and she would much prefer that the two of them ended the evening on a positive note.

"Tomorrow at five?" he asked.

She faltered slightly but continued towards the door before it had become horribly noticeable. His tone had been positively agreeable, for him, but she wished he hadn't decided to raise the matter just as she was congratulating herself on leaving successfully.

Still, she reminded herself, that detention had been set in front of Harry and Albus, and Severus had said he wouldn't punish her from this point forward, not that he would rescind any of the punishments from the past. She might think that it was unfair and had more to do with his temper than a fair punishment for her absence from class, but what was done, was done. She would just have to hope that this time around, he wouldn't assign a completely odious task.

"Of course," she answered, not quite able to bring herself to call him "sir" but hoping that her tone was respectful enough to pass muster.

"Goodnight, Hermione." His voice was positively velvety, in the turn-her-into-a-pile-of-mush sort of way.

"Goodnight, Severus," she therefore responded in kind, trusting that his knee-melting use of her name meant that she could do the same, even if her attempt was less likely to have such salutary effect on any part of his anatomy.

It was nice that he'd allowed her this last moment of equality, though. She believed that Severus was not a man to go back on his word, so it was only reasonable that she would have to finish the detentions which had already been assigned. And there was no saying but that they could continue to improve their relationship at the same time. The one was surely worth the other.

She wasn't terribly surprised to find that Harry was indeed waiting in the common room when she arrived although he had Draco for company this time around. Both had been sitting with books and were ostensibly reading them, and since Harry didn't look as though he'd been dragged through a privet hedge backwards, it was possible they'd actually been reading rather than doing anything more … energetic.

Or perhaps, given the length of her detention and its aftermath, they'd simply had plenty of time to clean up properly.

"I was considering sending out the cavalry," he said, scrutinising her carefully for damage.

"It's a very long story, and I'm about ready for bed now," she said, holding out her arms and twirling around so that he could see that she was unharmed on all sides. "The storeroom and a great deal of sorting was involved."

Harry grimaced. "Don't tell me he made you sort through it all."

"All right, I won't tell you," she answered with a grin, and he stuck out his tongue at her.

"I don't really understand how you—"

He got an elbow to the side before he could finish this sentence, and Draco looked up from his book with a very bright smile.

"Hermione, it's rather late. Are you heading for bed?"

"I think I'd better," she agreed with a smile. "You?"

He gave a very deliberate yawn. "Yes, indeed. Very tired. Must get to sleep while I have the chance."

Harry, thankfully, had decided to allow his comment to be curtailed without making a big deal out of it in front of her and without blurting out whatever stupid comment about her and Severus he'd been about to make. Harry might know how she felt about the head of Slytherin, but that didn't prevent her best friend from saying the daftest things as though he would be able to simply "correct" her feelings if he tried hard enough. She loved him to bits and knew he wanted her to be happy, but sometimes, Harry could drive her almost as mental as Severus could.

"Goodnight," she told them firmly as she headed into her bedroom.

Showering quickly for real grime removal, she climbed happily into bed and closed her eyes.

Hermione once again slept for nearly five hours, and she was uncertain if this was a new norm, if she was still recovering from her bad week, or if it was a by-product of her not having been into the Forest in the eight days since her return. Refusing to think about that possibility right now—it was hardly a soothing topic— she concentrated instead on getting ready for breakfast and making sure that she didn't get involved in a discussion with Harry or Draco about what was going on in the current detentions.

Until her reconciliation with Severus was more established, she didn't want anyone to know; the possibility of having to subsequently announce that everything had fallen apart once more was too much for her. Besides which, she wanted to savour her current happiness without the chance of Harry or anyone trying to question her or talk her out of it. It wasn't as though she didn't understand why they might have doubts.

Classes today were Transfiguration and Arithmancy which passed quickly because they were two of the most difficult growing only more so as they geared up to the home stretch before N.E.W.T.s. Seventh- and fifth-year students were collectively getting quieter and more studious, beginning to look more and more like their Ravenclaw counterparts, studying at mealtimes, often found in the library, frequently berating younger students who were being too noisy.

Hermione felt right at home.

After dinner, she had a few minutes before her detention, so she changed into an old pair of jeans, a jumper, and a robe which would be more appropriate for manual labour than her school uniform. Making her way to the classroom, she found, to her surprise, that Severus wasn't there. The wards informed her that he was in his sitting room, so she made her way to his quarters.

When she knocked on the door, she was given leave to enter, and she found Severus seated at his desk. He actually went so far as to tell her that it wouldn't be a moment before he continued with his work, and she hoped that she hadn't been gaping at him; the contrast between this current behaviour and his making her wait nearly an hour was rather extreme.

She stood slightly to the side of the door, ready to go as soon as she was given instructions to that effect.

Severus looked up a few minutes later, eyebrows rising in what looked like amusement when he saw her.

"Are you planning on staying?" he asked wryly.

"I rather assumed not," she answered, puzzled. At his look of faint confusion, she explained, "I thought you'd be telling me where to go."

"Go?"

She frowned, answering slowly, "To my detention. I assumed that you wouldn't want me working in your sitting room, but that's fine, too."

She looked round, not immediately perceiving any tasks that looked in need of doing. Perhaps organizing his books? Some were placed rather haphazardly on their shelves, but surely he realized that if he got her examining his collection, he'd have to drag her out three days from now when she was finally sleep-deprived enough to be removed.

"What makes you think you are serving detention?"

"It's five o'clock," she said. "Detention time."

He seemed momentarily at a loss for words. "That was … particularly maladroit of me. But I thought you trusted my word."

She couldn't decipher his tone, which usually meant that she'd done something wrong.

"I do," she answered immediately. "But you gave me these detentions before you offered me your word. They don't fall under that agreement."

He considered this, eyes pensive. Suddenly, he looked at her sharply. "But it shocked you last night."

She sighed. Trust him to have picked out that detail now. "I was taken somewhat aback, yes," she admitted. "But the more I thought it through, the more I realized it was entirely reasonable."

His lips thinned, and he said curtly, "I am able to make my own excuses, thank you. You already have a stated reason to be here. This seemed a convenient manner in which to continue our discussions. I did not intend to have you perform any detention-like tasks, so if you would stop dancing around at the door and sit down, that would be appreciated."

She did as she was told, recognizing that this was really not how he had intended to begin tonight's meeting. Yesterday had been rather … fraught between hours of detention and the beginning of clearing the air between them for the first time in quite a while. Today, she realized, was supposed to be a meeting between equals, with him having invited her to his quarters and everything. She just hadn't picked up on any of those cues, and now it had got all muddled again.

"I'll make tea," she offered.

He nodded.

It had been a long time since she had made tea in Severus's quarters, but she figured it was about as far as she could get from being in detention. There was no way that he would normally let a student serve him, and it was a task which she had offered to perform, rather than being asked or ordered to, so she thought that it would help increase the contrast between last night and tonight. They would talk like two ordinary people who didn't have to worry about point loss or detentions. She hoped.

As he made liberal use of red ink—grading, no doubt—she prepared the tea and bit back all her questions about precisely what he was doing, how his day had gone, and other daft considerations that would only irritate him. Severus didn't like to be interrupted, and if she left him to his work, then he would be finished that much more quickly.

He set his quill aside and rose just as the kettle was boiling, but he let her pour the water and set the tea to steeping in the teapot without interference.

"May I tell Harry?" she asked.

"I don't suppose I can stop you."

"I would prefer not to upset you," she countered.

"I would not ask you to lie to him," Severus returned. "He has a penchant for finding out information he isn't supposed to know; it might as well be you who tells him the truth in a reliable manner."

She nodded, grateful.

Once they were settled in front of the fire, she found herself speaking more about her rescue effort. He wanted to know details about the removal of the Dark Mark, and she told him everything that she could, which was not as much as she might have wished, given that she had not really known what she was doing but had been working on desperation, instinct, and hope.

He seemed to be equal parts awed and horrified at that. As someone who was very book smart and generally rule-abiding, that was pretty much how she felt about the chain of events, as well. She had made it work because it had to work, but that sounded awfully insane in retrospect.

"So, theoretically," he queried, "you could do this with every Death Eater? Sever him from Voldemort?"

She pondered this. "Perhaps … theoretically. But you saw what happened when I did two in one day. And in both the cases in point, I was particularly motivated. Lucius had agreed to help me, and you were being tortured. There's also the fact that both of you desired that the connection be severed. It's possible that it couldn't be severed if both parties wished it to continue."

"You realize that we don't have a Death Eater who's connected to Voldemort anymore."

She nodded, knowing he was not the only one who must have considered this. "But if I had it to do over again, I would do the same. It would never have made a viable attack plan; even assuming I could teach enough people, those who made it through the connection would likely be too magically exhausted to fight."

It was a scary picture. She could just see hosts of Order members getting lost somewhere in that ether between the Death Eater and the Dark Lord, others collapsing from the pressure or arriving to fight Voldemort only to be unable to perform magic…. It was completely implausible.

Severus made a noise that she couldn't identify as either agreement or disagreement. Since she was reasonably certain that no one could attempt it with much chance of success without her or Harry, she wasn't terribly worried; especially given that this particular method of travel led invariably to Voldemort, she doubted there'd be a queue of interested people. Even if Severus wanted to attempt it, as he had pointed out, they had no more Death Eaters on hand.

The Potions master appeared to have reached the same conclusion, for he abandoned that line of query and moved on to the next, which she found unfortunate; he wanted detailed information about what had occurred when she Apparated to Voldemort's safe house.

It was looking more and more as though he was going to want a blow-by-blow accounting of what had occurred. Unfortunately, since he had been there, since he was the one whom she had rescued, she rather thought he deserved the answers where she could tell others to mind their business.

She therefore walked him through arriving at the wards, making her way to the back entrance, and sneaking down to the dungeons. The details became progressively more difficult to relay to him the closer she got to that cell, but she forced herself to keep her voice even.

"I found you in the cell and lost my temper when I saw you being tortured. I Stunned everyone else and then took care of you. I brought you out to the wards—"

She suppressed a sigh as Severus interrupted. She hadn't really thought that he would let her get away with it, but it had been worth a try.

"You said as much in the headmaster's office, Hermione. Can you not tell me anything more specific?"

Swallowing heavily, memories crowding inside her head, she asked with an edge to her voice, "What would you have me say?"

There was no way that she was telling him any more than he absolutely demanded.

"You rescued me from a rather prolonged bout of torture at the hands of the Dark Lord. Frankly, I'm amazed that I came out of it at all." He wasn't the only one. Severus was gazing at her very intently. "Since my own memories of the event are not very lucid, I would like to know what happened."

Still somehow hoping to talk him out of it, she said, "I wasn't there when you were being tortured."

"I understand that," he answered, sounding as though he was remaining patient with a very strong effort. "But it was clear in Albus's office that you were the only one who saw me as I was when they finished with me."

She licked dry lips convulsively. They had come so very close to being very permanently finished with him, and the thought of being even a few minutes later was the stuff of her nightmares.

She drew a deep breath and let it out very slowly before speaking. "Severus, I can't describe to you how I found you."

He opened his mouth to protest, and then his eyes narrowed as he took in her hands clenched in her lap and her pallor—at least, she assumed she was pale given that it felt as though all the blood had drained out of her face.

His lips pressed together in a thin line before he said, "You needn't speak of it."

She let out a huff of breath, lips twisting up in a mockery of a smile, still feeling as though the wind had been knocked out of her and her stomach relocated to somewhere in her throat.

"Do you have a Pensieve?" she croaked out. "Or would you prefer to take the memory directly from my mind?"

"You don't have to—" he began awkwardly.

"Of course I do," she answered harshly. Because this was Severus. He expected answers to his questions. "This offer has an expiration date. Choose quickly."

For a moment, she thought he was seriously considering letting her off the hook, but she knew that he really wanted to know. Since she didn't want to ever have to go through this again, she preferred to get it out of the way now.

"Legilimency."

Curtly nodding, she very carefully chose the segment of memory that she was going to offer him, as she didn't want to risk him seeing the whole night unfold. Since she'd already described her initial rescue attempt to him, she skipped all the way until she entered the dungeon and decided to stop once she had Apparated to the hospital wing. He did not need to see the confrontations with Albus, Harry and Draco, Remus, and Poppy. And really, he was rescued by then, so it didn't fall under the purview of what he had asked about. Setting clear boundaries now would make it easier for her to stick to her plan once they were both reliving the rather emotional time.

Wanting to make this as quick and painless as possible, she came to stand in front of his chair, and he rose to his feet so that they were standing quite close and the connection was that much easier to establish. She thinned her mental barriers only as much as was necessary. He looked directly into her eyes.

She offered the memory right at the surface of her thoughts and watched as he assimilated it. In their joint minds, it was much easier to see just how stunned he was—first when she scattered Voldemort and the Death Eaters and then when she knelt beside him, and he could see how very injured he had been. She had to give him a gentle mental nudge to get him out of her brain once she brought the memory to a close as they arrived back at Hogwarts.

Blinking, she found that the two of them were still standing in his sitting room, although Severus now looked about as wan as she felt. Knowing that Winky could be discreet, she summoned the house-elf and requested tea and sandwiches. The little elf was back in the blink of an eye, and Hermione concluded that the two of them must look in dire straights. Though she had made no specifications for herself, there were plenty of fruit and vegetables as well as several more typical offerings for the Slytherin, and the tea was piping hot.

She served Severus, who had sat back down in his chair and was staring at the fire blankly. Knowing that it was a great deal to process and that he would only be annoyed by platitudes, she left him to it. For that matter, she could use a few minutes to recover, too. The warm tea sliding down her throat and pooling in her stomach seemed to do wonders.

It was a quarter of an hour later that Severus came back to himself and looked over at her chair, seeming surprised that she was still in it.

"Hi," she said. Not exactly brilliant, but it would have to do under the circumstances.

His lip curled slightly in a mild sneer. "I thought you'd gone."

"Whatever for?" she asked. She nearly said that she'd enjoyed sitting here and being able to watch him in the firelight, but she thankfully caught the words before she embarrassed herself completely. "I don't require constant conversation."

He let out a soft sigh. "No, I suppose not." Silence stretched once more, before he declared, "Albus was right, you know." She looked at him curiously. "It was dangerous."

She snorted. "Of course it was. And it was dangerous every time you went back, yet nothing stopped you from going. I would never abandon you there simply because there was danger involved."

He sat up and looked at her intensely. "Why would you risk your life and safety to come after me when it was so clear that I was probably already dead?"

"I knew you weren't dead just as I knew you were in trouble to begin with. It doesn't have to make sense," she hurried on as he opened his mouth, "and asking me more questions isn't going to get you more answers. I simply knew, and that meant I had to come and get you."

He frowned, shaking his head faintly. "Just because you knew didn't mean you had to act."

"It did," she insisted. "I couldn't ever have left you there. Harry couldn't have left you there if he'd known. Draco wouldn't. I don't think even Ron would have done."

This surprised a faint smile out of him.

"There was never any question, Severus," she said quietly but clearly.

Even when he was being a complete prat, he was still her mate.

"I'm the only one who's seen that?" he questioned.

"The only one who's seen my memories, yes. The Death Eaters are aware up to the point where I knocked them out, of course. And there was the one or more who set off the alarm. Poppy was the first one at the hospital wing, and she was followed by Albus, Harry and Draco, and then Remus. The only discussion I've ever had about the events was the one you were present at in Albus's office."

He nodded, appearing to accept this before saying, "I've never seen anyone perform their Animagus transformation while using their magic quite like that."

She had to work her back through the memory to realize that he was referring to those moments where she'd supported his unconscious body through the transformation. Twice.

"That was desperation," she said flatly. "I didn't think about it, just did what had to be done." She let out a huff of breath. "As you might have noticed, that was essentially my modus operandi for the night."

"Are you certain the Dark Lord didn't see you?" he questioned closely.

"You saw what I saw," she countered with a shrug. "I don't believe he noticed, but I cannot say for certain. Conscious Death Eaters saw only my Masked Animagus form. They could possibly have seen me in the moment when I breached the wards and Apparated us away, but I suspect that if that were the case, more than one attempt would already have been made to truss me up and deliver me back to Voldemort. It will probably make him more certain that the Pure Adult is at Hogwarts with you, but I imagine he strongly suspected that anyway."

Severus nodded. "Beyond planning horrible vengeance when the time comes, it has ceased to be one of his priorities. If you took the chance to rescue me, it is unlikely you would be swayed to his side, and even he would judge a kidnapping scheme to be unwise at this point, I think."

"To force me to work for him, you mean?"

Severus nodded, his expression sour at the notion of being held ransom for her. There was a hint of relish in his voice, however, as he noted, "Given how you got through every single ward on his most safe of safe houses, I doubt he wants you anywhere near him right now. And your method of entry was such that he will be quite puzzled; I was checked carefully for Portkeys and any other locating devices before they began with me."

"That's good, then," she said, the thought of Severus being under their power again enough to make her blood run paradoxically cold and boil through her veins. "It would be very unfortunate if they attempted anything of the kind."

He looked at her quizzically, and she was pretty sure that she wasn't having a Gryffindor dunderhead moment. It was the same way many witches and wizards looked at Harry sometimes.

"You've not had any trouble with your Slytherins, have you?" she asked, attempting to get the conversation back under some semblance of control.

His lip curled. "You're going to offer to protect me from them, are you?"

He sounded more amused than offended, thankfully, as she realized that her question had been rather tactless. Again.

She smiled at him. "Yes, if you'd like."

He snorted. "I have been able to take care of myself for many years now. Followers of the Dark Lord are hardly happy with me, but my miraculous rescue, healing, and removal from the Death Eater ranks has left me in a rather unique position. Under those circumstances, it is unlikely that any of the supporters at the castle will attempt anything without direct orders, and the Dark Lord will want to understand what he's up against before he attempts to have me eliminated. At the moment, I believe they will all have been instructed to retain their current positions, which means that they are pretending to be neutral or actively against the Dark Lord. Besides which, it has been a very long time since I have not been on my guard at all times."

She nodded. It went without saying that he could handle almost any spell that was thrown his way, and it was unlikely that the children would risk an Unforgivable within Hogwarts. Since only the Killing Curse would have the desired outcome and it was the hardest to cast, it seemed unlikely that there was an extraordinary amount of danger. Certainly not more than he had faced when he was spying, anyway.

Albus knew the situation that Severus was now in, and she trusted that he would be doing his part to ensure that the Head of Slytherin was safe. Fortunately for her peace of mind, she was able to keep an eye on him as well. The castle was quite sensitive to her feelings, and she knew that it would monitor Severus as only it could. She would simply never tell him about it.

When it came to his personal safety, she would do whatever was necessary regardless of his feelings on the matter. If that meant that at some point they were going to have one hell of a shouting match, then so be it.

To her relief, now that they'd discussed the topic that had obviously been dwelling on his mind, they were able to move on to much more innocuous conversation. Hidden meanings and sudden pitfalls were lessened this way, and she would be really grateful if they could make it through the evening without any disasters.

They talked about potions, even discussed Defence in a non-confrontational way that didn't involve insulting Tonks. Since it had begun to feel as though they were getting to know one another, she even offered several stories from her childhood.

It was impossible to miss the wariness that he radiated now that this subject had been broached, so she was careful not to ask any questions. She was still worried that he might feel as though she expected him to reciprocate even without her asking, so she cast about for a way to immediately divert the conversation.

"I have a very serious question for you," she announced in her gravest of voices.

His face was expressionless and his voice completely even as he said, "Yes?"

She wondered if he realized just how clear this made it that he was highly uncomfortable.

"How much do you like Quidditch?"

He blinked, frowned, finally ventured, "That's your serious question?"

She nodded, a smile playing around the corner of her lips. "You don't tend to bring it up in my company, but I recall my first year tolerably well, and I assume Madam Hooch wouldn't have let you referee without adequate training."

"I am hardly Quidditch mad," he answered slowly, as though still looking for hidden meaning that didn't exist in the question. "But I played in my youth and am hardly about to forget the rules."

From what she recalled—albeit not in great detail—there were about a zillion different fouls and illegal moves in the game. Still, he did have one of the most organized minds that she knew, and she supposed that schoolchildren weren't going to compare to the league matches where all these moves and fouls were more likely to occur.

"And you own a broom and aren't afraid to use it," she teased.

"I am an adequate flyer," he answered. "Nowhere up to Mr Potter's or Mr Krum's standards, of course."

It was impossible not to detect the bitterness in his tone.

"Well, I'll just have to leap up and march out of here in disgust," she said dryly, "given how extraordinary my own skills are and how concerned I am about expert flying ability." She adopted a lofty tone. "It's a requirement I make of all my friends."

His expression eased. "As you say."

They made it through the evening with no more than minor moments of irritation and upset. Winky popped in and volunteered tea once more, resulting in the appearance of a mountain of food and beverages for their pleasure. Although Hermione doubted that Severus was an expert on unicorns, now that he knew about her transformation, he seemed much more resigned to the way she ate than he had been previously. Winky had, of course, included chocolate mousse, and Severus watched with amusement as she consumed it eagerly.

She noticed belatedly that there'd only been the one bowl of it. She looked up at him guiltily.

"Ought I to have offered to share?"

Smirking at her, he shook his head. "I don't have that sort of interest in mousse."

So he had a flawed taste in mousse…. No one was perfect. And, she reflected, if he loved mousse the way she did, they might have to fight over it, so perhaps this was the perfect situation after all. She eyed him speculatively. He was so talented with potions, she wondered what the chances were that he could make a good mousse.

"What?" he demanded.

She startled. "Hmm?"

"You were staring."

"Was I?" He offered her a glare, and she sighed and mumbled, "I was just wondering if you made mousse."

He stared at her flatly for a moment, and then his lips twitched. "I've never made it."

She nodded, willing herself not to blush.

"Is that also a requirement you make of all your friends?" he pursued, light dancing in his dark eyes.

She grinned at him, pleased that his mockery was taking a friendly form. "Yes. They must all be expert mousse-makers."

"Would it perhaps be easier if I were furnished with a list of your requirements?"

"That would simplify matters," she agreed solemnly.

It was a very pleasing night. Severus made sure to invite her back the next day stressing plainly and self-deprecatingly that it would once again be in his quarters and would not in any way relate to a real detention, and she appreciated his effort.

It wasn't as good as dating him, of course, but being friends was a vast improvement over his acting as though she had less value than the dirt beneath his feet.

She was surprised to realize as she made the short walk back to her quarters that it was nearly eleven. She had no idea where the time had gone but didn't regret a moment of it.

Harry and Draco were once again installed in the common room waiting to see that she got home safely.

"Well?" Harry demanded immediately, taking in her relatively immaculate appearance. "What on Earth did he make you do?"

She smiled. "Tea."

"What?"

"We had tea," she elaborated with a bigger smile. "We talked and had tea."

Harry looked completely nonplussed. "That was a detention? I don't remember any like that."

"That was a meeting between friends that occurred at the time when my detention was originally going to take place," she corrected.

"He's cancelled your detentions?" Draco asked, eyebrows heading towards his hairline.

Harry's lips twisted. "Or he decided that the hours upon hours upon hours that he made her do on Monday and Tuesday were adequate punishment for something that was his fault anyway."

At this point, she was very much willing to let that go.

"He cancelled my detentions," she agreed with Draco. "Although, needless to say, he'll deny it should you ever ask."

"Of course," Draco agreed with a smirk.

"I'm going to bed," she declared. "I'll see you in the morning?"

Neither of them commented on how early it was for her to be going to sleep, which she took to mean that they were entirely happy to have the time to themselves. She would review for a couple of hours on her own, and they would get up to whatever mischief they wished.

Briefly, she let herself imagine what sort of mischief she could get up to with Severus, but she quashed the thought before it could get too far. She was just working on becoming friends with the man again, and she couldn't allow inappropriate thoughts to ruin that.

Chapter Forty-Three: The Communications

Thursday went as well as Wednesday had, and without the problem of the misunderstood detention. By the time Hermione left Severus's quarters that evening, she was feeling more at peace with the world than she had in some time. Possibly since she had learnt that Voldemort existed back in first year. But that was probably her happy high talking, and once she'd calmed down, she could make more realistic comparisons.

Now that the Weresbane was done and she had come to some sort of resolution with the people in the castle, Hermione finally admitted that it was more than time for her to go out to the Forest. She needed to know whether or not she was still welcome out there. It would be a blow if she weren't, but at this point, she needed an answer one way or the other.

She napped for a couple of hours and rose at three once most everyone else was safely in their beds. Masked, she made her way out of the castle and across the grounds, feeling the lure of the Forest before her. Much as she'd enjoyed roaming across unfamiliar ground when she'd run away, she realized now that she had a lingering fondness for the Forest itself, dark and spooky as it could be, bad memories notwithstanding. It was where she'd become a unicorn for the first time and where her herd resided. In a very peculiar way, it was home, and she had a feeling that it would remain as such even if she were exiled.

Once she was safely amidst the trees, she shifted into unicorn form and unMasked enough so that Castina would be aware of her presence; given the events of their last encounter, Hermione felt it safer to let her herd mare make the first move.

She didn't have long to wait; the mare appeared in a flicker of light.

Berit, the unicorn greeted her. I was not sure that you would return.

This needs to be resolved, Hermione said as firmly as she was able.

She felt the herd mare's agreement but was puzzled by the unicorn's actions; she stood in front of Hermione and twisted her neck back and down so that she was no longer facing Hermione, her mane brushing nearly to the ground. Castina continued to hold the pose as Hermione stood there wondering what was going on. Since the pose didn't look at all comfortable, Hermione assumed that it had special significance.

The mare wasn't looking at Hermione anymore, so it could be a stylized way of ostracising her. But that wasn't what it felt like. She hadn't sensed any anger from Castina. It was something closer to sorrow, and the turning away as she had done it seemed more like a penance of some kind, leaving her vulnerable. It was almost as though—

And finally, the reality of what she was seeing caught up to Hermione.

Castina, she said, stunned, I could never harm you.

I would have said the same of you. The remorse was clearer now. I injured a member of my herd when she was innocent of all crimes.

It was an accident.

I attacked your mate knowing it could hurt you.

When Hermione had been rational enough to think it through, she had indeed been a little confused; it was possible that she was human enough that she wouldn't follow her mate into death, but it was equally possible that killing her mate would result in her death as well, an outcome which Castina had never wanted.

But since it had taken Hermione more than a day to come to that conclusion, she could hardly be surprised that her infuriated herd mare had reacted without considering all the implications.

Besides, if Severus really had gone through with his threat, Hermione wouldn't have been in any position to be upset that her mate was dead, as she'd already be dead herself. If forced to choose between a definitely dead Hermione who had been killed by her mate and one who might die because Castina had defended her and attacked her mate…. It sort of made sense.

Hermione couldn't quite bring herself to believe that it had been the right decision; the part of her which knew that Severus was her mate rebelled at this notion of harm coming to him at all and especially because of Hermione, but she still understood how the decision had been made in that split second.

On top of that, Hermione could forgive a great deal in the face of genuine remorse.

I stopped you, Hermione said gently, because he is mine to protect with my life if that is my will. You did not hurt me badly.

You ran from us. You were forced away because of me.

It was meant to be a refuge for her, the Forest, and she could feel Castina's sorrow that she had prevented that from being the case.

The situation conspired, Hermione answered because it had been so much more than just Castina. There were many awful events piling up on top of one another, and there is no saying what Severus would have done if you hadn't intervened. She wasn't sure if that was a question she would ever be able to ask him. This gave me some time to recover, and it gave him the opportunity to do the same. We were able to speak to one another without death threats when I returned.

Castina finally turned back and Hermione could see the luminous sorrow in her eyes. You are certain, Berit? Vengeance is yours to enact.

You're my herd mare, Hermione answered firmly. You were trying to protect me. That is all.

Castina finally approached Hermione and ever so gently nuzzled the area on Hermione's chest where she had been injured. There was a faint scar there, about an inch thick, visible in both unicorn and human form. It still tingled occasionally, but it did not hurt.

I am sorry, Castina said formally.

You are forgiven, Hermione answered. She laughed softly. You realize I've been putting off coming out here because I thought you might be cross with me?

Castina snorted, although her voice was still tinged with regret. I would have invited you had I realized that you had not chosen to break unalterably with your herd. Thank you for coming.

Hermione nodded. She didn't need anymore misunderstandings in her life, and it was a great relief to find that she still had a haven in the Forest if the castle became too much for her. Since the next few months contained N.E.W.T.s and the Final Battle, she suspected that she would want this refuge fairly frequently.

The two of them galloped back to the valley, and Castina immediately remarked upon Hermione's speed and the ease with which she now moved in the unicorn form; although the herd mare hastened to assure her that she had hardly been awkward before, it appeared that Hermione's days as a unicorn had made her truly easy in that skin in a way that even frequent visits over a period of years had not done.

When Hermione had fled, that transformation had been done instinctively, and she had travelled in a very different mindset than she had ever used before. In the past, she had always seen her time as a unicorn as a visit of sorts. It was part of her, but the time she was allowed to indulge was short and restricted, and she had always kept that in the back of her mind.

When she had been out in unicorn form with no end in sight, she had started to think of the unicorn body as one she could inhabit for the rest of her life. Part of her still knew that that was possible, so it felt amazingly natural to be four-legged instead of two. She had not imagined that there would be so many repercussions from her flight, but at least this seemed to be positive.

They discussed what she had seen on her travels, and Castina shared tales of some of the journeying she had done when she was younger, before she had become herd mare. By the time they had arrived at the valley, it was almost as though none of the unpleasantness had happened.

Hermione was left with a lingering certainty, however, that should she ever decide that she wanted to exact vengeance, the herd mare would submit to her will. Hermione intended to never think about it again, frankly, but she understood Castina's code of honour and respected it. Hermione's relationship with Severus might go a little more easily if he ever felt as though he had to repay a debt or two given the injuries that he had caused her over recent months. She was quite sure he didn't see it like that.

The rest of the herd was very happy to see Hermione and eager to hear about the journey she had made. Since she was the injured party, Castina had not spoken of what had happened, and although she made it clear to Hermione that she was free to tell them everything, Hermione was very careful to explain only what had occurred as related to those who lived in the castle. Hermione would be much happier if the whole event could be forgotten, and that wasn't going to happen if she brought it up constantly.

They had a better appreciation for nature than any of the humans had, so Hermione spent several hours relaying the minutiae of what she had seen and felt. They particularly admired her descriptions of the sun and stars, and by the time Hermione left in the early hours of the morning, she felt as though her journey had served another worthwhile purpose.

She had a deeper relationship with her herd, was friends with Severus, and wasn't currently being yelled at by anyone. Life was good.

Friday morning was a happy morning. By nine, the last of the stragglers had submitted their bonus projects which meant that it was only N.E.W.T.s that they had left to stress about. It was a big stress, granted, but not one which was imminently occurring.

At nine, it was time for DADA, and Tonks was continuing with her very reasonable plan to prepare them very thoroughly for their N.E.W.T.s. Especially given that these tests were administered by Ministry officials, it wouldn't do for the newest Ministry-allocated employee at Hogwarts to allow her students to do poorly. There was no hint that Tonks had been prepped more thoroughly in the content of the exams than any of the other professors, but she was clearly filled with a desire for their success.

Since it was only about one in three DADA professors who had been competent throughout their scholastic career, Tonks was working with a bit of a handicap. Of course, given that nearly every member of the DADA class was a member of the DA, the competency of the professor wasn't necessarily an issue. Hermione had always wondered if there were those at the Ministry who still believed that Umbridge was a good professor because so many of the students had scored well on their O.W.L.s.

There was no denying, however, that Tonks most definitely was a good teacher. There was every reason for her—and the Auror Department and Ministry, by extension—to take some of the credit for what would hopefully be high scholastic achievement on the students' parts. This was of obvious benefit to the students themselves, too; it was an academic triumph, and they were in the middle of a war. The more they learnt, the better chance they had of protecting themselves and their loved ones.

Since Tonks knew that the vast majority of them preferred practice to theory, she was making them do the theory now; as they became more restless and panicked about their exams and bogged down by revision in other courses as the month progressed, they would be doing practical work in Defence. Hermione thought this was a very sound approach and made sure to tell Tonks so after class. The woman grinned at her.

"You'd approve of theory whenever it was being taught."

Hermione smirked back. "Probably. I still think it's a good plan for the class."

Since Harry and Draco had also agreed with the assessment, Tonks seemed rather pleased. They headed up to lunch together and met Severus on the way up the steps.

"Training session," he announced. "Tonight at eight o'clock for any who are interested. Room One."

He continued on his way before any of them could speak, and Hermione's lip curled up at the confusion that was displayed on everyone else's faces. Severus had never before invited them to attend, and here he'd not only done that but given a clear time and place so that there would be no confusion.

"What just happened?" Harry asked plaintively.

She laughed. "You get to decide if you want to come to a training session." She tried to speak with a straight face. "It's a new form of psychological torture, obviously. Get you to doubt everything you see and hear."

Harry's expression eased. "Right. That makes sense."

Shaking her head, she pulled them on their way again. Draco had recovered quickly and was staring at the spot where Severus had disappeared with interest. Severus had been free to be more cordial ever since he had ceased to be a spy for Voldemort, but there was no way that he could be cordial to this group when he was upset with her and she was present. Now that they were reconciled, the whole group got to see the improved behaviour.

She wasn't prepared to get into an argument with Draco about it right now, though, and she thought it would be much wiser to enjoy the good mood while Severus was having it; it was entirely possible that by tomorrow he'd be in a bad one, regardless of the fact that they would still be friends.

Lunch was full of plenty of chatter from the younger years who still felt as though they had plenty of time before exams. More and more older students could be seen hunkered down with books, and Hermione knew that certain students had taken to casting muffling or silencing charms so that they wouldn't be bothered by those speaking around them.

Ravenclaws were particularly notorious for this, and Hermione watched as Morag's housemate, Bronwyn, finally had to throw a roll at her to get her attention because she couldn't hear what her friends were saying. Hermione generally planned revision that didn't need too much thought for mealtimes; she filtered out as much of the ambient noise as she could in a natural manner because she didn't want to be caught out should anything untoward occur around her.

Her best friend being who he was, it was far more likely that she would be attacked than that a Ravenclaw would. Perhaps due to their natures, Gryffindors as a whole also tended to attract more attention than Ravenclaws.

After lunch, she, Harry, Draco, and Ron visited Hagrid, another brief tea trip since the half-giant was still busy with his own exam preparations, and the students needed to revise. Harry and Ron both seemed resigned to the fact that this particular afternoon was going to be entirely devoted to study, and she and Draco set them up with plenty to keep them occupied during the two hours that were left until dinner.

She was pretty sure that Harry was playing up his resignation either for Ron's benefit—so the redhead would have company—or for Draco's—so that Harry would get a better reward later, Hermione imagined. Perhaps a combination of the two.

Dinner progressed very similarly to the noon meal, and then they went back to their books, although Ron scarpered, claiming something to do with Quidditch. Hermione was unsure whether this was excuse or a legitimate absence, but since he'd done so well in the afternoon and she ultimately couldn't force him to study, she didn't investigate too carefully. Ron would study when he was ready, or he would fail his exams and disappoint his mother. He'd made it through in the end every year thus far, and there was no particular reason to assume that that wouldn't be the case this year as well.

She, Harry, and Draco packed up shortly before eight and headed over to Room One, meeting Tonks on the way. Hermione reflected on the effectiveness of Severus's technique; curiosity had won out over any qualms they might have had given the trouble they'd had with training sessions over the year.

The head of Slytherin was waiting for them, and he promptly split them into teams, she and Severus against Harry, Draco, and Tonks. Hermione didn't question this change from the usual routine, just came to stand by his side, and they began.

She and Severus had very different styles. She spent a lot of time shielding and protecting them, while he was eager to go on the offensive and strike the definitive blow. When they were on the same team, this actually worked rather effectively.

Harry was well aware of the manner in which she shielded, and he knew exactly when to cast once she'd lowered her shields for Severus's spells. Severus had had a great deal of practice at duelling hard and fast, however, so he tended to send a debilitating spell at Harry that the dark-haired boy would be forced to block, allowing Hermione to get the shield back up before Harry could effectively send any spells their way.

This still left Draco and Tonks, however, and Draco was nearly as powerful as Severus was. When Hermione was pulling no punches, she could both shield and cast offensive spells, so while Severus was occupied with Harry, she made sure to handle Draco and Tonks as they tried to attack in concert.

Harry was a fast learner, though, soon shielding against Severus and using his wandless abilities to cast through the shield; Severus, though strong, was no match for Harry in terms of sheer magical power. Harry upped the stakes and sent stronger spells at them, ones that she had to use a lot more power to counter. Without a doubt, Harry knew her weakness; he was no longer sending a single spell in her direction but focussing exclusively on trying to injure Severus, which meant that she focussed on protecting him rather than attacking Harry's team.

Trying to injure her mate, as it turned out, was not the wisest course of action. She had given no thought to the last time she had seen Severus attacked by spellfire until one of Harry's Cutting Curses made it past both her and Severus's defences. The curse clipped Severus on the side of the head, and the sight of him with blood dripping down his face brought all the memories of his torture crashing back to the forefront of her mind.

Magic exploded out of her before she even knew that she was reacting. It was very close to the completely uncontrolled magic that she had displayed when Severus had thrown her out and when he had tried to stop her talking about being a Pure Adult—it glowed with a golden light and had no purpose as far as she had ever been able to ascertain other than stopping whatever had upset her so much.

Harry took the brunt of the impact, but the residual magic took down Draco and Tonks as well. As Harry's body hit the ground, Hermione realized what she'd done and immediately reined in her magic. She rushed over to Harry and carefully turned over his unconscious body. He looked very pale but otherwise completely untouched. She felt for his pulse and let out an explosive breath of relief when she found it.

For a brief and infinitely horrible moment, she thought that she'd killed him because he'd attacked her mate in a training session. She'd had no idea that she'd be feeling quite so protective of Severus, and she was sure that the man himself wouldn't appreciate it, but it had been instinct and all those horrible memories from Voldemort's lair. Now that she knew that instinct was there, she could hope to be able to control it a little.

She cast a wandless and wordless Ennervate, but Harry didn't stir. Trying not to panic, she considered and discarded other options. Finally, she sent out gentle tendrils of her core magic—the raw kind, with no particular spell associated with it—to nudge at him. His own magical signature was weaker than normal, and she realized that her magic had packed more of a magical wallop than a physical one; it was Harry's core that had been blasted, not his physical body. Once she'd supplemented the magical energy that she had inadvertently decimated, she cast the Ennervate once again and found herself staring down into Harry's big green eyes.

"Hey there," she said, voice a little shaky. "How are you feeling?"

He groaned and sat up, needing her help to remain in that position.

"Like I lost an argument with the Hogwarts Express. What the hell was that?"

She sighed. "I'd better see to Tonks and Draco first."

This had the salutary effect of making Harry immediately forget his line of questioning in favour of panicking over his boyfriend's unconscious state. Since Tonks and Draco hadn't been the targets of her ire, they were thankfully revived in the regular manner.

As soon as the opposing team looked halfway functional, she turned back to Severus, who had staunched the head wound with a handkerchief that was now red with blood which was also staining his collar and face. Wincing, she hurried over to him.

"Are you all right?" she asked with concern, reaching towards the wound.

He jerked away, growling, "I'm fine."

She had to still the urge to back carefully away from him, all her instincts telling her that she was facing the equivalent of a wounded animal which had been backed into a corner. She realized that he couldn't be happy about being hit but the two of them were a team, and collectively, despite the wound and her guilt, they had just slaughtered the other team.

"Let me see," she said as bravely as she could, stepping forward again in an attempt to take a look at the injury.

His eyes narrowed to slits. "I did not ask for your assistance, Miss Granger."

Her lips settled into a tight line. He might be angry, but there was no call for him to be resorting to her surname.

"I think we're done for the day," she told the others without looking at them. "The three of you look done in and should probably get a good night's sleep."

It wasn't even nine o'clock yet, and she hadn't stopped staring steadily at Severus. There was a moment of silence from behind her, and then Draco's voice.

"Sleep. Yes. Have a good night, Severus, Hermione."

From the sound of it, Draco was dragging Harry who wasn't happy if his noises were anything to go by. Since the other woman was silent, Hermione gathered that Tonks had fallen in willingly with the other two. Really, anyone with sense would want to be getting as far away from this room as possible.

When Hermione felt the door close behind them, she put her hands on her hips and glared at Severus.

"I know you didn't ask for my assistance, you complete prat!" she snapped. "But you're injured, and I want to make sure you're all right."

"Now you do!" he snarled back.

She made a face, demanding, "What the hell are you on about?"

Had the blow to the head damaged his memory in some way? Did he not remember all the nights that she had waited up to ensure that he made it back safely from being Summoned? The nights she had stayed in his bed? The afternoon that he had woken from a healing sleep alive and unharmed solely because she had been there to take care of him? The torture nearly to death which she had rescued him from? Where on Earth did he get off accusing her of not caring for him? It was completely insupportable.

"I don't much fancy being your last choice," he spat.

She stared at him uncomprehendingly, waiting for his words to start making sense. They didn't suddenly acquire new meaning, however, and he was just staring at her spitefully, so she was forced to go with what she'd understood the first time around.

"Last choice?" she said incredulously. "Last choice? I don't know how it escaped your notice, Severus, but the whole bloody point of this entire year was that I needed someone for my first choice. That was you!"

Always. Without fail.

"Because you couldn't find someone else!" he snarled back.

She let out a huff of breath, incredulous. "Of course I could have. As you were so kind to point out on multiple occasions, anyone would volunteer to be a Pure Adult's first."

"You made your feelings abundantly plain that night," he said coldly. "You were settling."

"I was settling for what you were offering!" she snapped back. He merely raised an eyebrow, so she continued, realizing that might not have seemed like the clearest distinction ever. "I said that anyone would sleep with a Pure Adult, and you took that as an invitation."

"Was it not?" he asked. "I seem to recall your indicating so quite clearly."

She closed her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. "I confirmed it as such, but," she drew a deep breath and confessed finally, "I had meant it as the opposite."

His face could have been carved from marble, his voice expressionless. "Yet you say I was not your last choice."

She bit back a growl of frustration. They kept dancing around one another and here they were, right back at the answers that she had been unwilling to give him when he asked about how she had known he was in trouble. He wasn't going to understand unless she came out and admitted the whole of what she was feeling, but that was precisely what she had been trying to avoid all this time.

He could already make her feel unbelievably horrible; the power that he would possess once he knew her feelings would be vast indeed. Standing here right now, however, she could see that remaining silent was going to come at the price of her relationship with him for the future.

If he only cared about her as a friend, then she had to decide to accept that or to lose it all, because he obviously needed answers before he could interact in a normal way with her. The thought of hearing from him that he didn't care for her, however, was enough to chill her blood. Anyone who had ever called her brave need only be here in this moment to know it simply wasn't true. This scared the hell out of her.

"You offered to sleep with a Pure Adult." She forced herself to speak. She'd tried running once, and it hadn't really solved anything. "That was not how I wished my first time to occur."

"So you have made abundantly plain." He stared down his nose at her. "You have already had the impertinence to dismiss this training session; there is no reason for your continued presence."

"At least let me look at the wound first," she requested. He remained unmoved, and she tried once more: "You don't want to wander the halls looking injured, do you?"

He glared, his voice clipped. "It will hardly be the first time."

Without another word and ignoring her mouth open to protest again, he stalked out. She let out a sigh. So much for that cordiality she'd been prizing so highly earlier today and the peace she'd been praising in the Forest. As seemed to happen so frequently, she was in the dark as to what, precisely, had set him off.

They'd made it fewer than three days before a big blow out, and she was left to conclude that it seemed less and less likely that they could maintain any sort of useful relationship without something giving. Worse, she knew that what needed to give was her, but the thought of facing him day after day when he knew that she loved him seemed unbearable right now.

As it was, she now had to go back and confess to Harry and Draco that she and Severus were once again not getting along. She'd really thought she'd been all right to tell Harry and Draco that the two of them had talked rather than Severus administering a detention, but it seemed that she would really have to stop updating them on the progress of her and Severus's relationship or always default it to "going badly".

Unfortunately, Harry seemed to be quite aware when she was upset because of Severus, and she supposed that unless she started lying really thoroughly, it would be pretty clear based on her moods whether their relationship was going well or poorly no matter what she said.

Both she and Severus were very strong and opinionated people, so it wasn't that she had thought that they wouldn't argue, but she couldn't handle the constant ups and downs without her even knowing what the issues were. They were going to drive one another insane if they kept up this level of animosity in between short bouts of friendliness; it was difficult for her to reconcile the man who had just stormed out with the one who had teased her not two days before about her obsession with mousse.

That conversation was now a fond memory because here she was, standing alone in this room while Severus had a head wound and Harry, Tonks, and Draco were recovering from magical exhaustion because of her. It was all going so spectacularly.

Part of her wanted to either barricade herself here in Room One—she was sure that the castle would accommodate her—or escape out to the Forest, but she also wanted to prove that she could last for more than a day reacting like a regular person even with a certain amount of emotional upheaval. Much as she didn't relish the conversation, Harry and Draco deserved an explanation, too, so with a sigh, she headed back to her room.

Fortunately, it turned out there was no confrontation waiting for her when she reached her common room. Although it looked as though Harry and Draco had intended to wait up for her, their exhaustion had defeated them; Harry was leaning up against the corner of the couch, and Draco was curled up against him. Both were sound asleep.

She transfigured the couch beneath them and magically stretched them out more comfortably, conjured a blanket and pillows, and passed the peacefully sleeping couple to enter her own empty room, trying not to think too hard about the fact that even in their sleep they had moved to snuggle closer to one another once she rearranged them.

Being around the two of them was really depressing sometimes.

Still, though, there had been no point loss, no detentions, and no other punishment issued, at least not yet. No matter how angry Severus had been, he had thus far upheld the promise he had issued her.

She showered, although she barely remembered the actual training session that had started all this, letting the hot water soak out the tension that had nothing to do with a physical workout.

Patrolling and revision could wait until she woke, she decided. She was not in the mood.

Harry and Draco were still sleeping peacefully when she got up at two, so she made no attempt to wake them but performed late night rounds on her own. Her connection to the wards allowed her to easily skirt around Severus, who seemed to be having a bout of insomnia of his own. Although she wanted an explanation from him, she suspected that a late night encounter wouldn't do wonders for either of their frayed tempers.

The students, despite its being a Friday night, seemed to be behaving overall; the younger and less clever ones had already been caught in the earlier patrols, and the older and more daring students weren't performing nearly as many pranks or holding clandestine meetings since N.E.W.T.s were just around the corner. As it would be tempting but unfair to take her frustrations out on some poor, unsuspecting students, she recognized that it was probably fortunate that she met no one.

Although she kept to her resolution and didn't go out to the Forest, Hermione couldn't resist the pull to step outside for a few minutes. It felt good to be out in the moonlight and starlight even in her human form and even just standing on the grounds; millions of twinkling lights shining down on her and placing no demands on her was a huge relief.

She'd begun to think that a little bit of her life had become uncomplicated, but she had just been proven very wrong. Life with Severus, she snorted to herself, was never easy—and she barely saw him at all. What was mildly terrifying was the fact that she still wanted to spend time with him. Lots of time, if that were an option. She wanted to get to know him better, wanted to get them to a place where he would let her heal a head wound, where they could talk if they had a problem and get it sorted.

This was Severus she was talking about, so she imagined that there would still be a fair bit of stalking around and snarling no matter how well their relationship was going, but she thought she could handle that if they had some sort of solid base to work from. Today, she was left not knowing whether they were still friends or not, whether or not he would ever speak to her again, whether or not he would make any attempt to heal whatever it was that had happened between them or if it would be solely up to her to make an attempt to reconcile or to let it go.

It was the first of May. Exams started in all of a month, and if neither of them made any effort, the school year would be over in the blink of an eye, and the time of their forced interaction would be over. The thought of never seeing him again, despite everything that had happened tonight, was not a pleasant one, but she also didn't want to be the one to run after him all the time. She'd done plenty of seeking him out over the year and was tired of being constantly rebuffed. Wasn't it time for that to change?

Taking a last look at the bright stars, swearing that she could feel their rays soaking into her skin, calming her, she turned away from the soothing view and re-entered the castle. In the common room, Harry and Draco were still sleeping, the Gryffindor's head now pillowed on Draco's chest, the blond's arms slung over Harry in gentle possession.

She yearned for that sort of closeness with Severus but imagined that an attempt to cuddle with him right now would result in getting cursed rather comprehensively.

Mumbling to herself about discretion and valour, she retired to her room and buried herself once more in her books, spending several hours on revision and homework of the more challenging variety. It was much harder to dwell obsessively on Severus when she was trying to solve Arithmantic equations that Septima had administered with the sole purpose of giving her best students as much trouble as possible. Hermione had been flattered.

Arithmantic equations, at least, had an answer in the end. Severus was like the knottiest, most difficult equation she'd ever encountered times one hundred, and while she knew that theoretically, the reward at the end would be commensurately great, she wasn't sure that she was going to make it. She wasn't even sure at this point if there was actually an answer that she was heading towards. All she knew was that she was being constantly battered, and there were only so many times that she could withstand being knocked about before it became too painful to continue.

Was it so much to ask that they have more than two days in a row where they got on? Was it possible that this was another great big misunderstanding like they'd had in November? He'd spent months thinking that she was dismissing him while she had been equally certain that he was dismissing her. Statistically, it was surely unlikely for them to make the same mistake over and over again, but perhaps she and Severus were beating the odds on that one.

She let out a sigh. From Arithmancy to Severus in one analogy, and she was supposed to not be thinking about him. She couldn't seem to get him out of her head for more than a few minutes at a time, and since this had been the case for a good year now, she didn't suppose it was going to change any time soon.

By Saturday afternoon, when it would be impossible for even the stupidest student to miss that Severus was back to glaring like the Medusa on steroids, Hermione had determined that unfortunately, yes, Harry and Draco had been easily able to link the man's behaviour to what was going on with her. Given that they had witnessed the training session the night before, this was hardly a stunning leap of intuition, and while she was pretty careful of her demeanour in public, when she was back in her rooms, she usually stopped attempting to appear cheerful.

It would no doubt upset the head of Slytherin further to realize that his life and his relationship with her was being tracked in such a way by the Boy Who Lived, but honestly, if Severus weren't being such a prat, there would be nothing for Harry to observe. Somehow, she doubted that bringing this fact up would help at all, but she was tempted.

She was rather leery of seeing Severus at all, actually, as she would rather not test him when he was so upset with her. If he went back on his word, they were going to have to call it quits, and she really didn't want to abandon all hope.

She'd trusted Severus's word because he was an honourable man, but he was an honourable man with a temper, and if he lost it in her presence, there was no saying exactly what would come out of his mouth before he got a hold of himself. He'd managed so far, and he had been a spy for years, but there was no saying for certain. The most prudent course of action was therefore avoidance, and since she really didn't want to be cornered by Harry and Draco, either, she needed to make herself scarce.

N.E.W.T.s, like her brewing, were an excellent excuse for this. Who had time for personal discussions when there were exhausting examinations coming up? She had more classes than either of the boys, so the fact that she had more revision went without saying, and it was clearly unwise to impede her studying and cause her undue stress.

Harry very obviously wanted to ask her a great many questions, but he wasn't completely stupid, so he chose to respect her wishes for the time being. Not sure how long this resolution on his part would last and knowing that she could be more easily ambushed in her quarters when Harry and Draco could get her alone, she spent her time in the library. Whereas they would have an argument to make if she barricaded herself into her bedroom and put up impenetrable wards, the fact that she was surrounded in the library by nosy students that made private conversation difficult was a happy coincidence that they couldn't sensibly object to.

The downside to being in the library was that she was accessible to the other students, but since she was there looking for a distraction as much as to revise, it didn't bother her as much as it usually would. It let her feel that she was fulfilling her role as Head Girl, too, and taking the time to work out how to patiently explain Charms to a completely clueless Hufflepuff second-year actually seemed to take up a fair bit of brain power.

There was very little time to think about Severus, and if, from time to time, she slipped into a fond daydream about how the Potions master would have treated the spectacular displays of incomprehension on the part of these students, surely no one could blame her for that. There were also plenty of students on hand to recall her to her task before much time had passed. Since her mind had a habit of straying spectacularly when she was alone, she thought she was doing rather well in the library.

Plenty of students seemed to need her assistance, as it turned out, and they all took her lingering presence in the library as an invitation. While she therefore got very little revision done, she was safe from contact with Severus and Harry and Draco.

The wards informed her that Severus was spending most of his time in his quarters, although he ventured out into the halls more frequently as the day progressed. She realized that she was probably defeating her own purpose of not thinking about him by continuing to monitor him with the wards, but she couldn't help herself.

If he were seriously injured in some way by Voldemort supporters out for revenge while she was ignoring him in a fit of pique, she would never forgive herself. Any anger she felt towards him was always tempered by the realization that she cared more for him than she had ever cared for anyone. She'd protect him even if he didn't want to see her ever again, though she very much hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Duty discharged to a whole section of students by the time Irma closed the library at nine o'clock that evening—though Hermione wondered somewhat disparagingly what the students would have done had she not arrived—Hermione headed back to her quarters, relieved to see by the wards that Harry and Draco were out doing rounds.

It was easy enough to avoid them in the hallways when she knew exactly where they were; even with the Map, they would be no match for her ability to know who was where and to get wherever she wanted quickly and efficiently. The castle had evidently had a fondness for the Marauders to allow them to create the Map as they had, but their connection had never been as complete as hers; they were connected to the castle through a piece of paper, but she was connected mentally.

Back in her quarters, she headed straight through to her bedroom, forcing herself to only put moderate wards on the door. These were the equivalent of "do not disturb" rather than "death to those who attempt to bother me", so hopefully Harry and Draco would let her be rather than worry that something was really wrong.

It was too early for bed, so she went through to her lab. Connotations of Severus or not, Poppy still needed plenty of potions. They had depleted her stores with the number that had been poured down Severus's throat, and Hermione was uncertain if Severus had been making up the deficit. Since most of these potions had a shelf life of up to a year, Hermione reassured herself that there was no need to confer with the Potions master; Poppy would use the stores eventually, and Hermione would be keeping herself busy.

There were only a few weeks left now, and while that thought filled her with as much sorrow as relief, it meant that if all else failed, the definitive change between her and Severus would be that she was leaving the castle permanently. Perhaps if she and Severus saw one another only infrequently, there wouldn't be so much anger between them. If she could at least see him from time to time, it wouldn't be so bad. Her departure also wouldn't be as absolute as all that, either, because she wouldn't put up with not seeing her herd for very long.

Although she didn't strictly speaking have to come up to the castle when she came to spend time with her herd, she imagined that Albus and Minerva would be happy if she visited, and a few minutes' conversation with Severus as a result would be likely. He'd been a spy, for heaven's sake; surely he could be publicly civil with her when the occasion called for it? On the other hand, his current behaviour suggested that he was having serious difficulty with any form of politeness, not to mention the fact that he seemed heedless of the gossip that all the glaring, snarling, and irritability was resulting in.

Brusqueness and irascibility were the sum total of his modus operandi as far as most people were concerned, but there had been moments—whole hours, sometimes—where she had seen so much more to him, and she had hoped that he would let her in enough that she would be able to see the whole spectrum of his behaviour, his moods, and his desires. It appeared, however, that he was going to continue to be disagreeable and short-tempered with her above all else, and she was going to have to learn to live with that.

She let a breath out slowly. She'd Stunned Voldemort, manipulated all the wards of Hogwarts, and cured lycanthropy. She'd survive Severus, too.

Resolution firmly made, she was able to emerge into the common room where Harry and Draco were ostensibly reading but really just cuddling. Harry still looked as though he wanted to quiz her on what had happened the previous day, but Draco was being much more circumspect, and since she was now able to behave normally, Harry allowed himself to be put off.

She relayed several of the stupider problems which she'd encountered in the library that day and got Draco into stitches of laughter with how similar some of the Hufflepuff's problems were to those which Ron and Harry had had once upon a time and which she had had to solve for them as well.

Harry looked as though he were trying to be offended but was enchanted with Draco's fit of the giggles.

"So you're going to be sneaking into the library from now on?" the Gryffindor boy asked with amusement.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm there quite openly; I promised several of the needier students that I'll be back tomorrow. I figure now is the time for my good deeds so that I can make myself completely scarce as we get closer to N.E.W.T.s without feeling guilty."

Harry looked suddenly horrified. "I'm not the one who's supposed to be helping them at the end of May, am I?"

"Don't be silly, Harry," Draco said, his face still relaxed from his earlier mirth. "They all know better than to come to you."

This earned him a nudge to the side, but Harry continued to look amused rather than upset. The truth of the matter was that while the students could come to Harry for Defence, most of them didn't think of him as a potential teacher for anything else. He had good grades, for the most part, and could probably field most of the younger years' questions, but unlike her, he didn't tend to put himself out there as a possessor of such knowledge and abilities.

Her lips tipped up as she took the notion to its natural conclusion.

"What?" Harry demanded.

Humour made her smile broaden into a grin. "Just imagining what Severus would think about you tutoring his first-year Potions students."

Harry grimaced, and Draco laughed.

"Come on," the Slytherin said, nudging Harry back. "You might not like it, but it would be funny to see Severus's face."

Harry allowed a reluctant grin to be pulled out of him. "He really wouldn't like it, would he?"

They both shook their heads as solemnly as they could manage, and Harry reflected, "It's almost worth it for that. Not sure even the first- and second-years would trust me with it, though."

It was generally known that Potions wasn't Harry's best subject, although he had made it into N.E.W.T. Potions on his own work in the end.

Harry shook his head finally. "They'd just drive me crazy, I think. I had enough trouble going through it on my own the first time without wanting to rehash it with anyone else."

"There's also the Boy Who Lived factor," Draco pointed out helpfully. "You'd have queues of those who wanted to be taught by the Boy Who Lived whether the students needed any assistance or not."

Harry grimaced even more horribly than before. "I'm not stepping foot in the library," he said flatly, crossing his arms defiantly. "You can't make me."

She and Draco laughed even as she reflected that Draco was probably right; she well remembered the disruption caused by Viktor's presence in her fourth year, and it was far too close to N.E.W.T.s for her to put up with anything of the sort now.

"So how is your revision going?" she asked.

The two boys spent several minutes trying to explain to her how much they'd gotten done when she knew full well that they hadn't been reading, but she let them natter on with growing amusement.

Finally, Draco gave it up as a bad job and declared instead, "We're revising tomorrow."

She nodded. "That seems like a wise plan. I'll just leave you to admire that book while cuddling for the rest of the night, shall I?"

A cursory attempt was made to establish that they hadn't been cuddling, but it was abandoned promptly when they seemed to realize it might make her want to stay in the room, and then they wouldn't be able to cuddle properly.

"Goodnight, then," Harry said. "Pleasant dreams."

She suppressed a sigh as she headed for her bedroom. What she'd really like was some pleasant reality.

Hermione rose early and finished her essays for Muggle Studies and DADA. She went back to revising, wanting to get several uninterrupted hours in now, as she suspected that her stay in the library today would be quite similar to yesterday's; very little of her own work would be accomplished.

She headed to the library right after a quick breakfast, as this gave her the opportunity to install herself comfortably at her favourite table and get out a few books just in case she had some moments to herself.

The Ravenclaws, predictably, were the first to arrive. There were plenty of very clever older Ravenclaws who could assist their housemates, but several of the young ones seemed to have decided that Hermione was the better choice for a tutor. She wasn't sure if their older peers had warned the children off because they were busy—or perhaps they wanted multiple tutors to get the best possible coverage on all topics.

On the plus side, working on Transfiguration with them brought two quiet first-year Slytherins to the table. Since there was still that overt truce going on between Slytherin and everyone else, Hermione hoped that their decision to be taught by a Gryffindor wouldn't cause any problems for them. She was happy to help in any way that she could, and she was delighted that they had felt comfortable enough to come to her.

If there was one tenet which she could advocate this year, it would be school unity; there was so much more at stake than who would win the house cup. She was a proud Gryffindor in her own right, it was true, but that didn't mean she couldn't champion Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw as well.

She saw Harry and Draco at lunch and dinner. At each meal, they wanted an update on her progress, so she gave them a rundown of all the students and problems that she'd attempted to sort through during the day. Ron, who appeared only at dinner, having been doing something Quidditch-related at lunch, wanted to know why she hadn't been advertising that she was assisting people today, or he'd have come up to the library to get some help with his own work.

"I'll be there after dinner," she supplied helpfully, suppressing her amusement as she knew exactly what his reaction would be.

Sure enough, it seemed that his very important Quidditch something or other was ongoing, but he really hoped that she had fun. Harry and Draco smirked and watched as Ron went back to shovelling food into his mouth. Some things never changed.

Just as she'd told Ron, she returned to the library. Since she'd been assisting students all day and trying to provide them with ways to cope on their own, the number of people who were coming to see her was finally diminishing. Her goal was that students wouldn't need to ask her for help anymore because they would all have the tools to learn to help themselves. It was unlikely to ever actually happen, of course, but if she could really help even a handful of students, it would be better for both them and her.

It was nearing eight o'clock when Hermione was surprised by the arrival of Tracey Davis, one of the seventh-year Slytherins. Being part of a group of people who'd declared their allegiance to the side of the light wasn't quite the same as coming individually to the Gryffindor Head Girl to ask for assistance, but the more positive changes Hermione could foster, the happier she would be.

"What can I do for you?" Hermione asked with her most welcoming voice.

Tracey smiled at her, seeming slightly embarrassed but determined to speak now that she was here. "I'm having a problem with Transfiguration. I'm sure I get the theory, but when I try to turn water into ice, it's a complete failure. Gets a bit colder if I'm lucky, and I've no idea what I'm doing wrong. Do you think that you could help me with it?"

The Gryffindor smiled back. "Of course." She looked round the library at all the books. "I doubt that Irma would be too pleased if we attempted such a transfiguration in here, though. I'm sure there's an empty classroom we could work in for a little while. What do you say?"

Tracey shrugged. "If you think it would be all right."

Hermione nodded, rising from the table and casting a light ward over it; she didn't anticipate being gone for too long and now no one could seize her belongings.

"I don't think the professors really mind us being in classrooms when it's actually for academic pursuits. I'm sure I can get you sorted in short order," Hermione promised, leading the other girl out of the library.

She'd got Harry through years of Transfiguration, after all, and she seriously doubted Tracey could have too much of a problem if she'd made it all the way to seventh year. Although Hermione didn't much fancy assisting a bunch more students in terms of the workload it would mean for her, it would be worth it if Tracey's decision to come and see her convinced more Slytherins to do the same.

Hermione was in the library, revising her Transfiguration coursework. All the other students seemed to have settled down, leaving her free to work diligently. She wanted to make sure that Minerva wasn't disappointed in her because it would be quite embarrassing not to live up to the expectations of her own head of house. Working here not only left her available should any of the students decide that they were still having problems, it enabled her to confirm several of the theories in the larger tomes in the library.

She hadn't been reading about single inanimate object to multiple animal transformations for more than ten minutes before she became aware of a shadow looming over her positively bristling with impatience.

She looked up to find that Severus, arms crossed, was glaring at her.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

A furrow appeared in her brow. Such pleasant first words after he'd stopped speaking to her on Friday. Not to mention the fact that she didn't have the slightest idea what he was on about.

"The meaning of what?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he snarled.

She considered not saying anything but couldn't quite manage it, although she made sure her voice was very reasonable. "Sir, you interrupted me while I was sitting here reading. I wasn't doing anything but revising."

His eyes narrowed to slits, and he hissed, "I am referring to the message you sent."

She regarded him blankly. "What message?"

His lips tightened and he spoke dangerously, "Do not play games with me."

She sighed. "Sir, the very last thing I want to do right now is play games with you. I assure you, I don't have the slightest idea what you are talking about."

She met his eyes evenly and watched as a scowl deepened the lines around his eyes and mouth.

"Come with me," he ordered, turning on his heel and stalking away.

Letting out another sigh, she returned her books to their shelves, scooped up her belongings, and did as she was told. The other students all had their heads down, clearly hoping to avoid catching the attention of the Potions professor when he was in such a mood.

She reminded herself that he was allowed to be as nonsensical as he wished because he was the professor. She was only the student, and she had to submit to his whims.

With ill grace, he was waiting for her to catch up at the entrance to the library, and then he started his punishing pace once more, far too fast for someone with her stride. She hurried after him anyway, knowing the futility of commenting on his lack of regard for the length of her legs. It would likely only make him walk faster.

They reached the dungeon in record time, although she came perilously close to a jog to keep up with him. To her surprise, she found that he was leading her to her own common room. She followed him in, Draco and Harry looking equally surprised when Severus stalked in with her in tow. Or so she thought, until Harry spoke.

"What took so long?"

"She was in the library," Severus snarled.

The two boys looked at her as though this were the strangest place she could possibly have been.

"Have the two of you met me?" she demanded, thoroughly confused. "Why would you find that unusual?"

"You told us to meet you here," Harry said. "Professor Snape, Draco, and me."

She shook her head. "No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did," all three said in unison.

She blinked at them. "Maybe you misunderstood. When did I say this?"

"Forty-five minutes ago," the Gryffindor boy answered.

"I've been in the library all day," she said very slowly. "I saw you at dinner and just now."

"It was MindSpeech." Harry was frowning. "You told us all to meet you here with MindSpeech."

"But I didn't," she protested. "I'd remember if I told you to meet me here. I didn't do anything of the sort. I've been helping the students revise and revising myself. That's all. No MindSpeech whatsoever."

Severus was pacing the length of the room.

"That wasn't the entirety of the message," he finally growled.

When no more information was forthcoming, she asked, "What was the rest of it?"

He whirled back to face her, stepping closer so rapidly that she had to still the urge to jerk back. She held her ground, and he came to a stop all of six inches from her.

"So help me if you're making this up," he snarled.

"Making what up?" she asked, feeling only more confused by their collectively bizarre behaviour.

He stared into her eyes for a long moment and then reached out with both hands. To her complete and utter shock, he wove his fingers through her hair.

She just stood there, gaping at him, and then she caught sight of the equally stunned Harry and Draco to Severus's left.

Pain exploded through her head. It was a minor miracle that Severus managed to disentangle his hands well enough that he didn't rip most of her hair out by its roots as she collapsed to the floor.

Chapter Forty-Four: The Friend

Harry and Draco sprang up to help Hermione, leaving Severus free to stare at her as she was led to the couch where she could lean back against the cushions and spend several moments trying to recover from what felt like a freight train smashing through her brain.

"Draco," she said softly, worrying a little that it hurt her ears to hear herself speak, "Pain-Relieving Potion, top left cupboard in my lab, please?"

The blond Slytherin went to retrieve the vial she had indicated, and she closed her eyes since the room spun less when she wasn't looking at it.

She cracked her eyes open slightly when he returned to make sure he'd brought back the right vial. It was unlikely that he'd make a mistake, but her state felt a little fragile to be risking it. She downed the potion in one gulp, letting out a relieved sigh when the liquid began to take immediate effect.

"What is going on?" Severus demanded.

She supposed she should be grateful that he'd refrained from using that tone and volume of voice straightaway; it still made her head throb, and she could only imagine what it would have been like without the potion. Sitting up a little straighter, she Banished the empty vial back to her lab and contemplated the three men in the room and the best way to explain what had happened.

"We don't have to be concerned about how Voldemort's going to find out about the warding," she said finally. "He's going to know shortly."

"What did you do?" Severus snarled, fury etched into the harsh lines of his face.

Best to keep it simple, she thought. "I passed the necessary information on to one of his spies."

"Without consulting me?" he thundered incredulously. "Your arrogance knows no bounds."

"I seized an opportunity that arose," Hermione said tightly. "I didn't set out to do it, it just happened. Successfully."

He stared at her as though she were Harry the eleven-year-old who didn't know the difference (or lack thereof) between Wolfsbane, Aconite, and Monkshood. With an annoyed wave of her hand, she Summoned the Pensieve that she and Harry had bought during the summer after fifth year. It was an invaluable tool when working with memories.

"Let's skip the inquisition, shall we? It's obviously too much to think that you might trust my word."

Since this was clearly directed at Severus, the other two didn't respond, and the head of Slytherin showed rare restraint and didn't rise to her bait. She had, in fact, anticipated showing the Pensieved memory to Albus and select others; this was a very important part of the plan, and she was hardly a spy of longstanding with years of successful dissemination of misinformation under her belt. It only made sense that they would want to assess what had occurred.

What annoyed her so much was Severus's manner. If he'd asked, if he'd made even a token effort at politeness, she wouldn't have minded so much, but his assumption of her incompetence was absolutely infuriating.

She put the memory into the Pensieve and used Albus's trick of making the image rise from the surface so that they wouldn't all have to either peer into the bowl or get sucked into the memory.

The four of them watched the image of Tracey asking for help with Transfiguration, the two girls moving to adjourn to the nearest empty classroom. Hermione wasn't more than two steps into the room before she was hit with a Stunner. The memory they were watching fuzzed out for a moment and came back into focus to show that Hermione was now tied to a chair and swallowing something that looked an awful lot like three drops of Veritaserum.

The bottle disappeared back into Tracey's inner pocket as Hermione's eyes glazed over, and the Slytherin started questioning her about the whispers she'd been hearing about a secret plan in June that would leave the school vulnerable.

Hermione explained everything. How Albus had suspected word of the warding would get out because he needed to ask some of his best graduates to stay behind to help with the casting. How while they therefore planned to let word leak out that the warding would take place on the summer solstice—when they would be pretending to have a party for Harry to cover it—they actually planned to do it two days earlier. So when Voldemort came to attack them on the solstice, thinking they were defenceless, he would be the one surprised because they would be fully protected and ready to fight with the Chosen One leading the way.

Tracey wanted to know more about the wards, and Hermione revealed how Albus did not feel he had a choice about re-casting the wards; testing them had shown how much damage they had sustained, and he needed to make the castle safe again for all the children in his care. He was confident in his ability to outsmart Voldemort.

The Ministry wasn't going to be advised of what was happening because they couldn't keep their collective mouths shut if their lives depended on it; there would be professors here and some of the recent graduates, but that was all.

Heads of house were picking their top seventh-year students and requesting that they assist. Yes, Snape knew about it, but he'd been instructed not to ask any of the Slytherins because Albus didn't believe they were trustworthy.

Hermione readily confessed that the school was going to be completely vulnerable; they were bringing the wards down completely. She told the other girl that they would be beginning the process not long after six in the morning and that it would take perhaps three quarters of an hour to lower all the wards.

The wards would be down for several hours as they prepared the ceremony that was needed to cast them completely once more. It was very complicated, Hermione went on to explain, requiring that people be spread all over the castle, and that was why so many of Harry's friends had been asked to stay. Wide coverage across the grounds ensured that there would be strong and even wards over an area this large.

The Slytherin quizzed Hermione to ensure that there wouldn't be security for each of these people. Hermione denied it, stating that that was why it was so important that Voldemort not be aware of the real date. Harry had been told the actual date of the ritual because Albus trusted him so much, and Harry trusted her with all the details that he had learnt.

Everyone else was being told it would occur at the solstice, and since they would all be staying on from the end of the school year, the real plan could be revealed at the very last minute.

Finally satisfied with the revelations about this plan, Tracey spent the last few minutes of the Veritaserum fishing for more information. Hermione therefore explained that she didn't know who the Pure Adults were, although she would certainly like to find out who had that kind of power; they could be helpful in casting the wards.

Hermione admitted to her pleasure that they were going to be able to pull one over on Voldemort; who would try to cast such powerful wards two days before the solstice when it would be much more effective on the solstice itself? He'd never suspect.

As the Veritaserum wore off, Hermione began to look horrified by what she had said, causing a smirk of delight to appear on Tracey's face.

"You're so foolishly trusting," she spat, "coming with me into an empty room by yourself, all because I've said I'm going to be on the light side." Her smile turned cruel. "How stupid are you?"

Hermione was visibly panicking. "It's not true. Harry knows better than to tell me the truth because we can't risk this sort of thing happening. It's not happening two days early, it—"

Tracey laughed. "That was Veritaserum I gave you, you stupid Mudblood. Every word you spoke was the truth, and it's too late for your secret plans now."

"It didn't work, the Veritaserum," the Gryffindor said frantically. "You made it wrong."

The other woman's lips curled. "The Dark Lord gave it to me himself. Snape might be a blood traitor, but he knows his potions, and he wasn't so stupid as to tamper with those that my Lord required. The Dark Lord was gracious enough to let me test it first. It works just fine."

Hermione licked dry lips. "I'll tell them what I've done. They'll change the plans."

The Slytherin girl shook her head. "Do you really think I'm going to let you do that?"

Hermione's eyes widened slightly, and she swallowed heavily. Her voice shook a little. "They'll change the plan if something's happened to me. Harry will tell the truth."

"Not if nobody knows something's happened," Tracey answered in a fierce whisper. "You don't really think you're going to remember any of this, do you?"

Hermione had just started to protest when Tracey pointed her wand straight at her. "Obliviate!"

The figures flickered for a moment and then resumed as Tracey unbound the dazed-looking Hermione, gave her her wand back, and told her that she needed to head back to the library where she'd been revising all afternoon.

Hermione's head wobbled in an unsteady nod, and she obediently moved to head back to the library without another word.

The watching Hermione stopped the memory with a wave of her hand.

"I've convinced Tracey," she repeated to the three men who had silently watched the remembered scene play out. "She will tell Voldemort, and she will convince him. He'll come just as we've planned, and he will be defeated."

So went the plan, anyway.

"She gave you Veritaserum," Severus said. "Veritaserum made by me."

Hermione nodded.

"You lied to her."

She nodded again, not above dragging this out a bit after he'd been so doubtful of her abilities.

"You can't lie when you've had Veritaserum!" he exclaimed.

"Your memory is not normally so short," she answered with pursed lips. "I told you months ago that I was not subject to the effects of Veritaserum."

He stared at her as though waiting for her to take back the words and furnish an explanation that he preferred.

Harry interrupted the staring match.

"I'd like to hear about how you got around the Memory Charm. I didn't know about that one."

She smiled at her fellow Gryffindor. "That one wasn't exactly a plan. Or at least not a tested plan. I Occluded the rest of my mind as though I were about to face Severus, Voldemort, and Albus together, tied the memory that needed to be erased to a specific trigger, and Obliviated myself."

"You did what?" Draco said incredulously.

"I couldn't very well let Tracey Obliviate me," Hermione answered, shrugging a realization that she'd used a rather creative solution. "I used a modified Memory Charm on myself, one that had a trigger so that the memory could be retrieved, and then I Obliviated it. When I was hit with Tracey's spell, the memory was already gone, so there was nothing for her spell to erase. And since I'd hit myself with the Obliviate, I was exhibiting all the symptoms she expected. When appropriately triggered, the memory was exposed. In case any of you somehow missed this detail, it's extremely painful and not something I'd recommend except in an emergency."

Severus was staring at her very closely, and she wondered if she should have admitted that she'd borrowed the notion from him, a conversation that they'd had the summer after sixth year. Harry continued before she could actually add in this fact.

"And your triggers were—?" Harry asked awkwardly.

She pressed her lips together for a moment, swallowed, and said evenly, "An event that I knew would never happen naturally, so I wouldn't have to worry about setting the memory off in the hallway in case I ran into you there where Tracey might still observe me. Sending you all messages for an immediate encounter ensured that you found me wherever I was so that we all know that the lie was successfully passed on."

Harry was frowning now. "She could have badly injured you."

Hermione shrugged. "It wouldn't have been in Voldemort's best interest for me to be injured when I'd just provided crucial information. She was more interested in his needs than in petty revenge. She's cunning enough to be sensible or we would have caught her a long time ago."

The Boy Who Lived didn't look particularly placated by this explanation. "We're going to have a discussion about all these things that you keep doing on your own."

Both she and Draco snorted; by now, the blond knew most everything that Harry had done in his Hogwarts career, and that included quite a bit of haring off on his own. After a moment's consideration, Harry grinned a bit sheepishly.

"At least I'm gaining a growing appreciation for why you always found it so annoying."

She smiled back. "I only do what I have to do. It wouldn't have been half convincing if I'd told her I needed to retrieve Harry Potter first so that she could question us both."

Harry wrinkled his nose at her.

She knew that Harry had now forgiven her, and she was sure that Draco was just as glad that Harry had not been involved in a potentially dangerous activity. That only left Severus, and rather unfortunately but unsurprisingly, he was still glaring at her as though her attempt had been an utter failure instead of a big success.

"I suppose you're going to tell Albus about the clever way in which you transmitted this news to the Dark Lord?"

"In the hopes that it will in some way counter your recitation of my utter stupidity, yes," she answered smoothly. "I intend to make him aware of what I've done."

Severus looked as though he were barely managing to hold back a snarl, and she wondered, not for the first time since she had remembered what had happened, why she had included him. It had seemed important, at the time, that he be here to help her get her memory back, that he be aware of what she'd done to rectify the situation since it had become impossible for Severus to do the task that she had essentially set for him.

Now that she had more time to consider, however, she could so easily have had only Harry and Draco as her triggers. She could have specified in MindSpeech to them that they both hop on one foot in front of her or something. The chances of that happening naturally were really quite remote.

But she had had only a few seconds to decide how to save her memory and their plan, and in that brief span of time, her mind had immediately gone to Severus.

She was so screwed.

It was done now, anyway, and Severus would have found out once Albus was informed, so perhaps it was for the best that his reaction was got out of the way in short order and privately. The fewer people who witnessed the head of Slytherin belittling her intelligence, the happier she would be.

Severus, of course, insisted on dragging her up to the headmaster's office immediately. Mentally, Harry offered to accompany her, but she assured him it wouldn't be necessary. Putting Harry and Severus in a room together always heightened the possibility of an explosive outcome.

She was rather amused by how calmly Albus took the news. It had been crucial to the plan that Voldemort find out and be convinced that they wouldn't expect him. Once they ceased to have a spy in Voldemort's ranks, sharing that information became rather problematic. Now that that hurdle was behind them, Albus was twinkling like mad.

Severus was clearly disgusted by Albus's sanguine behaviour, and Hermione had to wonder if that was the reason that the headmaster was laying it on so thickly; she was certain that under normal circumstances, she'd be receiving a lecture from the man very similar to the one that she had already received from Severus, Harry, and Draco.

Albus, however, actually used not only "It's all for the best", but even "All's well that ends well," and Severus finally left the room in a huff.

The headmaster looked at her steadily.

"It's all been said," she pointed out, attempting to cut off any chastisements. "I did what needed to be done when it needed to be done."

This particular impasse had been reached once already when she'd rescued Severus, and maybe Albus had finally begun to recognize that she wasn't about to materially change her behaviour, because he merely said, "I'm glad that you're safe, Hermione."

She smiled. "Thank you, sir. Is there anything else?"

He shook his head. "That will be all. Thank you for informing me of the events."

"Of course," she said as she rose, though she knew that he would not be fooled into thinking that she would keep him informed on all fronts. This particular information was important to him, but she still had plenty of secrets.

Harry and Draco were actually waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs as though to ensure that Severus hadn't carved her up into little pieces in a fit of pique during the meeting. She'd been right about it being more pleasant with fewer people present; it would only have made Severus angrier if Harry was in there defending her while Albus was being completely blasé about the whole affair.

Overall, Hermione was quite pleased by the entire chain of events, although she rather wished that somewhere in there she and Severus had managed to make up or at least not become more antagonistic. He wasn't happy, she knew that, but it seemed a shame that each time they had spoken in the last few days, their relationship seemed to get worse rather than better.

She couldn't really understand it, either. She'd saved him, they'd sorted out the great big giant misunderstanding about unicorn blood. He no longer thought that she had been trying to curse the rest of his life. They'd made it through three days of a truce, and now he could barely stand to be in the same room with her. He seemed to be angry or confrontational all the time, and she was sick of dealing with him when he was like that.

Even with the factor of the big misunderstanding, she still couldn't quite wrap her brain around how he had intended such violence upon her that her herd mare really thought he meant to do her fatal harm. Hermione had known Severus for nearly seven years, and she couldn't say with absolute certainty that she would have come out of that encounter alive if Castina hadn't been there.

Of course, it wasn't every day that he was tortured within an inch of his life. That was obviously deeply traumatic. He'd been labouring under a big misapprehension, and the morning that he woke up was probably not a time where he was going to behave completely … normally, but it was still … a big deal. The tangled relationship between her and Severus had grown somehow epic, and all she'd ever wanted was to be friends with him if she wasn't allowed to have more.

Yet here he was dragging her once more to Albus as though she were an errant school girl. (And she knew that she was technically still in school, but that was beside the point.) He still hadn't suggested any punishment, it was true, but he also wasn't treating her as though she were an adult capable of making her own decisions. It was bloody frustrating, and she wasn't even getting any cuddles out of it. No matter how much Harry and Draco annoyed one another sometimes, it was clear that they felt as though the positive far outweighed the negative.

Hermione, on the other hand, didn't seem to be getting any return on her emotional investment. Even if a romantic relationship was completely out of the realm of possibility, couldn't they be friends? Unfortunately, events still seemed to suggest that her desires were completely unreasonable.

Harry and Draco escorted her back to the common room. They had surely seen Severus storm out before her, but either Draco had already elbowed Harry or Harry was growing a bit of restraint on his own; neither of them asked her what had happened. Or perhaps Severus's fury and her lack of cheer were simply self-evident.

It was all worth it, she reminded herself, because now the trap was set, and all they had to do was move forward and spring it. As scary and monumental a thought as it was, they were materially closer to the final showdown with Voldemort. With him gone (fingers crossed on this one), with this year over, she could be done forever with this part of her life.

She'd never imagined when she started at Hogwarts as an awestruck twelve-year-old that there would come a time where she would desperately wish that the school year was over. This year, though, she wanted the whole mess to be over and done with: school, N.E.W.T.s, Voldemort, fighting with Severus. She needed to get on with her life because it surely wasn't healthy to stay here and be hung up on someone who spent almost all his time angry with her.

Yet each time that he let her through a chink in his armour, each time that he made some attempt and smiled at her or looked as though he were trying, she fell for it because she found him irresistible. Hilarious as most people would find it, it was the truth. She wanted the life that she could glimpse in those moments, and it would take a stronger person than she evidently was to walk away from that without a backward glance.

He was her mate, and she wanted him to choose her for his. No matter how unlikely it was, she kept wanting it; in those up moments when they were getting along, it truly seemed possible. And then they fought about his being her last choice, and she was left wondering what end of the stick he thought he was grasping and how he could be serious about any part of what he was saying to her.

It made her want to write out long explanatory letters that detailed what she had been thinking when she made certain decisions because it was evident that he was missing the boat completely and mired in some stupid Slytherin backwater where everything was interpreted with the exact opposite of the real meaning. Because, really, how in the name of all that was magical had he managed to accuse her of making him her last choice? She had rescued him, she had given him her virginity, and there was nothing in this world that she cared about more than him. Yet he had the gall to stand there and accuse her of making him her last choice.

She took a turn about the room, realizing that she was completely furious and that there was nothing productive she could do about it. Storming into Severus's quarters and informing him of what she thought of him in this moment would be tantamount to suicide; the fact that it was so tempting probably told her that she was going round the twist.

As always, she was going to have to let as many of her feelings go as possible and bury the ones which she was stuck with. In time, she'd calm down, he'd calm down, and he could glare all he wanted in the end because it wouldn't change any of the facts. He would still be her mate and completely untouchable, and she would still be sad and a bit of a coward because she didn't think she had the guts to ask him what problem he had with her. Whatever intentions he had had to befriend her following the rescue, they were clearly no match for his anger and dislike, and that was all there was to it.

She let out an explosive breath. It didn't seem that anything she did would change his feelings for her; he was going to continue to sneer and yell and glare as much as he always had no matter how she looked at him in return, no matter that she'd snuggled in his bed and patched him up and saved his life.

"You all right?" Harry asked, and she startled, having forgotten that she was still in the room with them. "It didn't go so badly in there, did it?"

"It went fine," she answered as she processed what he was asking about. "Albus was quite understanding and seemed genuinely pleased that the information had been disseminated to Voldemort. Now we can continue to move ahead without a big gaping hole in our plans. Severus, as you no doubt guessed, was still less than pleased by events as they unfolded."

"I don't understand him," Harry complained.

Draco's sharp expression said that he was ready with his elbow once more, but Harry appeared to be done.

"I don't think anyone understands Severus Snape," she answered. She certainly didn't, and she supposed that even if she dosed him up with Veritaserum, he probably had an antidote on hand since he was the paranoid head of a paranoid house. There was no use dwelling on it, so she said firmly, "I'm going to go to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

Morning, of course, would bring Potions class, but it was unlikely Severus could be any more annoyed with her this week than he had been the week before. She'd survived the glaring then, and she could do the same now.

She needed all her Occlumency skills to clear her mind enough to go to sleep.

Monday morning was indeed very similar to the one from the previous week.

Hermione revised when she got up and checked on her Weresbane and other potions ingredients, as she'd be starting the next batch tomorrow. It was only as she was making these preparations that she realized that she'd somehow managed to alienate the man right before her next batch of potion making. Here was another week of brewing that she'd spend alone when she had been able to hope for several days together that she might have the company she craved.

Crave his company or not, she refused to ask him to join her now; she wasn't willing to extend an olive branch when it was he who had destroyed their tentative truce. It could be considered puerile, but she preferred to think of it as her reasonably refusing to be the one who made all the concessions and did all the work in their relationship—or non-relationship, as the case might be.

Her resolution was hardened when she found that Viktor and Severus were still glaring at breakfast. She'd been putting up with it for some time now, though, so she would simply revise for her N.E.W.T.s and endeavour to ensure that no one ever guessed that she cared for them.

Draco was the model of decorum, and Harry was following his boyfriend's lead even if he darted glances up to the High Table from time to time; no comments that were related to Severus passed his lips. Ron was being typically clueless, and she survived by disassociating herself from her Potions professor as much as she possibly could.

The glare continued throughout class, but the questions on bizarre minutiae had tapered off. She wasn't sure if he'd decided this was a form of punishment and thus not allowed by the terms of his agreement with her—because she was pretty sure they both knew the verbal attack in class had been directed at her—or if he'd simply realized it was ineffective.

She didn't suppose she could point out to him that she considered his glare and horrible attitude as a form of punishment; it affected her as much, if not more so, than many of the traditional punishments. Sadly, it seemed more likely that he'd renege on the whole deal at that point rather than improve his manner, so she let the notion go. Picking her battles was a technique that she had been honing when it came to Slytherins.

Severus made no attempt to call another training session, for which she was grateful. She, Harry, and Draco spent the evening working on their homework; Severus had piled it on. This could, perhaps, be construed as a punishment for her best friend, but she admitted wryly that it was supremely self-involved to imagine that all Severus's actions related to her. It was, after all, the time of year where professors gave a lot of homework, and Severus had always given more than most. Draco was apparently still bribing Harry with sex, though, because the Gryffindor boy didn't do more than grumble once or twice about the work load.

Over the next twenty-four hours, Hermione was able to distract herself somewhat with the realization that the Final Battle was approaching at a truly accelerated pace. Never mind about her N.E.W.T.s—and she couldn't believe she was even thinking that—but in all of six weeks, she was going to be supporting all the wards of the castle and grounds and rearranging them while waiting for Voldemort to arrive with an army bent on killing all of them.

The first time she'd fully accessed the wards and taken control of them, she'd done it successfully, but she'd completely lost track of the time, nearly lost track of who she was, woken up everyone sensitive to that sort of magic, and fallen asleep even when her life was practically in danger.

During the Final Battle, none of those reactions were an option. She needed to work flawlessly. She had hoped that she would be practicing with Severus, since it was he whom she needed to ground her, but she hadn't been bluffing when she had told him that she would do it alone if she needed to.

She had therefore begun "revising" on her own. She now had access to all the school's wards, but the easiest access remained at the magical centre of the school. She had thus begun to sneak there periodically very late at night or early in the morning when others were not around to wonder what she was doing.

She worked herself carefully, concentrating until she was fully aware of the passage of time. Since the wards' vastness and intricacy had overwhelmed her at the beginning, she had made sure to start small this time around, holding the wards for only thirty seconds, and then for a minute, and then for two. She made sure to rest afterwards and to gauge her magic levels, and she'd begun to feel as though she were improving slowly but steadily.

Tuesday evening, she got started on the Weresbane that would finish the second trial of the werewolves. It would be a busy week, and she tried to tell herself that there wasn't really time for hours of friendly chats with Severus. Surveying her empty lab once more, she let out a sigh. Right.

It was fortunate that she was very familiar with the base for this potion, as she was more distracted than would be safe otherwise. Since it was only nine when she finished, she rejoined Harry and Draco in the common room so that she could very carefully demonstrate to them that she was untroubled.

Now that she wasn't giving them details about what was happening between her and Severus, it was vaguely possible that they believed her. She was sure, at any rate, that much as they might want to help her, there was nothing that they could do, so avoiding the issue was the best possible action.

They finished their Potions homework after this second night of work, Harry appearing to feel for once that getting it out of the way was the safest choice if they didn't want to accidentally talk about Severus for the rest of the week. She knew that he would actually be happier once it was complete, and she imagined that Draco would give him an adequate reward, too.

Compared to the beginning of the week, Wednesday was a really quite pleasant day. Viktor and Severus didn't seem to be glaring quite as harshly as usual, and Hermione had Transfiguration and Arithmancy. Septima was always happy to entertain Hermione's questions, and she rarely seemed to get offended by Hermione's behaviour. Neither did Minerva.

Although Hermione had thought that they had straightened out yet another misunderstanding back in February when Severus had revealed that he was upset about her cure because he thought that she had been deliberately excluding him, at moments like this, when she found that he was ignoring her trial and her cure once more, she had to wonder if he wasn't rather jealous of the fact that she was the one who'd invented the Weresbane.

She was young, and she knew that managing a feat like the Weresbane at her age was kind of spectacular and kind of ridiculous and probably a source of some unsettled feelings for those very smart people in the field who hadn't thought of it.

But she'd been working on it for years—almost four now—and while she knew that wasn't a hugely long time for research and development, it wasn't as though she had simply snapped her fingers and the potion had magically appeared. She'd toiled away at it, and it was a great accomplishment, but it was one amongst hundreds of amazing accomplishments, potions that had been created by a variety of wizards throughout the years and throughout the world. She wasn't jealous of all of them, wasn't jealous of Severus because of any of his creations. Sure, she would have liked to have made those discoveries, but it was nonsensical to imagine that any one person could create everything. Plus, she was pleased on his behalf with everything that he had created.

Severus was a competitive person, and he was older and more experienced than she was. She actually understood that it might be difficult for him to completely come to grips with the fact that she'd made this potion, but in the end, she liked to think that he'd be happier that it had been created, that he'd be happy for herbecause she'd created it. They'd had that moment in February, she was certain that they had. He didn't voluntarily associate with stupid people, so that meant that proof that she was not stupid was going to be in evidence sometimes.

Although Hermione wasn't privy to Minerva's private thoughts concerning Hermione's managing to turn the children into Animagi, the stern Scottish woman had been full of nothing but overt praise, and she continued to want to be part of the process. It would be awfully nice if Severus would take a page out of Minerva's book.

After dinner, she managed all of an hour of school work before Severus showed up at the door asking to speak to her. Harry and Draco looked between the two of them and then rose as one and excused themselves. She tracked them through the wards as they headed up to the Astronomy Tower. It was early enough in the evening that she could hope that they were going to behave up there.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Severus.

"I said I wanted to speak with you," he said stiffly.

"I heard," she said flatly.

His lips tightened, but his voice was carefully expressionless as he asked, "May I sit?" and gestured at the unoccupied chair.

Her voice held no warmth. "If you wish."

They glared at one another, Hermione determined not to speak unless spoken to since this was Severus's idea.

He spoke reluctantly. "I may have been … precipitous on Friday."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Can we not have a civil conversation?" he asked pointedly.

She bit her tongue and barely refrained from pointing out that he was the one who almost invariably ruined their conversations.

"I don't doubt that we are physically capable," she said once she'd found some diplomacy. "It requires … effort on both our parts, however."

"It would help if you answered my questions." His expression made it clear that he thought she'd been deliberately difficult.

"It would help if you posed them clearly," she responded, making another effort not to be particularly snarky. The disapproval now on his face told her that she hadn't even come close to succeeding. Sighing, she said more carefully, "Severus, I don't have the slightest idea why we're arguing right now. You were clearly upset on Friday, but you wouldn't say why, and you wouldn't even let me tend your injuries."

"You seemed to have your hands full assisting Mr Potter and Draco."

She stared at him incredulously, thoughts rearranging rapidly now that she knew what had upset him. As it turned out, she had gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, although their argument following his injury suggested that the night in February was the root of the problem out of which everything else was stemming.

"Severus," she said, unable to prevent an edge of the incredulousness she was feeling from spilling into her voice, "I'd just hit Harry with raw magic whose effect I was completely uncertain of. For all I knew, I'd killed him. I needed to ascertain that he was all right."

"Before you helped anyone else. I understand."

His tone indicated that he wasn't making even a token effort to understand, and he was left sounding remarkably close to jealous.

"I tried to help all of you," she said softly. "If our situations were reversed, what would you have done?"

He didn't answer right away, which she took to mean that he would have done exactly as she had.

"What would you have done if we were injured equally?" Severus demanded suddenly.

She stared at him, unable to believe that he had actually just asked that of her, as though they were grade school children.

He rose to his feet and made it several steps towards the door, forcing her to rise as well.

"Are you just going to leave?" she challenged. "That was your attempt at a civil conversation?"

He turned back to her, face expressionless. "It was clear that the conversation had finished."

"Clear in what manner? Because you decided based on a moment of silence that you were hearing an answer you didn't like?"

He frowned at her.

"Damnit, Severus," she snapped. "I'd help you first. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

He stared at her darkly, and it was her turn to frown.

"If you aren't going to believe me when I answer, why did you even come?"

He spoke doubtfully. "You'd really let Mr Potter suffer longer?"

"I would," she answered solemnly.

It was kind of sneaky, she realized, getting round her reluctance to answer big, sweeping questions about her feelings with ones that seemed ridiculously innocent.

But she had really just come awfully close to saying that Severus was more important to her than Harry was.

It appeared that Severus was grappling with the same notion; his next comment had nothing to do with the topic at hand beyond the fact that it involved her and Harry.

"It was Mr Potter who convinced you to return here."

Would there ever be any event that occurred between them that they would both feel happy about, which wouldn't cause more questions than answers? She'd really thought that the rescue and its aftermath had been dealt with between them. He'd had the whole scene from her mind and everything.

Still, he was talking to her, which was a step in the right direction. She had already determined that the more unanswered questions she left, the more suspicious he got, and that was clearly not conducive to a friendly relationship of any sort.

Making him leave in a huff wouldn't help, either, so she refrained from pointing out that right before she ran away, he had just threatened to kill her; who did he think she'd want to come after her?

"Harry was the one who found me, and he used a combination of guilt and what I wanted to hear to get me to come back," she said slowly.

Severus raised an eyebrow, and she reluctantly elaborated.

"I'm important to our plan to destroy Voldemort. And he said—" She faltered for a moment, but she was tired of the misunderstandings, so she forged on, though her lack of conviction was evident as she added, "He said you were sad."

The look on Severus's face was indecipherable.

She continued her explanation. "I told him what it would mean to me to go back, and he offered to run off with me."

"How touching." Sarcasm dripped from the words.

She shrugged, as she felt that way just minus the ill-humour. "It meant a lot to me that he wouldn't force me. But I needed to come back."

"A war to fight."

It was not a question.

She conceded this. "And some people I would rather not leave behind."

She attempted a smile at him and was pleased when this didn't immediately result in more upset. He certainly didn't smile back, but he looked moderately less thunderous than he had before.

"Tea?" she offered cautiously.

He nodded, and they managed several minutes of calm discussion about school. This lasted until the discussion strayed to Potions homework; she should have known she ought to have steered clear of it entirely.

She made a teasing remark about his trying to bury them in the sheer volume of work. This resulted, of course, in a disparaging comment about the inability of Gryffindors to handle workloads that everyone else found perfectly reasonable.

She laughed. "I have to concede that Harry spent more time bemoaning his lot in life after he received the work than Draco did."

"You entertained all his complaints, no doubt?" he said darkly.

"I listened to him whinge, yes," she answered with amusement.

"And no doubt commiserating with him about the big bad Potions professor," he sneered.

"Actually," she answered, letting her irritation show, "as per usual, I told him to stop acting like a child and get the work done." And speaking of acting like a child. "Why do you always act like this when the subject of Harry comes up?"

"Why does the subject of Mr Potter always come up?" he countered, face hard.

"Harry and I are friends!" she responded explosively. Half the time Severus was the one bringing Harry up.

"A friend whom you never stop talking about? That sounds like something else to me," he growled, his tone making clear just what it was that he was insinuating.

She nearly snarled at him, not understanding what more she could possibly say to convince him but making the attempt to lay it out clearly one more time anyway.

"Harry and I are close friends. Best friends, even. But that doesn't mean we want—or have ever wanted—to sleep with one another or become romantically involved in any way. Don't you understand? Remus said you and Lily were friends, you must—"

And then she saw the look on his face, and suddenly, everything made a great deal of sense.

"You and Lily were friends," she repeated slowly, stunned by her so-tardy realization. "But you were in love with her … and she was in love with James Potter. That's why you're always so concerned about Harry and what he's thinking. This is your chance to even the score."

"You're hardly the first Muggle-born student since Lily to grace these halls," he scoffed.

"But the only other one to be closely involved with a Potter." Hermione swallowed heavily. "I think I preferred believing you'd slept with me because I was a Pure Adult."

"Hermione—" he protested.

There was a ringing sound in her ears, and the room was growing white around the edges. She forced herself to breathe.

"The situation's completely reversed," she found herself saying, appalled but somehow numb inside, the words tumbling out before she could censor them. "Harry has never been in love with me, and you never hurt him."

Severus opened his mouth to speak again, but she realized that under no circumstances could she hear what he had to say right now. She flung herself out of the room and was all the way down the hall before it occurred to her that they'd been in her room. She shook her head. She couldn't have stayed there anyway. One look at her right now, and Harry and Draco would have known that her life as she knew it had come crashing down around her ears.

There had been a part of her that had continued to hold out hope that no matter what happened between them, Severus cared for her. Despite the Pure Adult fiasco, there had been moments all year where it had really seemed as though he did, and she had let herself dream…. But just now that dream had flickered and died.

She'd known for years how long Severus held a grudge and that he wasn't averse to using any means necessary to get revenge, at least when it came to the Marauders. Granted, it took some time, but with Lily and James dead, this was really the only option he had left open to him. If he'd been right about her and Harry caring for one another romantically, it would have been the perfect revenge to steal her away from the last surviving Potter, to hurt Harry through her.

Severus had not had an argument to refute her realization. She'd chosen him as her mate, and he was in love with Harry's mother. The wards alerted her to the fact that Severus had left her room and without another thought, she Masked herself and escaped out of the castle.

Dodging students was nothing like dodging Death Eaters, so it was easy to make her way to the Forest. She'd have to be back in a few hours for the next stage of the Weresbane, but if she didn't want to destroy her hard work or collapse into a gibbering heap of maudlin depression, she needed to get outside for a little while.

She transformed, and Castina came to meet her when she was barely inside the Forest, which likely meant that she'd been broadcasting her emotions rather more than she had intended.

Little one, Castina said sorrowfully. I am sorry.

If Hermione had been inadvertently sharing the source of her distress, her herd mare was wise enough not to mention Severus's involvement.

The Gryffindor sent a mental nod of acknowledgement for both the words and the circumspection. May I run with you for a little while?

Castina consented, and Hermione spent the next several hours racing through the Forest and doing her best to forget everything she knew about the castle. If she'd been in human form, she might have succeeded in exhausting herself enough to stop thinking; her unicorn form ensured that she was feeling revitalized by the run, and this left her able to continue analyzing the entire situation.

She noticed that she didn't feel the urge to run away that had manifested on similar occasions in the past. She wasn't sure if her sense of responsibility was too strong—she couldn't be gone for more than these few hours unless she wanted to fail the werewolves in her care—or if it was because no one would be able to come after her this time—no blood for the tracking spell—or if she was becoming used to these crushing disappointments and knew that running away wouldn't solve anything.

Although this last theoretically meant that she was coping better, the thought currently seemed nothing but depressing. She didn't want to have to develop a thick skin just to live in the same castle as Severus.

There were only a few weeks left, she reminded herself. They didn't have to spend that much time together, and all she'd have to do was sit with Harry between her and Severus, and she could be assured that Severus would leave her alone in most public venues.

His behaviour towards Harry made so much more sense now. He wasn't just the boy whom Severus felt he had to save because James had saved Severus's life once. Hermione was sure that that debt had been paid back in Harry's first year. But Severus continued to save him because he was Lily's son, and he continued to hate him because he was Lily's son with James Potter. No matter what happened between them, Severus seemed incapable of judging Harry on his own merits.

She wondered what the chances were, statistically, that Harry would wind up with a Muggle-born best friend and that it would appear so frequently as though the two of them were romantically involved. When had Severus got the idea? In fourth year after that Skeeter woman had made up all those stories about them? He couldn't have acted right away, of course, because he'd never risk getting tossed out of Hogwarts for her being underage, and he had to worm his way into her good graces, and that took time and effort.

But he had taken the time and made the effort, apparently, because by the end of sixth year, he was right where he needed to be. Or perhaps it was she who had been manoeuvred. Maybe he used to have someone who came out to watch for him to return after Death Eater meetings, and he'd asked them to stop so that she'd be the one to find him and get him back to his quarters and nurse him back to health….

Unicorns didn't cry, but she needed to; it felt as though the tears were crowding up her throat, packing tighter and tighter, and if she didn't release them, she would explode.

It's all right, little one, Castina told her softly. Transform. Do not fight it.

And this was how Hermione found herself in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, clutching the silky mane of her herd mare and sobbing brokenly into her neck.

Castina was muttering soft horse sounds and nonsense words in MindSpeech, and Hermione cried and cried until it finally felt as though she had no more tears left. Her herd mare didn't move or complain even once, just curled up around Hermione when the human found her legs wouldn't support her anymore and let them both rest on the ground.

When Hermione finally came back to herself, she realized that she'd made quite a mess of Castina's coat. She looked up at the unicorn with dismay, but Castina seemed completely unruffled.

It is nothing, Berit, Castina answered before Hermione could even pose the correct question or make an exclamation of horror. Your improved state will endure longer because you have had the chance to purge yourself of all those tears that you were bottling up. It is not healthy, she chided gently.

Hermione opened her mouth to tell Castina that she'd only felt like crying in the last little while, but she closed it again when she realized how nonsensical that had to be. There had been plenty of times over the last few months where tears had threatened but she'd been too busy with this duty or that person to be able to release them. They'd apparently caught up with her today, all the tears for Severus that she hadn't been able to shed before, and she didn't want to argue with Castina because Hermione was very grateful that she'd had someone to silently support her.

It was also a great relief that, despite whatever she was feeling towards Severus right now, Castina had offered no threats or recriminations. Hermione needed unconditional support, and she doubted she would have received it from anyone else. She knew that Harry supported her, but there was no way that he wouldn't have had commentary. He would likely have threatened Severus, and she realized with dark humour, he would have been completely weirded out by the idea of Severus and Lily, so she probably wouldn't have got anything useful out of Harry whatsoever. It would simply have been cruel on her part to make this all weird for Harry, too. Memories of his mother and father were precious and not to be messed with.

Thanks to the minor breakdown and recovery she'd had in the Forest, she was able to sneak back into the castle and reappear in her common room looking unharmed and composed. She'd given herself several minutes back in unicorn form at the end of her crying jag in order to reenergize, and the transformation had also done wonders for getting rid of her puffy, red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks. Hopefully, it wouldn't be the sort of cover-up that she would have to employ very often.

Harry and Draco had reinstalled themselves in the common room.

"You all right?" Harry said, eyeing her closely.

"I'm fine," she replied, hoping her tone had come off pretty well. Not so breezy that it was over-the-top and clear she was lying but not so melancholy that Harry would be going for his wand and charging off after Severus, either. "I need to work on the next stage of the Weresbane, though, so that's why I'm back."

They exchanged glances, and she could see them gearing up to ask just where she'd gone.

"We didn't leave at the same time," she said quietly. "I've been in the Forest, and you won't have to worry about Severus coming to visit any time in the near future."

They both opened their mouths, but she cut them off before any words could emerge.

"I can't be late with the Weresbane. It doesn't really matter."

They looked far from convinced, but the Weresbane didn't wait for anybody's issues, so she went through her bedroom and into the lab where she could forget all her problems for a few minutes and concentrate on getting this potion perfectly right so that eighteen werewolves were cured.

She might be brewing a complex potion, but Severus had never evinced further desire to get her notes or to be involved in the process in any way, so that meant that she could push him out of her mind entirely and concentrate only on her potion and lycanthropy. For the next several hours, there were going to be no thoughts about Severus at all.

The potion went smoothly, and she was cleaned up well before midnight. She did a little revision to help advance the hour and hopefully tire her further, and then she lay down and tried to will herself to sleep. It had been a long day, after all, so there was no reason that she shouldn't be exhausted and ready to sleep.

Now that she no longer had a life-giving cure as a filler, however, she found her mind full of Severus and recent revelations, and she was once again forced to use Occlumency to clear her mind so that sleep would finally come.

Thursday saw her begin to actively avoid Severus rather than the other way around. So far as she could tell, it wasn't horribly obvious to everyone else, but she knew exactly what she was doing. At mealtimes, she didn't look up to gauge the glare-factor at his and Viktor's end of the table. Since she was tied in to the wards, she didn't have to do anything so obvious as turn round in the hallway when she saw him coming; it was a very simple matter of being aware of where Severus was at all times and working out routes that would avoid any nearby areas.

It helped that the castle was taking her part. Twice in that first day it redirected staircases and created a false wall so that imminent-seeming meetings could be averted; since she didn't want Harry, Draco, and Ron to know exactly what she was doing, she couldn't always manage an alternate route when she was with them. She appreciated the castle's show of support.

She was hoping that if she didn't look at Severus for long enough, maybe she could get the image of him that was branded into her brain to fade somewhat. It hurt a little less, maybe, when he wasn't actively trying to insult her or turn her to stone or whatever it was that he was typically trying to do when she was around, so she felt marginally more peaceful when she was away from him or very carefully paying him no mind.

If Harry and Draco noticed how atypically she was ignoring Severus, neither had yet geared up the nerve to ask for specifics. Since it was entirely likely that Severus was glaring at her even worse than usual, it could even be that they thought they understood why she was avoiding him; who would want to catch Severus's attention when he was on the warpath? No one did, so she had every reason to keep her head down and stay out of his way.

The house-elves had apparently noticed that something was amiss as well, because at dinner on Thursday, a little flute of chocolate mousse appeared next to her place setting, clearly meant for her alone. While the rest of her diet was full of necessary restrictions based on the fact that she was now a unicorn Animagus, the same could not be said for the mousse. It wasn't essential to her being that she have it, and normally, she didn't like the house-elves to make exceptions just because they were fond of her or fond of Harry or whatever it was precisely that motivated them. Tonight, however, she felt rather horrible, and she was very happy to drown her sorrows in mousse. It would be a shame, really, to let the perfect confection go to waste.

Tonight, the Weresbane had to simmer from one o'clock until she banked the heat just after half five in the morning, so she took the opportunity to work more with the wards.

So far, she'd worked her way up to holding the wards for ten minutes and was able to release them without anyone being the wiser. This left her a little tired, but she had the sense now to plan so that whenever possible she could sleep (or better yet, get out into the open and transform) for a minimum half hour afterwards. Her current conditioning would, she hoped, ensure that she could hold the wards long enough during the Final Battle without any chance of a collapse from exhaustion.

Accessing the wards did rather feel as though she were flexing muscles that weren't quite used to the exercise, and that told her that continued effort would likely yield the desired results. She had less than six weeks to hone those magical muscles adequately.

It really was an amazing feeling when she took over the wards. She had to prevent herself from prying too much into everyone's business because when she was the wards, she knew a great deal about the castle and its environs. She knew who was in bed with whom, the passwords that protected each of the common rooms and even the teacher's quarters if she thought too hard. She knew where secret rooms were, could even get some sense of the Room of Requirement, although it seemed that when it was out of use, at least as far as the wards were concerned, it was constantly in flux. She knew which house-elves were sleeping in the kitchens, where each animal that was on the grounds was located, and she could tell if Trelawney was up in her tower and at the cooking sherry again.

Most of this was, of course, none of her business, although she figured the Marauders hadn't had more business with that Map of theirs, so either the castle had a sweet spot for the lot of them or it trusted that they weren't going to do anything truly outrageous.

Given what she knew of the Marauders, she was pretty sure they must have charmed the castle. Hermione was going to do her best to live up to the trust that had been placed in her.

Once it occurred to her that in the middle of the Final Battle, there would obviously be chaos, she realized that she needed to start practicing at times other than very late at night or very early in the morning. These times were the calmest the school ever got with almost everyone in their beds. Hermione therefore had very little practice controlling the wards when there were many people crossing them.

While the main wards that guarded the entrance to the grounds were not accessed with huge frequency during the course of a day, many of the interior wards were crossed all the time. Students were in and out of their dorms, professors were in and out of their quarters, everyone was in and out of classrooms and storerooms and public areas, and wards were disabled and reinstated throughout the castle.

Since she had no way of knowing where exactly the battle would be fought within the grounds, she needed to make sure that the movement of people throughout the castle and the grounds didn't throw off her concentration; she had an awful lot to be worrying about at once, and during the battle, mistakes could cost lives.

While they waited for Voldemort to arrive, the wards had to be absolutely quiescent; there couldn't be so much as a hint of a ward to spook him and his army. Then she had to allow the wards to reactivate, modifying them if necessary. Anti-Apparition wards were most important, but she would also be trying to block what dark creatures she could, and she needed to leave the Dark Magic wards disabled because they already knew it was being used without being annoyed by any alarms.

She would probably have to redefine where many of the wards fell as the battle shifted and she needed to prevent the entrance of this or that creature…. And all this had to be done while members of her side were spread throughout the castle defending it as best they could.

Once she was finished with the potions for this moon, she decided, she'd carve out some more time for the wards.

On Friday, she had not only to work on the Weresbane but also get the Wolfsbane ready for what she hoped was the last time for any of her werewolves. There would still be plenty of people for her to help throughout the world, but her first series of trials was getting closer and closer to the end with each passing day. For the British werewolves, the cure was almost complete.

Saturday was therefore full of revision and working on the Wolfsbane. The Weresbane didn't need to be looked at again until a quarter to four in the morning when she added the dried Weresbane leaves. She had late rounds with Pansy at one, which she'd leave unfinished if her potion was threatened, but she was hoping that people were mostly behaving. Unless all the students in Hogwarts were out of their beds, there should be no reason for the rounds to take more than two hours.

When a quarter past one arrived and Pansy still hadn't shown up, Hermione began to get a little worried and checked the wards to ensure that the Slytherin girl was safe. What she found surprised her and was almost enough to restore her sense of humour—which had been somewhat lacking the past couple of days.

She bid Harry and Draco farewell, and once she told them she was heading out for rounds, they asked no questions; they were looking awfully snugly and pretty eager for her absence, in fact, and she suspected that if she'd announced that she was off to Hogsmeade in an attempt to find some Death Eaters, it would at least have taken a few minutes for the news to sink in.

Rolling her eyes at the same time as she suppressed something that was sickeningly like a coo at how cute they were together, she made her way out of the room. Rounds generally began at the top of the castle and progressed downward—gravity was in their favour that way—so Hermione felt right at home marching up to the Astronomy Tower at this late an hour on a Saturday night.

Emerging into the crisp air at the top of the tower, she was stunned momentarily speechless. She'd known, of course, but she hadn't quite anticipated—

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Hermione exclaimed as soon as she'd found her voice, turning away so that she didn't have to get any more of a visual than was already burned onto her retina. "This is a school, you two, full of adolescent children. There are places where that is appropriate, but the top of the Astronomy Tower is not one of them. Get decent and get over here before someone else finds you."

Chapter Forty-Five: The Mousse

Pansy approached first.

"We were just—" she started.

"Yes, yes." Hermione cut the other girl off before she could make up something utterly ridiculous. "You were just admiring the stars, and that's why my excellent night vision has resulted in images being burned into my brain that I'd rather erase. I know it's beautiful up here, but you've got to be more discreet."

Viktor stepped up beside the Slytherin.

"My apologies, Hermione. I had not meant for the situation to get out of hand."

She shook her head. "I know it's easy to get carried away when strong emotions are involved. But you're lucky you're not a student, or I'd have to take away points."

"How many am I losing, then?" Pansy sounded resigned.

Hermione shrugged. "I'm sure there's special dispensation for students involved with teachers. If I'm not going to penalise Victor, it's hardly fair to penalize you, is it?"

Pansy stared at her incredulously.

Hermione spoke as sternly as she could manage given that she was talking to two people whom she'd just seen in far too little clothing, one of them a Hogwarts staff member. "However, I'm likely to disregard any such dispensation if I catch you at it again. It really wouldn't do for any of the children to find the two of you in such a compromising position."

They both nodded.

"Might I have a vord?" Viktor asked.

Pansy excused herself, giving Hermione's arm a light squeeze as she passed.

Viktor spent a long moment searching for words but finally said, "She likes Quidditch."

Hermione smiled faintly. "I thought she might."

Certainly more than Hermione did, anyway.

"Did you ask her to come see me?" he demanded suddenly as though he had finally geared up the courage to ask what he really wanted to know.

"What makes you think so?" she hedged.

"She seemed … unsure vhen I opened the door. She did not act like it had been her idea."

It had been one of Hermione's better ones, she thought. Viktor had stopped coming to their Thursday sessions, but she doubted that he'd suddenly found something particularly entertaining instead. He was lonely. Pansy was lonely. They'd both seemed interested in one another, and they'd only needed a push in the right direction.

"But she came back on her own," Hermione surmised.

He nodded, smiling faintly at the memory, but the smile faded and he faced her in all seriousness. "You should have taken points. And brought my misconduct to the headmaster."

"I've only ever wanted you to be happy," she answered simply. "Besides, members of staff are allowed to have relationships with of-age students."

He shrugged this off. "I have not been … kind about this."

She shook her head. "I hurt you. You didn't do anything to hurt me or my friends. Wanting some distance is completely normal."

He still looked troubled. "You do not mind?"

"I'm fond of Pansy," she explained. "I'm fond of you. If the two of you are happy, then I'm happy."

The surly expression on his face eased. "Thank you, mila moya."

She nodded. Having called her that for years, she supposed it would be difficult to instantly break the habit. She wondered, now, if some of the glare that she'd thought had been directed her way over the last few days had really been worry over how she was going to feel at this revelation.

"You're very welcome." With a smile, she added, "Now, go catch Pansy up and plan some asinine encounter in a properly warded Quidditch change room or something. I don't want to hear that any of the younger children know anything about it."

He nodded, gave her a last smile, and went after Pansy.

Hermione spent a few minutes admiring the view, happily allowing the brightly shining stars to wash away the unwanted images in her brain. Why did she have to keep seeing the bare arses of men who thought they fancied her? Why couldn't she be seeing more of the bare arse of the man she fancied? She snorted to herself. That would be a conversation stopper for sure: I've seen Ron's and Viktor's arses—and Draco's and Harry's, too, actually—so I need to see more of yours to make up for it…. Yup, that would go over swimmingly.

Although she fought them back, what brought angry and pained tears prickling to her eyes was what would have happened if it were Lily saying the equivalent to him. Lily, Hermione was certain, would not have been up here on this stupid tower all alone, but there was no way that Hermione could fight a dead woman. Especially a paragon of virtue who had died to save Hermione's best friend.

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. It still seemed rather unfair to her that everyone was having sex except her. The thought was immature and not terribly logical because she knew that life wasn't fair, but on nights like these, she rather thought that fate could be kinder when it came to the little details of Hermione's life. She was curing lycanthropy. Thanks to Solace, she'd been able to present everyone with a way to defeat Voldemort, so wouldn't some happiness in her life be a nice gesture on fate's part?

She sighed. If only fate operated on a reward system, she'd be all set. Since that was not the case, she was going to have to learn to survive the situation in which she found herself. Even if it didn't mean any happy sex for her. She snorted to herself, knowing that her thoughts were stupid and that her friends would think she'd gone round the twist if she ever shared these musings. Given how things were going with Severus, she could really just discount any sort of sex for the foreseeable future.

Theoretically, she was capable of having sex with someone else, but the thought of betraying her mate in that manner (no matter what he was doing to her) made her feel more than a little sick to her stomach. It was only a few months since the consummation, however, and it was possible that eventually the constraints she felt would ease. And maybe by that point, she'd want to sleep with someone else instead of pining for the man she could not have.

Suddenly remembering that she was working to a deadline, she set out to do a quick set of rounds. Since she was on her own and in a hurry, she cheated; being connected to the school wards made it very easy to discover if anyone was out in the hallways when they ought not to be.

Since she felt a little bit guilty about using her special abilities to catch the miscreants, she was moderately lighter on punishment than usual, although she wasn't sure that the small handful of students really noticed.

She was a little surprised that it hadn't occurred to Draco, at least—who valued power and advantage—to ask her to use her connection to the wards to make all their rounds easier. Perhaps he hadn't grasped the extent of her skills, though, and the fewer people who guessed, the better; it wouldn't do for some clever student to work out what she was capable of. Fortunately, it was rather late, and most students had found their beds already.

Hermione was therefore back in her quarters in plenty of time to closely monitor the potion through its final stage, and by ten on Sunday morning, she'd dropped it off at the safe house and was back at Hogwarts with none the wiser. It was a very useful skill, being able to Apparate through the Hogwarts wards. Her job would be much more difficult if the castle didn't like her so much.

This particular moon phase resulted in the longest drink window of any of her trials; the moon was full at two twenty-nine on Monday afternoon, but it didn't rise until seven fifty-four that evening. This meant the potion could be drunk as early as two twenty-nine on Sunday afternoon or as late as six fifty-four on Monday evening. Her Arithmantic calculations had indicated that the potion would be less effective if taken after two thirty on Monday afternoon; the moon was full then, whether or not it had reached the horizon.

Although the strongest individuals might still be cured even if they took the potion that late, she wasn't risking the children or any less-prepared adults on an experiment to see if the Were really was less subdued if the potion was consumed after the full moon. The werewolves would therefore be taking their potion on Sunday evening, giving them plenty of time to assimilate it.

As Hermione grew closer to the werewolves, she desired more and more to be with them before the transformation as well as during it. She wanted them to have the best possible chance of success. While she trusted what Remus and the nine cured werewolves were telling the eighteen who would be making the attempt on Monday, it wasn't the same as being there herself.

Still, she'd be able to make sure that there were no sudden allergies or problems with the potion since it was being given Sunday night, and the werewolves would be able to have a full night's sleep before they prepared during the day on Monday.

The last thing she wanted to do during the day was go to class when all she would be doing was worrying about what would be happening in a few hours. While she was sure that Filius would understand if she didn't attend, she didn't want to miss another class. Curing lycanthropy was very important, but it wasn't as though the werewolves wouldn't survive without her for the afternoon. As long as Albus let her skip dinner, she could be at the safe house by shortly after four in the afternoon, still several hours before the moon rose.

There was no way on Earth that she'd ask Severus if she could miss his Potions class. Although she would love a reason not to have to sit in that classroom with him glaring at her for three hours, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of her appearing to be going to such lengths to keep out of his way. She would just have to avoid him as much as was possible in an enclosed room in the dungeons.

At least there were plenty of other students there. She could trust that Severus would never in a million years bring up the topic of Lily Potter in front of the rest of the seventh-years, so she was safe from any asinine conversations that he might want to start. He could sit there and believe that she and Harry were really in love and he was making the Boy Who Lived miserable, but it wouldn't matter, because she'd be keeping her head down, getting her potion done, and moving on just as soon as she could.

If Albus was in a very forgiving mood, she could pop over to the safe house at lunch. She would plan to do that, she decided, and then she wouldn't feel so bad about Charms.

Harry and Draco insisted on coming with her to the safe house on Sunday evening, Harry congratulating himself on catching her before she went over this time. Draco just shook his head and asked her what time she'd dropped the potion off this morning.

She smirked at them, Harry let out a big sigh, and they headed to the safe house. Remus stayed downstairs while the potion was being administered, and she was pleased to see that he seemed to be behaving normally, just as though they hadn't blown up over the topic of Severus Snape.

The fact that his belief that Severus wouldn't make her happy was being borne out with more and more force was rather depressing, but there was nothing that she could do about it, and she definitely didn't want to argue over it once again. Severus was still her mate, and she would stick with her resolution of not talking much about their relationship with anyone.

The werewolves were all happy to see her, the eighteen who were going to be in the final trial rather than the upcoming one very relieved to get their Wolfsbane. She always got the feeling that a little part of them couldn't help but worry that she'd forget about them or that for some reason they wouldn't get their potion. Too many of them had lived in fear for too long and had suffered through uncontrolled transformations that had left them with emotional scars that ran far deeper than any physical ones. She was doing her best week by week to show them that she was entirely trustworthy. If all went well, there would be more cured werewolves than uncured ones by Tuesday morning, and she knew that they would all feel that triumph.

There was the usual friendly grumbling as she fed everyone their dose and then took down all their vitals in her journal. The longer the werewolves worked with her, the better they got at reeling off the information she wanted in short order, explaining happily all the symptoms they were not having and all the normal feelings that they were currently experiencing.

It was interesting to see how much their behaviour changed as they got closer to the full moon. They were tenser and more energetic, and this time she observed that those who had taken the Weresbane appeared calmer than those who had taken the Wolfsbane. As far as she could tell, the Wolfsbane only did its job during the actual transformation, assuring that the human mind was in ascendance at that time. The Weresbane, by contrast, suppressed the Were and supported the wolf and the human, and it began to do its work to more visible effect from the moment that it was consumed.

Those who were taking the Weresbane were still subject to the pull of the moon, of course, but it was nice to see that they didn't look quite so much as though they wanted to crawl out of their own skins in the way that the Wolfsbane-dosed werewolves did.

She also checked in with the nine ex-werewolves, making sure that, like Remus and Draco, they felt nothing but human as the full moon neared. They liked to talk about how strange but wonderful it was to be human again, as many of them had got used to having better senses, increased strength, and the other side effects of being a werewolf. While none of them would go back for even a heartbeat, it was an adjustment that they had to make each and every moment until they got used to exactly what it meant to be solely human again.

The children were very happy to see Hermione, Draco, and Harry, and she promised them that they'd be back again the next day to help out. They would also, she reassured the anxious Sophia, be bringing Tonks. Minerva would be coming along as well, so there would be support for everyone.

Having assured the children about who would be attending the next day, Hermione was reminded that there was one more battle that she needed to face when she returned to Hogwarts.

It was nearly midnight when they regained the castle, but the wards informed Hermione that Albus was still awake, so she headed up to his office.

Harry and Draco looked surprised by the detour.

"You may come along if you wish, as the topic concerns you."

Harry immediately elected to join her, and that meant Draco was coming as well. She let the griffin announce their presence, and they found Albus nursing a mug of tea at his desk in an extremely bright purple dressing gown.

"Harry, Hermione, Draco, how delightful to see you this evening," the old man exclaimed. "What can I do for you?"

"I wouldn't have disturbed you if you weren't still awake," Hermione said. Leave it to him to guess whether she'd asked Fawkes, checked the Map, or accessed the wards. "I wanted to make sure you were aware that Harry will be coming to the safe house with me tomorrow."

Albus was regarding her as though he hadn't expected the baldness of this statement.

"I need him," she said plainly. "If he's in any danger, I'll send him back."

"You cannot—" Albus began.

"Apparate him from the safe house to the hospital wing before anyone knows what's happened? Of course I can," she answered assuredly.

Slowly, Albus's eyes began to twinkle. "It's reassuring to know that you're taking care of Harry, Hermione."

"You need never doubt it," she responded immediately, smiling. "His safety is a top priority. Now, if you'll forgive me, I have a long day tomorrow and should be getting to bed."

Albus rose and passed around his desk to escort them to the door, bidding them goodnight as they went.

Once they were in the hallway and the appropriate charms had been cast, Harry spoke. "Thanks. Have I said you're a little scary sometimes?"

She smiled. "I might have heard it once or twice before. And you're welcome, but I really do need you, you know. I have to concentrate on the children, and that means I need someone with a lot of magical strength and mental abilities for the adults. Therefore, you're coming with."

He offered her his biggest puppy dog eyes and pouted. "Would you really have left me behind if you didn't need me?"

Draco snorted and said dryly, "Everyone always needs the Saviour of the Wizarding World. What kind of a question is that? Although, if you're looking for someone with lots of mental abilities…."

He left the rest of the insult unspoken, and Hermione smiled while Harry deepened his pout.

"Come along," she instructed, envisioning the ridiculous argument they could get into otherwise. "There's no point in arguing about it now, and I'll consider changing my mind if you don't look well-rested in the morning."

Harry made a face at her. But really, it wasn't as though he needed much of an excuse to spend eight solid hours in bed with Draco.

They parted ways in the common room, Draco not even pretending that he was going to his own room; he tended only to do that when there were visitors or others in the hallway who might get suspicious about the legitimacy of a too-late visit. On those occasions, he'd promptly use the secret door to get from his room back to Harry's, and they could continue cohabitating peacefully.

Knowing that she would need her own wits about her, Hermione called it a night immediately and slept until four. She then went out to the Forest to energize with her herd. By six—when she could be awake without any awkward questions—she took a jog in human form around the grounds. This was followed by yoga in her quarters; since Harry and Draco were having a bit of a lie-in, there wasn't anyone she could spar with at the moment.

The little flutes of mousse had continued at meal times, and since she'd now had them on nearly a dozen occasions, she hoped that meant the trend wouldn't be stopping any time soon. The servings were small enough that it almost didn't seem completely irrational to be eating them constantly. At any rate, it was a way to drown her sorrows that didn't involve copious amounts of alcohol.

In the beginning, they had been flavoured differently. There was milk and dark, a white chocolate that was delicately flavoured with vanilla and cinnamon which she appreciated the flavour of but didn't like as much, and the same went for the raspberry, hazelnut, and caramel.

The house-elves were apparently keeping close tabs on her, too, because the flavoured ones stopped, and the chocolate got darker and darker until she could swear that there was almost nothing but cocoa in there, and it was beautiful. Her expression of bliss must have been observed because this variation was the one that had been present for the last several meals and looked to be sticking.

Ron had actually tried to grumble (fairly good-naturedly, but this was food they were talking about) about her getting pudding at every meal, but Harry coolly informed him that just as soon as he'd cured lycanthropy, he could get it, too, and that rather ended that conversation.

Harry did take the opportunity, however, to remind her that there were other food groups than chocolate.

"That's why I have the other plate full of food. The chocolate is for after."

Her physiology wasn't that different from a normal human's, so she knew that eating only chocolate couldn't possibly be good for her. She didn't really think Harry should be casting stones, though, when he was sitting next to her slathering more hot sauce than eggs on his toast.

In Potions, she reluctantly took her customary seat; she felt like hiding in the back, but the whole point in showing up today was to prove that she wasn't overly affected by Severus. Fortunately, there was no need for her to look directly at him; she just had to listen to his instructions, glance at the blackboard occasionally, and do her work quietly.

If it weren't for the fact that Severus was speaking, asking questions, and stalking around the classroom, she could almost pretend he wasn't there. He didn't single her out in particular in this class, although he did stop in front of her for several questions. She addressed her responses to his chest, careful to keep her answers clear and her tone polite so that there was nothing he could call her on.

Staring at his chest, however, had the unfortunate effect of making her focus on the buttons on his robe, and then all she could seem to think about were a variety of scenarios that involved her undoing those buttons. By hand, one by one, without any need for that neat spell she knew that undid all the buttons….

She shook her head to clear it and got to work on her potion, glad that she knew the curriculum well enough that she didn't have to concentrate too hard; she was already torn between worry about the werewolves and obsessing over Severus, and that seemed to be as much as her mind could handle at the moment.

Hermione was out the door the instant the bell rang, unwilling to risk that Severus might require something of her. She hurried up to lunch so that she could get her mousse, Harry and Draco smirking at her all the way, and then she rushed to the edge of the grounds so that she could Apparate to the safe house.

She'd refused to let Harry and Draco come along for this one—ignoring Harry's pointed, "But the mousse gets to go?"—using the old "It looks better when the Head Boy, at least, is at lunch" coupled with the fact that he and Draco could have a pleasant lunch together while she was gone.

Remus looked amused but not really surprised by her midday arrival, and she had time to greet all the werewolves and check that nothing was wrong with them before heading back to the castle for class.

Harry, Draco, and Ron were waiting for her in the Charms corridor, and they entered together, right on time.

As it turned out, she made it through only an hour and a half of class. Once it switched from lecture to practice, Filius pulled her aside and told her to make herself scarce; he knew that it was the full moon tonight and that she could easily do without a bit more Charms practice.

She gave him a kiss on the cheek, got permission for Harry and Draco to come with her, and told Ron not to be a bad sport (while forbearing from mentioning that sooner or later, he was going to have to learn to stand up to his mother). She asked Fawkes to relay the message to Minerva and Tonks that the three students were already at the safe house, as both women had intended to come with them after dinner and would now need to head over on their own.

The three of them Apparated from just outside the gates. Hermione realized as they arrived at the safe house that leaving early meant that she was going to miss her mousse at dinner, which she found rather distressing. The level of upset it provoked within her warned her that it might be better to prove to herself that she could go more than a few hours without eating it. She was sure it didn't contain any addictive ingredients but psychological addictions still needed to be dealt with.

Remus was even more amused to see her now than he had been at lunch time, and he seemed quite delighted to tease her about skipping class in order to lounge around with them for the rest of the afternoon. When Harry pointed out that all she would really regret missing was the mousse she wouldn't be getting at dinner, she rolled her eyes at him before escaping downstairs with as much dignity as she could muster.

Disaster hadn't struck in the short time since lunch; everyone was doing as well as could be expected just hours before the full moon, some resting, some meditating, and others practicing. She made sure everyone ate appropriately and kept the children entertained while they were awake.

Tonks and Minerva joined them at six o'clock. Bill was working on another big job for the goblins—moon cycles could be important in curse breaking as well as tasks that involved werewolves—and had laughingly checked in with her to ensure that she would be all right on her own. She had agreed that she rather thought she could handle the wards, and since she had plenty of people to help with everything else, he had been able to absent himself with a clear conscience.

Everyone who was here now had been here before, so they all knew how horrendous the evening was going to be. There would be fewer werewolves transforming with the Wolfsbane but more werewolves fighting for their lives with the Weresbane, and both of those transformations were gut-wrenching. Knowing how difficult it would be to connect to all of their minds at the moment of transformation, Hermione had planned ahead as best she could.

She connected first with Harry's mind, then with the four children's, and finally with the eighteen adults who were all standing anxiously in front of her. Being proactive about the mental link would prevent that fumbling moment of trying to connect while everyone was in pain. The last trial had taught her that it couldn't be done without support, so there was really no reason to wait. This way, she—and Harry—would be experiencing their agony straightaway but would be in their minds and ready to assist from the beginning. That would be safer and most efficient, especially for the children.

This time, she'd also taken the precaution of sitting on the floor to start, with Remus on one side and Harry on the other. Draco was supporting Harry, and Tonks, Remus; at least she could say that she was learning from the previous trial.

Since this was the full moon, everyone had to be down in the dungeons except for the nine who had been cured the previous month. Once it came time for the actual transformation, the ex-werewolves had declared themselves happy to look over the Wolfsbane werewolves with the other Order members since the Hogwarts contingent was concentrating on the Weresbane wolves tonight.

Using her wand more for show than actual assistance, Hermione cast the Acuity Charm a quarter of an hour before the moon rose in order to give the werewolves the chance to get used to the additional sensitivity. She'd prepped Harry on what he was going to experience through the mental connection, but she couldn't resist adding pointers through MindSpeech until he finally told her to shut it and she realized that her nerves were showing.

They waited.

Seven fifty four arrived with agonising suddenness, and Hermione and Harry experienced it just as all of the werewolves did. She gasped, sagging against Remus as a similar noise was torn from Harry's throat. Hermione took up her usual chant, reinforcing it for everyone there but especially for the children: they were wolves, not lycanthropes. Sophia, especially, found it difficult to concentrate on everything they had taught her when she was in blinding pain, but Hermione lent more power to her and made sure her mental voice was strong, drowning out the pain and the voice of the Were as much as possible.

She could feel the additional magical energy that was being contributed by Harry settling across the connection to the others and was relieved that she did not have to concentrate more on them.

"You are Animagi!"

She hadn't realized she'd yelled this aloud until she felt her mouth closing around the last syllable. Her cheeks were wet with tears but in front of her were a large group of Animagi.

The sounds of pain had stopped on both sides of her barrier, and the four wolf pups looked especially pleased with themselves. Sophia was already yipping and prancing, and many of the adults followed the young girl's example. Once this joyful clamour had died down, Hermione made them rest for a few minutes before she allowed them to turn back into human form. She was especially pleased when none of the children needed any assistance to do this; even though this last transformation had been difficult, they remembered what they'd learnt earlier. The sight of all these human bodies on the full moon resulted in another round of exclamations, this time from human throats, and Hermione and her friends joined in, the cheer swelling loud and strong.

After that, there were the formalities of the cure: leave the newly human in their cages long enough to ensure that nothing had gone wrong, test their blood and then their bodies, and finally allow them out as she lowered her protective barrier. The werewolves who were still werewolves howled in delight, and it seemed as though everywhere she looked there were beaming smiles—even if they were rather toothy from the werewolves.

Twenty-nine werewolves down, eighteen to go.

"That went well," Harry observed.

Hermione smiled, nodding. "I think we're starting to get a method ironed out."

"I'd be happier if the method didn't involve you in horrible pain every time," Remus observed and got a number of nods of agreement.

She let out a short sigh. "I'd be lying if I didn't say I'd prefer that as well, but right now, it's the only viable solution. I'm not about to risk anyone being unable to hold their form because I can't take a little bit of pain."

"A little—!" Harry started.

He was in a position to know, now, but she wasn't about to let that stop her.

"Many of them have been forced to transform into werewolves countless times," she said sternly. "Once is too many. If my sharing this pain with them means they'll never have to do it again, I will do it without question."

Harry sighed, and she knew that he thought the same thing but wanted a perfect solution.

"We're more than halfway there," she pointed out. "Only one more transformation like this until we've cured most of the werewolves in Britain. I'm doing all right."

Harry slung an arm over her shoulder. "All right, all right. We admit that arguing with you about this point is futile because you'll keep coming up with counter-arguments whether we like it or not. But don't think you'll ever be doing that alone again."

She smiled at him, grateful for the admission and the support.

"Thank you again for allowing me to witness this," Minerva said.

It was not the first time Minerva had said something to this effect, and while Hermione found it a little strange to have her professor thanking her, she realized that it was all part of growing up; in this matter, Minerva was treating Hermione like a colleague rather than a student.

"It's been very beneficial having you here," Hermione responded. "I know many of the werewolves have found your assistance invaluable, and the presence of Hogwarts Transfiguration professor is nothing if not reassuring."

"The honour is mine," Minerva assured Hermione. "I've never been in the presence of so many Animagi at one time. It's an astonishing accomplishment."

"It's going to change the face of Animagistry," Draco agreed. "When are they to be registered?"

"Not until they're all cured," Hermione answered. "They can hardly go to the Ministry when I've got them quarantined in the safe house. If the Ministry kicks up a fuss, I'll sic Harry on them."

"There's the spirit," the blond said cheerfully. "Someone needs to be using the power of Harry's name usefully. Given the trouble they've given him over the years, I think it's the least the Ministry can do."

Hermione bit her tongue and fought not to point out the trouble Draco had caused Harry over the years. A sideways glance at her best friend told her that he was doing the same, and they shared a grin.

"The topic has been raised with Minister Bones, but I plan to discuss it more fully once the cure has been fully realized," Hermione said more practically. "The Ministry will want additional proof that the ex-werewolves really aren't a danger to humans anymore. The last thing we need is some poor wizard in the registry office having a heart attack because he thinks a group of werewolves is about to attack him."

Harry snorted, but Draco nodded somewhat seriously.

"The next thing we know, the Prophet will have reported that there are new mutant werewolves who can turn into killer animals at any time rather than just on the full moon."

Hermione nodded. "Just the sort of accolade I want, and you know how much they love me."

Harry's arm tightened across her shoulder. "That's a point in your favour, as far as I'm concerned; the more they denigrate you in the Prophet, the better a person you really are."

This worked amusingly well for her, Harry, Sirius, Severus, and Albus, although once the paper could be convinced that there was truly a threat, they usually got it right when it came to Voldemort and his followers.

Since the moon set at four forty one in the morning, they congratulated all the newly cured werewolves, reminded the others that their time was coming, and went back to Hogwarts without having eaten breakfast. At best, missing the school's breakfast as well, Hermione's friends were going to be getting all of three and a half hours of sleep. Harry was lucky because he didn't have any classes on Tuesdays and could therefore sleep as much as he wished—or as much as Draco let him. Draco had Runes with her at nine o'clock, and Minerva and Tonks both had to teach.

Hermione, since she wasn't prepared to explain to Minerva or Tonks why she wasn't coming inside, went all the way down to the dungeons with Harry and Draco but didn't bother to go into the common room. Harry offered her a sleepy wave as the two of them hurried off to find Harry's bed while she immediately headed back outside through the secret entrance.

In the Forest, she transformed and cantered over to the valley where she could visit with the unicorns and relax for a little while. She came close to actually sleeping out there, resting her eyes with them quietly for a few minutes, admiring the stars and then the sun as it rose higher in the sky. She headed back indoors in human form at seven, prepared once again to tell anyone, should they ask, that she'd been out for her morning constitutional.

Making no attempt to rouse Harry or Draco, she showered, grabbed her Muggle Studies text for some straightforward revision, and headed up to the breakfast table at eight. There was mousse which she devoured eagerly, making her decide that she'd really better talk to the house-elves at lunch time and see if they'd scale back on their attempt to make her gain weight based solely on mousse consumption. Really, once a day should be enough for her.

Ron joined her at half eight, looking pointedly at the empty seats next to her.

"Late night?"

She supposed it was a good sign that he was starting to feel comfortable enough with them to tease her, at least, about Harry and Draco having sex.

"The moon set at four forty-one, Ron. They're sleeping off exhaustion, not doing anything more enjoyable."

He eyed her. "Yet you look fine."

She smiled. "It's a talent. Aren't you rolling out the compliments this morning."

He rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to his food. "Right, then. Will I be seeing Harry at all today?"

She shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. His bed may seem less appealing once Draco's in Runes with me. Draco's got the afternoon off, though, so he may crawl back into bed with Harry if Harry hasn't made it out yet."

Ron made a face but didn't comment about the mental images that she had just conjured for him. The rest of breakfast was quiet as Ron inhaled his food before running off to yet another Quidditch something or other, and she made her way up to Ancient Runes.

Draco arrived on the stroke of nine, and although he looked virtually as impeccable as usual, she had the feeling that he'd come perilously close to rolling out of bed and stumbling to class. Looking at him closely, she caught the edge of the glamour that he'd used to cover up the circles under his eyes. They weren't even that noticeable, as far as she was concerned, but apparently they were too much for the blond's vanity. Rolling her eyes, she kept quiet; if Harry could live with it, it wasn't for her to say anything.

They sat next to one another, and she made sure to give him a mental nudge whenever his eyes started to look heavy. As interested as he might be in Runes, sitting and hearing a lecture was not conducive to staying awake when he was exhausted.

Sticking firmly to her resolution, once Hermione had given Draco a shove in the direction of the dungeons, she headed down to the kitchens at lunch before she could see if there was any mousse at her place. Dobby and Winky, both visiting from the safe house, apparently, came over to enthusiastically greet her despite the fact that they had looked quite busy when she arrived.

Hermione explained her caloric dilemma and saw them exchange glances. It really didn't look like the normal "We want to bring you food that an army couldn't possibly eat" type of look.

"What?" she asked.

Winky spoke carefully. "We is not making you the mousse, Miss Hermione."

She stared at them. "I beg your pardon?"

Dobby nodded. "It is being very true. It is not us who is putting it by your plate, but when we is seeing it there, we is not making our own for you."

"All right," she said, regrouping as quickly as she could. "I appreciate that you've not been giving me more mousse. You know it's not good for me to eat too much of it in one day, right?"

Although they both looked somewhat doubtful, they nodded dutifully. She didn't think house-elves always had a great grasp of what was good for humans, just of what they liked to eat.

"I'd better head up to lunch," Hermione said, trying not to look as nonplussed as she felt. "Thanks for all the hard work."

They both scurried back to the heaped tables, the transfer of the serving dishes up to the Great Hall imminent, and Hermione made her way more circuitously by the corridors. She wondered, idly, if it would be possible for a human to be transferred just as the food was…. The next time she was in the kitchen, she'd have to look into that more carefully. Grinning to herself, she realized that it was probably information that only the Weasley twins would need for a practical joke, but she was rather curious now.

At the lunch table, her eyes informed her that she hadn't been imagining the last six days of mousse. The elves might disavow all responsibility for it, but there it sat, delicate and delicious-looking in its crystal glass. She slid into her seat, greeted everyone, and carefully spooned food onto her plate as she pondered. If the elves weren't even making the mousse, then it wasn't just a case of someone else working out how to deliver it to her. Someone was apparently taking the time and effort to make the mousse in the first place.

Who did she know who could do so? Harry could cook the basics, but he was unlikely to have the patience for the mousse—which she was sure was the kind that involved a double boiler and eggs and heavy cream and chilling in the fridge—and he would have given it to her openly. Although Draco was good at potions, he'd never given the slightest hint that he could cook—or had any desire to do so—and although the gifts were very elegant, they didn't quite seem his style, not as a gift to her, anyway. Ron was out, as he couldn't cook and would doubtless eat the pudding before he managed to get it to her. Viktor didn't have particular skills in the kitchen, either, and she was pretty sure that he wouldn't be so stupid as to send her chocolate when he was trying to make a go of it with Pansy.

She didn't really know anyone else intimately enough to warrant their making it, taking the time to get it to her anonymously, and knowing about her obsession with chocolate mousse to begin with. She frowned as she considered. In fact, the only other person who was likely to know was—

Her thoughts ground to a halt and she had to almost physically stop herself from looking immediately up to the High Table.

Severus was entirely aware of how much she liked mousse, they had recently jested about her desire that he make it, and the mousse had begun arriving the day after the disastrous discussion about Lily Potter. She stared down at the little cup, torn between its feeling suddenly more ominous and also far more delightful.

There wasn't anything addictive or inappropriate in it which meant that he was doing it just because she liked it, because he wanted her to get some natural enjoyment out of it. Assuming Severus had been telling her the truth earlier—and she didn't think it likely that he would lie about something as innocuous as that—he'd gone out of his way to learn how to make chocolate mousse for her, and he had been monitoring her responses to each of his offerings until he hit upon the one which she preferred. And then he had continued to make it for her day after day.

Anonymity was certainly his style, and while she didn't believe that chocolate mousse could make up for what he'd done, it did make a difference to her that he was trying to make amends in some way. After all, Lily was dead, and there wasn't anything Severus could do to change how he felt about her or James. However, trying to make Hermione feel better was concrete and definite—and somehow completely undermined the anger and pain that she felt towards him. Those feelings were still there but the edge had been taken off … by mousse. She made a mental note never to tell Harry or Draco about this. There'd be all sorts of jokes about her being led by her stomach like Ron, and she imagined that Severus would not be pleased that his secret was out.

She headed up to Muggle Studies with plenty to think about, but by the time she came down to the Great Hall for dinner, she was sufficiently composed that she could meet the rested-looking Harry and Draco without giving anything away.

Minerva passed by as they were finishing up their meal. Hermione noted how tired the woman looked; especially after being hit with so many Stunners at the end of Hermione's fifth year, the head of Gryffindor tired more easily than she had done.

Hermione rose and hurried off to speak with her, Harry and Draco, somewhat bemusedly, following in her wake.

"Go to bed," Hermione admonished as soon as they were away from the students and she'd cast the appropriate charms so that their quiet conversation went unnoticed. "I'll look after the Gryffindors for the night."

Minerva was looking at her with some amusement, Harry and Draco with some shock, and Hermione realized that she'd just given their stern head of house an order. She rolled her eyes.

"You came to see my trial," she explained. "That's why you're dead on your feet right now. I'm perfectly capable of keeping the students in line for one evening, and I'm happy to do so while you get some much-needed rest."

"I had thought to ask—" Minerva began, and Hermione suspected it was going to be to the effect of their taking over for a short nap.

Hermione raised her eyebrow in challenge. "Do you think so little of our abilities that you don't believe we can handle it for one night?"

The woman's face relaxed into a half smile. "Have it your way, Hermione. I'd ask that you ensure they're all out of the common room by one at the latest and take a turn about the dorms just to see that nothing outrageous is going on."

"You don't have a thing to worry about," Hermione promised, smiling brightly. "I'll make sure they all behave if I have to cast sleeping charms on each and every one of them and tie them all to their beds."

Minerva's lips tipped up; Hermione imagined that the older woman had wished to do just that on occasion. Probably to Hermione, Harry, and Ron, for that matter.

"Go on," Hermione admonished. "Get a really good night's sleep, and you'll be much happier in the morning. It's in my best interest, you realize, to have you in tip top shape for class tomorrow."

Minerva allowed herself to be prodded on her way to bed, although she turned back to say, "You may all spend the evening in the common room if you wish."

It was only after she'd made it up the stairs that the significance of her statement sunk in. Harry and Hermione had thought of Draco as an honorary Gryffindor for so long—much as it horrified him—that it hadn't occurred to them that he was a Slytherin and the Gryffindor common room was out of bounds. Draco, too, looked rather stunned, and Hermione was pleased that their head of house had been able to deliver that last so matter-of-factly. She'd always wondered what it had been like for Severus, having Minerva as a professor.

They regrouped, returning to the table where Ron was, unsurprisingly, still eating, to inform him that they'd be spending the evening in the Gryffindor common room. He was pleased that they'd be visiting, although he began to whinge as soon as he realized that it meant that Hermione would be revising there and that she expected him to do the same.

Since it was a Tuesday, the students were mostly behaving. Apart from their rounds, they could stay camped out in the common room ensuring that no one caused any disturbances that would necessitate waking Minerva. Hermione really would tie them to their beds if they drove her to that.

Once even Ron had finished dinner, they headed down to their own quarters to get the materials they'd need to study upstairs for the evening before mounting the many flights of stairs to the Gryffindor dorms. Hermione spoke the password—which the wards kept her apprised of even if the prefects forgot—and in they went, Ron looking at them a little strangely but not saying anything when Draco followed.

The Slytherin made a face as he took in the red and gold interior, but one look at Harry's tense face had him swallowing whatever derogatory comment he had been about to make. Harry could take a fair amount of teasing, but this was his first proper home, and given the number of witnesses they had right now, anything inflammatory that Draco said was likely to start a war.

Eyeing Draco and Ron, she hoped none of them wanted that to happen. Boys were very stupid sometimes. She and Harry were trying to keep the peace, anyway, and they headed over to the fire, where the comfiest seats were located. These were vacated with alacrity upon their arrival, and Hermione was uncertain whether this was due to their status as Head Boy and Head Girl or because a Slytherin was amongst them. The room was distinctly quieter than normal given the number of people who were currently in it.

Would you like to do the honours? Hermione asked. Or shall I?

Harry shrugged but turned his back to the fireplace so that he was squarely facing the majority of the people in the room.

"Yes, Draco Malfoy is standing with us, so no, you're not imagining things. Hermione, Draco, and I are going to be spending the evening in the common room at the request of Professor McGonagall, so it would be in everyone's best interests if we had a quiet evening. Understood?"

Mutters went up around the room, but there was a fair amount of nodding as well. The message had been received, and only time would tell if it were being adhered to.

They settled in by the fire, Harry seizing the seat that was closest to the open flames, and began their revision.

Hermione had brought Charms, DADA, Potions, Transfiguration, and Herbology, since these were the classes that the four of them had in common. Although she was often at a different stage of revision than the other three, she found that it usually helped Ron's motivation if they were all working on the same class at the same time.

To her delight, she found throughout the evening that stern glares on her part were working wonders for ensuring that the noise remained minimal so that they could study in relative peace. About half of their fellow seventh-years were in the room, as were most of the fifth-years; since there were many people who were trying to study, Hermione felt entirely justified in keeping the rowdy Gryffindors in line. It was very nearly the middle of May, and exams were around the corner. While she couldn't force anyone to revise, she could definitely ensure that those who wanted to do so had a quiet environment.

At ten, Harry and Draco went to do rounds, as they had decided mentally amongst themselves that it might not be in their best interest to leave Ron in charge on his own. Get him talking about Quidditch, and he'd forget that there was a common room never mind what others were doing in it.

It only took her a minute to notice the whispers going round the room in the wake of the two boys' departure.

"They've got rounds, just like they do most nights," she exclaimed loudly enough that everyone could hear. "Honestly, what would you have been thinking if the three of us had left together?"

Ron choked, and Seamus and Dean dissolved into laughter on the other side of the room.

By the time Harry and Draco returned an hour and a half later, many of the younger students had already headed up to bed. There were a lot of smiles on the faces of the older students who remained, but most of the looks were directed slyly at Ron rather than at Harry and Draco.

"What's up?" Harry asked as he flopped down into a chair next to her.

"Please don't ask," Ron said, burying his face in a textbook and making a very brave attempt to look as though he were working hard.

The messy-haired boy tried her next. "Now I have to know. Spill."

She explained what had happened in their absence, watching Ron's ears glow as identical smirks grew on Harry's and Draco's faces.

Since the older students knew how she got around examination time, they went to bed without causing any trouble. This was wiser than they knew given the access she now had to the wards and the lack of compunction she would feel about catching them now that she'd been put in charge by Minerva.

Midnight rolled around, and shortly thereafter, the four of them were the only ones left in the common room. Ron headed to bed having finally finished his Transfiguration homework for the next day. Everyone else had been quite amused by her tirade when she realized that he had been revising for Potions without having completed the work that was due in Minerva's class in a few hours. She honestly wasn't sure how he survived sometimes.

They revised for another half hour listening to the crackle of the flames in the fireplace, and then Hermione took the girls' dorms and Harry and Draco the boys' as they went up and down the stairs and made sure that the students were sleeping peacefully—or at least being quiet.

She had thought about getting round the wards that didn't allow boys to come up to the girls' rooms so that the other two could help her, but it was quiet enough that she didn't need assistance, and she had a special respect for these particular wards and their purpose; they had prevented Lavender and Parvati from bringing boys back while Hermione was still living with them.

Hermione made sure that the wards would alert her if anyone caused problems after they left, and then the three of them headed back to the dungeons. They were nearly at their common room when she realized that she'd gotten a bit sloppy in her monitoring of Severus due to the lateness of the hour; she'd only just noticed that he was down the hall from them. Unless she wanted to be really insulting and disappear practically under his nose, they were about to meet.

She couldn't stop the small sigh that escaped her lips. Harry looked at her curiously, and then Severus was bearing down on them. It had been inevitable, she supposed, that they would encounter one another privately before the end of the year.

"You're out late this evening," Severus observed.

Harry, she was amused to note, had taken a protective stance half in front of her. He didn't seem to need to understand the particulars to get the gist.

"Draco's a Prefect, Hermione's Head Girl, and I'm Head Boy." His voice was defiant. "We're allowed to be out late."

The head of Slytherin's tone had been rather mild, considering, and she guessed that the comment had actually been meant without the inference that Harry had automatically attached to it.

"I realize that, Mr Potter," Severus said dryly, still remarkably controlled. "I would like a word, Hermione."

Harry answered for her. "It's almost one o'clock in the morning."

"Yet, demonstrably, you are all still awake." There was more of a snarl now. "Hermione?"

Harry opened his mouth again.

Harry, if you keep answering to my name, I'm going to give you my hair and seriously consider putting you in one of my dresses.

His mouth snapped shut, Draco and Severus observing curiously.

"I have Transfiguration in the morning, Professor," she answered, curious to see if he would let her off if it was she who displayed the reluctance.

"It need not be a long conversation."

That would be a no, then. His eyes were very intense, and she imagined he was only going to get more annoyed the longer she put this off. The month that was left of school would be a long time to refuse to speak to him, really, and if she intended to give in eventually, she might as well get it over with.

"Very well," she said with a pronounced lack of enthusiasm. "Harry, Draco, I'll see you in the morning."

Are you sure—? Harry began.

Quite sure, she answered, despite the fact that she was anything but. It wouldn't do any good for them to be waiting up anxiously for her, however, and since her conversations with Severus tended only to be short if one or the other of them blew up and stalked off, she had no idea how long this conversation was going to be. Go on.

With visible reluctance, Harry and Draco bid her and Severus goodnight and headed the rest of the way to the common room. Severus turned on his heel and led her to his quarters. At one o'clock in the morning. She shook her head, wondering sometimes about just what went through his head. But she supposed that he could reassure Albus, should the man ever ask, that sex was not a consideration in the conversation they were about to have.

Severus gestured her to a seat and offered tea, but she crossed her arms and stared at him.

"You said this wouldn't take long."

His lips thinned. "That does not mean you can't listen from a seated position."

Reluctantly, she sat, and he joined her in the chair opposite. The fire crackled between them, and she kept most of her attention on it rather than the enigmatic man across from her. It seemed to take him a moment to gather his thoughts.

"I was not as forthcoming as I could have been last week." Probably because she'd walked out on him mid-word. Regarding him carefully now, she could almost see him thinking it, and the fact that he was taking care not to say it made her feel marginally better about the possible outcome of this conversation. "You are not in any way involved in some sort of revenge against the Potters. Whatever difficulties Mr Potter and I currently have, I have recognized that he is not his father."

He wasn't even denying that he'd thought so at some point. That was a pretty decent confession, all round.

He was speaking again, his voice tightly controlled. "When we last spoke, you compared yourself, me, and Mr Potter to Lily, me, and James Potter. But you said that the situation was reversed. You meant that I was in James Potter's place."

She said nothing. How had they gone so quickly from what he'd done wrong to what she'd said?

He looked as though the words he was speaking pained him, but he forced them out. "Lily was in love with James. She married James."

She didn't think she could make her voice work now if she tried. Those words had come out when she'd had no control over them, and she hadn't realized quite how much he had worked out from them.

"Hermione." His voice was urgent. "Is that what you meant?"

She swallowed heavily and forced words out of a throat that felt as though it had constricted so tightly she could no longer breathe. "The parallels are clearly not exact." She pasted on an approximation of a smile. "I'm not holding my breath for a marriage proposal."

Her attempt at a joke fell very flat, and Severus looked rather as though the world had gone and rearranged itself when he wasn't looking. Silence stretched for several long moments. He'd dragged her in here and basically demanded that she confess her love to him, so she sure as hell wasn't volunteering any more information.

He spoke abruptly. "You said you were still a virgin because the man you wanted wasn't interested in you."

She nodded cautiously. This was, after all, information that she had volunteered several times months ago.

He swallowed visibly and then asked in a low voice, "And did you come to that man anyway?"

She hesitated, but it wasn't as though he hadn't come to the conclusion on his own. She inclined her head once more.

Incredulity was painted across his face. "You didn't want to touch me. You practically shuddered when I laid a hand on you."

Or he hadn't come to the conclusion at all, and she should have run while she had the chance. If the whole situation weren't so emotionally eviscerating, it would have been funny.

"I've already said," she answered, clearing her throat and trying to firm up her voice. "You'd just agreed to sleep with a Pure Adult, not with me. It was exactly what I didn't want, and I had to do it anyway." She didn't suppose telling him it was in the top ten worst moments of her life would improve the current discussion, so she kept that part to herself.

"Because Mr Potter was having sex," he sneered with distaste.

She made a face of her own, correcting, "Because of all the reasons you told me. I didn't have sex because Harry was doing so, I had it because I was about to become the last Pure Adult. That put you in danger, and it didn't seem likely that I would be safe for the rest of my life."

"So if not for this…." He gestured a few times, apparently searching for an appropriate term, finally settling on, "If not for this problem with your status, you wouldn't have approached me?"

"I would have after school," she admitted, finding that once it was out, it was easier simply to continue. "Once I was no longer your student and Voldemort was defeated." She gave a slightly sheepish smile. "I promised myself I'd do it at the celebration party."

He was staring at her very intently. "Instead you came to me knowing that I could use my power as a professor against you."

She nodded stiffly.

"Believing I didn't care for you," he clarified.

She swallowed against the annoying lump in her throat. "I think it's pretty clear by now that it's not in the manner I would prefer. But," she hastened to assure him, "being friends is great, when we manage it." It had to be up to a week or so since January, probably. "I appreciate that, I really do." God, he probably wasn't ever going to speak to her again.

"But you want more." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Still."

She'd already learnt she was crap at keeping this a secret, so she supposed it was just as well if he knew and decided whether he'd continue to have anything to do with her or not. "And now you know how Lily felt, friends with someone who cared for her in ways that she could not reciprocate."

He was silent for a moment. "She dated me, briefly."

Hermione blinked in surprise. His lips twisted into a sneer. She hadn't anticipated this turn of events but what had surprised her more was the fact that he had voluntarily offered the information.

Staring moodily into the fire, he explained, "It was in November of seventh year. She and James had been dating since the middle of September, but Sirius had been … indiscreet about what had happened at the Whomping Willow. Lily confronted James, and they had a blow up of gigantic proportions. I thought he'd really done it that time, and she wouldn't pay him any more attention. She said she wanted to keep it quiet between us so that I wouldn't be bothered by anyone."

Hermione could well imagine what the reaction would have been if the information had gone public. Between the Marauders and the pure-blood Slytherins, it would have been a complete disaster.

Severus drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Within a couple of weeks, James's behaviour had changed drastically—at least where she could see it—and she broke it off with me."

Hermione tilted her head, considering him. "And you think James knew? You think she dated you with that goal in mind?"

"She assured me not," he said shortly.

It wasn't difficult to hear the bitterness that was still there. She pushed. "But you didn't believe her."

"I was foolish enough to believe that she had feelings for me because I wished that it was so," Severus snarled. "I refused to be taken in by her again solely to assuage her guilty conscience."

Hermione chose her words with care. "When you believe that the person you love doesn't care for you, the person you know who loves you becomes very tempting."

"And that makes it all right?" he demanded, looking incensed.

She shook her head infinitesimally. "It might even make it more wrong, but I understand what she was feeling."

"You speak from experience."

It wasn't a question, and she felt forced to respond because she knew that he'd jump back on that Harry bandwagon otherwise.

"Viktor," she admitted reluctantly. "When you're horribly unhappy, and you know there's someone out there who wants to make you happy, that's hard to resist."

"I see." This was said with the arctic voice and emotional detachment that she knew so well. He looked at the fire again instead of her. "I might have known James Potter and I had no similarities after all."

She shook her head. "I didn't say impossible to resist."

This brought his eyes back to hers, the doubt in his voice plainly apparent as he said flatly, "Viktor Krum professed his love to you, and you turned him down."

She let out a huff of breath. "Do you really think I'd be here discussing this with you if I'd chosen Viktor?"

He opened his mouth, and she knew what he was going to say.

"Please don't," she interrupted. "I came very near to losing him as a friend as a result. I don't want to lose you, too." She drew a deep breath, let it out, trying to ease the constriction that seemed to be taking control of her heart. "I'm not her. If you're going to treat me as though I am—again—then I'm going to walk out that door, and I'm not going to come back."

"I don't think you're Lily, Hermione," Severus said, sounding as though he were talking to a two-year-old.

"Don't you? Then what were you about to say?" she challenged.

"Mr Krum is considered a good prospect."

She noticed how he was carefully not answering her question, but she answered anyway. "Yes, he is. And if you like Quidditch and flying and Bulgaria and never want to discuss Potions and Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, he'd suit perfectly. But I assure you that I had to go through the entirely horrid experience of telling him that I was uninterested in him. I'm not using you, and I never wanted him. I had to work at getting him interested in someone else."

"He's only been here since March," Severus pointed out dryly, much of the tension easing from his frame, so perhaps she had begun to convince him. "He's already moved on to someone else?"

"I think he liked the idea of me more than the actual me," she answered. "We didn't really know one another well enough for anything else, and I could see plainly that we weren't well suited. I'm very glad that he's moved on."

"And you're certain that he has?" Severus asked. "He's not using her to try to get to you?"

This possibility hadn't actually occurred to her.

"I don't think so," she answered slowly. "The only time I saw them together, they seemed … very involved, and she really is a much better match."

Resignation filled his voice. "Am I going to be hearing about the nuptials of Miss Weasley and Mr Krum in the near future?"

She smiled. "Interesting assumption. Fairly logical choice, I suppose, but I didn't set Ginny up; if she were interested, I assume she'd've made the attempt on her own."

He made a moue of distaste. "I wouldn't think that Miss Brown or Miss Patil—"

Her eyebrows rose. "Good heavens, I've said that Viktor's a friend, haven't I? I'd never sic the Terrible Two on him. I set him up with Pansy."

Severus blinked. "Pansy Parkinson?"

Her lips quirked. "Do you know any other?" She saw his expression. "I'm not entirely certain how it escaped your noticed, Severus, but her being a Slytherin isn't a problem for me. I believe she's on the right side of the war, and I think she and Viktor suit one another."

"And if it turns out that he's using her to get to you?" he demanded.

"I have a little more faith in his integrity than that," she answered dryly, "but if he did such a thing, there wouldn't be much of him left by the time she and I were done with him."

"So you don't think much of Lily's integrity?"

She couldn't decipher his tone.

"If she really was using you as you suspect, then no, I suppose not," Hermione admitted with a sigh. "If she experienced a moment of weakness, then that makes her human."

"But less noble and good than you, who overcame your moment of temptation."

She spoke stiffly. "I had not realized it was a contest between us."

It was Severus's turn to sigh. "Occasionally, I may make comparisons."

She didn't like it. She really didn't like it, but she could see his point. It wasn't fair for her to forbid him to think about his previous girlfriends as long as he didn't act out his frustrations with the former on her. Time to get her own concession, she supposed.

"Then you're going to have to accept that I think of Harry sometimes. Not like that," she added hastily when she saw his face begin to darken. "But he's my best friend. I'm going to talk about him, and horror of horrors, you're probably going to have to spend time with him."

His look was very sour. "If you insist."

"I do," she said firmly, though she was smiling. "And I promise that I'll spend time with your friends, too, even if I don't like them."

He almost snorted. "There aren't very many of those."

"It's not as though I'm a social butterfly, Severus. And you'd be stuck with Harry anyway, given how close he and Draco are. You're making out well in this deal, you know."

He inclined his head slightly to acknowledge her point.

"I don't mean to judge you or punish you for her failings," Severus offered quietly.

She was pretty sure that he had done so for most of their relationship thus far, but if he recognized it now and was determined to do better…. She would take that.

"Thank you. I'll attempt to take that under advisement when I'm reacting to something completely daft that you've said or done."

His face softened slightly. "Impertinent witch."

Her lips tipped up. "I try."

She was also going to have to try to be more understanding when he jumped to conclusions during an argument given that she had managed to do so rather spectacularly and could now vouch for just how easy—and emotionally destructive—it was.

The clock on the mantel tolled two, and they both started slightly. He rose to his feet, and she followed.

"You had better return to your rooms before Mr Potter starts looking for a body."

She smiled, teasing in turn. "And before your class tomorrow morning is doomed to utter misery."

"I've gone without sleep many times in my life," he pointed out.

She tried to school her expression. His lips twitched.

"I think it would be better if we didn't discuss my teaching methodology."

This was said without rancour, and she beamed at him. "As you say, Severus."

He walked her to the door. They paused, and neither of them seemed to know how to end their conversation. After a moment, she stepped close to him, leaned up, and kissed him fleetingly on the cheek.

"Thank you for the mousse. It was delicious." She stepped back. "Goodnight, Severus."

His eyes were very dark. "Goodnight, Hermione."

Hermione returned to her room with a light heart and slept soundly from just after two until half six o'clock in the morning.

Chapter Forty-Six: The Wait

Minerva appeared to be fully recovered Wednesday morning, and while no mousse appeared at breakfast or lunch, Hermione was quietly delighted when a glass appeared next to her dinner plate. Exercising her self-control, she narrowly managed not to look directly at Severus.

She reminded herself that they'd been friends again for all of half a day. She might have made the resolution not to reveal everything to Harry and Draco when she and Severus were going through a very bad patch, but that was no reason not to remain prudent even when her future looked a little brighter.

Out of everything they'd discussed, after all, Severus's feelings hadn't exactly come up. She'd as good as said that she wanted to marry him, and while he'd agreed that he might have to spend more time with Harry, he hadn't declared much in return. He'd assured her that he wasn't using her, which she appreciated, and he appeared to be somewhat invested in their relationship; he wanted to know how she felt, and he'd gone to the trouble of making the mousse. But he hadn't actually said that he cared. She knew that people in general and men in particular and Slytherins even more so didn't much like making emotional declarations, but this left her in an uncomfortable position.

Still, as she'd only just reminded herself, it had been all of a few hours since they'd started speaking again. It was a little early for him to be making sweeping declarations.

She now had a week before she had to start making the Weresbane again, and this gave her the opportunity both to continue revising and to practice more consistently with the wards.

It had occurred that she should consider what would happen if it became impossible or impractical for her to access to the wards from the magical centre of the castle during the battle. It would be too horrible if the plan were ruined because that part of the castle became inaccessible. To remedy this, she'd set about ensuring that she could access the wards completely from a variety of locations on the grounds. Since accessing from anywhere meant that she could do so sitting in her lab or her common room or a random empty classroom somewhere, her ability to make unnoticed attempts throughout the day was improved.

During the day, she made sure to control the wards especially briefly and very carefully; when everyone was awake, it was more important than ever that no one notice anything untoward occurring. Hermione imagined that Tracey was only one of the spies that he had at Hogwarts.

Thanks to her practicing, Hermione therefore knew when Albus was pacing in his office, when Ron and Lavender sneaked off together, and when Minerva and Severus got together for a drink and stopped pretending that they didn't get along. It was when she saw this last that she realized just how invasive what she was doing would seem to many people. There was only so much that she could block out, however, even in the interest of human decency. It was equivalent to standing in the Great Hall with her eyes wide open; she couldn't help but see everything that was in her field of vision. Trying to not be aware of what was encompassed within the wards was next to impossible. She could dim her awareness somewhat, make it fuzzier and less distinct, but she couldn't be completely unaware because she was the wards while she was accessing them like this, and the wards knew what was going on within them.

There were wards that she had to work a little to get access to, like Severus's and Albus's; those were some of the most complex wards within the school. They still started on the original base work of Solace's wards, though, which meant Hermione had access to them, although they felt somewhat foreign. It was essential that she be able to render every single ward inert for their plan so that Voldemort would not become suspicious.

Once she felt very comfortable with accessing the wards, able to control them for twenty minutes at a time without ill effect, she began to work on what she could do with them; from a distance, she took down and re-established her own wards on her bedroom, and once she had the hang of that, she practiced rendering them inert so that they seemed to be completely gone when they could really be reinstituted with a mere thought. It was that which she would need to do for the whole of Hogwarts, and practice was essential.

She practiced on herself, resetting her own wards so that they kept everyone including her out, rendering the wards inert and making sure that she could pass through without trouble, then allowing them to pop back, barring her once more. When she decided it would be useful to see what happened if she was standing directly at the point where the wards were re-established, she managed to blast herself out of her room and knock herself unconscious for a good twenty minutes, receiving the jolt of power both as the person in the way, and as the one who took the backlash within the wards. She was extremely grateful that she'd decided to make that particular experiment in the middle of the night once Harry and Draco had already retired.

Given the power concussion involved with such an action, she reluctantly decided that despite how beneficial it could be to knock out a whole bunch of Death Eaters as they stood around the grounds, it would sadly be more practical to simply erect the wards in front of them. She would be handling wards on a much more massive scale than she was currently doing, and she'd make a grand mess if she knocked herself out in the middle of battle.

She met with Severus on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings in the neutral territory of his lab. Even if they couldn't always speak to one another, they could brew together in silence if necessary.

Brewing, of course, was not quite as perfect as having happy sex while being in a committed relationship, but it was definitely progress in the right direction, especially as it often included excellent conversation. Since Severus had remained reticent about becoming more involved with her even though she had admitted such strong interest in him, she was determined to let him make the first move now.

It was on Friday that she went into the storeroom in search of more powdered prickly pear and found the jars of rat spleens which she had minced for her detention and which had disappeared from the classroom. She had become quite sure that he had thrown them all out.

"They were of far too good a quality to leave to the students."

She had apparently spent a good deal too long staring at them because the voice belonged to Severus, and he had found her in the storeroom standing there like a complete idiot. She turned around to face him, clearing her throat to say, "I'm glad you think they're good enough for you to use."

He almost laughed, dark amusement threading his voice. "Hermione, I would barely have been as meticulous as you were with those damn spleens. I've never had a student—even under threat of dire future punishment—cut as carefully as you did."

"I would never voluntarily offer you a way to criticize me in a detention setting." Or any setting, really. "Not only would it be extremely unlikely that I would deliberately mangle potion ingredients, I've cut worse than rat spleens."

Memories of the giant Basilisk that had nearly killed her and her closest friends came immediately to mind.

"Hmm." She took that as agreement. He was staring at her with a glint in his eyes. "You're a difficult person to punish."

Her lips quirked up. "I suppose I'll take that as a compliment."

There were, as it happened, a number of ways that he could punish her; she'd suffered through a number of them in the last couple of weeks. It was probably a good sign that they did not occur to him or at least that he refrained from mentioning them in this context.

"It would probably be better if you did, yes," he said dryly.

She shook her head but smiled at him.

"Come have tea," he requested.

She followed him through to his quarters where he installed her in front of the fire with a mug of Earl Grey and took his customary seat next to her with a mug of his own.

They drank in silence, and Hermione wondered why he'd brought her here. He didn't look as though this were simply a pleasant interlude; he was staring at his cup as though it held the answers that he sought and he had no intention of asking her.

The longer the silence stretched, the less comfortable she became until she finally cracked.

"Ask."

He turned his head to look at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Whatever it is that you're sitting over there thinking about but not asking," she said wryly. "We were heading steadily towards awkward silence, so I thought I'd see about cutting it off. I'd much prefer that you address whatever it is that's bothering you."

He didn't speak immediately, but he didn't look away from her, either, so she waited to see whether or not he'd decide he could be forthright about whatever it was. His expression was detached, suggesting that the topic worried him more than he wanted to admit.

"Is this what it's going to be like?" he demanded finally.

She considered him and the question, decided that it would be foolish to jump to conclusions based on what little information he had provided, and queried, "What what's going to be like?"

"Us," he said abruptly.

When no more information was forthcoming, she prodded, "I'm not sure what aspect you're referring to."

"Brewing in the lab."

It was rather like pulling teeth the Muggle way. She would really like him to string a whole coherent question together rather than leaving her to try to piece it all together.

She spoke cautiously. "I was under the impression that both of us enjoyed brewing."

He waved this aside with an impatient movement of his hand. "Yes, that's fine."

"If it's fine, then we wouldn't be having this conversation. If you don't want to brew with me, you need only say so."

One step forward and two steps back seemed to be about how their relationship progressed, after all.

He rolled his eyes as though she'd just been particularly stupid, and snapped, "This has nothing to do with my wanting or not wanting to brew with you!"

She let out a huff of breath, attempting to rein in her temper as she said, "You're the one who brought it up, Severus. I don't know what you're talking about if you're not talking about brewing in the lab."

"Do you imagine that James and Lily brewed?"

She regarded him askance. "I seriously doubt it. As I understand, she was quite good at Potions, but I don't think James had any particular love of it. I imagine there were … other activities that kept them occupied."

His eyes flashed to hers, and she finally bought a clue. So much for her determination for him to make the first move; it seemed that if she wanted any chance of their relationship moving forward, she was going to be the one who had to actually declare her intentions first.

She spoke slowly and carefully, not wanting to mess this up. "I confess that I would be a little disappointed if all we did was brew."

He was leaning forward slightly, regarding her carefully. "You'd like to do other things? With me?"

She frowned slightly. "You shouldn't be in any doubt about that fact, Severus. There are a great many activities I would like to pursue with you, brewing amongst them."

He sat back in his chair again.

"Activities. Right." His voice was derisive. "Romantic walks and poetry reading, no doubt."

"I'm not holding my breath for us to walk barefoot on a beach holding hands, Severus," she answered, mostly amused, "but I don't have anything against the occasional constitutional. And those sorts of public activities were not the only ones I was referring to."

This regained his attention in short order. "No?"

"No," she confirmed. "I feel like I'm out on this limb all on my own, though."

He was regarding her with a strange mixture of impassiveness and a hint, she thought, of uncertainty. He remained silent.

She sighed. Apparently, it was all or nothing from her end. "I'd like our relationship to become more intimate."

There. She'd said it. The world hadn't imploded, and she hadn't been thrown out. Yet.

"Would you?"

She tried not to grind her teeth. "Yes," she bit the word off. "That's why I just said."

"Yet you've made no attempt to initiate any further forms of intimacy." This sounded accusatory.

"Nor have you," she snapped back. She pressed her lips together and tried very hard not to end another night with a fight. "I don't much fancy being rejected and was hoping for some sort of indication on your part that you were interested."

There was an edge of hardness in his voice. "Because you're so interested in me."

"Severus," she said firmly, "we have discussed my feelings for you more than once in the last couple of weeks. I would think it would be quite apparent by now that I am very interested in you."

He rose to his feet and started pacing the length of the room. Apparently, they'd arrived at the root of the problem that had led him to invite her here in the first place.

"You could barely stand to look at me," he said, voice taut with suppressed emotion.

Ah. So much of that night had been horrible for her, and it had ended so disastrously that she hadn't spared a great deal of thought to how it might have looked to him. She stood so that she didn't feel as though he were towering over her and stepped closer to him, although she didn't attempt to interrupt his agitated movement.

"Actually, I was really quite enamoured of looking at you. I have been for several years now, although even I didn't know it at first," she admitted with only a trace of self-consciousness. It was high time they talked about this, really, and she tried to explain her jumbled feelings from that night. "I wanted very much to reach out and touch you, but I didn't know how to ask for what I wanted without upsetting you. And then you'd gone and doused the lights."

He still wasn't looking at her, and it sounded as though his jaw was clenched when he said, "You didn't even want to touch me when we were in bed."

She sighed. She would prefer a discussion to an interrogation, but at least he was posing his questions instead of stewing in silence.

"It wasn't that at all; I didn't know how to go about it. I didn't know what you were expecting or how you wanted us to proceed. I wasn't sure how you would take interest on my part given that we were performing what I assumed you saw as a business transaction. I was nervous."

Flat disbelief. "You were nervous."

"It was my first time!" she exclaimed. "It's not something I can learn about it a book, and I didn't want to disappoint you!" She could feel the blush burn up her cheeks. "I'm sorry, all right? I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't want you to have a bad time."

He'd finally stopped pacing and even turned to face her.

"You may be assured that I didn't."

She nodded. "Well, that's something, then."

"Hermione." He stepped closer so that he could reach out and clasp her upper arms, waiting until she reluctantly looked up and met his eyes before he spoke again, voice firm: "It was extremely enjoyable."

She pressed her lips together into a thin line, knowing that it couldn't possibly have been his best experience in bed but appreciating that he was lying to her about it.

"Thank you," she said, hating how awkward she sounded. "I … wish that I could have done better."

He released her arms, a hand reaching up to delicately ghost down her cheek, and she fought the urge to rub against him like a cat.

"It isn't a school project on which you get graded."

Her lips twitched. "Right. But I still—"

"You better not say one word about my being your professor."

She actually grinned at how foreboding he sounded.

"I'm not quite as inept as that," she assured him. "I wanted to make a good impression, that's all."

"You succeeded."

"Please," she scoffed. "I offended you as soon as we got into the bedroom and all I could do was stare at your shoes." She was such an idiot. "You were angry with me from the moment you emerged from the bathroom, and we both know it didn't get any better. I couldn't even kiss you without comment."

He spoke slowly but offered her what sounded like an honest answer. "I was under the impression that you were uninterested at best; I took your hesitation for distaste rather than uncertainty."

"I dislike being a novice at anything," she told him stiffly.

She liked her knowledge to be full and complete and clearly evident to all observers.

"But in this case it was with very good reason, and it's very…." He seemed to be struggling for the correct word. "….Touching."

He wasn't quite adept at making her feel better, but it did rather make his point, as she thought it was cute and rather touching that he was trying so hard.

She found that her lips had curved into a smile. "I'm glad that you think so, Severus."

He made a slight face of distaste, indicating he had heard the gentle edge of mockery in her statement.

"I didn't say I was good at this."

"I didn't ask you to be," she said softly.

"Nor did I ask you to be the most proficient and perfect that you could have been your first time, either. You know what they say."

"Practice makes perfect?"

Suddenly, he was standing a great deal closer than he had been, and she fancied she could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"Is that an option?" His voice was a velvety purr.

Her heart rate had picked up, and she reminded herself sternly not to hyperventilate and pass out before anything happened. She was almost too nervous to speak, not wanting to wake up from this very pleasant dream. But he was clearly waiting for a response, and she didn't want him to get the wrong message from her silence.

Her voice came out more breathlessly and nervously than she would have hoped, but at least she managed to cobble words together into a sentence. "I've been hoping for that since I woke up in your arms last time."

His response was immediate, and she found herself wrapped in those arms, the same ones that had pushed her away from him so forcefully on that fateful morning after. This time, however, he seemed only desirous of increasing their contact, which he did quite firmly, tucking her up against his body. His lips crushed hers in another kiss, this one intense and purposeful, sending what felt like fire coursing through her entire body in a rush of sensation.

This was how she wanted to be kissed for the rest of her life, and she couldn't imagine how she'd survived this long without such a touch.

When it wasn't her directing the kiss, there was no hint of noses in the way; he seemed to know exactly how to tilt their heads, and then there was only the heat and passion of the kiss. By all that was magical, why hadn't she told him she wanted to sleep with him ages ago? If this was the response she would have gotten then, she'd definitely deprived herself of a sublime opportunity.

Before she quite knew what had happened, he'd manoeuvred the two of them into his bedroom. This was how it was supposed to be, she thought hazily; there weren't supposed to be awkward invitations and long pauses as they both rallied and undressed and misunderstood one another. It was supposed to be all this frantic need, him pulling at her clothing to get it off, her discovering that her hands were completely useless and utterly uncoordinated as she attacked all those buttons that had so many jokes attached to them.

Speaking of, she did know this really neat spell that took care of buttons, and she desperately wanted to feel again what was underneath all that cloth, so she wandlessly and wordlessly performed the deed. Severus did not appear to notice anything amiss, pressing up against her questing hands, and she found pale and warm flesh beneath the fabric that protected him so assiduously.

Coherent thought fled when his long fingers danced along the contours of her bra. Oh, he could keep doing that forever and he wouldn't get a single protest out of her.

His hands froze suddenly, the cessation of movement so abrupt that she looked down to see what had stalled him. His fingers had found the silvery scar tissue that was the physical remnant of Castina's charge against Severus.

She looked up to find that his face was set in hard lines, and she knew that the anger she saw there was not directed at her. She placed her hand over his, covering the mark and making his eyes, which had been trained on her chest, rise to her face.

"It's nothing," she whispered. "I'm healed, and you're here, and I want you to kiss me."

He gave her what she wanted, his mouth gentle at first, and she could taste his apology, but then he deepened the kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and hoped that he forgot all about the scar. It was a small price to pay if it had brought them successfully here.

They fell into bed as the last of their clothing was finally shed. She was underneath him, which suited her just fine, as she was delighted by the feeling of his larger body pressing against hers. They'd done this once before already, but there was something brand new and exciting about this occasion. No matter if it turned out that they had both wanted this previously, this time she knew that he was voluntarily taking her to bed and it had nothing to do with Pure Adults; he wanted to have sex with her. He'd chosen her, chosen to be with her, chosen to bring her pleasure.

By the time he slid inside her, she was more than ready for him, and she had discovered that while begging didn't get him to move any faster, it did make his eyes glitter and make him smile faintly, lips tipping up at the corners.

She could work with that.

Now that she knew he was here because he wanted to be with her, she didn't feel the slightest inhibition against expressing her pleasure; she was pretty sure she was more vocal than he had anticipated, but given how fiercely he kissed her, she didn't think he minded.

There was no white light when she climaxed, and she managed to retain consciousness as ecstasy crashed through her, helped further along by the fact that Severus whispered her name as he came.

Apparently, they were both still aware of one another, and no disasters seemed imminent. Although Severus moved carefully to the side so that he wasn't crushing her, he didn't settle on the other side of the bed but spooned up behind her and pulled her into his arms. If she didn't know better, she could have sworn that he was snuggling her to him.

He pressed a soft kiss into her hair.

As she listened to his breathing even out, she drifted off into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione woke first a few hours later. Severus was still pressed up against her back, an arm reaching across her and a leg tangling with hers. She still felt more content than she had in a long while but part of her couldn't help but be on tenterhooks as she worried what was going to happen when he woke up.

For all of about thirty seconds, she actually considered sneaking away while he was still sleeping. Then she realized how completely and utterly daft that was. It would possibly begin to even the score between them for horrible mornings after if he woke up alone with no idea why she'd left, but she was hoping that they could repeat this experience not take turns being angry with one another for eternity.

She then spent several minutes wondering if she could make it out to the Forest to calm down and then sneak back into bed without his being the wiser. She found herself snorting with silent laughter at her own absurdity.

"You find something amusing?"

His tone wasn't as sleepy as it should have been. The question had come close to a growl.

She shook her head. "I caught myself considering whether I could sneak out to my herd and then back without your waking."

"Which you would do because?" he prompted.

"I was nervous. I wanted to be calm and collected when you woke."

He untangled them enough so that he could roll her onto her back and look down at her. His eyes were very dark, and he looked more rumpled and human from this vantage point and after the night they had had. Suddenly, answering questions seemed rather secondary to a much more enjoyable activity that she now had in mind.

"And what was the source of your nerves?"

"I felt very content when I woke last time, too."

He didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"It was when I woke that the morning … unravelled."

She gave a short nod of assent.

"This morning is more to your liking, I trust?"

She arched her body, bringing them into rather intimate contact with one another, and was pleased by the flare of heat in his eyes.

"Very much so," she answered his question, already feeling breathless and eager. "What do you think?"

He settled on top of her, their bodies flush and feeling as though they fit perfectly against one another.

"At first glance, this morning is not without its merit," he assessed slowly. "I may need more time to produce a considered reply."

"Is that so?" she asked, lips curling into a smirk.

"It is," he agreed pedantically before leaning down to capture her lips with his own.

Hermione preferred to think of this occasion as their real first time; it couldn't be further removed from what had happened in February. There was more sex, more cuddling, more dozing, and not so much as an intimation that Hermione should be getting out of the bed and continuing on her way never to speak of the incident again.

At half seven, Hermione reluctantly removed herself from Severus's bed so that she could get back to her own room, shower, dress in fresh clothes, and make it up to breakfast on time.

Severus came amusingly close to pouting, although she wasn't sure how she could tell, given that his expression did not change significantly.

"You wouldn't want Harry to come looking," she pointed out.

He made a face of distaste. "Perish the thought. Out, woman, out!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm going, haven't I said? It would be worse if I ended up in the corridor naked, so give me a moment to get dressed, would you?"

It didn't take very long. Severus was still lying dishevelled in bed watching her, and it made her want to crawl straight back in with him. As far as she could figure, he needed to be getting ready for the day as well, but if he wanted to lie there and look sexy as hell, she couldn't really complain.

They were likely going to see one another at breakfast, and they hadn't lost their tempers, but Hermione still felt as though it was important she handled this right.

At the door leading out to the sitting room, she paused and turned back to him. "Would it be too forward of me to say that I'd like to do that again?"

He smiled faintly, face appearing much softer this morning than it had in some time.

"I believe I can accommodate such a declaration."

Her lips curled into a half smile as she asked dryly, "Do you think so? When would you like me?"

She meant it with every bit of double entendre the phrase could possess, and the answering quirk of his lips said that he knew it.

"I imagine the Gryffindors will be disgustingly triumphant this evening," he began.

"Severus," she gasped with mock shock. "Did you just admit that Gryffindor is going to win the Quidditch Cup?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't be daft. You know you are."

"So we're going to be very triumphant and misbehave this evening," she resumed his sentence, grinning unrepentantly.

"The halls will need to be monitored. By both of us, I imagine, along with Mr Potter and Draco."

She really thought that he should make an attempt at Harry's first name, especially paired with "Draco", but she realized that now was probably not the best time to bring Harry into the discussion.

It was a Saturday with only two weeks before exams; it was likely that students young and old would be trying to let off some steam, and the Quidditch Final was an excellent excuse for that.

"Agreed," she said. "Afterwards, then?"

He looked faintly gratified that she was still trying so hard to make an assignation, and she came close to telling him that it would take something more along the lines of an apocalypse to slow her desire down. For that matter, she'd be quite happy to plan a private celebration for right after the Final Battle.

"That is acceptable." He nearly managed to sound as off-hand as she imagined he wanted to.

"I'll come by once I'm free?" she suggested, not wanting to predict a time given all the variables involved.

"That's fine."

Dressed now, she found herself wanting to do something ridiculous like blow him a kiss—or head over and climb back into bed to kiss him goodbye properly, and she knew how that would end—so she restrained herself to a "See you tonight" and hurried on her way before she could embarrass herself completely.

Since she'd missed the last match, Harry, Draco, and Ron insisted that she attend this one. She wondered if Severus would have given her a detention if she'd requested one…. It was too late now, however, so she resigned herself to the loss of revision time and admitted that giving her detentions so that they could have sex was probably not a precedent that she and Severus should set.

Really, it wasn't so bad once she was actually sitting in the stands with everyone else. Energy was high and most everyone was in a good mood. Gryffindor against Hufflepuff simply didn't engender nearly as much angst as Gryffindor versus Slytherin did.

It was a very furious match—that much even Hermione could see. In order for Hufflepuff to win, they would need to be at least forty points ahead of Gryffindor before the Hufflepuff Seeker, Phillips, caught the Snitch. Otherwise, even if Phillips did catch it, Hufflepuff would still lose the Cup, albeit by a close margin.

Hermione watched and listened to Harry and Draco's commentary as the Hufflepuffs applied remarkably Slytherin tactics, apparently, to try to prevent Ginny from getting the Snitch and to try to get around Ron so that they could score.

Twice, Hermione was absolutely certain that Ginny was going to crash as she hurtled after the Snitch with Phillips in hot pursuit. The fact of the matter, however, was that even Hermione could see that Ginny was the better flyer, and unless the Snitch wandered over into Phillips's hand when nobody else was looking, there was no way that he was going to be able to catch it before Ginny. Harry and Draco were making constant commentary as they watched Ginny, and Hermione recognized that it would have been a much more interesting match if either of them had been up against the youngest Weasley.

Ron was in top form, only letting in two goals out of the myriad shots that were made against his hoops. Gryffindor was awarded two penalties for some of the outrageous fouls that the Hufflepuffs managed at the end when even they could see that they weren't going to win. They were thirty points behind Gryffindor, and the chances of their getting sixty more points while Gryffindor scored none didn't seem to be terribly high.

The mood in the stands was still tense; it was rare for a team to lose the Final and still win the Cup, and the Gryffindors seemed very anxious for their victory to be complete.

Ginny caught the Snitch two and a half hours after the match had started to thunderous applause from the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw stands. Many of the Slytherins booed, and Hermione suspected that some of the Hufflepuffs took the opportunity to join in.

Harry and Draco were both grinning like mad, and Hermione bit her lip to prevent herself from saying anything to Draco that would embarrass him as he stood here in the Gryffindor stands fully participating in the Gryffindor glory of Ginny's catch.

As soon as they were able to move through the crush of people, they made their way down to the Quidditch locker room where Harry pulled her and Draco in without ceremony, sliding past other Gryffindors who were trying to congratulate one another. They all seemed to be yelling and talking loudly at once. There were moments where her increased hearing could be a curse rather than a blessing, and this was definitely one of them.

Her ears were trying to pick out too many of the individual noises and words and sentences that were going on around her, and she had a feeling that if she sat down later and gave it a concerted effort, she would probably be able to reconstruct most of what everyone had said. What she really wanted to do right now, however, was concentrate on her own friends; taking a moment, she managed to filter out much of the sound so that there was only a dull roar around her. Harry seemed to manage it without effort, and she wondered if it came naturally to him because he had put up with this sort of scene frequently before he wound up with magical Animagus-improved senses.

Paying close attentions to her immediate surroundings once more, she found that Harry had brought them over to the corner where Ginny was pulling off her Quidditch robes. Harry gave Ginny a giant hug, and Hermione watched as Draco struggled not to let his irritation show. He wasn't terribly successful.

Ginny leaned in to whisper in Harry's ear, and this made Draco's scowl more pronounced when Harry turned back to him with a look of surprise. Draco made an attempt at smoothing out his features, but Harry squeezed Ginny's arms and stalked over to where Draco was standing, putting himself right in the blond's face.

"She's just a friend," he said in a low voice that Hermione imagined no one else could pick up in the hubbub.

"I know," Draco said, voice tense.

"I'm going to touch other people sometimes."

"I know." There was irritation and impatience now, as though Harry were making Draco say something that he didn't really think should be declared.

Harry stepped closer still, backing Draco up until he was flush against the lockers and there was nowhere else he could go. Even from here, Hermione could see exactly what Harry did with his hips as he smashed the two of them together.

"There is no one in this world who I want like I want you," Harry said intensely.

Draco's eyes were very bright, his cheeks heated as he gazed directly into Harry's eyes.

"Only you," Harry reiterated before leaning in to kiss Draco forcefully.

As Draco melted into him, wrapping his arms around Harry's neck, Hermione cleared her throat and turned to Ginny, who'd been watching with equal amusement.

"Nice match," Hermione offered.

Ginny smirked at her. "Thanks. They do that often?"

"All the time, I imagine." She grinned. "If you mean in front of everyone, not so much, no. Think I should shield them?"

The redhead's smile was sly. "If they didn't think of it, why should you?"

Hermione smirked in return and left Harry and Draco to it, wondering if they would remember at some point that they were in a crowded Quidditch changing room.

As it turned out, they were forcibly reminded of that fact.

"Harry!"

Ron had emerged from the shower, and he sounded completely scandalized to have found his friend in such a compromising position. Just to see how much redder his face could get, Hermione would have loved to tell him that since all clothing was still intact, this wasn't half bad, but she restrained herself. It wouldn't do to cause one of her best friends to have a heart attack.

Ron's shout had not only garnered Harry and Draco's attention but also everyone else's. There was a smattering of cat calls and applause, and Harry and Draco unwound themselves from one another, Harry, red-cheeked, making an attempt to straighten his clothing a bit as well as taking a swipe at his hair.

"Now we know why your hair always looks such a mess, mate," Seamus called, and there was a great deal of laughter.

Draco, somehow looking very composed and unruffled despite the fact that he'd just been backed against a wall and snogged senseless, stepped forward, standing beside Harry.

His smile was fully as haughty as Hermione had ever seen it.

"I assure you, Harry has nothing to complain about in that regard. Now if you'll excuse me, I believe they're serving lunch in the Great Hall."

Hermione had to admire that poise. The rowdy Gryffindors parted for Draco like they were the Red Sea and he was Moses, and Harry, looking bemused, trailed after him. Hermione offered Ginny a jaunty wave, rolled her eyes at Ron, who still hadn't managed another word and didn't seem to have processed that Harry and Draco weren't still kissing in front of him, and headed after the two boys.

As she left the room, she heard it explode into noise again. She was both glad she wasn't in there anymore and curious as to what rumours were now going to circulate around the school. By the time the day was over, it would no doubt be a certain fact that Harry and Draco had had sex in full view of everyone or perhaps that there'd been a giant orgy in the changing room. Shaking her head, she lengthened her stride so as to catch up with the two boys.

"That was interesting," she observed.

Draco didn't seem at all upset to be the centre of such Gryffindor attention. Hermione hadn't realized how much good it might do him to see that Harry didn't have any self-consciousness about their relationship, and from the look on Harry's face, he hadn't considered it, either. Harry had always been as open as he could be about their relationship. It had been through the papers, but Hermione supposed, given the number of lies that were regularly printed there, that wasn't really an indication of anything; it was true that the two of them hadn't expressed that many overt displays of affection outside of their limited circle of friends.

Now half the Gryffindors had seen Harry kiss Draco, and Draco seemed quite pleased with that fact. Fortunately, as brash as Gryffindors could be, they could take dashing action in a stride, and they were usually a good group of friends. Although the wizarding world was generally more tolerant of same sex couples than the Muggle world was, this did not make the acceptance universal. Add to that the fact that it was the Gryffindor Golden Boy with the Slytherin Ice Prince, and it was a lot for some people to take in. Knowing about it in theory and catching them playing with one another's tonsils were two very different matters.

Hermione and Ginny had clearly not been bothered by it, though, Seamus would have had to have been the biggest hypocrite in the world to be overly upset, and Ron's shock, contained as it was to one syllable, had been more amusing than anything else. The overt display had really gone very well, although they would still have to see how Ron was at lunch.

Draco and Harry both ate heartily, piling food onto their plates as though they'd been the ones playing in the match rather than just observing it with a great deal of in-the-stands Seeking. Ron didn't appear until Ginny did which seemed a little unusual given that he had been coming from the shower when she hadn't even made it in yet, and he sat down on Ginny's other side, rather than next to Hermione, Harry, or Draco.

Still, he didn't sit at the very end of the table, and since he heaped enough food on his plate for four people, she couldn't really be surprised that he didn't find much opportunity to talk.

As lunch came to an end, there was a general consensus amongst the Gryffindors that it was time to head back to the common room for a party. Hermione watched the boisterous, chattering group as they moved off to the stairs. Was it her duty to join them, or could she leave this one to Minerva?

Transferring her gaze to the High Table, she saw that her head of house was sitting next to Severus. The Scottish woman was looking very pleased with herself, and since Severus hadn't lost to her, he didn't look entirely put out, just mildly surly as a result of the extreme Gryffindor good cheer. Since Hermione found it a little much herself, she couldn't blame him. Their eyes met, and her lips tipped up in amusement as she read as much resignation in his gaze as she was currently feeling.

Not wanting to draw attention, she made herself look away and felt more than saw the poisonous scowl that he sent in the Gryffindor's direction. Probably adequate camouflage, that.

The excellent mood of her head of house, however, told Hermione everything she needed to know. If anyone was going to be keeping an eye on the giant Quidditch celebration party, it was going to be Minerva. Hermione could disappear into the blissful quiet of her lab without a qualm.

That was the plan, anyway. Since Ron had come in a bit later than most people and eaten enough to feed a small army, he was one of the last to finish, and their whole end of the table was waiting on him. Harry and Draco were pretending that they weren't cuddling in full view of the entire Great Hall, and Hermione took a moment to check in with Ginny about how her exam prep was going.

Ron finally pushed his empty plate away and rose to his feet. He was grinning fit to burst, although perhaps that was only her impression given what she had watched him consume.

"Celebration time. Gryffindor common room. Gin?"

Ginny rose to her feet with a smile at Hermione. Despite the proximity to exams, now wasn't exactly the optimal time for an academic discussions, and Hermione had been impressed that Ginny had been willing to discuss it as much as she had.

"Party time," the redhead agreed with her brother.

She was, after all, one of the biggest heroes of the hour, having caught the Snitch and cemented their victory.

Ron looked down at them from his standing position.

"You're all welcome to come."

It took Hermione a moment to process the significance of this. She and Harry were, of course, always welcome. As little time as they spent in the Gryffindor common room, they were still very much affiliated with that house, and they could enter the dorms whenever they wished. It was their house who'd won the Quidditch Cup just now, and it was entirely possible that they'd want to go and celebrate. Ron's comment, however offhand, obviously hadn't been directed at either of them. He'd made it a general invitation, but he had to have meant it for the only person who wasn't generally welcome or invited to the Gryffindor common room.

Draco looked awfully close to stunned before he rose gracefully to his feet.

"Thank you, Weasley," he said very politely. "I think Harry would like that. Harry?"

Harry stood hurriedly. "Uh, yes, thanks."

She and Ginny exchanged glances and then climbed over the benches and headed for the doors. If they got moving, it was likely that everyone else would follow, and that was better than an awkward pause at the Gryffindor table as they all marvelled at what had just happened.

Since it had been officially a general invitation and Draco and Harry had accepted, Hermione didn't get to head straight down to her lab as she had hoped. Now that Draco was going to be in the Gryffindor dorms, it might be best to have someone on hand in case anything went wrong.

The party was as boisterous as she had feared it would be, and the house-elves had provided an astonishing assortment of sweets that Hermione was certain shouldn't be consumed so soon after lunch had been inhaled in the Great Hall. She was not, however, everyone's mother, and although she might have to give them a hundred detentions and drive them back to the common room later tonight after rounds, their behaviour right now—so long as it didn't become completely outrageous—was up to them.

She got Winky to bring her tea that she was certain was undoctored (because while it was the middle of the afternoon, she knew how sneaky Seamus and some of the other Gryffindors could be) and nursed it in as much of a quiet corner as she could find under the circumstances.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Draco got involved in some sort of Quidditch discussion with half the upper-year Gryffindors before they'd been very many minutes in the common room, and Hermione left them to it, running through Potions ingredients in her head and wondering how much revision she could do without a textbook. As long as she was sitting quietly and appearing more or less attentive, she couldn't be termed quite the spoilsport that she would be if she actually got out a book and tried to read.

They let her go after a couple of hours, for which Hermione was very grateful. It was nice to see everyone in high spirits. Especially given the real life danger they faced every single day with Voldemort on the loose and trying to kill Harry and take over the world, there were plenty of occasions for seriousness. Having one big happy group of people for a number of hours in a row was a welcome boost to everyone's morale.

Hermione was still happy to escape, however, and it really felt as though she were coming home after a long absence when she made it into her laboratory. She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Right. Big groups of noisy people were really not her style, apparently. It didn't bother her that they were enjoying themselves, but she'd rather not be doing it with them, not when it was about Quidditch, anyway. Get her into a big Potions celebration, and she could happily talk theory for hours.

She'd discharged her duty, and now she could get back to her own work and hope that Harry and Draco weren't completely sloshed and were continuing to keep an eye on everyone. Maybe all the sugar and alcohol highs would ebb by early this evening and everyone would get a really good night's sleep…. Hermione snorted to herself. It wasn't terribly likely, but she could dream.

With no one to interrupt her, she was able to revise quietly for several hours, check on her plants for next week's Weresbane, and practice with the wards—as there was plenty of activity at the moment. She went up to dinner alone when she found that Harry and Draco still hadn't returned.

Almost the entirety of Gryffindor House trouped down en masse a few minutes after she arrived and settled down noisily at the table. The celebration was still going strong. She was filled with an incredibly strong urge to point out how many days they had until exams began, but she kept her mouth firmly shut and let their excited chatter wash over her. They were happy, and she would not be a killjoy; it wasn't as though any of them could productively study with what was left of today.

Harry and Draco had sat down on either side of her, which was rather unusual for them, as it meant that if any footsies were being played, she'd be in the way.

"What's up?" she asked.

"That's what we were going to ask," Harry said. "You all right?"

"Relieved to be well out of the party."

"You don't mind us staying?" the Gryffindor pursued anxiously.

She looked at him incredulously. "You've met me, right? I'd be happy if you stayed away for a week and let me work in peace."

Harry laughed, nudging her with his shoulder, and settled in to pile more food onto his plate.

"How is it that all of you can still be hungry?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea. We just are."

Fair enough, she supposed. She looked over at Draco.

"How are you doing?" she asked quietly.

He looked directly at her, and she was pleased to see how relaxed he looked. She was pretty sure it meant there had been plenty of alcohol at the party, but since Minerva would turn them all into slugs permanently if the younger students got into it, Hermione was going to trust that they were being adequately responsible.

"I'm quite well, thank you."

He really did seem to have been enjoying himself, and Hermione was pleased that the Gryffindors appeared to have accepted him—at least in the context of this party—without reservation.

Today, Hermione's mousse appeared with the rest of the pudding, and although it was right next to her plate, Ron made a go for it.

He snatched his hand back the moment it touched the glass however, bringing it to his mouth to suck on his fingers.

"Ouch," he complained around his hand. "What the bloody hell was that?"

Unconcerned, she picked up the glass.

"That," she answered with deliberately coolness, "was your warning to stay away from my food. You've got plenty of your own pudding, Ron."

He removed his hand from his mouth, goggling at her.

"You charmed your mousse to protect it from me?"

"It seemed to need it, didn't it?"

He subsided reluctantly, helped along by the fact that there really were loads of other desserts piled all round him.

She had not, of course, hexed her mousse, but she didn't think she could possibly explain to everyone else that it was really a gift from Severus and, paranoid and suspicious Slytherin that he was, he had made sure that no one but she could eat it.

Of course, she smiled to herself as she took the first bite and let the dark chocolate flavour melt on her tongue, all she had to do was tell everyone it was made by Severus, and Ron and the rest of her classmates would be scared off straightaway. A last resort, then, if Ron tried to get grabby again.

Finishing her mousse with a delighted sigh, she ignored the amusement of those around her and set the dish back down. It promptly disappeared. Back to Severus's lab, she supposed. Or perhaps he had a small kitchen somewhere. Probably it would be better if she didn't clarify in case her temptation got the better of her.

"Why is it that you're the only one who gets mousse?" Ron asked again, seeming to only be able to go so long before the fact that she got more pudding than he did became something he needed to question.

"I'm special, obviously."

He stared at her in surprise before his face broke into a grin. "Obviously. Forget I asked."

A few of the Gryffindors had already trickled away but the majority of them rose again as one and trooped back to the Gryffindor common room.

"I don't suppose there's any reason to ask if any studying is going to get done now?" she asked, resigned.

Harry and Ron laughed.

"Highly unlikely," Harry said immediately. "I take it you're not coming back?"

"No, thank you. I have some plants that I need to watch grow. Anything but the lot of you in a room all talking about Quidditch at once."

Ron shook his head. "Your loss."

She nodded with mock solemnity. "I'll try to live with my disappointment."

Ron, Ginny, Harry, and Draco followed in the wake of their housemates, Hermione waving Harry and Draco on when it looked as though they were going to pause again and ensure that she didn't mind that they left. They were sweet. Completely daft, but sweet.

Back in her own quiet common room once more, she did more revision for the evening, playing with the wards at the same time and seeing how long she could hold them and keep her concentration sharp enough to perform Transfiguration spells and recite facts at the same time.

She managed it for almost half an hour and was still able to release the wards gently. The students were beginning to get more active now, venturing out into the hallways and breaching the wards at multiple points in the school. Since what she was doing was top secret, she fortunately wouldn't have to thank any of them for affording her such good practice rather than taking away points and sending them back to their dorms.

All the current activity was laid out before her, and she could see that the Gryffindors were making impressively steady runs to the kitchens to keep up the supplies for their party. She still had no idea where they were collectively packing all that food away given that they'd now been eating for hours straight as far as she could tell.

Ron, she was amused to note, also made a run to Hogsmeade with Ginny; despite the fact that the Map was still affixed to the wall in front of her, Fred and George's legacy lived on. Butterbeer, at least, didn't have an outrageous amount of alcohol in it. Hermione only hoped that they made sure that Honeydukes was paid for whatever they nicked.

The Hufflepuffs were in their own common room, and she was pleased to see that unless they were actually plotting a mass revenge, they seemed to be having their own party. They hadn't won the match, but they'd come in second place. Since most of the school conceded that Ginny was a crack Seeker, the loss wasn't unexpected.

The Slytherins seemed to be scattered throughout the school. Some of them were actually in the library, and she supposed that if anyone were going to pretend the Gryffindors had not had a great triumph today, it was going to be them. There were a number of Ravenclaws there as well, but she doubted that a Ravenclaw win would have prevented many of them from populating the library. Unlike the vast majority of the school, the Ravenclaws could count, and they knew exactly how little time there was until exams. Quidditch was all well and good, but N.E.W.T.s only came once in a lifetime.

Around ten, Hermione went to retrieve Pansy from the Slytherin common room. The Slytherins didn't look particularly pleased to see a Gryffindor, but Hermione was careful not even to think about Quidditch in their presence, and the tension seemed to ease a little. Pansy joined her in the hallway.

They made it through three corridors before the Slytherin girl spoke. "I thought we were doing rounds with Harry and Draco tonight."

"We are. They're still up in the Gryffindor common room." One of Pansy's eyebrows rose, and Hermione clarified, "They've been celebrating the victory all day."

Pansy licked her lips, swallowed several comments, and finally simply smiled.

Hermione smiled back. "I know. Wait 'til you see him."

Pansy's eyebrow lifted higher, but she didn't utter a word as they climbed to the top of the castle, and Hermione ventured into the common room to find the two tardy boys. The Slytherin had professed herself entirely pleased to wait outside as soon as she heard the volume of noise coming through the round portrait hole.

The students still didn't look like stopping. Someone had got music playing from somewhere and there was a dancing smash-up at one end of the room. Hermione actually had to access the wards to find Harry and Draco, and the prospect of digging through people to get to them made her realize that she was an idiot. She retreated to the safety of the hallway and used MindSpeech to advise them that she and Pansy were waiting at the door.

The relative coolness and quiet of the hallway was a welcome relief despite the short period she'd been inside.

It was a few minutes until the boys emerged, and Pansy's lips twisted into an immediate smile as she took in how happy Draco looked. He had one arm slung over Harry's shoulder, and he appeared slightly dishevelled and completely relaxed. He certainly didn't look as though he'd just been braving the lions in their den.

Shaking her head in bemusement as Draco tried to look at her challengingly, Pansy turned on her heel and headed down the hallway.

"Come on, then," the Slytherin girl said. "We've got rounds to do."

They had to roust a number of the younger years from a variety of locations, all of them under the mistaken impression that since Hermione and Harry were Gryffindors, they would be celebrating and not checking the corridors as carefully as they normally did.

There was a giggling group of seven fourth- and fifth-year Hufflepuffs whom Hermione was certain had been planning some mischief, but since they were found before anything incriminating had actually occurred, she could only send the group back to their common room under threat of dire punishment should they be found outside again tonight.

Since Harry still retained enough shyness that he and Draco seriously making out in the Gryffindor common room in full view of almost the entire house was out, Hermione had watched as their desire rose exponentially each time she saw them, and by this point in the evening, it was quite clear that they were barely resisting tearing off one another's clothes.

In the course of the evening, they had to remove four couples from the Astronomy Tower, and Hermione and Pansy carefully avoided looking at one another. They crossed paths with Severus only once. He offered Draco and Pansy nods, glared at Harry and Hermione, and continued on his way without a word. Harry opened his mouth, looked at the three of them, and closed it again.

Hermione sincerely hoped that was a bit of acting for everyone else's benefit rather than his now being totally annoyed because the Gryffindors were acting out and had been all day. He'd gotten to three pairs of very enthusiastic Gryffindor celebrants before she and her patrollers could, and she imagined those hadn't been particularly happy meetings.

Still, the Gryffindors should really know better by now. It was a Saturday evening, a time when Severus was most likely to be keeping an eye out for misbehaving students, and if they were old enough to be getting up to the activities in which they had been engaged when Severus found them, then they should have been old enough to cast silencing charms or otherwise hide out discreetly.

It was after one before her group of patrollers had waded through the castle several times and Hermione's check of the wards revealed that there were very few students who'd braved their wrath a second time. Between their group of four, Terry and Morag, Severus, and Minerva, they'd made a pretty thorough job of it.

If they did another set of rounds for stragglers, they wouldn't be finished until five in the morning, and she had other plans. The other three seemed content with the work that they had done, and that was good enough for her under the circumstances.

They dropped Pansy off at the Slytherin common room, and she bid them a pleasant goodnight. As far as post-Gryffindor wins were concerned, Hermione was pretty sure that this one was the least unpleasant that these two Slytherins had encountered. Since Harry and Hermione were present, none of the Gryffindors who'd been caught could accuse Draco and Pansy of unfairness, and the same went for the Slytherins toward Hermione and Harry.

As soon as they made it into their common room, she bid the two boys goodnight. "I'll see you in the morning."

They both threw her grateful glances for not protracting the evening and made an immediate bee line for Harry's room. The door closed with a thump, and Hermione guessed that clothing was probably already all over the floor.

Rushing instantly to Severus's quarters was probably not prudent, so Hermione decided to shower first. She had been marching all round the castle, and she'd like to be clean for the rest of the evening's activities.

Back in her room, she dried her hair with a charm and finally decided to wear undergarments and a robe. She could pass for fully dressed especially if it turned out that Severus really was annoyed. In the hope that he wasn't, however, it was going to be very easy to undress her.

It was nearing two when she Masked herself and sneaked out. She'd knocked at his door before it really occurred to her that this might be considered a bit late to be visiting him even though she'd said she'd come by after rounds. Hopefully, since he'd been out earlier in the evening, he'd realized how busy it was and thus how late she was going to be. But it was possible that he'd thought—

The door was pulled open, and she was tugged into the room despite the fact that she hadn't unMasked. She was smashed up against the wall and her lips plundered ruthlessly before her brain finally caught up to the fact that Severus was, as far as she could tell, very pleased to see her indeed.

Chapter Forty-Seven: The Lead

Hermione barely managed to unMask herself, realizing fuzzily that she needed to do it immediately before she forgot her own name—which seemed likely to happen any time now because Severus could kiss like the devil, and she'd like him to continue doing this forever and ever.

When he drew back enough to see her, he was perilously close to smiling, and that made her grin entirely stupidly at him. She took in the intensity of his dark eyes and the colour on his cheeks with relish.

"Hi," she said inanely.

His lips twitched. "Hello."

"I wasn't sure you'd be happy to see me," she continued, feeling that more was required following her particularly stupid greeting after being snogged senseless by the man.

"And why would you think that?"

"You didn't seem particularly happy when we saw you in the corridor," she answered somewhat breathlessly, as he'd taken the opportunity to press his lower body up against her and start worming his hands beneath her robe.

"Of course I wasn't happy," he answered, but his eyes were on her torso and the work that his hands were doing. "I was running around after brainless nitwits who don't have the sense to go to bed when they're told."

"I don't suppose you were ever out after curfew," she said, tilting her head back to give him access to her neck.

He obediently nuzzled it before answering her question. "If I was out after curfew, I was smart enough not to get caught."

That was the approach that she espoused, too, and it didn't surprise her that Severus had learnt how to sneak around undetected. He'd spent a lot of time following the Marauders, for one thing. Best not to mention that, she supposed.

"And have you ever done what so many of the students were doing this evening? Decided that the Astronomy Tower was the perfect location for a late-night rendezvous?"

He pulled back to look at her, a frown pulling at his brow.

"I have not," he answered, the response stilted.

Feeling uncomfortable, although she didn't know the cause, she shrugged as carelessly as she could manage. "Me neither."

"If you wish—" he began, voice sounding resigned.

"Oh, no," she answered once she'd realized what he'd inferred. "I didn't mean that at all. To tell you the truth, I don't think it's the best location for students and professors to be spending any time romantically."

He regarded her seriously for a moment, his lips twisting slightly as he finally observed, "Krum and Miss Parkinson."

She nodded, making a slight face of her own. "I sent them off to the Quidditch locker rooms."

He snorted, observing dryly, "A much more appropriate venue."

"Far less likely for young students to be wandering around there late at night and not within the boundaries that I am charged to patrol." She frowned at him and asked slightly anxiously, "I didn't mean anything by it, you know that, right?"

He stroked the side of her face with his knuckles, and she leaned into the touch.

"It is not the sort of question I am accustomed to hearing without mockery," he said finally, offering her an almost smile, though it did not reach his eyes. "I realise you did not mean it as such."

She gritted her teeth and reminded herself that James Potter and Sirius Black were dead. It was not within her power to change the torture they had put Severus through, but she could do everything possible to heal the damage that they had left in their wake.

Severus shouldn't have assumed an inquiry as to whether or not he'd ever snogged someone on the Astronomy Tower was a mocking question. It made her want to suggest that they go up there and do it right now except that she knew he wouldn't be comfortable, knew she wouldn't be comfortable, and was well aware that he'd be downright annoyed if he learnt subsequently that it was where Viktor had taken her when he had declared his love and kissed her.

Smiling at him, she said, "I can't promise that I'll never tease you, but I won't mock you, not like that."

He nodded, and she hoped that he believed her. She knew that it was a lot of trust that needed to be rebuilt, but he was trying, as he'd said, not to judge her by any previous Gryffindors' failings.

"Shall we take this elsewhere?"

She nodded immediately and eagerly, surprising a smirk out of him, and she reflected that all she apparently needed to do to keep him happy was appear as pleased as she really was by the prospect of spending time with him intimately. Not much of a hardship, that.

It took more time than normal to get to the bedroom, as it had somehow become imperative that they shed clothing on the way. Severus seemed quite pleased that she didn't have much on underneath her robes, although it really just meant that they both spent a fair bit of time on all his layers. She was thankful once more for the button spell and wondered, idly, who had created it and for what reason. Had they had a slightly repressed lover, as well? Not, she realized, a topic to ever bring up with Severus.

They made it to the bed eventually, Severus setting out to explore her body, a task which she gave herself over to with enthusiasm. They couldn't stay like this forever, she supposed, but a week's holiday in bed where he didn't move from this spot was exactly what she needed.

Unfortunately, she'd need to start the Weresbane on Tuesday, and she couldn't really brew from the bed with Severus on top of her. She snorted to herself. Spending her nights with Severus on a semi-regular basis was obviously going to her head.

"Something amusing?" he asked acidly.

She was reminded that laughing when in bed with this man was something that one did at one's own risk.

"Wondering if I could work out how to brew the Weresbane from here as I don't fancy moving from this spot for the next week or two."

His face softened in the way that it only seemed to do when they were alone and intimate.

"By all means," he pronounced. "You can explain to Albus why it is that I am no longer teaching."

She bucked up against him, and he hissed out an explosive breath.

"I'm very tempted."

He looked down at her with a predatory expression. "As am I."

Fortunately, she appeared to be a temptation that he didn't mind succumbing to, and he ravished her thoroughly, leaving her with the blissful reflection that it was better, even, than his chocolate mousse—and she really loved that mousse. Every time she won a gasp or groan out of him, she felt a sense of triumph because she knew that he was enjoying himself. He was not as vocal as she was, but it was more than enough to satisfy her.

After sex, he didn't seem to mind being simply affectionate, for he again rearranged them so that he was not crushing her but then pulled her close so that he could wrap an arm around her and settle against her to sleep.

She was feeling a very contented lassitude and reflecting that every time they did this, it only got better, when a thought made her bolt upright.

"Oh, my God!"

He sat up as well, looking an odd mixture of sleepy and alarmed as he scanned the room as though searching for a threat that had disturbed her.

"What?"

"I can't believe I didn't even think about it," she said, mostly to herself, recalled to his presence when he grabbed her arm.

"Hermione."

She turned to look at him. "Sorry," she said, grimacing. "My mother would be disappointed in me."

He frowned at her, his voice quite frosty. "You've just now decided that your parents wouldn't approve?"

She had to slap a hand over his to keep him from pulling away from her entirely.

"Don't be daft," she snarled impatiently. "I like to hope that my parents would approve my choice because I made it, but even if they didn't, it wouldn't stop what I feel for you. I wasn't talking about that. I always told her I'd be responsible, that's all."

He wasn't looking very mollified. "And choosing me is irresponsible."

She rolled her eyes. "Dammit, Severus, stop putting words in my mouth. I mean I wasn't responsible for me. For taking the proper precautions before having sex." He still looked remarkably clueless. "I didn't use any birth control!"

She was trying to add days in her head and work out the likelihood of her getting pregnant with no protection and the several times they'd recently had sex.

He was regarding her with confusion. "You have done."

She blinked at him, now confused herself. "I haven't." He still looked quite certain. "Pretty sure I'd remember if I had."

Wizards didn't use condoms or any of the Muggle contraceptives, but she hadn't cast any charms or used any—

"Potion," she breathed. "That's what you gave me in February."

He was frowning again. "Of course that's what I gave you. What did you think it was?"

"I had no idea," she answered, an edge to her voice now. "That's why I asked."

"You really didn't know?"

"I really didn't know."

"You still drank it." He sounded close to stunned.

"You wanted me to."

From the look on his face, he'd really thought that she'd known what it was at the time and was simply being difficult. The fact that she'd trusted him enough to swallow a potion the effects of which were unknown to her appeared to have really shaken him.

"You had no idea what my intentions were."

She shrugged. "I was in your bed and about to stop being the last Pure Adult. I didn't believe you were going to harm me, so that meant the potion was going to benefit you or me in some way. You wanted me to take it, so I did."

"It could have been a drug," he spluttered. "I could have knocked you out."

She made a face, saying dryly, "I trusted that you wanted a little more interaction than that."

"It could have been a lust potion designed to make you react strongly."

"Then you would have had a very wild night," she said, lips quirking, "since I seem to recall reacting quite strongly all on my own."

"But why weren't you more concerned? Why didn't you demand an answer?"

She shrugged again, unsure what she could say to make him understand. "I may not have wanted to be chosen because I was a Pure Adult, but make no mistake that I wanted to be with you. Since that required drinking a potion of your making—even though I didn't know what it was—that's what I did."

This confession was rewarded with a very thorough kiss that warmed her down to her toes. Maybe she'd have to see about confessing more of her feelings to Severus on a regular basis if it pleased him this much.

They kissed languorously for several delightfully long minutes and eventually ended up rearranged in a horizontal position once more, tangled up very pleasantly in one another's arms.

"May I ask you something?" she said once their breathing was settled but she knew he wasn't asleep yet.

He raised an eyebrow; apparently, if she had to inquire about asking, he didn't think that it boded well.

"Why did you have the Contraceptive Potion?"

Unlike the Contraceptive Charms which most everyone could use and which were cast on males or females (or both, for maximum protection), the Contraceptive Potion was rarely used. It only had to be ingested by one partner as it rendered them temporarily infertile whether male or female. It was one hundred percent effective, and unlike the charm, which had to be recast each time sex occurred, the potion lasted for six months at a time.

It would, presumably, be highly sought after, but it was expensive and harder to make than Wolfsbane. It took four weeks to brew, which left it out of the price range and patience of most people. The charm, after all, was generally effective, and few people had a Potions master in their pockets. Hermione was having trouble coming up with a list of people for whom Severus could possibly have been willing to prepare it.

The Slytherin sneered. "Albus's Golden Boy and Girl were the Pure Adults. I knew it was only a matter of time until they ceased to be Pure, and I was certain that he would ask me to brew the potion in order to keep the two of you safe and protected from the consequences of your actions."

She tilted her head. The words had been rather harsh, but if Albus had asked Severus to brew the potion, he would have said so. This meant that Albus had not asked and it had simply been Severus who had though to brew it, and she wasn't about to be put off by his tone.

She considered her words carefully. "You might have taken the potion yourself."

His sneer deepened. "I didn't anticipate having anything to do with the two of you losing your status."

No, it had become quite clear that he had anticipated her running off with Harry to shag like wild rabbits.

"Once you knew," she said calmly, refusing to be riled as he evidently intended. "That night. When you brought me the potion. You might have taken it yourself."

His pause was a little too long before he said, "I knew I wasn't going to need it again."

She regarded him carefully, noticed how he wasn't quite meeting her eyes. He had been certain that they were a one off, but rather than taking the potion himself so that she would only be protected the one time that the two of them had sex, he had continued to protect her. He'd probably thought she'd been having sex with Viktor since March, unworried about the possibility of getting pregnant because Severus had given her the Contraceptive Potion. All on his own, without Albus's interference.

She leaned over and kissed the spectacular man she was in bed with, trying not to say any of the words that she knew would make him uncomfortable, hoping that he could tell from the emotion behind her kiss how much the gesture meant to her. He'd had some sort of concern for her even before they'd ended up in bed together, even when she had thought he was just sleeping with a Pure Adult.

Hermione was relieved that not only had Severus been responsible for her when she had forgotten, another one of the miscommunications from that evening had been cleared up. Surely they had to be getting close to understanding one another now.

Severus spooned up behind her once more, his preferred sleeping arrangement, apparently, pressing a kiss into her hair as he had done the night before. She closed her eyes and fell asleep again to the reassuring sound of his breathing evening out into the steady rhythm of slumber.

Hermione slept until nearly seven on Sunday morning, Severus a warm presence beside her. She would be happy to wake up like this every morning but was not sure that Severus was actually interested in a commitment of that length. She suspected that it was too soon to broach the subject, but she was pleased and surprised by how easily he seemed to be allowing her to infiltrate his life.

On the other hand, this was only the second morning they'd managed to wake happily together. She didn't have any illusions that they'd be spending every night together like Harry and Draco were doing. Severus was still her professor, and they didn't live in adjoining rooms. Plus, he was probably going to need space, and she was prepared to give it to him because the last thing she wanted was to scare him off with too much, too fast.

Nevertheless, it was very comforting to wake up in his arms. She'd had no idea what to expect on Friday and had known that it was entirely possible that she'd be sent packing directly following their encounter. Being allowed to spend the night in his bed was a concession that she fully appreciated the significance of.

Severus was a very private person, and the fact that he felt comfortable enough to sleep the night away in her presence when he was in full possession of his faculties was a relief to her. Especially following their contraception discussion last night, it would have been very easy for him to make a comment about how late it was or name a task that he needed to perform Sunday morning, and she would have taken the hint. Instead, here they were.

It was, however, nearly seven, and even on a Sunday, she couldn't stay in Severus's chambers forever. Harry was awfully good about worrying where she was if she didn't show up at mealtimes, and even if liaisons between of-age students and professors were allowed, it was the better part of valour—and safety, given the particular political climate in which they lived—not to draw attention to themselves.

She kissed Severus until he was awake enough to respond sleepily to her overtures. Moving up to his ear, she whispered, "It's morning. I need to get back to my room before Harry sends out the cavalry."

He frowned a protest although whether this was at her proposed absence or the mention of Harry, she wasn't sure. She kissed him soundly once more and slid out of bed. A survey of the room told her that none of her clothing had made it this far, and a glance back at the bed showed her that Severus didn't seem to mind that she was heading to the sitting room starkers.

She smiled at him in a brave attempt not to end up blushing like a school girl as that would be really quite ridiculous given what they had got up to in that bed a few hours ago. He'd been all over her body then, she reminded herself, so if he wanted to look at it now, there was no reason for her to be self-conscious. Taking a last look at his pleasantly rumpled self in the bed, she moved into the sitting room and found and donned her few pieces of clothing.

Masking herself, she sneaked down the quiet corridors and back to her own common room.

She didn't unMask until she was safely in her bedroom even though the wards had assured her that Harry and Draco were still in bed. It was much easier to sneak around, she noticed, when Harry had someone keeping him company at night.

Despite taking a shower, Hermione was still ready and reading by the time Harry and Draco emerged from Harry's bedroom just after eight.

"Good morning," she said, trying really hard not to beam at them like a complete fool because Draco, at least, wasn't utterly clueless and could probably spot someone who had been having lots of sex and was very happy about it.

"Morning," Harry said around a yawn.

The two of them looked a little rough around the edges, and she was reminded of the day they had spent in the Gryffindor common room. They hadn't seemed horribly inebriated last night when they'd gone on their rounds, but it appeared that they'd consumed enough throughout the day to be somewhat regretful this morning.

She Summoned two hangover remedies and directed them to the two boys. They looked really quite grateful and drank the potion hurriedly before sinking onto the couch. They hadn't even asked what it was or inspected it at all, seeming to take it on faith that she was going to help them. Given that one of these two was theoretically a paranoid Slytherin, perhaps there was hope for her and Severus yet. Or perhaps Draco recognized a hangover remedy by smell alone.

"Do you suppose any of the Gryffindors are going to show up for breakfast?" she asked.

"The vast majority," Harry answered firmly. At her look of surprise, he continued, "Minerva stopped in about half nine, I think, and made it clear without exactly saying so that she was condoning the party on the clear understanding that none of us were doing anything that would prevent us from being in top form today. She didn't confiscate any of the alcohol, which she obviously knew was there even if it wasn't out in the open, but it was clear that if we disgraced Gryffindor House, we'd be done for."

This had been the essence of Hermione's stance. So long as her housemates didn't wander around with big bottles of liquor in front of her or display their drunkenness outrageously, they could be allowed to have their celebration. As far as Hermione was concerned, it was the last one they were going to be permitted to have until exams were over.

The three of them headed up to breakfast at a quarter past. To her amusement, Hermione found that while many of the younger Gryffindors had slept in, as it was a Sunday morning, each and every one of the sixth- and seventh-years—in various degrees of wakefulness and sobriety, from the look of them—was present. Minerva wasn't doing much to hide her own amusement at the staff table, and Severus looked as delighted as he ever got in a public venue.

For all they often pretended to be so different and at odds, Minerva and Severus had many similarities, including the fact that they commanded a great deal of respect from their houses. While Severus was more openly feared, neither were professors that the students wanted to cross, especially this close to exams.

Ron and Ginny were both heavy-lidded, Ron looking mildly disgruntled to see how recovered Harry and Draco were. The meal was quiet, the older students apparently finding that it was easier in their current condition to eat if they weren't trying to talk as well. Hermione wondered just how much additional drinking had occurred after Harry and Draco had left.

Not wanting today to be as much of an academic waste as Saturday had been, Hermione invited the two Weasleys down to revise. Ron looked as though he wanted to refuse but not only had he spent the entire previous day partying, he'd lost his ready-made excuse of needing to go off with his Quidditch team to prepare for the Final.

The two redheads went up to the tower for their books and then descended to meet Hermione, Harry, and Draco in the common room in the dungeon. Hermione gestured them to the chairs and the vials that were sitting on the tables next to them.

"You'll likely find it a little easier to concentrate after you've had that."

If Ginny had been surprised by the invitation—she had exams but nothing so drastic as the N.E.W.T.s—the potion vial seemed to explain everything to her, and they all settled down without fuss to revise.

Periodically, Ron would ask for clarification on some point or other, but it was a quiet and uneventful morning overall. Hermione appreciated this, as she had to start the Weresbane soon and there were still the wards to work with and she had to make room for Severus in her schedule now, too. She was very much looking forward to spending time with him, but it was still hours that were being taken away from other activities.

She'd thought that Severus might call a training session, as they were now all on speaking terms once more. The last session had been over two weeks ago and had been cut short by her burst of magic. He spent the day in his rooms, however; from the stationary position he had taken at his desk, she imagined that he was grading. She therefore reluctantly gave up the idea of seeing him and instead invited her friends to spar after lunch, citing it as a good way to de-stress and recover from all that studying.

Ginny ran the DA but had never been to one of Harry's and Hermione's training sessions. Since it was a Sunday, Ginny immediately pointed out that there was a meeting that evening which they were welcome to attend. Hermione tried to think of a diplomatic way to say that she wasn't sure how helpful the DA setting would be for them, but Ron beat her to it with an answer that was surprisingly tactful.

"You'll understand once you see them fighting."

Ginny subsided, Ron made no attempt to join them, and once Draco saw that this had turned into a demonstration, he bowed out as well, leaving Harry and Hermione to fight one another.

They offered one another slight bows now that this had turned into a rather formal exercise, and then they set to work. Since they were both using as close to all their power as they ever used in practice, Hermione couldn't spare a lot of attention to see how Ginny was taking it. There was the occasional gasp, though, so Hermione assumed they were making an impression.

Hermione had discovered months ago that Harry was much more resistant to fire and heat spells than he had been previously; his shielding could be minimal, yet he didn't react as though he'd been burned at all. It occurred to her as she was blocking a rather forceful Vanishing Charm that if he liked heat so much, there was every chance that he would be more sensitive to the cold. When she saw an opening, she therefore cast the strongest Freezing Charm that she could manage.

Harry went down like a ton of bricks, shivering just to look at, but she overestimated the degree of powerlessness that would result and was taken by surprise by the strong Blasting Charm that he still managed to cast.

She hit the wall with a thump and slid to the floor, and while she didn't lose consciousness, Harry was able to Summon her wand from her, signalling the end of the duel.

She immediately cast a Warming Charm that would hopefully return him to a healthy temperature and get rid of the bluish tinge to his lips.

Draco was at Harry's side by the time they were both trying to rise to their feet. The Slytherin helped Harry regain the sofa before Summoning Winky to ask for tea. Harry returned Hermione's wand and she nodded her thanks as they all settled down to partake of the tea.

"No DA," Ginny agreed as though it had been an ongoing discussion. "How many people know you can do that?"

"Our class has seen us duel," Hermione answered since Harry still looked as though his teeth were chattering. "But we only put that much force behind our spells on … special occasions. When we train with Severus, Remus, or Tonks, we'll approximate what we're capable of but we don't reveal it to the student body at large."

"I guess not," Ginny said, sounding amused. "There wouldn't be a Slytherin in the castle who'd be daft enough to fight you."

Hermione considered that that might be one good reason to let everyone know, although with her luck, it would just result in them all deciding to see who could best the supposedly unbeatable Gryffindor dream team. To give the Slytherins their due, however, ever since their truce, there hadn't been any particular attacks on her.

"We save up all our special powers for Voldemort," Harry said, managing to look marginally thawed as his lips tipped up into a pretty good attempt at a smile. "Gives us the element of surprise."

"You've certainly surprised me, and I thought I knew what you were capable of. Since he constantly underestimates you anyway, I think you're in a good position to beat the crap out of him."

Harry smiled more solidly now. "That's certainly our intention."

They rested for a few more minutes as Harry finished recovering.

"Remind me that I don't like cold spells," he said plaintively.

"You should probably practice a better shield against them," Hermione agreed, "but you certainly didn't let it get in the way. And you're far more resistant to heat spells."

"Gain a little, lose a little," Harry said philosophically.

She was pretty sure this was his outlook on life in general; he'd gotten away from the Dursleys only to discover that he was being hunted by a homicidal maniac who had killed his parents and was trying to take over the world.

They continued to revise until dinner, heading upstairs as a group. The rest of the Gryffindors finally looking recovered from yesterday's indulgence. Hermione had the feeling that tonight would be a pretty quiet night with many of them finishing up all the work they had neglected or getting a really good night's sleep. Either way, if she didn't have to deal with them, she'd be happy.

She ate her now customary mousse with just as much delight as on all the previous occasions. The thought of there being all of a month left until the end of the year seemed ominous. What was she going to do without Severus? Without the mousse? She'd grown quite used to this nightly indulgence not to mention the indulgence she got with Severus himself, and she didn't much fancy giving either of them up.

He would probably run screaming if she broached the topic of living together so early in their relationship, though. This meant there wasn't much she could do about the situation except try to become as indispensable to him as he already was to her.

She cast a few sidelong glances towards his area of the High Table. He looked to be in an average sort of mood, expression not even approaching a smile but not the glare of death, either. His persona had been cultivated over a rather long period of time, so it would probably be safer for her to concentrate on improving his mood and his expression of that mood when they were in private.

It was a Sunday night, so she knew that they'd have Potions together tomorrow morning. With all the other calls upon their time, she doubted they'd have the chance for many private encounters during the week, especially with her brewing the Weresbane. This meant that if she wanted to spend time with him—if she wanted more sex—tonight was probably the most sensible night. And since their encounters so far had involved him being in the lead, she thought that it was time to even the score.

She had plenty of ideas about just what she'd like to do with him, and she could, when the occasion called for it, be as brash a Gryffindor as any of her housemates; it seemed like a good time to let that side of herself out. They were in this relationship together, after all, and if she had ideas and desires, then it was her job to act them out. He'd never liked a pushover.

Behaving students meant that there was going to be less trouble for both of them and that there was thus a higher-than-usual chance of an uninterrupted evening. If she kept her eye on the wards, she could sneak away from Harry and Draco and go to Severus's quarters once he'd finished his rounds for the evening.

She smiled to herself. It was about time that she was in charge of the seduction. She might be a novice, but the only way she was going to learn was through practice.

Revision continued to be the order of the day. Harry was also finishing an essay for Minerva, and Draco was polishing up an essay for Filius that he wasn't completely happy with. Ginny and Ron had headed off to the DA meeting where Ginny was hoping to incorporate some of what she had seen earlier in the day.

At moments like this, Hermione wondered if she and Harry should have been taking more of a hand in the DA. She knew that delegating was important and that Ginny was doing a fine job, but seeing the redhead full of ideas and lesson plans and such enthusiasm made Hermione want to take part more than ever.

The truth of the matter was that she would likely have driven herself insane trying to figure out what she could show the other students and what she had to keep secret from her own training. There were plenty of tips and techniques that she had learnt at the hands of Severus, Remus, Kingsley, and Tonks which it wouldn't be wise to spread to everyone.

Besides, she knew her own failings, though she did not always want to admit them, and if she were instructing her peers on a weekly basis, she would likely display too much of her power proving to someone that she could outsmart and outfight them. It was better that she not be given the opportunity to show off too much.

This way, a very worthy team who could spare the time was teaching the DA now, and Hermione could be nostalgic about her fifth year when there wasn't a great deal that she missed from that awful ten months.

Harry and Draco volunteered to do the rounds on their own as they recognized that they had not been in perfect condition the night before; had she not come round to retrieve them, they would certainly have forgotten all about that particular job.

She told them that she wanted to get a good night's sleep with the week of brewing she had ahead of her, and they let her head off to her room at ten o'clock without making a fuss. If they suspected her of harbouring nefarious purposes, they were at least keeping it to themselves.

By half ten, Severus was in his rooms, and if he planned on going out again, she'd just have to see if she could change his mind. Planning on getting undressed at some point in the near future, she had a quick shower and transfigured some knickers and a bra into scraps of material much lacier and more risqué than she actually owned. She made them Slytherin green with black trim since she thought that would amuse Severus, transfigured a dress into what was closer to a silky negligee, and donned her regular robes so that on a cursory inspection, she'd pass muster as the regular Hermione Granger, off to the library or some bookish pursuit.

A quick glance at the wards informed her that Harry and Draco were on the third floor in the Charms corridor, so she Masked herself and made her way to Severus's quarters, knocking softly on the door.

He let her in after a short pause, the lack of death glare on his face suggesting that he had guessed that she was the one at the door, though whether that was because her knock had given her away or because he figured she'd be the only one to disturb him this late, she did not know.

She took a quick glance around the room and found that a book had been discarded beside his chair in front of the fire; she had probably not interrupted anything that could not be resumed with relative ease.

An eyebrow rose. "To what do I owe the honour?"

She didn't waste any time on unnecessary words, just gave him her best smile and wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned up to kiss him thoroughly.

He seemed taken aback at first, as though he could not quite work out what had just happened, but as soon as his mind caught up with what she was doing, he responded wholeheartedly.

She wove her fingers through his hair and moulded her body to his. His arms came around her waist and just as he seemed to get one hundred percent engaged in what they were doing, she drew back. He looked at her, eyes delightfully clouded and heavy-lidded with lust. She hooked a finger in between two of the myriad buttons on his robe to pull him along with her.

His focus sharpened drastically the longer she wasn't kissing him. She smiled at him again, hoping that her expression came across as the sultry invitation that it was. Whether she succeeded or not, since she was still holding onto him, it was a simple matter to tug harder at the cloth that she was holding and lead him to his bedroom.

"What are you doing?" He finally baulked at the pressure she was exerting to draw him along.

She turned back, making a tsking noise and shaking her head slightly. "I would think that was obvious, Severus. Come along."

Hardly looking appeased, he nevertheless obeyed, and she got him all the way over to the bed where she gave him a push towards the mattress. It had apparently been a little too gentle, however, because he simply didn't go down, instead staring at her with an expression between confusion and challenge.

This seemed to go a lot more smoothly when he was directing them, when she went wherever he wanted without question or complaint. It made her more determined to get it right now, to show him that she was capable of pleasing them both.

"This is much more fun if we're in the bed, Severus."

She pushed him again, and he finally allowed himself to be borne back. She immediately climbed on top of him, settling onto his thighs as she grinned down at his supine form and began to attack his buttons, smoothing the white shirt away from his pale skin with eager but tender hands.

She faltered when she saw the hint of discomfort on his face, expressed more in the sudden absence of emotions than in an easily identifiable expression of dismay. Drawing further back so that she was sitting completely upright across his legs, she frowned.

"What?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

"There isn't anything the matter," he responded curtly. "We are doing what you wish."

She let out a heavy breath. He had seemed to enjoy when she was kissing him in the sitting room. She had honestly thought that it was about time that she turned the tables on him and was the one who was in charge, but Severus clearly did not feel the same.

His eagerness last night had been apparent, but although she had been the one to suggest another encounter, he had again been in control of the actual events, doing what he wanted.

Patrols had already been finished for the day, his book had been abandoned without apparent regret, but the reluctance when it came to intimacy in bed was impossible to miss. Today, all that she was seeing that had changed was that it was she directing what was occurring.

She wasn't sure what it meant that he wouldn't let her have this measure of control in their relationship. Did he not think her capable of giving him pleasure when left to her own devices? Did he not trust her enough to let her do this? Did he in fact think of her so firmly as a student while he was her professor that he couldn't even conceive of her directing him, even in this?

Lifting a leg and twisting round, she quickly climbed off both him and the bed. She backed to the door.

"I'll just call it a night, then," she managed with difficulty.

She had a glimpse of him sitting up, shirt gaping deliciously to reveal the pale skin of his chest, and then she'd made it all the way out the door.

Somewhere, the fates were laughing. The Gryffindor know-it-all had made a muff of every sexual encounter that she had initiated. She had been put down and told off and even made the man she loved—the unflappable man she loved—completely uncomfortable.

Severus didn't suffer fools, and she was looking like the biggest idiot around. Escaping outside, she made her way rapidly to the Forest and shifted into her Animagus form. She was tired of emotional turmoil, and she was really very embarrassed at the moment.

She knew that Severus could affect her so much because she cared for him so much; that was what made the relationship so powerful. Some longer periods of peace, happiness, and stability amidst the rocky moments would be nice, but she'd still take the hard times for the happy moments and the wonderful feelings that she had thus far experienced.

Communicating briefly with Castina, Hermione advised her herd mare that she would prefer to be alone, and she felt the unicorn's support and acceptance of her choice. Right now, she needed to let what had occurred percolate around in her brain for a little while.

The past three sexual encounters—two of them spanning several encounters across a whole night and morning—had shown Severus to be a passionate and generous lover. Even when he'd thought she had no interest in him—although she still wondered how on Earth he'd really managed to come to such a daft conclusion—he had taken care to ensure that she had a pleasurable first time.

The fiery connection, the solicitude he showed only seemed to grow stronger once they got past all that misunderstanding, and this left her with an intense and ardent man who apparently didn't want her to call the shots. Was that an acceptable price for what he was offering her? Nothing he had chosen to do had thus far been the least bit objectionable, so that had to count for something.

She thought of Harry and Draco's relationship. Although most of the scenes that she had witnessed had involved Draco in the lead, their biggest indiscretions had occurred early in the relationship when Harry had had lots of enthusiasm but no experience. Yesterday, she'd seen ample evidence that Harry could be very masterful when he wished without complaint from Draco. Draco, in fact, had seemed quite pleased by the turn of events.

Hermione knew well enough that public displays of affection weren't in the cards right now between her and Severus. He was a much more private person than Draco had ever been, and there was a lot at stake if the wrong someone realized that there was something between them and put two and two together and worked out who had rescued Severus and what that meant about her.

She knew all of these facts, and so it had seemed very reasonable to her to plan in the privacy of his quarters. They'd had lots of sex there, in point of fact, but her attempt to show Severus just how much she cared for him had made him uncomfortable.

He was probably the strongest and bravest man she knew, and while she recognized that didn't mean that he feared nothing—only idiots like Voldemort made those sorts of claims—she was still rather shocked that it was she who had evoked such an unsettled emotion within him. It was actually rather disconcerting to know that an action which she had intended to give him pleasure had the completely opposite effect.

Displaying emotions that he regarded as weaknesses—love, caring, concern, fear—was not something that he did easily. From what she had seen, Severus was so worried, sometimes, about letting someone in and sharing what he was feeling that he wound up disconcerted by emotions and events which she took in a stride.

Of course, sometimes she wasn't so good at expressing herself, either, at admitting what made her vulnerable, but she thought this had been an easy one.

She couldn't understand what it really was about this encounter which had upset him so, and she knew that he rarely reacted well when confronted, so she wouldn't do so. He wasn't ready for what she was attempting, and the reasons were his; it was up to her to decide if the consequences for her were ones that she could live with. Once she'd figured out how she felt about it, then she could consider talking to him about it. When they were both calm and rational.

It was very early in the morning when she finally sneaked back into her bedroom where she slid out of her clothing, staring unhappily at the fancy underwear that had been so very useless. She transfigured it back into its usual state, pulled pyjamas on, and lay down and didn't sleep terribly well for a couple of hours.

Sunday night, she decided upon reflection, really was a stupid time to be attempting any sort of seduction. If it backfired spectacularly, as hers had, she had to suffer through three hours of close contact with Severus the very next morning.

Of course, she'd become an expert, recently, at avoiding meeting his eyes or having any more contact with him than was absolutely necessary. Since that was what she'd been doing for the past several classes, Harry and Draco didn't notice anything unusual, and Severus proceeded as normal.

She was once again one of the first out of the classroom, but since it wasn't as though Harry ever tried to linger, it wasn't horribly obvious what she was doing. Lunch went by quickly, and then she was off to Charms where Filius joked about the privilege of actually having her presence for an entire class; she did her very best as a result to pay perfect attention. Thinking very hard about Charms also meant that she didn't have too much concentration left to think about a certain inscrutable Potions professor.

Dinner went much as lunch had with her refusing to look at the High Table and moving food around on her plate rather than actually consuming it.

"You're not eating," Harry observed.

"I'm not very hungry."

Not her best effort, perhaps, but the absolute truth in the instance. The thought of food was rather repellent, actually.

"Not even for chocolate mousse?" he asked teasingly.

She smiled at him. Much as any memory of Severus right now was a bittersweet one, the chocolate mousse was a good memory which she cherished. His generosity and thoughtfulness in this area was heart warming, especially in moments like these. It would—

Her thoughts ground to an abrupt halt. Not a single spoonful of chocolate mousse was in sight. Severus, it appeared, had decided to take his feelings about last night out on her whether he could speak to her or not. After a frozen moment of mental anguish, she realized that her expression was no doubt giving away far more than she intended, so she schooled it to impassivity.

Fortunately, Harry, Draco, and Ron weren't looking at her but all around the table as though they had to have missed the mousse. She knew as certainly as she knew that she was sitting at the Gryffindor table in the middle of the Great Hall at Hogwarts that no mousse would be forthcoming.

"No mousse," Ron said blankly, as though he couldn't quite believe it.

She rose from the table.

"Not tonight, it would appear," she said with what she thought was masterful calm. "So that's me done. I'll see you all later."

Turning away before they figured out whatever it was they looked poised to say, she left the Great Hall at a very deliberate walk. She was, after all, allowed to finish her dinner whenever she wished, and it had been a long time since anyone had told her what to eat or when she might eat it. She was definitely finished.

Not bothering with her unicorn form, she wandered into the Forbidden Forest as a human. There, she could navigate through the underbrush and pay enough attention to not getting caught by any creature that might like to eat the defenceless-looking human that she didn't have to think too hard about what had happened in the castle.

When Harry contacted her by way of MindSpeech, she reassured him that she was fine and just needed a little air. It was pretty clear that he didn't believe her, but he seemed to be somewhat reassured by the fact that she was responding to him promptly and coherently. She promised that she wouldn't be out too long and reminded herself that it was nice that someone cared.

She was obviously psychologically dependent upon the mousse in an unhealthy way if she was getting so upset about its absence. Besides, it wasn't as though there wasn't other chocolate mousse in the world. Severus's had been damned good, but the house-elves were excellent cooks, and she had always enjoyed their mousse in the past. If she asked for it, she was sure that they would bring her an entire tub of it, even deliver it here in the Forest if that was where she really wanted it. They aimed to please.

Severus, by contrast, did nothing of the sort. He hadn't made promises about how long the mousse would be available, and it must surely have been growing annoying to him to make it all the time. Their disagreement was the perfect opportunity for him to discontinue the practice, and it was very silly for her to have become so attached to a handful of ingredients.

As her stomach rumbled, she realized that she really hadn't eaten nearly enough. She was far enough into the Forest that she was well out of sight of any humans, so she switched to her Animagus form and cantered to the nearest clearing.

Soaking up the light would ensure that she didn't have to think about human food for the rest of the day, and it had the added benefit of soothing her before she headed back into the castle anxious to avoid Severus. And everyone else, for that matter. She sincerely hoped that most hadn't noticed anything particularly strange about her departure, as she wasn't up to answering questions.

Before Harry could fret too much, she transformed back into human form and discreetly made her way out of the Forest and back inside. It was almost half eight, and Harry and Draco were on the couch.

"You all right?" Harry asked immediately.

She offered him the closest to a carefree smile as she could manage. "As right as I can be. I just needed a little break, that's all."

"And how is Castina?"

"Just fine." It wasn't really a lie because she was sure that if there had been something wrong with her herd mare, Hermione would have been informed. "What have the two of you been up to?"

Harry smiled complacently at her. "Not a great deal. We're in trouble when you're not around to ensure that we work."

Draco frowned. "The last six and a half years demonstrate quite amply that I am able to work productively without Hermione's assistance."

Harry simply raised an eyebrow and asked with amusement, "And just how much work did you get done in her absence?"

Not a great deal, according to the Slytherin's expression.

"Harry's a bad influence," she told Draco solemnly. "You'll want to look out for that."

The blond smiled faintly. "I'll do that."

"Hey," Harry protested. "I'm a perfectly reasonable influence."

"Of course you are," Draco agreed with the sort of soothing tone that was usually reserved for small recalcitrant children or mad adults.

Harry made a face at Draco and then they smiled at one another with very clear affection. She reminded herself that she wasn't jealous but very pleased that they'd found one another and were managing so well. She'd just call it a night and try not to brood in private.

Tuesday passed much the same as Monday except without the awkwardness of having to go to Potions class. To her surprise, pudding included a flute of mousse which she immediately recognized as coming from Severus rather than the house-elves.

It sat there innocently while she stared at it stonily. She was sure that he had chosen not to give it to her yesterday when she had been confused and hurt. It was stupid to become so attached to a food, and she wasn't going to do it again. She certainly wasn't going to let him think that she'd forgotten about the last couple of days.

Everyone in the vicinity looked completely surprised when she rose to her feet.

Harry gestured at the glass.

"You can't be leaving without your mousse."

"To the contrary," she responded coolly. She dissolved the spell that protected it from all hands but hers. "Eat it as you like."

Her last sight as she turned away from the table was of Ron's hand reaching to grasp the glass.

She started the Weresbane at seven and thus on much the same schedule as the last time she'd made it. It meant she wasn't working outrageously far into the night for the most part but it was late enough in the evenings that it didn't interfere with anything else that she was doing. The work was quiet and soothing, and she realized that once she managed to completely cure lycanthropy, she was going to have to invent another difficult potion that she could lose herself in.

It seemed to be the only reliable way to keep her sanity.

On Wednesday, there was once again no mousse at dinner, but Severus himself appeared to announce that he had to meet with the Head Boy and Head Girl at seven. Training session, apparently. It figured that he'd arrange one when she didn't particularly want to see him.

They arrived promptly on time at Room One and found that Severus was already there. He gave his instructions curtly, and they formed their teams in some surprise: Harry and Severus against Hermione and Draco. She'd expected Severus to make it Slytherins against Gryffindors which would have left Harry to decide whether to attack his own boyfriend or Severus when the latter action had had such an awful result during their last training session. She and Harry exchanged glances.

You know I love you, right?

Harry sent her a mental smile. Me, too.

If it came as a surprise to Severus and Draco when they started fighting that Hermione and Harry concentrated all their powers on each other, neither of them indicated it. She and Harry defended themselves against any spells that came at them, but they only attacked one another. This made for an energetic display.

Despite the deviousness of Severus's spells, it was difficult for him to get past her protections when she was going all out. She and Harry were evenly enough matched that there was never any saying who would have an advantage at any given time. She knew she didn't even have a chance with a Freezing Charm this time around. The only weakness she had detected thus far was a slightly imperfect protection of Severus. She wasn't sure if it was unconscious—since Severus wasn't his most favourite person ever—or if he'd correctly guessed that she would be unwilling to capitalize on that particular weakness.

It wasn't noticeable to most, perhaps; Harry's effort coupled with Severus's own not inconsiderable protections prevented Draco from getting through, but there were a couple of shots that she was pretty sure she could have taken successfully.

She knew that they'd never made a very big deal out of defeating one another in a practice scenario, but she found herself loath to bring Severus down when she didn't need to. Matters between them were a little awkward right now, but she didn't want to hurt him, and she was leery of the sort of situation they'd run into last time, where he had accused her of caring more for Harry than for him. She'd reached her quota for emotional drama already this week.

Severus finally called what appeared to be a disgusted halt to the proceedings. She and Draco stopped casting, but they both kept their wands at the ready, and Severus's lips curved into something approximating a smile at their caution.

"This particular duel has come to a draw," he pronounced clearly. "Some one-on-one work will perhaps have more felicitous results."

She immediately moved towards Harry.

"You and Mr Potter have the opportunity to practice together a great deal, Hermione." Severus's voice was cool. "I think not, in the instance."

Chapter Forty-Eight: The Encounter

With a challenging glare, Hermione immediately moved next to Draco. Since she and the blond didn't spar nearly as often as she and Harry did, and since Harry and Severus didn't spar much, either, the older Slytherin didn't have a valid reason to protest the choice she had made.

His lips settled into a thin line, but he didn't object. She and Draco moved across the room before separating until there were several feet between them.

You and Severus still aren't getting along? Draco asked.

She faced him firmly.

I've got my wand pointed at you and official dispensation to hurt you. You might not want to discuss this right now.

He laughed. Touchy subject. Got it.

They settled in for a formal duel rather than the type that they would face in battle. They both knew that if they were simply to throw whatever they could at one another, she'd have an excellent chance of simply blasting him; although Severus and Draco had both become more powerful after sleeping with her and Harry, the increase in magical strength had been considerably larger for the two Pure Adults.

For a formal duel, though, they took turns casting, so they both got to practice their shielding, and Draco wasn't knocked unconscious in the first few minutes. She tried not to pay too much attention to how Severus and Harry were faring in their half of the room.

It was almost a quarter to nine when Severus told them to stop. She knew he was on his last nerve when he resorted to holding her back. It made Draco and Harry suspicious; they all knew that the latter worried about her, and Severus didn't much like to be fodder for any gossip, especially when it came to Harry. But hold her back he did, and once she had shooed Harry and Draco along, Severus warded the room so that there was no way the two boys could get back in.

"You've been avoiding me," he accused.

"We live in the same school and you teach me, both officially and unofficially," she indicated the room they were currently in.

He wasn't buying it. "You've been careful not to be alone with me."

She shrugged as carelessly as she could manage. "I thought some space might be beneficial to both of us."

"I upset you."

She drew a deep breath and let it out very slowly. He'd made her feel horrible. All she said, however, was, "I can't talk about this right now."

His face tightened. "We are going to talk about this."

She met his angry gaze squarely. "I have to work on the Weresbane in a few minutes. It can't wait."

His lips pressed together, and she was certain that he wanted to tell her to forget the Weresbane … but he couldn't.

"You will come to see me once you have finished," he pronounced.

"I won't be done until after eleven," she pointed out immediately. "I don't think—"

"You've come to my quarters later, Hermione," he snarled. "Don't be difficult, and don't make me come fetch you."

Looking at him, she was filled with the sure knowledge that he'd do it. She could ward to keep him out, but she knew that she wouldn't because in the mood he appeared to be in, he'd probably stand in the hallway and attempt to get in, and she couldn't risk any of the students seeing that. Nor did she want to imagine how Harry would react.

And there was a small part of her which was willing to admit that she wasn't being particular mature to keep running from this conversation.

"Very well," she conceded with bad grace. "After I finish with the Weresbane."

He offered her a curt nod, and she hurried back to her common room. Harry and Draco were waiting, and even Draco looked a little concerned.

"I have to work on the Weresbane," she said flatly in an attempt to curb any questions. "It's nothing for you to be worried about."

Neither looked convinced, but like Severus, they knew that the potion waited for no one, so they allowed her to pass.

The threat of the confrontation with Severus loomed over her and fractured her concentration. She managed the potion because she had no choice in the matter, but it wasn't the soothing occupation that it usual was.

As she tidied up shortly after eleven, she thought again about ignoring Severus's summons. But unless she went to live in the Forbidden Forest for a few days, he would track her down and probably humiliate her. It didn't feel very Gryffindor to be running from her fears, so she finally shored up her courage, finished with the washing up, and made her way out of her quarters. According to the wards, Harry and Draco were patrolling, so she was spared that confrontation.

She knocked once on Severus's door and waited, wondering if she could have knocked really softly and then run off when he hadn't answered…. If he'd fallen asleep, it was possible he hadn't heard—

The door opened. Severus stood there looking as tall and foreboding as he almost always did. Joy. He stepped aside, allowed her to enter, and closed the door firmly behind her. There were no wards in Hogwarts that she couldn't dismantle or control in a matter of minutes at most, yet the sound of that door closing had been very ominous. She'd evidently got herself more worked up than she'd realized.

He presented her with tea without having asked her if she wanted any, but the tension in the room seemed to ease marginally at the gesture. She once again found herself seated before the fire, and it was her turn to stare into the flames and try to avoid looking at the man beside her.

He took up the conversation right where it had left off in Room One. "I upset you."

She swallowed, still not looking at him. "You're entitled to your feelings."

"As are you to yours," he answered with an edge of impatience, as though she were being very stupid. His voice was marginally softer as he continued, "I offended you, and that was not my intention."

She assembled her words with care, as it was clear he wasn't going to let this alone. "I was … saddened that you were so unreceptive to my plan on Sunday."

Frustration was evident in his voice. "I didn't tell you to stop."

"You didn't have to!" she snarled, twisting to face him incredulously. "I'm not going to keep doing something that makes you uncomfortable."

His lips were pinched. "I wouldn't have stopped you."

"All the more reason for me to stop myself." She turned away from him again, wrapping her arms around her torso protectively, hating having to talk about this as it stirred up all the hurt feelings that she had been trying to suppress since Sunday. In an effort to get this over with, she whispered, "I would prefer if you would just tell me what sort of behaviour on my part is acceptable to you."

She was startled when she felt a hand on her knee. Severus had risen from his own chair and was kneeling before hers, an incongruous position for the man if ever there was one. He reached up to brush a hand down her face, and she made no move to stop him. It was a delicate touch, and she found herself wanting to lean into it, though she did not allow herself to do that, either.

"That is not what happened," he said, voice unusually gentle. "There wasn't anything wrong with your behaviour."

"Well, something clearly went quite wrong," she snapped. "I assure you that the evening did not unfold as I had planned."

She could hear the thread of dark amusement in his voice and see it in the light in his eyes. "I imagine not. Your perceptiveness allowed you to witness a weakness that I had not intended to display to you."

"If you need to be in control, you need only say."

Far too much of what that made her worry about must have been evident in her voice because the hand that was touching her face fell away while the one on her knee tightened painfully for an instant before he recovered and loosened his grasp.

He was silent for a moment, clearly gathering his thoughts before he offered stiffly, "That was not how it was between Lily and me, nor—"

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to. She had always wondered and been equally careful never to ask about his first time, but she had suspected that being an outcast in Slytherin house when all those wizard libidos had been raging would not be a very safe position for him.

Between that initial experience and how it had been with Lily—not to mention what he might have gone through once he was a Death Eater—he didn't ever want to repeat it. She got that without his having to say the actual words.

"I understand." Plastering an approximation of a smile on her lips as he looked at her doubtfully, she said firmly, "I'll just let you call the shots. That's fine."

He was now sporting a very sour expression that indicated that this notion did not meet with his approval.

"It's not all about me," he ground out. "You have needs as well."

She had no idea if he'd said those words to anyone before, but she could see what an effort he was making now. And she hadn't expected their relationship to be perfect. "What I need is for you to be happy. The rest of the details aren't important."

"It has … been a long time since anyone has put my needs above their own." The words were stilted, but he spoke them, and she was rather amazed that they were still having this conversation, that he hadn't snapped or snarled or thrown her out yet. "But I won't allow you to make all the concessions."

She blinked at him. "But I don't mind conceding on this point."

"Of course you do!" He sounded quite aggravated. "It upset you so much that you left the room and have been avoiding me ever since. You're proposing a concession that will leave you unhappy, and I'm telling you that it won't be necessary."

For someone who was claiming that he wouldn't call all the shots, she thought that whole speech had come out rather autocratically, and she felt a bizarre urge to both laugh and cry that left her feeling really quite muddled.

She let out a huff of breath. "Then I think we are rather at an impasse, Severus. I don't wish to make you unhappy, and you profess to wish the same for me. Since our needs are opposite on this topic, there does not seem to be a viable solution."

"Our last encounter occurred when I was not anticipating it," he said curtly. "You need not concern yourself over any feelings of discomfort that I might experience in the future."

She made a face. "I'm not having sex with you because you've geared yourself up and are laying back and thinking of England." His expression was caught somewhere between outraged and amused, and she added irritably, "Or whatever it is you would be doing. I don't want it to be an onerous chore that I have to warn you about in advance so that you can prepare yourself for it."

"Well, that's fine," he said, and the snarl was back in his voice, "because that isn't what will be happening. That's something out of a bad romance, not what's happening here. I assure you that I am quite reconciled to the notion that you wanted to explore with me."

She sighed. Reconciled was a far cry from the ringing endorsement that she had been looking for. Even if he didn't think of it as such, she knew that she would feel as though she were forcing herself upon him. It didn't matter that he was physically stronger and was sitting here telling her that it was what he wanted. She knew that he wasn't actually comfortable with what was going on, and that meant she wasn't going for it. Severus evidently saw this resolution on her face because he rose to his feet and stared down at her.

"Hermione, you are quite clearly thinking too hard about this and making it far more complicated than it needs to be. I want to have sex with you. You want to have sex with me. I am perfectly all right with you being in control, and you want to be in control, so we don't have a problem." She started to shake her head, and he let out a growl of frustration. "What do I have to do to convince you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I know what I saw, and it was only three nights ago. I refuse to make you uncomfortable like that again."

His eyes narrowed. "That sounds rather like you've issued a challenge. I accept."

She frowned. "Accept what?"

"To show you that you don't make me feel uncomfortable like I was before. If that's the only reason you won't proceed, then I insist that you prove the validity of your argument."

Unfortunately, she'd walked right into that one.

"Very well," she conceded unhappily.

His lips twisted. "Could you please greet the prospect of having sex with me with a little more enthusiasm?"

She made a face at him. "What would you have me do?"

"Whatever it is you had planned before. We ought to reconstruct the events."

She looked down at herself, suddenly aware that she hadn't made any real attempt to clean herself before this encounter. Her lab might be spotless, but her fancy underwear had been done away with and her hair was probably a mess.

"I hadn't exactly planned—" she said, looking towards the door.

"You look fine," he interrupted. "Don't make me hex you."

She wasn't certain if he was getting snarky because he was being denied or because he was unhappy, but she did wonder at the fact that he wouldn't even let her leave the room. Did he think that she was going to make a break for it if he let her leave to tidy up? She let that idiotic notion soothe her a little.

He was determined, he'd made a logical argument, and he wasn't going to let her out of the room. And all things being equal, she did want to sleep with him. It looked as though it was time to give in to the inevitable.

"I believe you know the way to your bedroom?"

He moved without a word, and she followed him to find that he'd stopped once he'd arrived in the room, staring at her passively and clearly waiting for more instructions.

"Shoes off," she instructed, kicking off her own, and Severus obeyed. "You don't need your teaching robe, either."

Without a word, he shrugged out of it. Her issuing orders and his silence compliance was not exactly how she'd anticipated the evening going. It was sort of creepy, actually, and given how badly it had ended last time when she had at least known what she wanted, she was quite sure that this was doomed to failure.

In his sock feet, Severus suddenly crossed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. He brought his lips to hers, deepening the kiss until she melted utterly against him and would do whatever he asked. He could have pulled her into bed and she would have gone without complaint, but instead he drew back enough to whisper in her ear and send a shiver down her spine, "What's your pleasure, Hermione?"

She'd had a plan before, so-called, and it looked as though she was going to have to resurrect it and hope for the best. Mentally squaring her shoulders and firming her resolve, she pulled him over to the bed.

He went down willingly onto the soft surface this time, and she settled on top of him once again, watching him carefully for so much as a hint of discomfort. At the moment, it seemed as though she was still far more nervous than he was, and hoping that kissing would continue to have such a salutary effect, she leaned down to meld their lips together and lose herself in him.

Once she felt able to continue, she began anew her button hole by button hole removal of his shirt. True to his word, he didn't look uncomfortable, although she couldn't be certain if that was because he wasn't uncomfortable or because he'd hidden it better this time round. Unless she resorted to Legilimency—which would be certain to ruin the mood and result in her being tossed out on her arse—she was going to have to trust what she was seeing, and that said that he was enjoying her exploration thus far.

Her mouth followed the path of her hands, pressing open-mouthed kisses and gentle nips to the skin she found as she mapped out his chest with inquisitive fingers. She paid special attention to any scar tissue that she came across, laving it with her tongue and trying her best to reinforce with actions what he hadn't accepted with words during their first time together: his scars didn't bother her, and she wanted him to know how desirable she found him.

He squirmed slightly as she licked his nipples, causing her to smile in satisfaction. His hands had come up to weave into her hair and tighten spasmodically as she found sensitive areas on his body.

Lower still, and she undid his belt and pulled it from the belt loops with a hiss of leather. She'd heard Lavender and Parvati go on about women who could do that with their mouths, but Hermione had discarded the idea when she realized that she would only look a complete fool when she didn't manage it and had to resort to her hands to get the belt off in the end.

She unbuttoned and unzipped Severus's trousers and then slid them off, tugging his socks off as well and discarding it all over the end of the bed.

She discovered that there was a spot on his right hipbone that was particularly ticklish. His breath hitched when she lavished attention on a small, thick scar on his left side that looked to have been made with a blade of some sort. His erection was tenting his pants, and every time she arched over it to give attention to some other body part, she could feel the momentary strain in his leg muscles as he sought to control the instinctive urge to thrust his body up against her and bring himself some relief from the slow torture to which she was subjecting him.

Not wishing for the potential disaster of working an elastic waistband over this protuberance, she wandlessly Vanished the material. Severus's eyes were glittering brilliantly, his skin flushed and glistening faintly with sweat. He still didn't look uncomfortable—he'd looked downright eager for much of what she'd done, and the noises she had surprised out of him had been quite encouraging—so she steadied her nerves for her next attempt.

She smiled at him, probably more nervously than seductively, and then focussed her attention between his legs. Here went nothing. His erection was long and thick, dark red with arousal, the tip glistening. Cautiously, she reached out a hand and slid the pads of her fingers down its length. He let out a very loud exhalation, hips bucking, and she settled herself more firmly on his thighs, smiling at him fleetingly in genuine pleasure before turning her attention back to the task at hand.

Curling her fingers around the velvety softness, she stroked down his shaft and then back up to the tip, garnering a loud moan from the man beneath her. She shifted back so that she was settled on his knees, hoping this would be the most comfortable position for what she was about to attempt next.

Leaning down, she swiped with the flat of her tongue along the slit on the head, lapping up the beading precome. He groaned, hips flexing once more, and she finally had the opportunity to try what she'd wanted to do since the first night they'd been together.

She knew this still wasn't going to be anywhere near the most accomplished blowjob he'd ever received, but she'd worked out what she thought was manageable and wouldn't leave her looking a complete fool on her first attempt.

Reminding herself over and over in her head to be careful with her teeth, she took the head of his erection into her mouth and sucked on it. After a moment, she remembered to keep up the movement of her right hand, stroking all the flesh she couldn't take into her mouth. Her other hand was pressed against his hips, hopefully minimizing the likelihood of his bucking into her mouth and causing her to choke.

Chances of horribly embarrassing newbie mistakes thereby lessened, she set about to suck as strongly as she could. She was able to move down his shaft a little, she discovered, and she made a sort of rhythm out of that movement coupled with the up and down motion of her hand. Each time he made any sort of noise or involuntary motion she felt a sense of triumph and happiness that made her want to grin like an idiot—fortunately difficult to do given her current occupation. She was bringing him this pleasure, making the man she loved squirm beneath her, and it was wonderful.

Severus's hands clenched more tightly in her hair and suddenly he was coming with a short cry, and she discovered that swallowing was a talent that she hadn't entirely mastered. She tried and narrowly managed not to choke, but some of the bitter fluid leaked down her face.

Trying not to feel awkward, she carefully wiped it up as she watched anxiously as Severus's breathing began to even out to normal.

His voice was still slightly gravelly when he spoke. "You didn't have to do that."

It was like a kick to the stomach.

Lavender and Parvati had always gone on and on about how men positively adored this. Hermione had thought that it was going all right, but she had to have done a horrible job indeed for him to be trying to avoid it like that. The last thing he'd want to add to this disaster was a crying witch bothering him, so she did her best to block off enough of her emotions that she was likely to make it out of the room without incident.

"All right, then," she said as she climbed off of him. Here was twice that she could be relieved that she'd remained clothed in these encounters. Fleeing was much more easily accomplished when there was no nudity to overcome on the way. "I'd better get going before Harry calls out the guards."

"Hermione, don't walk out on me again." He sounded angry.

She stiffened but refused to turn around. "We've done what you intended."

"This was your idea," he reminded her harshly.

"Actually," she snarled as she whirled back, "it was your idea that we do this now. You were kind enough to humour me, and now we've finished."

He was out of the bed in a moment and across the room to seize her by her upper arms, looking at her fiercely.

"Why would you think that I was humouring you?"

She pulled away from him, trying to ignore the fact that he was naked and very appealing even when she was hurt.

"I don't want to discuss this," she told him flatly. "It's over with, and we don't need to speak of it ever again."

He frowned at her. "That is not want I meant."

"Fine. Now, unless you intend to keep me here forcibly against my will, let me go."

He released her abruptly. "I don't want to keep you here against your will, I want to talk to you without your instantly trying to run away."

"Severus," she said with a sigh, "it's late, and I'm tired. What's so damn important?"

His expression was still dark. "What you just did, it was … very enjoyable."

She hadn't missed his hesitation before he came up with what he no doubt deemed a not-too-depressing descriptor.

"But it need never be repeated," she finished for him. "I'd gathered as much, thank you, so you needn't belabour the point."

He let out an incredulous-sounding bark of laughter.

"Damn it, Hermione, the number of times anyone's done that for me can be counted on one hand, so if you felt like doing it once a month, I'd be a very lucky man. But I'm not going to force you to do anything against your will."

In spite of herself, she found herself asking, "And why would you think that it was against my will?"

He did not quite meet her gaze as he answered stiffly, "You were quite obviously reluctant during our first encounter."

She shook her head. "You've missed it again. I was as eager to do it now as I was then, but I didn't have any experience."

His eyes snapped to hers, and she was stunned by the sudden fury she saw in them. "So you acquired some experience, did you?"

What he was suggesting was so far out of the realm of what she'd been thinking that it took her a moment to realize what he was implying.

"Severus, you're the only person I've done that with or have ever wanted to do it with. My only concern at the time was that I didn't want to displease you."

"You can't."

She scoffed outright, although she was actually touched by this immediate daft reply. "I've probably displeased you just about every day we've known one another."

"You know what I mean," he growled.

She shook her head. "Actually, I have no idea what you mean. You're one of the most critical people I know."

"If you don't wish to pursue a relationship with me, you need only say so." The words were stilted.

"I'm not saying that at all," she said, now frustrated in her turn. "I'm one of the most critical people I know."

"So should I be concerned about harsh criticisms from you?" he asked, tone suddenly surprisingly mild.

"I don't have any reason to complain in that regard," she responded without thought. "You're wonderful." She flushed as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

He smirked slightly, but his question held no mockery. "Then why do you assume that I have any complaints?"

She swallowed. "Do you not?"

He let out a huff of breath. "Hermione, you took charge of our sexual encounter in order to spend all your time pleasing me. You're almost two decades younger than I, and yet you've decided that it is currently me with whom you want to spend your time. You have no cause for concern, I assure you."

She had a weird moment where all she could remember was her discussion with Remus at Christmas time. She wondered if it had been less awkward for Tonks to fight for him because she was those few years older than Hermione and presumably not nearly as much as a novice when it came to romantic relationships and sexual encounters.

She smiled faintly but was unable to keep the uncertainty out of her voice as she asked, "You really didn't dislike it?"

He hauled her into his arms. "I'd like to think that my reaction earlier speaks for itself. Did I seem displeased?"

She shook her head. "I thought it went rather well. But I know it wasn't the best blowjob in the world, and there're all kinds of techniques I don't know, and—"

He lifted her chin with one long, slender finger. "Then allow me to volunteer myself as your test subject."

"Oh?"

"Hmm," he agreed. "You can improve your skills, and I'll just have to suffer through it."

Her lip curled up. "Not getting any benefit for yourself."

"None whatsoever," he agreed with mock solemnity.

She twined her arms round his neck. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he corrected with quiet emphasis. "You don't give up easily."

"Gryffindor pigheadedness," she agreed, although she'd been showing some cowardice recently, too. "We're annoyingly persistent."

"In this instance," he clarified dryly, "I don't object."

"All right."

"Now," he pressed himself intimately against her, making her especially aware that his naked body was so very close to her, "is there not anything I can do for you before you go?"

"Mm," she moaned. "But I really ought to get back to the boys. I wanted you to have a lovely night."

"And I did. But the night would be lovelier if you were pleased as well."

"I'm pleased that you are pleased," she answered. "I'm happy when you're happy."

"I suspect that philosophy will get you into trouble one day." His expression was wry. "But if you insist…."

"I wouldn't say no to a goodnight kiss," she said hopefully.

She had the opportunity to see that his face had softened slightly at her words and then his mouth was hungrily devouring hers. If he really wanted to prevent her from leaving a room, all he had to do was kiss her like this, and she would forget that they had even been arguing.

Make-up sex—or make-up intimacy—was apparently very effective. She believed that it was important that couples actually talk out and resolve their problems, but it was still nice to know that there was a pleasurable alternative in case of emergency.

When he finally drew back, she smiled at him stupidly.

"I'll make sure to ask for these every night."

"And you shall receive them if that is your wish," he responded with only faint amusement. "I'm glad you approve."

She pulled back, still smiling. "I'm going now."

"If you insist."

He still sounded flatteringly reluctant, a welcome relief to how she had thought he was behaving about the incident.

She stuck to her resolve, however. "It's the middle of the week, and I'm fairly certain you don't want Draco and Harry to start tracking when we have sex."

As predicted, he grimaced immediately. "The less Mr Potter knows about my—our—sex life, the happier I will be. Now, go away."

Amused by this abrupt change of opinion, she offered him a last smile before heading out of the bedroom and back to her own quarters. It turned out to be a wise plan not to have stayed the night because Harry was waiting for her in the common room.

"You all right?" he asked anxiously.

She had to forcibly stop herself from smoothing down her hair self-consciously or straightening her robes. There was nothing like a guilty conscious to get one caught when the question had actually been an innocent one.

"I'm perfectly fine, Harry," she answered with what she thought was a pretty normal tone. "You needn't always wait around for me, you know."

"I know. I just worry."

"But you don't need to. I'm perfectly able to take care of myself and in this instance, it's just disrupting your life. Where's Draco?"

Harry made a face. "He's in bed. Where I should be, according to him."

"And he's perfectly right," she answered firmly. "I left while you were out; how did you know?"

"Hammered at the door and you didn't answer."

She regarded him with amused disapproval. "And if I'd made an early night of it and was trying to sleep?"

He grimaced. "That's exactly what Draco said."

"Then Draco's being very sensible right now, unlike you," she chided gently.

"You just … you've seemed very upset the last few days," he said in a rush.

"And I appreciate that you're concerned," she answered. She'd thought she'd hid it better than that, but she supposed she'd been a complete ninny about the mousse. "But you've got your own life to live, and I've got mine. If I'm ever in trouble or need to talk to you, you may rest assured that I will do so."

He frowned. "But you're always looking out for me when I don't know that I'm in trouble or haven't worked out how to ask for help. I just want to be here for you, too."

"I appreciate it, Harry, but I'm not in need of that particular form of assistance currently."

Harry sighed. "All right, just promise me you'll talk to me if you need me."

"I promise," she answered solemnly.

He rose to his feet. "Right, then, I'll just go see if Draco's going to let me into my own room."

She smiled at him, amused because not only had Draco not gone back to his own room when he'd been cross with Harry, Harry had matter-of-factly accepted the blond taking over his bedroom. She wondered if Harry would be sleeping on the couch in the common room if Draco wouldn't take him back.

Snorting to herself at the bizarreness of relationships, she took a quick shower before heading to bed. She felt a great deal better than she had for several days now, and she realized how very true it was that her happiness was tied inextricably to Severus's, just as she'd told him. When they were cross with one another, it seemed to be quite detrimental to her well-being.

With luck, there wouldn't be any reason for Harry to detect anything the matter with her for the next couple of days. She and Severus seemed to be able to keep it together for that long, at least, and Harry would hopefully be placated.

As she lay in bed and wished that she was in bed with her own Slytherin—just as Harry was with his, according to the wards—she hoped that she and Severus would be able to get along for whole weeks in a row. Even one week to start would be nice. Running through the list of secrets that she currently had, she thought that Severus knew the vast majority of them. There didn't seem to be huge misunderstandings that had yet to be cleared up, and they seemed to have clarified that they both wanted one another. If they hadn't quite got as far as saying for how long, there was still time for that. One week, then, without any major fights; she imagined it was too much to hope that they wouldn't fight at all.

Thursday and Friday were both excellent days. Hermione tried to prevent herself from constantly smiling like an idiot; eventually, someone would accuse her of being well-shagged, and while the last month had resulted in far more sex than the other nineteen years of her life combined, the fact of the matter was that she was blissfully happy because Severus was happy and because their relationship seemed to be in a genuinely happy place.

Of course, that wasn't to say that she wouldn't say no to lots of sex in the near future. Really, she and Severus should have one room or at least adjoining rooms. She wasn't sure that she felt quite right about asking the castle to do that for her; it wasn't the same as asking for someone else's benefit…. She supposed she was just going to have to plan to have sex with Severus discreetly over weekends or whenever it seemed least likely to disrupt their lives in ways that couldn't be allowed.

Friday evening, Hermione didn't have to work on the Weresbane until half two in the morning, so at the earliest opportunity after dinner, she sneaked away from Harry and Draco and over to Severus's quarters. There, she discovered that he had rounds to complete and marking to do, but she installed herself in the armchair by the fire and told him that she would be there whenever he found the time for her.

This resulted, she was amused to note, in his finding time for her in very short order, neither the grading nor the rounds being completed. She wasn't one for shirking of responsibilities, but since Severus seemed desirous of seeing what it was like to have sex on the rug in front of the fire, she was hardly going to complain. She began to wonder, in fact, if the students needed their work back at all ever, but she didn't get quite so carried away as to ask that question.

After their very pleasurable encounter on the rug, she had to convince him that what he'd wanted had been perfectly pleasing to her, and she definitely didn't want to be in charge of all of their encounters or even to swap back and forth. She liked what he planned for them and suspected that much of their intimacy would concentrate on mutual enjoyment such that the issue of who was in control wouldn't even come up.

What had unsettled her previously, she found herself explaining, was the prospect that in order to keep him happy, she could never direct what they were doing. She knew that was no longer the case, and it was more knowing that the option was there than making use of it at all times.

Once he'd ascertained to his satisfaction that she meant this honestly and wasn't simply placating him, he was happy to pull her into the bedroom so that he could furnish her with another example of why she was very happy that she'd chosen him for a mate.

She didn't suppose she'd ever be able to tell Lavender and Parvati, but there were apparently some men who had a talent for oral sex and would perform it on more than one occasion without being asked.

By the time she'd recovered from the afterglow, Severus had recovered enough from their activities in front of the rug for another go, and she got to experience more orgasms in one night than ever before.

They dropped off into a mutually sated sleep.

Hermione woke at two in the morning, her internal clock waking her so precisely that she didn't feel completely guilty for not having set an actual alarm. She slid as carefully out of the bed as she could.

"Where are you going?"

His voice was rough with sleep, but he seemed to have gathered, despite his state, that her movements hadn't been indicative of a quick trip to the loo.

"I have to work on the Weresbane," she said softly. "Go back to sleep."

"Bed's cold."

She revised her estimate of just how awake he was and leaned back down over the bed so that she could kiss him. As he began to sleepily respond, she slowly gentled the kiss and pulled back.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

She could hear him grumbling as she Summoned her clothing and pulled it on. This made her grin as she Masked herself and made her way back to her own room. If he were always this adorable when he was woken from slumber by her attempt to leave quietly, she'd be doing it just to see that reaction. He really did seem to be making an attempt to integrate her into his life, and she hoped this was not her imagination but rather a good omen for the future.

She slipped back into her quarters, pleased that Harry and Draco were in bed, as she'd dressed in the dark in Severus's quarters and doubted that she looked as though she'd just come in from visiting her herd. She wasn't ashamed of her relationship with Severus, and she wouldn't ever want him to think so, but she would prefer to keep the details to herself for a little while longer yet. At least a week, she'd decided, before she would be reasonably certain it wasn't all about to self-destruct.

Once she reached her bedroom, she unMasked and changed; she'd slept for a bit and her clothing had been strewn about Severus's bedroom, so she thought fresh was in order.

She worked quickly and efficiently and managed the work for the Weresbane with a light heart, only emphasizing for her once again how much better her life was when she and Severus were getting along. She was sure that everyone else would find her completely mental that she was starting to find him cute—and he would probably be offended—but there it was. He'd wanted a personal heater in bed tonight, and she'd been more tempted than she could say to crawl right back into bed and cuddle with him.

The Weresbane didn't wait for her even when her life was going well, however, and she only had one batch after this one until the Final Battle. Hopefully, that meant she'd be able to arrange more time with Severus.

By the time she finished with the potion, it was almost five o'clock in the morning. She'd had an hour or two of sleep with Severus, and since there was so little of the night left, rather than trying to sleep more, she headed out to the Forest to see Castina.

The mare came out to greet her immediately, and Hermione found herself gushing to her herd mare about how well it was going with Severus. Every once in a while she would remember to add some sort of caveat about how she knew that their relationship hadn't been going on for very long and there was plenty of opportunity for more to go wrong, but most of the time she simply expressed all her happiness and excitement.

Castina, Hermione recognized, was rather amused but pleased by this outpouring of happy emotions. Hermione had been coming out to the Forest so frequently because she was upset that it was a bit unusual now for her to be chattering happily to the unicorn.

Her herd mare was firmly of the opinion that Hermione deserved a great deal of happiness, and if she was finally getting it with Severus, it was about time. Hermione was just glad that she had someone whom she could confide in, since the inhabitants of the castle weren't exactly non-partisan on this matter. Harry might have declared that he was supporting her choice, but that didn't mean that he really wanted to know that she was actively in a relationship with Severus, and she knew that he definitely didn't want to hear any details.

The unicorn was happy to hear anything Hermione wanted to share, and by the time she was back in the castle, she felt as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Someone else was happy for her, and she and Severus weren't fighting yet.

She was industriously revising long before Harry and Draco stirred from their bedroom, but they were up in time to head up to the Great Hall together. It was the last Hogsmeade weekend of term, and that meant they'd all be heading off to patrol shortly.

Voldemort's activities had been rather curtailed ever since she broke into his hideaway. Rumour had it that he was taking some care to lie low in the new location of his choice, and she was pleased that her intervention had had this collateral benefit. She knew that it was only a matter of time before he displayed all his strength, but given that he now knew about the warding in June, it was likely that he wouldn't want to give away too much of his strength before that event.

If all was going according to plan, he thought he had the perfect opportunity to injure them, and her rescue of Severus had given him an excuse to look as though he'd given up or suffered a serious setback. He could quietly amass his army, and while that wasn't exactly good for them, they had always known that he was going to come with one, and the fewer people he attacked in the meantime, the safer the wizarding world would be. Meanwhile, they were perfectly aware of the fact that he was coming, and they could continue quietly with their own preparations.

There were still plenty of professors, Prefects, and Aurors patrolling the visit to Hogsmeade, as no one was willing to take the risk of assuming in error that Voldemort wouldn't attack Hogsmeade. Although most of the fifth- and seventh-years weren't in attendance unless they were Prefects, the younger students were taking the opportunity to pretend that exams weren't right around the corner, so there was a great deal of boisterous behaviour and far too much sugar consumed.

Hermione wasn't certain how Albus had managed it, but Severus was not amongst the professors who were patrolling. Hermione had been worried that while Voldemort might decide that the students were not enough of a reason to attack the village, the lure of a traitor who had escaped him would be too strong to resist.

When Severus was beyond the bounds of the wards, he was also more vulnerable to attack from any of the students who supported Voldemort; neither she nor Albus could monitor him in Hogsmeade. They knew that Tracey Davis, at least, supported Voldemort, but Severus couldn't avoid her because it was important that they act as though they weren't aware of her true allegiances. He'd never patrolled in pairs in the past, and she'd known that suggesting that they walk around together wouldn't have gone over well.

But Albus had succeeded, and Severus was up at the castle the entire morning; Hermione had even convinced a rather amused Fawkes to promise to keep an eye on the Slytherin and to physically bar him from leaving the castle if need be. Severus would no doubt be outraged at this bit of interference and irritated by how much she'd worried, but the feelings persisted.

She had hoped that not having to worry about Severus's safety would make the visit relatively pleasant for her, but she didn't like running after sugar-high children under any circumstances, and the entire visit was actually rather awkward, although Hermione couldn't put her finger on exactly what the problem was.

It might have been the fact that rather than being the trio that they had become accustomed to recently—her, Harry, and Draco—or the Golden trio of old, it was the four of them who spent the afternoon patrolling together. Half the time, it seemed as though Ron and Draco were jockeying for a position with Harry; if Ron dragged Harry off to see something Quidditch-related, the next thing she knew, Draco was dragging him off for tea.

The look on Harry's face said that he'd picked up on it, too. Everyone was excessively cordial, so they couldn't accuse either Ron or Draco of being rude or inappropriate, but it was as though Harry was constantly being pulled in two different directions even when he was standing right there with her. When she tried to take him off to look at a book on advanced shields that she thought he might be interested in, Ron and Draco united in their desire to take him for a Butterbeer.

What's going on? Harry asked her plaintively.

She gave a mental shake of her head. Not a clue. But it is our last Hogsmeade visit. Maybe they want to share that with you.

Were it not for the necessity of helping all the sugar-happy children she'd been wading through for the past several hours, she wouldn't have been here at all this weekend; Hogsmeade wasn't going anywhere, after all, and once she graduated, she'd be able to visit it whenever she wished—which would not include Hogsmeade weekends for future Hogwarts students.

Whatever was going on, neither she nor Harry seemed to be feeling as adamant as Ron and Draco, so Harry allowed himself to be tugged along to see Madam Rosmerta. Since many of the students were in there—drinking and ogling the witch who ran the establishment—Hermione supposed it made an adequate place for them to look in on.

As she watched Ron get all tongue-tied and awkward in Rosmerta's presence, Hermione wondered idly if Severus was as taken with the woman. Harry and Draco seemed all right, but as they were gay and quite committed to one another, she didn't suppose they were very good examples. Still, no matter how Severus felt, Hermione couldn't imagine him making such a fool of himself as Ron did every time, so she probably didn't have much to worry about.

As always, Hermione was greatly relieved when it was time to return to the castle. It was nearly dinner time, as there'd been many stragglers for them to round up and send back to the castle, and she was perturbed that she'd missed such a large portion of her day. She knew the students wanted their last gasp of fun, but honestly, she had a great many more important things to worry about.

Fawkes, still sounding indecently amused, informed her that Severus had been a very good boy and stayed inside all day.

You better watch yourself, bird, or I'll tell him you said that, she threatened.

You better watch yourself, Girlicorne, he returned, or I'll tell him you asked me to watch out for him.

She mentally stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed.

There seemed to be an inordinate amount of shuffling to get seated at dinner, and she found herself seated between Draco and Neville, because Ron was seated on Harry's other side with Ginny next to him. Hermione shrugged to herself. She liked both Draco and Neville, and if there was something that was going on that she was missing, no one had been seriously injured yet.

The redhead and the blond kept engaging Harry in conversation, causing his head to turn back and forth rapidly, and Hermione finally gave up entirely on tracking what they were discussing and sank into her own musings instead.

She really wouldn't miss the Hogsmeade visits, but the fact that her last one was over did reinforce for her the fact that a chapter of her life was closing with a great deal of rapidity. Soon she'd have her whole life ahead of her, and she'd have to figure out exactly what it was that she wanted to do with it. She had many ideas but not a lot of conclusions yet, and she supposed that a great deal was riding on how events unfolded in June.

Assuming they were successful—although really, they'd either be successful or she'd be dead and not need to worry about her future plans—she'd probably want a vacation, but she'd need to get working on the Weresbane for all the other werewolves in the world. Still, they'd been tweaking and streamlining the procedure with each trial, and she was sure that she'd have lots of volunteers to help once all the British werewolves were cured.

And even needing to cure the werewolves, she could surely take at least a little vacation, maybe a week or two somewhere warm where she had no responsibilities. It didn't even have to be warm, in point of fact, as she couldn't really imagine Severus on a sunny beach in the tropics. Just somewhere where they could have some quiet time, then. A little cottage, maybe, near the sea.

Glancing up at the High Table, she found her picture put into amusing perspective because Severus was sitting up there in very high dudgeon indeed. Just the thought of dragging him off to a cottage now so that they could spend a week together in solitude was enough to make her want to burst into giggles. He looked as though he were trying to curse people into stone with just his eyes again, and she shook her head at herself as she wondered why this made her think of him so fondly.

In the interest of assuring that the students' last week of Potions classes weren't full of horrid memories, she had probably better go see him after dinner and attempt to get him out of his completely dreadful mood. She did not, of course, have any ulterior motives that involved seeing him and having sex.

After dinner, she therefore followed Harry, Draco, and Ron down to the common room, not even asking why Ron was with them instead of inventing some sort of excuse against studying that involved next year's Quidditch team and coaching Ginny on the captaincy or something of that nature.

He claimed nothing of the sort, however, and they all settled down in the common room before Hermione enacted her plan and announced suddenly that she needed to see Charity about a detail from Muggle Studies.

None of them seemed to notice that she had conveniently chosen the one class that none of them were taking with her, although this may have been because Harry was caught between Ron and Draco as they continued to vie for his attention, both scrupulously polite, and it was really rather scary. She doubted the other two had even heard her announcement.

She escaped with a feeling of relief, and since she was leaving Harry in the room with his boyfriend and his best friend, she refused to feel bad about getting out while she had the chance.

The wards informed her that Severus was in his quarters, and she was admitted a moment later by a not-very-happy-looking Potions professor.

She settled herself into the chair by the fire of her own accord when she wasn't invited.

"How was your day?" she asked politely, thinking this would be a good place to start.

Sitting down in his own chair, he offered her his patented glare of death.

"Oh, it was simply charming. For some reason, the old man," he snarled, and her eyebrows rose, because she'd never heard him speak of the headmaster in that manner before, "decided that I needed to look through several of the most dusty and ancient tomes of complete nonsense." His glare deepened. "I suppose you had a lovely time in Hogsmeade."

She pursed her lips, staring at him challengingly. "I'll thank you not to take your ill temper out on me. Of course I didn't have a lovely time in Hogsmeade; we were chaperoning a bunch of little monsters in an attempt to protect them from their own stupidity. A duty, I might add, that you regularly attempt to get out of, so why you're complaining, I don't have the slightest idea."

He stared at her angrily. She thought she was about to be witness to a very fine display of temper when, to her surprise, his face relaxed and an almost smile played around the corner of his lips.

"It is something I attempt to get out of, isn't it?"

She relaxed and smiled. "Yes, it is."

He huffed. "I'm not apologizing to that man."

She snorted. "I don't imagine he expects you to. But you really didn't miss anything. Ron and Draco spent the day dragging Harry after them, and Harry and I were stuck in the middle."

"I'm exceedingly sorry for you," he said without a trace of regret.

She let out a short bark of laughter. "I can well imagine that you are, disagreeable man. Why don't you come over here and make me feel better?"

Whatever his feelings for what she'd suffered at Hogsmeade, he didn't seem to object to this invitation, and she soon found herself seated in his lap and being quite thoroughly kissed.

"Mm," she said when she was allowed to breathe again. "Well, that is a vast improvement."

She hadn't even been feeling that poorly to begin with, but those kisses, she decided, were always welcome.

"I'm so glad to have passed muster in that regard," Severus said dryly, but the glint in his eyes suggested that he was actually pleased.

She'd worked him out of his bad mood quite successfully, she thought, and she should probably go be supportive of Harry, so she attempted not to sound too reluctant as she said, "I should probably get going. Harry will be expecting me back, I imagine."

"What did you tell him you were doing?" Severus asked curiously.

She grinned. "Asking for a point of clarification for exams, obviously. What else would I be doing with my Saturday evening?"

This surprised another slight smile out of him. "What, indeed? You'd better be careful or you're going to lose your reputation for badgering all your professors at all times."

She made a face at him. "That's hardly fair, Severus. Most of my questions were restrained to class time or normal office hours. And it takes work to be top of the class."

"I am well aware of that fact, Hermione, but you have always been … very enthusiastic."

He sounded as though he'd substitute this last for something less polite.

"You say that as though it were a bad thing," she said, regarding him challengingly.

"Well—"

"Shall I attempt to curb my enthusiasm currently?" she suggested sweetly.

His face darkened, the glitter in his eyes telling her that he'd understood her threat quite clearly.

"I think not," he growled.

"Oh?" she said loftily. "But you've just got over telling me that I'm entirely too enthusiastic—"

Her words were abruptly cut off when she found herself in the air and being transported rather haphazardly to the bedroom. She needed, she decided, to bait Severus much more frequently in matters that related to sex because she loved seeing him display his enthusiasm.

She'd always known he was an extremely passionate man; knowing that she aroused some of that passion made her feel desired and made it seem as though it were possible that more of his deeper feelings were engaged than he ever let on. She could hope, anyway.

It was getting rather late in the evening before the two of them had quite recovered from their dual display of enthusiasm.

"I really should get back," she said again. As it was, she was going to have to make up something else she'd done because she couldn't possibly have spent so long on a Muggle Studies problem on a Saturday evening. "I suppose you have grading that you need to do?"

He groaned slightly. "I now have a great deal of grading to do, annoying witch, without your bringing it up."

"Shall I apologize for making you late in getting to it?" she asked with amusement.

His lips twitched. "That will not be necessary, under the circumstances. But you can bugger off, as you've said."

She rose from the bed and began to root around for her clothing, knowing his tones well enough by now to know that this last had not been said with a mean spirit.

It amused her that their encounters seemed to result in her clothing being flung all over the room. They were both private and bookish people, so she'd somehow imagined that they'd be a little more restrained; nothing had pleased her more than to learn that that was not the case. It was useful in these circumstances to be a witch who knew how to use a Summoning Charm, however, because she couldn't find her second sock or her jumper without it. Severus looked on with a great deal of amusement and, apparently, open appreciation as she wandered around half dressed.

She regarded him with sudden suspicion. "You know, Severus, if I find that you toss my clothing about solely for the enjoyment of watching me look for it later, I may have to be cross."

Chapter Forty-Nine: The Claims

Severus smirked at Hermione, arms linked behind his head as he watched complacently from the bed.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Hermione."

Sneaky bastard.

She donned her clothing, truthfully hardly upset by the fact that he liked to watch her get dressed but making a show of looking mildly put-out anyway. It wouldn't do for him to think himself too clever.

"You'd better watch yourself," she said archly, "or you'll find that I've gone and hidden your clothes the next time you're looking to get dressed."

She caught a fleeting expression on his face that she couldn't quite decipher, but after a moment's consideration, she put it together with the fact that he tended almost never to get dressed at the same time she did. Instead, he stayed in bed and waited for her to leave. The only time she'd seen him naked out of bed, in fact, was when he'd had to leap up so quickly to prevent her from leaving on Wednesday. He probably hadn't even realized what he was doing.

Stalking over to the bed, she leaned in and kissed him for all he was worth. The hesitation at the beginning of the kiss was soon overcome, and he responded with ardour. Once she was certain that she'd banished his doubts and had his full attention, she gentled the kiss and pulled back.

Regarding him seriously, she found that his eyes had the slightly hazy look that she was very flattered she could put there. She reached up and ran a gentle finger over that large scar on his shoulder which had brought her so much trouble the first morning they had woken up together.

"You're one of the most intelligent men I've ever met, Severus, so how it can have escaped your notice that I take every enjoyment out of looking at you, I don't have the slightest idea."

He appeared immediately uncomfortable, face losing its mobility as he went to that expressionless mask that told her that she'd gotten it exactly right. He tried to shrug out of her grasp.

"Look at me," she said sternly.

His eyes rose to her face, annoyed. She leaned closer to press a gentle kiss to his lips and then she lowered her mental barriers enough to flood his mind with images of just how much she liked looking at, feeling, and touching his body—all the way from their very first sexual encounter to this most recent one. They'd be here forever if she showed him every instance of her staring at him.

He was breathing heavily by the time she lessened the onslaught and withdrew her mind from his. As she re-established all her mental barriers, she reflected that there had probably been a more appropriate way of doing that which hadn't involved her shoving the images into his head, but at least he already knew that she was skilled with MindMagic. Hopefully he wouldn't be completely offended.

He was staring at her with something akin to shock. She swallowed and waited for a verdict to be passed.

"Could you make tea?"

She blinked, this having not been the first comment that she expected out of his mouth. Still, he hadn't started yelling yet.

"Of course," she answered, sliding off the bed and moving into the sitting room.

Tea. She was certainly capable of making tea, although it was hard not to notice that it got her out of the bedroom in order for Severus to dress without her being there. She sighed. Making him more self-conscious had been rather the opposite of her intention.

She set the kettle to boil and stood staring for a great deal longer than necessary at all the tea Severus had. All were labelled by him. He had always struck her as the sort of man who preferred to do it himself rather than let exuberant house-elves into his domain.

Hopefully, this meant that he wouldn't want a house-elf when he finally left Hogwarts—and as long as he did want her, she rolled her eyes at herself, then she'd be all set. The truth of the matter was that she'd likely even consent to a house-elf if it gave her Severus, so long as the house-elf in question was being paid or saved from a worse situation; Winky, Kreacher, and Dobby had given her a more tolerant viewpoint when it came to how rights for house-elves could be established. The three of them were evidently so much happier when they were assisting Harry, and Harry somehow always seemed to be in need of assistance; the arrangement benefited everyone.

At least Dobby was getting paid, and maybe one day she'd be able to win the other two over to the idea of being servants rather than slaves…. Not, she knew, that Harry would ever treat them as slaves, and she could well imagine the sort of reaction the Gryffindor would have if Draco ever made any sort of attempt to be high-handed in that regard. She had noticed that there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between them to have Dobby and Draco cross paths as little as possible, and she wondered what was going to happen in the future.

The kettle coming to a boil reminded her of her task, and she hastily grabbed the first tea that came to hand. This, unsurprisingly, was Earl Grey, as that was the tea which Severus drank most frequently from what she had been able to observe. She scooped the loose leaves into the strainer, admiring the curls of bergamot amongst the dark tea, set the strainer in the teapot, and poured the boiling water over top.

As soon as she had finished, she reflected that maybe she oughtn't to have made a teapot. She'd been working on automatic, so she'd made tea for both of them, but Severus hadn't invited her to have tea, he had just asked her to make some. He had, in fact, told her to go, and she was the one who'd dragged the conversation out longer and made him uncomfortable.

Really, there was no need for her to outstay her welcome completely, and if she started over, he would never know. She Vanished the water from the teapot, put one of the mugs back in the cupboard, and set the kettle to boil again with a more sensible amount of water.

Arms slipped around her waist.

"I hadn't thought there was a particular shortage of water that would necessitate our sharing one cup," Severus said into her ear.

She sagged against him.

"You asked for tea," she explained, resisting the urge to fidget. "So I'm making you tea."

"You're overanalyzing. There was nothing wrong with the tea that you Vanished."

She turned around to face him, annoyed that he hadn't said anything before she'd Vanished the tea if he'd been watching her behave foolishly for so long, and—

Her annoyance disappeared as though it had never been because Severus was not, in fact, dressed. He was wearing a dressing gown that didn't come even close to covering him from head to foot; several of his scars were visible in the gap in the material before it was cinched at his waist.

She smiled brilliantly at him but did her very best not to make a big deal out of what he'd done.

"Luckily, as you say, there isn't a shortage of water." She turned back to the kettle and wordlessly adjusted the amount of water inside it as she took in the next nearest tea that was in front of her. "I'll make a pot. You don't mind English Breakfast, do you?"

As if she'd suddenly decided that she didn't want Earl Grey and that was a perfectly logical reason to have Vanished it and started over.

She could hear the amusement in his voice. "Not at all."

They drank their tea, managed an innocuous conversation, and didn't refer even once to what had happened in the bedroom. But Severus was sitting here in a dressing gown, so she knew that her message had been received and that he appeared to be trying to change the habits of a lifetime.

He gave her a very lingering goodnight kiss when she finally finished her tea and was about to actually depart for the evening.

She smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

His expression was only slightly mocking given the daftness of this statement.

She winced faintly. "I'll just go now, shall I?"

His lips tipped up, and it was with the memory of that almost-smiling, barely clad Severus that she left the room. Since it was now nearly ten, she figured she might as well retrieve Pansy for their rounds. The Slytherin girl had had the good sense to get out of the final Hogsmeade visit rounds back at the beginning of the school year but that left her doing these rounds tonight. Hermione still wasn't sure how she had ended up doing both, and she hoped it had more to do with her being Head Girl than with her being a stupid Gryffindor.

The truce between the Slytherins and the Gryffindors was still in effect, which made it easier for Draco and Pansy to find time to talk together, although Hermione imagined that the blonde girl lied about the topics of conversation with regularity when she was questioned by her housemates.

This meant, however, that it was less necessary for them to have the excuse of rounds to spend time together, and since Harry and Draco were so happily a team, this left Pansy and Hermione as the odd two out. Since they got on rather better than most people suspected, this wasn't a hardship for either of them.

Pansy was retrieved in short order from the Slytherin common room, and the two of them headed up to the top of the castle and started down. Students seemed to be in the woodwork, and Hermione reflected that it was going to be a long night. Perhaps she should have insisted that Harry and Draco come with them after all.

She inquired after Pansy's health and what she'd been doing while the rest of them were stuck in Hogsmeade. By the faint pinkness on her cheeks and the satisfied smile that graced her face, Hermione could easily guess and waved aside any explanation from the other girl. She had noticed that Viktor was absent from the visit to town, and now she knew why. She didn't imagine that Pansy had gotten much studying done, but Hermione had recently begun to enjoy the benefits of a happy relationship herself, and she thought Pansy had the right of it.

"I'm glad the two of you are getting the chance to get to know one another so well," Hermione said.

Pansy's gaze was sharp, but as she saw that Hermione had meant this earnestly, she relaxed. Hermione realized that her phraseology could have been better; all she'd meant to indicate was that Viktor wasn't going to be here much longer.

"If you don't mind my asking, have the two of you discussed any future plans?"

Pansy cleared her throat, admitting with uncharacteristic shyness, "He's asked me back to Bulgaria with him."

Hermione grinned. "That's brilliant."

The Slytherin seemed to have to check Hermione's face for her sincerity once more, but as soon as she saw it, she started to natter on about all their plans during all the quiet moments of the rounds. Hermione was delighted that Pansy was so happy and amused that so many students were still stupid enough to think that because it was nearly the end of term the rounds would suddenly stop. They were similarly shocked that a visit to Hogsmeade still didn't mean that they had official dispensation to misbehave and come up with the stupidest stunts to try to pull in the evening. Hermione, for all that she loved being Head Girl, knew that there were some aspects of the job that she wasn't going to miss in the slightest.

She and her friends had done some dumb things throughout their years at Hogwarts, but honestly, they had done very few of them just for the hell of it, and she could have sworn that they weren't quite this stupid. She did wonder, though, about the lack of any sort of patrols while the Golden Trio was in its early years at Hogwarts.

At the time, she would have sworn that they were wandering around the school virtually on their own, whereas from her position in seventh year, she knew that wasn't the case at all. She and Harry and three years' worth of Prefects were making sure that the younger students didn't get into too much trouble. She couldn't be certain if they had had the most phenomenal luck imaginable, if it was Albus's interference again as he "trained" Harry, or if the procedures really had been tightened as Voldemort's interference became more pronounced and the threats to students out after-hours became more life-threatening.

It was good, she reminded herself, that the students were resilient and not completely shattered by the fact that they were in the midst of a war, but the fact remained that they were in the midst of one. When she and Pansy had to send an entire gaggle of completely insane Ravenclaws back to their dorm after deducting ten points apiece after the idiots had tried in all earnestness to convince the two of them that Filius had told them to sneak into the Restricted Section at eleven on a Saturday night, Hermione wished that they were all cowering in their dorms so that she had a peaceful castle that she didn't have to patrol quite so frequently.

She didn't really feel that way, of course, and would be quite concerned if the morale approached what it had in her second year, when everyone was terrified of Harry, or in fifth, when they were all having the life squashed out of them by Umbridge. But when she and Pansy discovered the six second-year Gryffindors who were trying to find the secret passage to Hogsmeade without the slightest notion of where it was, Hermione banished them back to the dorms with point loss and detention and prayed that they'd be inspired with a little more fear. Of her, if that's what it took to get them to behave.

Really, they should be concerned if the students were truly getting exponentially stupider each year. She shared this thought with Pansy, who laughed and told her that was just what happened the closer one got to graduating.

"You're getting older, Hermione; they're not getting younger or stupider. It'll be over in a few weeks, and then these little idiots will be someone else's problem. I'm sure if you ask the professors, they could regale you with harrowing tales of what the three of you got up to when you were younger."

Hermione sighed. There was no point getting into that old argument with Pansy, since she suspected that her professors thought the Slytherin was perfectly right; explaining about needing to save the world when they were twelve was a whole other issue, really. Minerva and Severus in particular, she imagined, still couldn't quite fathom some of the stunts that they'd pulled in their years here. Albus, at least, probably understood and had orchestrated half of what they'd gone through, but she doubted that would save her from a sound tongue-lashing if she ever brought the topic up in front of Severus or her head of house. Better to leave the past in obscurity on that one.

It took her and Pansy until past midnight to get through the entire school, and Hermione was left suspecting that this would not be the end of trouble for the night. Still, having taken off as many points and assigned as many detentions as they had, she and Pansy could hardly be accused of not doing their jobs.

She dropped the Slytherin back off at the common room and wondered if Severus had gotten his grading done and if he intended to do his own set of rounds in an hour or two. She was very tempted to go see him again but couldn't come up with a particularly good excuse as to why. Wanting to spend time with him and not being averse to more sex were reasons in and of themselves, of course, but Severus did have other responsibilities.

Besides, if she went back now, she'd probably wind up staying the night, and Harry would worry about her. It wouldn't be the best way for him to find out that she and Severus were now involved in an ongoing intimate relationship.

Reluctantly, she therefore returned to her common room. Crossing the threshold, she was stunned by the level of noise in the room. It took a moment for the yelling voices to resolve themselves into recognizable words, by which point her eyes had taken in the sight, across the room, of Draco and Ron screaming at one another—while Harry was sitting sideways on the couch with his legs stretched out across the cushions, not even looking at the two of them.

Apparently, Draco and Ron had given up on the superciliousness and stilted politeness that they had been using all day, and they had not settled their differences.

Making no attempt to go after the two who had invaded one another's personal space, she joined Harry, who tucked up his legs so that she could sit down next to him.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I've no idea," he answered wearily, lines of strain evident around his mouth. "We were talking about the holidays—after graduation, I mean—and what I was going to do. I mentioned I had plans, and the next thing I knew, the two of them were going at it. They've not noticed yet that I'm not actually taking part in the conversation."

She looked over at the two red-faced, gesticulating boys and could have sworn she saw spittle flying.

"I'm not sure I'd call it a conversation," she said wryly.

Harry shrugged, lips tipping up. "Yeah."

She listened in for a moment and heard Draco call Ron a "dirt-poor Weasel". Ron retaliated with a "pointy-chinned ferret-face".

"This has been brewing for a while, I think," she observed.

Harry nodded. "Honestly, it seems like they seized the first excuse they could find today, although I'm still not entirely certain what excuse it was that they went with."

Although she'd thought that they were about as loud as they could possibly be when she entered, she found that their volume had somehow increased, the argument intruding on her and Harry's quiet conversation.

"Harry is my best friend!" Ron screamed.

"Harry is my lover!" Draco yelled back.

"Only because he's stuck in a school that obviously doesn't have enough gay blokes. He'll find someone loads better once he has more options!"

"I think you've gotten a little confused, no surprise there, and are thinking about why he's friends with you," Draco snarled. "That would be because, unfortunately for him, you were the first kid from the wizarding world whom he met, and now he's just too nice to put you out of your misery."

"Just because you're supposedly good in bed doesn't mean it's going to be a lasting relationship! What does Harry know, anyway, given how much experience he's had?" Ron demanded with an ugly sneer.

"Hermione's more of a friend to Harry than you've ever been, and she learns everything out of a bloody textbook!"

"We could curse them together," Hermione proposed calmly from the couch.

"They probably have no idea what they're saying," Harry said with a tight smile.

"Probably not," she agreed. Her smile was a little dark as she offered, "We can still curse them."

Harry's lips curled. "I confess it's becoming more tempting the longer they go on."

The two of them didn't actually make any move to stop it, however, listening as Ron and Draco both took digs at why Harry would possibly want to travel with the other after graduation.

"Think it'll occur to them at any point that you weren't talking about either of them?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm tempted to tell them that we're running off together, but I don't suppose Snape would much like that."

She laughed. "Probably not, but we could do it anyway. It'd serve them right given how ridiculous they're being. I thought they'd grown up a little."

"I don't think they bring out the best in one another," Harry said with a sigh. "We're just lucky Ron didn't decide to do it in the corridor for everyone to hear."

"Did he start it?"

"Honestly?" Harry shrugged. "I've no idea. One minute we were speaking, and the next, the two of them were on their feet, screaming for all they were worth. I was still on the couch, and they were halfway across the room before I'd even worked out what had happened. I refuse to wade in there and break it up when they're both being so asinine."

"I'm with you on that one," she said, impressed with his vocabulary. "If they both hurt each other, it might do them some good."

This proved to be more and more likely as the argument progressed because wands were soon drawn and spells actually bounced around the room. Since the two of them were arguing in the protected area, Hermione and Harry remained unscathed on the couch.

Although Harry was still seated casually with her, she could tell that he was getting more and more upset. She contemplated stopping the fight for him, but she was pretty sure that the only way to get this one sorted was to let Draco and Ron come to the complete end of their argument on their own. They weren't going to be able to function if they didn't get these feelings out in the open, and Harry was going to be unhappy for a long time if Draco and Ron couldn't get along at all.

As the argument stretched to twenty minutes in Hermione's presence, she had to wonder just how long they could go on like this. They didn't actually have that many years of grievances, but it seemed as though they'd both decided that now was the time to bring each and every one of those incidents up. Hermione winced as soon as Ron brought up Draco's Death Eater father, and Harry did the same once Draco brought up Arthur's "embarrassingly dead-end miserable excuse for a job". This led to Ron's bringing up the Department of Mysteries, and they both had plenty to say about that one.

Hermione started to wonder if Draco was actually taking frustrations he had with Harry out on Ron, but before she could properly finish the thought, the two boys' argument was going back to the long history of the Malfoy and the Weasley line; it truly seemed to be a fight between them and their families.

It was like an auto accident that she and Harry couldn't quite look away from even though they were trying to pay the increasingly colourful insults and spells no mind.

"Did you know that weasels and ferrets are actually both part of the Mustelidae—weasel—family?" Hermione said conversationally.

Harry looked at her blankly, processed what she'd said, and then dissolved into laughter. She grinned at how successful this distraction had been, listening happily to Harry's bright peels of laughter as he giggled madly at her side.

It also had the fortunate side effect of finally breaking up the fight, as both Ron and Draco were reminded that there was someone else in the room.

"What are you laughing at?" Ron demanded belligerently.

Harry paid them absolutely no mind, collapsed against her and still chuckling, and she patted his back and smirked as she took in the two boys as they came round the couch and into proper view.

Draco had tentacles for hair and was limping. Ron was cradling his arm and had pink hair that clashed horribly with his skin, although that looked rather scaly and abnormal at the moment. There was bruising high up on Draco's cheekbone, and Ron had a fat lip. She hadn't realized they'd had the opportunity to have a go at one another physically. There was a tiny trickle of blood from Draco's ear, and Ron had a smear of it across his neck.

"What is so funny?"

The effectiveness of Draco's imperious tone was rather lessened by his current appearance and by the fact that Harry was completely pissed off with him as well as with Ron. The green-eyed Gryffindor sat up and glared.

"I don't see why it's any of your business," he said flatly. "Hermione and I have business elsewhere. The two of you can go right ahead and continue ignoring me completely and injuring one another; I don't have the slightest intention of spending any more time with either one of you."

He rose, and Hermione obediently followed despite having no idea where their supposed business was. Harry led her out of the common room into the corridor, and they waited until the gargoyle reformed behind them.

"Are you sure that we should have left the two of them in there alone?" she asked laughingly. "We might not have a room to go back to later."

"We likely wouldn't have done anyway if I'd stayed in there a moment longer. They were starting to get on my nerves."

She snorted. "They were on my last nerve about ten minutes ago. Let's go have tea."

Harry acquiesced, looking as though any sort of distraction was welcome, which was perhaps why he didn't notice where they were going until she'd already knocked.

"What—" was as far as he'd gotten when the door was opened.

"Hermione," Severus said before his eyes lit on the figure who'd hunched in on himself behind her. "Mr Potter. What a pleasant surprise. Why are you here?"

She rolled her eyes, as the greeting she received when she was on her own tended to be a great deal more cordial than this one had been.

"I've come to visit," she answered, amused.

Despite the fact that it was nearing one in the morning, he'd clearly been awake.

"And you've brought a little friend with you," he sneered. "How thoughtful."

"You are going to let me in, aren't you?" she said pointedly.

He looked as though he wanted to refuse, but he opened the door wide enough to permit their entrance and stepped back. She entered, Harry trailing after her with obvious reluctance.

"Tea," she said before Severus could start in with something ruder.

He looked highly annoyed, but he acquiesced. Harry was staring between the two of them as though he knew that he'd missed something but was not entirely sure that he wanted to know what that something was. She supposed that she had rather ruined all that discretion she'd been aiming for in not letting Draco and Harry know how things stood between her and Severus. Still, friends enough to have tea with was not the same as sweaty and naked in the bedroom, and Harry didn't need to know about the latter.

They were soon seated in front of the fire, Harry looking as though he were waiting for everything to fall apart and for Severus to start sneering at him again. Which, admittedly, was entirely likely to happen in the near future.

"To what do I owe the honour?" Severus asked finally.

"Beyond my obvious desire for two of the most important men in my life to spend some quality time together?" she deadpanned.

The two of them couldn't have looked more horrified than if she'd told them she wanted them to get married and run off together.

She laughed. "Honestly, the two of you are behaving like small children, and I've just come from enough of that, thank you. We needed to get out of our common room for a little while, Severus, and you're the first person I thought of visiting."

"To my great delight," Severus said dryly. "Why the rapid egress from your place of residence?"

"Ron and Draco decided to air their grievances."

"Ah." Severus nodded. "Although it pains me greatly to say it, the two of you are welcome to spend the night in my sitting room."

Harry had just taken a sip of tea and managed to spray it all over himself. Severus smirked merrily, and Hermione grinned as she waved away the hot liquid.

"Thank you, Severus. Last we saw them, Draco had tentacles and Ron had scales."

"And they'd made it all the way back to their great grandparents as far as slurs and insults went," Harry added. "Or maybe it was the great greats. It was hard to keep all their names straight."

Severus was still smirking. "I can imagine."

"Harry's essentially told them both to bugger off, so we're hoping they'll sort their behaviour out in the next, oh, month or so."

Harry laughed. "It's a good thing I'm spending the summer with you, that's all."

They grinned at one another until they noticed the expression on Severus's face.

"Bugger," Harry swore. "Told you he wouldn't be happy."

She laughed. "Don't be silly, Severus. We'll be working with the Weresbane, and I'm hoping you'll be working with us."

Severus's thunderous expression faded somewhat. "Because more time with Mr Potter is what I desire above all else."

"There we are, then," she said with a smile. "The perfect solution for all of us."

"So long as you're always there to mediate," Harry stage-whispered.

She shook her head. "Maybe I'm planning to lock you in a room and see how long it takes you to self-destruct like Ron and Draco."

The two of them eyed one another doubtfully.

"You're both going to admit to being as uncontrolled as Ron and Draco?" she asked with amusement.

"We can certainly control ourselves," Harry said immediately.

Given that both of them had had remarkable explosions of temper in her presence, she found this claim rather optimistic, but it would be nice if they at least tried.

"And if we couldn't control ourselves," Severus pointed out, "you'd be looking for unconscious bodies not tentacles."

That, at least, was the honest truth, and she wondered when it would occur to Ron and Draco that they were using kids' spells to attack one another when they probably both knew at least a handful of ways to kill one another slowly and painfully.

"Of course," she added, "you'd both be permanently scaled and tentacled once I found you and saw what you'd done to one another."

"Duly noted," Harry said with a grimace.

Severus looked as though he wanted to challenge that statement, making her wonder if he had ever heard the entire story of Marietta Edgecombe and the DA. Hermione considered idly whether Cho Chang was more convinced than ever that Hermione and Harry were together or if the Ravenclaw was off somewhere rejoicing that Harry had apparently thrown Hermione over for Draco.

Harry, of course, knew all about Marietta, and he changed the subject with alacrity. "How is your Potions research coming, sir?"

Both Hermione and Severus stared at Harry incredulously. The Gryffindor cleared his throat self-consciously.

"Hermione mentioned that you were doing some research, time-permitting, and I thought I'd just see how it was going?"

The statement had turned into a question by the end as Severus continued to look completely flabbergasted by this attempt at casual conversation.

"I can't think of the last time I mentioned my research," the Slytherin said, looking over at her in question.

"Not terribly recently," she replied with amusement. "And I believe I mentioned it to Harry around the beginning of sixth year. Maybe as late as Christmas."

They both looked to Harry.

"There didn't seem to be a good time to bring it up before now," Harry said defensively.

Hermione smiled and even Severus's lips twitched.

"I have not had a great deal of time recently," Severus answered.

"We've got a lot to be worrying about at the moment," Hermione pointed out.

"Of course," Harry said hurriedly.

There was another reason that was not war-related as to why Severus might not have as much time to do research as he could have, and she was pretty sure that Harry was trying really hard not to think about that possibility.

Severus finally seemed to recover, for he offered his own social question. "How are your preparations for the Potions N.E.W.T. coming along, Mr Potter?"

It was Harry's turn to look surprised and on the spot. "Oh, uh, fine, sir, thank you."

Severus smirked at the obvious discomfort in the answer. Harry looked to her, as though to reassure himself that she was still there and would buffer when necessary, and then he offered a small smile.

"Actually, it's going loads better than I would have anticipated at the beginning of the year. Living with Hermione makes sure that I keep at least a little bit on track, although I always feel way behind compared to where she's at." He shot her a grin. "And ever since Draco and I got together, I've been spending loads more time dealing with Potions than I ever thought I would. When he isn't being a complete prat, he's very useful to have around."

The last was said with quite a bit of affection, and Hermione knew that no matter how annoyed Harry was with Draco at the moment, he was going to forgive him. Ron, too, no doubt, once the two of them had healed and sworn to Harry that they'd be civil to one another forever after.

"You'll be able to threaten to blackmail them for years to come," Hermione said with a grin as the pleasing thought occurred to her. They had made a truly absurd picture with all their injuries. "I'm sure Draco will be especially embarrassed once he realizes how childish he appeared and how unflattering those curses were."

Harry laughed. "That's so true. I'll put the memory in the Pensieve?"

"Of course," she said cordially. "We'll threaten to get it out at parties."

Severus was looking at them with a faint showing of surprise.

"What?"

"That's almost Slytherin of you."

She shook her head pityingly. "Severus, I thought you realized by now that we're good at keeping secrets. We're living in the dungeons and spending half our time with Slytherins. What are you surprised about?"

He frowned faintly. "You appear like such quintessential Gryffindors in public."

"Slytherin subterfuge," Harry answered immediately. "Keeps everyone from looking for any depth."

Hermione was impressed that Severus didn't even take a shot at Harry saying he had depth.

"Are they still fighting?" the Gryffindor asked.

She accessed the wards, closing her eyes so that she could filter the information more quickly. "They're not in the common room anymore. Ron is…." She searched for his magical signature. "He's making his way to the Infirmary. Draco's found Pansy, and they're in one of the unused classrooms in the dungeons."

She opened her eyes to see Severus rising to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to make sure Poppy is aware of the situation. I can hardly allow her to heal a seventh-year student who's disobeyed the rules, now can I?"

She answered his smirk with a slight upturn of the lips, and he reached for the Floo powder to make his call. Hermione wouldn't have dared given the lateness of the hour, but Severus didn't tend to let those sorts of niceties bother him. In this case, it simply meant that there was no way that Poppy would heal Ron even if he showed up at a decent hour tomorrow.

"What about Draco?" Harry asked quietly. "It's hardly fair if he's healed while Ron's stuck with no treatment."

"I doubt that Pansy will be as sympathetic as Draco is hoping." Hermione shrugged. "Besides, it isn't as though Ron doesn't have plenty of friends in Gryffindor. He has as much of a chance, if not more so, of getting healed by one of them."

Harry shrugged, conceding the truth of this.

"Hopefully Colin is standing around with his camera before then, of course," Hermione added with a smirk, "but they'll probably both be fine for class on Monday. Doesn't hurt if they have to suffer for a little while, though."

"Serves them right," Harry agreed immediately. "If they'd had the slightest bit of sense, they would have waited until our next training session and then they could have had a legitimate reason to have a go at one another."

Hermione smiled. "I'm sure Draco will be further embarrassed when you point that out to him."

Harry responded with a grin, though he added, "He'll blame Ron is what he'll do."

Her smile deepened. "Of course he will. And Ron will blame Draco, and you and I are learning we shouldn't expect anything more from either of them."

Severus pulled his head out of the fire as his conversation ended, wordlessly Vanishing the ash from his clothing.

"Poppy won't be treating Mr Weasley—or Mr Malfoy—" he added, as though he'd heard Harry even though his ears had been out of the room with the rest of his head, "should either of them seek her assistance."

"Then I believe we've done our disciplinary duty for the evening," Hermione said cheerfully. "Thank you for letting us monopolize your time, Severus."

"It was not … quite as unpleasant as I expected," he answered, causing her to snort with laughter.

"I agree," Harry said immediately. "Thought it would be much worse."

If they wanted to bond over a shared less horrible than they'd anticipated meeting, who was she to complain?

"It's so nice to know you both think so highly of my company," she said dryly just so she could watch with amusement as they both spluttered identically.

She rose to her feet, grinning at the two of them. "Right, then, off we go."

Harry stood, and Severus did the same an instant later. Since he could have assured himself from his chair that they actually left, she trusted that his gesture was a courtesy.

"Hermione," he said at the door. "Mr Potter."

Harry, she admonished gently, halfway between a plea and a demand, are you really going to make him call you Mr Potter forever?

Make him? Harry said indignantly. He takes a great deal of pleasure in sneering my surname, I assure you.

If you don't invite him to call you by your first name, you're not giving him much of a choice, are you? she said pointedly.

He looked at her mutinously, so much so that he looked it externally, as well, causing Severus to stare at him, eyes narrowed.

Pretty please? she asked, giving him her very best mental pout. With a cherry on top?

His lip curled into an expression that was remarkably similar to how she imagined Severus would look if she tried it with him. She watched Harry close his eyes, draw a deep breath, and let it out slowly through his nose. Opening his eyes, he directed his stare at Severus.

"Please call me Harry, sir."

Severus's eyebrows rose. "I hardly think—"

"Severus," she said warningly.

The Potions master let out a short breath. "You may do the same." He pinned her best friend with a fierce gaze. "In private and politely, mind."

Harry looked as though he might take affront to this suggestion that he didn't have the slightest discretion, so she interceded.

"I don't see how it will serve him to call you 'Harry', Severus. It's bound to get confusing."

They both stared at her blankly, and she could see the exact moment that they took her meaning. Harry's eyes widened, and he looked as though he was furiously biting his tongue in an attempt not to burst into laughter. Severus's lips twitched, however, and that was the end of it as Harry let out an explosive giggle.

"Hermione," he gasped, "you're completely outrageous."

"And now you have a second thing in common," she said cordially. "You're both thinking the same uncharitable thoughts about me. Weren't we going?"

Harry struggled to get control of himself. "Yes, we were." He cleared his throat loudly. "Thank you, for having us over for tea, Severus." He managed very nearly not to stutter over the name.

"It was my pleasure, M—Harry," Severus answered, looking as though the words pained him only mildly. "Hermione. Goodnight."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Harry opened his mouth, but he seemed to think better of speaking in the corridor, for he seized her arm and fairly dragged her back to their common room where he pushed her down onto the couch and took a seat next to her.

"Hermione," he said. "I … I'm not entirely certain what just happened."

She smiled encouragingly at him. "You just had tea with Severus, dear, and survived it quite beautifully."

"Right. I hadn't thought…. It really didn't go that bad."

"No," she agreed. "When both of you make a modicum of effort, I'm convinced that it needn't go badly terribly often at all."

Since she'd put the onus upon both of them, he didn't seem inclined to argue, but he did have more questions.

"I thought the two of you were arguing."

"Not currently," she said politely but with enough repression that it had to be clear to him that she didn't really want to talk about it. For a moment, Harry looked as though he wouldn't let it go, but perhaps he recalled the fact that he was currently arguing with his boyfriend. "Time for bed, I think," she added quietly.

He sighed and rose. "Yes."

He made it all the way to his bedroom door before he paused, squared his shoulders, and looked back at her. She raised an eyebrow in query.

"Will you ward my door?"

She blinked at him. "I can assure you that I'm not going to leap upon you in the middle of the night."

He laughed, but it wasn't an entirely happy sound. "Not that door."

Ah. That had been particularly stupid of her.

"Of course," she said gently and reached out to the wards to tweak them appropriately. "No one will be getting in from the other side."

He looked faintly surprised that it had been done in such short order but gave her a somewhat forced smile before he disappeared into his bedroom.

It looked as though Draco was really going to have to work for this one, and she sincerely hoped the blond didn't do anything as daft as blame Harry for what had occurred between the Slytherin and one of Harry's best friends.

Surely she and Harry weren't doomed to have only one of them happy at a time?

Given the lateness of the hour, she made no attempt to go to bed once she parted from Harry. It was past two o'clock in the morning now, and she needed to start working on the potion at a quarter to four, so she passed the time with a little revision in the lab. Once three forty five rolled around, she efficiently added the Weresbane leaves with the required intricacy and then turning the heat down to just barely warm. Now the potion was in its penultimate stage, needing to be watched for any changes in texture and consistency. Since her ingredients were pure and her methodology precise, she generally had to contend only with the potion's interaction with the air.

She'd been experimenting with wards as her control over them grew, and she seemed finally to have successfully developed ones which were sensitive enough to pick up those changes to the potion which required her attention so that she could easily attend other tasks while monitoring the Weresbane. This would allow her to clean up and then study. She was still working out which textbooks she wanted to pull for revision when she heard what sounded like muffled yelling coming from Harry's room.

Silencing charms had become a permanent feature of the room since Draco had installed himself there, and Hermione had never considered meddling with them under the circumstances. A light examination of the wards told her that it was not, as she'd half-hoped, a confrontation between the Slytherin and the Gryffindor. Harry was alone in the room, the silencing charm had fallen, and he was quite evidently in distress.

She knew without even looking exactly what the problem was, and she imagined that he'd be the first person to tell her that the Weresbane was more important than his untroubled sleep. He might even be right if one simply weighed one night of nightmares against eighteen werewolves having to wait another month before they could possibly be cured of a horrible affliction.

Hermione had cured lycanthropy, however, by not letting anyone tell her that something was impossible, and she therefore didn't let a little thing like needing to be in two places at once stop her now.

Her wards, after all, would alert her if there was a problem, and while she had never been away from the potion during this stage for as potentially long as she would be with Harry, she reposed a full measure of trust in her own warding abilities.

For good measure, she purified the air and set up a protective ward around the cauldrons that would allow only air to pass through without any additional contaminants. She made sure that the alarm would alert her without waking Harry, and then she retraced her step to the common room. Opening Harry's door, she found that the sounds grew immediately louder, and as she stepped over the threshold, she realized that she was doing precisely what she had told Harry she wouldn't a few hours ago; she was barging into his room while he slept.

Sighing at the trials of her best friend, Hermione climbed into the bed and pulled the trembling boy to her, murmuring all the nonsense soothing words that she had been wont to use earlier in the year when this happened so much more frequently. He clutched at her fearfully, as though she were going to disappear from him, and she stroked his hair and continued to mutter that everything would be fine.

She didn't believe that Voldemort could still breach Harry's mind, but it wasn't as though anyone had done a proper study on the interaction between the two of them. Given the uniqueness of the connection, there was no saying but that Harry got some bleed over from the other man's twisted mind, and what Harry could block out when he was in prime physical and psychological condition was not necessarily the same when he was feeling vulnerable or really unhappy. This was the first time in a long time that Harry had slept on his own, and especially given that he was quarrelling with Draco, it was really no surprise that old demons had risen up to haunt him.

Settling herself more fully into the wards, she found to her surprise that Draco wasn't far away at all; rather than staying away in a snit, he appeared to have fallen asleep propped up against the door that connected his rooms to Harry's. She found this really rather touching but wondered how bad a mood he would be in later when he woke up in such an awkward position. It was really rather … Gryffindor of him, almost Hufflepuff, actually, and she was pleased to learn that he cared so much about her best friend even when they were cross with one another.

Although still unconscious, Harry had finally begun to accept that she was firmly there at his side, for his uneasiness lessened, and he wrapped his arms round her and held on tightly before finally drifting off into a deeper and more contented sleep.

Her wards alerted her to changes in the Weresbane four times in the three hours she was in Harry's bed, and she used the same technique that she had the time Severus had found her there, thinking a muscle-relaxing charm at Harry so that she could get out of his arms easily. She made her way quickly to her lab, adjusted the potion and re-established the protections around it, and then headed back to Harry's bed.

It was nearing eight in the morning when Harry began to stir, and the first notice of this that she had was when he pushed against her thigh with a body part that she had really rather not know so intimately. The movement was repeated with a murmur of sleepy pleasure, and Hermione was hard-pressed between choosing laughter and recoiling. Gods, Severus and Draco were going to kill her.

She resorted to clearing her throat and saying with as even a voice as she could manage, "You may want to stop doing that."

Harry froze. There was a very long moment where he might well have been Petrified and then one eye opened ever so slowly to behold her.

He went red as a beet faster than any spell could have managed the transformation.

"Hermione!" His voice was two octaves higher than normal.

"Good morning, Harry," she said with what she thought was a continuing praiseworthy attempt at a straight face and matter-of-fact voice. "How are you?"

He pulled away from her and sat up, regarding her ruefully.

"Embarrassed beyond belief. I thought you were Draco."

"So I gathered," she said, giving into her amusement and laughing softly. "It would be really quite inconvenient at this point if you decided you fancied me after all."

He made a face. "I'm going to die."

She grinned. "I hardly think that's likely. I've heard that if you take these sorts of matters in hand, especially in the shower, you'll be perfectly fine."

He blushed even redder, which she hadn't thought possible. "Hermione!" He sounded scandalized.

She laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. You are feeling better?"

He gave this question some thought and nodded. "I had a nightmare, I take it?"

She nodded.

He huffed an embarrassed breath. "Guess I don't do so well on my own."

"You have a lot on your mind," she said soothingly. "And you know that I'm happy to be here for you."

He grimaced again. "Are you so certain that Sn—" He saw her look, and corrected himself with a bigger grimace. "Are you sure that Severus would be pleased to hear that?"

Her answer was very firm. "Severus knows how important you are to me. But I confess that I'm trusting you won't be fighting with Draco forever."

"No," he answered with alacrity. "But I would like an apology from him before I let him crawl back into bed with me, so I rather imagine I'll be waiting a long time."

She smiled at this assessment of Draco's likely behaviour.

"We'll manage," she promised. "You had a lot on your mind last night; it doesn't mean that every night will be like this."

He nodded, although he didn't look convinced. Since it was less than a month until the Final Battle, she could see his point, but she thought optimism would stand a better chance of beating those nightmares. He had a lot of magic and a very strong mind, so if he put them to good use, she was sure they could aid him.

He nodded again. "I have been sleeping for years on my own and not had nightmares all the time."

"Exactly," she said cheerfully, rising from the bed as she realized that Harry didn't have the slightest intention of getting out while she was still there and might see further evidence of how happy he'd been to see her this morning. She tried not to giggle.

"I've got to check on the Weresbane, but if you need company for breakfast, it'll have to be a very quick meal in, say, fifteen minutes?"

He nodded close to fervently, clearly anxious to see her on the other side of the door. She let herself giggle once that door was closed and tried to imagine just how Severus would react to that scene. It wasn't really fair, of course, because she'd hardly be pleased to know he was in bed with anyone else, but this had all been remarkably absurd.

The wards were still working perfectly with the Weresbane, but she felt better for having physically kept an eye on it for a few minutes. She changed into fresh clothing and met a still slightly red-faced Harry in the common room.

Breakfast was a very strange affair. Harry insisted on going up without waiting for Draco. The blond arrived a few minutes after them, slowing a bit as he approached the table, eyeing the spot next to Harry.

I wouldn't recommend it, she said gently for his mind alone.

He looked at her sharply and then moved to sit down next to her. She was reminded that she was supposed to be frustrated with him, too, but that seemed like a lot of effort at the moment.

Although the tentacles were gone, his hair didn't seem quite right, though she had no idea when she'd become so sensitive to the nuances of Draco Malfoy's hair. He'd scrounged bruise salve from somewhere or managed a minor healing charm because he didn't look physically injured, although his movements had been ever so slightly ginger, owing, she supposed, either to Ron or to the way he had slept last night.

"Good morning," he said quietly.

"Morning," she replied.

Harry didn't speak.

Fortunately for her peace of mind, Ginny arrived before her brother and readily understood the signals Hermione was sending her, for she settled in at the vacant seat next to Harry, a spot which she would under normal circumstances have left for her brother.

"Morning, Harry, Hermione, Draco," the redhead said politely, just as though she hadn't noticed the tension that was rife in the air.

She got polite, monosyllabic greetings from all of them, and Hermione realized it was going to be a long day. Suppressing a sigh, she started up as inconsequential a flow of chatter as she could with Ginny, unsurprised when no one else joined in.

It was shortly after this that Hermione noticed that while Harry had been avoiding looking at basically everyone at the Gryffindor table, there was one person whom he couldn't seem to avoid. He kept casting would-be covert glances at Severus and looked so damn guilty as he was doing it.

Casting her own glance in that direction, she saw that Severus had noticed and was looking rather suspicious, as well he might. She would have been cross if the cause didn't still make her want to giggle. Harry could be such an idiot.

Ron was one of the last to arrive. Hermione was nearly done her meal by the time the redhead sat down next to his sister. He didn't greet any of them, although it was hard to tell if this was due to particular pique on his part or simply a result of his normal love of food, which he piled upon his plate forthwith.

The moment she had finished, rather than waiting on the others as she would usually do, she rose to her feet, naming the Weresbane as her excuse. The silence between the three boys was thick, and Hermione wasn't surprised when Ginny rose as well, evidently not fancying being the sole peacekeeper at the table.

Back in her lab, Hermione shook her head over the behaviour she had witnessed. They were three of the most stubborn people she knew with a fair bit of pride thrown in. If they were all waiting for one another to make the first move or apologize, there was no saying if they'd ever speak to one another again.

She happened to be of the opinion that Harry was very correct in his anger on this particular occasion, but it didn't mean that the situation was going to be easily resolved.

At least her lab was quiet, and the Weresbane did not appear to have suffered in the least for her longer-than-normal absences. This would be useful knowledge for future batches, and she thought she'd see about the filtration charms and wards all the time.

As a quarter to ten arrived, she dropped the very last ingredient into the potion and was pleased to see it turn the exact shade of blue that it was supposed to. She happily decanted and bottled her newest batch of Weresbane.

An instant later, she had Apparated to the safe house. She could, she supposed, have Apparated directly downstairs, but she liked to have a few tricks up her sleeve for emergencies.

Slipping down to the dungeons, she found that they were empty. It was barely ten in the morning, and the drink window didn't begin until half seven that evening. The wards informed her that many of the inhabitants were, in fact, having a lie-in.

Hermione carefully warded the potion and turned back for the stairs. Remus was coming down.

"Hallo, Hermione," he greeted her cordially. "Dropping off the potion?"

She nodded.

"You'll be back in the evening?"

She nodded once more. "And everyone will be along tomorrow for the actual transformation."

"Everyone all right at Hogwarts?"

She regarded him bemusedly, wondering if perhaps he was on the outs with Tonks, and Hermione simply hadn't heard. "Anyone you're inquiring about in particular, or did you actually want me to list off the hundreds of people who live there?"

His lips tipped up. "I'm not so good at this, I suppose. Is Severus doing all right?"

She regarded him through narrowed eyes, asking suspiciously, "Is there a particular reason you think he wouldn't be?"

He sighed. "I was attempting to show that I was trying to be more accepting and less stupid about the whole thing. 'Dora recommended it."

Her face relaxed as she snorted. "Good job. Very subtle."

He smiled at her. "I thought so."

"Severus is doing fine," she answered his original question, "and I appreciate that you're making the effort. He might not be an easy man, but he's always going to be my choice."

"So I gather," Remus said. "I can't really argue with that."

He had done at length, as a matter of fact, but if he was coming round now, she was willing to let that creative rewriting of the past slide.

She therefore smiled at him and asked after everyone's progress. He assured her that all eighteen werewolves had been working hard since the last time she'd asked, and the two of them climbed back up the stairs together where he saw her off in the entry-way.

She Apparated back to her lab and decided that she'd much rather deal with Severus than Harry, Draco, and Ron, so she checked the wards for the former's location and then headed to his private lab, relieved that neither Harry nor the two combatants were anywhere in the vicinity.

Severus let her in with an unreadable expression on his face and turned back to what he was doing without a word. She suppressed a sigh.

She watched him quietly, noting that the potion he was brewing (a restorative draught) didn't require nearly as much attention as he was currently giving to it. It was mildly insulting that he didn't think she'd notice or didn't care if she did, but this was his private lab, and he should therefore be allowed to brew without interruption, especially as she didn't have anything crucial to say to him.

It was as he was adding the corydaline to the potion, the last ingredient before it had to boil for some minutes, that he spoke.

"Draco and Mr Weasley seemed none the worse for wear this morning."

He wasn't normally one for small talk, but at least he was speaking.

"Mostly. There's something wrong with Draco's hair. I've not worked out what, but it doesn't look like normal."

Severus actually turned to look at her after this comment, one eyebrow arched.

"It's true," she protested. "I sat next to him all through breakfast. I couldn't help but notice."

He made a noncommittal noise. "I did notice you sitting next to him, yes."

She waited to see if this would segue into whom else she had been sitting next to and his erratic behaviour at the meal. There was silence, and she rolled her eyes.

"I confess that sometimes I'm a bit amazed that Harry's our one bright hope."

This brought a twitch to Severus's lips. "There are moments where he seems to possess no guile whatsoever."

"He was remarkably unsubtle," she agreed, "which is particularly sad given that he's so worried about your finding out."

"Finding out what, precisely?" His voice was very carefully devoid of emotion, but the question was asked very carefully.

"As you are aware, he and Draco are fighting, which means that Harry was alone in bed last night."

He grimaced. "I do not want to know."

She rolled her eyes again. "Harry and Draco having sex is not Earth-shattering news, Severus. But last night was the first night in some time that Harry's been alone; he had a protracted nightmare."

Severus was frowning at her. "I can see why Mr—Harry didn't particularly wish me to be aware of that fact, but he displayed more concern this morning than such news warrants."

"Do you think so?" she said. "Don't you remember what happens when Harry has nightmares?"

He continued to regard her solemnly for a moment, and then she saw the flash of understanding in his eyes. To her pleasure, his lips twitched marginally before he got them under control.

"You mean to tell me that he is greatly concerned because you spent the night in his bed, and he thinks that I will have something to say about the matter?"

She smiled at him. "That's about what he's thinking, yes."

Severus had finished with the potion and stepped towards her now so that he was looming over her.

"And are you not concerned?"

"I've thought about it," she answered honestly, meeting his eyes evenly, "and I realize that I'd hardly be pleased if you spent time in another woman's bed. But mitigating circumstances are mitigating circumstances; I'm going to continue to help Harry in every way that I can. I'm not in love with him, and all I did was hold him to stop his nightmare. He'd much rather it had been Draco, and I'd much rather have been in bed with you, but neither of those were options last night."

He was continuing to stare at her, and just as she'd begun to wonder if she was being judged wanting, he leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to her lips.

Pulling back, he inquired, "Would you have said if he hadn't given it away?"

She considered this. "Probably. I would hate for you to find out later and think that I'd been hiding something from you. But it really was innocuous."

He eyed her. "I do get to amuse myself, I trust?"

Her lips quirked. "For a little while, if you really can't help yourself." Her expression sobered. "But you're not to mock him about his nightmares."

His eyes were very dark, and he agreed with equal solemnity, "No."

There was much that could have been said to that, but she had the sense to let it go.

"Have you finished with your potion?"

She could see that it only had a few more minutes to boil.

"Very nearly. You intend to monopolize my time again today, do you?"

She shrugged. "For a little while, at least. I'd just as soon stay out of my own rooms, and I could stand some tea. I've taken the Weresbane over to the safe house, so I don't have to worry about it again until the dosing tonight."

"It shall only be a few minutes, then, as I've said."

There was something in his tone again that had disappeared for a little while when she had explained about Harry. She had no idea what she could possibly have said to cause it but decided that quizzing him on it while he was finishing the potion would not be a prudent action.

"Can I help?" she asked instead, for there were always vials to be cleaned and ingredients to be put away.

"You may make tea," he answered rather curtly. "Go ahead."

She suppressed a sigh and went as instructed, wondering if her wish for a week of happiness between her and Severus was just about to be ruined.

Chapter Fifty: The Confrontations

Hermione successfully made tea for the two of them on the first attempt today, choosing the Earl Grey that Severus was so fond of and hoping that it would miraculously improve his mood. At least it was unlikely to make his mood worse.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later that Severus emerged from the lab and went to sit down in his chair by the fire without so much as a word to her. It was looking as though it was going to be a very long day indeed.

She brought his cup over to him, but when he reached for it, still without speaking, she didn't relinquish is as soon as he had it in his hands, ensuring that their fingers overlapped for a moment.

Softly, she said, "It's much easier for me to try to improve the situation when I know what the problem is."

He didn't meet her eyes, and she relinquished the cup and went to sit in her own chair. She wasn't nearly as fascinated with fire as Harry was, but she supposed she was capable of staring at it for an extended period of time when necessary….

"You went to the safe house this morning."

She started, aware that she'd been close to drowsing in front of the fire—or at least meditating—for about twenty minutes, and Severus had spoken as though he were answering a question.

She recovered and answered only, "Yes," because she didn't know what it was that he was really asking.

"And you'll be going back—?" he prompted.

"This evening. To administer the potion and monitor its ingestion. Then again tomorrow evening as soon as classes let out so that I can be there for the transformation."

"Everyone else will be going with you?"

It was the bite in the else that finally gave her an inkling of just what it was that they were arguing about.

"If you mean that Harry, Draco, Tonks, and Minerva will be joining me, then that is likely, yes," she answered evenly. "Has it occurred to you that it is beneficial for me to be accompanied by those who know the transformation?"

"Tonks, Minerva, and Mr Potter hardly fit that description," he snarled.

Her lips settled into a thin line, but she didn't suppose that admonishing him to use Harry's first name would help this discussion. "Minerva is an expert at Transfiguration. Tonks was seeing Remus while he was a werewolf, and she's an Auror who's had to go up against werewolves before. Harry, like Minerva, is an Animagus, and he's been with Draco since this whole mess started. They've all seen two trials and can therefore be invaluable in assisting with the process. And they came to the trials," she said more loudly to override him as he opened his mouth, "because they asked to come. Minerva wanted to see the transformations, and Tonks wanted to be involved because it means so much to Remus. I wasn't deliberately excluding you, Severus, but you never showed any interest before now."

"It's one of the most amazing potions to be invented in recent years!" he snapped. "Of course I'm interested."

It was difficult for her to be both glowing at the compliment and angry with the man for being so daft.

"Severus," she said as reasonably as she could, "it's not been safe for you to come while you were still a spy. I'm afraid that I have a great deal on my mind without having to try to predict what you are thinking. Asking wouldn't have been so very horrible, would it?"

He seemed to consider this. "Did Mr Potter really ask?"

She wondered how much the use of Harry's last name was habit and how much was sheer obstinacy. It wouldn't be sporting, she supposed, to tell him that he could come if he remembered to always call Harry by his first name.

"He did, actually. Of course, he sneaked along the next time, despite the fact that he'd been forbidden from coming."

Severus grimaced. "Of course he did. Can't bear to be out of the limelight."

She shook her head. "He was invisible, and no one knew he was there but me. Albus was especially adamant after what happened during the new moon, but you know Harry. He wanted to be there for me in case I killed anyone else, I guess. Thankfully, the full moon went—"

Severus's cup was smashed down on the table next to him with enough force that it sloshed tea all over his hand and nearly startled Hermione out of her wits.

"You didn't kill anyone!"

She blinked in surprise at his vehemence given that this was rather the opposite opinion from that which he had shared the last time the topic had been raised. The death still loomed in her mind, marring that first trial with the mistakes that she had made.

Struggling for a response, she found that she couldn't look at him, so she spoke to the fire as she finally said, "So most people keep telling me."

"By most, I assume you mean everyone but me."

It hadn't felt that way in her mind, but now he said it, she realized that he was right. She'd accorded so much weight to his opinion that it had somehow stuck in her brain as though it must have been vouchsafed by several people.

Her throat felt very dry as she swallowed, but she managed to say, voice mostly steady, "I've always valued your honesty."

If he'd had the guts to say it then it just meant that others were thinking it.

"Hermione," he sighed, but his voice was curiously bereft of any impatience, "I had no idea what you were talking about when you told me you had killed someone. I was … disgruntled, and I lashed out at the first available target. You didn't kill anyone."

Now that she knew that he'd been angry that everyone but he had been going to witness her cure, she understood why he had tended to be on his worst behaviour after she returned from the safe house. He always seemed to react rather than talking about what was upsetting him, and she found this incredibly frustrating.

She probably wasn't in a position to cast stones, however, given that she had run away and had taken to avoiding him whenever she was upset. Still, she'd chosen to absent herself, not to attack him and try to make him feel as miserable as possible.

"Okay," she said, realizing that he seemed to be waiting for some sort of a response from her.

He let out a huff of breath. "Hermione, the head of Magical Law Enforcement and a group of senior Order members were standing guard over that man while you were curing nine werewolves. It's Kingsley's job to think of those sorts of things, not yours, and as he pointed out, Roger was an Auror who could likely have killed himself no matter what precautions were taken. He chose to take his own life, and you chose to preserve life, to save your friend and to make the cure possible. Don't ever think differently."

She stared at him, completely flabbergasted. Not only had he offered her a great deal more compassion than she had thought to receive on this subject after what had happened the first time, she knew that Draco had not given all those details when he had told Severus what had happened that night. Draco hadn't even been there when Kingsley had talked about Roger being an Auror, no one had been there except her and Kingsley, and that meant that Severus had gone to the other man for more information.

Despite the abrupt and harsh assessment he had made in her presence, he had subsequently taken the time to get a clear idea of what had occurred, and he had absolved her of complicity in the crime. It would have been nice if he'd advised her of this fact before now, but it was a monumental relief to find out just the same.

She nodded unsteadily, turned back to the fire and spent several minutes sniffing and brushing tears out of her eyes which Severus tactfully ignored, appearing to suddenly need more tea and busying himself with making it.

When the new pot was ready, he Vanished the old in their mugs and poured fresh, dropping a kiss onto the top of her head before he returned the teapot and resumed his seat.

Hermione was rather stunned by the casual comforting gesture, and she felt rather better than she had before. She didn't want to talk about it anymore, but she was mindful of why it had come up in the first place, so she said, "You are welcome to come along, of course, now that I know you want to."

He grumbled a bit at this invitation combined with a rebuke.

"You might have thought to invite me."

She snorted. "I might have done, yes, but as we've spent the last several months arguing more than speaking to one another, working out what you'd enjoy was not foremost in my mind until recently. Given that I've spent so many transformations not involving you because it wasn't safe, you shouldn't wonder that it didn't immediately occur to me now. It would," she stressed again, "have been far more productive for you to have discussed this with me instead of treating me horribly. Discussion is very important in a relationship, you know."

"Is that what we have?" he asked.

She frowned at him. "Would you prefer to call it something else? A fling? Sex without strings? Friends with benefits?"

His lips twisted. "Relationship." It was said with ill-grace, but it least it was conceded, and this was followed with, "A relationship with discussion."

She wouldn't make the mistake of assuming that this was going to happen instantly, but hopefully it was something they could work towards.

Since he'd agreed to try, she didn't mind letting him off the hook for immediate relationship discussion, so she once again turned the conversation back to what had started it. "You'll need to talk to Albus about coming to the safe house. He's had an opinion about everyone so far, and we had a bit of an argument about Harry. You'll likely have to come later like Tonks and Minerva so that there's still a presence at dinner."

"I'll speak to him this afternoon," he agreed.

They spent a more agreeable morning after that as they drank their tea in a silence that was much more comfortable now, and then Severus moved to his desk to mark and allowed her to Summon her books and review in the quiet safety of his sitting room. Very few of her friends would be brave enough to seek her out here, which was what she was counting on. She was still officially accessible, but she was effectively out of reach.

The two of them headed up to lunch at the same time but separated early as he went round to enter by the High Table and she came in from the regular entrance. Harry was already there, and he looked greatly relieved to see her.

"Where have you been?" he demanded the moment she was seated. "I've been going out of my mind with the two of them. Draco keeps trying to study with me, Ron's been lurking, and it's driving me mental."

She smiled as she cast a Muffling Charm. "I've been revising with Severus."

Harry let out a long-suffering sigh. "Wish I could join you."

She snorted, impressed that the two boys had disturbed him enough that he had announced Severus as preferred company. "If you really want to, you may."

Harry made a face. "I still want them to apologize first. They behaved like complete idiots."

"You don't have to tell me twice. Perhaps you should try telling them."

Harry sighed again. "Yeah."

Draco and Ron arrived almost at the same time, and she was glad they hadn't met in the hall and decided to fight once more. They glared at one another when it became clear that Harry still wasn't speaking to either one of them.

Hermione didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when the storm hit, so she ate the bare minimum and could see that Harry was eating quickly, too. She supposed that using her newfound powers to Apparate down to her bedroom would be imprudent.

When she rose, she found that Harry, who had looked to be eating what food was still on his plate a few seconds before, had risen, too, and Ron and Draco, both with plates half full, had done the same.

It was like she'd stumbled into another era where men still stood up when a woman left the table.

"I'm going to go revise," she said breezily, just as though she hadn't noticed any odd behaviour. "See you later."

Harry got as far as "I—" when he was interrupted by both Draco and Ron who insisted that they needed to speak with him right away.

She left forthwith, ignoring the beseeching look that Harry had sent her. She felt a little guilty, but this really was a mess that needed to be sorted between the three of them.

She'd only barely made it down the stairs when a voice whispered near her ear, "Slytherin."

She looked back and smiled at Severus. "I have no interest in being involved in that debacle."

"I don't suppose so," he agreed readily. "Come with me."

She followed him obediently to his quarters, greatly relieved that he had renewed his invitation for her to spend time there. He set her up with more tea, allowed her to Summon yet more books, and graded once more while she worked quietly.

With Severus, she found that it was easier than with anyone else she knew to work silently and companionably. It was distinctly odd because there also wasn't anyone else with whom she had the most distracting thoughts, wondering as she looked across the room at him if she could possibly pounce on him and drag him off to bed.

Occasionally, when their gazes crossed, the warmth in his eyes made her wonder if they were thinking the same distracting thoughts, but there was still an easiness between them. Perhaps it was the knowledge that they would be able to enjoy the bed later?

That was actually debatable, though. While they had enjoyed some very pleasant moments in bed together thus far, he hadn't made any declarations, and it was difficult for her to take events at face value when it came to Severus. He had every right, she supposed, to enjoy himself with her as he could. She'd declared her interest, he hadn't seemed uninterested, and it gave them something rather enjoyable to do as they prepared for a battle of epic proportions.

Did he actually have any notion of making it a lasting match, though? That she was less certain of. He hadn't seemed so enamoured of the idea of a relationship. He could tire of her or think her too young or find that he had many other options once the blasted battle was out of the way and the wizarding world at large became aware of what a hero he was.

She suppressed a sigh as she looked over at him once more. She might not get to keep him, but she would be grateful for all the time that they had together. And if—once—they survived the destruction of Voldemort, then she would see what was left and what was possible.

"You are very pensive," Severus said, startling her.

She offered him a smile that was only moderately forced.

"It's nothing. I've a great deal on my mind right now, that's all."

He smiled faintly at her. "I should suppose so. That reminds me that I need to speak to Albus. You will excuse me?"

She did so, bemused that he was taking leave of her so politely from his own rooms and wondering what had gotten into him. Perhaps he had caught more of her mood than she had wanted to admit and he was still trying to make her feel better.

Although she tried to work, she found that she got little accomplished while Severus was absent, and when he returned a quarter of an hour later, thoughts of revision flew right out of her head because the door was slammed shut loudly enough that it made the windows rattle.

Severus's mutterings were disjointed and exceedingly rude. His lips were pinched very tightly together, two pink spots of colour high on his cheeks, and she at once set the kettle to boil for more tea.

"Albus was not enamoured of the idea?" she ventured finally once the tea was steeped.

Severus had still not spoken a coherent word to her.

"He was not," Severus answered shortly. He rallied with a visible effort. "He said that he would not feel secure if so many professors and Order members were away from the school all in one evening, and it would therefore be better for me to stay here."

She regarded him with some surprise. "Albus said that?"

Severus took a large mouthful of tea that was too hot, but he swallowed it anyway with a grimace. "Albus said that."

She had absolutely no idea what the headmaster was playing at, but she found it very poorly timed; she didn't want all the progress she and Severus had made to be lost to this arbitrary decision.

Although she'd won the day with Harry, she suspected that Albus would not allow her to do the same with Severus. As inane as she and Severus both thought it sounded, she needed to address the issue of the headmaster's safety before she could possibly win this argument. If he claimed he needed more professors and Order members, then that was what he needed, and there was nothing she could do about it. Unless—

She leapt up, hurried over to kiss Severus on the cheek, and told him she'd be back in a few minutes.

Checking the wards, she tracked Minerva to her office. Hermione entered when she was bid to do so and threw up enough privacy charms to ensure that their conversation was perfectly safe—even from meddling headmasters.

"Hermione," Minerva said welcomingly, "what can I do for you?"

Hermione sat in one of the chairs before the desk and declined the tea and biscuits which had been offered to her.

"For reasons best known to himself," she explained, "Albus has decided to play the part of the doddering old headmaster, incapable of protecting himself." Minerva's eyebrows rose. "He has refused Severus permission to come to the safe house tomorrow because, in his words, it would leave Hogwarts too vulnerable."

"I see," Minerva said, although the look on her face made it clear that she understood Albus's motivation as little as Hermione did.

"I've come to ask, therefore," Hermione said resolutely, "if you would be willing to stay behind this time and allow Severus to accompany me in your stead. I know it's a great deal to ask, but—"

"Say no more," Minerva cut in. "I will stay behind."

Hermione regarded her curiously, having thought that the Gryffindor head of house would have made Hermione work a little harder to take the Slytherin head of house with her. Minerva must have seen her confusion.

"It is your cure, Hermione," the older woman said briskly. "You were kind enough to allow me to be present twice already, so I can have no qualms about your decision for the third trial. And I will have words for Albus, I assure you."

Hermione smiled at her, fondly imagining just what would happen if Albus attempted to tell Minerva that she was inadequate support in place of Severus. Hermione knew they had nothing to worry about on that front.

Minerva checked in on Hermione's preparation for the upcoming N.E.W.T.s, although it seemed more a matter of course because she had a seventh-year student in front of her than any concern for Hermione's progress. Her quiet faith that Hermione would have everything in order for the examinations despite all the other calls on her time was quite bolstering.

Making her way back to Severus's quarters, Hermione felt quite pleased with life. She'd have a few more hours of quiet revision with Severus, she'd administer the potions to the werewolves after dinner, and then she'd be all ready to save another set of human beings tomorrow at the new moon.

Not knowing the precise mood that Severus would be in, she knocked on the door and waited to be admitted rather than barging in.

"You're back, are you?" he said coolly.

She bit back a "demonstrably" and came all the way into the room. Severus, she reminded herself, got precisely like this when he was annoyed, trying to goad those around him into similar temperaments so that it was more fun to draw blood.

"Very astute of you to have noticed," she said with a hint of teasing in her voice.

His eyes narrowed.

"Of course," she said consideringly, "I could be a Polyjuiced copy or someone using a really good Glamour. Maybe I'm not me at all."

His lips pursed, but she could see the smile lurking. She came closer and slid her arms around his waist, pleased when he immediately wrapped his arms around her.

"I've been to see Minerva. You'll be fine to come with me tomorrow."

Buried against his chest, she couldn't see his face, but she swore she could sense his eyebrows rising. "You think Minerva will be able to convince Albus where I could not?"

Hermione shook her head marginally, enjoying the feeling of his heart thudding rhythmically in her ear.

"She's going to stay behind."

He pulled back abruptly so that she was bereft of his warmth.

"You asked her to stay behind in my place?"

"You don't owe her anything," Hermione said tartly, recognizing his tone. "I don't even owe her anything; as far as Minerva is concerned, it's my cure, and I may therefore bring whomever I wish with me. She's already seen it, she can understand your wanting to see it, and she volunteered to read Albus the riot act, so that's all there is to it."

He considered this with piercing eyes, and then just as abruptly as he had let go, he pulled her back into his embrace.

"That was … well thought of."

Her lips quirked. "I do have an idea in this brain of mine from time to time."

"So I gather." She could hear the smile.

"You'll be able to come over after dinner with Tonks. That all right?"

"That's fine," he agreed easily.

His hands had begun to caress her sides, and she realized that she had, perhaps, been a little premature in deciding what she would be doing with her afternoon.

They did, in fact, finish some grading and revision, but it started later than she had imagined. At half three, there was a knock at the door, and the wards apprised her of the fact that several Slytherins were standing outside. When she told Severus who was there, he curtly ordered her to Banish her books and get into the bathroom, which she accomplished on automatic.

She listened as Severus learnt that there was some sort of altercation in the Slytherin common room, and he left without a word. As she stepped back out of the bathroom, she contemplated what she should do.

There had been nothing indiscreet in what they had been doing just now. Both of them had been fully dressed again, and there had in fact been so many books and papers in between them that it would have been difficult for them to wade over and find one another. If she'd been in Minerva's quarters, she wouldn't have had to hide, and she knew that Viktor wouldn't have asked it of her, either.

Yet with the Slytherin head of house, it appeared to be of paramount importance. He wasn't a spy anymore, his house already knew he worked for the light, and Voldemort already hated her and everything she stood for.

Severus was still a target, though, and whether he was right or not, she supposed she could understand a desire to protect her if he thought that it would be unwise to reveal that they spent so much time together.

Besides, even outside of all the Voldemort-related risks, flaunting a relationship between a professor and a student was hardly prudent. Since too many people still thought of Severus as a Death Eater, he'd likely be in for a tough time of it if news of their relationship hit the papers. She didn't want to put him through that, especially when there was all of a week of classes left.

Logical as all these reasons were, they didn't do much to still the ache in the vicinity of her heart. She knew he wasn't rejecting her—at least she really hoped he wasn't—but being hidden away even when they'd been sitting across the room from one another with paperwork was very disconcerting.

She wasn't altogether certain that she could face him with equanimity upon his return, and there was always the chance that students would be coming with him if there were things he needed to say outside of the presence of the entire common room. Now that her books were all back in her quarters anyway, she didn't think there was anything to keep her here.

Although the wards informed her that there was no one watching Severus's quarters at the moment, she could also see that Harry, Ron, and Draco were all in her common room, and even if she Masked herself, they could see the gargoyle disappear and reform, so she wasn't going to risk it. Instead, she Apparated from Severus's quarters to her bedroom, glad that the castle seemed amused more than anything else that she was making such use of its concession to her.

Now that she was back in her own room, she wondered if she should have left some sort of note in Severus's quarters, but surely he would be able to grasp quite readily that she was no longer present. There was no need to be redundant.

She went back to her book for a few minutes, trying to distract herself until it was time to head up to dinner. She emerged shortly before the hour to find that Harry, Draco, and Ron were all in the common room with books of their own, apparently revising in earnest.

They all looked up in surprise.

"Didn't hear you come in," Harry said.

"I'm good at that," she answered, skirting the issue and leaving them to think what they liked. "How's the revision going?"

"Good." It was still Harry who answered. "We've all got lots to learn still, but it's, you know, starting to sink in a bit."

Hermione wondered if they were actually talking about revision. Whatever had happened, all three of them looked to be at ease, which was a big improvement over yesterday.

"I'm glad," she said simply. "Dinner?"

They made noises of assent, and the three of them headed upstairs together.

Everything's all right? she verified with Harry.

He hummed an agreement. They combined forces. Threw themselves upon my mercy.

Very clever.

Quite, he agreed cordially, seeming to be genuinely pleased that they'd banded together. It certainly seemed like a good sign, and she hoped it meant they had really and truly sorted out their differences.

Dinner was a great deal more pleasant than breakfast or lunch had been, although Hermione found that, like yesterday, she'd been bumped out of her spot at Harry's side so that Ron and Draco could flank him. If it made it less likely that they'd ever have a fight like yesterday's again, Hermione was happy to give up the seat.

She took up a position between Ron and Ginny, and asked the youngest Weasley once again about her exam preparations, which made the younger girl grin as she filled Hermione in.

Looking up at the High Table, Hermione noted that Severus was looking particularly grim. She sighed. For someone who had advocated earlier today the need for discussion in a relationship, she was perhaps coming off as more than a little hypocritical.

It really would be unwise for the Slytherins to catch sight of the Gryffindor Head Girl curled up in the head of Slytherin's sitting room studying. There was a week of school left, and there was no need for wild rumours to spring up because she was being overly sensitive.

After dinner, Severus swept off quickly, leaving her stuck with Harry, Ron, and Draco when they assumed she was coming back to the common room to study. Since it was her room and she was such a stickler for revision, it seemed useless to do anything but fall in line.

They studied for several hours, managing to keep on topic pretty well after Hermione forbade the raising of anything remotely Quidditch-related and reminded them all sternly of exactly how long they had left until exams began.

It was almost eight when she rose and informed them that she was off to see Severus. Ron's grimace was the largest, Draco told her to have fun, and Harry appeared to have inured himself somewhat after yesterday's tea. Or perhaps he was still in shock.

They would no doubt be cross later when they realized that she'd only used Severus as an excuse; what she was actually doing was Apparating to the safe house for the potion.

The last eighteen werewolves were already downstairs and ready to receive the Weresbane. Excitement was high; while this moon wouldn't cure them, it would mean that they were all in the process of being cured, and it would signify that no more werewolves would transform in this house on the next full moon.

Hermione felt as though she were fully as pleased as they were about this fact. She reassured everyone that the Hogwarts helpers would be coming tomorrow, explaining that they were currently mired in exam prep; most of the people present had been through N.E.W.T.s, so they understood.

Following a routine now well-established, Hermione administered the potion and then monitored it. Remus tried to tell her several times that she was free to leave, and she told him an equal number of times that she had no intention of leaving until she'd done everything she'd done in the previous trials.

If something unforeseen did occur, having Remus here looking everyone over wouldn't do a bit of good; there might not have been a problem yet, but she wasn't taking chances with these people's lives. Remus finally gave up when he saw that she wasn't about to budge. The werewolves had looked on with amusement, and none seemed terribly surprised by the outcome of the argument.

They boys didn't appear to have remembered about the potion, or so she gathered because over the next four hours, neither Harry nor Draco made any attempt to contact and remonstrate with her. Interrupting her when she was with Severus was something that they had thus far always tried to avoid.

There were once again no abnormal side effects to report from the ingested potion, and Hermione Apparated back to Hogwarts in very good humour, appearing Masked in front of Severus's door. The wards informed her that no one was in the vicinity except for the awake Slytherin on the other side of the door, so she unMasked and knocked.

She had to wait a long moment for the door to be answered, and she thought that Severus betrayed faint surprise at her presence, but he ushered her in and closed the door firmly behind her.

He made no move to sit down but asked immediately, "To what do I owe the honour?"

His voice was tight enough that she couldn't take this for the joke that she would have liked it to be, so she answered cautiously.

"I've never thought my visiting you was particularly an honour. If it annoys you overmuch this evening, I can return to my room."

His eyes had narrowed sharply at what she thought was a very straightforward statement of fact.

"There isn't anything you wish to say to me?" he asked pointedly.

She tilted her head to one side, knowing he was digging for something specific but not having a clue what it was.

"Plenty of things, as I imagine we could find topics of conversation for years to come. Is there something in particular you'd like to hear?"

He didn't appear to enjoy having the question turned around on him.

"Just tell me," he said harshly.

"Tell you what?" she asked, confused.

"That you think it would be better after all if Minerva accompanied you tomorrow." The tone was particularly scornful and angry, as though he couldn't believe that she'd made him say the words.

At least he had said them; it meant they could clear up their misunderstandings so much more quickly.

She stepped closer to him, watching him eye her warily. "That is not, as it happens, one of the things I had any intention of saying to you today, Severus. I know I left rather abruptly this afternoon, and that's why I came back. I hate being a hypocrite."

"You were upset."

This reminded her of another conversation they'd had not so long ago.

"I wasn't exactly pleased," Hermione conceded but continued self-deprecatingly, "but it was only my ego that was bruised. A little bit of reflection straightened me out."

He stepped closer to look into her eyes, so she thinned her mental barriers enough for him to see that she spoke the truth.

He smiled a curious half-smile. "You were upset."

Apparently he'd seen a little more than she intended.

"Momentarily. It doesn't matter."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, and she knew that he understood. Her feelings hadn't been rational, but he was soothing them anyway.

"Besides," Hermione said briskly as she pulled back slightly so that it was easier for her to look up at him, "there's no way I'm going back to Minerva and telling her that she might as well come along because you and I have quarrelled. I'd not live it down."

Severus chuckled softly. "Albus would be insufferable, too. You need tea before bed, I imagine?"

She acquiesced readily and was served Earl Grey with lemon. In moments like this one, Hermione wondered how much sleep Severus got on a regular basis. He seemed to keep hours rather like hers, and he didn't have the benefit of turning into a unicorn and absorbing light to sustain him. She remembered how cross she had been when her friends had questioned her sleeping habits, however, so she reluctantly conceded that she'd have to trust that he knew how much sleep he needed.

They drank in comfortable silence and then she found herself telling him about how she'd used him as an excuse to sneak off to the safe house, not because she thought he'd be particularly happy but so that she wouldn't run the risk that someone else inadvertently revealed it instead.

Severus, fortunately, was rather amused, pointing out that it was usually some legitimate activity that was the excuse for an illegitimate one, rather than the other way around.

"I don't consider us to be illegitimate, Severus," she said forthrightly given what had happened earlier today.

He nodded, which she supposed would have to do. It was better than outright disbelief, at any rate.

The conversation lapsed, but it was not uncomfortable and they both had their tea.

Severus spoke after a few minutes. "If you wish to spend the day with the werewolves tomorrow, you may."

It took her a moment to unravel this statement into the permission to skip his class that it was. She smiled brilliantly at him.

"Thank you, but I'm not sure you'd live it down if you let Harry and Draco out as well, and I rather doubt you want to single me out especially."

"You have always stood out, Hermione."

She didn't imagine this was precisely a compliment, given what he'd thought of her as a know-it-all first-year, but she let that pass.

"I wouldn't want to miss my last Potions class."

He nodded again, but she thought he was pleased.

Once her mug had been drained and the hour advanced by nearly forty-five minutes, she rose.

"I'd better go. You should be getting plenty of rest, too, you know, given the night you'll be having tomorrow."

He probably found it impertinent, and she doubted it would change anything, but she felt better for having said it.

"Goodnight, Hermione," he said with a trace of amusement.

"Goodnight, Severus."

This, fortunately, resulting in a lovely goodnight kiss, and just before she left, one more thing that she could do for him occurred to her.

"I've a memory for you," she said.

He blinked at her but then met her gaze steadily, and she shared with him the image of the vestibule of the safe house and told him where it was located.

She smiled at him. "Wouldn't want you to have to ask for Tonks's arm for a Side-Along."

His expression was light. "That would indeed be very lowering. Thank you."

She Masked herself and returned to her quarters in a very pleased frame of mind. She and Severus couldn't seem to do things easily, but currently, they were straightening out their troubles in shorter and shorter order. She would hope that trend continued.

Hermione slept until five and then sneaked out to the Forest for an hour and a half so that she would be in the best shape possible for that evening.

At breakfast, Minerva stopped by to inform them that everyone leaving for the safe house would be doing so together. Once again, for reasons best known to the headmaster, now that his deputy was staying, it was apparently permissible for Tonks and Severus to miss dinner and leave right after the last class of the day. Since it didn't materially interfere with Hermione's plans, she chose not to object to Albus's interference. She knew when to pick her battles.

She wondered, now she thought on it, if Albus wasn't upset that he hadn't been asked to attend, but since he seemed to do what he wanted when he wanted anyway, she couldn't imagine that he would have let a lack of invitation stop him if he decided that it was what he really wanted to do.

There was really no use in trying to work out his thought processes.

Her last Potions class made her very nostalgic. They'd had some of their worst classes here over the years, and she'd fallen in love with potions—and the Potions professor—as the years progressed. This was one of the only classrooms in which she had deliberately broken school rules during class time. And it was outside this room tha t she had experienced one of the worst school-related moments of her life. Fighting Voldemort and the Death Eaters was horrible, of course, but as much as it was entwined with her time here at Hogwarts, it was also separated distinctly in her head.

She still remembered how much she had cried after Professor Snape had told her that he saw no difference between her cursed monstrous-sized teeth and her regular ones. She would have expected such a dig from Malfoy and his cronies, but no matter what bad blood lay between Harry and the head of Slytherin, she had not expected such an unprovoked low blow from a teacher towards a student.

She didn't really blame him, not anymore; she was Harry Potter's Muggle-born best friend, and there were appearances to be maintained. But it still remained a sore spot in her psyche. It was a memory that shouldn't have as much power over her as it did, but the nostalgia she was feeling made it worse. She tried to concentrate once more on the present.

Severus had set them several plausible exam practical questions, giving them names of potions from which they had to recall the ingredients and the brewing method, the brewing method without ingredients, and ingredients without a potion name. All had to be properly enumerated with all the relevant information so that the potions could be brewed.

Hermione barely had to think about it, which she could see was not the case for most of the other students. She wondered if scaring the students in the last class was really the most beneficial method right before exams but had to concede that not only would there likely be a frantic scurrying to study Potions texts in the next few days, Severus was not well known for his kind methods of dealing with his students. He'd made his point, certainly.

They walked up to lunch together, Hermione surprised to find that Severus was coming up the stairs with them and seemed inclined to talk—to her, at least.

"You seemed pensive," he observed quietly.

She needed to school her face better, apparently, as this seemed to be his preferred method of pointing out that she looked sad.

"It was the last Potions class I'll ever have."

This was not the instance that she imagined had given her away, but she was hardly going to say more in the corridor. Harry, Draco, and Ron, just in front of her, had doubtless heard as much as she had said.

"I imagine it will be a great relief to the vast majority of your fellow students," he answered.

She grinned at him. "I've no doubt. Is that why you're walking with me? To ensure that Harry can't dance a jig or weep with joy?"

Harry's foot faltered on the stairs, but he evidently decided he didn't dare comment.

"That's it," Severus answered quite agreeably.

They separated at the head of the stairs, and Hermione found that she was being stared at by all three boys.

"Yes?"

They seemed to realize that just outside the Great Hall was no better a place for this discussion than on the stairs, even with Severus now gone, so Harry shook his head, and they headed over to the Gryffindor table.

Does he insist on pretending he's not a decent human being? Harry asked her privately.

In company, generally, she agreed readily.

Harry subsided, and they ate lunch in short order before heading up to the Charms classroom. Filius arrived a few minutes after they did, and Hermione found herself informing him that she intended to stay for the entire class despite his kind invitation for her to cut off early again.

"This is my very last Charms class. I can't miss any of it."

Filius seemed pleased, much as Severus had been when she had told him the same, and the class passed very well. It was all review, and Hermione didn't detect any particular holes in her knowledge as some of the other students did from the looks on their faces. She found it reassuring to know that she appeared to have prepared well. Harry and Ron would tease her, no doubt, but she would forever worry that she'd missed something important; a class where she was reassured that all the major points had been covered was rather bolstering.

Before she knew it, the class was over, and Hermione bundled her books back into her bag, never more pleased about Severus's Christmas gift to her since it let her pile so many texts in without feeling the weight. She, Harry, and Draco needed to go back to their quarters for their cloaks and so that the boys could decide which texts would be wisest for them to bring should they have time to study while the werewolves were resting.

When they parted after Charms, Ron had looked as though he wished he were coming with them, but he still hadn't even tried to speak to his mother.

Once the three students and two professors had gathered together in the entrance way, they set off. Passing the gates, they Disapparated.

Remus appeared to have Tonks radar because no sooner had they appeared, he came trotting up the dungeon steps to greet them. He restrained himself to only a kiss on Tonks's cheek, which might have had to do with the strength of Severus's sneer simply from that mild gesture.

When the six of them got downstairs, they were swarmed by Sophia, Lou, Alissa, and Dorian. The littlest girl wanted hugs and kisses from Tonks, and the three other children looked as though they wouldn't mind the same though they didn't feel they could simply demand them as Sophia had done.

There was a general round of greetings with hugs exchanged, but before Hermione could introduce the one person they didn't know, Severus spoke.

"What are you going to do with the children?"

She regarded him with puzzlement. "Do with them?"

"Their lycanthropy," he said impatiently.

This didn't clear the matter up for her, so she answered slowly, "The same thing I'm doing with the adults: curing them."

Severus looked at her as though she had a serious Quidditch-related brain injury.

"Children can't become Animagi."

Harry grinned suddenly as he understood the problem. He spoke with glee. "There isn't a cure for lycanthropy, either."

Sophia and Lou were watching the exchange politely, but Alissa was frowning fiercely, and as Hermione watched, tears began to slip down Dorian's cheeks.

"Is it safe to have him here?" the young girl demanded fiercely, hands on her hips and expression fierce.

Coupled with the fact that Albus had made a token attempt to prevent Severus from coming, Hermione suddenly had a very bad feeling about what was going on.

This was not a conversation that she had anticipated having right now, but there was no way she could leave the concern unaddressed. She wished it had occurred to her as a possibility before now. She knew, after all, how the children had become werewolves.

She threw up privacy charms to prevent the more remote dungeon occupants from hearing what was being said but she didn't try to prevent those clustered around her from hearing what was looking to be a confrontation. They were already half-involved now.

She addressed herself to the two children as she gestured towards the tall man in black. "This is Severus Snape. He's been a spy for almost as long as I've been alive. This means he brings very important information back to us, but in order to do that, he has to go to Death Eater meetings and do what Death Eaters do. To answer your question, Alissa, I trust him with my life."

Dorian's lower lip had begun to tremble while Alissa's nostrils had flared. Harry, Tonks, and Remus were regarding her with very similar expressions of astonishment, as this was hardly the sort of introduction she normally gave. Draco was looking grave, indicating that he'd probably worked out what was happening, and Severus's face was perfectly expressionless.

"But if he spies for us, he must spy for You Know Who." Alissa's eyes skewered Severus. "If he doesn't bring back information to them, he wouldn't be trusted."

"He's spent a very long time keeping us safe, telling Voldemort only what he had to," Hermione explained. Hoping that Severus would forgive her, she added, "He was caught by Voldemort and tortured for his defection."

"Did he not deserve it?" Alissa sneered shrilly.

Severus's face could have been carved from marble, and no one else in the group made a sound.

Hermione found that she had stepped up to the younger girl without thought, her voice hardening. "He was tortured to the brink of death, yet he did not give up one secret that would harm us. He could have given them me and might even have saved himself had he done so, but he did not even consider it. I rescued him because he is one of the bravest and best people I know. He does not deserve to die, and if you have a problem with my mate, you have a problem with me, is that understood?"

Alissa dropped back, hunching in on herself, head lowered, peeking up at Hermione.

"I apologize. I did not know. He will come to no harm."

There might not have been an audible "alpha" tacked onto the end of that sentence, but Hermione could hardly miss Alissa's submission. Although Hermione's words had been heartfelt and absolute, she recognized that a normal ten-year-old would probably have screamed that she had a problem with Hermione.

Hermione might be fiercely protective when it came to Severus, but she didn't want to scar these children for life.

"Right, everyone," she said firmly, "Dorian, Alissa, and I are going to have a conversation over here." She gestured towards a corner between the cells. "And the rest of you are going to go meet the soon-to-be Animagi over there." She gestured again as she lowered her privacy charms.

Since her tone had been unequivocal, they all moved to obey.

She joined Dorian and Alissa on the floor so that their heights wouldn't be so disparate.

"I didn't mean to be rude earlier," Hermione clarified, making sure her tone was much gentler. "I know it must have been very difficult for you when you recognized Severus. But I swear to you that he did not join in the attack willingly. In order to maintain his position, he's had to witness and participate in some horrible events. Just like some of the werewolves have done horrible things when they're werewolves, right? That doesn't make them bad people, just trapped in a situation they can't get out of."

"He's always been a spy?"

Alissa's questions were quite piercing today.

"I didn't say he was perfect," Hermione conceded, not wanting to sugar-coat the truth when Alissa had been through too much already. "Severus can be petty and rude and downright mean sometimes, but where it counts, he's a good man. He regretted his decision to become a Death Eater quickly; the choice was made when he was young, and I know he would undo it if he could. He has been striving to make up for it ever since. If he could have saved your family, he would have."

Dorian sniffed. "He was the one to turn us over to Greyback."

"What makes you say that?"

His sister took over the explanation. "That's what he said before. What are you going to do with the children? He suggested we be given to Greyback. It's because of him that we're werewolves."

Hermione knew nothing more about this incident than what she was being told right now, but she trusted Severus.

"What would have happened if you weren't given to Greyback?"

The two of them frowned, and she knew it wasn't the nicest topic to make them consider, but she watched them think the question through.

"We would have been killed," Alissa answered slowly. "We would have died like Mum and Dad."

Hermione nodded. "I know being a werewolf has been horrible, but it meant you lived."

"Meant you could save us," Dorian said, tucked in beside his sister and seeming much smaller than normal.

She nodded slightly once more. "It meant that you could live another day and as it happens, be alive for the cure to be given to you. If Severus hadn't turned you over to Greyback, you wouldn't be here now. And I know it hurts to be without your parents. Harry's without his, too, and Sophia and I don't get to see ours anymore. But they'd want us to be alive."

Alissa nodded shakily while Dorian had started to cry again. Hermione pulled the little boy into her arms and rocked him slowly back and forth, tugging Alissa closer so that she could hold the girl close as well.

"I know it's a lot to try to understand, and I'm very sorry this had to happen tonight," Hermione told them very sincerely, glad beyond words that they had already been cured and this wouldn't destroy their concentration for such an important effort. "But I swear to you, Severus will do everything in his power to keep you safe, just like I'm doing."

They both nodded, and Alissa said, muffled but clearly, "He's your mate."

Hermione nodded. The wolves, she thought, understood this concept better than most of the humans. "He is. He doesn't ever have to go back to Voldemort, and he's here to help us. He wanted to come see exactly how my cure worked. Do you think you could show him what you can do?"

Alissa pulled back to wipe at her eyes. "He didn't believe that children could be Animagi."

"That's right," Hermione agreed. "Shall we go surprise him?"

Alissa smiled, and her effort at appearing cheerful did wonders for Dorian who liked to follow his sister's example.

Hermione rose to her feet, setting the little boy on his.

"You don't ever have to be alone with him if you're not comfortable with that," she said. "Just ask for someone else to go with you if that's what you need. I don't want you to feel unsafe here."

Alissa nodded, taking her brother's hand. "We'll be okay. We have to face our fears so that they don't grow stronger."

Hermione nodded, recognizing a young Harry in the faces that were staring up at her. This was what was so amazing about children. They could be dealt crippling blows, but they just kept fighting. These two had lost their family, been turned into werewolves, been suddenly confronted with one of the people who had been there when they'd been attacked, and they were rallying before Hermione's very eyes.

"You're being very brave," she acknowledged. "I've had to face some big fears myself over the years, so I know that it's all right to be afraid sometimes, too. Admitting that there's something scary out there is part of facing the fear and eventually not letting it have any power over you, but it doesn't often happen straightaway. We're all here if you need to talk to us. Remus especially."

And she'd talk to him about making sure they had access to a proper counsellor if they needed one.

Alissa nodded again. "Thank you."

The Gryffindor led the two children back across the room to where Severus was standing. He seemed to be on the outskirts of the rest of the group, and Hermione frowned. Was it always going to be like that, Severus the outsider while everyone else congregated in a big, happy throng? He was her mate, and he was the Potions expert, and he didn't deserve to be left out like this. She sighed. He was also the only one of them who hadn't been here before, and there'd been a bloody scene when he arrived.

The two children were quite brave about approaching him, Dorian only tucking himself slightly behind his sister who marched right up to Severus and held out her hand.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be rude earlier."

Severus's eyes rose briefly to Hermione's before he shook the small hand that was offered to him.

"There is no need to apologize, Alissa," he said gravely. "You reacted quite understandably under the circumstances. Allow me to apologize for the pain that I caused your family."

Hermione wondered when he'd learnt the child's name.

The auburn-haired girl met his gaze firmly, correcting him with only a trace of a stammer. "The pain that V-Voldemort caused. We would be dead if not for you. We understand that you did everything you could."

Severus's eyes sought Hermione's again.

"Now," she said, just in case Severus was thinking about bringing any of his questions up right here and now, "I believe there's something you wanted to show Severus."

The two backed up a little so that they would have room to transform. Alissa looked to her brother until he smiled at her and let go of her hand so that she knew he was feeling all right to proceed.

In as smooth a transition as Hermione had ever seen, the two children became little red wolves. And Severus, Hermione was delighted to see, came awfully close to gaping at the two of them. The two pups had picked up on the same emotion, apparently, because they yipped happily, tails wagging in a rather dog-like manner as they pranced around in circles so that Severus could see them from all sides.

"My turn!"

Remus had Sophia in his arms, but at her yell, he set her down and let her transform so that she could race over to bowl into Dorian. Lou, who'd been talking to Harry and Draco, transformed as well, and approached more sedately, managing to seem almost aloof until Alissa pounced on him, and he got dragged into the mock fight that they were all staging for Severus's benefit.

Harry and Draco strolled over at a leisurely pace.

"Children can't become Animagi," Harry said.

"Just like there's no cure for lycanthropy," Draco agreed, nodding sagely.

They both broke into grins, clearly as pleased by Severus's reaction as Hermione was.

"How did you do that?" he breathed.

"That's why you're here," she answered. "There are three other children, and they're all going to become Animagi tonight, along with the rest of the werewolf adults. This is the final trial of the war werewolves."

Statistically, with all the unrest and crazy evil dictators in England recently (or the one who just wouldn't die), England had an abnormally large population of werewolves at the present time. There was a big old world out there, but a lot of werewolves had been here. She just had to make it through the Final Battle, and then she could see about curing all the werewolves everywhere.

Once the children were back in human form, Hermione got them settled again with Gemma, Adam, and Steven in order to continue explaining what was happening. She thought the children who had already been through the trial were still some of the best teachers for the other children. She left Remus and Tonks in charge, as anything that involved Sophia interested them deeply, and then headed upstairs to find some tea and a little privacy.

The kitchen, as it turned out, was quite crowded, and Hermione knew that if she tried to wade through everyone to get to her tea, she'd be in there for half an hour chatting. She therefore bypassed the liquid that she was sorely in need of and headed for the library.

It was usually quite a well-used room, as so many of these people were trying to better educate themselves. This evening, however, almost all of the ex-werewolves were downstairs. Now that more than half of them had achieved their Animagus form, it was possible for all the remaining werewolves, those who had had barely an idea what Animagi were at the beginning of all this, to have one-on-one tutoring with an ex-werewolf who had been through everything they were being asked to go through right now. This gave them the best chance of transforming successfully, and every single person in this house was devoted to making that happen.

This evening, therefore, the library was deserted, and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her. She'd only been in here a couple of times because so much of her focus was on the dungeons and what they were doing with the potion down there. Back when they were first preparing the house, however, she had helped Draco cull out the inappropriate material and recommended some texts, which had given her the opportunity to get a good handle on the material. There was still plenty on the shelves that she would like the chance to read one day. Right now, though, she had come because she wanted peace and quiet and the chance to regroup.

Standing by the window, she stared blindly out to the sky and the lawn that she'd never set foot on. Until the war was over, every single one of them Apparated (or was Apparated) into the building. This way, there was no way their Fidelius could be compromised, not even if the Death Eaters were watching outside; this was, after all, a Malfoy property.

Bloody Death Eaters. Bloody Voldemort. She might have known that they'd screw everything up tonight. This was the final trial. No one had tried to kidnap anyone since the first one, she'd already transformed a whole big group of adults and a whole set of children. She'd thought she could get this one right, and so there had been no hesitation in her mind about bringing Severus along.

It had gone completely pear-shaped. He had been confronted by children who identified him as a Death Eater and wished him dead within thirty seconds of his arrival. She shook her head, and it was only as she sniffed that she realized she'd started crying. What else could possibly go wrong?

Strong arms wrapped around her. She didn't think she'd even heard the door open, but she leaned back against him, not making the slightest effort to deny that his support right now was very welcome.

He kissed her hair. "You're crying."

She wiped hurriedly at her cheeks. "Bit of mysterious condensation, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

His voice was dark. "I shouldn't have come."

She turned round in his embrace so that she could look up at his shadowed face.

"I'm sorry it was so horrible," she said miserably. "I meant for it to be so very different. You go back to Hogwarts, and when I get back, I'll tell you the version where you weren't slandered as soon as you walked in the door."

He sighed. "You're so much a Gryffindor sometimes, Hermione, that I find myself quite at a loss. I should go because I've ruined your triumphant day, not because anything that's happened has upset me. Those children were very right."

She shook her head. "They were upset. Rightfully upset, perhaps, but that doesn't make what they said right." Severus opened his mouth to protest. "Even Alissa and Dorian agree with me, so don't you dare tell me that you deserved to die, Severus Snape." He closed his mouth, lips quirking up slightly at her fierce declaration. "I meant every word I said today."

He tugged her closer again so that they were flush against one another.

"I know you did." There was an edge of awed incomprehension in his voice. "You didn't even know what I did, and you defended me anyway."

"I'll always defend you," she answered. Her head tilted to one side. "Well, not when you're being an obnoxious prat." He snorted. "But whenever your honour and integrity is called into question. I believe in you, you know."

"I know," he answered again. "I can see that you do. I'd like to earn that trust."

"You have done, as far as I'm concerned." Gently, she added, "I think you need to learn to forgive yourself."

His jaw clenched, but he only put a bit of distance between them rather than pushing her away completely or storming out of the room. They were making progress.

He spoke stiffly. "There are a great number of people who would disagree with you and who are entirely certain that I don't merit forgiveness."

"I can't change the mind of every person on the planet," she answered with a shrug. "Some of them will always believe that you're evil, but that doesn't make it so. There are people out there who will always believe that I'm in love with Viktor and was using Harry to get to him. There are people who believe that Harry should die so that Voldemort should rule supreme. But those who are close to us know the truth. Those who suffered have a right to be angry, but they also have an obligation to hear the whole truth before they pass final judgement. Think of where we'd be right now if you, Draco, Harry, or I stuck with our initial opinions of one another. There are still plenty of imperfections shared out amongst the lot of us, but even Harry has conceded that you're not half bad."

Severus made a face. "A ringing endorsement from the Boy Who Lived."

She smiled. "Shall I see about getting it published? Sway the public opinion in your favour?"

He glared at her. "If I see an owl that so much as smells like it came from the Prophet, they will never find your body."

She grinned at him. "The important people understand us."

He tightened his hold on her waist, pulling her flush against him. "You understand me," he corrected with unusual gentleness before he sealed his lips over hers.

She melted into him, thinking muzzily that she cared what he thought about her, too, and wasn't it lovely that he didn't think this evening had been a complete waste. At least he wasn't talking about going back to Hogwarts anymore. There'd be less snogging if she were here and he were there.

She was feeling a great deal more content when he allowed her to breathe again, and the evening seemed to be on a definite upswing.

"I believe the masses are clamouring for you downstairs," he said resignedly. "They can't seem to do anything without you."

She laughed slightly. "That's just them being polite. They all know what they're doing by now."

"There's nothing wrong with politeness," he declared firmly.

She thought this was a bit rich, coming from him, and her thought must have been evident on her face, because his lips thinned before he said, "I meant towards me, not from me."

"Ah," she said, suppressing her laughter with difficulty. "I did wonder."

"You keep that up," he groused, "and I won't give you the present I brought you."

"You brought me a present?" she said sceptically.

"I did."

"Give it over, then," she said eagerly, "before you change your mind, and I don't get to see what you think is a proper gift."

He looked ever so slightly uncomfortable now. "It's not really—"

She shook her head. "You can't possibly start this conversation and not end it properly." She held out her hand. "Gift."

Looking rather put-upon, he retrieved the gift in question from the table and handed it to her. She smiled at him, wrapping her hands around the warm porcelain.

"You're a lifesaver. It's what I came up for, but I wasn't feeling quite ready to brave the kitchen."

The tension in his form eased, and she realized that she'd left him expecting that she'd be disappointed by tea because she was now expecting a real gift.

"You got it spot on," she said, smiling at him.

He ghosted a finger down her cheek. "Drink up," he admonished. "I'll not stand here until Po—Harry sends up a search party."

Hermione grinned at him. "Does he know you've come up here?"

Severus nodded.

She was delighted and said, laughing, "You know what he probably thinks we're doing right now."

It only took Severus a moment to work out what conclusion the adolescent boy had likely come to, and then he had hold of her elbow and was tugging her out of the room.

"He's probably told the whole bloody room by now," Severus growled. "We're not staying here a moment longer."

Chapter Fifty-One: The Questions

Hermione allowed herself to be led, wise enough not to share with Severus the fact that she found it rather funny that he cared so much about what Harry thought the two of them had been up to in the library.

They reached the dungeons, and it did seem as though many of the people were staring at them.

"I am going to kill him," Severus pronounced.

She narrowly managed not to laugh, knowing that she shouldn't take death threats between Severus and Harry unseriously. Since she was the one who'd invented the cure and was here making it happen, she was generally in for a fair bit of attention no matter what. She thought it rather unlikely that Harry had actually gone around telling everyone that she and Severus had been off having sex.

The Gryffindor boy was smirking, however, when she and Severus joined him, Draco, and Remus; Hermione wondered her best friend realized the dangerous waters into which he had just drifted.

"Have a nice time?" he asked, the insinuation clear.

"I don't want to speculate about how you … operate, Mr Potter," Severus said in his most cutting drawl, "but any 'nice times' that occur between Hermione and myself go on a lot longer than twenty minutes."

Draco had a very suspicious coughing fit, Harry went red, and Hermione and Remus laughed. Severus smirked, happy that the status quo had been restored.

"All right," she said before anyone could attempt to start a protracted argument over the issue of Harry's stamina, "we have work to do tonight, so I'm splitting us up. The lot of you will continue to be in charge of the adults, and I'm going to concentrate on the children. If you need any assistance, you let me know."

They sobered enough to agree.

She led Severus over to where the children were sitting with Tonks.

"You're welcome to take a look at the transformation of the adults," she told him, "but I don't want you picking any fights with Harry, not while he's helping. What he's doing is important."

"I'll behave with perfect civility."

She doubted that their definitions of perfect civility were the same, but she trusted that he didn't want anything more to go wrong for her tonight; he would mostly curb his tongue. Since Harry was concentrating on what he was doing, she thought they'd be all right.

As they settled, she acknowledged that it made her nervous to have Severus here; his opinion mattered to her very much. Still, given how horribly the night had started, almost anything she did now would look like an improvement. And she was the expert out of all the people here. The children reposed every confidence in her, and there was simply no reason for her not to get it right in front of Severus.

Sophia, Dorian, Alissa, and Lou were living proof that her cure worked on children, so last month's concern was gone; she just needed to replicate those results. She'd pretend that Severus wasn't really sitting there watching her, that was all. Since she'd never let him get to her during tests and Potions practicals when he was trying to be intimidating, it should be easy work now.

With Severus observing, she went through the same process that she'd employed on the last new moon. The four children had all come to watch, although Sophia, to Hermione's not very well-hidden amusement, had decided that the seated Severus was the perfect piece of furniture for her to sprawl across and fall asleep on.

Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen him so uncomfortable, but as Sophia slept peacefully without exploding, crying, or in any other way upsetting Severus's life, he relaxed bit by bit until he was finally able to rearrange the little girl into a more comfortable position when she turned in her sleep and half fell out of his lap. He even brushed her hair out of her face, and Hermione suspected that she was now looking much as Harry did whenever he turned to mush in front of Draco. She wasn't sure that anybody who saw Severus doing this right now would be completely afraid of him ever again.

He caught her staring, his look one of defensiveness and challenge, and she averted her eyes and got back to the job at hand, which was waking the three newest Animagi and ensuring that Gemma, Adam, and Steven could change into their forms as they liked. Since these three were seven, eight, and nine, it wasn't as much of a challenge as it had been with Sophia.

They still lacked the power and concentration that prevented many adults from ever making this transformation. This meant the same solution as last time, and Hermione was now sitting with one of the men most likely to recognize what she was doing. Fortunately, as she'd already stated once today, she trusted him with her life.

One by one, she transformed with each of the children until they could do it on their own. She remained peripherally aware of Severus watching her, and each time she came back to herself between children, she found that he was staring at her more intensely than before.

How are you doing over there? she asked Harry.

Good. They're not all perfect yet, but they're all transforming.

I've just finished with Steven, so I'm ready to send them over, if that's all right.

Go for it. Harry sent a broad mental smile. The more, the merrier.

She suggested to the children that they show off their transformation abilities to everyone else, and all six who were awake were happy to oblige.

Hermione rose to go join everyone else. Severus was still staring at her.

"I'll take Sophia," she offered.

He rose fluidly to his feet, shifting the sleeping girl so that her head rested on his shoulder. "I am capable of carrying her myself."

She took this to mean that he was willing to be seen with Sophia.

"As you like."

"We're going to have a conversation later," he warned her.

"As you say."

She didn't honestly think there was much else she could say, currently, and the sleeping child in his arms apparently had a beneficial effect on his tongue.

As they rejoined the others, Hermione saw to her amusement that Harry was gaping at Severus as though he had never seen him before, and even Remus and Tonks looked rather surprised. It was Remus who broached the topic.

"I hadn't thought you'd be quite so comfortable with a child in your arms, Severus."

Hermione wondered if she was the only one to detect the proprietary note in Remus's voice. She hoped it was a case of a wolfish notion of pack because he had better realize with the logical part of his brain that Severus had no intention of trying to steal the child away from him.

"It is not a task in which I frequently participate, Remus," Severus answered, and she was pleased that he was making an effort to be civil to her friends, "but it is hardly more difficult than riding a bicycle."

"What other children have you held?" Harry demanded as though doubtful of the veracity of this statement.

"Two others." Severus surprised her by answering rather than telling Harry to mind his own business. "Both of whom are in this room."

Everyone's eyes lit upon Draco pretty quickly, as this was a relatively logical conclusion even without knowing that he was Severus's godson. The second person seemed to stymie everyone, and Hermione waited, trying not to smirk, for everyone else to reach the same conclusion as she had.

It went by process of elimination: Remus was too old, Severus hadn't known her or Tonks as babies, Draco was the first, and that left….

"Me?" Harry squeaked.

"Once," Severus said, his voice slightly strained but softer than normal. "When I came to see Lily. She insisted that I hold you."

Harry still looked as though a fundamental part of his worldview had been blown out of the water. Knowing how Severus had felt about Lily and James Potter as a married couple, Hermione could guess the reason that Severus had been to see them, and she didn't want to risk anyone else asking that question.

"Now that they've had their fun, I think we should see about putting the children to bed," Hermione said authoritatively. "They've all had plenty of excitement tonight."

Severus immediately offered to carry Sophia upstairs, leaving Hermione sure that he'd spotted the dangerous waters into which they'd been headed. Remus and Tonks rounded up the other children, and all of their protests were halted when Hermione told them that it was important that they get lots of sleep; there would be plenty of time for further transformations tomorrow and all the days after.

Since she hadn't been able to witness most of it, she stayed downstairs to congratulate all the adults who had gained their forms tonight. Afterwards, they collectively moved upstairs, some to eat, some desiring only a bed. Severus, Remus, and Tonks reappeared.

"Only two more weeks," Remus observed.

"Only two more weeks," Hermione agreed. And not much longer than that until her second great big plan came to fruition. "Thanks for working so hard on this, Remus."

He shook his head. "It's your work, Hermione. I'm just doing what needs to be done. There was never any question of my taking this on."

She smiled slightly at him. "And you think there was a question of my doing so?"

Remus opened his mouth, but Severus interrupted. "No," he said flatly. "We are most definitely not starting an absurdly Gryffindor conversation where you both keep demurring and praising each other. It's time to go."

He turned on his heel and started off, and Hermione grinned, waved goodbye to Remus, and followed. The others bid Remus farewell and fell in step with her. They might find Severus brusque, but they all knew that he was right.

They regained the school grounds which were very quiet this early in the morning. En masse, they trooped downstairs, Tonks waving tiredly at them and heading in the opposite direction as Hermione, Severus, Harry, and Draco.

Harry and Draco looked as though they were contemplating the necessity of the pretence that they didn't share the same bedroom. Even with the door connecting the two rooms, Draco didn't head through his own quarters unless he absolutely had to, and she was guessing that he was willing to take the risk in front of Severus while Harry was less certain that was a wise idea.

It became a moot point, however, when Severus grabbed her elbow and tugged her down the corridor past both Draco's door and her own.

"I'm going this way," she told the two boys, craning her neck around so that she could see Harry and Draco. "See you later."

Both looked rather bemused, and even though she turned back to face forward so she wouldn't trip over her own two feet, she knew that they were both going into her and Harry's quarters.

Sadly, she didn't think Severus was dragging her off to have sex or even a cuddle.

They reached his quarters, and she was relieved when he immediately released her once they were inside the room; it meant the gesture had largely been for show.

"You do realize it's half five?" she asked pointedly. "We should be getting at least a little sleep so that we're functional for class at nine."

"Sit."

She sat, and he joined her in the seat opposite.

"Never," he pronounced, "not once in my entire life, have I seen someone do what you just did."

She didn't pretend to misunderstand him.

"They wouldn't have been able to sustain the transformation otherwise," she explained. "They're only children."

"I know that." He rolled his eyes. "Haven't any of the others wondered how in Merlin's name you managed it?"

She shrugged. "In a general sort of way, I guess, but I've cured lycanthropy, so most of them just think I've come up with another clever way to get around the age restriction."

"It is a clever way," he said, shaking his head as he let out a huff of breath. "The Ministry would be terrified."

"Why do you think I haven't said?" she asked, frowning at him. "I'm not completely daft, you know. I did what needed to be done to cure them as I promised, but I'm not taking risks without reason."

"They would have been able to do it on their own eventually."

"You mean in years," she clarified acidly. "Sophia mightn't have been able to transform for fifteen years. At least a decade, even if she was as powerful and determined as the Marauders were. I made the only choice I could live with."

"And if others find out?" he demanded.

"That would only happen if you told them," she said, her tone making clear that she didn't think this was likely.

It was his turn to frown. "You don't think one of those garrulous little children will say something at some point?"

"If they remembered, they might," she answered steadily.

The complete blankness of his expression told her that she'd succeeded in surprising him.

"They're children," she found herself repeating. "They're not supposed to mind their tongues. The whole point of what I'm doing is to let them be as normal as they possibly can. It protects me and them."

"Of course it does," he said with the air of a man who thought this went without saying. "I hadn't thought—"

"That I'd be that ruthless?" she snapped sharply.

"That you'd let common sense overrule sentimentality," he corrected, his glare letting her know that he didn't appreciate words being put in his mouth. "It was the only sensible course of action."

She nodded. It was the reason she'd done it, of course, but her sentimentality was still twinging in the corners of her brain.

"They're not easy choices," he said quietly. "But you've done what's right."

Her nod was a little firmer this time.

"Could you really have done anything in their minds?"

She nodded. "I didn't try, but … I was in control, yes."

"Do you think it would be the same with an adult?"

She narrowed her eyes at the question; she sincerely doubted it was random curiosity, but she nodded once again. "I'm not certain whether I could gain access to the mind of an expert Occluder, but if I did get in, I believe I could at least fight for dominance. If I won, then I would be in control."

He was silent for a long moment, and she waited, wondering what it was that he, Severus Snape, was gearing himself up to in her presence. These tended to be Earth-shattering confessions.

"Could you do so with me?"

She stared at him, waiting for the words she thought she'd heard him utter to reveal their true meaning. They continued to hang in the air just as she'd understood the first time, however, and the challenge on Severus's face told her that she hadn't got it wrong.

"Perhaps," she answered noncommittally. "Why would you want me to?"

He exhaled sharply through his nose. "For the same reason you helped the children."

"You're not a werewolf."

He looked at her as though she'd just said the stupidest thing on the face of the planet, and as her brain caught up with her mouth, she offered him an apologetic smile.

"I'd wondered," she confessed quietly. It had been impossible not to miss the "no trespassing" signs that he had strewn up regarding this topic. "What makes you think this would help?"

"You think I am incapable?" His voice was carefully expressionless.

She knew what he was really asking. "You're one of the most powerful wizards I know, Severus. But there has to be a reason you haven't done it thus far. It's not for everyone."

He closed his eyes briefly, opening them to stare at the fire in the grate rather than at her.

"I knew the Marauders were up to something in their sixth year. They were not nearly as discreet as they liked to think they were, although as it turns out, I had not quite worked out all the details." She nodded; he would never have gone out to the Shack if he'd known. He still was not looking at her but continued, loathing in his voice, "Much as it pains me to admit it, we were appallingly similar in some ways. I thought I had fastened on just the way that I could show up Black and Potter: I would achieve the Animagus transformation and become a fearsome and impressive animal. I was sure it was the way to find out what secret they were hiding, too, because no matter how much I tried in human form, I hadn't been able to get close enough.

"Black must have caught sight of me at some point, and shortly before I attempted the actual transformation, he came up with his clever prank, and I overheard one more piece of news. It was an out of the way location and made perfect sense as their little base of operation for whatever mischief they were up to. After verifying this fact, I intended to perfect the transformation and then sneak out there and make them regret ever having met me."

Silence stretched, only the crackle of the fire audible, the light flickering across Severus's lined face.

"I found their secret, and it was not one that I'd ever anticipated. Lupin was a werewolf." He shook his head. "I hate James Potter, and even I had trouble believing that the Golden Gryffindors of my time were let off quite so easily, but there's a reason I acknowledged the debt I owed him. It is unlikely that the werewolf would have let me live given how long it had been without human flesh."

She moved to kneel in front of his chair, clasping his ice cold hands with her own warm ones.

"You shouldn't have come tonight. I had no idea."

His eyes rose to meet hers, the fire reflecting in their dark depths.

"It has been a long time since I've let my emotions rule me."

In other words, it had been a long time since he'd been allowed to avoid something he feared.

"I want no part in making you unhappy," she argued. "I shouldn't have made you come."

He snorted, turning his hands palms up so that he could grasp hers. "I wanted to go, as you well know, and I want to become an Animagus."

"But you've not been able?"

He sighed. "I tried after that, but the spells are never effective."

"What about if someone else casts them on you?"

He regarded her flatly, and she realized that he had never told anyone else of his difficulty. She was honoured by the trust he was placing in her.

"We should start there," she said firmly. "More drastic forms of intervention will be used only if necessary."

He considered this and then offered a short assent.

"It's better if I stand?"

"Absolutely not!" she exclaimed.

"I'll sit, then," he said, clearly surprised at her vehemence.

She rolled her eyes. "When you're trying to become an Animagus, it is better that you stand during various parts of the process. But if you think we're about to try this now, you're out of your mind."

"But—" he started.

She rose to her feet, hands on her hips. "Severus Snape, it's six o'clock in the morning. I've transformed three other people already, we have class in three hours, and you haven't done any preliminary reading and preparation."

"I—" he tried again.

She shook her head. "I gave Harry a book about it for Christmas and made him read it and my notes for months. Remus read about wolves. Draco got blow-by-blow pages of notes from Remus. There is no way on this Earth that I'm going to risk you to an unprepared transformation when we're both tired, do you hear me?"

He looked oddly torn between taking offence and being touched, and he settled for grumbling. "I only thought we could get started. Of course I didn't think we were going to do it all right now."

That was exactly what he'd thought, and they both knew it.

"Get a little sleep," she admonished. "You're going to be a holy terror for your classes as it is."

He rose from his chair. "And that would differ from every other class in what manner?"

Her lips curved up into a grin. "True."

He tugged her to him with his hands on her hips so that he could kiss her. She twined her arms around his neck and responded enthusiastically.

When he finally drew back, they were both breathing heavily, and the look in his eyes said that he was thinking precisely what she was thinking—which was a very bad idea given the time. Since a completely sleepless night would be more hazardous to him—and the collective student body—than to her, she reluctantly disentangled herself.

"Sleep for two hours," she instructed. "Be a little late for breakfast."

"You're not staying?"

She smiled. "I really want to. But you should sleep for two hours, and as you were kind enough to point out to Harry earlier today, what we'd get up to would take up all that time."

He smirked as he was reminded of Harry's embarrassment.

"Go on, then," he said, voice a growl, "before I forget myself."

Being thrown down and ravished sounded pretty damn appealing, so she made haste to depart before her weakening resolve crumbled entirely.

"Goodnight, Severus."

"Goodnight, Hermione."

Back in her own quarters, she briefly regretted that she had put the needs of the other students above her own. But if Severus drove too many first- through fifth-years to tears, it wouldn't be pretty, and it would probably be her duty as Head Girl to deal with them. It was safer this way.

She wanted to be as functional as possible, so she changed her mind about her destination, Masked herself, and sneaked out of the castle despite the hour. She had spent a good portion of the night casting strong spells, not to mention jumping through several people's brains, and she needed to be politely attentive for all of her professors' last classes this week.

Forty minutes in her unicorn form cantering around the Forest was enough to make her feel as though she had had a good night's sleep; despite all the trouble being a Pure Adult had caused, it definitely had its perks.

She was definitely the most alert of the people who'd been to the safe house yesterday. Tonks had surely encountered sleepless missions in her time as an Auror, but either she was growing soft at her "desk job" here or she'd decided that the school environment didn't pose enough of a threat to warrant her trying to hide how tired she was. At breakfast, she looked bleary-eyed and even clumsier than usual, stumbling all the way to her spot and practically falling into her chair.

Draco kept yawning, which set Harry off every time; just like two weeks ago, the Gryffindor was present this early in the morning because Draco was. She didn't think Harry was going to last long once she and Draco were in Runes.

Her predictions about Severus's irritability turned out to be quite accurate from what she could gather throughout the day. Those whom he had taught in the morning had actually been relatively lucky; he wasn't happy to be up, but he'd had less of the day to annoy him. As the day progressed, his little nap grew into a more and more distant memory, and the number of dunderheaded students he'd had to deal with only grew.

By the end of the day, word of Severus's horribly bad mood had spread through the entire school, and a quick peek at the wards told her that there was no need for rounds that evening; the students had planted themselves in the library or their common rooms and weren't attempting travel when there was the chance that they might encounter Severus.

The taciturn man came to retrieve Hermione from the common room at nine o'clock.

Are you certain it's a good idea to go with him? Harry asked worriedly.

She laughed mentally. Don't worry about me. I know when I have to be concerned about Severus's behaviour.

She'd had plenty of opportunity, this year especially, to gauge when he was in a truly vitriolic mood, and now was not one of those times. From what she could see, he was just tired and pissed off.

Better you than me, Harry conceded finally, shaking his head at what he evidently viewed as her folly.

Severus led her back to his quarters for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

Once the door was closed, she observed, "You know, if any of your Slytherins are watching, they're likely to have formed a distinct impression of what's going on here."

"Do you care?" he snapped.

"I'd take out an advert in the Prophet," she answered easily. "I was under the impression, however, that you didn't want our relationship advertised, especially amongst the Slytherins."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"You can leave." His voice was marginally less abrupt but not much warmer.

She stepped further into the room and closer to him.

"I'm entirely capable of it, yes. I don't have any intention of doing so in the near future, however."

Up close, the lines of stress and fatigue on his face were more apparent, but some of them seemed to fade away as she wrapped her arms around his waist, locking her hands behind him and pressing them closely together.

She was fairly certain that he wanted to renew the topic of Animagi, but seeing the state of him, there was no way she would allowed it. Fortunately, her plastering herself all over him had conveyed just the message she intended, and she was hoping that she could tire him out in the correct venue—a bed—to facilitate his getting a very good night's sleep tonight.

She was given further evidence of how tired he had to be when he actually snuggled up to her as soon as they were in bed. It was usually only when he was out of his mind with pain from the Cruciatus that he forgot himself enough to seek the comfort he desired without any subterfuge.

Yet here he was, head pillowed on her shoulder, an arm and a leg flung over her, allowing her to rhythmically stroke his hair. She liked to know that he needed her sometimes, although she didn't suppose she could ever tell him that.

It was some minutes later that she realized that she didn't have to worry about tiring him out enough to sleep; Severus was already dead the world, breathing evenly and deeply at her side.

He might be annoyed later, but she was quite pleased that he had relaxed his guard enough around her to fall asleep this easily; he had been at pains throughout the day to show the students that he was fully functional.

Having been out to see the unicorns that morning, Hermione wasn't feeling terribly tired at nine in the evening, but since she was in a warm bed with a pleasantly heavy-limbed Severus, she had no desire to leave.

She puzzled for only a moment on how to make herself tired in short order; she'd simply have to do more with the wards than she normally did. It felt, admittedly, a little bit strange to be working with them while in bed with Severus, but there was no reason it couldn't be done.

First off, she tested how quickly she could find myriad different people, and then she took down and re-established her own wards and Severus's in rapid succession. Next, she examined the higher traffic areas. It was while she was experimenting with the wards in the library, trying to see if there was any way to tweak them so that she could read the books from here, that she felt the wave of tiredness hit her, and it was with mingled reluctance and relief that she released the wards and let her eyes fall closed.

Exhausted as Severus had been, he wasn't the sort to sleep overlong. As a result, he was awake by half four, and he woke her from her sound sleep in order to make her aware of just how pleased he apparently was to find her in his bed. She was, as a result, especially delighted to be there.

It was a little odd to be up an hour and half later sitting in Severus's sitting room with tea and breakfast. Severus had declared himself too hungry to wait until eight, and he didn't seem to care if the house-elves were aware that she was in his quarters at this hour.

He called upon Dobby, and the elf, who was always marginally less excitable around those who were not Harry Potter, took the sight of them quite well—much better than Harry would have done, given that she was in one of Severus's dressing gowns. They received a positive mountain of food, even larger than normal, so Hermione took it that Dobby approved.

It was another domestic scene that made Hermione certain that she'd be very happy to spend the rest of her life with Severus. At the moment, she felt as though she'd be happy to spend the rest of her life in these quarters, although she supposed they were really rather cramped for two people full time.

She wondered if he'd be open to the idea of moving and if she could casually bring it up in conversation or if that would scare him away completely, since he hadn't ever said explicitly that he wanted to spend an extended amount of time with her. It was always difficult to judge with Severus.

He seemed to be investing effort in making this relationship work, but she didn't really know what that meant. He'd been alone for a long time, and she knew that he hadn't had that many opportunities for relationships over the years. Might he not have taken her up on her offer because she was there but other offers would interest him more once the war was over?

It was equally possible, however, that this was just her insecurities talking and she wasn't giving Severus nearly enough credit for having serious feelings and just not being ready to share them yet. She felt as though she'd shared a great many more of her feelings with him, but the fact remained that she hadn't actually ever explicitly stated that she loved him nor explained her feelings outside of forced confessions that really had to do with other matters like her rescue or her Pure Adults status. They hadn't exactly talked about their relationship—and it was only two days ago that he'd asked if they even had a relationship—so it probably meant that he was finding this as confusing as she was. She wondered if Harry and Draco had this trouble or if they'd gotten their relationship all sorted.

"What upset you so much in class on Monday?" Severus asked suddenly.

They were on their second cup of tea, having gone through much more of their breakfast than Hermione would have anticipated. She forced herself to take a careful sip.

"Hmm?" she said innocently.

Severus's expression showed that this attempt had not been in the least successful.

"That was not simply nostalgia."

She sighed. She had to wonder why he could be so perceptive in moments like those when at other times he was completely emotionally clueless.

"It brought back a lot of memories of other Potions classes," she answered reluctantly. "I was remembering one of the … less pleasant ones, that's all."

"Oh?" he said pointedly.

"It's not even a class, really," she hedged. "It doesn't matter."

"Assuming this isn't a class you had this year, as I don't remember anything particularly egregious occurring," he said with quite the selective memory, as far as she was concerned, "it is evidently an event that has lingered in your memory."

"And it would really be better if it remained there."

"Must I ask again?"

She sighed. It had already become more of an issue than she wanted it to be. "Your cruelty to Harry was superseded by your cruelty to me," she said abruptly. Her lips twisted. "Oh, I even understand why you did it, but the memory smarts sometimes."

He was regarding her nearly expressionlessly, and she realized that he had no idea which moment she was talking about.

She gave in. "It was in my fourth year. Draco's curse missed Harry and hit me. Outside the Potions classroom. Made my teeth grow. They were huge by the time you found us, and you said—"

He finished her sentence for her. "I see no difference."

She nodded. Four little words. They represented all her concerns about self-image and what he thought of her. And damn, but they still made her feel awful.

He was silent for a long moment, and she felt her eyes upon him.

"You said you understood why I said it."

"Quite," she answered, pleased when her voice didn't tremble.

She might have known that he would simply maintain what he had said. It was no doubt the truth, after all. Her teeth had been too big back then, and he had seen what all of them had seen, a girl who was unrecognizable when she looked halfway pretty at the Yule Ball.

She was so lost in these reflections that it wasn't until she was being pulled to her feet that she realized he'd come round the table.

"Hermione, I am quite fond of all your body parts, from you hair down to your feet, and that most certainly includes your teeth, which are of quite unremarkable size today."

She sniffed.

He continued: "I can hardly tell you that I did not wish the comment to hurt you because we both know that would be untrue. My primary objective, of course, was to upset Mr—Harry. You would have been far less likely to receive such a comment had you not been his best friend. And really," he added with a grimace, "I trust you do not want me to confess that I paid a great deal of mind to any of your body parts when you were in fourth year."

She could hear the disapproval in his voice and knew that she would, indeed, have been highly disconcerted by any such attention. She had been a child.

He tilted her chin up with his hands. "I never intended it to be a memory that plagued you so perniciously."

And that, she reflected, was a clear apology. She smiled at him, and he evidently saw her forgiveness, for he leaned down to kiss her, making a very thorough examination of her teeth and mouth.

"It all seems to be ... quite acceptable," he said with a hint of superiority when he drew back and found her flushed and breathless.

She couldn't even be upset with him.

His expression was now pensive. "Are there any other memories that you feel it incumbent upon you to share with me?"

She shook her head. "I—" He had to realize that there were innumerable instances of his unfairness and petty cruelty that she could list throughout their school years. "There is nothing that stands out."

He grimaced again. "You may furnish me with the entire list at some future date if you wish."

Her lips quirked. "And give you an opening to let me know all the times you've been outraged by the behaviour of the Gryffindor trio and the know-it-all in particular? I think not."

His expression softened, and she didn't think he'd be demanding any of those memories in the near future. Time to turn the subject, though.

"I'm just going to finish my tea before heading back to my quarters. Harry will no doubt quiz me if he realizes I've been out all night."

"And once he realizes where you've been?" Severus inquired silkily.

"He'll probably spend breakfast trying not to look at you and blushing like mad," she supplied readily.

The head of Slytherin smirked. "At least there will be some entertainment value in that."

A short time later, Hermione had successfully made it back to her quarters, the wards having informed her that Harry and Draco were in the bathroom. Since they were together, she suspected she had time.

She showered quickly in her own half of the loo and dressed in fresh clothes, wondering if she could convince Severus that some of her things should be left in his bedroom. It wasn't really necessary, as she could cast cleaning charms and transfigure as necessary, but she liked the idea of a few of her belongings invading his space.

He might well regard it as a true invasion of his space, however, and she didn't suppose that her clothing in his room would qualify as discreet should their relationship come under scrutiny. It was much safer to be content with what they had at the moment and work out the future details after she didn't have N.E.W.T.s and the Final Battle looming in her immediate future.

She hurried into the common room before she could get bogged down in those concerns and managed to be sitting in her armchair, calmly revising for Charms, by the time the boys emerged.

"Good morning," she greeted them placidly.

"Good morning," they returned, Harry looking at her through narrowed eyes, Draco now looking amused.

"Didn't hear you come in last night," Harry pursued.

"You never hear me come in," she pointed out, refusing to make this easy for him.

He tilted his head. "We were up until two. Here, in the common room, I mean."

"I'm very glad for you," she answered calmly. "Did you get much revision done?"

"Interspersed with many concerns about how you were faring," Draco supplied helpfully.

"And how were you faring?" the dark-haired boy asked when she didn't immediately follow Draco's hint.

"I was just fine," she answered with a trace of amusement. "You've already guessed I spent the night with Severus; do you really want more information, Harry?"

Now that his suspicions were confirmed, he blushed beet red and backed down, the look on his face suddenly indicating that he wasn't certain why he'd been pushing the issue so much.

She smiled. "Up to breakfast?"

He agreed hastily, and she and Draco came at a slightly more sedate pace behind him.

"Enjoy yourself?" Draco asked with a slight smirk.

"Of course," she answered with supreme satisfaction.

His smirk deepened, although he seemed pleased that this was her prompt answer. She knew he was very fond of his godfather, and although he had to work against all those childhood tenets, he seemed willing to accept the idea that she and Severus made a good couple.

Breakfast was crowded at an early hour, more and more people up early with books in hand. Exams were truly looming now, all the students suddenly studying like maniacs, even the younger years. Every year, Hermione wondered how it could take this long for the realization to sink in. It was marginally better, she supposed, than the night before exams began.

The library was full at very odd hours now, and Irma, with Albus's permission, had consented to keep it open until ten o'clock at night. Since the library was kept quiet whereas the common rooms were not, many students planted themselves in the large room—for once grateful for Irma's insistence on proper library etiquette.

Students had also suddenly remembered that Hermione and Harry had their own common room, so they found themselves hosting larger than normal numbers of their friends on Wednesday evening after dinner. Hermione didn't mind a Weasley or two—a safe statement now that the twins had left—but she was less sanguine about what seemed like all the Gryffindor sixth- and seventh-years being hosted down here.

It was far more crowded than she was used to and not at all peaceful. Deciding that she'd be too retrievable if she just went to her bedroom or her lab, she waited for a quiet moment and then abandoned Harry and escaped into the corridor. If he did the same, at least she'd be in a position to say that she'd done it first.

She'd grown used to her own space in the year that she'd been living with Harry, so while she knew that she'd spent years getting more or less used to the Gryffindor common room, she was out of that habit now. Plus, when she was in her own space, she wanted to be able to tell people to bugger off not to always be politely available to assist them.

Fortunately, she knew someone who would not only understand but be able to offer her a protected environment.

Severus had a scowl firmly established on his face when he opened the door, but it faded somewhat when he saw her. He ushered her in, and she explained about her common area being overrun.

"Throwing the lot of them out on their collective arses didn't occur to you?"

"Oh, I certainly thought about it," she admitted readily. "It didn't quite seem the supportive thing to do, however."

"Gryffindor," he said deprecatingly.

She shrugged. "But I did sneak out, leave Harry in charge, and come to see you."

He considered this. "A smidgeon of Slytherin cunning."

She smiled at him. "May I sit?"

He gestured her to a chair. "I'd hate for your clever escape to be ruined now. You intend to take up residence here, I take it?"

"For a little while, at least," she agreed. "You may tell me to go whenever you wish."

He regarded her with faint amusement. "You may be certain that I will."

She rolled her eyes. "Thank you."

Her book bag was quite useful for making sudden getaways with all study material intact, and she was able to pull out numerous texts and notes that would allow her to revise here for hours if Severus would allow her to stay that long.

Severus remained preoccupied at his desk today, reading and scribbling away with such attention that she gathered it wasn't student papers that he was working on. She should really be taking a leaf out of his book and concentrating as hard on what she was supposed to be doing rather than staring.

She had been preparing for N.E.W.T.s for the last seven years, ever since she had first learnt about the tests as a twelve-year-old. It was an amusing reflection that she could be so powerfully distracted by a man when the tests were so close. Of course, she'd never imagined as a twelve-year-old that at nineteen, she'd have found her mate and be ready to spend the rest of her life with him.

Really, though, she needed to get her head on straight because if she peeked at him much longer, he would be bound to notice and demand to know what she was doing. Since there was no sensible answer she could give him, she set about to study in earnest. In his honour, she pulled out her Potions notes and gave them another thorough scan.

Potions was one of those courses where it almost felt even to her that she didn't need to do any more studying. She worked with most of these potions on a regular basis and could make many of them in her sleep—certainly in an exam setting. There were, however, some potions that she was mildly less familiar with, ones that had only been referenced in class, not brewed, and there were likely to be some historical potion makers and facts and dates on the written that could confuse her if she were … well, probably brain dead, but it was always good to go over the facts just in case.

The exam would be testing their knowledge carefully, so she made sure that she could recite all of the potions on the curriculum, list all their ingredients, and make them step by step in her head without referring to the book even once. This was a nicely mental task that kept her from staring overlong at Severus, who was still reading in his corner of the room.

Once she'd made it through Potions, she moved on to Runes, as that was her second exam. She ran through every runic alphabet she knew and assured that she knew each of the runes and their meanings. She made sure she hadn't somehow forgotten how to weave runes into wards, practiced writing in runes, translating runes, and studying the rest of her notes for any facts or figures that Bathsheba wanted them to know. Hermione even found herself running through the symbols for her own name in her head, although there was no way that "Berit" in symbols that included Parseltongue was going to come up on the exam. It seemed, however, that she was well on her way to being prepared.

By the time she made it through these two subjects, she found that she was both hungry and thirsty. Severus had either been keeping an eye out for this development or had reached the same state, for he made tea and summoned Winky for food.

What was better, he came over to his chair by the fire once the food and drink arrived so that she had him in closer proximity, although she hesitated to tell him how much happier that made her. Sometimes she felt like a complete nutter when she got this sappy in his company, and she wasn't sure whether he would take it in good part or simply mock her mercilessly.

The fire was crackling merrily; it might be May, but the dungeons were always chilled, making her wonder just how much wood they went through. The house-elves surely had to hop around like mad to take care of all the fires in the dungeons, although she supposed that apart from Severus, Tonks, and the Slytherin and Hufflepuff dorms, there weren't a lot of people who slept down here. It made her wonder if it had been Severus's choice, given that Pomona was located on the fourth floor rather than right near her house.

Hermione and Severus ate in comfortable silence as she realized that she'd never seen a house-elf come to tend Severus's fire. Perhaps he looked after his own, maybe employing the same charm that Harry used which made the wood burn slower; ever since Harry had gained his Animagus form, he'd taken over the care of the fireplace in his and Hermione's quarters.

"How are you feeling about your N.E.W.T.s?" Severus asked.

She was slightly startled by the question but was able to go on for several minutes about the degrees of preparedness she felt for each of them. She had a good memory, and she was very interested in almost all of what she was learning, both the practice and the esoteric theories. Since she was invested in the topics as well as invested in getting a good grade, this put her in pretty good order for the exams. Now it was just a case of finding enough hours in the day to be able to study as much as she felt she ought to. There was always the chance that she'd miss some little detail that wasn't quite so fresh in her mind from September if she didn't read her notes over very carefully.

Since Severus, as far as she had ever been able to tell, was a very similar type of person in that regard, it wasn't as though he could say much against this choice. Near the end of the recital, she took notice of the expression on his face.

"You have a particular reason for asking," she said belatedly. One that probably hadn't involved her nattering on for as long as she had.

"Would you permit a distraction?"

Especially when he asked nicely rather than ordering her about?

"What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to see your lab."

"Oh." All her friends had seen her lab, and it hadn't occurred to her that she and Severus had never been on civil enough terms for long enough since she'd been gifted with it for him to actually see it. "Of course."

She checked the wards and was pleased to note that Harry and Draco had thrown everyone out of their quarters. Despite the fact that it was all of eight o'clock in the evening and the sun hadn't set yet, the two of them appeared to be on the Astronomy Tower, and she was careful not to check the wards more explicitly, as she did not want to know what they were up to.

She and Severus would never have been able to simply walk to her bedroom if the common room had been full of Gryffindors, but the solitude made her feel a little weird. They'd been intimate on several occasions now but never in her room. They were heading to her lab, not her bedroom, but it all still felt very … new.

She was glad that she'd made the bed that morning and only the desk was cluttered. In general, she was quite consistent about cleaning up after herself, and she was glad that habit had stuck even now she had her own bedroom. Not that she thought he'd abandon her if she lived like a slob (at least, he probably wouldn't), but all things being equal, she could do without the teasing.

They passed through the bedroom and into the lab, and Hermione was suddenly nervous even though she recognized the foolishness of the feeling. It wasn't as though she'd built the lab, so she couldn't be worried about a critique about the layout, nor was he the first person who'd seen the room. But she supposed he was the most important person to her, the one who would look at how she'd organized it and either commend or lambaste her.

"This is the lab," she said, regretting the words the second they were out of her mouth.

His lips twitched but his tone was only mildly mocking as he said, "I can see that."

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "Of course you can. You can just ignore me, too."

He tsked. "And what would my reception be tomorrow if I took up this salutary suggestion?"

She smiled. "I'd say that you're only supposed to ignore the daft things I say, but I imagine that would only lead to lots of arguments."

His lip curled. "Excellent deductive reasoning, Hermione."

It would be nice to occasionally earn that compliment in earnest, but he still seemed to be taking pity on her and not speaking with nearly the sharpness that was warranted by her foolishness.

He spent several minutes prowling around, examining the shelves, the cupboards, the view from the windows. He didn't say a single word in either praise or scorn, and she finally couldn't take it anymore.

"Did you want to brew something?"

He pivoted back to look at her, letting out a soft huff of laughter. "To prove that it's functional, you mean? I trust that it is, given that the number of potions coming from it rivals the number coming from my own."

"Right," she said shortly, turning her back on him and gripping the edge of the counter in front of her. She stared blindly at the metal surface which was reflecting a wobbling image of her frowning face. "Right," she muttered quietly.

So there would be no brewing in the lab. He'd made it sound particularly stupid when, really, it was a pretty standard activity in a bloody potions laboratory. The only other things she done in here were revision or homework while she was waiting for a potion, and she rather doubted he'd be interested in that, so—

His body was suddenly flush against hers, her back pressed against his chest, his legs bracketing hers as he pushed her forward until she was bent over flat against the counter and had nowhere else to go. Long-fingered hands swept her hair out of the way, caressing her skin and causing jolts of heat throughout her body. Warm breath ghosted over her ear as he leaned down and began to nuzzle the sensitive skin there. Her hands tightened spasmodically against the counter as she immediately arched her neck to give him better access.

This was an option she hadn't previously considered. He began to work his way down her neck, nipping and sucking, and she let out a moan. But it was entirely welcome.

When he eased the pressured of his lower body against hers, she twisted around, pushing him upright enough that she could face him. His eyes were dark and glittering, and she only had time to twine her arms around his neck before he leaned down to kiss her hungrily, mouth hot and demanding on hers, and she suddenly found it very useful to have the counter supporting her. It felt as though all the bones in her body were rapidly turning to mush.

Just as she reached the height of this melting point, she found that, as though she were one of the small children he'd carried less than two days ago, Severus had hoisted her without visible effort onto the counter. He settled into the space between her spread legs, his hands on her arse pulling her closer to ensure that they were once again in intimate contact.

She was now looking down at him when they were upright, and it was a novel experience. Smiling at him in delight, she leaned down and got to see him tilt his head up marginally so that they could kiss again. As she parted her lips and his tongue snaked into her mouth, the mechanics of the kiss went right out the window, and she lost herself in the pleasure of what she experienced every time their lips touched. Weaving her hands into his hair, she chased his tongue back into his mouth and spent long, languorous moments exploring.

She didn't have the slightest idea of how she'd lost her jumper, but she noticed its absence when Severus settled on top of her and pressed her bare back into the counter—having used his superior manoeuvring skills to get himself onto the countertop with her and the two of them lying along the length of the table rather than the width when she hadn't noticed, apparently. She gasped as her flushed skin met the cold metal, and he swallowed the noise as he covered her mouth with his.

In her lust-fogged brain, it narrowly occurred to her to hope that the counter was designed to hold the weight of two fully grown humans because it would surely spoil the mood if it suddenly collapsed and took them down with it. Well, the castle had designed the lab for her; she would just hope that it had taken the possibility of a happy ending for her into account.

It was the metal table, at least, so there wasn't an ominous creaking or anything as there might have been from the wood table, and the metal seemed to warm quite quickly when two excited humans were on top of it, so she didn't even notice the cold for very long. And since she cleaned up after her work on a regular basis, she didn't have to worry that they were going to break anything or cause any inadvertent explosive reactions—which could be quite dangerous when in a potions lab, really.

She gasped as Severus's mouth closed over one of her nipples at the same time that he slid inside her. It always felt as though he was able to multitask in a way that she was incapable of as her brain short-circuited when he did such wonderful things to her. With an effort, she managed to pull enough brain cells together to delve her fingers into his hair and arch up against him to prolong their contact.

There were no words to describe exactly how it felt when they were connected like this. It felt as though it went far beyond simply the sexual or the physical, the part of her that knew that Severus was her mate rejoicing in the fact that they were completely together right now. They were happy, and they were as physically close as it was possible to get—and it felt phenomenal, of course. Life was good.

Perfect, really. It felt in these moments as though life were perfect, and it didn't matter if she was a know-it-all or Severus had greasy hair or the Final Battle with Voldemort was looming. Because Severus smiled at her when he was inside her in a way that he didn't at any other time. And when she grinned like an idiot in response, it didn't feel out of place.

As the pressure built higher and higher inside of her, she could see the answering tension in Severus, could feel it in his increasingly erratic thrusts, in the firmness with which he stroked her with a long finger, ensuring that the two of them came together in a haze of toe-curling pleasure.

It felt very happy indeed when they were recovering in a posture that was remarkably similar to cuddling, although Severus would no doubt call it something else. He'd shifted so that he wasn't crushing her, propped up on his side right next to her, keeping her warm, and she was sure the castle had known exactly what it was doing because the counter was precisely the right width for the two of them to lay on it like this.

"So," she asked, stretching languorously and watching as he eyed her appreciatively, "how long have you been angling to have sex with me in a Potions lab?"

His expression went rather blank, telling her immediately that it was an answer he didn't want to give.

She grinned at him. "That long, eh?"

"I would never—" he began, sounding affronted.

Leaning towards him, she cut his words off with a brief kiss, immediately contrite. "Of course you wouldn't. I didn't mean it like that."

"How did you mean it?"

She sat up, offering him a slightly forced smile. "It doesn't matter. It's a little chilly in here."

She Summoned her shirt, glad once again for being a witch. Her attempt to slide off the counter, however, was hampered by Severus's hands on her hips, long fingers digging in not enough to hurt but to solidly impede her progress. He didn't make her turn around but leaned closer so he could speak softly in her ear.

"It was rather less chilly a moment ago."

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

"So you keep saying." His fingers slipped under the shirt she'd just got on to caress her skin rather than restrain her. Since it made her want to squirm against him and stay that way forever, it was rather effective. "I've always maintained that Gryffindors are horrible liars. I could keep you here until you talk."

She laughed softly, relaxing back against him and feeling the tension in his body ease as well.

"That would be awfully difficult to adequately explain to Albus." She sighed. She should have just said straight off instead of making it seem like a big deal. "From time to time, it's nice to hear, that's all."

"What is nice to hear?"

She was glad she didn't have to look him in the eyes for this conversation, but she s ometimes had to wonder if he were being deliberately obtuse.

"That you want me," she said very quietly. "That you wanted me … before."

She could feel his sudden stillness, and since he'd stopped clasping her tightly, it was easy for her to get off the counter this time. Thus liberated, she could pull her skirt back on, making her feel marginally less vulnerable, although she still didn't manage to turn round and actually face him again. At least she didn't blush as easily as Harry did.

Severus had made it off the counter, too, she discovered when he turned her round again and used one finger to lift her chin to encourage her to actually look at him.

"I would not be here if I were uninterested."

She nodded.

His lips thinned, and for a moment she couldn't tell if he was going to yell at her or just leave. There was a brief flash of resignation on his face, and then he spoke.

"You were brewing Wolfsbane in the lab at Grimmauld Place. Almost two years ago now."

She stared at him in surprise.

His lips twisted. "It was an image I tried assiduously to rid myself of; you were my very young student. I have enough mental discipline to prevent it from intruding in any way during day-to-day affairs."

As if she had seriously thought that he had spent the last two years daydreaming about her.

"My birthday's on nineteenth September," she pointed out. "I wasn't that young." Less young than he knew, in fact.

"Young enough to be my daughter," he growled. "And you were under my protection."

She laughed. "We can say quite safely, Severus, that I've never thought of you as a father figure. And while I might have thought of you as a mentor—or at least tried to do—you did a pretty good job of quashing that whenever you could, too. I've spent at least half of last year and this year convinced that you hated me."

He didn't seem completely appeased.

"Would you ever have done anything before I was of age?" she asked.

"Of course not," he answered, sounding completely offended.

"There we are, then," she said definitively. "It's as simple as that. You had the occasional stray thought, which everyone does. You didn't even consider acting on it, and nothing short of the need to save the world got you into my bed when I was of age. You've not done anything wrong."

Of course, she'd gone and reminded herself of a fact that didn't make her the slightest bit happy, but it was done now.

"You said you wouldn't have approached me, all things being equal, until after you graduated."

She nodded.

"But you've wanted to be with me for some time."

She nodded once more.

"Is it not possible, then, that my situation is similar? That I would have tried not to put either of us into a potentially awkward position?"

Huh. Now she felt rather stupid. She'd always had trouble understanding his motivations when it came to her, however.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Tonight, he'd fulfilled a fantasy he'd had about her, and although he'd been reluctant to reveal those details about himself, he'd done so in an effort to make her feel better.

She smiled at him suddenly. "How long before I get to have a go with you in the Potions classroom?"

His eyes darkened. "That is a … very provocative image, Hermione, but I'm afraid the answer is the middle of June."

"I know."

"Do you?"

She nodded. "I generally understand your boundaries, Severus. It's why our activities have been restricted to your quarters—and now my lab."

In areas where he did not feel that he was a professor. The lab might have been stretching a point, but it was certainly true that none of the other students had one, and it had been highly enjoyable.

"Yet you asked?" he said pointedly.

She smiled cheekily. "I never said I didn't want you anticipating the event."

This had the very salutary effect of getting her pulled up against his body, his hands sliding beneath her jumper as he kissed her deeply.

She seemed in danger of losing her top again—and not much minding—but her attempt to get under his robes resulted in his drawing back with a shadow of regret in his eyes.

"I'm not seventeen anymore."

"For which I'm very grateful," she answered. "I don't have a lot of use for seventeen-year-old boys."

He huffed a laugh. "I'm going to tell P—Harry that at the earliest opportunity."

"That I don't want to have sex with him?" she said, deliberately misunderstanding. "We've already talked about it, but I doubt he'd mind in particular hearing it again. Draco might even be pleased with the reminder."

"There are certain advantages to being seventeen," he pointed out, as though she'd actually missed what he'd been trying to say in the first place.

"Disadvantages, too," she answered immediately. "People can make awfully imprudent decisions when they're seventeen."

"Yes, they can," he agreed. "And it would be cruel to hold them to those decisions."

She thought this was quite progressive of him, given how long he'd been known to hold a grudge. Admitting that he shouldn't be held responsible for a decision he had made in his youth suggested that he was really starting to forgive himself and—the way he was looking at her, she suddenly realized what he was talking about.

"I'm not seventeen."

"Eighteen, then," he said impatiently.

She cleared her throat and said carefully, "That's what my birth certificate would suggest."

His eyes narrowed.

"Hermione," he said slowly and deliberately, stepping closer so that he could look her very carefully in the eyes, "how old are you?"

"You're going to be cross," she warned.

"And that would differ from my regular demeanour in what manner?"

She laughed at this attempt to put her at ease, although it rather proved her point. At this precise moment, he was in a good enough mood to joke with her about his own frequently abysmal mood; that was unlikely to last given the revelations that went hand in hand with the one about her age.

"I feel as though I should get you a stiff drink first," she said nervously.

"We are in your lab," he observed dryly. "If you stock it as well as I expect, there are any number of potions which would have the desired effect."

She doubted he realized just how seriously she was considering dosing him.

"Will you at least sit down?" she requested, waving her hand at one of her lab stools which obediently transfigured into a black armchair. He sat. "I don't suppose you'd consider giving me your wand?"

He raised an eyebrow eloquently.

She sighed and answered her own question. "No, I suppose not."

"You can't honestly be that concerned about my reaction."

She transfigured her own chair and sat down in it, wondering if she should have positioned herself across the room.

"The topic is one of the few about which I have seen you completely irrational."

He was frowning, but his tone was relatively mild, considering. "How does your age involve Black?"

She released a breath slowly. "You're going to have to bear with me a little on this one." He gave an impatient nod, which she stifled a snicker over. "Imagine, then, that you're a bright Muggle-born student who has just completed her second year. You know that there are elective classes that can be picked in third year, but there isn't room for very many of them on your schedule. You want to learn as much as you possibly can, so you go to your head of house to see if any exception can be made to the regular course load of a student. Your head of house agrees that you could handle more classes than many of your peers, but the problem is one of conflicts; too many of the classes go on at the same time to make it feasible. You lament that it's impossible to be in two places at once, promise to think about which classes you can possibly cut out, and go on your way."

He was listening intently, still waiting for the punch line.

"Third year arrives and before the feast begins, you get pulled aside by your head of house who announces that she's worked out a way for you to take all the classes you want. Because you can be in two places at once if you travel through time."

The axe was poised and ready to fall.

"Minerva gave a thirteen-year-old student a Time-Turner?" Severus said with utter incredulity.

She nodded.

"That's—" He seemed to be scrambling to find adequate words. "That's completely insane!"

Another nod. She knew how careful she'd been but also what rules she'd broken, and she shuddered with horror at the thought of what Ron or Draco could have done with the device at that age.

"You used a Time-Turner to go to more than one class at the same time," he said, "but that can't be the reason you're so concerned about my temper. I'm going to have stern words with Minerva, but that hardly concerns you. The reason you're worried is because—" His eyes burned bright as the connection was made. "—Because you saved Black. You lied to me, and you were the one who made sure that he escaped, doubling back on the version of yourself whose whereabouts I knew."

She nodded yet again, doubting that speaking would be a wise choice at this point, and not even trying to point out that she hadn't actually lied to him. Even when he had been yelling at them, incensed, she had tried to explain what had really happened.

But she had hidden the truth after the fact.

He was out of his chair and pacing.

"All this time you knew, and the headmaster knew—and Minerva probably guessed. None of you would say how it happened, how he escaped."

Hermione noticed how it didn't seem to matter that he had known Sirius was innocent for years now, that Severus had been forced to work with the Gryffindor at Grimmauld Place, or that the man had died almost two years previously. Just as she'd feared, he was dwelling on nothing but the fact that she'd freed the man who had tried to kill him.

He whirled for the door.

"Severus—" she protested.

He opened it without even pausing, and she let him go. He was incensed, and she didn't want to add homicide as one of the activities that could take place in her lab.

Chapter Fifty-Two: The Block

Hermione transfigured Severus's chair back into a stool, sent a warning through Fawkes to Albus and Minerva just in case Severus decided that now was the time to confront them with the information that he'd learnt, and sat in her own armchair with her legs curled up under her trying not to feel depressed.

She'd been hoping that they'd be able to get a little further in the conversation than that, but she'd known he'd be upset. Smiling grimly to herself, she reflected that at least she'd had the chance to have happy sex here once even if it turned out Severus wasn't going to visit the lab again.

Realistically, they couldn't ignore the past; they were going to need to come up with ways to discuss it effectively. Badly as it had gone, she would still rather he heard that particular information from her rather than from Harry or Albus.

After she'd stared off into space contemplating what had just happened for far too long, she rallied and set to brewing a batch of Calming Draught. It was probably in her mind because of how much Severus could have used one, but the fact of the matter was that plenty of students became too high-strung the closer it got to year end, and Poppy went through the potion quite rapidly. They could always use more.

It was an easy potion to make, but Hermione lost herself in the haze of mindlessly doing a task at which she excelled. She didn't have to worry that this potion would suddenly explode on her unless she did something monumentally stupid.

While the potion was simmering, she cleaned all the equipment that she'd used up to that point. She was returning the ingredients to their shelves when Severus re-entered the lab.

His nostrils flared.

"Is that a hint?"

The question had sounded quite mild, but Hermione wasn't taking any chances.

"It's for the Infirmary," she answered as she placed the lavender oil on the shelf and closed the door of the storage room as she exited. "Exams are in less than a week."

"You warned Albus."

This, too, didn't sound particularly accusatory.

"It's not his fault that the topic was raised now."

"It is his responsibility for not telling me the truth years ago." There was a definite edge to Severus's voice now.

She kept her tone even. "I didn't tell him to relocate."

"You thought he should have time to prepare himself."

"I think," she corrected, "that he had a story prepared from the moment he denied all knowledge of what had occurred four years ago. I don't like to be blindsided by someone giving away information that implicates me, however, so as a courtesy, I informed him of what you had learnt today."

"What I haven't learnt," he said with emphasis, "is an answer to my question." She raised an eyebrow, and he looked at her like she'd missed a very simple question on a test. "You've not told me how old you are."

This surprised a laugh out of her. She'd practically forgotten that was what had started this whole mess.

"You're the only person besides Harry who knows this," she said and proceeded to explain precisely how she'd turned time back in third year.

"You added ten months to your age and no one noticed." He sounded shocked.

"What would they notice?" she queried. "I might have been aging two to three times faster than my peers, but it was still day by day. I ended up looking like one of the more mature students in my year, and I believe my demeanour already lent that impression."

"Albus and Minerva don't know?" he asked, and there was a hint of a smile lurking around the corners of his mouth.

"I didn't give them all of the details," she confirmed. "As far as they know, I used it to go to my classes only."

"And to rescue Black."

This exception had been one which she'd been careful not to point out, but he apparently wanted to make sure that it still hung in the air between them.

She nodded.

"Tell me, Hermione, did you suddenly have the brilliant notion of going back to rescue Black all by yourself?" She didn't answer and he raised his eyebrows. "No? You had a little help, perhaps, in coming up with the idea that Black and the hippogriff had to be saved?" He pursed his lips. "You did exactly what you were told to do, and Albus knows precisely how foolish placing such a burden on your shoulders was."

She narrowly forbore smiling, tickled that what seemed to concern him about the event (now, at least) was the danger that she had been in.

"I suppose you'll just lie if I ask you if you rescued him alone?" Severus asked with would-be casualness.

"I try never to lie to you, Severus. You know it wasn't me who conjured the stag Patronus that saved Sirius and Harry from the Dementors at the lake."

He sighed. "Vindication."

She tried not to goggle at him; he seemed far more pleased that he had been right all along than upset that Harry had rescued Sirius.

"I am sorry," she offered finally.

He looked at her quizzically, and her faint smile was shadowed.

"This seems like the best opportunity to apologize for what happened in the Shack. I never wanted to hurt you, but Sirius was innocent—of the crime he was sent to Azkaban for, anyway—and I did my very best to reason with you."

Severus let out a half-laugh. "I'm sure you would try to reason with the Dark Lord himself."

In her most recent encounter with Voldemort, she'd been rather more desirous of smashing his head repeatedly against the wall.

"Not under all circumstances," she managed after a pause that was only slightly too long.

He held out his hand, and after a startled instant, she took it. He drew her close, settling her against him so that her back was to his chest once more as he wrapped his arms around her. He pressed a kiss into her hair.

"I confess I might have been a little perturbed had you taken the time to discuss the practicality of genocide at that particular opportunity."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Thank you."

This was without any scorn or mockery whatsoever.

"You're welcome," she answered softly, touched that he had actually gotten the words out. She knew he was pleased to be rescued from Voldemort and not dead, and she knew that he attributed that release to her, but this was the first time that he had officially acknowledged that fact—apart from when he had been trying to kill her for it, of course.

"And thank you for my birthday gift."

She twisted around to face him as her eyebrows rose. "Trying to get all the gratitude out of the way at once?"

His lips tipped up, but his eyes were shadowed. "I was wearing them at the time."

Ah. She grimaced.

"They definitely helped to lessen the impact of the torture; I noticed primarily once they had been destroyed."

She found her voice with difficulty. "I'll get you new ones."

The cufflinks themselves had been the easy part, though she had been quite pleased with the small platinum ouroboros. The work had been casting every charm she could find on the two small pieces of metal so that they would protect the wearer. It had been worth every moment—not that it had done much good.

A troubling thought suddenly occurred to her. They hadn't tortured him worse because of her charms, had they? Hadn't thought it would be a bit of a challenge to overcome her spells? Made Severus suffer longer because of the small reprieve that she had given him?

If she had only got there sooner, it might have done some good, but she had been so nearly too late, and the protections had been destroyed, and he had had time to contemplate the relative degree of pain with and without her cufflinks, and—

"They were torturing me to death, Hermione, and you stopped them. I am here because of you."

She let out a huff of breath and tried her very best to believe him and to forget about all the horrible "maybe, might have, could haves" that were plaguing her.

Severus's hands snaked around her waist and tugged her closer once more, and he felt reassuring warm and alive against her.

And quite suddenly, they were back at the beginning of their encounter in the lab; he had started placing feather-light kisses down her neck, a rather good distraction, for she was once again tilting her neck to the side in encouragement.

Severus wasn't seventeen anymore, and that meant that once he'd recovered, he had excellent stamina. Their lovemaking was much slower this time, a thorough exploration, and he conjured a mattress and blankets and properly divested them both before he made her feel like the most cherished person on the planet.

It wasn't until her heart rate had slowed to something approximating normal again that it occurred to her that she had a perfectly nice bedroom in which they could have done this. She pointed this out to Severus, who smirked.

"But this way, we can very truthfully tell anyone who asks that we spent the entire evening in your laboratory."

She gestured at the Calming Draught on the counter above them. "We even brewed."

"Of course we did," he answered pedantically. "What else would one do in a laboratory?"

She shook her head, smiling at him. "You're incorrigible."

"Little lies and misdirection get one through the day," he said quite cheerfully.

"Mm." She rolled onto her side so that she was facing him fully. "Is that what you're doing? Teaching me to be a spy?"

"Teaching you to unleash your inner Slytherin. Since you're currently working so closely with one, it's important to understand our tactics."

"You'll have a very long time to teach me," she said, not having missed how he'd slipped that "currently" into his sentence.

And now they were back at the conversation that had started their argument in the first place.

"Ten months doesn't make that much of a difference, Hermione," he chided.

"I spent ten months making sure that I didn't destroy the space-time continuum," she argued, moving to face him upright, and he sat up as well. "Ten months can make plenty of difference. I'm not seventeen, Severus, I'm nineteen and a half, and I have been through I great deal since I arrived here. If I can choose ways for Voldemort to die and how to protect the entire castle and save Harry and myself from being captured by Voldemort and giving him extraordinary power, I think I can decide whom I'm meant to be with."

"I decided at seventeen whom I was 'meant to be with'," he said intensely, "if not romantically, and we both know how that turned out."

"Yes, well, obviously I'm a great deal cleverer than you were at seventeen."

This surprised a genuine bark of laughter out of him.

"Obviously," he agreed, eyes crinkling with mirth, and she was pleased that he had taken her insult so well.

Smiling at him, she amended her answer to something a little more useful. "Honestly, though, there are plenty of teenagers in the world, and just like adults, some of them are going to make very smart choices while some are going to make very stupid ones. I think you made yours based on all the wrong reasons, and I think you regretted it rather quickly." She took his silence as assent. "No one has yet convinced me that my choice was made imprudently, and you're not the only one to have tried. I haven't regretted it, not even when it was going horribly awry."

"No?" he said, attempting a light tone. "No wishes for Quidditch stars and pretty promises?"

"Not even when people tried very hard to hand them to me on a silver platter." Oh, to hell with it. "It's you I want, Severus."

"You sound very certain now," he began.

"And I will always be very certain," she overrode him. "Do you know anything about the mating habits of unicorns?"

He blinked at what he perceived as a non-sequitur. "Not as much as you, I'm sure."

"When they mate," she said, "they mate for life."

He was clearly waiting for more, and she was waiting for what she'd said to sink in.

A frown furrowed his brow. "You're not a unicorn."

She rose to her feet, moved around the nearest counter so that she had enough free space, and transformed.

I am, she corrected. You might not see it all the time, but in some very fundamental ways, this is what I am.

She hadn't even thought about the fact that the only other time he'd seen her in this form was fleetingly just before she'd run off after being injured. He approached her slowly, reaching out a hand to lightly brush the scar on her chest. Abruptly, he snatched his hand away, looking at her guiltily.

It's all right, she reassured him. You're my mate.

Now that he knew that his touch would not cause her harm, his hands caressed her silky coat more firmly, and she leaned into the touch, delighted by the warmth and the feeling of connection that was established because her mate was touching her in this form.

"So soft," he whispered.

She wondered if he'd meant to say it aloud.

I know you worry about the future. I can't make you guarantees because life rarely allows for them. But I can promise you that you are my mate and that unicorns mate for life.

One of his hands was still sliding along her coat, and the other had come up to stroke her mane. She could just stand here forever, he could keep touching her, and it would be perfect.

Light and mousse and Severus, and all her needs would be met.

He was eyeing her horn as though contemplating whether or not it was permitted to touch it, too, so she lowered her head in invitation.

With careful fingers, he reached out and touched the golden surface, one finger ever-so-gently tracing the spiral.

"So beautiful," he breathed, and she was quite certain that she wasn't supposed to hear that.

A moment later, in a regular volume, he asked, "What happens if a unicorn's mate dies? Surely it's not compelled to live alone for the rest of its life?"

She chose her words carefully. A unicorn who has lost his or her mate rarely lives alone for long.

"Similar to many humans," he said with a nod.

He'd been looking for ways to dispute her permanent attachment, and it looked as though he was finding them at the price of analysing what she was saying. But she didn't want to belabour this point.

He stroked her face a final time and stepped back, which she took to mean the examination was over; an instant later, she was standing before him in human form, and he pulled her close so that he could kiss her tenderly.

"Thank you."

"You had only to ask." Not, of course, that he was very good at that, so she volunteered, "My blood is only human."

"I wouldn't have asked."

"I wouldn't have minded if you did," she pointed out. "You would have wondered."

His slight grimace indicated that she was right.

"I can't promise that I won't sometimes be disgruntled by your questions." Teasingly, she added, "I'd have to be doped up on Calming Draughts all the time." His expression softened slightly. "But I'd much rather that you asked and if necessary, that I be annoyed for a little while. I'll always do my best to answer you. That's how we're going to learn about one another."

And it was the only way to make a relationship work in the long-term, but despite the face that they'd skirted around the topic plenty of times, neither of them had ever managed to come right out and say that they were going to keep trying to give it a go. While Hermione might be the Gryffindor, there was only so much she was willing to risk at once. He'd spent most of the afternoon trying to prove that she wasn't going to want him for much longer.

He nodded slowly. "I am … accustomed to keeping my desires to myself."

"I know." Because letting someone know what you wanted from them gave them a hold over you. "I'm just asking that you keep my willingness in mind."

Maybe, in time, he'd even consider reciprocating. She wouldn't hold her breath, but she figured the best way to teach in this case was by example.

He smirked at her. "I always keep your willingness in mind."

She'd meant the double entendre and was very happy when he took the opportunity to kiss her soundly again.

They dressed and Vanished the mattress and blankets, and she reflected with satisfaction that she now had a very lovely set of memories for her lab complete with a happy ending. She should have invited him here ages ago. Of course, she mightn't have got so many potions brewed if he'd spent more time in the lab.

As they entered the common room, it was to find that Harry and Draco had reappeared. Harry didn't manage to hide his surprise at their sudden emergence from her bedroom.

"You were in the lab," he said, the edge of hopeful desperation in his voice quite unmistakable.

"We were," she agreed, waiting until he looked relieved and then adding with a smile, "but we weren't brewing."

Harry blushed spectacularly, and Draco and Severus smirked. Severus might not like having his sexual activities discussed, but he thoroughly enjoyed Harry being horribly embarrassed by them.

"I should get back to my own lab," Severus said before she had the chance to invite him to stay for tea.

"Company?" she inquired.

"Not presently, I think."

She nodded. "Have fun."

His lip curled. "Somehow, I doubt it will be nearly so entertaining as the evening we spent in your lab."

Harry's flush deepened once more, and Severus left in triumph.

"Have a nice time, did you?" Draco asked with mock innocence.

Harry moaned pitifully, hiding his face.

"A very nice time, thank you, Draco," she answered. "Harry, would you like to help me take a batch of Calming Draught up to Poppy?"

He sat up abruptly. "I thought you said you didn't brew?"

"I said we didn't brew," she corrected. "I made the Calming Draught."

"And he was what?" Harry asked, frowning in confusion. "Checking your technique?"

Hermione bit her lip and nearly managed not to react, but one look at Draco had the two of them dissolving into laughter and Harry blushing again as soon as he'd worked out what he'd said.

"That's not what I meant!" he protested. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Severus was actually out of the lab at that point," she admitted when she had herself under control again, "and I'm sure that's all you need to know."

Draco opened his mouth, but Harry elbowed him in the ribs, and he subsided with another smirk.

They all trooped into her lab to decant the potion, and then they took it upstairs. The mediwitch was grateful to receive it, stating that although she knew it happened every year, the students always seemed to need more than she anticipated.

"It would be better for everyone if we could give mandatory doses to some of the teachers," Harry muttered.

It had been loud enough for everyone, including Poppy to hear, and they all looked at him.

He cleared his throat. "You know how wild and crazy Tonks is. I'm sure the students would be relieved if she was calmer."

Draco snorted. "Nice recovery there, Harry."

He grinned weakly.

Hermione laughed. "Let's go before you dig yourself an even deeper hole, shall we?"

He nodded vigorously, and they bid Poppy farewell and headed back towards the dungeons. Hermione cast privacy charms around them.

"By the way," she said, figuring Harry might as well be hit with all the blows at once, "Severus knows that it was you and I who saved Sirius in third year."

Harry stopped in his tracks, and she and Draco had to turn back to face him.

"Are you out of your mind?" her best friend demanded. "You told him?"

"Would you have had me lie?" she asked quietly.

From the look of him, he really wanted to answer in the affirmative but realized it wouldn't be the prudent response.

She shrugged. "Overall, he seemed oddly pleased to know that he was right after all, and since he was too … distracted when he left to take the matter up with you, it may never come up."

Harry made a face. "Of course it'll come up, 'Mione. It's Snape who's discovered that I did something wrong. He'll be bringing it up hourly."

Draco's lips twitched at the whiny certainty in Harry's voice.

"I don't think so," she answered. "He was upset with me and Albus for lying to him, but I don't think he's particularly disappointed or surprised that you did."

He regarded her narrowly. "You did that thing again, didn't you?"

"What thing?" she asked, confused.

"Made it seem like it was all your fault so he'd be less angry with me."

"But I have better ways of making him forgive me," she pointed out ingenuously.

As she'd predicted, Harry's righteous anger was completely derailed by the mental picture she'd just provided. He made a face of disgust, and they were able to continue down the corridor and get back to their common room. It wasn't long before they turned in for the night; Harry, at the very least, didn't seem to want to run the risk of more innuendo that involved Severus.

Classes on Thursday and Friday continued to show Hermione that she was in good shape for exams. Harry went out of his way to remind her that the fact that she'd achieved her Animagus transformation showed that she'd completely mastered that art. She thought his reasoning was specious—the Marauders had become Animagi in fifth year, after all—but she appreciated the thought.

The last of each of her classes filled her with mostly fond memories. All week she thought back to her very first week of classes when she'd been so nervous and so very determined to show that she had as much knowledge and wherewithal as any pure-blood. She thought of all the Defence teachers they had run through and was, of course, reminded of all the insane extracurricular activities that she, Harry, and Ron had taken part in day after day.

The three boys had all detected her sadness and seemed torn between teasing her and trying to cheer her up; she told them to cease and desist on both fronts. It was difficult not to be nostalgic, but the need to keep preparing for the Final Battle and revise for N.E.W.T.s—as well as come up with some sort of real plan for what she was going to do after Hogwarts—kept her from getting too distracted by her memories.

She spent at least an hour each night out in the Forest so that she needed to sleep only for a few hours in order to still feel completely refreshed. The couple of quiet hours that she gained as a result were when she got her best revision done, although she also joined the hordes of studying students whenever she could.

Since students were revising everywhere and anywhere until all hours—dorms, blind corridors, unused classrooms, other people's common rooms, the Quidditch stands—Hermione also continued to work with the wards when people were present and crossing them frequently. The more she practiced, the better she got at identifying more people at the same time and having a better overall picture of where everyone was.

When she was monitoring one person, she could sort of pretend that she was tagging their progress, as though she'd put a tracking device on them. Looking at the entire picture at once—being the wards in their entirety—meant that she was processing a great deal more information than a human brain normally did. The more she practiced, however, the less unusual it seemed. She had started to be able to monitor it without conscious effort, filtering out the information that she had no use for.

There was no evidence that anyone had yet remarked upon the work she'd been doing with the wards. She'd been working with everyone's, including hers and Harry's, and Harry hadn't once complained, not even when he was sitting right next to her while she was doing it.

In a further effort to ensure that she knew what she was doing, she started stopping and resuming the wards that the headmaster had around his office and quarters. These wards were particularly complex because they had so many layers to them from headmaster after headmaster who had made adjustments and changes and fixes.

She practiced while Albus was sleeping, slipping round the wards that should have woken him, and amused herself with completely foolish restrictions, modifying the protections so that only people dressed in pink could get through or so that access was only granted on Saturdays.

Amusing yourself, Girlicorne?

She'd alerted Fawkes to what she was doing just in case something went wrong.

Immensely, she answered with a wide grin.

How about wards that require one to come bearing food for the phoenix?

She obeyed.

You could leave them like that, he pointed out. They look nice.

You'd get fat.

I'd burn it off.

They giggled like little children, and then Hermione went back to doing more practical exercises.

Plenty of students could be found out on the grounds on the nice evenings now, which had resulted in professors and prefects having to do occasional patrols outside, just in case Voldemort decided to be particularly stupid.

He'd made a few attacks in recent days, but they'd all agreed that this seemed to be keeping up appearances more than anything else. Innocent lives were still lost, which infuriated them all—and made them miss the spy who had been able to alert them to some such attacks in time for them to be stopped or the damage at least to be minimized—but Voldemort wasn't targeting anything particularly significant to the war effort. It seemed as though he was still gathering his forces and preparing for the Final Battle.

Very occasionally, Hermione would see a smirk on Tracey's face and attribute it directly to what the other woman had attempted to do to Hermione. The Slytherin was hardly the perfect spy, but Hermione supposed that there would be no reason to link the expression to the war effort had Hermione not managed what nearly everyone else thought was impossible and foiled both the Veritaserum and the Memory Charm.

Albus had leaked the information that Harry was going to be allowed to have a party at Hogwarts after his graduation, a perk of being the Gryffindor Golden Boy and Hero of the Wizarding World. This would thus be the overt explanation for why they were staying on for a few days and would hopefully seem a reasonable cover for what, as far as Voldemort knew, they actually wanted him to find out; if all had gone according to plan, he just thought that they thought that he was going to be coming two days later than he really was.

There was a training session on Thursday, Severus insisting that they could spare a few minutes from revision to prepare to save their lives come the middle of June. He might have sounded contrary, but she believed firmly that he did have their best interests at heart. Plus, if he pissed her off for no good reason, he'd be the one suffering for it later. He kept the session relatively short and light but promised them that once the term was out, he would be throwing even more dark spells at them. She appreciated that he wasn't trying to do that in the days right before exams, and Harry attributed this concession directly to her.

By Friday evening, the school felt positively abuzz with energy. Students could be seen with books everywhere Hermione looked, and there were whispered study sessions and myriad questions as students tried to grasp, quite at the last minute, all the crucial concepts that they suddenly found it necessary to know. More and more people were borrowing books from the library which they had avoided all year.

Hermione found when she checked the wards that evening that there wasn't a single person out of bounds. They were still piled into the library and spread about their common rooms, but they weren't picking fights with one another or sneaking to the kitchen or off for a snogging session on the Astronomy Tower. The final countdown to exams was here.

Her plan to revise with Harry, Draco, and Ron that evening suffered a check when she received a summons from Severus. One of the Hufflepuffs whom Severus had been teaching in the very last class slot of the year delivered the note at dinner.

The letter was sealed so that only Hermione could open it, and she was amused to note that it actually said only "Head Girl" on the envelope. The little Hufflepuff scurried off the second she'd done her duty. Hermione, staring down at the missive, didn't imagine she had to worry that anyone was about to accuse her of receiving love letters from the Slytherin head of house. Even Draco, who was sitting between her and Harry, snorted when he saw how it had been addressed.

"In a bit of a mood, apparently," he said. "Lucky you."

To the best of her knowledge, she'd not done anything outrageous that would require him to chastise her publicly like this; probably, therefore, it was a bit of subterfuge. Looking up at the High Table collectively, they found that Severus was sporting one of his blackest scowls.

Harry made a face. "You, er, want some support?"

Ron dug an elbow into his best friend's side. "Are you mad? Couldn't pay me to go near him when he's in a taking like that."

She smiled faintly. "The letter is addressed very clearly to me, Harry. I'll be fine."

Harry, who'd seen her in a complete temper and utterly miserable as a result of Severus, didn't seem entirely convinced, but he also knew how stubborn she could be.

Neville was across the table from Ginny.

"Don't you think you should find out what it says straightaway?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt I'm supposed to read it to the table. Wouldn't want to bring down any of his wrath on your heads, would you?"

That was the end of anyone's suggesting they be allowed to find out what was in the letter. Hermione made sure to eat quickly, however, and no one offered a word of protest when she was the first to rise and bid everyone else a pleasant evening.

Arriving in her common room, she quickly broke the seal, smirking slightly at some of the curses that would have been activated should anyone else have made the attempt. Had he given the letter to a too-brash Gryffindor or a too-inquisitive Slytherin, there was a rather good possibility that there would be a student in the hospital wing right now.

Opening the letter, she found that it was a straightforward summons to Room One after dinner. Frowning down at the words, she thought that he could be really very incomprehensible sometimes. Had it really been necessary to make the collective student body think she was in trouble?

She arrived to find that Severus was not yet there. Sourly, she supposed that he was having an unhurried dinner while she had been forced to rush in order to find out what had proved not to be time-sensitive information.

It was another quarter of an hour before Severus put in an appearance, and he came bearing several books and a sheaf of parchment. She eyed him curiously and not with a great deal of cordiality, arms crossed over her chest.

He frowned at her.

"You don't really think I wanted to see the Head Girl, do you?"

"I don't have the slightest notion," she answered shortly. "You may do as you wish."

His eyebrows rose slightly. "I hadn't thought it would put you in that sort of mood."

Her lips tightened. "I've been standing here for almost twenty-five minutes; my conjecture during that time has hardly been unbiassed."

She had actually started a mental review of Muggle Studies, but she was still annoyed.

He inclined his head. "Albus kept me after dinner. Afterwards, I had to do a credible job of glaring at all the students and frightening a few of them in the hallways."

"For a specific purpose?"

"I prefer that we aren't disturbed this evening, and the most straightforward way to do that is to convince all the students that Professor Snape is in one of his particularly egregious moods."

Hermione gave some attention to the wards and found that he was perfectly right. Despite the fact that dinner was barely over, all the students seemed to be already ensconced in the library or their common rooms.

She relaxed her stance, lips quirking up. "And you wanted to ensure that we were alone and unbothered for what reason exactly?"

"I want to become an Animagus."

She blinked at him, nonplussed. She had been sure that she was going to get some sort of innuendo out of her question. Blankly, she said, "Of course you do."

"I've brought my research," he said, hefting the books and parchment he held, "so that you can't just tell me I'm unprepared again."

Huh. She'd not precisely forgotten that this was what he wanted to do, but it had been a little lost in the jumble of responsibilities that she had right now. She hadn't even considered finding him reading material, but Severus was not Harry. The former had been researching on his own for years, and she suspected that she now knew what he had been working on so industriously on Wednesday while she had been studying.

Normally, she'd insist that whoever she was training did so for a longer period of time, but she didn't think Severus was going to take no for an answer unless she had very good reasons to back her up.

She conjured some chairs, gesturing him to one while she settled in the other and took a look at everything that he'd prepared. It was, as she'd imagined it would be, quite thorough. He'd read three of the premiere books on Animagi including the one that she'd got Harry for Christmas, and he'd written notes not only from the books but also from what he seemed to recall about his own failed attempts and—she only very narrowly managed not to betray her surprise—even a couple of pointers from Remus. It was couched such that she was certain that Remus thought—or at least had allowed Severus to think he thought—that this was a result of his desiring to have a clearer understanding of the lycanthropy cure. It told her in no uncertain terms that Severus was very earnest about doing this.

She realized when Severus made some slight movement that she'd been silent for a long time and he was nervous.

Offering a small smile, she said, "I daresay you've managed to research more in the last several days than Harry managed in a couple of months."

Severus relaxed, his lips twitching up into their customary sneer. "Of course I have. My only surprise is that you seem shocked."

Her smile deepened. "Not at all. You've brought us here, then, in the hopes that the transformation will actually take place tonight?"

He offered her a curt nod, apparently not at all pleased with the idea that this might not be the case.

She nodded. "It's a good-sized room and should be able to accommodate almost any sort of transformation."

There had been, she remembered, that wizard who'd transformed into an elephant…. Severus didn't strike her as possessing terribly many characteristics of a pachyderm, though, so they were probably safe.

She Banished all the books and scrolls to one corner of the room and then insisted, to Severus's displeasure, that he have a glass of water and shed his teaching robes, shoes, and socks. She stared him down until he obeyed her. Too bad she wasn't pettier or willing to risk their relationship, or she could really have a lot of fun with this role reversal.

Staring at him seated cross-legged in front of her in trousers and a shirt, she wished that she could convince him to dress like this more frequently in his quarters.

"What?" he demanded shortly, clearly not in a temper to be toyed with.

She shook her head. He glared at her.

"You're the one who made me undress like this, M—Hermione. You can't blame me for how I look."

"Blame you? No. Seriously consider getting quite distracted from the topic at hand? Yes."

He blinked at her, looked down at himself, and said unguardedly, "Really?"

She hummed an agreement. "But perhaps you'd better tell me what you know of the first spell, the one that allows you to feel the transformation into an animal."

Severus looked for a moment as though he were going to pursue the previous topic and never mind about this one, but his desire to become an Animagus was such that he abandoned the first topic and even swallowed the desire—she could practically see the words on the tip of his tongue—to tell her that it was all written in his notes.

She knew it was written there, of course, but what she wanted to see was what he'd assimilated. He told her everything he knew, using different phrases from those in his notes as though to prove to her that he hadn't simply memorized what had come out of the texts.

His knowledge was excellent, and there was nothing for it, then, but to go on. She made him meditate, which he tried to baulk at, but she told him in no uncertain terms that he was going to go through the entire procedure step by step or they weren't going to go through the procedure at all. He capitulated with ill grace.

Fortunately, it was difficult to remain angry with someone while meditating and clearing one's mind of all thoughts, so his ire was quickly lost. Every time she checked, she found that he seemed to be meditating properly. There were no stray thoughts plaguing him nor anything else that would explain why the transformation didn't work.

Perhaps whatever impediment had existed was there no longer. She knew that he relished failure as little as she did, so he probably hadn't tried in recent years.

Twenty minutes later, she gently roused him from his meditation and told him it was time to cast the first spell. He did so, and she watched as it fizzled completely. She'd seen him cast, and she knew he'd done it correctly. It was just as it had been with Harry: what should have worked had not.

That was, indeed, a bit of a problem. If she didn't know it was impossible for Severus to be a Pure Adult, she would have suggested that was the sort of block he had right now.

He was looking at her with an expression that mixed defiance with an attempt at nonchalance that he clearly didn't feel. Deciding that this was one of those moments were actions spoke better than words, she stepped right up to him, pulled him to her, and kissed him.

It took him a moment to give himself over to this new plan, but once his rigidity melted away, she found that he was quite as enthusiastic as she was. Several minutes in, she realized that if she let this go on for much longer, there'd be no more attempts at becoming an Animagus in their near future. Despite how flattered she was to know that it seemed she could, after all, distract Severus if she wished, she knew that this transformation was very important to him.

She therefore brought the kiss, which had somehow come to involve hands and close contact of a great many body parts, to a reluctant end and pulled back enough that she wasn't in danger of simply melting against him once more.

His face was faintly flushed, and she imagined that she was in much the same state. One of his eyebrows rose.

"I hope that is not the solution you use for all the people you've assisted in their Animagus transformation," he said dryly.

She grinned. "Given all the people I've helped, that's quite a daunting image. You may rest assured that you're the only Animagus trainee I've done that with."

He gazed at her narrowly. "But not the only person with whom you've ever done it."

She imagined this was knowledge that he genuinely wanted to possess, but she suspected it was also a defence mechanism kicking in; it was her turn, apparently to feel on the spot.

She didn't harbour any naïve notions that he'd be reciprocating. In fact, if she asked, she rather suspected that she'd be told that she was impertinent and that it was none of her business. Since knowing about Lily had been quite difficult enough at this point in their relationship, it probably was information she was better off not knowing.

So if he wasn't going to say, why did she have to? On the other hand, given the degree of experience she'd had, was it worth upsetting him to hold to the principle of quid pro quo? It wasn't a big dark secret, and he could probably guess if he thought about it.

"I've never kissed anyone else as I kissed you," she answered matter-of-factly. "I haven't ever had a relationship that approached this level of intimacy or intensity. As to previous kisses of a romantic nature, I've received two, both of which were mistakes."

He frowned. "Mistakes?"

She nodded. "The first was in fourth year when I'd made it clear that I wanted to be friends. He said he accepted that and apologized for the kiss."

Severus looked as though he were trying to work out how this meshed with what he knew of her relationship with Harry, and she tried not to roll her eyes.

"The second was for much the same reason, only more so. I'd said I wanted to be friends, and he thought to prove that there was more between us."

"When was this?" he asked pointedly.

"April."

Understanding dawned, and his words were spoken very coldly. "Mr Krum."

She nodded, the memory of that painful scene on the Astronomy Tower bright in her mind. She tried to blink it away, looking at Severus with a twisted smile on her lips.

"You may rest assured that they were both kisses that weren't initiated or desired by me. They were quite one-sided, really."

He was staring at her, and she wondered what it was that he saw in her face.

She rallied with an effort, managing to smile at him and admit, "Unlike ours, which you might have noticed I initiate on my own from time to time."

His face softened, the harsh lines around his mouth easing.

"I had, actually."

Silence stretched between them.

"Are you not going to ask?" he snapped finally.

"Nope," she answered, letting out a huff of breath. "That's not to say I won't ever do so, but I'll endeavour not to demand a list of you."

"Unlike me."

She smiled. "Who evidently has manners that leave much to be desired, yes."

He started at her incredulously for a moment, and then he smiled, and she wondered how many students would believe that Severus Snape could be teased and insulted out of a bad mood.

"You're very absurd today," he observed.

"It comes from proximity to exams," she answered easily. "I've a finite amount of brain power, and most of it is currently allocated to my tests. There's only so much I've got left for everything else."

He offered her a glower that she could tell was mostly for show. "I'm lumped in with 'everything else', am I?"

"At the very top of the list," she answered with a great deal of sweetness. "Right above Harry and Draco."

Severus made a face. "Why are we discussing this?"

She forbore pointing out that it was because he'd brought the matter up. It had, after all, taken his mind off the failed spell, and she'd gotten quite a lovely kiss out of it.

Checking the wards, she verified that no crises were taking place. This made it a prime time, therefore, for her to cast the spell that he had just attempted. She had been able to use it to great effect on all the werewolves for their first transformation, so she was hoping that with enough power behind it, she would be able to break through whatever barrier was preventing Severus from properly casting the spell.

She had him sit again, conjuring an armchair that she thought would be most comfortable for him and would support him no matter what sort of reaction he had. Easing her own straight-backed chair close so that they were nearly knee-to-knee, she held her wand loosely in one hand and saw that he had his clenched tightly in his fist. She couldn't blame him for being nervous.

Meeting his eyes squarely, she saw him nod very deliberately. Using her wand and speaking aloud—figuring it was better for him to be fully aware of what she was doing—she cast the first transformation spell.

Magic enveloped him in a light amber cloud that only she could see, and it would be inaccurate to say that it didn't have an effect. She could practically feel him hit with the force of the spell, and even her light connection to his mind allowed her to feel the effects there.

When she cast Känn Förvandlingen, it was supposed to enable Severus to feel his own transformation into an animal form. Instead, it was as though his mind short-circuited. Severus had never experienced the transformation from human to werewolf, but he might as well have given his reaction now. When she cast the spell, all she could feel was pain, and she was bombarded with images of claws and sharp teeth, her ears left ringing with the sounds of screaming. Half of that wasn't even supposed to be part of this spell, but it all immediately flooded Severus's mind.

She could see why his subconscious had been trying to protect him. Severus's mind was one of the most well-disciplined that she knew. He had the power, the experience, and the cunning to Occlude against Voldemort and not get caught for years and years. He'd had to face horrible situations, hide his fear and disgust, and he'd done it over and over again.

When Remus in werewolf form had tried to attack Severus, the Slytherin had only been sixteen years old. This appeared to be one of the most traumatizing events of his younger years, and the beast had scared Severus so badly that his mind had worked against him. That great tool with which he horded minute details had retained far too much information. His terror had blocked his ability to transform, and she began to really understand why Severus felt as though he had a lasting reason to be angry with the Marauders.

She had hoped that she'd be able to use the same technique she'd employed with the adult werewolves, predominantly powering Severus's spell but not needing to be more invasive. Severus's problem, though, had never been one of power or of focus; his problem was one of the mind, just as he'd suspected, and she was quite sure now that if she tried putting even more power behind the spell, she'd only make him feel worse.

He was breathing heavily even as the spell effect diminished, a haunted look in his eyes. She unceremoniously summoned Winky to ask for tea and sandwiches. Severus tried to tell her that he was fine, and she ignored his protests. He was pale as a piece of parchment, and she was pretty sure that if he wasn't gripping the arms of his chair in a white-knuckled grasp, he'd be shaking.

"I've faced far worse," he offered wanly.

"I'm sure you have," she answered evenly. "You've not tried to achieve an Animagus transformation after any of those events, though, and we're not going to progress any further when you're in this sort of a state. End of discussion," she added when it looked like he was going to protest. "You need me to continue, so you might as well just behave."

With some reluctance, he subsided to sip at his tea and eat his way through a whole array of sandwiches—which seemed to take him by surprise him when he found the empty plate in front of him.

He'd come perilously close to whinging by the time that she finally gave in and said that they could make the next attempt; first he'd started fidgeting and gotten all twitchy, then he'd refused to eat another sandwich, and finally, he'd forbidden her to bring up any topic related to potions. She wanted to tell him that Harry had behaved better than this, but in Severus's current mood, it might not have the effect that she wished.

When she announced that they were going to meditate once more, he snapped.

"I don't need to meditate! I've been meditating for years, and I've already done it once this evening."

"I trust that you do know how, and I know you've done it already tonight," she pointed out dryly, "as I was present at the time. However, that was before you had a very harrowing mental experience."

"I don't think—" he began.

"That much is patently obvious," she interrupted, offering her own glare when he frowned at her. "You don't think when you're trying to become an Animagus, you remember what happened in the Shrieking Shack all those years ago. We've just seen that it's the only thing that's on your mind when you attempt the Animagus transformation. You've just been shaken by the memory that I unearthed, so you need to meditate."

He grumbled, swearing under his breath. Apparently, he had not grasped just how acute her hearing was because she heard every word and learnt several new ones. She just stood there, her lips twitching, waiting for him to finish. He glanced at her, and his litany cut off abruptly.

"You didn't—"

"Learn a whole bunch of words that I should only use in the company of sailors?" She made no attempt to hide her amusement. "I most certainly did. My excellent hearing attests to the fact that I'm the person in the room who has successfully transformed, so I would appreciate it if you would listen to me."

It was like teaching him how to raise defensive shields all over again. He could only seem to accept for so long that he wasn't the expert and then he revolted and tried to do whatever he thought was best. He seemed, finally, to have taken her point, however, or at least to have subsided for the time being.

"I want you to meditate," she repeated, "on nothing in particular. Concentrate on clearing your mind of all images—and don't you dare try to fob me off because I'll know if you're not really trying."

He gave her a dirty look but proceeded to obey her. She knew that he was nervous and getting more embarrassed as time progressed, so she was going to forget about all his behaviour until they were done with this attempt.

She made another light mental connection to ensure that he was meditating like he was supposed to. She frowned as she realized that his mind was now a complete mess. When he'd been blocked before, the problem had been well hidden. Now that she had released the mental block, it was like walking into a mental tornado, layers of memories and associations and mental traps accosting him everywhere. No wonder he was having difficulty with the spells.

Drawing a deep breath, she deepened the connection between them and entered his mind. Wading through his memories to get properly connected was a challenge in and of itself, but working as a buffer allowed him to filter out all the images that were in the way. When it seemed as though he was fully calm, she carefully eased out of his mind and readied her wand.

This time, she did the same with him as she had done with Remus and Draco and most of the other werewolves; she cast the first spell without bringing him out of the meditation. This should have brought him straight to feeling the effects of her spell.

It was a good thing that she hadn't put as much force behind her casting this time because she felt immediately when the spell failed. He'd gone straight from meditating near his core to being consumed with fear as the werewolf transformed and came after him as a ravening beast.

Bugger but that was annoying.

She made him sit again, and although he accepted tea, he told her flat out that if she tried to shove one more sandwich down his throat, he was going for his wand. She surreptitiously nudged the plate of biscuits in his direction and let him recover at his own pace.

"By this point, you've perhaps noticed the problem I'm having?" he said snidely.

Evenly, she said, "I'm not about to try something dangerous when a less invasive spell could prove effective. I understand that it's not the most pleasant association for you, but it's important that I do this properly."

His expression showed clearly that he didn't think much of "properly" at the moment, but perhaps he could be mollified with the knowledge that he had been very right; it was looking as though she was just about the only one—or at least the only person he trusted, as he wasn't about to go to a Healer—who could help him achieve the transformation.

She considered the problem, and then sat down in front of him to tell him very seriously, "We have two choices. I can try to Obliviate the memory of the werewolf—with appropriate triggers, of course, so that you can get the memory back afterwards. There is a chance that won't be adequate to achieve the transformation if enough of the feelings have disassociated from the specific memory of the incident. I would obviously be very careful, but I don't exactly have a lot of experience with this."

He rose from his chair without a word and crossed to the other side of the room to look out the window that had popped into existence as he approached. This room was getting more and more like the Room of Requirement the longer they spent in it. The sun was just starting to set, but she was quite sure that Severus wasn't seeing it as he stared out.

"You need only have said."

His back was still to her and his voice low, but it was fierce and taut with suppressed anger, and she picked up each and every word. The words weren't making a great deal of sense, however, so she rose to come stand by his side although she was careful not to try to touch him.

"Said what?" she asked softly.

"That you didn't want to do this," he spat.

Chapter Fifty-Three: The Form

Hermione wasn't sure how someone could speak so quietly and so fiercely, but no matter the tone, Severus had still clarified the problem; she was certain that there was a time not so long ago when he would have simply stormed out and they would have avoided one another for weeks. Possibly months.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" she asked. "Because I want to give you as many options as possible that don't involve me potentially ransacking your mind?"

He turned back to her, finally, face still dark, but she could see that he was listening, so she continued, "You're a very private man, Severus, as I have plenty of reason to know. I did this with the children because it was essential that they be cured. Even doing everything in my power to keep my thoughts to myself and theirs to them, when I'm in their minds like that, we're connected. I still pick up all the surface thoughts and emotions, and it's very … intimate. The children were happy to get the help, and now they don't remember any details of what I've done. Sophia was like an excitable little puppy, delighted to have company."

She smiled sadly at him. "You're not like that, Severus. You're going to know exactly what I'm doing, and you're going to feel as though I'm places that I most definitely should not be. I'm the one who needs to be in control, and that means you're going to have to surrender it. It's asking a lot, and I want you to be aware that there are other avenues that we can explore if you prefer."

His lips were compressed in a thin line. "But it has nothing to do with a reluctance on your part to be in my mind?"

"Only with how you will feel when I am there," she said again. "I am happy to help in any way that I can."

She wasn't altogether certain what would happen if his terror were to win out over the both of them, but she doubted it would be pleasant. It might not be possible to lose the ability to transform, but she really didn't want to test that theory; she didn't feel as though she would survive if she could never transform again.

Severus had a lot of Legilimency training, had recognized what she was doing with the children—or at least recognized enough to want to know more—and he might therefore recognize that possible danger she was putting herself in now.

If he hadn't worked that much out, he was likely to assume that she was worried either that he'd have access to her thoughts, feelings, and memories, or that she didn't want to have access to the same in him, as some of these were from events that would be difficult for her to experience. This wasn't even a passing concern for her; she had no intention of snooping in his mind, and she'd meant what she said about being willing to help him no matter what.

He wanted to be an Animagus, so she would do everything in her power to make it happen.

"I would … prefer that you do what you did with the children," he pronounced finally, watching her carefully. "I don't think Obliviating me would work."

Understandably, he was also not enamoured of the idea of having a bunch of his memories removed. Given that the only time she had done it to herself was when she'd been faced with the prospect of having them wiped for real by a malicious Slytherin—and the entire Final Battle jeopardized—Hermione rather understood his point.

He lowered all his Occlumency barriers at her request, as it was essential that she have complete access to his mind. It took several minutes, and she wondered, fleetingly, just how long it had been since he had been without mental shields of any kind. Given that she'd put hers up in fifth year and hadn't taken them down since, she imagined that it had probably been years, if not decades, for him. They might thin their barriers when necessary, but they both had lots of secrets, and he'd had longer to acquire his.

Although he didn't ask, she volunteered the information that she had absolutely no intention of digging about in his mind; she explained that with the children, she'd been able to keep rather separate from their memories, as they were concentrating on doing something new and different. She didn't see why she wouldn't be able to do the same with him.

Of course, she'd be more curious with him than she had been with the children, and she'd already be linked to a great many more of the memories in his head than she had been with the children, but she was also preternaturally aware of how easy it would be to destroy his trust, so she'd be walking on eggshells.

She knew he wanted desperately to become an Animagus. The fact that the last of the Potters was a majestic magical bird no doubt only fuelled this desire to prove himself, but it was still a huge step on his part to be able to confess this need to her and ask her for help. She wanted to show him that he'd made the right choice.

His nervousness was slightly more apparent now that he wasn't shielding.

"We can stop at any point," she assured him.

He grimaced. "I'm not doing that again. Get on with it."

She hid a smile, as it was likely to be misinterpreted. His curtness didn't appear to be affected by his shields, anyway, and she knew that she'd feel quite naked without any of her shielding. It had become second nature to her, and it would only be worse for him.

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before she had them both sit on the floor facing one another. While she didn't anticipate losing control of either of their bodies, they'd be safer closer to the ground in case anything went wrong.

She met his eyes and watched him still the urge to flinch. It had evidently been a long time indeed since he had faced a Legilimens with nothing to protect himself. Given how recently he'd been tortured by Voldemort who had been trying to rip through his mind to get to the state that Severus had now voluntarily entered for her, she could see why he was finding it more than a little disconcerting. She stilled the urge to tell him again that they could stop whenever he wished. He already knew that, and he was going to get annoyed if she treated him like a child.

Dropping into her core, she thinned her own shielding, reached out, and settled firmly in his mind, feeling a little as though their cores had suddenly merged and twined, though that was only a mental approximation of something that she did not think could really be quantified. It felt different, more complete, than it had with the children.

Severus gasped, and she could feel his body produce the sound and movement. Emotions bubbled up all around her: shock at what he was feeling, surprise at the success of the action, pleasure that he was that much closer to becoming an Animagus, and fear of all the things that she could see that he didn't want her to, like—

She ground this mental hyperventilation to a halt forcefully; fortunately, this need to react to his behaviour had also ensured that she took control.

Behave, she admonished with a thread of laughter and felt the answering amusement from him.

She was pretty sure that he wouldn't have let so much of it show outside, but here in his head, she knew that he was amused and relieved that she had taken that so well and that she wasn't delving to try to find out just what it was he didn't want her to—

Stop that, she said again. Use some of that mental discipline, for the love of Merlin, Severus.

He was chagrined now, but the admonishment had forced him to concentrate. His decision to recite how Wolfsbane was made was perhaps a little unfortunate under the circumstances, but she supposed that it was his way of asserting that the werewolf could be controlled. Maybe it was the best thing for him after all.

She could have forcibly calmed him, but given that she didn't intend to Obliviate him afterwards, she knew that they were both going to have to live with what she did in his mind. She therefore wanted to give him as much control and as much dignity as possible, and as she watched him gather his mental control through, over, and around her, she was as impressed by it from this inside view as she had always been as an outside observer.

Okay, she said, once he was mentally much calmer and she felt as though she was ready to begin. She raised his arm, marvelling at how strange it felt to be holding his wand and to feel how perfectly it worked. And if she looked past the dark wand and the hand holding it, she found her body sitting there, staring at them.

Magic had allowed her to do a million wonderful and amazing things over the years, but staring at her own body while camping out in someone else's mind was still one of the most bizarre.

Recalled to the task at hand by a thread of impatience on Severus's part, she immediately set about to soothe him.

I'm going to share something with you that I've never shared with anyone.

He began to pay close attention, curiosity tingeing the thoughts around her as he wondered what else she hadn't told him.

She laughed softly. You already know. But this is in a much more intimate way. This is what it feels like when I transform.

She cast the spell with his wand and their combined magic, and she didn't allow so much as a shadow of doubt to cross her mind that they were going to feel anything other than the unicorn transformation. And it was exactly what they felt.

It was like watching Sophia all over again except more wonderful. The little girl and Severus had both feared the transformation because the painful and horrifying werewolf one was the only one that existed for them.

Now, however, Severus knew precisely how painless it was for Hermione to transform into a unicorn. Despite the fact that there were all sorts of bones, organs, tissue, and muscles rearranging and moving—hell, she was growing a horn out of her forehead—there wasn't any pain. It was a smooth transformation, allowing the animal part of the human to rise to the surface for a little while.

That's brilliant, he breathed, and she knew that he'd forgotten that she was aware of everything that he was feeling. She rather liked the fact that he was the only one she had shared this with. No matter how many people she had helped transform into wolves, Severus was the only one who had experienced her transformation into a unicorn.

It was with something close to regret that she carefully removed herself from his mind and settled back into her own body. She blinked her eyes, momentarily disturbed to see Severus in front of her, and then the world righted itself, and she realized she was back where she was supposed to be. Because really, they couldn't have nearly as much fun if they were stuck in one body.

"What?" he demanded.

"Hmm?"

"You're blushing." His voice was low.

She gave a self-conscious smile and confessed what she'd been thinking.

His lip curled. "You like the things we do with two bodies, do you?"

She nodded.

"You know," he said, head tilted slightly to one side as he considered, "it might be interesting—"

"I'm entirely certain it's better if you don't go there," she said, having started to go there herself already. "We're not thinking about it, not right now."

His lips tipped up again. "As you say."

She was glad that he seemed so happy now and that there didn't appear to be any unexpected fall-out from her time in his head.

"Thank you," he said, mirth still easing his features but seriousness in his tone.

"You're very welcome. If you wish, you can put up basic shielding before we continue."

He nodded his understanding, although he grumbled again once he understood that continuing started with food, drink, and a few minutes of rest.

"I know, I know," he said when she opened her mouth, "you're doing it properly."

She closed her mouth on the comment that he was behaving just like Harry. Again. As though the man didn't demand exactly this sort of methodology every day in class. On the other hand, he was also almost always impatient when he wasn't getting his own way. Unfortunately for him, it was her way or no way on this particular matter.

Once he was rested, they cast Se Förvandlingen together, and it worked beautifully. She'd conjured a large mirror just as she'd done for Harry, and she and Severus surveyed the results together. Neither of them was particularly surprised by the black hairs which had sprouted on his face. His jaw had changed shape, elongating and beginning to resemble a muzzle. His arms and legs had grown shorter, as had his fingers, but they could not tell for certain what his appendages would be, although it didn't look to be wings.

At least he wasn't pink and fluffy. She wondered if he had been for or against scales but did not ask given that the point was moot now.

"What am I?"

She couldn't answer, of course, but she knew that this uncertainty was tough—although it was one step that she had skipped over; by the time she'd actually got to her transformation, she had known that she was herd, and there had been nothing more to it than that. But she remembered Harry, and she remembered her friends; at this point, you could be a step closer to turning into something highly embarrassing or the most awesome ever, and you were therefore hopeful and trying not to get your hopes up, and it was hard.

"You'll find out when we finish the spell," she said mildly.

He grimaced. "If I turn into a rabbit, we're never speaking of this again."

She smiled faintly. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

He was paradoxically most impatient now and almost resigned to the fact that she was going to make him wait no matter how much he wanted to continue. Wryly, she supposed that the fact that he didn't feel he had to hide his emotions from her was good.

They cast Märk Förvandlingen together as well, but she was careful not to put much power behind it; Severus was doing almost all the work, and there was still no hint of further problems with the spells.

He managed to correct before he took to all fours on limbs that weren't made for such movement, but he did hunch over a bit and come closer to sniff at her. He nudged her side with his head before he drew back and released the spell. He smiled at her.

"What?" she queried.

"You smell like my mate."

She grinned back at him, pleased that he had confessed this so readily, although that might have been the after effects of the spell more than his conscious decision. "That's good. Because I am your mate. I always will be."

But she didn't think they were going to be precisely … compatible in Animagus form, and she was going to try to never bring that up with Severus because she didn't much fancy blushing as much as Harry usually did.

Severus nodded and even consented to eat and rest without any particular complaints. The next spell was the big one, and he seemed to have really accepted that he needed to be well-rested for it.

When it was time to begin, she rose to stand in front of him.

"This is it. Are you ready?"

He nodded steadily, appearing confident. He may not have had the ability for long, but he had had years of needing to make rapid assessments, and if he said he was ready, she needed to squelch her own nerves and let him get on with it before she undermined their hard work.

"Then let's transform," she said simply. "I'm going to cast with you, but you're in charge, all right?"

He nodded, and they both readied their wands.

"Förvandlas till djur," they said in unison.

She watched as the human body she knew so well disappeared as it was remade into the shape of…. She smiled. She thought this explained at least part of the reason why he'd been so caught up in the werewolf transformation. He was a big, four-legged predator, and his magic had sensed the similarities even if he hadn't done so consciously.

He was a black panther. His long body, short legs, and large skull identified him as a leopard rather than a jaguar or a cougar. She knew that he theoretically still had spots, and she'd read that especially in some light, it was possible to see them clearly, but as she stared at him now, all she could see was gorgeous deep black fur. His eyes were still dark, and his paws didn't make a whisper of sound as he padded over to the mirror to look at himself.

I think you would have taken Prongs, Padfoot, and Moony, she observed.

This recalled him to her presence, and he turned round to grin at her, showing lethal-looking teeth lining his very powerful jaws. He stalked over to her and gave her another head butt, one that made much more sense in this form than in his human one, and she sank to her knees and buried her fingers in his fur.

You're very beautiful.

Thank you.

He sounded very pleased, and she found it refreshing that he'd just accepted what she was trying to say rather than dissecting and questioning it. It was nice to see that MindSpeech worked fine both ways, too, after her foray into his mind.

He glanced in the mirror again. Do you really think I could?

She knew exactly what he was asking and laughed. Of course. Leopards might be the smallest of the four big cats, but they can kill and carry prey three times their size up trees. Actually, they can bring down antelope that are ten times their size.

He frowned, an expression that was interesting to witness on his cat face. Antelope aren't that large.

The Giant Eland in Central Africa is, she countered promptly. They range in size from five to nine hundred kilos.

Why do you know this?

She raised her eyebrows. Have you met me?

He huffed mental laughter. I know you're well-versed in numerous subjects but antelope that live in Africa?

I had friends who were trying to achieve their Animagus forms. I wanted to be well-educated.

And did any turn into Giant Eland? he asked sceptically.

She made a mental face for his benefit. No. But look how useful that knowledge has turned out to be. I took out some general animal encyclopaedias and learnt a great deal, that's all.

As you say. He still sounded amused.

She let him admire himself in the mirror followed by several minutes of running around the room testing out his legs. Finally, she called him back to her.

You can't stay in this form for very long the first time. Seeing his reluctance, she continued, You know you'd be embarrassed to tell Albus that you were stuck as a cat and couldn't teach Potions.

He grimaced and said shortly, Fine.

Shall I assist?

I can do it on my own.

She didn't have the chance to warn him of the possible disadvantages of that decision, although he should have been aware of them on his own given that he had spent the last new moon at the safe house. And he'd done all that research, but it was possible that he hadn't realized—

Well, on the plus side, he was definitely human, and he was as close to grinning with triumph as she'd ever seen. On the negative side, he was somewhat lacking in the clothing department.

As he immediately tackled her to the floor and covered her body with his own, she reflected that it was perhaps premature to assess the lack of clothing as a negative feature. She responded wholeheartedly to his very enthusiastic kisses, and it didn't take him long to get her into a state of undress similar to his own.

His lips moved from her mouth down her neck and across her chest so that he could lick and nibble at the sensitive skin there before sucking one of her nipples into his mouth; he had apparently noticed how much she enjoyed that last time.

She arched into him, reflecting that this was perhaps the most salutary outcome of a transformation that she'd yet had the privilege of witnessing. In fact, she smiled to herself, clutching at his hair as he transferred his attention to the other nipple, if Severus wanted to transform several times per day, she wouldn't complain.

As he coaxed her onto her hands and knees, her thoughts skittered rather irreverently to what the feline equivalent of "doggy-style" was since she was with someone who transformed into a big cat, but she rather imagined that she'd break the mood if she inquired, and she was definitely up for a little experimentation.

Wordlessly, she cushioned the floor so that it would be easier on their knees, and Severus guided himself carefully inside her. He waited until she rocked back against him, still the gentleman when it came to making sure she was ready, and then he pulled back and thrust smoothly forward. She realized that the angle afforded by this position allowed him to penetrate deep inside of her, and she let out a pleased sigh as she tried to figure out what movements she could make that would maximise their contact.

His hands stroked over her hips and the small of her back, fingers tightening spasmodically when she experimentally tightened her pelvic floor muscles. She grinned to herself and did it again. So Kegel exercises were for more than preventing pelvic organ prolapse, and there were good reasons for her to have kept up the Muggle exercises. Who knew?

Severus retaliated by leaning lower over her so that he could reach round and stroke her with those long and talented fingers. A shock of pleasure burst inside her, and she let out a sound that was nowhere near coherent enough to be considered words. She could feel Severus's smirk even though she wasn't facing him. Since it was all in the name of turning her on, she wasn't going to complain.

She did twist her neck around so that she could almost see him, and he leaned to the side so that he could bring their lips together in a sort of sideways kiss. It was more than a little awkward, but it felt good, ensuring that what could be a very impersonal act where she couldn't even see him stayed very personal.

She could get quite used to all of this, she really could, to this notion that they were in enough of a relationship that he could tackle her in the middle of an unrelated event and that was a perfectly acceptable expression of his feelings. They could tease one another and spend time trying to work out what turned one another on best, and it was all fun and pleasurable—and sort of a thing that couples did on a regular basis, and wasn't that wonderful?

Severus continued to be meticulous in his ministrations, thrusting in time with the movement of his fingers until the two of them came together—he was really quite phenomenally good at that—and they were both panting and well-satisfied.

He rearranged them so that he was lying by her side.

"That's not normally the activity that I recommend between transformations," she said breathlessly.

"I should hope not," he growled.

She caught up his hand and pulled it to her mouth to drop a kiss onto the palm.

"Only you."

He used the hand she was holding to tug her close enough to kiss her soundly again.

"I know," he said softly. "Thank you for this."

She smirked at him. "Any time."

"I'll be sure to take you up on that." He sounded very sleepy and satisfied with himself.

Given the benefits of rest at this point, she conjured blankets to go with the soft floor, and he was soon asleep, cuddled up against her.

She'd wondered if sharing her transformation with him would result in his turning into an animal of her choice, so to speak, rather than his own. He couldn't have become a unicorn, but she'd wondered if he was going to be a horse or at least in that family. The antelope immediately sprang to mind given their absurd discussion, and she suppressed a chuckle.

An equine companion as her mate would have been enjoyable, but she had not wanted to dictate what Severus became; this was his transformation, and objectively, she didn't feel as though a horse was particularly suited to Severus's personality. A solitary predator blending in with the night and silently stalking its prey before pouncing and killing it with one blow to the neck, on the other hand, was about spot-on.

In the end, he was happy, and that was what mattered. Besides, this form would allow him to join her in the Forest if he wished, and she had an entire herd who would accompany her when she wanted equine companionship. This way, she knew the transformation was his choice, and that was best.

He woke an hour later and seemed momentarily disconcerted to find that she was still awake and watching him.

"I'd appreciate it if you could sleep from time to time," he said sourly, "so that I don't feel so abnormal."

"You're not the abnormal one," she corrected. "And I do sleep, just not as frequently as everyone else. I was having very nice thoughts, if that helps."

He sneered. "I'm greatly reassured."

There wasn't much heat behind the look, though; it seemed more habitual than anything, and she didn't bother to respond.

He wanted to practice immediately, so after making sure he ate again, she let him get to it.

By the time two hours had passed, he was frustrated that his transformation wasn't perfect, but he'd only lost his clothing twice more, and it had been consistently with him for nearly a dozen transformations in a row.

When he looked ready to try again, she interjected, "We need to take a break."

"I don't want—"

"We're going to take a break," she said more firmly.

His glower was full of all its usual menace. "If I want to transform, then I'm damn well going to do so!"

"If you want to injure yourself, you're going to have to do it out of my presence and out of my knowledge because when you try to do something foolhardy and unnecessarily dangerous right in front of me, I'm going to stop you," she snapped back. "Nobody gets the transformation the first time they do it, and you've been progressing in leaps and bounds. It's supposed to take weeks, and you managed it in a night; you need to give your body time to adjust."

"I should be able to do it by now," he growled.

She'd just explained why he shouldn't be able to do it by now, but he was quite evidently in one of those moods where logic played no part. Dealing with him like this was next to impossible.

"Fine," she said, voice hard. "Go ahead. Strain yourself, get stuck as a leopard, and see how well you're able to function." He could live with Hagrid for all she cared. "I will be in my quarters not assisting as you injure yourself."

She turned on her heel and marched out of the room. Her fingers practically itched with the desire to cast wards that would prevent him from transforming. Given how connected their minds had been, she might even have been able to block him from doing it mentally. She restrained herself. They weren't there to be one another's minders. She'd be damn angry if he ever tried to interfere in her life like that, and this choice, stupid as it was, was his to make.

Harry and Draco were in the common room, and she wished that she'd paid more attention to the wards so that she could have bypassed the two boys and grumbled in private. It was too late once the gargoyle had disappeared, though, so she continued into the room.

The many books strewn about proclaimed that they were studying.

"What's he done?" Harry asked immediately.

She suppressed a sigh. "Why?"

"Because he's the only reason you come back looking that upset," Harry answered promptly, and Draco nodded in agreement.

She tried out several creative curses in her head but reluctantly discarded them. "Disgruntled more than upset," she answered finally. "We had a difference of opinion, that's all."

They both looked doubtful, but she ignored them and made tea, moderately soothed by the process of boiling the water and watching the tea steep. It was probably a bad sign when she was soothed by steeping tea, but there it was.

"What are you two up to this evening?" she asked once she had settled into the nearest chair.

It was nearing eleven o'clock and it was likely that all they were planning was sex and sleeping, but she had to get the conversation going in some manner.

They exchanged looks and appeared to struggle for some sort of answer that didn't involve what she'd just been thinking.

"Did Morag come to talk to you about rounds?" she pursued.

Harry seized gratefully onto this topic, and by the time he'd waxed eloquent on it for five minutes, it had been decided that he should really be a little more involved this evening, just in case, and what about if he and Draco were to go do another set of rounds?

Draco and Hermione both watched in amusement while Harry carefully constructed this plan, and the Slytherin acquiesced now that it had been declared so hopefully by his boyfriend. They turned down her offer to accompany them, and she hoped that they wouldn't forget themselves enough to have sex in the corridors.

Or at least that they'd shield properly.

Off they went, and Hermione was left alone. After a few minutes of sitting and doing absolutely nothing, she pulled herself together and went for her course notes. N.E.W.T.s were two days away, so there was no such thing as spare time.

She set Potions aside, realizing that now was not a good time despite the fact that it was her first exam on Monday morning. Transfiguration was similarly discarded given what she and Severus had just been doing. Defence always made her think of Severus thanks to all their training, so she ended up working on Runes and History of Magic, as these were the two other exams that she had in the first week. She laid her materials out around her on the couch since the boys were absent and went back and forth with a topic in each subject so that she could force her mind to concentrate.

She'd been working at it for almost an hour and a half when she felt the gargoyle dissolve.

"It's about time the two of you got back. I was contemplating sending out a search party."

Well, really, she'd just have checked the wards eventually, but—

Her head snapped up as the magical trace in the room finally registered. Severus was standing there, clearly waiting for her to actually start paying attention to him.

"It would be such a shame if the two of them went missing," he said dryly.

She nodded, although knowing them, they'd be found a week later in some secret location completely shagged out.

She tried to decide if she should close her book or go back to work. She was still feeling cross with him, and his arrival didn't mean that she had to let him interrupt her revision.

He was silent for a long moment when she let the conversation lapse. Then he offered, "It is difficult to make potions with paws."

Nodding her agreement once more, she was still unsure whether or not she should forgive him so easily. She sighed, admitting that his words had definitely been a Snape-ish apology. Closing her book firmly, she offered him a slight smile.

"I don't think chewing with razor-sharp teeth would have quite the same effect as using a knife, either."

He came further into the room.

"Very true," he agreed. He looked down at all her books. "I'm interrupting."

She Banished the books to the table and patted the spot beside her.

"It's not important."

His raised eyebrows said quite eloquently that he thought this dismissal of N.E.W.T. preparation on her part rather unlikely, but he sat down where she had indicated.

"You're more important," she amended.

He seemed surprised by this assertion, perhaps coming as it did on the heels of their having fought.

"Tea?"

He assented, and several moments were lost in its preparation. She handed him his mug and settled next to him once more, tucking her feet up so that her toes were brushing against his leg.

He let out a breath and asked, "Is there a frequency with which transforming is recommended?"

She smiled at him, touched that he was attempting to listen to her and that he was showing her that he was doing so; he could have got the information out of his notes if he didn't actually remember off the top of his head, but he had come to her.

"Trying for hours in a row is draining, that's all. While you're learning, it's reasonable to transform multiple times per day. Once you've got the transformation sorted, you won't likely be doing it more than once or twice except under special circumstances."

"Dare I ask how many times you've transformed in a day?"

She smiled faintly. "Not that many times that I immediately recall, actually. I'm relatively circumspect, I guess."

"Wandering around as a unicorn for days," he pointed out dryly. "Very circumspect."

"Mostly Masked as a horse," she clarified. "They have horses in Scotland." Not exactly wild. "Ponies, anyway … in the Shetland Isles." Not that those were exactly wild anymore, either.

Severus rolled his eyes, repeating, "Very circumspect."

She shrugged, grinning at him, and stopped making a nonsensical argument. "As I told Draco and Remus, make sure someone else knows when you're transforming so that if anything untoward occurs, that person can come change you back before the change becomes permanent. You've got one of the most well-disciplined minds I've ever encountered, so I imagine you'll get over that stage pretty fast, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful. I'll be quite cross if I lose you to the leopard."

"And I should so hate to make you cross."

Beneath the mockery, she was fairly certain was a genuine desire on his part not to have her angry with him. Or to remain a leopard forever, anyway.

"It would be better if you rested tonight," she clarified, "and tried again in the morning."

"I suppose I could do that," he said as he used his long arms to pull her closer and tuck her up against his side, "if I had something interesting to do with the rest of the evening."

Since it was now nearing one in the morning, she could readily guess what activity he had in mind.

"Did you miss the part where I said 'rest'?"

He dropped a kiss into her hair, voice low as he spoke into her ear. "No, but I'm curious as to whether or not I can change your mind."

"I've no doubt that you can," she answered, already feeling slightly more breathless than normal, "but I suspect you'd be very annoyed if Harry and Draco interrupted us."

He grimaced. "That would … not be ideal."

"How about I finish my Muggle Studies notes and you can read Potent Poisons," she suggested, Summoning the book from her room and passing it to him. "Then we'll go to bed."

"Together?" he queried.

"Not if Albus were to ask," she said breezily.

Looking pleased, he permitted this agenda to go forward, and when Harry and Draco returned half an hour later, it was to find her and Severus reading curled up together on the couch. Severus had arranged himself in the corner so that his book was propped up on the armrest. He was turning the pages one-handed because his other arm was slung across her shoulders. Periodically, his fingers curled in her hair, and she resisted purring, reminding herself that she wasn't the cat. She was propped up against his side, legs stretched out on the couch and books lying across her lap.

Although Harry was aware of their relationship, he always managed to look completely shocked when he saw actual evidence of it. Still, round-eyed with astonishment was better than disgusted, and shocked meant it took him a little while to find his voice.

Draco took the image of the stern Potions master curled up with the Gryffindor Head Girl much more calmly.

"You're here late, Uncle Severus."

"And you were out past curfew," the Slytherin head of house riposted without looking up. "Did you wish me to do something about it?"

Despite the fact that they were Head Boy and prefect and had actually been legitimately out doing rounds. For at least some of the time.

Draco smiled at both of them, seized Harry's arm, and immediately began to walk the two of them to Harry's bedroom.

"Goodnight all," he said brightly. "Pleasant dreams."

Harry had just opened his mouth for some comment that would probably spell trouble, but Draco yanked him through the door and shut it firmly behind them.

"That," she declared, "is why they're better together."

"Mm," Severus agreed. "That was moderately less painful than usual. How is the revision coming?"

She closed her book. "Done, or near enough."

He sat up fully so that she could extricate herself, and she Banished all her books back to her bedroom as she rose to her feet, tugging on his hands so that he followed.

"Come along." She continued to pull him along towards her bedroom.

"I would prefer—"

"I know you would. Come along."

He subsided. She knew that he didn't want to spend the night in her bedroom, not least because it was the bedroom of a student but also because he needed to be in his quarters should an emergency arise to which the head of Slytherin needed to respond.

She led him through the bedroom and into her potions laboratory, walking all the way across the room to the new door that had appeared there. Even when left to its own devices, the castle was quite brilliant. Hermione wondered if it had been waiting for her to bring Severus into her lab for the first time. She let go of his hand so that she could present the door with a flourish.

"Ta da," she said proudly.

He looked at her as though she were several syllables short of an incantation.

"It's a door."

"Spectacular deductive reasoning, Severus. Open it," she chided.

Looking put-upon, he did so, a little huff of breath emerging when he saw what was on the other side.

"This is my sitting room."

"Another brilliant deduction," she said teasingly. "You're allowed to step through."

Thus prodded, Severus stepped from her laboratory into his sitting room, and she followed, closing the door behind herself.

"From my lab to your sitting room," she clarified, in case he hadn't grasped all the pertinent facts in his shock. "Keeps us from prying eyes."

"You did this?"

She shook her head. "The castle. Sort of like when my lab appeared."

"You're telling me that the castle connected the living quarters of a student and a professor."

"Well, strictly speaking, the potions laboratory of a student and a professor's sitting room, but yes."

"Does the castle do this frequently?" He sounded appalled.

She assumed not but sent off a mental query just in case, receiving a negative that seemed amused.

"Not frequently, no. But as far as the castle is concerned, we're meant to be together."

Severus still looked shocked. "If others see this door…."

"The door is only accessible and visible to the two of us," she answered, the castle and the wards giving her the particular details. "Besides, there are all kinds of precedents in the Charter for bonded couples, so if it ever became necessary, I would make quite the effort to sway the Board of Governors."

"We're not a bonded couple," he pointed out immediately.

"I am aware of that," she answered, trying to keep the edge out of her voice. "You are my mate, however, and I could argue that I require frequent contact with you."

"Do you require frequent contact with me?" he questioned.

"It doesn't really matter," she said more sharply than she had intended. "The castle can get rid of the door as easily as it put it there."

Come to that, she could get rid of the door. It would be more sensible for her to be on the other side of it first, though, so that she didn't have to Mask herself to get down the hallway to her own room.

His hand on hers stopped her from turning the doorknob.

"It would hardly be polite to get rid of it on the same day that it was created."

She didn't remove her hand.

"We should test it more thoroughly," he continued, sliding up behind her so that she could feel the heat from his body, and his words were whispered right in her ear. She wondered why the words always sounded more persuasive when spoken from that position. "Make sure it's still there and working properly in the morning." He let her pull her hand away from the doorknob and twist around to face him. "You could prove to me that you sleep as you keep claiming."

He was rather irresistible when he was trying to be cajoling. Especially since he'd seen her sleep on several occasions recently, which meant that this was a complete and utter excuse to get her to stay right now.

"I wouldn't want you to think I was fibbing," she said, playing along, and was rewarded as he drew her to the bedroom.

It would be nice, she reflected as Severus headed into the bathroom, to be able to have access to her own bedroom, bathroom, and clothing without having to go down the hallway. Even Masked, she always felt a little vulnerable when she was sneaking back from his quarters. Not to mention the fact that as Head Girl, she could be roused for emergencies just like the head of Slytherin. She was supposed to be in her own bed at night, and this door would ensure that she could get back without anyone being the wiser and without her Apparating; it would feel a little spurious to be doing so all the time in order to facilitate her and Severus's having sex.

Fortunately, she could check the wards before entering his sitting room, and anyone who came into her lab knew that she and Severus were sleeping together. Harry and Draco were also already benefiting from a door that oughtn't to be there, so there was no way that they could complain about her own.

Of course, if Remus knew there was a door between her and Severus's quarters, he'd probably have a heart attack, but he hadn't been to her lab in months, and the chances of his being there at the precise moment that Severus decided to enter were slim to none, so she was probably safe.

She would, however, be very happy when she could proclaim beyond a shadow of a doubt or misunderstanding that she and Severus were together. She knew that it wasn't safe right now for either her or Severus to publicly proclaim their feelings for one another, but it left her feeling … a little edgy sometimes.

What was really worrying her, of course, was what Severus's feelings for her actually were. There were times when he seemed to care, and plenty of occasions where he evinced desire for her, but did he actually want to declare to the world that he had feelings for her?

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed likely that that was one of the last things that he'd be interested in doing. Sure, from time to time he liked to rub Harry's face in the fact that she'd chosen the head of Slytherin for her mate, but that wasn't really a case of his showing anyone else how he felt. When pressed, he would occasionally claim some sort of attachment to her, but what did that really mean?

She took her turn in the loo, reflecting that there was nothing like demanding details on feelings to send most men fleeing for the hills. Brushing her teeth with a conjured toothbrush, she promised herself that she'd get these details sorted once and for all in June. After the war ended. If she'd made it that far, she'd have earned her answers.

Transfiguring her robes into a simple nightgown, she emerged into the bedroom to find that Severus was already in bed, leaning up against the headboard. If the state of his chest was anything to go by, she was overdressed, so while he said nothing as he waited for her to climb into bed and then extinguished the lights, she Banished the robes to the dresser and then shifted over until she could spoon up behind Severus, who'd settled with his back to her.

"Where's your nightgown?" he asked, voice low.

She affected a puzzled tone. "I don't know. Perhaps you should come over here and look for it."

This had the salutary effect of his twisting around and pinning her to the mattress. "Lost it, have you?"

"Mm," she hummed her agreement. "I now require the assistance of a clever Slytherin."

This turned out to be just the sort of assistance that Severus was happy to provide.

Saturday morning, having easily sneaked back to her own bedroom via the magical door and emerging into the common room without Harry or Draco being any the wiser as to where she'd spent the night, she headed up to breakfast with the two boys.

She made sure that word went out at the breakfast table that disturbing the Head Girl today or tomorrow for anything but a dire emergency would result in injuries being heaped upon the unfortunate student to the effect that they wouldn't be well enough to sit their exams until next year. Ginny had kindly stepped into the breach and promised that should anyone have any other important problems, they could come to her instead of Hermione.

Hermione knew that this was the time of year where students were having crises left, right, and centre. O.W.L. students were dropping like flies and had to be given Calming Draughts by Poppy so frequently that Hermione suspected she was going to have to brew even more.

The N.E.W.T. students were tenser, but they'd been through O.W.L.s before, and they knew that if they only kept their heads down and continued to revise like complete maniacs, they'd make it through these tests, too. They also had a lovely prize hovering just out of reach: once they completed these examinations, they'd have completed their Hogwarts education. In order to do so with honours, they were hard at work right now, and they weren't going to let any of the younger students get in their way.

Saturday morning or not, the Great Hall was completely full, and nearly three quarters of the students had books at the table now. Hermione couldn't hear so much as a whisper about Quidditch, and she was pretty sure that this morning she'd heard more about academic subjects outside of class time than she'd heard through the whole rest of the year. Nothing could compare to every single student having exams at the same time and two of the years being frazzled beyond belief as they tried to cram everything they'd ever known about as many as ten subjects into their heads at once. No O.W.L. students were attempting all twelve subjects this year, and Hermione had the most N.E.W.T.s at nine. She'd been doing that many classes through the entire year, of course, but students suddenly seemed to have noticed and realized why she was going to kill anyone who bothered her.

She had an exam every day for the first week of exam time and four in a row the next week. She was pretty sure that Minerva or the Ministry invigilators had had to work around Hermione's exams to set the schedule.

The N.E.W.T.s were in much the same format as the O.W.L.s. There was three hours of theory in the morning, and if there was a practical as well, it was the same afternoon. The practical tests, they had been told, ranged from approximately thirty minutes per student up to two hours. Potions was the class that almost invariably required the longer time slot, as very few of the more difficult potions could be brewed in thirty minutes.

Since, for the most part, there were fewer students in the N.E.W.T. classes than in the O.W.L. ones, their examinations were being held in one of the largest dungeon classrooms, one which Hermione was entirely certain grew magically larger during the exam period. The practicals that required more space in order to prevent accidents—Transfiguration, DADA, and Charms—were still being held in the Great Hall. Potions would be held in the regular classrom, and Herbology would be held in the greenhouse which had been off limits to all of them for almost two months now. Hermione had been very careful not to peek through the wards.

Perhaps fortunately for Hermione's sanity, she wasn't nearly as stressed as could have been predicted from years previous. Compared to curing the werewolves under her care or working with the wards so that they could defeat Voldemort all of a week after exams finished, N.E.W.T.s were the easy task. She would be the first person to say that N.E.W.T. results would last a lifetime, but she was also busy doing everything she could to ensure the continued lives of a great many people.

Severus would probably have chucked her out if she'd been any more frantic about it. As it was, she had her books with her wherever she went, and while she was very happy to duck into his sitting room to review in peace, he'd gathered all on his own on Saturday morning that she wasn't interested in much else.

Classes were now over, and Severus was generally prompt about returning school work, so she wasn't sure what was keeping him occupied at his desk. Since it kept both of them from getting distracted, she left him to it without indulging her curiosity.

The students had received the exam timetable at the beginning of May, but it was only as Ron was looking at it at lunchtime on Saturday—as though he'd never seen it before and was hopeful that it suddenly wouldn't indicate that it was Potions first thing Monday morning—that he seemed to notice anything amiss.

"Hey, isn't there a moon on Wednesday?"

"Well spotted," Harry drawled.

It was said with a rather Draco-esque tone, but fortunately, Ron just elbowed Harry in the ribs.

"I meant a full moon," he clarified with a roll of his eyes.

Hermione nodded, still reading over her notes for Potions just in case she'd missed some crucial detail the last three times she'd been through.

"Aren't you going to be with the werewolves?"

"Of course," she answered, still not lifting her eyes from the page she was looking at.

"Then how can you write your exam?" he asked blankly.

"They don't take place at the same time." She thought this was a particularly stupid question. "The moon sets at three thirty nine, and the exam isn't until nine."

There was silence, and she finally looked up to find that he was positively gaping at her.

"You're going to be up until four in the morning and your exam starts at nine?"

She nodded.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"I don't sleep much." Her stock answer. "You needn't be the slightest bit concerned about me."

"But that's completely insane," he protested again.

"Ron," she said as patiently as she could, "I know exactly how much sleep I need, and I know that I'll be able to write the exam without any problems."

So long as she could sneak out into the Forest and recharge that way. Since it was Arithmancy on Wednesday morning, she'd be able to get sleep in the afternoon if she wished before continuing to study for Herbology, her final exam on Thursday morning.

"But—" he started again.

"Ron," she interrupted, "you just have to trust me on this one."

His mouth shut again, and she was pretty sure that he was thinking of her third year, where she'd had multiple exams at once; it might not have seemed possible to him, but she'd managed it.

She escaped back to Severus's sitting room with relief given how long lunch had seemed to drag on. The Slytherin had made it back to his quarters before she did, and he merely offered her his version of a smile before he went back to his work. Settling into the comfortable quiet, she began to steadily revise once more.

"You aren't still working on Potions, are you?"

She looked up to find Severus staring down at her. Checking the time, she realized that she'd worked straight through dinner, and Severus had apparently made no attempt to go himself or to rouse her. She looked down at everything in front of her. There were Potions texts out, but she'd actually been working on an Arithmantic equation that predicted the reactions of all the ingredients in Veritaserum, which she explained to Severus.

"Good," he declared firmly. "You realize, don't you, that you needn't have studied for Potions at all?"

She rolled her eyes. "Writing 'I cured lycanthropy' across my paper and handing it back is a charming option that Ron has already had the goodness to suggest to me. We'll only quarrel if you tell me to stop revising."

Little lines had appeared around his mouth. "I do not want you to overwork yourself."

"If you'd seen me before O.W.L.s, you'd understand," she said with a shrug. "I'm perfectly in control now."

His lips tipped up. "I can only imagine. Do you suppose you could take a short break?"

She regarded him for a moment and realized that she'd been sitting in the same position for hours, the tea at her hand had grown stone cold, and it was going to take some clever spells to extricate her from the sprawling array of all her books and notes.

"Of course."

Not the response that pretty much anyone else would have received.

He Vanished her old tea and made her fresh, which she drank gratefully, reminding herself that she needed to continue hydrating and not forgetting that her body existed as the day progressed.

"Your behaviour makes me think I need to take you outside and stand you under the sun," he muttered when she refused most of the plate of food that he tried to ply her with.

She was pleased that he'd taken news of her altered constitution so well.

"I'm quite capable of going out on my own when it's necessary," she said with amusement, "but it's nice to know you're looking out for me."

He grimaced, as she'd known he would at this suggestion that he was trying to take care of her. He was apparently allowed to do it, but she wasn't supposed to make note of it.

He didn't make much of a fuss, therefore, when she went back to her many books and continued right on with her revision.

Chapter Fifty-Four: The Preparation

It actually delighted Hermione when Severus tried to take care of her like this. And despite his reaction when she thanked him or teased him about it, she didn't think that he was actually averse to knowing that she'd noticed and appreciated it. While it was true that she needed to be functional in order to have sex as well as to pass her N.E.W.T.s, Severus making her tea and trying to get her to eat made it that much easier for her to hope that he really cared for her. It just seemed like so much of a … couple thing, something that a mate would do for her, that it made her happy every time.

She did wonder what everyone thought of the lack of Hermione and Severus from the dinner table, but since the world did not revolve around the two of them, the vast majority of the school was unlikely to link the two absences; there were no doubt many occasions in the past where both of them had been away for unrelated reasons. Harry, Draco, and Ron might well think that they were busy having sex, but as she certainly hoped that sex was on the agenda at some point, that didn't really bother her; the frequency with which they were probably thinking it just meant that they were seventeen and eighteen-year-old boys and their minds were always in the gutter.

It hadn't escaped her attention, either, that even when she didn't show up for meals, if she was in Severus's company or presumed to be there, Harry never made the slightest attempt to communicate with her. If he was that worried about interrupting at an inopportune moment, it was really rather funny. Of course, Harry had always been very lucky—or unlucky, depending on how one looked at it—so she supposed that he might well manage MindSpeech at exactly the wrong time. Since Hermione could just imagine Severus's reaction if Harry were to come between them, as it were, it was possible that the Boy Who Lived was trying to retain that title by practicing a very wise circumspection.

At the moment, of course, very little of an intimate nature was occurring, but Severus seemed to be taking that in good part. It had been years since his own N.E.W.T.s, but it wasn't as though he'd gone far from the academic setting; he understood her desire to study—if not Potions, seemingly the other subjects, at least.

Given the year that Hermione had been having, it felt like a lifetime since September, and she had enough on her mind that details that she had learnt then, let alone in the last six years of study, weren't necessarily at the forefront of her mind and the tip of her tongue. She still intended to do extraordinarily well at her N.E.W.T.s and that meant that plenty of revision was necessary, whether other people thought so or not.

She continued with her revision, going through study note after study note, cross-referencing with extra books that she hauled out of her bag because she'd thought she'd might possibly want to follow up with a few more details just in case. Going the extra mile and knowing strange but still pertinent facts was a characteristic for which she had become known in her years here, and she wouldn't want to disappoint at this late a date.

It was only when Severus once again loomed over her and asked her if she intended to keep studying all night that she realized he'd long lit the wall sconces and stoked the fire. The windows had gone completely dark. A tempus informed her that it was nearing half twelve already.

"Huh," she said in bemusement. "I'm not used to working somewhere where I can actually study at my leisure anymore. I keep being interrupted if I'm with anyone else."

"That's a compliment, I take it?" He held out his hand.

She smiled at him and accepted the offered assistance to extricate herself from the nest of books and notes that she'd made.

"It most certainly is," she agreed as she wobbled a little as she came over the mountain of books. Severus caught her and quite fortuitously clasped her to him. She clarified hastily, "I don't mean to ignore you, though."

He rolled his eyes. "You have N.E.W.T.s in less than two days. My ego understands."

She batted her lashes at him in a move copied straight off Lavender Brown. "Then you don't want me to apologize?"

The impending acerbic comment fell by the wayside as he contemplated her expression of mock innocence. "Perhaps you'd better."

She proceeded to do exactly that, pleased when their activities brought them once more to Severus's bedroom where they divested one another and she noted, this time, the way that he flung her clothing all about the room with a bit of a smirk. But she liked things that made him happy, and if seeing her naked made him happy, that was a nice little boost to her self-esteem.

The sex was glorious, and she was really enjoying the fact that they could cuddle up afterwards and fall asleep in one another's arms; every time they did so and she woke up to find a sleepy-eyed Slytherin who was still happy to have her there, the memory of that horrible morning in February was pushed a little further into the back of her mind. In many ways, the sex was easy and it was intimacy that they had trouble with, so every time that Severus let her into his life a bit more, she rejoiced.

Tonight, despite how much she loved being in Severus's arms, she slipped out of his bed in the wee hours of the morning. Extricating herself carefully, she found that she'd succeeded in not waking him. She wasn't sure if that meant he was simply more tired than usual or if he'd finally begun to trust her enough to sleep more heavily in her presence; perhaps he was simply growing more used to having her there. Whatever the reason, he slumbered on, and she pressed the lightest of kisses to his forehead before dressing and making her way back into the sitting room. She gathered up all her study materials with a quick charm, put the bag easily into her lab with a fair bit of glee at the fact that she could stand in Severus's sitting room to do so. Then she headed out to the Forest.

Given how close it was to exams, she was determined not to lose energy, so she was keeping up the visits to her herd even when a large part of her thought that she should just have stayed in Severus's bed on this one occasion at least. But she felt in peak physical and mental condition when she did this, and since she needed to revise, write a whole bunch of exams, complete a whole bunch of practicals, brew the Weresbane, cure the last of the war werewolves, and work with the wards all at the same time—plus continue to develop her relationship with Severus whenever possible—she definitely needed to be in tip-top condition.

Ron, she was sure, was not the only one who thought she was out of her mind to be trying to cure eighteen werewolves the night before one of her exams. She had chosen to believe, however, that it was meant to be, because the Ancient Runes exam, although it was in the morning barely five hours after the moon set, was only theoretical. Her magic was unlikely to be at its peak given what she'd be up to during the night, but since she intended to spend as much of those five hours between the moon set and the exam as possible in the Forest, she was sure that her mind would be sufficiently orderly for her to write about Runes for three hours.

It was not the ideal situation, certainly, but since she couldn't move the moon and wasn't about to ask if the exam could be deferred—if for no other reason than because there wasn't really a convenient time to move it to—she was making do with what she had.

She suspected that the others would be doing the same, which was why she'd bit her tongue and not pointed out how imprudent it was for anyone else to join her. Harry and Ron might not have exams the next day, but they were in the midst of exams, and she knew they could still use the study time. Tonks, Severus, and Minerva—although Hermione supposed her own head of house might not be permitted to come again—had to proctor exams for those not taking their N.E.W.T.s or O.W.L.s. Putting Severus in a beastly mood was cruel at this time of year because some of the students were nervous enough as it was.

If she pointed any of these considerations out, though, the argument that she'd used to explain why she was still going could be thrown back in her face. She had a propensity to try to sort the lives of everyone around her, and she knew it; sometimes, the fate of the world was not hanging in the balance, and they were as much adults as she was and able to make their own choices.

Plus, she was pretty sure that if she tried to convince Severus not to come for his own good and the good of the other students, he'd conceive some asinine notion that she didn't want him there. There was, in point of fact, no triumph that she wanted to share with him more, so she kept her thoughts to herself and trusted that everything would work out in the end.

The Forest was very peaceful; despite the fact that Dementors and other Dark creatures were spreading, the unicorns made very able guardians. A unicorn horn through the heart was one of the only methods of which she was aware to destroy a Dementor rather than simply driving it off. Choosing to risk that force now would be foolish because Voldemort knew the Final Battle was coming. Given that his attempt with the werewolves in the Forest in January had cost him an alliance, he was finally smart enough to stay away.

It was perhaps fortunate that he had taken such a clear stance on pure-bloods being supreme, or he might have been able to court the centaurs. They did not like to involve themselves in human battles, it was true, but if Voldemort had played his cards right, he could have offered them the freedom and respect that the wizarding world at large denied to them; with idiots like Umbridge setting such bad examples, someone who'd been polite and respectful might have been very appealing, and it was possible they would have believed him and not learnt the truth until it was too late.

As for the rest of the Forest, the unicorns were quite above his touch, and the Acromantula obeyed Aragog—as much as they obeyed anyone, anyway—and he remained friends with Hagrid. The giant spider would not accept an envoy from the man who had framed Hagrid, set a Basilisk loose in the castle, and driven all the spiders away. The envoy would also probably be eaten by all the other spiders in the Forest, although that might not bother Voldemort very much.

Those were the largest groups within the Forest as far as fighting forces went. The castle thus remained protected from attack—at least until the actual battle dawned, at which point Hermione imagined that Voldemort intended to overwhelm them and send a host of forces through the Forest and the grounds with impunity.

The unicorns continued to patrol carefully, and Castina had agreed to keep Hermione apprised of the activities within the Forest. When necessary, Castina also informed Fawkes and Fawkes, Dumbledore, so the side of Light was quite well-informed about goings-on in the Forest.

The unicorn's valley remained as peaceful as always, and not for the first time, Hermione wondered if it were possible for other creatures to enter it. Although she couldn't see any particular enchantments around it, she had never seen any creatures but the unicorns in the valley proper. It was possible that this was simply a sign of respect but equally possible that it was what Dumbledore would term "old magic". It was highly unwise, after all, to make an enemy of a unicorn.

Hermione needed to clarify the matter, actually, because she'd like to bring Severus to visit. It went without saying that the herd didn't allow strange humans to wander through their home, but she didn't think her mate would count as such, and the image of him running at her side in panther form was very appealing.

Her time with the unicorns was something that she cherished, and while she knew that Severus understood why she was here, perhaps even understood objectively that she wanted time alone with them, it was a part of her life that she hadn't shared with him. Throughout the rest of the year, it had in fact been a bone of contention between them, and if she could recover that and make it an experience that they could experience together, she would be delighted to do so.

It was a busy time of year for Severus as well as Hermione, however, so she was waiting for a more propitious time to tender this invitation. Currently, the only time she could really rationalize spending so many hours out here was when she would normally be sleeping, and she couldn't in good conscious make Severus lose hours of needed sleep solely so that she could drag him out to meet her herd.

There was even a chance that he didn't want to meet the herd, she supposed, given that his meeting with Castina had not been a pleasant one. Perhaps Hermione would attempt it after exams had finished. It would be the crazy days of the build up until the Final Battle, but both of them might find it a relief to slip away for several hours.

It was nearing six when Hermione discreetly returned to the castle. She wanted to go back to Severus, but since she didn't suppose it would do for them to miss another meal or to head up to breakfast together, she went back to her own rooms to shower, dress, and prepare for the new day.

She slung her full book bag over her shoulder once more, not sure when she'd be returning. Her preference would be to spend the day with Severus, but although he'd made no protest yet, he might well want to have some time to himself. He'd been living a solitary existence for years and years, and she'd prefer to work out a compromise rather than driving him to a point where he threw her out on her ear in order to get some time alone.

Harry and Draco emerged from Harry's room not long after she'd taken up a position on the couch, and they headed up to breakfast together, Harry snorting at the bag on her shoulder.

"Going to make a run for it again?"

"As soon as possible," she agreed with a cordial smile. "I study best in solitude."

"You know," Draco observed conversationally, "solitude doesn't normally include the company of another person."

"When he knows how to behave a day before N.E.W.T.s, it counts," she countered immediately. "He's been very good to me."

Harry's mind really was apparently perpetually in the gutter because he flushed immediately. Draco snorted.

"You'd think Harry would take issue with the idea that he was good to you at all."

Hermione smirked. "He seems to have accepted that we're very … compatible."

Harry groaned. "One day I'm simply going to spontaneously combust, and then where will you be?"

"Hmm…." She looked over at the blond. "That would put a crimp in Draco's love life."

Draco seemed rather struck by this consideration, and they headed into the Great Hall without any further jibes.

The students seemed marginally more frantic than they had been the day before, and previous years suggested that tomorrow morning would be the worst for panicked students and last minute cramming. Fortunately, no one had cracked in the middle of the Great Hall yet, a feat which had occurred quite memorably at the end of last year. Sharon Kelly's panic attack about O.W.L.s in front of the entire school beat out Hannah's fit in Herbology at the end of their fifth year, and it currently stood out in everyone's memory as the reaction most to be avoided. Sharon, rumour had it, had transferred to Beauxbatons.

Hermione's intention to sneak off to Severus suffered an immediate check; she was summoned, once breakfast finished, to the headmaster's office. Fawkes relayed the message directly to her, making it clear that this was not a meeting that needed to include anyone else, so Hermione made no mention of it when she rose from the table. Since the boys assumed they knew where she was going, Draco smirked at her and told her to have fun, and Harry tried to ignore both of them.

It didn't take many minutes in the headmaster's company to ascertain why he had called her there. The fact that he'd chosen the day before exams began to inform her that he was going to bring Bill in to assist her with the wards was a bit much for her. It probably explained why the oldest Weasley child had been here yesterday morning for a few hours and hadn't greeted any of them, not even Ron and Ginny, but that hardly made her feel better.

Fawkes flipped his feathers and sat straighter on his perch, indicating that he'd read the danger signs correctly even if Albus remained oblivious. The headmaster was probably trying to be helpful, but the patronizing tone of the assumption was a little too much for her.

In answer, she rendered his wards inert while he was fully conscious and staring right at her.

His eyes went wide.

"Hermione," he breathed.

She held them carefully and absolutely inert for several more seconds, to ensure that her point was driven all the way home, and then she let them come back to full power, feeling them snap back into place just as though they had always been there, and she could see that Albus had felt the same.

"You haven't asked," she said with a mild but pointed edge to her voice, "but that does not mean I've not been working to ensure that my plan is successful."

There was now complete respect in the twinkling blue eyes.

"I could not feel them at all," he marvelled.

She smiled. "That's the idea. In effect, they are not there."

"I had not realized," he began slowly.

"And now you do."

"There were no disturbances similar to the one that we felt that first night."

He had clearly anticipated that he would be aware of her actions.

She offered him a self-deprecating smile. "That was my first attempt. I believe I've improved quite markedly since then."

"Demonstrably," he answered, and he still seemed rather stunned.

"I'm going to make this work," she stated clearly.

The twinkle was growing in his eyes. "I believe you."

She supposed that it had to be a little disconcerting to him to have somebody else taking on a large part of the masterminding for the plan when he had been working so long to defeat Voldemort. They appeared to have reached an understanding now, however, and she hoped that it would carry them through to the end.

"If there's anything you need," he offered.

This, she realized, was open-ended and acknowledged her role for what it was; she was in charge of this particular part of the plan, and he would be happy to help if he could.

"Thank you, Albus," she therefore answered genuinely. "For the moment, I'm going to practice with the wards. I would appreciate if you would, of course, apprise me should you become aware of any unexpected power breaches; outside of my little bit of showing off just now, I've been working to ensure that no one notices."

"Of course," he said, and he seemed pleased that he once again had some sort of monitoring job. It wasn't completely a sop, either, because she did need to know if she screwed up badly enough that Albus had to bring it to her attention. She didn't think it was likely at this point, but she didn't want to get too cocky.

"I would like Bill to be here," she added diplomatically, "for the warding."

They'd never quite got around to discussing this part.

Albus nodded. "All the Weasleys have asked to attend."

"Have they?" Hermione asked.

Albus smiled. "Yes, well, I'm letting Molly handle the issue of Ginevra when the time comes."

Hermione had had a similar notion.

Although the headmaster phrased his next as nominally a question, it didn't really sound like one. "You will be able to lower the anti-Apparition wards in a select area of the castle long enough for the necessary Order members to arrive with no one being the wiser?"

"Of course," she answered. Since this was normally an ability permitted only to the headmaster, she took this as a sign of respect towards her and the abilities that he had just witnessed firsthand.

"Harry's party has been set for the solstice, as agreed. I have spoken with Kingsley, and he will discreetly log mention of some sort of threat discovered in the early morning two days earlier which he will be investigating with several other Ministry officials who just happen to be Order members. This will explain their unavailability for the morning, as well as affording a reason for the absence of any other Order members should anyone know to be looking at them."

For the most part, Order members were at Hogwarts or in jobs that already necessitated them using some standard protections for their homes—sometimes even Fidelius—in these troubled times. But there were some members who did not warrant such a level of security in their public lives, and protecting them too much would only make others suspicious. These people had been left to their own devices and were hopefully not being followed or tracked. But the Order was trying to be prepared for that eventuality just in case.

She nodded. "If he is aware of what we've done, Voldemort will, we hope, suspect that Kingsley and the others have really been brought here to help with the warding."

Albus smiled faintly. "But since we look as though we are covering up after ourselves, he will not realize that we know he knows."

"Thus, what we hope is a clever plan." She rose from her chair. "If that is all you needed, I do have an exam tomorrow."

He nodded, the amusement in his expression informing her that he was well aware of the fact that he'd gotten a lot more than he bargained for in this discussion. She bid farewell to an equally amused phoenix and headed downstairs wondering what the man had been thinking, talking to her just now. Less than three weeks before the Final Battle wasn't enough time for her to suddenly learn how to use the wards properly if she'd not already been practicing.

Perhaps he'd been anticipating that she would show him some sort of development but had been surprised by the exact form that it had taken. It had been his modus operandi over the years, after all, to tell Harry something and then leave him to learn what to do with the knowledge.

If she got this wrong, they'd be back to square one, although she supposed at that point she and Harry would just have to venture out and hunt until they found Voldemort; as his years in hiding had attested, however, if he wanted to get lost, he was rather good at that. This way, though, they would not only get him, so long as everything went well, they would get all his Death Eaters and his other forces as well.

Although Hermione wanted nothing better than to keep everyone she knew safe, the fact of the matter was that the large final battle was highly strategic, as long as they could win it; capturing as many of those people as possible was crucial to the continuing safety of the wizarding world. Killing Voldemort but leaving all his followers alive and well would be a blow, but it wouldn't necessarily end the war. She wasn't filled with blood lust, but she wanted the war to end for good. It wouldn't stop another Dark Lord from ever rising but hopefully it would put it off for a long while.

It hadn't been a terribly long meeting, and Hermione found her feet leading her to Severus's door before she could consider any other options. He answered promptly, eyebrows rising in query.

"Albus wanted to see me."

He ushered her in and once the door had closed, she stood a few feet away from it. When Severus perceived that she was making no move towards the fire, he arched an eyebrow once more.

"You're not sitting?"

She shook her head. "I thought we should talk first."

The eyebrow arched higher. She'd love to learn how to make so much commentary solely with the movement of her eyebrows, but she really didn't think she had the face for it.

"And you don't think taking a seat would be beneficial to this discussion?"

"Not if it results in my turning right round and leaving," she said.

"Of course."

It took the excessive blankness of his voice to realize what she had just said.

She grimaced. "Let me start over, and I'd appreciate it if you could just ignore the daft way I phrased that last."

The tension eased out of his form slightly. "Oh?"

She felt stupid now, but continued gamely. "I thought it would be better if we have a conversation up front. You've been very accommodating in letting me be here all the time and take over your sitting room, but I'm well aware that you're a very private person, and I'd just as soon not get to the point that you're so annoyed that you feel it necessary to throw me out. We don't always communicate terribly well until an explosion occurs, so I was hoping that if at any point you want some space or you think I'm encroaching a little too much, you could let me know."

He regarded her silently for a long moment, declaring finally, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Honestly," she added, not sure that he'd entirely taken her point. "I won't be the least bit offended if you tell me you'd rather spend the day or the evening alone. I didn't want to just stop coming, though, because I was worried you'd think I didn't want to be spending this much time with you, and that's very far from the case."

There was, apparently, a good deal of fervour in her voice, because his lip twitched.

"Anxious to spend time with me, are you?"

She shrugged, but admitted readily enough, "Yes."

He didn't respond to this, but she could see that he wasn't displeased. He gestured towards the fire.

"Make yourself at home and rest assured that I will let you know in a very … reasonable way if I find your company tiring."

She smiled at him, amused by his careful working.

"Thank you, Severus. I'm sure that will serve beautifully."

After that, it was a repetition of Saturday. She spread out a fair portion of the books she owned over his floor and read through copious notes so that she could be sure she knew all the official details about the rise of Voldemort and the Boy Who Lived (since it would only cause confusion if she put details in there that weren't widely known), as well as plenty on Grindelwald's rise to power and the rest of the twentieth century. She worked on her Transfiguration written, as well, since this was Wednesday's exam, pleased that her time out in the forest had helped her come up with a human-to-probably-qualifies-as-an-inanimate-object transformation which she hoped would serve for her exam if she were given the choice of her own object.

Anxiety was beginning to coil through her, the same jitters that she had experienced every year because no matter how much else she had going on, she was less than twenty-four hours away from a major examination. And really, they'd been fighting a guerrilla war against Umbridge during O.W.L.s, so Hermione had a precedent for still being concerned about tests while trying to save the world.

Severus didn't let her forget about meals today, pulling her from her studies so that she could go to lunch. She would have much preferred to have spent the time privately with him, but since he told her to go to the Great Hall, she would just hope that meant he had a better plan for her dinner. Or more likely, she supposed, he wanted them to be present today for all the meals so that yesterday's absence would be an isolated event.

He sent her on ahead of him so that they wouldn't be seen together, and she met up with Harry and Draco as they were heading up. She settled down at the Gryffindor table and noticed a few minutes later when Severus came sweeping in to sit at his chair. She wondered if he had to consciously think about getting his robes to flare like that anymore or if it was ingrained habit. It made her want to put him in some other type of sweeping garment—preferably something silly and frilly—to see what happened.

Somehow, she doubted it would amuse him.

After lunch, Harry and Draco didn't even ask her what she was doing, just waved goodbye as she passed them heading down to Severus's quarters. He'd still been at the table when she and the boys left, so despite the fact that she was entirely capable of breaking through his wards, she Masked herself after assuring that no one was around to see, and settled herself against the wall to wait.

It was a quarter of an hour before Severus appeared, the way his gait slowed marginally as he approached the door seeming to indicate that he sensed her presence—the only person who had ever been able to do so when she was Masked, and she had finally taken it as a quirk of his being her mate. His awareness was confirmed when he held the door open extra long so that she could slip through behind him and unMask.

"I believe you are able to break through my wards."

"Able? Yes," she answered carefully. "Certain that doing it in something other than an emergency would be wise? No."

With her handle on the wards, she could waltz right in whenever she wanted but that didn't mean she would. Offending him was quite high on her list of things not to do.

"If you prefer to be more mundane," he said with a faint sneer, "you will find that 'monokeros' will admit you."[36]

It was with an effort that she prevented herself from smiling like an idiot. There might have been tone, but not only had he given her his password, the password showed that he had a sentimental side—and that he was willing for her to be aware of it. Not wanting to embarrass him and make him regret his decision, she didn't thank him effusively.

"That would be rather more pleasant than sitting in the hall, thank you."

That hurdle overcome, they both settled down in their respective seats.

She continued to work on Transfiguration before moving on to Defence. That exam wasn't until Friday, but it was still this coming week, so she was determined to be on top of the subject before the week began. Even she had to admit, though, that she wasn't sure what anyone could ask her that she wouldn't know since both her and Harry's grasp of Defence far outstripped the scope of the curriculum for all seven years they'd been educated at Hogwarts.

The only potential problem would be refraining from showing too much power when they were doing their practicals. They weren't very far from the Final Battle now, and they couldn't tip their hand. Too much power, after all, was how Voldemort had caught Severus.

Fortunately, she and Harry already had reputations for being strong and competent wizards. She'd need to use a wand, but she was used to doing that in front of others, although she hoped that they would be allowed to cast wordlessly. It was one of the skills she had learnt later in her Hogwarts career which she was happiest with. Not having to cast aloud also saved on trouble when she was holding her wand but not really using it; the vast majority of people couldn't tell the difference, so little slip-ups could be glossed over.

Exactly what they'd be facing in their Defence N.E.W.T. was unknown. She supposed a battle area probably wouldn't be replicated precisely, but simply demonstrating spells in front of Ministry employees seemed rather tame. A duel, perhaps, or a series of…? There was very little information given out on the exact forms of the practicals, however, which she was sure was part of the "fun" of these particular tests.

She and Severus once again went their separate ways for dinner. Hermione found that when she tried to duck off immediately she was done, Harry wanted to know if they were ever going to see her for more than mealtimes. She smiled brightly at him.

"Tomorrow morning from nine until twelve."

He rolled his eyes and waved her off, and she happily hurried back to Severus, aware that Draco was amused by her eagerness and Ron working his way from disturbed to resigned.

Severus had made it to his quarters more quickly than she had, but since the wards showed her that no one else was in his room or in the nearby hallways, she took the opportunity to avail herself of the password. His sardonic expression upon her entry showed that she hadn't managed to suppress her pleasure quite enough, but he didn't seem actively upset.

Once she'd finished with as much Defence as seemed necessary for this early in the week, she went back to Potions. Despite what everyone kept telling her, it was tomorrow's exam, and that meant she was going to review it the day before. Unlike plenty of other people she knew, it wouldn't be a last-ditch attempt to memorize formulae that should have been learnt a long time ago, but it still held an important place in her study regime. She had a method, and she wasn't going to let anyone upset it.

Since the exam was all of half a day away now, she didn't want to burn herself out, either, so she made sure to alternate her intense studying with an activity that would stimulate other parts of her brain.

It was in the midst of one of these intermissions that Severus seemed to notice for the first time that every bit of her attention wasn't dedicated to her textbooks.

"What are you doing?"

"Accessing the wards," she admitted. She smiled at him. "The ones surrounding your Potions laboratories, to be precise."

He started to speak, and then his eyes snapped to hers as he demanded, outraged, "You what?"

"Have been enabling and disabling the wards to your labs," she repeated helpfully. "Wanted to see if you'd notice."

"Well of course I'd notice," he answered, "if you're messing with my wards."

Her lip curled as she asked very pointedly, "Did you notice?"

He frowned. "Don't tell me you've done it yet."

She smiled. "If you were standing in one of the labs, you'd know."

"Even if I were sitting here," he corrected with an intense frown. "I might not be able to stop you, but I'd know what you'd done."

She rose to her feet. "Come along."

They went to his private lab, where he gestured impatiently for her to begin as soon as the door closed behind them.

She wondered if his abrupt nature was going to rub off on her. Snorting, she admitted that she could already be pretty impatient and rude when she wanted to be. It took her but a moment to render all his wards inert. He came very near to gaping at her.

"But I'm to be warned if my wards are breached."

She shook her head slightly. "You mean you have wards designed to send alarms if they're breached. If I take them over and make them effectively disappear, then you've got nothing to warn you but your own senses."

"That's … incredible."

She doubted this was the first word that had sprung to mind when he considered the phenomenon, but she appreciated that he'd cleaned it up for her. It was incredible, but she knew that it was also incredibly disconcerting.

Comprehension had sharpened his features. "This is what you'll be doing when the Dark Lord comes."

Nodding, she reflected that she now had another convert; apparently letting people see what she was actually doing was key.

"You've been practicing." He sounded accusatory now, and she was uncertain as to why.

"I wasn't about to go into it untrained," she scoffed. "I woke all of you up the first time, and while that was putting the wards back in place, I can't risk that I'd forewarn Voldemort during the battle."

"Why isn't Potter here?" Severus demanded, eyes shifting around the room as though he expected the boy to suddenly appear.

Hermione looked at him in surprise. It was the Slytherin's free time, and she'd never heard him request Harry's presence before.

He grimaced when he saw her face and clarified, "I mean for you. With the wards."

She still had no idea what he was talking about.

"Why isn't he here helping you with the wards?" Severus strung together a whole sentence, but it still wasn't doing a lot of good, and he waved a hand, gesturing at her. "Grounding you, like you said was necessary to ensure that you didn't injure yourself."

Ah. He was apparently operating under a misapprehension that she'd thought was sorted.

"I already said," she answered after a moment of figuring out how best to word her answer. "I have no intention of asking Harry to help me."

Now it was Severus's turn to stare. "But I've not been helping." She shook her head, and his face darkened. "You found someone else."

Another negation on her part.

"So who's helping you?" he asked aggressively.

She looked at him with faint incredulity. "I've only asked one person."

He stared at her intensely. "I haven't said yes."

She let out a huff of breath. "I'm well aware of that."

"You've been doing all this practicing on your own."

She assented.

"What would you do if I don't agree?"

She stared him down, thinking that his questions were getting stupider but not quite gutsy enough to say so.

His voice was harsh. "You can't do this on your own."

"If I have no choice," she answered flatly, "I'll do it anyway."

She doubted she'd survive it, but the cause was, in the end, important enough to die for.

He spoke without inflection. "You weren't going to say anything to me."

"I would never ask you again."

His face stiffened. "Of course you wouldn't."

His tone said he'd taken that entirely the wrong way.

"Severus," she protested, stepping slightly closer to him though his body radiated tension, "anything that you choose to do during the Final Battle is exactly that: your choice. When I presented my plan, I made you aware of the way in which your assistance would be most beneficial to me. That does not in any way obligate you to help in that manner. I would never force you."

"Even if it killed you?" he asked arctically.

"Even then," she answered softly but without regret. "You have been forced for far too long to do what was needed for the greater good, and I will die before I start doing that to you, too."

His expression was very dark. "You would ask nothing of me."

Her face twisted. "If I had my way, you'd be tucked away in a Potions laboratory, safe and sound, where nothing could harm you. I don't suppose you'll allow that to happen, but any choice you make is yours."

"You would have me hide," he jeered.

"I would have you safe," she corrected sternly. "I would know for certain that you were going to come out of this war alive."

"Even if you did not."

"Even then," she repeated.

"Yet you expect me to stand here and let you perform a stunt that is outrageously dangerous."

"I expect you to let me make my choice," she corrected once more, smiling somewhat wistfully as she added, "but I hope that you wish similar safety and peace for me."

He grimaced. "So you will let me do anything I wish during the battle?"

Her head tilted to the side as she wondered what, precisely, he was probing towards. "Well," she answered after due consideration, "if I saw you taking a foolish and unnecessary risk, I'd probably bollix up all the lovely things I just said and do my best to keep you safe."

He let out a breath of almost laughter. "But you would not permit me to do the same for you."

"I would not call my risk foolish and unnecessary," she argued. "It is, for better or worse, calculated and required."

His eyes glittered darkly. "Yet you don't want me helping you."

Her lips tightened, but she confessed, "If I were being very selfish and protecting you elsewhere were not an option, then I would want you with me."

"Why couldn't you just say that?" he snarled, sounding completely fed up.

"Why couldn't you just say," she snapped back, "that you wanted me to rescue you from Voldemort?" She answered her own question before he could: "Because it was safer for me if I didn't attempt it. Because you wouldn't tell me to risk my life for yours."

Finally, her words seemed to have an impact on him.

"We're in the middle of a war," she continued more reasonably. "I already asked once because it's the best chance we have of defeating Voldemort, and that's bigger than any one of us. But it remains your choice to make."

"What if I'd forgotten?" he asked mildly.

She laughed, amused by the question and relieved by the decrease in tension.

"Then no doubt Harry would have reminded you."

Severus's voice was long-suffering. "Is there a particular reason that he had to be made aware of my possible role?"

"He kept trying to volunteer," she said with a fond smile. "So I told him I'd already asked the only person I was considering."

Severus perked up a bit at this, and she tried not to let her amusement show.

"He guessed it was you all on his own," she added, in case he hadn't got that far. "Straight off."

"A lucky guess."

His tone suggested that even he didn't really believe that, so she only said, "Harry may not always like it, but he understands how I feel about you."

"And how is that?"

Huh. She'd walked right into that one. Part of her didn't want to say, and she was pretty sure that she could pass the moment off with a casual answer, but she knew he deserved better than that. Besides, arguing that he should be able to see how she felt or something to that effect would imply that she could do the same. Since she was actually often very uncertain given that nothing was being said in words, she didn't want to be hypocritical. She'd given him an opening, and he had taken it.

While she was still nominally his student, she'd completed all his classes, and he'd graded all her assignments; what was left was to the N.E.W.T. examiner to assess. And really, if she'd been willing to have sex with him while she was still in his class, she could hardly cavil at a verbal declaration of her feelings now.

"I'm crazy about you," she admitted, mildly embarrassed but very earnest. "It can't have escaped your notice."

His look seemed to indicate that he was by no means convinced.

"Severus, you're my mate," she said clearly. "Forever. I have never cared for anyone as I care for you."

He regarded her seriously, and it was a moment before he spoke. "You spoke of unicorn mates earlier, and you said that previously mated unicorns were never alone for long. You meant that these unicorns find new mates." He said it like a statement, but there was clearly a request for confirmation.

At least he'd been reviewing what she'd said after all.

She looked at him steadily, and he evidently read the truth in her eyes. He clasped her upper arms, eyes boring into hers.

"Promise me," he said, voice as intense as she had ever heard it, "promise me you won't kill yourself if I die."

"You're not planning on dying, are you?" she asked as lightly as she could when there was a battle coming.

He shook her slightly, refusing to be put off. "Promise me."

She remembered how it had felt when she had known he was dying. Could she swear that she was going to keep going if that got infinitely worse? If she were overwhelmed by the barren emptiness of life without him? She had no intention of throwing herself off the Astronomy Tower or anything so dramatic, but she wasn't convinced that she could live without him, not as a Pure Adult who had a lot of unicorn inside.

She met his eyes, and he released her abruptly.

"I cannot make you that promise," she answered regretfully but firmly. "I cannot be but what I am, Severus. But I give you my word that I will stay with you for as long as you will have me."

He turned away from her and crossed to the window. Unlike in Room One, this time she already knew what the problem was, and she was hesitant to disturb him when he had such news to assimilate.

When ten minutes had passed without movement on his part, she crossed the room to stand by his side.

"Should I have lied to you?" she asked softly.

He turned back to her hurriedly, eyes flashing, but when he spoke, his voice was nearly steady and without warmth. "No. I would not have had you lie to me."

She nodded in acceptance of this, recognizing that she had nevertheless offered too much information.

"I'll gather my things."

He made no attempt to stop her, so she hurried back to his sitting room and set about packing her belongings, telling herself that she was not going to cry over this just because it felt terribly ominous. It took her a few minutes to gather everything together because she had such a wealth of it and had chosen to do it largely by hand this time.

Rising to her feet, she crossed the room and the door obediently sprang into sight since she had need of it. Severus still had not returned though she had lingered a bit, so it seemed that he would not do so until he was certain that she was no longer present in his quarters.

The wards informed her that Harry, Draco, Ginny, and Ron were in the common room. It was just after nine in the evening, and they were no doubt studying, but the thought of joining them was insupportable. She wasn't going to be able to hide the mood she was in, and at least half of them would be able to guess who'd put her in it. She wasn't willing to answer any of their questions.

Instead, she had a hot shower—which did much to cover up the tears that she insisted she wasn't crying. By the time she emerged, she felt somewhat better and more prepared to concentrate; she still had that bloody N.E.W.T. in the morning. Studying Potions was the last thing she wanted to do right now, but the schedule existed independent of her emotional crisis that concerned the Potions master, so it was simply too bad for her.

She changed into her pyjamas. It might not be late, but she felt better, today at least, for pretending that there was every reason for her to be crawling into her bed with her books and ignoring everyone else currently in the castle.

Laying her Potions texts and notes around her, she made a concerted effort to carefully read them and not distract herself with thoughts about the man who was only a door away. And really, if she were being logical, it would be even better for her N.E.W.T.s if she was spending her evenings studying on her own rather than spending time with Severus.

Of course, for making this resolution, she seemed to be concentrating an awful lot on subjects that weren't Potions, so she redoubled her effort to focus on the facts that were swimming before her eyes.

It may have been this focus which made her rather blind to what else was going on around her; she was startled out of her mind when a hand touched her shoulder.

She had the hand and the body attached to it Stunned without thought, resulting in Severus Snape lying prostrate beside her bed and her trying to recover from what felt like her heart trying to leap out of her throat.

Looking down at him with dismay, she realized that he was going to kill her for this. Delay wouldn't help, however, so she cast an Ennervate and watched him open his eyes and blink up at her.

"You startled me," she said apologetically.

"So I gather," he said dryly.

"I don't normally have anyone in my bedroom unless they've come in with me. My door," she said, gesturing towards the one that led to the common room, "is quite well warded."

"I'm sure it is," he replied as he sat up. Discovering that all his limbs seemed to be in working order, he rose to his feet. "I did not, however, enter through that door."

No, of course he hadn't. He had come through the door that she'd been so certain a little while ago there would not be the remotest chance of his using.

"I did not expect to see you," she answered, wishing immediately that the words hadn't come out so awkwardly and rather more forlornly than she had intended.

To her surprise, he sat down beside her on the bed.

"I know you did not, which is why I am here. It was not my intention to upset you earlier."

He never could seem to bring himself to say he was sorry, but the longer they were together, the less he wanted to upset her. And if the intention was there, the words didn't matter so much. She nodded to show that she understood.

"It was a great deal for me to spring upon you at once," she said apologetically.

A shake of his head dismissed this. "You brought it up quite honestly days ago, and it was I who refused to understand your meaning. I would never have you lie to me, Hermione, and I did not want you to leave tonight with that impression."

Despite his words in the lab, she had begun to think that judicious misrepresentation would better serve her in some situations.

But he had now directly requested that she not lie to him, so her answer was simple. "Then I shall not."

To her surprise, this resulted in her being pulled to him and kissed thoroughly. Was it not very recently that he'd made it clear that he had no intention of showing his affection to her in her own bedroom?

As he pushed her onto her back and settled on top of her, she considered hazily that perhaps now that classes were over, he was of the same opinion she was that she was essentially no longer his student. But if they were asked if they'd ever had relations in her bedroom, it was soon going to be very difficult for them to deny the charge.

And it was becoming more difficult for her to think coherently and rationally about the subject.

"Severus," she murmured as he planted kisses along her jaw and she found herself tilting her head quite instinctively to try to get more contact, "you know we ought not to be doing this here."

He made a noise that might have been agreement or demurral. The sound hummed against her skin, making it quite pleasant from a sensory perspective but not very useful in her attempt to ensure that he didn't do anything he would later regret.

Unless she wanted to ruin the mood entirely, which she wasn't particularly anxious to do because his hands were curling through her hair, and she loved that, it looked as though they were going to have sex here, unless…. Smiling at her sudden solution, she wrapped her arms tight around him, kissed him hungrily, and a moment later, they were in his quarters.

She had not been in his bedroom that many times, but she had still judged to a nicety, and they were squarely in the middle of his bed. Severus continued to be employed quite profitably in kissing her senseless, one hand snaking under her pyjama top to caress her skin.

It was when he drew back to breathe that he froze and then looked more carefully around them.

"We're in my bedroom."

She nodded.

He stared down at her. "I am quite certain that we began this in your bedroom."

"We did," she agreed.

It took a moment for the Knut to drop. "You Apparated us to my bedroom?"

"It seemed the only reasonable course of action under the circumstances," she said loftily.

He regarded her in astonishment and she wasn't entirely certain how he was going to react. Suddenly, however, his lips twitched.

"I have never met anyone quite as impudent as you, meddlesome witch."

Since this was said quite affectionately, for Severus, and was followed up by more heady kisses, she took it that he approved, at least under the circumstances.

Fleetingly, she wondered if anyone would find it objectionable that she was spending the night before her Potions exam in the Potions master's bed…. But it wasn't as though he'd set the exam, and as he divested her of the pyjamas that she'd been wearing, she realized that she didn't care even if there were objections. There certainly wasn't going to be any discussion of potions going on while they were here.

This was almost Severus's version of clingy, not that she'd ever tell him that, as she rather enjoyed when he heaped attention upon her, touching her and kissing her with an intensity that took her breath away.

In moments like these, she felt as though she could feel what he could not say, and she was content.

Monday morning, from the look of most of the students in the Great Hall, had dawned far too early. Hermione, as it happened, had been up when the sun had actually risen, slipping away from Severus so that she could visit her herd and remind herself that there was no need to be stressed when it came to Potions. She felt in remarkably good shape for the first of her N.E.W.T.s, which she hoped would set the tone for the rest of them.

Draco looked fairly at ease, and she imagined this was a combination of the topic (one he knew extremely well) and his upbringing (Malfoy masks in times of stress). Ron and Harry were holding up less well; even though they'd improved immensely since they'd started almost seven years ago, it seemed that all the old insecurities had come back as the test to end all tests loomed.

"You'll be fine," Hermione reminded them both. "Nobody's saying you have to come out of there with Outstandings, but you've made it through the entire year under your own power, and if anyone can teach you to overcome Ministry officials, it's Professor Snape."

From the interested looks on the faces of not only the two boys to whom the comment had been addressed but several other nearby Gryffindors as well, Hermione gathered that this phrasing had brought a fresh outlook on the matter and that she'd therefore done her cheering for the day and acquitted herself as Head Girl.

Although some students seemed to want to linger over breakfast so that they could keep their books propped up and study that much longer, the room needed to be set up for the O.W.L.s. Everyone cleared out, finally, and the twelve seventh-years who would be sitting their Potions N.E.W.T. headed down to the dungeons.

Hermione and her friends led the way to the classroom in question. The door was closed, and while Hermione could tell that there were three Ministry officials inside laying out exam papers and casting the appropriate anti-cheating charms from the look of their movements, everyone else could only guess. Even without Hermione's extra knowledge, no one attempted to enter before they were invited; they all established themselves in various standing or sitting positions down the corridor, many reading one more fact or looking up just one more potion in case it was on the exam. Hermione hadn't brought her books to breakfast, not wanting to jumble the information she'd so carefully instilled by frantically cramming information that she already knew.

At five minutes to the hour, the door was opened, and they were ushered in. All bags, books, and notes were left at the back of the classroom before the students were allowed to seat themselves at a desk where the exam booklet, parchment, and quill and ink were provided.

Looking down at the face-down booklet, which Hermione could see was stuck to the desk until precisely nine o'clock, she reflected that examinations weren't really designed to handle people with great wandless ability. The invigilators might notice if any other student took out his or her wand and attempted a spell that would aid them, but she or Harry could, with enough time, spell their quills to write the answers for them, look at the exam booklet before it had become properly unstuck, and probably get answers to appear on their desks if they were really looking to do some difficult Transfiguration. Hermione could break the anti-cheating charms on the parchment—which prevented spells from adhering to it—without thinking very hard. Fortunately, neither she nor Harry intended to cheat, but it worked out more to the honour system than to any actual preventative measures.

On the other hand, it wasn't as though the ability was a very common one, and she and Harry hadn't advertised their extreme proficiency. Even if the officials did know, there was very little they could do to prevent them from using these powers, although she supposed that special Ministry workers could be posted to stand right at their desks and see that nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Since Hermione would find that extraordinarily intrusive and annoying, she'd be sure to keep her opinion to herself on the matter.

It was not prudent to assume that all those who were proficient wandlessly had the morals to go with this responsibility, though, so she would give the matter some consideration in the future—when she wasn't about to start an exam knowing full well that she and Harry posed no danger to the invigilators' efforts.

It was three quarters of the way through the exam that this belief on her part suffered a serious check.

Is the thyme in Veritaserum supposed to be powdered or minced?

Her head shot up in tandem with Draco's, garnering stern glares from the three wizards who were wandering the room ensuring that no one was attempting anything improper.

Hermione and Draco very narrowly managed not to gape at one another and by sheer force of will, didn't look over at Harry, from whom the question had come.

Chapter Fifty-Five: The Practical

Harry, Hermione said, making no effort to hide the censure in her voice, you can't imagine that I would tell you.

It was Harry's turn to snap to attention, earning him another evil eye from the witch who was walking past, and he immediately ducked his head down to stare at his page again.

No! he exclaimed. Sorry. That was just me thinking too loudly. I'd never ask it of either of you. Could you block me, please?

He sounded so horrified that Hermione took pity on him and obeyed his request.

Just until the exam is over.

She'd expressed this widely enough that Draco and Fawkes would hear as well and know that Harry couldn't be contacted, and then she cut him off. It was something he could have done himself, but he seemed to feel that it would be better under the circumstances if it was an outside restriction, and now was really not the time for them to be debating it.

From where she was seated several rows away, she could still see the red tinge on his cheeks.

It was completely atypical of him to try to cheat on an exam, but the question had come across so clearly that she had reacted without actually thinking about it. Draco had looked equally as shocked as she, so at least she wasn't alone in her wrong assumption.

She forced herself to turn back to her exam and not worry about the fact that Harry hadn't remembered every detail of every potion that was being asked about. Unfortunately, it was not a problem that she could fix now, and Harry would be only more mortified to know that she had wasted time thinking about it. Settling, she continued to read over the answers she'd made, adding addenda here and there, making sure the spelling and grammar was unexceptionable, and ensuring that every single question had been completed to the very best of her ability.

Although several other students set aside their exams before she did, she wasn't concerned. There had been no questions that she had been unable to answer and few that had given her trouble. It was in her nature, however, to read all her work over a second or even a third time to make sure that no additional knowledge occurred to her.

A dozen or more times throughout the exam, she'd wished that she could have replaced her quill with a never-out one so that she hadn't needed to constantly replenish the ink. She would also have charmed the parchment so that words could be added or deleted, seamlessly rearranging the other words on the page. Explaining to the invigilators that she was only endeavouring to make her exam paper aesthetically pleasing would be unlikely to go over well, however, so she had resigned herself to crossed out words and the occasional arrow.

The three-hour mark was called, and their parchments were collected and spelled shut. They would be taken to the Ministry to be graded.

Hermione took her exam booklet with her, as she'd want to look it over later. She'd finally learnt that bringing it up with Ron and Harry would only serve to upset them, but she thought Draco might be willing to discuss it.

Right now, though, she was most concerned about Harry; he still didn't look very well. She released the mental block she'd placed on his mind and told Draco to take him to their room. It wouldn't signify if the two of them were a bit late for lunch; Harry's mood needed to be improved because if he went into the practical feeling embarrassed or distraught, it could be disastrous.

Ron looked mildly curious, but as he was a little limp himself simply from having suffered through three hours of a Potions exam, it wasn't difficult for her to get him upstairs to lunch. While still eating an astonishing amount of food, he managed to flip through his textbook, reminding himself of several details that he couldn't believe he'd forgotten since he'd read them over the night before (for the first time, she imagined, but she bit her tongue and kept her comments to herself).

Harry and Draco appeared halfway through lunch, and her lip curled as she tried not to think about what Severus would have to say about their stamina. Personally, she had nothing against a quickie, especially when it served such a noble purpose as ensuring that Harry didn't fail his Potions practical.

He seemed in much better spirits, and Draco looked very smug, so she decided that it had done both of them good. Ron looked faintly disturbed, so he'd likely guessed what they'd been up to. She had to look down at her plate so that she didn't start giggling.

Once lunch was over, they were all shepherded out into the corridor, those who needed to be elsewhere hurrying off, and the twelve Potions students heading downstairs to the classroom where they had been taught for the last seven years.

Harry took the opportunity to apologize again, and Hermione told him there was nothing to apologize for.

I was shocked because I never expected it of you, she clarified gently. If I'd reflected for more than a second, I'd have known you'd never do it and realized it was all a mistake. I'm sorry for doubting you. Don't worry yourself.

He still looked troubled.

Harry, she added firmly, Severus knows you and I can communicate by MindSpeech, yet he wasn't worried enough to request of Albus that it be disbanded for the length of N.E.W.T.s.

And if the most paranoid Slytherin of them all wasn't worried? Hermione smiled to herself as she watched Harry relax once more.

They were informed when the invigilator emerged from the classroom that there were two parts to the exam. First, they'd be led through one by one and asked to identify the contents of three sets of ten cauldrons within a fifteen minute period.

Second, there would be a bag from which they would draw the name of a potion at random. From the name, they were expected to choose the necessary ingredients and equipment and brew the potion in question. They would be given two hours for this portion of the exam, and each person would be timed from when they started the potion and retrieved when their time was up, so they needn't be concerned that those who began first would have longer than anyone else.

Once they had assured the woman that they had no questions, she subsided into silence until it turned half one and it was time to begin. When she asked for a volunteer to go first, everyone looked to Hermione who rolled her eyes but stepped forward immediately.

Some of the Slytherins—especially Draco—would probably have been willing to do the same, but the class seemed to have decided collectively that she'd earned the right to go first if she wanted to. The truce with the Slytherins appeared to have unexpected benefits because Hermione definitely wanted to go first.

A screen had been set up in front of the door so that nothing could be seen when she first entered—meaning that none of the waiting students in the hall could catch a glimpse of what they would be in for. Once the door closed behind her, Hermione was escorted round the screen to find that the classroom had been completely rearranged. To her left against the wall was the table with the first ten potions on it. The next table, presumably on the wall opposite her, couldn't be seen because the majority of the classroom had been blocked off into individual brewing cubicles.

This set-up was really the only way to effectively use their time and ensure that they named potions, picked ingredients and equipment, and brewed independently of one another. Theoretically, as soon as Hermione reached the second table, the next student could be let in for the first one, and so on through the twelve students.

Hermione was given a parchment which accepted voice entries so that she could record her guesses. She took a quick perusal of all ten of the potions on the table and then amended her wording as she thought of exactly what the witch in the hallway had said: contents of the cauldron. Meaning that number six was indeed the pumpkin juice that Hermione had detected on her first pass.

Each of the cauldrons had a stirring rod in it, and Hermione was assured by the grey-haired witch that she was allowed to stir the contents if she wished. As Hermione neatly dictated the contents of each of the cauldrons in front of her, she reflected that it really was for the best that the world at large did not know that she had spent last night in Severus's bed.

She had no idea where he'd been brewing, and he had not breathed so much as a word of it to her, but it was unlikely that that excuse would be altogether believed. They might be lovers, but all Hermione knew was what was staring her in the face right now: somehow, Severus had found time to brew nearly thirty potions without her noticing. Most people might not be able to tell just from looking at the potions that the majority of them were his work, but Hermione knew.

There was a wide variety of liquids on display before her, but Hermione worked her way through them quickly. Amortentia gave itself away by smelling like books, the valley where the unicorns dwelled, and Severus (leaving Hermione relieved that they weren't asked to explain how they recognized the potions). She recognized the Fire Protection Potion that she and Harry had drunk in first year. Seeing Skele-Gro, she smirked and reflected that at least that was one potion that Harry would know without question.

The Wolfsbane would have been identifiable even if she was under a Confundus Charm. She recognized the Eyesight-Correcting Potion and thought that not only would Harry get that one as well, Severus was making good use of the ingredients she had given him for Christmas. Some of the potions, she realized, were ones that they hadn't brewed in class but which they should have come across in their supplemental reading and were apparently still expected to be able to identify.

Hermione's extracurricular activities were giving her an advantage. But then, no one had forbidden the other students to brew on the side—although it was easier for her to manage given the lab that she had acquired. Still, it was likely she would have heard if there had been any other students who were desperate to brew and simply couldn't find the space, so it was more likely that none of them had particularly wanted to do so. It was too late now, anyway, to change what she or they had done with their spare time.

Even Ron would get the Polyjuice, and she hoped that he would be able to recognize the simple boil-curing potion from their first year. She recognized the Draught of Living Death from the way it moved spasmodically in the cauldron, quivering and changing from a foggy grey to a deep, dark blue. There was a blood replenisher (similar to the one Arthur Weasley had consumed a great deal of during her fifth year), Mors Mortis (which was ever so faintly yellow rather than colourless, heavier than water, and could kill a grown adult with only four drops), and the same contraceptive potion that Severus had given her in February.

Hermione's eyebrows rose at this last, and she wondered if they were going to be auctioning some of the potions off afterwards. For there was Felix Felicis as well, leaping liquid gold in its cauldron, and Hermione differentiated between the cauldron full of water and the one full of Veritaserum; the latter had a lower refractive index and thus looked slightly duller and less shiny than the water.

Hermione reached the end of the third table knowing that she hadn't missed a single answer and that it had taken her perhaps a third of the time that had been allotted.

She was feeling quite good by the time she got to the brown-haired wizard who was holding the bag from which she was to draw the potion she was to brew. The smooth potions vials slipped under her hands as she rooted through the bag for a moment, finally clasping one and drawing it out. It was empty, and she realized it would hold her effort at the end of the examination. Turning the vial so that the label was facing her, she stared down at it in wordless incomprehension.

Once the swoop of panic that made her stomach lurch subsided, she was able to confirm quite logically in her own mind that the Sensilis Potion was not one which she had reviewed especially with an eye to brewing for the exam for the very –simple reason that it was not on the curriculum.[37]

Severus had mentioned it once in passing in class weeks ago. Hermione, being Hermione, had researched it that evening, finding it listed in one of their supplemental texts. She had looked at it with an eye to brew at the time, but that was because she looked at all potions with intent to brew, and this one had looked enjoyably challenging. It didn't mean that she had ever imagined that without further preparation of any kind she'd suddenly be asked to brew it for her Potions N.E.W.T.

It was at a Mastery level, not only in the category of Spelled Potions, but also in Intent; in other words, not only would "foolish wand waving" be necessary to complete the potion, impure intent on the part of the brewer could also lead to disastrous results.

Hermione's brows drew together. There was no way that she could brew this potion in two hours, but she was sure the examiners knew that. In fact, she was starting to suspect that she had been set up, a feeling that was only confirmed when the wards alerted her to the next student to enter the room: Terry Boot.

What were the chances that the second person to volunteer was the one who would have gone first alphabetically? Hermione wouldn't know for certain until the next person entered in five minutes, but she was willing to bet that it would be

Christopher Dempster, who would be followed by Justin Finch-Fletchley.

The man in front of her had very bright hazel eyes and a bushy moustache. He had not said one word since she had stood there stupidly staring at the empty vial, her mind working a mile a minute.

It was almost certainly a given that nobody else in the class would have a chance of brewing this potion. She didn't think even Draco could do it without more preparation, although perhaps he had been doing more reading on the side than she was aware of. They were undoubtedly the two top Potions students, however, so unless the goal was to make the whole class fail, this potion had been intended for her alone.

She had the feeling that when Terry Boot got through the thirty cauldrons, only potions that were on the curriculum were going to be listed on the vials in the bag. In fact, if she were to make another wager, it would be that all the little labels she had felt under her hand a minute ago had all had the same potion written on it.

She drew a breath. It was definitely a test, but she wasn't certain of what. She wasn't afraid to tell the examiners that the potion wasn't one which she had been taught, but she suspected there was more going on than that. Since she was sure down to the marrow of her bones that they already knew this fact, she had two choices: demand another choice or brew the potion anyway.

Even as she'd been panicking, the analytical part of her mind had been ransacking her memory of studying the potion, verifying that she could recall ingredients and instructions from start to finish. The Slytherin side of her—which sounded rather like Severus in her head—was rather horrified, but the reckless Gryffindor was coming to the fore.

If they wanted a show, she would give them one.

Entering the storeroom, she discovered another reason for Bill's presence on Saturday, probably the primary one. He had definitely been here, and he had messed with her wards.

It was probably giving her an advantage again, but she could hardly help that she knew what the wards in this room did. The tweaking had been simple but purposeful; whereas her wards had sorted the ingredients alphabetically based on what they were, Bill's fix made them sort based on what the label said.

She spent a moment admiring the job he had done ensuring that he hadn't alerted her at the time, and then she focussed on the task at hand. She had the advantage again, she realized, but she knew that even without the warning, she couldn't have missed what was going on when she picked up the bottle labelled "dittany" and found that it contained lemon verbena.

Choosing ingredients with extreme prejudice was the order of the day, apparently, and they were found in no sensible order; since the alphabetical labelling couldn't be relied upon, she had to scan everywhere for what she needed. The actual contents weren't sorted by any category that she could detect.

Extremely suspicious now, Hermione not only found her ingredients based on what was in the containers rather than what the containers said, she examined the bottles carefully for impurities and contamination, which resulted in her discarding the first offerings of ground copper and belladonna which she found.

All the more dangerous ingredients that she needed for her potion—including Basilisk venom and blood, Erumpent Fluid, Ashwinder eggs, Re'em blood, and runespoor eggs—were all present in the storeroom, and she rather hoped that they were going to be removed before the rest of the students came through. She wasn't even going to ask how the runespoor eggs had been procured given that trading in them had been outlawed years ago.

On top of the extreme danger it put everyone in if they were mishandled or misused in a potion, it could be extremely expensive for the Ministry which had never struck her as a body that would willingly expend so much on a student examination. This was turning into a much weirder N.E.W.T. than she had anticipated.

To the left of the storeroom, where she had stacked vial upon bottle upon bag of potion ingredients once upon a time, there was now an area set up with a vast array of equipment to choose from. The Sensilis Potion was finicky, requiring a pure gold cauldron, platinum stirring rods, and a mortar and pestle made entirely of Kilkenny marble.

Hermione was unsurprised at this point to find that all this equipment was present, and she was more certain than ever that this had been the plan just for her all along. There wasn't an overabundance of the equipment that she required, and had someone else come through first and taken the cauldron or the stirring rod, she would have been out of luck.

She laid everything out in the little cubicle that had been appointed to her and then undid the hex on the cauldron that would make any substance burn, the jinx on the scales which added weight to what was measured, and the spell on the pestle which would have prevented pulverization.

Irreverently, she thought that the Slytherins might have a better chance at this than those students from other houses because of their tendency towards suspicion. On the other hand, all twelve of them had been through a lot over the years, and to have made it into seventh-year Potions, they should all know what to look for to ensure that their potions were properly brewed.

Hermione conjured a very hot flame under her cauldron, remembering at the last minute to use her wand so that anyone examining her wouldn't also get an example of her use of wandless magic; potions were something that she was quite used to being able to do as she liked in the privacy of her lab. The enchantments on the cubicles made it impossible for the students to see out of them. They were transparent to the invigilators, however, ensuring not only that nobody cheated but that nothing went disastrously wrong and endangered everyone.

Although Hermione wanted to know what the other students were doing in order to confirm her theory about her potion, she had no desire to be accused of cheating. She really had enough to be getting on with as it was, too, so she kept her curiosity to herself and didn't mess with the enchantments on the cubicle.

The Sensilis Potion was a sense-enhancement potion with very unique properties. The drinker didn't simply have a better-than-normal sense of hearing, smell, taste, touch, and sight; he or she was given it to the required degree. The drinker could thus hear what he or she needed to hear, see what was important to him or her, and so on. A yelled conversation nearby would not cause any pain to the hearer because it didn't need to be louder. Poisons had been detected by smell with this potion, allergens tasted, truths seen that had prevented wars and destroyed marriages, saved lives and lost them.

The range of the potion was not limitless. Conversations could not be overheard from miles away, but the drinker was able to assess what was close to home with acuity. He or she could then make good or horrible decisions as a result; the potion merely made the information accessible.

It required a dedicated brewer who had to believe in the good purpose to which the potion was being put. This seemed to be easier in days past when wizards served lords or other masters and readily believed in the nobility of their cause. If Voldemort had known about the potion, Severus would likely have been screwed.

Hermione could hardly argue that she was working now with disinterest, but she could attest with a great deal of firmness of mind to the fact that the potion would not be used for ill. Since it had to be blood-bound to the drinker as it was being made, Hermione could use her own blood and thus ensure that there was no way anyone else could use it—as would be unlikely to happen anyway because she wouldn't be able to finish it. Since it required the dedicated brewer, it became useless to anyone else.

She chopped, diced, and minced in record time, using the mortar and pestle while setting the stirring rod to stir the base magically; it had to be stirred more quickly than human hand could achieve. That was part of the reason her golden cauldron was so large compared to the amount of potion she would be making; the yield was small, but once she got the rod stirring at the appropriate pace, the base ran all the way up the sides of the cauldron, appearing as though it would go flying out at any moment.

If she miscalculated in her brewing, it would, and she'd burn herself and possibly cause an explosion. Fortunately, she was a very careful brewer.

She prepared and added the ingredients with precision, ignoring the eyes that she felt on her from time to time. She might not be able to see them, but she knew that she was being watched quite closely. Given the potential danger and the odd situation, she couldn't blame the invigilators, but she did hope that they were keeping a close eye on everyone else, as well. Despite what those watching her might think, she was probably in the least danger of causing a serious accident. She might never have brewed this potion before, but she had probably brewed more than most of the other students combined—and she and the castle would have no problem cooperating in order to Vanish the potion or get the other students to safety should it become necessary.

It was two hours and twelve minutes after she had begun brewing when she realized that she had gone past the allotted time. Since she could still feel herself being watched, she couldn't suppose that she'd been forgotten. They'd been told that they'd be retrieved when their time was up, so she was going to assume that she was allowed to stay.

She still couldn't finish the potion unless they let her stay for about a week, but if she could work until the end of the exam period at five, she'd at least be able to complete the base. The potion would then be stable enough for them to examine. It wouldn't keep for more than twenty-four hours, but it also wouldn't explode all over them when she let up with the stirring.

At ten minutes to five, she successfully fused the Erumpent fluid and Ashwinder eggs to the copper and formed the base of the Sensilis Potion. Since the flame was hot but not nearly hot enough to melt copper, Hermione knew that this was where the magic had come in, her casting enabling the successful combination of ingredients. It had taken a lot of magic to fuse the potion, and she realized in that moment another reason why the Sensilis Potion had fallen out of circulation; being a Potions master wouldn't necessarily give one enough magical strength to succeed.

Extinguishing the heat, she stared with satisfaction at the liquid which was currently the consistency of room temperature molasses, mostly colourless but with a copper tint and flecks of runespoor eggs that now and then caught the light and shone like little stars.

She didn't need her examiner to tell her that she'd brewed correctly. Filling the labelled vial, she felt the preservation charm kick in as she pressed the stopper back into place. Hermione looked up to find the little old witch who'd been the one to inform them of the procedure standing at the entrance to her cubicle.

"Finished, my dear?" she asked mildly, although Hermione could see by her sharp gaze that she already knew the answer to the question.

Hermione held out the vial. "As far as it was reasonable to get under the time restraints."

The other witch took it.

"You have brewed this potion before?"

The Gryffindor shook her head. "It was supplemental reading. But I have a good memory."

The older woman was staring at the vial, smiling faintly.

"You may go."

Hermione gestured at her workstation. "I need to clean my equipment."

The other woman's lips twitched.

"You are the only of your peers to make such a statement, Miss Granger. You may leave them."

"I can't imagine anyone enjoys cleaning up after twelve students who haven't cleaned up after themselves. I wouldn't be much of a brewer if I didn't leave the lab the way I found it, would I?"

The older woman's look of amusement did not waver.

"As you say, Miss Granger. Mr Zabini has just left, so you may tidy as we disassemble if you wish."

Hermione happily did so, verifying that she could Vanish the remainder of her potion and then cleaning her equipment and returning each item to its rightful position. She looked with some despair at the storeroom which would now need to be completely overhauled to fix all the misnamed and contaminated ingredients.

The grey-haired witch laughed softly as she saw Hermione standing at the door looking rather forlorn.

"Not to worry, Miss Granger. It will all be set to rights again."

Hermione knew that it would, but she wondered when she would find the time; somehow, she couldn't see Severus doing it on his own.

Once everything was squared away, Hermione followed the examiners out into the hallway.

"Can I direct you to dinner?" she asked politely, not sure how familiar they were with the castle.

"We are eating with Severus, not in the Great Hall," the grey-haired witch said. "Can you take us to his quarters?"

Hermione was stunned almost speechless before her brain caught up with her gut reaction. She had, after all, known where Severus's quarters were before the two of them had become lovers.

"Of course," she said with a smile.

So off they went to Severus's quarters, and Hermione didn't even question when Severus responded to her knock with a clear smile for the grey-haired witch.

Obviously, Hermione had fallen down a rabbit hole and was in the land of the strange and bizarre.

Severus ushered the four invigilators in, his eyes fleetingly crossing Hermione's but no expression coming to his face.

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

"You're welcome, sir."

She turned back the way she had come as the door closed firmly. A bizarre end to a bizarre day except that the day wasn't over, and Hermione reluctantly made her way upstairs to the Great Hall where she could rejoin her friends.

"Where have you been?" Harry demanded immediately. "What have you been doing?"

He got a nudge in the ribs from Draco for this and flushed a spectacular crimson as soon as it occurred to him what her answer could be. Hermione discreetly waved up a Muffling Charm.

"You know, I'm beginning to think, Harry," she drawled, "that you think about sex with Severus more frequently than I do."

Ron sprayed a mouthful of half-eaten food across the table, nearly hitting Draco, and Harry's head thumped against the table, nearly getting covered in mashed potatoes.

You're evil.

Why, thank you, Draco, Hermione smirked. "To answer your question," she continued smoothly before Harry or Ron could offer her their opinion on what she had just said, "I was in the Potions classroom, and I was brewing."

This brought Harry's head off the table. "All this time?"

She nodded.

"But you went in first," Ron said. "Weren't we each supposed to get two hours?"

Hermione nodded once more, enjoying herself thoroughly. "They decided to make an exception with me."

"Well, but that's hardly fair, is it?" Harry asked.

"The potion I brewed took three hours to get it to a stable enough state that it could be examined."

She could practically see Draco running through potions in his head.

"What potion did you brew?" Ron was the one to ask, making no attempt to think through possibilities in his head.

"The Sensilis Potion," she answered.

Draco drew in a breath sharply, causing the other two to look at him.

"What the hell is that?" Ron asked.

Briefly, she explained.

"But," Harry finally managed to say, "it wasn't on the curriculum."

Hermione laughed softly. "I'm quite aware of that, Harry."

"So how could you be asked to brew it?"

She shrugged. "It's the potion I drew from the bag. I knew how, the ingredients and equipment were all there, so I brewed it."

"You've never brewed it before," Draco said.

She wondered if he was thinking of the expense or assuming that she would have gushed about it.

She shook her head. "I did think at the time that it looked like it would be a good challenge, though."

Ron couldn't seem to contain himself. "You knew how to brew it without instructions or ingredients and you never brewed it before? And you thought that would be the potion to brew for your N.E.W.T.?"

"Well, it was quite an interesting potion," she said defensively. "Much more challenging than being asked to brew the Draught of Living Death or Amortentia. I enjoyed myself." She shrugged. "I know how to brew lots of potions that aren't on the curriculum. I like potions."

Ron and Harry were shaking their heads.

"And I needn't ask how the potion went," Draco said dryly.

She allowed her satisfaction to peep out again although she was trying not to be annoyingly smug about it—probably a lost cause.

"I think the base looked pretty good."

Draco smiled back at her, and she knew that he appreciated her accomplishment. Harry and Ron smiled at her, too, and she knew that they didn't really understand but they at least appreciated that she was happy.

"How did your potions go?" she asked. "What did you have to brew?"

The rest of them had pulled vials that named potions that were indeed on the curriculum. Draco had ended up with the blood replenisher, Ron with the Draught of Conscious Volition, and Harry with the Standard Healing Draught. They had all succeeded, although Ron had had to start over when he hadn't realized at first that the crushed Vinca Major he had chosen had actually been violets.

There was a general chorus of complaints about all the sabotage that had been done in order to hamper their progress; although they knew it was part of the N.E.W.T., they didn't like it. Hermione was just glad they'd all come out of it unscathed.

She consented to be taken back down to the common room since the wards informed her that Severus still had visitors. Ginny attached herself to their group, and the lot of them clamoured for more information about what had happened. Hermione recited the event with more detail, but there was very little in the way of concrete information that she could provide. Draco actually rolled his eyes at how "Gryffindor" she'd been when she brewed the potion without complaint, but Ron, Harry, and Ginny agreed that it was gutsy. When Hermione got to the part where she had insisted on cleaning her equipment, Draco, Harry, and Ron cursed in unison, and Ginny grinned at her.

"I believe we can safely say that this is one N.E.W.T. that you've got an Outstanding on."

Hermione just smiled back at them, pleased when Draco let her discuss the written exam with him for a few minutes while Ron and Harry traded notes on how their potion had not gone quite perfectly. From what she overheard, they were pretty sure that they had nevertheless produced acceptable results.

Ron and Harry agreed that the written had not gone quite so well as the practical, but since they didn't engage in any of the conversation that she and Draco had on the details of all the correct answers that they'd had, they weren't stressing about it now.

While they had been at Potions, Ginny had successfully sat her Transfiguration exam. She had Potions tomorrow, however, which was the reason she was hoping to spend time with them tonight. Hermione and Draco declared themselves happy to help; unlike Ron and Harry, who were trying to forget everything they had learnt in Potions for a little while at least, she and Draco were happy to continue to share their knowledge. At the same time, they were studying for Runes, the exam they would be sitting tomorrow.

Harry and Ron, who didn't have Transfiguration until Wednesday, were inclined to take a break, and Hermione had stopped trying to force them to study.

As it turned out, they could still be guilted into it, though; after not more than fifteen minutes of sitting there watching the other three hard at work, the two boys dragged out their Transfiguration books and set to work on the floor by the fire. Ginny had taken up a place in one of the armchairs while Hermione and Draco were spread out across the couch with their combined Runes notes and texts.

The next several hours passed quietly with only the occasional question and a quiet Potions discussion or two between Draco, Hermione, and Ginny. It was eleven o'clock when the two Weasleys decided they had better get back to their own dorm. Hermione, Harry, and Draco continued to revise for another half hour before the latter two called it a night. She bid them goodnight and stayed in the common room for another hour herself.

The wards informed her that Severus was still with the invigilators of the Potions exam, and she had to wonder what on Earth they were discussing at such great length.

Eventually, she decided that waiting up for him when she had an exam the next morning was very foolish. At this rate, by the time he was free, it would be too late to have the discussion she wanted to have. There would be opportunity to speak to him later on Tuesday, so she needed to put the unanswerable questions out of her mind right now and sleep.

Hermione rose at four so that she could go out to the Forest, still determined to keep up her regime of nightly sleep and unicorn time. The unicorns were very good at making the N.E.W.T.s seem of less importance; one little human test meant very little to them. Since Hermione was likely to think of them as the be all and end all if she got too much into academic mode, this outlook was a good counter to her own—and easier to take from the unicorns than from students who preferred Quidditch.

She was first into the common room in the morning, but she noted that Draco looked well-rested when he and Harry emerged from Harry's room. They went up to breakfast together to find that there were still plenty of students with books and the noise level wasn't atrocious.

Harry and Ron headed off together after breakfast, and Hermione pretended she thought they were going to study. Besides, if they frittered away the morning without her and Draco there, they'd be more susceptible to study guilt in the afternoon.

She and Draco headed downstairs with the eight other Runes students, back to the classroom where they'd written their Potions exam, once again arranging themselves in the hallway until the door was opened.

Three hours later, they emerged, the looks on their faces showing how satisfied (or unsatisfied) they'd been with the exam. Hermione felt pretty happy with it, and Draco seemed to be in the same state. The test had certainly made vigorously sure that they knew runes backwards and forwards. Hermione felt as though it had all been drilled into her brain now, and she supposed this would stand her in good stead for warding. She could employ a variety of runes from different alphabets which would significantly slow down anybody trying to break through her protections.

Harry and Ron appeared at lunch, their windswept appearances telling her and Draco what they had been up to even if they didn't immediately confess. When the meal finished, they made their way back to their common room, not wanting to get mixed in with all the students who still had an exam that afternoon. The two boys, Hermione was amused to note, indeed offered no protest about revising for Transfiguration now.

There was a great many complex incantations to know for this class, and some of the theories were the most difficult that either of the Gryffindor boys would need to know. Arithmancy trumped this in several points for her and Draco; fortunately, that exam wasn't until next Wednesday.

The others practiced some of their transformations, but Hermione said that she preferred not to show the transformation they were all curious about; she was saving that for the exam itself. She did want to surprise everyone, but she also still found it much more comfortable to be either in human or unicorn form. The fewer times she had to make this transformation, especially in a relatively short period, the better.

Dinner was set for five o'clock tonight because the examinations taking place in the Great Hall weren't finished until then. It was four when Severus came to retrieve her. She was delighted that she didn't have to hunt him down and quickly gathered up her books and bid the others farewell.

Severus escorted her to her quarters. Once there, he congratulated her on the Potions N.E.W.T. which he had apparently heard all about from the invigilators.

"You're not going to chastise me for not pointing out that it wasn't on the curriculum?" she asked in some surprise. "Not going to tell me I was hopelessly Gryffindor to attempt it when I'd never made it before?"

He smiled faintly at her. "Had you done so, you could have brewed one of the potions on the curriculum. But this was much more interesting, was it not?"

Severus quite obviously knew more than he was saying and equally obviously did not intend to give the secret away right now. He could be as stubborn as she was, so trying to force the answer out of him didn't seem nearly as appealing as showing him that she'd missed not being in his bed the night before.

He didn't allow them to get completely carried away, as they had dinner in less than an hour, but their efforts did require that she use several charms to make her appearance presentable before they left. Severus smirked quite happily.

Her friends made no protest when she disappeared again after dinner, and she didn't feel terribly guilty because Ron and Harry had had plenty of time to ask her theory questions during the afternoon (or for the last several months) had they wished to do so.

Since she had made her way downstairs with the boys, Severus was already seated by the fire when she got to his quarters. He had made tea, and he allowed her to settle in her chair quietly for a few minutes.

She was apparently more relaxed around him than she had realized because her mental conversation was obvious enough that he noticed.

"I would appreciate it if you told Mr Potter to keep his mind to himself," he snarked.

"Oh, that wasn't Harry," she said, giving in and letting out a little burble of laughter at the image that had been presented to her.

"The unicorn, then, or the phoenix," Severus amended.

She shook her head once more.

"Then who was speaking to you?" Severus demanded, annoyed with her evasion.

"The castle," she answered, maintaining her policy of not lying to him despite the likely result.

He was silent for several moments before he said almost diplomatically, for him, "The castle is speaking to you?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Speaking might be a bit of a stretch, but it's definitely communicating with me, and more frequently than normal, too."

"And you thought you'd share this fact with me? Are you, perhaps, hoping I will commit you to St. Mungo's so you can forego the rest of your N.E.W.T.s?"

"I figured that if you were going to commit me, you would already have done so," she said with a grin.

His lips twitched. "What are you and the castle discussing so frequently, then?"

She cleared her throat. "It's … wooing me, I guess."

"I beg your pardon?" Said as though he was certain he must have misheard.

"It's trying to convince me to stay here," she specified.

He sounded completely incredulous. "The castle is trying to keep you."

She offered a slight nod.

"Why?" he asked pointedly.

Hermione prevaricated a little, not thinking that Severus needed another shock right now. "It wants company, I suppose, and it seems to like me."

"In what manner has it been wooing you?"

She smiled at the way he sneered the word. "Offering more and more interesting accommodations, for the most part. I'm pretty sure it just turned the entire sixth floor into one great big wing for us to inhabit."

"I've been invited along, have I?"

Naturally, this was the aspect he'd sourly grasped.

"Oh, the entire premise is that it's trying to find adequate quarters for the two of us, Severus. It's been sweetening the pot with potions labs and secret access to your office and everything."

He looked appeased now, sinking back further into his chair. "Really? Secret entrances?"

She smiled. "Absolutely."

"The whole sixth floor, you say?"

Her smile deepened. "Well, I think it would be in trouble if I actually took it up on that one, but it likes to make me laugh."

"It's offered you towers, I suppose." He sounded resigned.

She nodded.

"I am not particularly fond of towers," he admitted quietly.

"Nor am I," she answered with amusement. "What makes you think I'm discontent with where I'm currently living?"

"That was Albus," Severus said dismissively.

"Have I ever complained?" she pursued. "About my quarters or yours?"

He didn't answer.

"I'm a unicorn," she continued. "We don't fly."

His lip curled, and his voice was rich with satisfaction. "So I recall. Not even Krum could get you onto a broom."

She rolled her eyes about how much pleasure he was getting out of that fact even months after it had occurred.

Since she didn't want to fight with him, she merely answered, "True. I like my feet on the ground where they belong. I'm not sure I'd be happy underground without windows," she admitted, "but so long as I've got those, I'm perfectly content in the dungeons."

"A bit claustrophobic, are we?"

She couldn't quite decipher his tone and wasn't sure if he was still looking for a weakness or just sussing out her preferences.

She explained, briefly, about what happened to a unicorn who was imprisoned with no light of any kind. His expression was very grave by the time she finished.

"I'm not that much of a unicorn, I don't think." Probably. "But I would not be comfortable—psychologically, if nothing else." She forced a smile. "You aren't planning on getting rid of your windows, are you?"

He shook his head. "I am not averse to windows."

She tilted her head, regarding him carefully. "Meaning you'll put up with them or you like them?"

His lips tipped up ever so slightly at the corners. "Properly spelled ones are fine. If a wizard is not careful, they can be an easy point of entry."

"Not my windows," she answered, affronted.

"Nor mine," he agreed. "Our windows will no doubt be the best-warded in Britain."

She beamed at him.

He frowned faintly. "That statement hardly rates that level of pleasure."

"You said 'our windows'."

An eyebrow rose sharply.

"Not 'yours' or 'mine'," she elaborated.

For a fleeting instant, she had the impression of a deer caught in headlamps but then the expression was gone and his voice was casual as he asked, "Would we not share windows if we were to take the castle up on its offer?"

She smiled again, letting all her happiness show. "Very true."

It was one thing when she or the castle suggested it. When Severus essentially confirmed it, she had no hesitation about showing how happy she was.

His expression could hardly be called ecstatic like hers, but there was no more tension in his frame, and his lips had tipped up in an indication that he was not unhappy. "You'll have to let me know once the castle decides to offer us the entire building for our own personal use."

She felt a swell of warmth and affection emanating from the castle and suspected that it had known what it was doing more clearly than she had suspected.

"Of course," she answered him. "I'll ruthlessly hold out until we've taken over."

He smirked at her. "I'll be happy to inform Albus."

Hermione was entirely certain that he'd volunteered for this task because he didn't have the slightest intention of informing the headmaster until their quarters had appeared and they had moved in—rather like what Albus had done when he had installed her and Harry in the Slytherin Head Girl and Head Boy quarters. There were moments where Severus's thirst for revenge was entirely amusing.

They hadn't discussed exactly what she was going to do with her future, but it suddenly appeared more definite that Severus and she were going to be in it together. The fact that it now seemed distinctly within the realm of possibility that she would have a mate she could home to made the rest of her worries about a career seem less dire. In no vision of her life did she see herself staying at home while Severus supported her, but if they were in this together, then she was already more than halfway to getting the life that she wanted. Everything seemed possible.

Since she had her Transfiguration exam tomorrow, Severus seemed to feel it necessary to send her back to her own bed to get a good night's sleep. Given that he had come awfully close to telling her that he wanted her in his bed for a long time to come, she didn't mind the absence so much at the moment.

In the morning, they had the written portion of the exam; many of the students emerged three hours later looking a little shaky. It was amazing how much information could be crammed into a compressed amount of time. While it hadn't been possible to cover everything, this particular exam had made quite a good effort.

There was a general round of grumbling about how they could possibly be expected to be in top form for the practical after such a gruelling written section. Hermione disagreed—but was wise enough not to say so in more than the mildest of ways—since the written always put her in mind of all the spells and facts that she needed to know subsequently. Since the practical could be literally draining of magic—not to mention the fact that a serious accident could physically prevent a student from writing—Hermione thought that the order in which they had their exams was very sensible.

After lunch, they milled about outside the Great Hall until they were called to wait in the antechamber where they had gone before they were sorted in first year. It reminded her very much of the Defence O.W.L.; they were once again summoned in small alphabetical groups, put before an examiner, and asked to do a variety of transfigurations that ranged from relatively easy to really quite difficult.

The human-to-inanimate-object transformation was, fortunately, free-style; had the examiner demanded something specific, Hermione would almost definitely have failed. It was a fact that she had hardly been happy about, as this was an exam and she wanted to score as high as possible, but since there was absolutely nothing she could do about it, she had been fairly reconciled.

Since the choice had been left up to her, however, she could transform into the one object which she had ever been to manage: a tree. Her roots, though no one looking was to know it, delving through several feet of stone to ground her. She had asked mental permission before she had begun, and the castle had expressed happiness at the notion of supporting her.

Most people would accept that trees were inanimate; she had a dictionary definition of the word which could back her up. But a tree was not a chair or a bookshelf or even a rock. They lacked life in a way that a tree did not for her. When she was a tree, when her branches stretched out towards the sky, leaves yearning for the sun, there was a clear similarity to how it was when she was in unicorn form.

It still did not feel right, did not feel comfortable as her unicorn and human forms did; she definitely could not remain a tree as a prolonged disguise. But for one examination, she could compare photosynthesis to the way that she absorbed light as a unicorn.

Being several metres tall, branches swaying and leaves rustling in a non-existent breeze while she was stared at by most of the people in the Hall was interesting, too, but she was actually rather glad when her examiner told her that she could change back. She hoped that she did not too obviously betray her relief at being in human form once more.

There was a spontaneous round of applause when she became human again, and she offered a faint bow, apologized for interrupting everyone, and thanked them for their kind attention.

Seamus, who had been working next to her, congratulated her on getting past her block; so long as she made it out of the exam without having to change into anything else, there would be no need for anyone to know different. She was pretty sure her desire to keep it that way was a fairly even mixture of not wanting to admit there was something she couldn't do and thinking it was safer if she wasn't widely acknowledged as having some strange incapability that might warrant further investigation on someone's part.

That was, fortunately, the most exciting event that occurred during the exam, at least that she saw or heard about; no one made disasters of themselves which they were unable to get out of. They had to Vanish items which had been spelled to resist them, conjure a variety of objects with increasingly finicky details, and give inanimate objects the appearance of intelligence so that they could perform certain tasks. (Hermione was strongly reminded of a certain giant chess board.) They were even given the chance to run through some of their defensive transfigurations when they were given the task of preventing a transfigured cat from catching some transfigured mice. Hermione was impressed with whoever had designed this N.E.W.T.

Draco joined her outside the Great Hall, and the two of them chatted quietly as they waited for Harry and Ron, who were in the last of the groups to go before the examiners. The Slytherin, it transpired, had turned into a canopy bed which she was willing to wager, given his smug expression and sly comment about being very familiar with it, had borne a striking resemblance to Harry's bed. Fortunately, the examiners had simply seen the complexity of the transformation, and none of the students Draco had been examined with had ever been in Harry's bedroom.

"I'm sure Harry will be pleased to know that you're taking your inspiration from him," Hermione said, and Draco grinned at her, eyes bright.

The sex was very good; Hermione had got that message loud and clear.

After dinner, it was back to the common room because she and Draco had History of Magic on Thursday. It wasn't long before she was driven to visit Severus, however; Harry's last exam this week was Defence, and he didn't want to study for it. Like her, he was hard-pressed to imagine what they could ask of him that he couldn't do. He only had two more exams next week, and he didn't want to study for either of those.

In other words, Ron and Harry wanted to take a break right now.

Draco looked more than a little harried by the exuberance of the two other boys, so she invited him along and was amused by the alacrity with which he accepted. She couldn't remember his ever being alone with her and Severus before, but he'd clearly decided that interrupting the two of them was a risk that he was going to have to take in the face of the horror that was Harry and Ron refusing to study and being within three exams of the end of their academic career.

Hermione supposed that it would also be a little odd to be sitting there and revising about Voldemort's second rising while sitting in the room with Harry who might, at any moment, get bored enough to finally ask just what it was they were studying in their seventh year of History of Magic.

Severus looked rather surprised to find that Draco was with her. Fortunately, the blond boy was one of his favourite Slytherins, not to mention his godson, so the invitation to come in and join them for tea was quite cordial.

She and Draco both had personal perspectives on the Second War, and she could practically see the intensity with which Draco was revising the official facts. Just like her, he didn't want to open that can of worms. As she read about Voldemort's first rising, Hermione realized that she and Draco were sitting in a room with one of the men who knew the most about that time; neither of them looked to even be considering broaching the topic, however, as they preferred to live to see their exam.

Correctly reading Severus's expression, Hermione bid him a mild good night at the same time that Draco did—shortly before midnight—and headed back to her own quarters. It was a little annoying, but she knew he was behaving sensibly.

She went to bed as soon as she returned, enabling her to once again get four hours of sleep before joining her herd. When she reached the valley, Isaura gambolled over to inform her how very much she liked this new routine and hoped that Hermione would employ it always.

I'd like to, Hermione answered. But sometimes my life is very busy and I cannot quite manage it. I should be able to see you for several more days, though.

The young unicorn was pleased, and the rest of the herd echoed her happiness, leaving Hermione feeling cared for and far less stressed than she had been when she entered the valley.

On Thursday morning, Ron apparently took advantage of the fact that he had no exams in order to have a lie-in; there was no sight of him at breakfast, anyway, and sleep was about the only thing that occasionally took precedence over food. Harry came to wish Draco luck, and they parted ways as Draco and Hermione headed off to the dungeon classroom for their History of Magic N.E.W.T.

By the time they left, she was sure she wasn't the only one who wished she didn't actually know Harry personally; normally, when she wrote, she strove to put down everything and anything that pertained to the question and that an examiner might possibly find interesting. In this N.E.W.T., however, she had been forced to constantly suppress the urge to write more or fill in little details that weren't widely known.

Draco's face had taken on a pinched look by the end of the three hours; some of the questions had pertained to their earlier years at Hogwarts, to both the events in the school and elsewhere like at the Department of Mysteries. They were some pretty dark topics—or at least ones which now afforded a degree of regret—in which they had often been personally involved.

Fortunately, although the topic of Voldemort had taken up a large section of the exam, there had been plenty to write about on other topics as well, and Hermione had written to her heart's content on those subjects.

"Remind me never to do that again," Draco said as they sat down at the Gryffindor table.

Neville agreed immediately. "That was one weird experience."

Harry and Ron, who were already sitting at the table with Ginny, wanted to know what they were talking about, and they hastily changed the subject after explaining somewhat incoherently that the exam had seemed so different without Binns there droning on and on in that dry way. Now they were finally going to have someone live grading them who might really care, and that was just, er, odd.

Ginny, who was taking History of Magic and apparently knew what they were studying in seventh year, kindly turned the subject to Quidditch.

After lunch, they headed down to Room One, as Hermione and Harry had finally decided that they'd better ensure that they could fight without displaying any extraordinary skills; all their training recently had involved them going pretty close to all-out, and they needed to scale back for these tests.

They duelled for several hours, having to stop several times at the beginning when one or the other of them did something which Draco, Ginny, or Ron—all spectators—declared far too much to show the Ministry.

Once they got the hang of curbing their power in a duel setting once more—it was what they had had to do in the classroom up until last week, after all—they managed to work at it for a solid hour, practicing a number of different manoeuvres and taking turns bringing each other down effectively.

To her and Harry's amusement, Draco and Ron sparred next in one of the cleanest duels she had ever witnessed. She and Harry traded theories about the cause, figuring that at worst, the two boys thought that if they started to cross the line, they'd attempt to slaughter one another again. In the best-case scenario, having already done it once, the two of them now had the desire for blood out of their system.

It was shortly before four that Hermione excused herself because she needed to start the Weresbane. She had worked out this schedule carefully since it was essential that no part of the brewing took place during an exam. She'd be missing dinner tonight to work on it, but otherwise, it fit into her schedule almost perfectly. Beyond, of course, the bizarreness of brewing a highly complex potion during her N.E.W.T.s.

She'd barely been in her lab long enough to get started, the ingredients and equipment laid out and the fires under the cauldrons, when Severus appeared from the door that led to his quarters.

"How very timely," she observed.

"I found the others in Room One, and they told me where you'd gone."

She nodded in understanding, continuing to chop and reflecting that this was the last time she had to brew the potion for the War Werewolves and the first time that Severus might actually be present.

"Why are you brewing it?" he asked.

Her knife-wielding hand froze, and she looked up at him in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's the middle of your N.E.W.T.s."

"I'd noticed," she observed dryly. "But the moon isn't going to wait for me to finish them."

"You might have asked me to brew it for you." The words were stilted, but she was fully impressed that he'd got them out.

She'd had so much on her mind that she hadn't thought about this possible outcome.

"I might have done," she answered slowly, wishing that they weren't discussing this now, "but I wasn't … altogether certain that you could."

It took a moment for her words to register. His face went completely expressionless, and she actually had to ward the door against his leaving.

"I'm in the middle of brewing, Severus, so I can't follow you right now if you walk out on me; please, listen to what I have to say first."

He turned back to her, tight-lipped with anger. "If you think you've invented a potion that I am incapable of brewing, there is nothing more to discuss."

She let out a sigh. "You don't quite understand how right you are, Severus."

His face darkened again, and she wished that she wasn't trying to chop so that she didn't lose her entire schedule at the same time that she was speaking to him.

She hurried on: "I've never written down the very last ingredient of the Weresbane."

He looked at her as though she were speaking nonsense. "It's ground Weresbane leaves and birch sap. I can recall that, or do you doubt my memory, too?"

"I said it was the last ingredient, not the very last," she corrected. "The very last—and I confess that's a conceit of mine, but I needed a way to ensure that I wouldn't slip up if I ever spoke to anyone about it—wasn't written in the report I gave you for my project nor in my notes. It's an ingredient that I intended to tell you only by word of mouth."

"And it's this ingredient that you think renders me incapable of brewing your potion?" He was listening now, at least.

She nodded. "The Wolfsbane potion, for lack of a better way to describe it, doesn't care who brews it. As long as the person has sufficient proficiency, of course, they can make it. Theoretically, you could begin brewing it and I could finish brewing it, and the potion would still be a success. The Weresbane is its opposite. It requires a dedicated brewer; the maker's involvement is explicit. You no doubt recollect the portion where the brewer immerses the roots by hand?"

He nodded impatiently.

"The brewer is an integral part of the process. We're … giving ourselves to the potion, a bit, I suppose, and the potion knows."

"I'll take your word for it," he said coolly. "That still does not explain. You think me incapable of giving myself to the potion?"

"In a manner of speaking," she said apologetically. "The problem is with the very last ingredient."

"Which is?"

"A brewer's tear."

He blinked at her. "You think I cannot cry."

"It's not that I think you're incapable of it," she said carefully. "It's the … type of tear, I suppose."

He gave her a very long-suffering look, and she forced all the words out. "The tear has to be shed by the brewer in recognition of the suffering of the werewolf."

He regarded her without the slightest expression.

She nodded slightly. "I tried it with tears from other causes. It only works when it's a tear cried for what a werewolf goes through."

Having viewed as many transformations as she had, that grief was never difficult to feel.

"I was … hesitant to bring it up before," she confessed, "and only more so when I learnt the details of your history with Remus. It seemed a great deal to ask of you."

Still he said nothing, and she continued chopping on automatic, practically seeing her desire for the two of them to have a pleasant evening in her lab while she brewed the potion dissolve into ashes.

He broke the silence with clipped words. "I would like to return to my rooms."

She disabled the wards she had put up immediately, embarrassed that she had forgotten to take them down and made him ask.

He left without another word, and she was left with her base and a very quiet room.

It was after six by the time she had cleaned up after herself, and she thought that perhaps she should be hungry, but she wasn't feeling the slightest desire to eat. What she wanted to do was go after Severus. She wasn't going to be able to concentrate in the slightest tomorrow if she didn't know whether or not the two of them were speaking to one another. He needed time to consider what she'd said, she knew that, but it had been nearly two hours now, and if he yelled at her to bugger off, she'd at least have an answer.

Rather than going through the door between their rooms, however, she went round by the hallway and knocked. It seemed more polite, under the circumstances.

To her relief, his expression lightened when he saw her standing in front of him, and he ushered her in.

"I did not mean to upset you," she announced as soon as the door was closed.

She saw his lips quirk infinitesimally and realized that she'd used the line that he was usually wont to apply in situations like these.

Sighing, he reached out his hand for her. She crossed the distance between them and was enveloped in a very tight embrace that made her sniff slightly.

"I am uncertain whether or not I could brew your potion," he admitted. "Obviously, now would not be an appropriate time to find out the answer to that question. I do realize," he said with a thread of dark laughter in his voice, "that you didn't set out to design a potion that I would be incapable of brewing."

She smiled against his chest before looking up at him. "I really didn't."

He captured her lips with his, and she poured all her feelings into the kiss. It had been too many days since they'd been able to affirm how they felt in this manner—which only went to show how quickly she could get used to something enjoyable given how long she'd lived without kissing Severus.

Unfortunately, Severus didn't seem to be missing it quite as much as she did because he gentled the kiss in order to pull back and observe that she had missed dinner.

"It was the only way to get the schedule to come out all right between N.E.W.T.s and the drink window." She shrugged. "I don't mind missing a meal."

His stern look told her that it was not her not minding that was at issue. He sat her down at her customary chair by the fire and summoned Winky to bespeak a meal. Since her appetite had returned with the end of her tussle with Severus, she acquiesced to his wishes and ate.

Finishing her plate resulted in the agreeable surprise of being presented with some of the mousse that Severus had made, so she was delighted. He also took the opportunity to explain that when he had stopped giving her the mousse following her first disastrous attempt to take control of one of their encounters, it had been intended only to get her attention and drive her to speak to him. After she'd fed the next batch to Ron, he'd decided that abandoning the whole idea of mousse for a while would be wise.

She accepted this explanation readily enough, barely even caring for his reasons in light of the fact that he had voluntarily offered them long after the event in order to explain his actions to her and make her feel better. She made him laugh when she assured him that a good relationship with him was even more important to her than chocolate mousse.

He allowed her to retrieve her Defence text and study for a little while with him, but he once again sent her off to her own bedroom as it approached midnight. He did indulge her in a goodnight kiss tonight, and by the time she pulled herself away, he looked rather as though he wanted to drag her to his bedroom, and she was pleased that she had proved that his control was not infinite.

She felt quite content when she went to bed, and no thoughts of DADA entered her mind as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Hermione returned from a long run with the unicorns to go to breakfast on Friday morning. She felt as though she was in shape and ready to face whatever was thrown at her in Defence.

The seventeen of them trooped down to the classroom they'd now grown quite familiar with, emerging three hours later after they had discussed beasts, beings, Voldemort, Unforgivables, Aurors, and any number of other topics. There had been straightforward defence questions—in the nature of the Patronus Charm to defeat a Dementor—but also ones which had allowed them to get quite philosophical—such as an argument as to whether or not Dementors should be classed as Beings instead of Beast—and Hermione had enjoyed those especially.

The question on werewolves had allowed her to expound quite lengthily on her cure, and from the number of eyes she had felt on her throughout the exam, she imagined that the examiners were going to get an array of answers to the questions that they had never had before.

From the lively chatter at lunch, everyone seemed to believe that they'd done pretty well. Living in the middle of the war as they did, this topic was of far more than academic interest. All the students who were still taking Defence knew what they were talking about because they recognized that they might really have to face those situations at any point. The exams would likely make an interesting read for the examiners, anyway.

Not knowing what to expect, they gathered a bit nervously after lunch for the practical. Finally, they were all ushered into the room together—which was already not what they had imagined would happen.

There were three examiners, all middle-aged wizards with stern features.

"We will assess your prowess in Defence," the extremely tall, extremely thin examiner with the short dark hair announced, "by calling upon you first to defeat a variety of creatures, then to demonstrate your shielding abilities, and finally to duel." They looked round at one another in surprise, and Hermione could see that she and Harry were getting some interesting looks. It didn't look as though anyone wanted to go up against them.

The second examiner, who looked short and round only in comparison to his colleague, addressed their concerns. "We shall be taking all your behaviour and offensive and defensive actions into account, not simply who wins. Auror Tonks has told us that you have fought similarly in class before."

Tension eased out of most of the students as they remembered that many of them had acquitted themselves well before they were beaten out. Before this could occur, though, they had to go up against the various beings, and Hermione and the rest of the students were transported straight back to third-year DADA when they saw what they were lined up against.

Hermione had understood why Remus had had them face the Boggart in turn. It was how they learnt; they'd never faced it before, and it made sense, especially in a classroom setting, to have them all present at once. Why, however, the examiners had decided that this was the ideal procedure for their exam, she had no idea. While she did understand that it was important that they be able to defeat such a creature, it was actually not hugely likely that they were going to run into one, and it seemed … poorly timed.

Perhaps the goal had actually been to disconcert them as much as possible, but Hermione thought it was a bit of a low blow. They were in the middle of a war, and they weren't thirteen-year-olds anymore who feared clowns and spiders. They all read the newspaper and they all had friends or family who had died.

Hermione could make a rather good wager on exactly what form the Boggart would take, and she didn't have the slightest intention of letting the entire seventh-year class and the examiners see what Severus had looked like when she had found him tortured to the brink of death by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. She had been so very nearly too late, and she imagined that the Boggart would pick up on that fear.

Picking up on fears was what it did best, after all. Hannah Abbot had lost a cousin, and it was Voldemort coming after her next which she feared. While she didn't know precisely what Voldemort looked like, the idea was there, and Hannah broken down completely while most of the class jumped.

Rather than seeing that this was a very stupid plan, the tall examiner waved Susan Bones forward to go next. Susan was the niece of the Minister for Magic, and Hermione wouldn't have thought it took a genius to guess what she feared. Sure enough, the Boggart morphed into her dead aunt—which caused a round of exclamations from the examiners—and Susan was now the second upset student who'd not been able to banish the Boggart. While the examiners had begun to look disturbed, the tall one still gestured Terry Boot forward.

Harry, however, had reached his limit sooner than the examiners, and he skipped right over half the line to step forward. She, Draco, and Ron all stepped up behind him. The four of them levelled their wands at the Boggart; although Harry could have done it himself, the presence of four of them made it less exceptionable as they blasted the Boggart with enough magic that it ceased to exist without anyone having to try to turn it into something funny.

As one, they turned back to the examiner.

"We don't care if you penalize us," Harry said.

"But that's the end of that part of the examination," Hermione finished quite definitively.

There was a frozen moment where it wasn't clear whether or not the examiners were going to take exception to the fact that they'd just destroyed part of the exam. They clustered to one side and didn't seem to think it necessary to use a Silencing Charm. Thanks to her acute hearing, Hermione heard the short and round examiner defending their actions—as did Harry, from the look on his face. No one could deny, after all, that they had defeated the Boggart, and the fact that they had done so to prevent it from terrorizing their fellow classmates showed that they had more than upheld the spirit behind the examination as well.

Fortunately for her, Harry, Draco, and Ron, this argument was allowed to prevail, and the students were told they would move on to the next stage of the exam—which Hermione sincerely hoped was less stupid than the first part had been.

Thankfully, someone's common sense had made an appearance, and there weren't any actual vampires or Dementors or anything of the sort for them to fight, although they were given the opportunity to display the defensive spells that would be used in these situations.

Practicing conjuring her Patronus hadn't actually occurred to Hermione; although it had been one of the only spells she had had true difficulty with in fifth year, taking an embarrassingly long time to master, she had ceased to have trouble with it in sixth year after she had gained her Animagus form. It had never been clear to her how the two related, but the sluggishness and uncertainty that had been there before had evaporated. She had further assumed that she now had enough happy memories with Severus to fuel her Patronus in spades.

She was therefore completely unprepared when she cast the spell.

Chapter Fifty-Six: The Final Trial

It would have been embarrassing beyond words if the spell hadn't worked at all; she might have had trouble with it in fifth year, but she had got the spell to succeed eventually, and she'd learnt a lot since then. Fortunately, failure was not her problem. No, the problem—or at least the shock—was that what came out of Hermione's wand was not what she had expected.

She had read that a Patronus could change as a result of drastic emotion—life-changing, one might say—and given what form her Patronus had taken, this appeared to be true.

For it wasn't an otter that swam out of her wand but a large and fierce-looking panther which leapt gracefully to the ground and stood there, haunches taut as though just waiting to pounce. Those nearest her reared back slightly.

There was a flutter of movement amongst the students, as many of them had seen her original Patronus when they worked in the DA together, but it couldn't be supposed that they were suddenly going to be allowed to interrupt the exam a second time to quiz her about it. Harry looked very much as though he wanted to break the "no MindSpeech during exams" rule, but he kept quiet.

The leopard prowled around the room, beautiful and deadly, before coming back to her side, butting his head against her thigh and then disappearing. Schooling her features, she made sure that she didn't look as mushy as she felt, although Harry and Draco were looking at her suspiciously. Fortunately, the examiners saw nothing amiss and simply marked down, she hoped, that she had successfully cast the charm in question.

By the time all seventeen of them had shown their Patronuses, Hermione wondered if the examiners had ever had a full class do so before. Most of them had been in the DA, and they were all serious, one way or the other, about this war.

Once the first portion of the practical was over, they were told that they could rest for a few minutes. Most of the students sat, but Hermione stood leaning against the wall and considered how this was likely going to end. She, Harry, and Draco were the top contenders, but she and Harry were so evenly matched that there was no saying who would win at a given time. Draco probably wouldn't beat either of them, although if she and Harry were taking care not to display too much magic, there was no saying for sure. The Slytherin could be awfully sneaky when he wanted to be, and he had some good moves.

They were put into pairs to demonstrate their shielding capabilities, much as had been done in that long-ago class with Tonks. Since it was done alphabetically, Hermione ended up with Daphne Greengrass and discovered that, fortunately, she could shield the other woman as well as she could shield anyone she wasn't particularly compatible with.

Next, they had to shield themselves against a barrage of spells from one of the examiners while the other two observed, one from inside the shield and the other from outside. Hermione took it as written that allowing the examiner inside the shield to be hit should the shield be penetrated would not result in a good grade.

Harry had made quite a show by using his modified shield which absorbed the spells it came into contact with until the examiner finally sent a strong enough charm that the shield exploded in a brilliant wash of light.

Knocking the caster on his arse might not be good for Harry's grade, but since he'd immediately set up another shield which had protected the two grading examiners from being injured in the explosion, she figured he'd do all right.

Unless Hermione was out of her mind, the spells that were thrown at her, Harry, and Draco were stronger than those cast against the shields for some of the other students. She decided that perhaps she was being paranoid—or word of their exploits had definitely reached the Ministry examiners. Since none of the three of them let any of the spells through, she didn't suppose it mattered in the grand scheme of things. And given that she had brewed a potion that wasn't even on the syllabus for Potions, she probably oughtn't to be complaining now.

Barely was that thought completed, however, before the examiners declared that they would test the wards of any students who wished for bonus points. Out of nowhere, one of the examiners who had been invigilating Hermione's Ancient Runes written exam appeared and asked if he might not be present while she warded with runes.

Hermione began to suspect that the examiners sat around at night discussing the students, but she consented anyway and was given five minutes in which to construct the wards of her choice. She was careful not to use any particularly strange runes that might display too extraordinary a talent. Everyone watched as the three examiners plus the Ancient Runes invigilator tried to get through her wards—either with spells or by disabling them—and when ten minutes had passed, Hermione reluctantly swallowed her pride and let the expert in Ancient Runes and the short and round Defence examiner who had banded together break through.

These were, after all, wards that she had put up in a couple of minutes, and while she could easily have cast wards that would never have let them through here in the castle, she knew that showing brilliant ability with wards right before the Final Battle would be extremely unwise.

She still felt a little bit sick to her stomach that she'd deliberately failed at anything during an exam, but the fact that Draco had to elbow Harry to get him to school his expression of shock made her feel obscurely better, especially when Draco rolled his eyes at her. There was one person, at least, who knew exactly what she'd done and why she'd done it.

The examiners still seemed impressed, too. She only hoped that Tonks and Kingsley were as quick as Draco was because they had appeared with a third Auror whose name she did not know in the middle of her demonstration, and she didn't want them to think that she'd actually failed…. She reminded herself sternly that helping to save the world was more important than even more bonus points on her Defence N.E.W.T.

Harry, Draco, Morag, and Daphne all volunteered for the bonus as well, the latter three warding with Runes since they had all taken Ancient Runes with Hermione. Harry had never tried to learn more than the basic idea from her; he concentrated on layering several powerful wards one on top of the other, ones that took sheer time and effort to get through. None of the other wards lasted as long as hers had, but Draco's wards had clocked in at just over seven minutes, Harry's at just under six, and Daphne's and Morag's around five. The Ministry officials were once again looking as though the students had distinguished themselves.

Afterwards, they were broken up into three different groups, and she was unsurprised that she, Harry, and Draco were separated. They duelled until they came out to three contenders when Hermione finally beat out Ron, Harry bested Daphne, and Draco won against Neville.

Rather than fighting each other, however, they learnt that they'd be fighting the Aurors who'd shown up while they had been warding. Harry was going up against Tonks, Hermione was going up against Kirkpatrick, the third Auror, and Draco was going up against Kingsley. Hermione wondered if there was a rule prohibiting family members from testing each other in N.E.W.T.s. Given some of the pure-blood families she knew of, it seemed like it would have been a wise ban for the Ministry to institute.

Hermione also wasn't certain if the Ministry considered such things as political correctness; having the only female student of the top three fight the only female Auror had the potential to be misconstrued, and the configuration they had just been presented with had prevented any possibility of that.

The tall examiner announced that they would be going alphabetically, and Hermione decided that she would really be just as happy to get this over with because no amount of preparation was suddenly going to make her more ready; she had never seen Kirkpatrick fight, and she rather doubted that they could take a moment out of the exam so that he could give her a demonstration.

It wasn't precisely fair to have Tonks involved, given that the three of them had been taught by her throughout the year and therefore knew her style; that gave Harry a distinct advantage. The training with Kingsley was a secret, so she supposed she couldn't really blame the Ministry for that one, although now she thought on it, she had to wonder if someone wasn't trying to prove something by putting the Malfoy heir up against the head of Magical Law Enforcement in his N.E.W.T.

Then again, Kirkpatrick was the only one out of the three of them who didn't really know what to expect when he came up against Hermione; perhaps the exam was actually skewed in her favour.

Either way, a requirement to pass the exam had been laid before them, and Hermione rose from the few minutes' rest knowing that the three of them had every intention of showing the examiners that it didn't matter who they were up against. Draco was certainly eyeing Kingsley in a way that indicated that he didn't think it would be bad form under the circumstances to defeat the head of Magical Law Enforcement in front of a whole bunch of witnesses.

The examiners seemed a little surprised when all three of the students who were facing off against the Aurors beat them.

Hermione spent a few minutes getting a feel for Kirkpatrick's abilities. He was fast on his feet and possessed of a rather charming smile that blossomed on his face whenever he thought he had the advantage. She used a combination burning and freezing charm to defeat him; while Kirkpatrick fumbled with frozen fingers to try to deal with the fact that his feet were on fire, Hermione disarmed him—as well as immediately casting the counter-charm for the burning.

Harry had used Tonks's clumsiness against her, using a couple strong and flashy spells and shields to get her to fall back to the area of the floor which he had transfigured to the consistency of molasses; as she floundered into it, he took possession of her wand.

Draco and Kingsley had the longest battle, though it was fast and furious because they both favoured offence to defence. There was a lot of movement, a lot of pressing forward and falling back as they tested one another with an array of spells. Defeat came for the older man, however, when Draco managed one of the best-executed double-shield charms Hermione had ever seen; the first shimmered clearly in front of Draco while the second was invisible—to those who could not see magic like her and Harry, anyway. Kingsley's Blasting Hex failed to penetrate the shield closest to Draco, and Kingsley fired again immediately, obviously hoping to hit the younger man as he took down his own shield to retaliate. Instead, the Auror was felled by his own spell rebounding off the second shield he had not realized was right in front of him.

There was an extremely loud cheer from the rest of the class, and Hermione, Draco, and Harry left this particular exam feeling rather as though they'd been to a tournament rather than a N.E.W.T.

Hermione was feeling a little restless by the time she got back downstairs after dinner. Since she needed to continue brewing at six o'clock, she curbed her impulse to go to Severus; that would have to wait until later.

Since dinner had been delayed to accommodate the N.E.W.T. schedule, she had about fifteen minutes during which she could get everything ready and grumble to herself about stupid examiners. At least it was Friday and Hannah and Susan would have a couple of days to recover from a rather unpleasant experience.

Dividing her concentration between DADA considerations, preparing the potion, and planning precisely how she was going to finish reviewing for her second week of exams, it wasn't until she finished this stage of the potion that she realized that Severus was sitting on a stool by the door watching her.

She barely had enough control of her faculties not to startle visibly; scanning back through the last several hours, she realized that he'd been there for the better part of an hour. He'd impinged upon the wards, but she'd really internalized the notion, apparently, that he was her mate and not a threat, so she hadn't even noticed.

It was still rather disconcerting.

"You might have said something."

"You seemed to be concentrating very carefully," he answered as he rose from the stool he had conjured and Vanished it.

"Thinking about three or four things at once," she admitted. "Not all of them necessary. I can't seem to get the DADA N.E.W.T. out of my head despite its being over and done with."

"Hmm," he said. "Albus kept giving sly hints at dinner. Explain."

Rephrasing that as a polite request in her head, Hermione did so: the Boggart (he was not surprised by the lack of concern), the Auror duels (he rolled his eyes but couldn't completely hide his look of pleasure that they had won), and finally, the Patronus.

"Have you seen my Patronus before?"

"Do you not recall who ensured that you and P—Harry could transmit messages to other Order members?

It had, in fact, slipped her mind.

"Right," she said, struggling not to feel awkward. "Well, I wouldn't want you to wonder who a message was from now."

He was staring at her with a look of confusion; she conjured her Patronus, and his eyes widened.

The leopard prowled once around the whole room, looked as though it was sniffing Severus, and then came to nudge her affectionately before it dissipated.

Severus was still staring at the place where it had vanished.

"You can imagine my surprise," she said dryly. "A charm that I had been quite sure I didn't need to practice, and suddenly, there it was in the middle of the Great Hall."

Severus swallowed. "Thank you for showing me."

He still seemed rather shaken, so she busied herself with tidying up and making tea.

"I've never seen a Patronus change before," he offered once he had the mug clenched between his hands. "I've seen people … get together." She knew that wasn't the phrase he'd originally intended to use. "But that's never happened."

"But it happened to me," she answered, shrugging, as it wasn't something that she could change, nor did she want to. "I rather fancy the idea of the leopard protecting me."

"You may be certain that it will."

And that response, she knew, had nothing to do with her Patronus.

As she'd hoped, Severus's decision to keep his distance from her during exam time did not extend to the weekends. Faced with the prospect of studying a great deal more after making it through five exams or taking the evening off to spend it with Severus, it didn't take her so much as a minute to choose. Severus seemed quite gratified to bring her right back to his bedroom despite the relatively early hour of the evening. It would still, she knew, be some time before they slept.

Hermione woke at five in the morning, impressed that exams and Severus had tired her out such that she had slept for nearly six hours even with all the visits she had made to her herd this week.

She eased herself out of Severus's grasp so that she could go to the washroom but found that she had woken him after all when she re-emerged into the bedroom and he called her back to bed. She had intended to go visit her herd again, but there was really no way to resist a sleep-rumpled Severus who clearly had just one thing on his mind.

They were up early for breakfast once more, and Severus ensured that they ate a full meal instead of waiting to go up to the Great Hall.

"No one will be shocked, given the week you have had, if you miss breakfast this morning," he observed. "I will go up anyway, but you may stay down here and revise. I would prefer that annoying questions which might threaten your sanity be delayed several more days at least."

Hermione approved this program, supposing that Severus was well able to take care of himself and was unlikely to be faced with very many annoying questions of any sort.

She waited until Harry and Draco were awake and out of their communal shower before she informed them that Severus was keeping her tucked away in his quarters. Harry told her that he expected to see her at least a little at some point during the weekend. She promised she wouldn't disappear completely but was quite pleased not to have to deal with the rest of the student body until lunchtime.

By the time Severus reappeared from the meal upstairs, she had laid out a great many books all over the floor and was revising in earnest for Charms. She intended the afternoon to be devoted to Muggle Studies and as much Arithmancy as she could manage, as the evening would be broken up as she worked on the

Weresbane.

After lunch, Draco joined the two of them again, looking apologetic but in need of a break, so she switched her plan about a bit and began to study Arithmancy with him before she looked at Muggle Studies; sadly, she didn't suppose now was the time to try to engender his interest in the topic.

"They don't study nearly as well without you," Draco observed.

After years of association, she knew they didn't, and she imagined it would only be worse with the strange dynamic that sometimes sprang up when Ron, Harry, and Draco were in a room together.

After dinner, Hermione headed back to Severus, promising Harry that she'd spend all of Sunday morning with him if he wished. Somewhat wryly, she wondered how she had lived without the Slytherin for as long as she had when she seemed to need him—or at least want him—so constantly now.

Severus proved that he had not forgotten her words concerning the castle as he inquired for an update on what it was offering them as accommodations. Now that the ice had been broken between her and Severus, Hogwarts was sending much more reasonable images. Hermione had to wonder how many people it had tried to convince to stay over the years. She had the sense that it was amused to be communicating with her so thoroughly and able to offer such advantages. Hermione had also guessed its goal, and it seemed content even though she had no intention of submitting to the plan immediately.

The arrangement that the castle finally offered which she was truly tempted to accept was a two-floor layout. Since there would be two of them living there, Hermione didn't think it was utterly outrageous. This way, there would be real windows as well as enchanted ones. The upper floor, which would be level with the ground, would have their bedroom suite: bedroom, sitting room, large walk-in closet, and full bathroom. The lower floor would contain their sitting room, their library, a smaller bathroom, and their laboratory—because together, they apparently rated an official private lab right in their rooms.

She'd done her best to ascertain that no other rooms would be seriously rearranged or the rest of the school inconvenienced by this option, but the castle seemed entirely certain that it was completely possible. Since she was getting real windows, Hermione suspected this meant a classroom somewhere was being collapsed into wizarding space, but she couldn't quite bring herself to object.

There would be two entrances, the main one in the dungeon and a hidden one on the ground floor. Severus was getting a door that opened to his office despite the distance involved, and the castle had made clear rumblings about the same for Hermione … when she needed it, of course, since she hadn't even been asked to teach.

When she shared this mental image with Severus, she was also careful not to make any mention of the final room that the castle had made clear was ready for them whenever it would be needed: a nursery with the possibility of plenty of bedrooms for children if the castle's glee was anything to go by. Hermione did not intend to have as many as Molly, but since these were Severus's children she was thinking about, she was entirely certainly she could be persuaded to have one—or perhaps two, so that he or she would not be an only child.

Severus was quite impressed with what was on offer, although she could see him practically biting his tongue not to say anything about Gryffindors and perks. She therefore refrained from pointing out that if this current situation could be attributed to anything, it was probably to the fact that she was a many, many times removed descendent of Salazar Slytherin.

"If we accept this offer, is anything expected of us?"

Always the Slytherin, she thought fondly.

"You don't have to worry about anything," she reassured him.

He regarded her narrowly. "What will be expected of you?"

She considered this for a moment. "The expectations do not hinge upon whether or not I accept the rooms."

"Tell me what it wants."

She raised her eyebrows at the very sharp tone, reminiscent of an order to a first-year.

"Or?" she asked pointedly.

He breathed out shortly through his nose but said with very careful neutrality, "Please advise me of what the castle has convinced you to do."

She laughed softly, wondering irreverently if this meant that he could be trained after all. "I'm not sure that you'll believe me."

"Has that ever stopped you before?"

She sighed, and admitted, "I suspect the castle has chosen a headmaster."

He continued to stare at her for a long moment.

"You."

His tone was just shy of incredulous, and she tried really hard not to be insulted. Her chin came up.

"I said you wouldn't believe me."

Severus seemed to realize that the chances of her joining him in bed later were considerably diminished if he continued to upset her, and his tone of voice now was more reasonable. "The castle doesn't have a say in the matter. The Board of Governors appoints a headmaster."

"The Board of Governors is sometimes successful in forcing someone into the position against the castle's will. But do you really think a headmaster who doesn't have the support of the castle will last long?"

Severus appeared never to have considered this before.

"If Umbridge had been approved by the castle, do you think Albus would really have been able to keep her out of an office that was, by appointment of the Ministry and the Board of Governors, no longer his?"

"You're really serious."

"I really am," she agreed. "I don't have the slightest desire to become Hogwarts' youngest headmaster—certainly not at this age—and the castle has accepted that. It's still happier if I remain here. If you're happy at Hogwarts, then there's every chance I'll be happy at Hogwarts as well, and ready to be headmistress when it's time for me to do so, which I trust will be years and years from now." She shrugged. "Did you not find it a little unusual that the castle took my part in February?"

"It's choosing favourites, then?" he said with amusement.

"In its own way, I suppose. It knows that Albus will not retain his post forever, and it is aware that I am young and care a great deal about knowledge and the dissemination of information."

"The Board still has some say."

She nodded. "And there may be a half dozen headmasters between Albus and me." She shrugged. "From what I am given to understand, the castle has a habit of getting what it wants."

"I'll just pretend that isn't the craziest notion I've ever heard," Severus said, apparently not convinced.

Hermione supposed that she would have thought it was completely insane once upon a time, too.

The castle kept sending more images of what their new lab could look like until she laughingly told it that they were mostly sold but needed not to be distracted right now.

Severus joined her in her lab when she announced that she needed to work on the next stage of the Weresbane. Since she was consciously aware of his presence this time, he asked plenty of questions, and just as she had imagined when Viktor was there, Severus wanted to dissect all her decisions, and she prepared to defend herself.

It was very invigorating, and by the time the potion was ready to simmer shortly after ten o'clock, it was quite clear from Severus's expression that he was feeling the heat as much as she was.

They tumbled into bed again, which made the nearly four and half hours before she could bank the heat of the potion pass in a glorious mixture of heated skin and flurried movements and steadily building pleasure. Shortly after half two, she left his bed to perform this office and then returned to curl up next to him and sleep properly for a few hours.

She was pulled abruptly from slumber by Severus's suddenly bolting awake, arms clutching around her tightly.

"Severus?" she demanded in concern.

She heard him draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Your castle is insane. And apparently mildly annoyed by my reticence in believing everything you told me."

"You don't think you've just had a strange dream?" she asked with as deadpan a voice as she could manage.

He nudged her arm for this. "Very funny. I don't need anymore convincing, thank you, so tell the interfering building to stay out of my dreams."

She projected this desire as clearly as she could and was certain that somewhere, the castle was giggling.

"I never thought I'd be seeing the headmistress of Hogwarts," Severus said as he pulled her closer to him, lips brushing against her ear as he spoke. There was wry humour in his voice. "Primarily because I always thought the position would go to Minerva."

She made a face at the mental image he had conjured.

"It might well," she reminded him. "I may be occupied with other tasks for years."

He took her unsubtle hint for what it was and kept her occupied until they both fell into sated slumber once more.

When she moved to slip away a few hours later, Severus appeared to be sleeping deeply enough that she didn't wake him, and she went out to the Forest to see her herd. Upon her return, she found that Severus was showering and since he'd left the door unlocked, she invited herself to join him, a decision which he did not appear to object to in the slightest.

By the time they made it out of the room, she fully understood why Harry and Draco spent so much time showering together.

They parted ways with her intending to return after lunch, as she'd promised herself to the boys for the morning. Draco looked mildly surprised when her admonishment that Harry and Ron sit down to study after breakfast resulted in their actually sitting down to study effectively after breakfast. It was a combination, she explained to him, of her longer acquaintance with them and the fact that they were now materially closer to the exams in question.

She had a lot to fit around her four exams this week, and Severus let her be when she returned to his quarters. He joined her once more in the lab when she had to work on the Weresbane from half eleven until a quarter to two, and he didn't protest that her schedule was keeping both of them up the night before one of her exams.

The late evening terminated with the two of them in his bed, a fact she relished for what she suspected was going to be the last night for another week. She wasn't sure if this lent itself more to the proprieties or to the fact that she had so many calls upon her time, but since she really was quite busy, accepting his decision seemed the only sensible course of action.

She was able to slip out to the unicorns for a little while before breakfast and then arrived in the Great Hall to see precisely what she'd expected: there was still a whole second week of exams left, and freedom was nearer but seemed further away than ever. Students were frazzled and irritable and still studying like mad fiends.

She ate breakfast swiftly, joined by most of the seventh-years in this endeavour. There was nothing like listening to a second-year whinge about his or her exams to make a N.E.W.T. student want to snap and find out if she could make the second-year cry. Hermione thought it rather better not to learn if she was already that much like Severus.

The nineteen Charms students headed to the dungeon classroom which was beginning to feel very familiar. They sat their Charms exam just as they had sat all the exams before it, and three hours later Hermione emerged feeling rather pleased. She was fond of Charms, and Filius had been quite good about ensuring she wasn't at all behind because of the classes she had missed for the Weresbane.

At lunch, she ate her food absentmindedly and remembered a time where there had never been any question but that she would do better on her written exams than on her practical ones. It had seemed so very important to know all the theories and to be able to show her knowledge to good advantage on paper.

Seven years later, she wasn't quite of the same opinion. She still believed that knowing theory was essential to being a truly gifted witch or wizard. Although there were some witches or wizards who worked purely instinctively, most could improve their practical work considerably if they understood how the spells they were casting actually worked.

But the theory was indeed in aid of the practical. In order to survive in the wizarding world, a wizard needed to know how to transfigure objects and cast charms. It wouldn't do to run into Devil's Snare and not remember first-year Herbology.

Given the life she and her friends led, she'd still be using Potions until she was two hundred, and all of them were going to be using DADA until the day they died. She was proud of all the advances that she'd made in practical wandwork over the years, as well as very slightly sad; part of the reason she'd learnt was because she likely wouldn't have survived otherwise.

Pushing these morose thoughts aside, she joined the Charms students waiting for the Great Hall to be rearranged for them. They were led in alphabetically in small groups, the routine seemingly back to the one they had had with their O.W.L.s. There were more objects that had been spelled to resist them, but Hermione was expecting that by now. She got the chance to show her Patronus once more; it was classified as a charm and apparently not every examiner had been in on the DADA N.E.W.T.

Meeting Draco, Harry, and finally Ron afterwards, she found that there were good feelings all round, and Harry and Ron were especially happy that they had two days off until Herbology on Thursday. She immediately washed her hands of the two of them since she needed to study for two other exams in the meantime and finish the Weresbane.

Even Draco was taking tonight off. There were only seven other students taking Muggle Studies with Hermione, and they only had a written to worry about; she was very relieved that someone hadn't decided they needed a practical where they would do a variety of tasks the Muggle way. It was a ridiculous idea but seemed precisely the sort that the Ministry would adopt.

Her resolution not to be overly concerned about this particular exam was all to the good, given the timetable of the Weresbane. Revising after dinner, she then napped from nine until eleven in the evening, headed out to be with her herd until half twelve, and was back in the lab for the final stage of the Weresbane right on time, stirring in the last ingredient until a quarter after one.

She narrowly managed to convince Severus to go to bed, not wanting him to get no sleep and be a terror to the students sitting their exams on Tuesday. Judging that she really had studied enough for Muggle Studies, she switched to Arithmancy as she sat next to the potion to monitor it.

Although her monitoring spell appeared to have worked well enough when Harry had needed her last time, she didn't feel as though a need for sleep was adequate reason for her to put the potion in the hands of a spell yet again. This was the very last batch for the War Werewolves, and she was going to give it all the attention it deserved.

Severus's reappearance right on time for the addition of the very last ingredient told her that he had been paying quite a bit of attention to her schedule, and since he would likely have been up around that time anyway, she figured she'd done her duty by the students already and now they were on their own.

Retrieving the vial of tears—which she had collected over some very unpleasant nights—she used an eyedropper to carefully allow two tears to drop into the potion and watched as it turned the blue that told her that it was a success. Severus's face was rather relaxed, and she beamed at him, resulting in a light kiss which only made her smile like more of an idiot.

She decanted the potion as she explained to him that she would take it to the safe house now and monitor those who had ingested it until right before her exam. Severus didn't look entirely approving of this schedule but asked to accompany her, so she wrapped her arms around him and Apparated them both to the safe house.

Remus was passing through the lobby just as she and Severus arrived and did nothing to keep the disapproval out of his eyes. Hermione stilled the urge to growl and reminded herself once again that she was a unicorn and not a werewolf. She just wished she'd taken the two of them straight downstairs.

Severus was holding himself very stiffly, and she had to wonder if they were about to get into a fight. She had not cursed Remus to kingdom come last time, but Severus was unlikely to show a similar restraint. This was a fact to which she was becoming rapidly reconciled.

She'd thought Remus had been making a rather good attempt at adjusting to the notion of the two of them being together, but if his idea of that was to be polite when it was just her but be blatantly disapproving when Severus was present, that simply wasn't going to cut it.

She handed the potions to Severus.

"Would you make sure these get downstairs for me?"

Severus turned on his heel and left without a word.

She regarded Remus sternly as she threw up privacy charms.

"It's called Side-Along Apparition." She made no attempt to curb the sharpness of her voice. "Please don't make me come over there and hit you up the side of the head, Remus Lupin."

"You're saying he couldn't have Apparated himself?" Remus asked doubtfully.

"I'm saying," she bit out as she stepping closer so that she was nearly in his face, "that I chose to bring him with me. In point of fact, however, no, he could not have Apparated himself because I went through the wards."

Some of the obstinacy left his eyes.

"You went through the wards?" he repeated blankly.

"I was in a hurry," she said stiffly. "I have an exam in all of two hours, and I have to administer the potion, watch to make sure that no one has ill effects, go write the exam, and then come back to prevent eighteen people from turning into werewolves before another exam tomorrow morning. If you would like to criticize my behaviour, Remus, you had better do it quickly, as I don't have time for such an event allocated in my schedule."

"I didn't mean—" he began, looking faintly shame-faced.

"Of course you did," she interrupted impatiently. "And I wish you would stop. It's quite obvious to everyone by now that you don't approve, but allow me to repeat that it really isn't any of your business. My mate is mine, and it has nothing to do with you."

"I'm concerned—" he tried once more.

"But there's no reason for you to be," she answered, trying to acquire patience from somewhere. "It's my life, and I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"Are you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered firmly, moving towards the stairs as she realized that she would likely still be here a week from now if she waited for a resolution. "I understand Severus better than you think, Remus. I'm not going into this blindly."

"If you knew the things he'd done—"

She whirled back, nearly making him step down on top of her, but he reared back just in time.

"Remus John Lupin," she pronounced, "this is the very last time we are going to speak about this. Whatever secrets you think you are hiding, you can let them go. Tell me, tell him, I don't care, but if you cannot be civil, we are not going to speak again after tomorrow evening."

"Hermione," he protested, "you don't understand."

"Then make me understand," she gritted out. "You have thirty seconds until I get down these stairs, and that's the end of this discussion."

She started to move again, and he was very silent until just before she reached the bottom.

"Severus hurt Lily very badly," Remus blurted out.

Hermione's tone was acid as she snarled over her shoulder, "And was this before or after she slept with him only until James found out and started behaving as she wished?"

Remus's arm on her shoulder stopped her from stepping onto the ground. He turned her forcibly back to him and scanned her face anxiously, looking more and more shocked.

"That's why he stopped speaking to her?"

She nodded, continuing reluctantly, "And I ought not to have lost my temper because whatever he thought of her, Remus, he didn't ever tell anybody that, not even Sirius or Harry, and you know damn well what it could have done to either of them."

Remus nodded, looking very troubled. "I had no idea."

"So I gather. I'm not Lily, Remus, and I assure you—although it's more information than you have any right to—that Severus and I have already had that discussion. The two of us are embarking upon our own relationship, and it has nothing to do with those very old issues. Do you understand?"

He nodded, although he still looked a little lost.

"I need to start administering the potion," she said gently.

This recalled him to the fact that he was still clutching at her, and he let go abruptly.

She continued, "I can't let you speak of this to anyone."

He nodded again, still not making an effort to speak, and she stepped off the stairs, released her spell, and hurried over to her werewolves.

Remake someone's worldview, cure lycanthropy, write N.E.W.T.s. All in a day's work, apparently.

Severus was picking up the slack for her and had already begun administering the potion. The fact that all the werewolves had gone along with it delighted her. By this time, all of them had to know that he had been a Death Eater, and here he was administering a potion before she'd even got into the room. It made her beam like an idiot, actually, but she figured there was no harm in their knowing she was happy.

Perhaps the events of the new moon hadn't been quite as disastrous as she had thought. This group of people seemed to be taking the news that Severus was her mate better than most everyone else she knew, actually.

Once everyone had taken the potion and Hermione had recorded the first set of vitals, she moved over to clean all the potion vials. Afterwards, she would sit down to chat with the werewolves until she had to leave for her exam, but she wanted to get the work out of the way.

Severus joined her, and she saw the privacy charms go up around them.

"What was that on the stairs?"

Given that this was Remus in a taking he was asking about, his tone had been pretty reasonable.

She sighed. It would only be worse if he found out later.

"Remus was … concerned about my happiness."

"I can well imagine," Severus growled.

"I told him this was his last chance to explain to me what his real problem was."

Severus's glare was eloquent.

She forced herself to speak. "He thought you'd made Lily unhappy when you ceased to be friends with her."

His silence suggested that this revelation had actually startled him.

Embarrassed, she nevertheless made herself continue. "And I let my tongue run away with me."

"You told him about Lily and me."

She could decipher nothing from his tone and reluctantly nodded.

"That's why he looks like he currently does."

Following Severus's gaze, she saw that Remus did indeed still look rather shell-shocked.

She nodded again, offering, "I told him he couldn't speak of it."

His tone was biting. "You no doubt place a great deal of reliance on his word."

She shook her head. "I mean I told him he couldn't speak about it. I've spelled him to silence."

An eyebrow arched. "You do this a great deal?"

"Whenever necessary. No one but you or I can speak about the Final Battle."

Severus's lips suddenly tipped up. "I had not realized."

She nodded slightly but couldn't shake the feeling that she should never have said anything about Lily when it was not her secret to tell.

He tipped her chin up with fingers that were quite gentle. "It's all right, Hermione."

"If you say so," she said doubtfully.

He laughed softly.

"If anything, it explains a good deal about his behaviour," Severus answered. "He was always very fond of Lily."

Hermione looked up at him sharply and realized quite tardily that Severus and James were not the only ones who had loved Lily Evans.

"Oh," she said somewhat blankly.

She began to wonder if she'd been wrong about her guess as to who had ensured that Lily would not be a Pure Adult.

"'Oh', indeed," he said, still sounding amused.

They finished with the bottles and made their way to the werewolves.

Gemma, Adam, and Steven, Hermione learnt, had been spending a great deal of time with Sophia, Alissa, Dorian, and Lou, and they were happy to tell her all about how prepared they felt. She got distracted speaking to them, in fact, and didn't immediately notice when Severus and Remus disappeared.

The wards informed her that they were in the library and didn't seem to be breaking any of the furniture or causing horrible bodily harm to one another, so after a moment of misgiving, she left them to their own devices and continued with her work downstairs.

As she checked in with the other fifteen werewolves, she found that she was being asked more questions than they were answering as they wanted to know how her exams were going. Many reminisced about their own exam days. As the morning advanced, more of the cured werewolves came down to hug Hermione and see how everyone else was doing.

At a quarter to nine, she pulled herself away. The N.E.W.T. examiners tended to frown upon tardiness no matter what the excuse. She felt energised by all the positive energy, at least, even if nothing she had been doing had been related to Muggle Studies.

Her N.E.W.T., she told all of them sternly, could in no way compare to any of their lives, so she made them promise dutifully to inform Remus if they had any untoward symptoms. It seemed unlikely at this late a date, but one never knew.

Severus proved that he could tell time as well as she could, reappearing just as she reached the lobby. Remus, she noticed, was nowhere in evidence, but since it didn't seem polite to ask where the body was when other ex-werewolves were trooping up the stairs behind her, she simply smiled at him and asked if he was ready to go.

He was, and he made no protest when she wrapped her arms around him, even going so far as to hold her back quite tightly as she Apparated them back to his lab.

"It's all right," he repeated, placing a kiss on her forehead. "Do not fuss."

He'd never struck her as the type to offer reassurances when someone was being silly, but her exam started in ten minutes, and she was going to take what was on offer.

She arrived in the corridor all of five minutes before the exam was set to start having positively flown through the common room and not stopped to do more than wave at Harry and Draco—both sitting there looking rather nonplussed—as she passed.

Dean, the only other Gryffindor in the class, smiled at her.

"Cutting it a bit close. Don't tell me you had a lie-in?"

Hermione shook her head. "Busy morning, that's all." He looked curious. "Moon's tonight. Had to administer the Weresbane."

His eyes grew wide. "Lord, that's tonight, and you're still doing all these exams?"

Hermione grinned at him. "The one won't wait for the other."

The door opened, and the examiner appeared.

"Off we go, then," Dean said with a shake of his head.

As the exam period finished and the parchments were collected in a swirl of magic, Hermione reflected that being forced for three hours to concentrate on a lifestyle that had absolutely nothing whatever to do with magic made it much more difficult to worry about Severus, Remus, and a houseful of werewolves. It had probably been quite good for her.

She headed back to the common room where she found that Draco and Harry were both standing there waiting for her. Right. She'd forgotten about this battle.

"Draco," she began.

He shook his head. "I've got it all worked out. I'm going to go up to lunch now and play nicely with Ron. I'll sleep this afternoon and join you in the evening. I'm not missing this, 'Mione."

She looked at Harry, who was regarding her helplessly.

"Arithmancy is one of the most difficult exams, Draco."

"Seeing you cure all the werewolves in Great Britain is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I'm coming."

"I could ward you out."

"Of my own house?" he scoffed.

She regarded him quite seriously. "Naturally."

He considered her. "I'd rather you wouldn't."

"I don't want to spoil your exam."

"You won't," he repeated stubbornly. "I've already said I'll sleep this afternoon, and you know that after the moon rises, there's plenty of down time. You wouldn't really leave me behind, would you?"

This was said with a pout that was remarkably similar to the one that Harry had offered her the last time leaving him behind had been mentioned.

She grinned reluctantly and shook her head.

"All right, then. Be it on your head, and remember that you can leave and sleep at any point."

His stubborn expression—also remarkably similar to Harry's and Ron's—indicated that he had no intention of doing anything of the sort, but at least she'd made the offer.

They headed upstairs together, Draco off to lunch, and Harry and Hermione off to the edge of the grounds and the safe house.

It had worked out quite handily that today and Wednesday she had exams with only a theoretical component. The Ministry had been the one to set the schedule, and she doubted that moons had been their priority, not unless Albus had managed to lean rather heavily on them. She wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

It seemed that most everyone was in the dungeons, one or two ex-werewolves speaking to a soon-to-be-ex-werewolf. The mood was still good, and they seemed happy to have Hermione and Harry there with them. She dutifully reported that her exam had gone well and explained that many from the Hogwarts contingent would be meeting them later as schedules permitted.

Checking all their vitals yet again, she assured herself that they had survived the three hours of her absence without trouble and hadn't hidden anything so that she could finish her N.E.W.T. It was still over seven hours to the actual transformation, but as the minutes ticked by, she could see all eighteen werewolves getting more and more antsy even with the Weresbane in their system.

If nothing else, she suspected it was a conditioned response; many of them had been werewolves for quite long enough to know how they were "supposed" to react coming up on a full moon even if the Were was not actually giving them as much of a reason as usual to act like that.

They settled down to rest, revise, or talk quietly of unrelated topics. Remus and Hermione had explained how the ex-werewolves would be kept in quarantine for two weeks after the full moon to ensure that there were no untoward side effects. Given that all the rest of the werewolves had been cured for weeks without anything out of the ordinary happening, they were touting it as being "better safe than sorry". It was true that the Ministry and the public would want to know that everything had been done to ensure that the werewolves were really human and that there was no chance of their suddenly becoming "unhuman" again.

The truth of the matter, however, was that Hermione didn't want them out of the safe house until after the war ended. If the Light won, it would be the perfect time to reintroduce the ex-werewolves into society. Feelings would be at their most expansive, the Ministry would owe the Order, and Harry would hopefully have a fair bit of clout.

If the Light lost, the werewolves would be targets for Voldemort and Greyback. She didn't want any of the ex-werewolves to go out just to be re-bitten—and she wouldn't be in a position at that point to find out whether or not her cure could be used a second time—so she had every intention of protecting them for as long as possible. The wards that prevented them from leaving on their own would fall upon her death or if she did not return within a week of the battle, so that they would be in no danger of being imprisoned forever.

No one had gainsaid any of these decisions, so she trusted that Remus, Molly, and Albus felt the same way.

The afternoon progressed, and as the dinner hour ended at Hogwarts, the second contingent from the school arrived. To Hermione's surprise, this wasn't just Severus, Tonks, and Draco. Ron had come as well.

He'd never come to a full moon transformation before, and from the sound of the greeting upstairs—screeching, one might call it—Molly Weasley had not been terribly pleased. But it seemed that Draco, sitting as he had with Ron at lunch and dinner, had imbued in the redhead a desire to be there for this last of the transformations. Hermione was even pretty sure, in looking at Draco now, that he had done it kindly rather than to set the boy at odds with his mother.

Whatever had transpired upstairs, Ron came down with a look in his eyes that said he, like Draco, had every intention of staying.

"I'm eighteen," Ron pointed out belligerently, just as though they were the ones who had told him he couldn't stay. "I'm an adult. She can't tell me what to do anymore."

Molly didn't come down to retrieve him, and he was able to go over and speak with Mary—who had to have heard all the kafuffle but greeted him with every show of pleasure.

Draco and Harry looked over.

"Are they … flirting?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"Oh, I expect so," Hermione answered easily. "They've been doing that since they first met. I can't imagine what she sees in him, to be honest, but if she makes him grow up a little, it can only be a good thing."

Draco shook his head, Harry shrugged, and they lost interest in the spectacle of heterosexual flirting and went instead to greet the rest of the werewolves and ensure that they were in good shape for the upcoming transformation.

Naps had taken place throughout the day, as even those who were cured wanted to be present and awake to help the rest of their pack. Hermione didn't have the heart to refuse them, simply explained about the barriers that she'd be putting up to protect everyone.

As seven o'clock rolled around, the werewolves took their places in their little cells, each clearly hoping that this would be the last time they would ever have to do this. Hermione was quite vocal in her belief that it absolutely was.

"I know how hard you've all been practicing, and that's going to pay off tonight. I want you all to rest for a few minutes, and then I'm going to cast the Acuity Charm so that you can get used to the sensations, all right?"

They went through the same process as they had the last moon, Harry and Hermione connecting to their eighteen minds—Hermione prioritizing the children, Harry the adults—and practicing what it felt like to be in all their heads while a charm had been cast that was going to make this as painful as possible from the moment the moon rose.

Fortunately, this time she had Severus with her. When he saw that she intended to sit on the ground, he sat down behind her and let her support herself by leaning back against his chest. Harry and Remus took up the spots on either side of her, and neither of them said a single thing about the fact that this had them rubbing shoulders with Severus.

Whatever had happened between the two men this morning, it had resulted in Remus appearing to be in quite normal spirits when she and Harry appeared at lunchtime. She had worried that Harry would detect that something was wrong and somehow find out that his mother was involved, but it seemed that that paranoia was baseless.

Remus appeared to be looking forward to this last of the moons, and he didn't betray by so much as a frown that he was filled with other concerns. In fact, it looked to her as though he really was easier in his mind than he had been for some weeks, and she had to wonder if that was because of what had happened between him and Severus or because they were nearing the end of this trial and the lives of the War Werewolves was about to become much brighter.

Since there were no werewolves to look after other than the ones who were right in front of them, Tonks was able to sit next to Remus, and Ron took up a seat next to Draco. He'd made no attempt to insinuate himself between Draco and Harry, and she was again impressed with everyone's behaviour.

Looking at the big long line of werewolves, she felt as though they were a string of dominoes and hoped they wouldn't all be brought down by what she knew damn well was going to be a very unpleasant experience.

Kingsley appeared just after half seven, explaining that he'd been tied up but that nothing would make him miss this auspicious occasion. She realized anew what she'd been asking Minerva to give up in order to have Severus here. It meant the world to Hermione that he was here now, though, and she suspected that Minerva knew that.

Seven-fifty-three arrived and left Hermione and Harry screaming in a joint agony that was twenty voices strong. Severus clamped his arms around her, and she could practically feel his shock and horror as she fought in concert with those eighteen people in front of her and reminded them that they were wolves and people until she felt as though her mental voice was going to go as hoarse as her human one.

When she opened her eyes, having had no notion of closing them because she'd seen everything quite clearly through her mental connection, it was to behold eighteen wolves who looking very pleased with themselves.

This was one of her favourite parts of the entire procedure, that first moment of incoherent delight when they all realized that they had succeeded. The Were had been defeated.

If her smile was a bit wobbly, that couldn't surprise anyone who had just witnessed what they had all been through.

She gave them a little while to recover, encouraging them to drink the water that had been left out for them. Some laid down, but most tried out their legs as though they hadn't quite appreciated the form fully before now.

Rising to her feet, she watched as the line that had been sitting rose as well. Severus had his arms about her waist, and she gathered that he was concerned about her ability to remain upright.

She disabled the wards that had prevented the individuals from hearing one another. All the Animagi turned to face her, even the little ones silent and still.

"Everyone," she said, smiling around the slight rawness of her voice, "human forms, if you please."

And a moment later, eighteen humans were standing in front of her.

The noise was deafening, the mood infectious. They were now in a house that did not contain a single werewolf, and it left her feeling almost faint with relief.

Once the furor had died down a little, she repeated a description of the regular program of tests that would occur until she was certain that the change had held. Once the moon set, they would be free to join their fellows and spend the next two weeks getting ready as they liked with no more moon to rule them.

Remus, she knew, would take over the explanation of the need to transform from time to time. Since the ravening, bloody-thirsty beast bit was gone, it was really one big happy pack now.

They all settled down to wait for the next test, and Severus threw up privacy charms around them. Remus, Tonks, Harry, Ron, and Draco were close enough to be included.

"Are you out of your mind?" he demanded. "You do that every full moon?"

"Every one," she agreed, feeling tired and a bit drained but not out of reason destroyed. It was just as well she didn't have a practical tomorrow, however.

"You were in agony," he said harshly.

"I can take it," she responded, not thinking there was much else to say but that.

"I can take the Cruciatus," he answered flatly. "It doesn't mean I should. We need to come up with a better method."

"You tell her," Ron muttered quietly enough that she almost didn't hear.

She smiled faintly, amused by their agreement—and rather pleased since Ron tended to spend as little time with Severus as possible and to try rather hard not to think about Severus and Hermione as a couple. She had not even tried to include him in any of the relationship information that had been coming about recently, but he had been amazingly mature about what he had been learning recently.

"And when you suffered through the Cruciatus because it was necessary for what you were doing for the war, did anything I say make you stop doing what needed to be done?"

"Bugger," Ron swore.

"You really intend to do this for every werewolf in the world?" Severus asked.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. "Every single one."

"That's me as well," Harry said immediately.

There was a chorus of agreement from Draco and Remus.

"Because after a night like this," Hermione said, content, "they won't need me or anyone else to do it ever again."

Severus didn't seem exactly pacified, but he did pull her back into his arms.

She had to admit that she was sort of counting on the fact that there were a finite number of werewolves in the world; she didn't much fancy doing this every single full moon for the rest of her life. But she was determined to cure all the werewolves she could.

The most recent ex-werewolves passed all their tests. Draco was as good as his word and dozed for a few hours as they were waiting for the moon to set. As it sank below the horizon, the last of the War Werewolves watched without having to submit to an agonizing transformation back into human form. They were all already humans, and she could see that they were quietly ecstatic.

Molly invited those from Hogwarts to stay for the early morning breakfast since nearly everyone was already awake, but Severus put his foot down and ordered them all back to the castle.

Since this had been her intention anyway, Hermione didn't argue. She was again impressed when the leave-taking included Remus and Severus shaking hands with one another. If Harry looked a little puzzled, she thought that he also looked pleased.

If they could all keep up this sort of behaviour, Hermione would be very much impressed. It was really starting to look as though everything was working itself out. They just had to win the war, of course, and then they'd be all set.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: The Guild

Back at the school, Hermione saw Tonks, Harry, and Draco off to bed. There were several hours of sleep to be had, and Hermione knew that Draco would profit from another nap so that he was as functional as possible during an exam where there were going to be plenty of complex equations that it was necessary for him to understand completely.

She wasn't going to bed but out to the Forest, and it appeared that Severus intended to come with her.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Entirely," he answered. "Do you not wish me to come?"

She twisted around in his grasp and kissed him.

"I've wanted to invite you for a long time, Severus. I would be honoured to have you with me."

Once they had transformed beneath the eaves of the Forest, she led him on a merry chase through the trees. She had a magical form and could therefore outrun him if she wished, but she had more fun when they were in close proximity to one another, and he seemed to enjoy loping along beside her. It was quite obvious that he very much enjoyed all the interesting sights and smells of the Forest in areas where humans did not tend to venture.

While it was possible there was still the occasional predator who would hunt a solitary panther despite its claws, teeth, and strong limbs, few would attack this big black animal when it was padding along beside a unicorn with a very sharp horn.

She didn't take him to the valley, as she'd not yet spoken to Castina about his visiting, but the herd mare came out to meet them.

Severus only gave a low growl, Hermione was pleased to note; given how they'd last encountered one another, she thought this was quite restrained, and she noticed that Castina made not the slightest effort to defend herself.

Berit, she greeted Hermione. Black one.

It was clear from Severus's slight start that he'd heard the mare as well.

Castina, Hermione greeted her mare. The moon has set.

So I perceive. You have cured all your werewolves.

I have, Hermione answered, letting her pride and happiness show. I have only a short time until my next exam, and Severus wished to join me in the Forest.

That is very thoughtful of him. You must bring him to visit us when you have more time.

Hermione swamped the unicorn with her gratitude for this invitation. The mare whickered softly and moved closer so that she could stroke her muzzle against Hermione's.

He is your mate, Berit. I know that. Enjoy the rest of your run.

Before they could bid her farewell, the mare had disappeared again.

What was that? Severus asked.

She explained about the valley where the unicorns dwelt and the invitation that had now been extended to him to visit them there.

He was silent for a moment.

I'm not sure I deserve that, he answered with more humility than she would have anticipated.

You're my mate, she answered. Where I go, you may accompany me.

Any creature passing by might have been surprised to see the large predator gently butting the flank of the unicorn at its side before they continued their run as Castina had bid them.

When they changed back into human form, Hermione couldn't help but grin at Severus, and he gave something surprisingly close to a full-fledged smile back in return. She would, it seemed, have to contrive to get him into animal form more often.

As they re-entered the castle and headed back to their respective rooms to change before breakfast, Hermione realized that she really should have tried to convince him to get some sleep. That jaunt through the Forest hadn't imbued him with more energy.

Still, when she'd left him, he'd seemed in quite a good mood, and she would just hope that he didn't scare any students with glares later. It had been wonderful to have him out there with her.

Draco looked fairly awake when he emerged from Harry's room with Harry in tow. There really didn't seem to be anything like a boyfriend to get Harry out of bed and ready for breakfast every morning no matter what he was doing for the day. She was sure that he could use more sleep, but here he was, off to support Draco and give him a good luck kiss, apparently, before she and Draco headed off to their Arithmancy exam.

There was Slytherin ingenuity; Draco had gotten Harry out of bed and giving him kisses while she was stuck looking up at the High Table and wishing that kisses were being bestowed. Severus still looked in form at the moment, though. If she'd been really clever, she would have been offering him kisses to ensure that he made it through the day.

In no time, it was off to write her Arithmancy exam with Draco and the eight other students in the class. This was both her and Draco's second-last examination, and the excitement of nearly being done was starting to catch even them up.

Draco worked industriously throughout the exam from what she saw when she was not utterly absorbed in her own work. Having been with her from the very first trial with him and Remus, she couldn't really blame him for wanting to be there for this last one, too. He was obviously capable of assessing what he was capable of without interference from her.

When they finished and went up to lunch, it was to find that Ron had finally rolled out of bed. Harry had apparently gone back to his if the state of his hair was anything to go by. Draco took one look at Harry and seemed torn between dragging him back to bed and putting a very strong neatening spell to work on him.

Hermione, watching with amusement, fancied that dragging him to bed was going to win out. She didn't think it possible that the Slytherin could really resist Harry when he looked sleepy-eyed and dishevelled like that, especially when Draco likely wanted to go to bed anyway.

Recognition that it would probably take a number more hours for her magic to be completely back to its regular levels was about all that she had noticed from her night's effort. It took a lot of concentration and effort to assist eighteen people in fighting against the Were and retaining their human and Animagus forms.

Since they had to fight Voldemort when the next new moon was coming round, Hermione knew that it was going to be at least another month and a half before they would be ready for the next set of trials. And the werewolves needed to be gathered and trained first. She would have to investigate as soon as she made it past the next crisis, she supposed.

Officially, she was taking a break for the summer since she could hardly announce why she wasn't curing more werewolves right away. Anyone who'd seen everything she'd done would support her right for a break, and the news wasn't going to completely hit the public—not worldwide, anyway—until after they knew the outcome of the war. It was one detail that she could put out of her mind for now.

Since neither Ron nor Harry had been in this class, it was very easy for her and Draco to happily compare notes after lunch. When she caught him yawning into his hand for the third time, however, she gave up and sent him off with Harry. Hopefully, they'd sleep at some point before dinner.

She hauled out her Herbology textbook and revised for a few hours. It was her very last exam and part of her wanted to let this one go because it had been a very long week. But she couldn't quite stomach the thought of not doing as well as she was capable of simply because of where this exam was placed on the timetable.

By dinner, she was happy to shut her books for a little while, however, and she was even happier when she found that quite a large cup of mousse had been included with the meal. She snatched it up before Ron, who was eyeing it covetously, could even consider making a grab for it, and ate it rapturously.

Her friends wanted to know why she hadn't had it for several weeks, and she merely replied that it made the enjoyment sweeter when she got it now.

After dinner, she, Draco, Harry, and Ron regrouped, and the latter two were finally prevailed upon to study for this last exam. Herbology was not the most difficult of their classes, but it was also one of the ones in which Ron and Harry didn't have that much natural interest. There were a great number of very intriguing magical plants in existence, but they didn't particularly intend to use these skills in everyday life.

Hermione knew it was therefore important to cram the facts and descriptions of the plants into their heads and hope they managed to remember a fair bit of it before the exam ended at five o'clock tomorrow.

They went to bed early; despite the nap Harry and Draco had ostensibly had in the afternoon, they seemed to be yawning a lot as the evening progressed, and Ron, even having slept in as he did, appeared tired as well. With everyone around her yawning, Hermione gave in to the inevitable and went to bed at eleven when the rest of them did.

Putting Herbology and all other thoughts out of her mind, she was able to quickly fall asleep and got up at half four to head out to the Forest, feeling quite energized and virtually back to her normal self.

Isaura was full of the idea of Hermione's mate coming to visit them, and Hermione could see that Castina really had been in earnest about his visiting to have told her daughter. Hermione promised to bring him along as soon as she had the opportunity, which she hoped would occur by early next week.

This weekend would be the one after exams ended, and since the students didn't head back home until Monday, she knew full well that they were going to be up to every kind of ridiculous activity they could think of. She and Severus were going to be patrolling the corridors every moment of the day, probably. After Monday, however, all that would be left would be preparation for the Final Battle, and she felt certain that they'd need a break at some point.

At breakfast, there was suppressed excitement amongst the students. For the seventh-years, anyone who had Herbology or Divination but not Astronomy was writing their last exam today. The Astronomy exam was on Friday. Several of the students had finished for the year already, but they were still in the minority because there were eighteen people in Herbology and seven each in Divination and Astronomy.

By dinner time, most of them would be done, and she realized that she'd probably have to patrol stridently this evening just to ensure that the poor Astronomy students were able to get some sleep.

The Herbology written passed without any extraordinary occurrences. They were given the option of writing about their special projects if they wished, and Hermione made some general remarks about the Weresbane. She didn't have enough faith in the Ministry's altruism to draw a precise diagram.

They trooped out to the greenhouse shortly after one for their practical, everybody wondering what was inside. The examiner and Pomona came out to greet them, and they learnt that, given the time constraints, they would be doing something remarkably similar to the third-year obstacle course that they had had in Defence.

They had to navigate through a number of the plants that they had taken care of throughout their Herbology career, some of them, naturally, quite dangerous. They would have to work out what to feed some of them and the manner in which to do so, had to put certain plants in shade or sunlight as needed, and so on and so forth. They would be graded on finishing the exam in good time but also on how many plants were alive and healthy by the time they finished—thus ruining several students' whispered intentions of simply blasting their way through everything in their path.

Hermione was halfway through this class list, alphabetically, and she spent most of the time wondering what would happen if the eight people who'd gone before her destroyed the plants in such a way that there was nothing left for her to deal with when she went through. Given that there were eighteen students doing this test, however, she imagined that the examiners had thought of that; it was probably why Pomona was here, ready to replace anything that was destroyed beyond repair.

By the time it was actually her turn, Hermione was very anxious indeed to get started. To be sure, Hannah hadn't looked particularly pleased to be going first, but had it been Hermione, she would have been quite relieved to go through the plants before anyone else had touched them. At least, she reflected, she wasn't Ron or Blaise.

She came out of the maze twenty-three minutes later feeling in rather good form. She'd even contrived to feed the Devil's Snare, which had been looking a little peaky from whatever Gregory Goyle had done to it.

From the look of Pomona, who was there at the end of the maze when Hermione had emerged, what she had done had not escaped notice, but the woman had looked amused. They had said that the students would be graded on the health of the plants, so Hermione assumed that even the Devil's Snare counted.

The students who had completed the examination were allowed to wait for the rest of the class if they wished so long as they were quiet, so despite the fact that Hermione couldn't see what was going on inside the greenhouse, she continued to stand around quietly in the area to the side of the greenhouse that had been indicated. This meant all those waiting were a bit removed from both the entrance and the exit to the greenhouse and wouldn't distract anyone or be able to relay information back to those who hadn't gone through yet. Since this was Hermione's last exam, it wasn't as though there was anything else academic that she needed to be doing.

The average wait between students was around the twelve-minute mark, with a second student let in before the first had finished, much as they had done in the Potions practical. There were no hugely long extra delays, which Hermione took to mean that no one had been badly injured, and that was a relief. There had been the bit with the venomous tentacula right before the mandrakes where she had come a little close to getting knocked out. She admitted to some relief that young mandrakes had been used; it was probably a good thing that that examiner who'd got them the Boggart hadn't had anything to do with their Herbology exam.

Draco came out of the exam looking slightly ruffled and muttering about the Devil's Snare. Since she was reasonably certain that the three people between him and her had ensured that it wasn't her vigour which had resulted in his coming close to getting snared, it probably wasn't her fault. On the other hand, since Neveille had been the person in the middle, perhaps Draco had been hit with a double whammy of healthy Devil's Snare…. She would, she decided, refrain from mentioning what she had done.

There was an odd ripple in the wards almost fifteen minutes later, but Hermione squelched her curiosity and didn't let herself look when she found that they'd stabilised a moment later. She might be done, but there were other students still in there, and it wasn't fair for her to spy on them.

Harry didn't appear until more than forty minutes later, and since there was only Nott between Draco and Harry, and the Gryffindor was white-faced and tight-lipped, this was a little worrisome, and Hermione began to wish that she'd given in to her curiosity earlier. But Harry wouldn't say a word as they waited for the last three students to emerge.

They headed off to dinner.

What's going on? Hermione finally asked, projecting this to Draco as well so that he wouldn't get annoyed.

I'll tell you after dinner, Harry said.

He sounded very cross, but since he seemed all right, Hermione agreed to be patient. She had the feeling it wasn't just frustration with a poor exam moment, a fact which seemed to be confirmed when it became clear that word of whatever had happened had reached the professors; Albus, Minerva, Severus, and Pomona all looked rather grave, and their gaze strayed rather frequently down to the Gryffindor table.

Hermione began to wonder how close they had come to the last three students not having an exam at all. Ron had said something about it being easier than he had expected, but she had brushed that off as his being simply overjoyed to finish and not much caring how he got through.

They headed straight down to the common room after that, Ron tagging along and talking about the run to the kitchen he wanted to make. She thought he was being particularly clueless until they actually made it to their quarters; as soon as they entered, however, he put his hands on his hips and demanded to know what in Merlin's name had happened.

Harry flopped onto the couch and said that he'd come ridiculously close to being killed in his Herbology examination. They demanded details, and he explained how just as he'd been going past the Venomous Tentacula, there had been an explosion.

Diving for cover with bits of a poisonous plant littering the ground, he'd ended up in the Devil's Snare, which he'd been hard-pressed to get out of especially when he was nearly overrun by a group of mandrakes who'd somehow been moved and climbed right out of their pots.

He'd kept his head, however, Conjuring soundproof earmuffs and then blasting at the Devil's Snare with fire. By this point, he'd begun to think that this was more like a Defence practical than a Herbology one, but it wasn't until he'd barely missed rolling onto a Portkey that he'd realized for certain that this was not supposed to be happening.

"A Portkey!" Ron screeched. "In the middle of the Herbology exam?"

Draco's face had gone very tight, and Hermione didn't fancy the chances of Theodore Nott if Draco ran into him in the next little while.

"It was very carefully done," Harry explained. "Easily set up before I went through and not so much out of place that the examiners noticed anything amiss until the explosion. It took them a few minutes to get to me, but Pomona assures me that I carried myself off with distinction."

Hermione snorted with laughter, although Draco and Ron looked much more upset. They had, she'd noticed, very similar temperaments at times like these, while she and Harry seemed more reconciled to the ridiculousness that was his life.

"We'll have to be sure to point out to Nott that it earned you an 'O' in Herbology," Hermione said.

Harry grinned at her, the last of the tension seeming to leave him. The important thing was that the effort had not been successful.

"Are they taking him to the Ministry?" she asked as Ron and Draco continued their loud and belligerent conversation about what they thought of people who would do such a thing in Harry's final exam. At least they were in agreement.

Harry nodded. "Kingsley's coming. They're whisking him off after dinner if they haven't done already. Don't want anyone to think they can get away with something like that, plus they were a little worried about … fall-out."

Hermione merely nodded back since Ron and Draco were still going on about the torture that they wanted to inflict on anyone who dared to harm Harry.

Severus arrived shortly thereafter and caught some of the creative punishments that the two of them intended to inflict upon the unsuspecting Nott. His lips tipped up before he asked if she would join him—assuming Harry thought he'd survive the evening without her.

Looking over at the two collaborating boys, Harry rolled his eyes and said he would do his best. He knew as well as she, after all, that Hermione was officially no longer a student.

It was definitely for the best that Nott had been taken away, or she'd have to be seriously concerned that Ron and Draco were going to perpetrate a great deal of mischief this evening, and she had more important things that she wanted to be doing right now.

Her hope that they could jump straight to congratulatory sex as soon as they reached Severus's rooms was quashed, however, when he gestured her to the chair in front of the fire, and she sat, wondering about the seriousness of his expression.

"I've spoken to the Guild."

"Which Guild?" she asked, nonplussed.

He looked down his nose at her. "The Potions Guild."

Ah, that Guild. The one to which Severus belonged. She nodded.

"They approve Potions Apprenticeships and issue Masteries," he added, as though now doubting that she knew anything about them. "Given the general autonomy accorded Masters, it was felt that it would be beneficial to have some sort of body to oversee the final results of Apprenticeships. Potions can, after all, be a matter of life and death." He seemed rather cheerful about this fact. "They administer a test that is in the realm of a very specialized N.E.W.T. They remain in contact with the Master and tailor a test to an Apprentice's specialities, although they will also test for the general potions that ensure the overall knowledge of an apprentice as well as his or her particular skills."

This seemed entirely sensible to her, and she ventured another nod, as Severus seemed to have paused in expectation of a response of some kind from her. He continued.

"For obvious reasons, they don't particularly approve of Masters and Apprentices being … intimately involved with one another. They feel it interferes with the integrity of the process."

She was finally beginning to see where this was going. "I wouldn't have asked."

He smiled faintly. "I am well aware of that. I have, however, spoken with the Guild, as I said. It is not everyday that someone invents the cure for lycanthropy, and they are anxious to count you amongst their number. They suggested several Masters who would be more than happy to teach you."

She nodded. She'd considered getting her Mastery but did not want to leave the country for that extended a period right now. Since Severus was the only Master in England, that left her with few options.

Severus still looked slightly amused. "I took the liberty of informing them that notion wasn't particularly to your liking."

She opened her mouth for a comment about his presumption, but given that she'd just been thinking that thought exactly, she didn't have anywhere particularly clever to go and simply closed her mouth again. His lips twitched at the corners.

"They were therefore able to see the sense in allowing me to Apprentice you."

She blinked at him in surprise. "But you said—"

"That they didn't generally approve, yes. But you're one of the brightest and most promising witches to take an interest in Potions in some time, and when I suggested that you might not get your Mastery, at least for years, if they didn't come up with another option, they were able to see their way to finding this one. They were quite impressed with your brewing of the Sensilis Potion."

That made sense, at least. She was a little bit cross that it had all been done without her knowledge; she might have objected on principle to being asked to brew it and then that would have been her introduction to the Guild. They seemed to have presumed a lot on her character.

Severus continued, "Although they are in little doubt, the test before you attain your Mastery will allow them to ensure quite strictly and properly that you have the required skills and that my feelings have not unduly influenced my judgement."

"I'd be your apprentice," she said.

He nodded, a trace of mockery in his face that that was as far as she seemed to have gotten in the entire discussion.

"That's … very generous of them," she said with slight difficulty. "I'll have to think about it." She rose. "Can I get back to you?"

He nodded again, and she excused herself, deep in thought. She realized belatedly that going back to her common room this quickly would invite unwanted questions, so she Masked herself and went out to the Forest instead, not bothering to turn into a unicorn but sitting down in human form and contemplating the life that had been laid out before her.

It was a brilliant opportunity, and she was pleasantly stunned that Severus had thought to go to the Guild on her behalf. The fact that he'd openly confessed to his peers that he cared for her—she was pretty sure it couldn't be construed as anything else—and pushed until he got the concessions he wanted meant a great deal to her. It was exactly what she'd wanted and thought she couldn't have, and now she had to decide if she was willing to accept the consequences.

She'd made it almost two hours, she reflected a little grimly, without being his student.

All evening the possibilities ran through her head, and she finally gave up on the notion of going back inside, transforming instead and heading deeper into the Forest.

Apprenticeships typically lasted for three years, and she wasn't sure that she could make it work for that long.

At midnight, she checked the wards and found that there were far too many students still out. Since Pansy had Astronomy the next morning, Hermione broke her own rule and patrolled solo for over an hour, not hesitating to use her abilities to clear out the students from all the nooks and crannies.

By the time she'd finished that and checked the wards again, she found that Severus was already in his bedroom. He still had his last set of exams to monitor in the morning, so she imagined he would not thank her for keeping him up to an unreasonable hour.

She made herself sleep, therefore, tiring herself out practicing with the wards, and spent most of the day doing the same—as well as reminding noisy students that others still had exams. She felt as though she were suddenly left kicking her heels. She had no potion to brew, no exams to revise for, and until Severus finished proctoring, she couldn't go speak to him.

It seemed to take an inordinately long time before the evening arrived and she was able to get away from Harry, Draco, and Ron. The Astronomy practical would be starting once it grew dark, and Hermione marvelled a little at the Ministry's decision to put that practical as the very last one. Perhaps they'd intended it to inhibit other students from misbehaving on the last Friday of term. What it meant effectively, however, was that all the Prefects except Pansy were patrolling the corridors and making sure that the students writing their last exam on the Astronomy Tower weren't bothered by anyone who was enjoying their own freedom.

Once she'd survived that ordeal, she made her way to Severus's quarters where she found him at his desk, angrily penning something that looked to be on paper too nice to be a student's exam. Given the ferocity with which he was writing, she certainly hoped, for students everywhere, that that was the case.

"What are you writing?"

He didn't even look up.

"I am trying," he bit out through clenched teeth, "to come up with a way to explain to the Guild without looking a complete idiot that you have absolutely no interest in becoming my Apprentice."

"I didn't say that!" she protested.

He finally glanced up to give her an expression of distaste before looking back down at the letter.

"Please," he snarled. "I've seen Death Eaters who are about to be tortured by the Dark Lord look more enthusiastic than you did yesterday."

"So you're going to give my answer for me," she said with anger of her own.

He looked up fully so that he could glare at her. "Your answer was quite obvious."

"I said I needed time to think," she argued, "not time for you to decide what I was going to do."

"What is there to think about?" he demanded. "The idea was clearly abhorrent to you."

"Of course it wasn't!" she yelled, volume increasing with each word. "But if you're already making my decisions for me, what do you think it would be like if I were your apprentice?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I've been your student for seven years, and a fair percentage of our problems this year have been rooted in the fact that you're in a position of authority over me. I've had one day, Severus, just one, where I'm not your student anymore, and I've just learnt that you were, in fact, in here deciding my future."

She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming herself a little before she continued. "This was going to be my chance to finally be equal to you, and now I have to decide if the perfect opportunity can come at the cost of three more years of being completely unequal once more."

He finally laid his quill down very deliberately and rose from his desk.

"That's what you're worried about?"

She turned away from him to look into the fire. "You don't know what it means to me that you asked this of them. But I care more about our relationship working that I do about getting an apprenticeship right now. I care more about you than I care about being a Master. Much as I'd like both, I'm not certain that's realistically an option when you're already deciding what choices I'm making as it is."

She felt him behind her a moment before he wrapped his arms around her.

"I was cross."

She wasn't certain why this admission made her feel immediately better, but it somehow did.

He continued, "I shouldn't have been writing that letter; I probably wouldn't have posted it."

This pulled a reluctant smile out of her.

"I was rather forward in my anticipation of your reaction to this news, and I didn't take into account any of the concerns that you might have had about the proposal which you weren't ready to immediately share with me."

It's really nice, what you're offering, but I'm worried you'll be a complete prat hadn't sounded that clever to her last night.

"Sit," he requested. "I'll tell you what I should have done yesterday."

She sat, and he joined her in the chair opposite, his expression very intense.

"Contrary to what you may imagine, it has not escaped my attention that your autonomy is very important to you. Similarly, I have no interest in having a relationship with one of my students, which I believe we've already discussed." He waited for her nod, and continued, "I also realize that I am not the least likely person in the world to abuse a position of power."

She snorted and watched his lips twitch at this circumspect way of saying that he'd done his best to make the lives of most of the Gryffindors he'd taught completely miserable simply because he could.

"The apprenticeship would only be for a year."

She raised her eyebrows.

"The Guild was suitably impressed with your creation of the Weresbane at the age of eighteen." His lips twitched again. "They recognized that you had quite a solid foundation as far as the basics of potion-making went. The Sensilis Potion only confirmed this fact. Normally, part of the apprenticeship is spent in the creation of some sort of original potion which demonstrates a Master's ability to contribute to the wealth of knowledge as well as competently brew already-existing potions. In your case, you've already done so. They have deliberated and decided that they cannot accept anyone until at least a year of training has been completed, however.

"I've spoken to Albus, and he evinced every happiness at the notion of having you teach Potions next year." She started. "This would give you the opportunity to brew a great number of basic potions without the drudgery associated with my supervising you privately. You'd be doing plenty of cutting and chopping and preparation of basic ingredients, but none of it would be assigned by me, and for that matter, I expect that you would be able to delegate plenty of it to delinquent teenagers."

She smiled at this mention of one of his preferred types of detention.

"We would establish clear guidelines," he went on, "about acceptable behaviour between us. If you wish, for example, we could only brew for your apprenticeship in my private lab—not the one we'd have in our quarters, but the one I currently possess. In our quarters, there would be no mention of that relationship, only the … emotional one."

"You'd be comfortable with this?" she asked.

"I will likely not always react perfectly, but I give you permission to curse me as freely as you wish when I overstep my bounds."

She smiled warmly at him, pleased by the sparkle in his dark eyes.

"I should have let you finish speaking yesterday," she admitted. "I should have known you would have thought it through."

"Yes, you should have," he agreed immediately, surprising another smile out of her as she was reminded of just how Slytherin he could be.

But then, she would have said the same had their situations been reversed.

"You shouldn't have been drafting that letter," she retaliated.

He raised an eyebrow eloquently. "You're lucky my self-control is so good, or it would have been posted hours ago."

She made a face at him. "I hope you've made the Guild aware that I am capable of both writing and speaking and would be happy to communicate with them all on my very own."

"Hmm. I'll consider putting that in my next missive."

She rose from her chair to join him in his, and although he let out a theatrical grunt as she sat down sideways in his lap, his arms curled immediately around her waist, and he made no effort to dislodge her.

"Thank you," she said very seriously. "I had no idea that you were thinking of doing anything of the sort."

"You're welcome," he responded solemnly. "You're not supposed to know everything that I'm planning. I think all this MindSpeech is going to your head," he continued. "You're getting delusions of grandeur and omniscience."

She smiled and leaned up to kiss his cheek.

"I'm just getting to know you," she answered, moving to kiss the other cheek as well. "I start to have expectations, and then you remind me of all the aspects of you that I have yet to learn. It's very exciting."

"Hmm," he answered, eyes glittering. "I'm quite certain I was about to get cursed earlier this evening."

"I didn't go near my wand," she said with mock innocence.

He tightened his hold on her. "No, I'm sure you didn't."

She leaned up against him. "I've a question."

"Oh?" he asked, fingers drawing lazy circles across her back.

"I'm teaching Potions."

"I believe you forgot the question part of that question," he drawled.

She rolled her eyes. "What will you be doing, annoying man?"

"I will be teaching Defence."

She sat up so that she could see him properly. He was looking particularly pleased with himself.

"After all this time?"

He nodded. "I don't have the slightest intention of giving up Potions on a permanent basis, but Albus has agreed that he owes me, and the opportunity to curse the little brats rather than allowing them to blow up cauldrons in my face is far too tempting to resist."

"You're not concerned about a stray spell getting you in DADA?"

He shook his head. "When they're under threat of the entire castle coming after them because that's upset you? Not likely."

She let out a bright peal of laughter at the thought of his using her to threaten the students into good behaviour, and he smiled genuinely at her, his face lightening to the soft expression that she'd never seen him wearing in anyone else's presence.

"And have you told Albus that I've accepted?" she asked with some amusement.

His lips pursed. "I told him I'd had an idea."

She laughed. "You told him I was going to teach Potions."

His eyes shifted so that he wasn't looking straight at her. She rolled her eyes.

"I don't mind you speaking for me on occasion but would appreciate if we'd actually discussed the matter first. This is my life we're talking about."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said loftily.

She trusted that she'd made her point for this evening, and while she knew he wouldn't consult her on everything, she didn't intend to consult him on every detail, either. As they became more familiar with one another, making certain assumptions about their opinions would probably become more frequent. The big decisions, though, still needed to be decided in concert.

"You really think I'll be able to teach Potions next year?" she said. "When I've gone to school with most of the students?"

"I came back to teach at Hogwarts after only having left for three years," he answered. "I believe that you, like me, won't accept a lot of nonsense in your classroom, and that means you'll be able to make it work. Being the Gryffindor best friend of Harry Potter and living with the Slytherin Head of House takes care of a good portion of the school."

It would certainly make it harder for either of those houses to argue that she was favouring the other.

"When exactly does the apprenticeship start?" she asked.

"When do you intend to begin it?" he countered. "I can already hear that you have a plan."

She smiled as she leaned back against him. "I'd like to have the summer off. Most of it, at least. I need to ensure that all the werewolves know about my cure. We can hopefully start in July with the actual potion, and that will mean a great deal of brewing."

"So different from your apprenticeship," he pointed out teasingly.

"True," she said with a laugh. "But I'd prefer to know that my time is my own for a little while. I'll need to do specific tasks as you desire them for this apprenticeship, and that means that I can't always be working to my own schedule."

"I had imagined waiting until September," he agreed. "You need time to relax after graduation. Spend time with your friends. Travel if you wish. Have a genuine holiday after all the chaos that we have put up with. I do not intend to interfere with that."

She didn't sit up again but tilted her head so that she was looking up at him.

"You make it sound as though you're not a part of that."

She saw an eyebrow arch.

"Everything that you've just mentioned. I'm hardly going to travel without you."

He was doing that expressionless thing. "You should get a holiday," he repeated.

"From you, you mean?" she interpreted.

He shrugged in a would-be careless gesture that didn't quite manage it. "From the school. From this life."

She was forced to sit up properly again so that she could face him nearly straight on.

"If you think that I'm going to wander off and leave you here, Severus Snape, you are out of your mind. This will be my first opportunity to shag you whenever I wish, to ignore stupid students who want to cry about God only knows what disastrous relationship experience they've just had at the age of twelve. I won't have to worry about house points, detentions, or upcoming N.E.W.T.s. Nothing will be looming on my horizon, and I want you to be there to celebrate that with me, do you hear me?"

"I only thought—" he began.

"To try to force me to stretch my wings or see what was in the world or whatever you want to call your asinine notion. I appreciate that you're trying to let me get out on my own, but out on my own is precisely where I don't want to be. I want to be with you. I've wanted to be with you for ages, and if you tell me that the first thing you want to do with our hard-earned time together is send me away, I'm going to have to get out my wand after all."

"Perish the thought," he said, smiling faintly, and she knew that she'd finally begun to convince him.

"Do you expect Harry and Draco to split up as soon as the year is over?"

He made a face of distaste. "They'll be glued to one another's hips and shagging like rabbits at every opportunity."

She smiled at him. "And is that not a rather inspired example?" He shifted her weight so that she could tell just how eager he was, and her smile deepened. "So certain you want to send me off all on my lonesome?"

He growled. "It would serve you right if I locked you in here and didn't let you out until September."

"Is that an option?" she asked sweetly.

He kissed her soundly, hands possessively on her arse.

"I suspect you'd need to see your herd a little more frequently than that," he observed.

It took her a moment of concentration to connect his comment back to the discussion they had been having.

"Castina's always wanted to visit the castle. I'm sure she'd stop by periodically."

He snorted. "And we could explain it all away to Albus because it's completely reasonable that you won't leave because we need to have insane amounts of sex."

She smiled at him. "He'd probably even buy it."

Severus shook his head, grimacing faintly. "You're probably right. I suppose I'll just have to let you out from time to time."

"Very considerate of you." She admitted, "It will be nice to see the herd. Not to have to leave them."

"I doubt you'll ever have to leave them, Hermione," he answered. "At worst, they're only a visit away."

She nodded. It suddenly felt as though her future had arrived, and it made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Severus was here, and the castle was here, and her herd was here. All the elements that made up home were located in one spot.

She'd not been paying the slightest attention to the wards, but the castle remedied this, resulting in Hermione swearing quite fluently. One of Severus's eyebrows arched sharply.

"Second-years having a food fight in the corridor outside the kitchens. Quite a group of them."

Severus heaved the two of them collectively to their feet, and as she took in his grim expression, she realized the students weren't going to know what had hit them.

"Shall I join you?"

He shook his head. "I would prefer to take care of this privately. If you wish to make your way to the Astronomy Tower, however, I will endeavour to join you there afterwards."

She readily accepted this suggestion, pleased that they were apparently doing rounds together. She watched Severus morph into the embodiment of Professor Snape and stalk off in the direction of the kitchens. She almost wished she was there just to witness what happened but supposed that Severus could always put it in a Pensieve for her later.

She headed up to the Astronomy Tower and had to disperse three different couples. It took thirty minutes for Severus to join her, and he looked quite pleased, to her critical eye.

"Have fun?" she asked him with amusement.

He hummed an agreement, stole a kiss which left her rather breathless and reflecting that he had sort of managed an assignation up here after all, and then they set out to complete their rounds.

As a result, Hermione learnt that walking around with Pansy or Draco was nothing to completing her rounds with the Head of Slytherin. She'd never seen more surprised students in her life. She and Severus both had to keep careful checks on their laughter before they could finally make their way safely back to his quarters.

"That was an … enlightening experience," she said with a laugh. "Why haven't we been doing that all year?"

"They might have gotten used to it by now," he pointed out.

Given the sheer terror in some of their eyes, Hermione wasn't convinced, but she supposed that was better than pointing out that they hadn't been getting along for enough of the year to make the notion feasible.

"You're staying the night?"

This was a clear invitation, if a Snape-ishly issued one, and it pleased her that he was taking what she'd said tonight so seriously. There was bound to be plenty for the two of them to learn the longer their relationship lasted, but it helped to know that they were both actively trying to make it work.

"Of course," she answered. "There's nowhere that I'd rather be."

He seemed to like this response, or so she gathered from the fact that it resulted in her being carried to the bedroom and thoroughly ravished. They undressed one another, Hermione reflecting that it got moderately easier to undo all those buttons by hand the more times she made the attempt. Severus still laughed at her if she fumbled too much in her eagerness, and she wondered just how affronted he would be if she dressed in something with a great many teeny tiny buttons and saw how he liked it.

Hmm…. That was something to consider for later, actually, as she was pretty sure she'd thoroughly enjoy the experience of being divested in such a manner.

At the moment, however, her clothes were quite of the ordinary sort, and Severus had no trouble getting her out of them, hands stroking over all the sensitive areas that he had detected in their previous encounters, making her shudder and moan and squirm until he had rolled them over and she was suddenly on top of him in the bed. There was the delightful sensation of so much bare skin on bare skin, heat and pleasure sizzling through her, and that constant thrum of awareness running through her that she was here with her mate and it was good.

His fingers teased at her until she was breathless, and then he urged her up until she was sitting across his hips, legs on either side of him so that he could guide himself inside of her. This was a new position for the two of them, and it was kind of fun to be able to look down at him like this and control their pace, watching his reaction as she moved slower or faster on top of him.

"Do you know how long I've been waiting for this?" he asked.

His fingers were splayed across her hips, and his eyes seemed to be locked about chest-level. Given all the bouncing that went on in this position, she could hardly blame him, and she tried not to feel completely self-conscious.

"For me to be on top?" She found this rather doubtful, actually, but added, "You need only have said."

"For you to cease to be a student. For us to be equals." His lips had tipped up slightly, indicating that he was fully aware of the irony of making that statement given what she had thought was happening with the apprenticeship. Sometimes they managed to talk so at cross-purposes that it was a wonder they managed to communicate at all.

Only it turned out that he had been trying to ensure that she retain equality with him, and it was totally, totally a turn on that he was telling her this now.

"Then we're both happy," she managed to articulate, wondering distantly if she'd get better at being able to speak and have sex the more she did both simultaneously.

His hands slithered up to the small of her back and coaxed her down so that she was leaning over him. He could kiss her that way, and it took some of the strain off her legs and abs. And she liked the closeness, losing herself in the feeling of connection and the knowledge that they'd made it to the end of the school year and Severus had not denied that he was happy.

Of course, it was hard not to be happy when having an orgasm, and she was becoming quite addicted to the ones that she and Severus managed to achieve together, all fire and pleasure and perfection burning through her.

This was how a relationship was supposed to work, as far as she was concerned, and while there had been plenty of times where she hadn't thought it was even remotely possible for her and Severus to make it to that, here they were. And he was rearranging the two of them for that post-coital cuddling that had been so unexpected but which she always found delightful.

She hadn't ever heard Severus talk so consistently about life after the Final Battle. He had gone to all this trouble for an event that was going to be occurring after Voldemort's demise, and he'd never once intimated since he'd proposed this topic that there was a chance that one or both of them wouldn't be there to see this cheery outcome.

He was trying to make an uncertain future work. In fact, he'd designed a future where it was essential that they were both present, so that he could teach her and she could apprentice to him, and there'd be Potions and Defence, and that was brilliant.

Just as Harry had said when she had spoken of warding after the Final Battle, she realized just how reassuring it was to have someone else, someone who knew what Voldemort was capable of and who knew of their plan, certain that they were going to get through it. There wasn't really any certainty, of course, but there was hope, and she was thrilled that Severus was hoping with her.

She was so glad that she'd come back to talk to him tonight. Now she could lie here and listen to the reassuring sound of his deep breathing as he slept. They both needed to remember to communicate, she reminded herself.

It was a very pleasant prospect, the summer and next year with the two of them having their own official quarters and no need to worry about what anyone would say if they were found out together. The Guild had given an official sanction to their being involved while she was apprenticed, and that had been the only potentially valid protest. They were allowed to be dating as colleagues at Hogwarts—she'd checked the charter for that one, just in case—and she was sure that they could gain Albus's support if they didn't have it already.

She fell asleep imagining how Severus would want their sitting room decorated and how many books they possessed collectively.

Aside from the people who'd been torn to shreds by Severus the night before, almost everyone was in a very good mood on Saturday morning. For the first time in days, a number of students weren't present at breakfast, and she knew that they were getting a lie-in while they had the chance. Most of the second-years were absent, and Hermione had to wonder if they were still being punished or if they simply hadn't dared show their faces right now.

Harry, as instructed by Albus, casually let be known the fact that he and his friends would not be taking the Hogwarts Express the next day. They didn't anticipate that it was a particular target of Voldemort's, but they figured that every reason they could give why it shouldn't be, the better.

At this point, it was anyone's guess why Harry was staying behind: to protect everyone else, to have that party that had been whispered about, or to help with the wards, as those Tracey had informed knew. There were enough layers to the problem that it was difficult to come to a definite answer—or to know what anybody else was thinking.

Draco was the first to remark upon the absence from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

"What happened to the second-years?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "They had the misfortune to engage in a food fight outside the kitchens last night."

"And were never seen from again?" Harry asked with amusement.

"No," she answered, trying not to laugh because it really would have been quite horrible for the children, she was sure. "Severus was the one who found them."

Harry took one look at her with her lips twitching and lost the battle, dissolving into laughter. Ron looked as though he was torn between laughing as well and being scandalized because they'd spent so much of their school career on the other side of this; it wasn't so long ago that Ron and Harry, at least, were bitterly animadverting on Severus's character for doing such a thing as catching some students out on a lark.

"You have to admit, Ron, it was a bit of foolishness to do it down in the dungeons so close to his office, classroom, lab, and quarters."

Ron, after due consideration, admitted that this was not the wisest course of action ever and dismissed it as a youthful mistake which would hopefully teach them to plan their misbehaviour better in future.

"Of course," Draco observed, "it has had the salutary effect of scaring the younger years out of their wits."

Looking around, Hermione saw that the story must indeed have spread because the first-, second-, and even third-years looked a little more … prim than was to be expected the day after exams had finished.

Hermione would hope that this beneficial mood hadn't completely worn off by this evening, and then perhaps she and Severus wouldn't be out until all hours driving the kids back to their dorms. They had, if the students only knew, much more important things to be doing—and Hermione really wanted to be doing them.

She had to wonder how she'd survived for so long without having sex with Severus; she was already anxious to do it again, and it just hadn't been that long since the last time. She'd begun to see why she'd caught Harry and Draco at it all the time and was glad that she hadn't been too hard on them. It was a good thing, perhaps, that she and Severus hadn't got together earlier in the year.

A fair number of dark-ish glances were being cast her way by some of the students who'd been caught out the night before.

"What's up with that?" Ron asked, pointing with a thumb towards one of the fifth-year Ravenclaws.

"Oh, my pact with the devil," Hermione said with amusement. "Severus and I patrolled last night and it … startled people."

Ron let out a crack of laughter. "If that startles them—"

Draco was nearest and hit Ron up the side of the head; the redhead seemed to decide that it wasn't even sensible to protest, given what he'd been about to say. He cleared his throat and began piling more food on his plate.

Hermione shook her head, glad that they weren't depending on him to keep this secret forever; at least the Guild and Albus already knew.

After breakfast, Severus came to retrieve them, stating for all and sundry to hear that while they might believe they had nothing left to do for the year, it was still term time, and that meant that Prefects and Head Boys and Girls were still obliged to work. He eyed Ron and added that since the Quidditch Captain had nothing of use to do right now, he could assist Severus as well.

Ron grumbled quite convincingly while Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny—who'd all been in the vicinity when this was declared—rose collectively to their feet and followed Severus down to Room One.

Tonks joined them a few minutes later with Remus, who must have arrived while Hermione was sleeping for her not to have immediately noticed.

Severus dropped the pretence as soon as the door was closed and the wards engaged. The purpose of the meeting was one of training, as the Final Battle was at hand, and he didn't intend that any of them not be perfectly prepared.

They spent the rest of the morning in battle, although Hermione noticed that Severus spent more time with the others, allowing her and Harry to spar as they liked between them. Theoretically, at least, they would have very little to do with hand-to-hand combat during the battle.

She intended to go over the ritual several more times to be certain that she knew exactly what she was doing when the time came for casting it against Voldemort. The blood was better the fresher it was, and since she was already trusting to Solace's extremely good preservation skills, she didn't intend to draw her own and Harry's until right before the battle.

She and Harry needed to be in synch for this to work, so they practiced connecting their minds and casting and fighting in unison against the nearest wall. It was only when they paused for a break that they noticed that they'd garnered everyone else's attention.

"Just getting ready for the battle," she said after she'd cleared her throat and Harry had looked at her helplessly.

Severus was looking at them intensely, and she hoped that she hadn't offended him; he had to have known that she and Harry were going to be working closely together in order that the plan had a chance of success.

Severus sent them off in time to get cleaned up before lunch, putting out that they might inform anyone they wished that he'd had them cleaning his private lab.

She let the others go on without her and waited to see if she and Severus were going to have an argument.

"It occurs to me," he said, "that you and P-Harry are very compatible."

"I think we've had this conversation a great many times," she responded. "We're friends."

"And how is that different from what you would be doing with me?"

It took her a moment to unravel this question since she thought he'd grasped, being an intelligent man, that the things that she did with her lover were quite different from those that she did with her friends.

"It's not the same at all," she answered when she realized he'd meant the spell-casting. "We weren't sharing power there, just using our minds to work in unison. It will be essential when we cast the blood wards. You, if you choose to ground me, will be connected to me in all respects, and I'll use your power if it takes too much of mine. I would be dependent upon you."

He snorted slightly. "I don't think you've ever been dependent upon anyone, Hermione. Is there a point at which you would feel yourself able to practice this with me?"

She smiled at him. "At any point that you wish."

Surely he'd realized that she wasn't going to ask him to do it if he didn't offer first.

By the way he rolled his eyes, she realized that he'd understood, finally.

"In the evening, then, after we've scared the children out of the hallways."

"Before," she suggested. "It'll give you the chance to see where all the children are hiding so that it will be easier to scare them."

He eyed her with some surprise but smiled slightly at this prospect, agreeing, "Before."

Heading back to her quarters, she discovered that, of the Slytherins who had declared themselves against Voldemort, Vincent and Gregory wanted asylum, and they'd brought Daphne and Millicent—who'd tried to remain neutral for so long—with them.

Hermione left them in her quarters with Harry and Draco and went through her bedroom to apprise Severus and Albus, which discussion led to her offering the four of them the use of a safe house—where they would be required to remain until the end of the summer. Like the ex-werewolves, Hermione wanted to give the Slytherins the best possible chance of survival.

They all agreed to this readily enough and accepted the necessity of going straight away without telling anyone, their clothes and belongings to follow once Albus had seen that they were gathered up. And carefully screened, Hermione trusted.

Daphne looked faintly distressed at this immediate departure, and Hermione promised she needn't worry.

Daphne's face relaxed, though her eyes were gleaming. "I always wondered if you saw us."

"I know how to guard my tongue."

The beautiful young woman nodded, and the four Slytherins were sent forthwith to a safe house rather like the Malfoy's. Like the ex-werewolves' safe house, Hermione had warded this house herself months ago in anticipation of this possible need, and the necessary protections would fall if she did not renew them after the Final Battle.

If they emerged victorious, she would, of course, let the group out sooner than that, but she wasn't taking any chances of the real date of the battle getting out.

Hermione checked the wards and found Vera in a little-used classroom on the sixth floor where she had evidently been waiting for Daphne. The Hufflepuff looked completely surprised when Hermione arrived.

"Miss Granger," she said in some confusion, "I didn't know—"

"You needn't bother," Hermione said gently. "I know why you're here and wanted to tell you that it would be better if you headed back to your dorm and packed."

"But—" she protested, at a loss.

"And when you get on the train on Monday, it would be better if you didn't look for anyone."

Vera froze. "She's gone, then?"

Hermione nodded. "And her only worry was that she wouldn't be able to say goodbye. She will be there for the summer."

The petite Hufflepuff nodded, although Hermione could see that she was holding back tears.

"Anything that will keep her safe," she said, although her voice quavered a very little.

"That is our intention."

Vera nodded a little more steadily this time, wiped at her eyes, and then, head held high, made her way out of the classroom and back to her dorm. Hermione knew that she'd never betray Daphne, but she could see that the impending separation just as they were supposed to be free to live their lives as they chose was going to be hard on her.

Hermione sincerely hoped that she'd be able to be reunite the two of them sooner rather than later.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Interlude

After a rather late lunch, Severus needed to mark more papers and tally more results; grades needed to be submitted by Monday. Albus had moved the date arbitrarily, officially. Unofficially, he knew that the professors who were aware of the impending battle wanted to get the work out of the way. The last thing any of them would want to do if they won was go back to grading. If they lost, it would be work wasted, but they were all doing their best to look towards a hopeful outcome as often as possible.

Since Albus had a habit of behaving eccentrically for reasons best known to himself, even those who weren't aware of what was happen two days before the solstice simply fell in with what was required of them.

Hermione knew that she should probably spend more time with her friends, but since none of the close ones were leaving on Monday with the Hogwarts Express, she couldn't quite gear up enough resolution to leave Severus's sitting room.

While he was grading, she had plenty of opportunity to work with the wards. He'd not made it through more than one set before it occurred to her that it would be excellent practice for the year that was ahead for her to grade some of these now.

Severus, although he seemed slightly sceptical, was hardly going to turn down someone he thought capable offering to relieve him of some of his workload. As she summoned a quill and charmed it to replicate his hand-writing, the look on his face suggested that he was finding something difficult to say.

"Go ahead," she told him as she looked down at the first paper and wondered how the student had actually decided that a boil-curing potion was for chicken pox.

"I was not altogether certain, until this moment, that you marked an entire set of my papers earlier this year."

She looked up at him, having almost forgotten about that herself.

"My recollection around that time is somewhat vague," he added, "and I thought that perhaps I had graded more than I thought. I take it that is not the case."

She shook her head. "I put you in a Healing Sleep and didn't think you'd be impressed as it was when you woke up. I didn't want to put you further behind in your work."

"Your generosity still takes me by surprise sometimes." There was a curious expression on his face, one that she could not identify. Almost wistful, maybe. "You do realize anyone else would have simply left me out there."

She shrugged, looking back down at the paper and moving on to the second question. "Not me."

Not even when she was angry and hurt could she leave him in pain.

"Thank you."

She looked up, startled, as this was still not a phrase she heard from him very often.

"You're welcome," she responded, smiling at him. "You may rest assured that I will always be there to assist in those sorts of situations. Which reminds me," she said, glad that this had been finally brought to mind in his presence even if it was extremely tardy, "I owe you a thank you for taking care of me when I overextended myself with the wards. I didn't think I was going to last much longer."

He waved this aside. "You were only in such dire straits because I was being a prat."

She blinked at him. "Severus," she said, astonished, "I fell asleep in your class. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

His lips twitched. "Go back to your work, nonsensical witch, and stop quizzing me about good deeds that I would rather not think about."

Laughing, she obeyed, relieved to know that he really wasn't cross about the event anymore.

They passed the rest of the afternoon grading, Hermione astonished by all the things that the first-years didn't know—and she wasn't just speaking after seven years' more experience because these were things that she had known in first year. Hell, some of them were things that Ron had known.

She struggled to grade with a balance between fairness and Severus's typical style. There was a certain level of incompetence that Hermione wouldn't accept from the students, although fortunately, there weren't too many instances of that, as a class where you really could kill yourself by exploding a potion or ingesting something poisonous meant that they'd paid some degree of attention. There were two hopeless students as far as Hermione could see, however, and she retained their papers and brought them over to show Severus at his desk.

Severus frowned at them but once he saw whose they were, he didn't seem surprised.

"Yes, I'll be seeing if I can get them tutors for the summer."

"You do that?"

He frowned at her. "Of course. Students are obliged to take Potions for five years; it's in my best interest to have them acquire enough skills that they won't kill me out of hand."

She continued to eye him, and he appeared to follow her train of thought.

"Augusta Longbottom was entirely certain that she knew best what her grandson required. To be fair to her, I'm not certain that tutoring would have resulted in anything more than a great many more accidents at home as well as at school. As for Mr Potter, Albus made it quite clear that his relatives would not accept any magical assistance at any point during the summer months."

"But you actually suggested that he be tutored?" she asked, still surprised.

"I could hardly forbear noting that he was completely hopeless." Severus hesitated slightly, his eyes flickering to her before he continued, "Given his mother's abilities in the subject, it seemed that he could likely learn if only he would put a little effort into the subject—as is borne out by the fact that he made it all the way to his N.E.W.T.s."

She shrugged. "I suppose."

What she was really thinking was that Harry would have been shocked and perhaps slightly less antagonistic towards his Potions professor had he known that the man had made the slightest effort to get him through the years instead of only giving him a zero and punishing him at every opportunity.

She still remembered how badly Severus had humiliated Harry on that first day, and although she knew it was water under the bridge now, it was no wonder to her that Harry had felt hopelessly at sea and hounded such that he had rarely tried to make his best effort.

"You might as well say whatever's on your mind."

His voice was very sour, and she looked up to find that he was clearly braced for commentary on his teaching habits and his treatment of Harry in particular. She leaned down, for he was still seated, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"It's to no moment; I don't particularly want to drag it up again. As you've already remarked, Harry made it all the way to his N.E.W.T. which shows that something went right."

Severus's tight expression had eased, and he snorted now. "Yes, they cared enough about you to muddle through."

She laughed softly. "I'm still rather amazed that worked, actually. Thank you for taking them in hand."

He shook his head. "I still wish that you'd not attempted to take them into hand or I might have succeeded in finally getting them out of my class."

She stiffened. "I know that you didn't want us there."

He twisted around in his chair so that he was looking up at her fully.

"I don't think you recall quite correctly. Have you never wondered why I did speak to them?"

Of course she had.

His lips tipped up. "It was because I wanted you in my class, twit, and since you'd made that nonsensical bargain, I had to ensure that they got in as well."

She stared at him quite expressionlessly for a moment and then unceremoniously crawled into his lap so that she could wrap her arms around him and kiss him.

"Thank you."

His slight smile said that he didn't mind being thanked in this manner. She wondered idly if she could train him to politeness with kisses. Not that she'd want him to be too polite, as she hadn't become involved with him desiring that he have a complete personality change.

"Now," he said brusquely, "you are far too heavy to stay in my lap while I finish grading, and I wish to complete this before dinner."

She climbed off him, reflecting that perhaps a few manners wouldn't go amiss. Looking down at herself, she thought she was rather nicely sized. But perhaps she'd have to see about curtailing her mousse consumption a little.

She went back to her chair by the fire and worked with the wards since this prevented her from simply staring at him or asking him stupid questions like "How heavy is too heavy?"

It had been said without thought, she was sure, which suggested that it was probably true, although maybe not what he would have said if he were minding his tongue.

But she knew she'd drive him insane if she expected every word out of his mouth to be polite. He said what he thought, and she didn't suppose that she would have been very comfortable grading if Severus had been sitting in her lap—or even if Ginny had, as that was probably a more proportional image. That didn't mean she thought Ginny too heavy in general, just a large weight under the circumstances.

By the time they went up to dinner, she'd almost convinced herself that she didn't mind that the only time he'd ever spoken about her personal appearance in truly flattering terms was when she was a unicorn. Well, she corrected, there had been his "You look fine, don't make me hex you", but she wasn't sure that that really counted. He had said that he liked her from head to foot when they'd had that dreadful discussion about her teeth…. So perhaps he wasn't displeased after all.

She sat down to dinner in a bit of a distracted frame of mind but was soon forced to listen to Ron and Draco's loud and very enthusiastic explanation of the impromptu Quidditch match they'd set up and played that afternoon. They'd just wandered round until they found the makings of two teams, which had allowed Ginny and Draco to go head-to-head as Seekers, and they'd apparently enjoyed themselves really quite thoroughly.

Harry, Hermione saw, was almost as quiet as she was, and she realized that since the Ministry had allowed Umbridge's edict to stand, he could not play Quidditch even now. During term time, when he had had so much else going on, it was less noticeable, but right now, he was missing the game. She wondered what he had done with his afternoon since it had apparently been spent neither with her nor with Draco and Ron. It was likely no one would have said anything if he had tried to participate, and he could probably have argued that it wasn't a formal match, just a bunch of people in the air on brooms with a bunch of balls, but there were strong Ministry or Voldemort supporters here—or both—and it would have been a risk for Harry to exhibit behaviour that could be sanctioned right now.

Ron and Draco were so excited that they seemed to have forgotten all about Harry, and while she was pleased that they were getting along so well, she thought it would be simply splendid if they shut up for the rest of the meal.

This did not seem to be destined to happen, however, for a rematch had been called for after dinner. As far as non-destructive pastimes went, Hermione didn't suppose she could argue.

With all the disasters that had befallen them, the Golden Trio tended to have a somewhat odd end of term. Somebody was always injured or something life-altering and often tragic had just happened. This year, they knew that the big event was still a few days away, and they had to pass the time without looking too obviously as though they knew they were heading towards what could be the end of life as they knew it. Or would be, really, because they would either attain peace at least for a time, or they'd likely all wind up dead while Voldemort took over the world.

Ron and Draco got into an argument with Ginny and Dean about the relative merits of Seekers who were slender and faster versus those who weighed a bit more but had better staying power in adverse weather conditions. They actually headed out to the pitch to solve the issue without more than a vague sort of wave at Harry and Hermione.

"Come with," she offered immediately, eyeing the mousse that was still sitting so temptingly at the corner of her plate. There was still that consideration of heaviness…. She'd better not.

Harry looked up at her, his expression a little grim.

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"I'm going wherever you're going," she said flatly.

He looked defiant momentarily but gave in; he wanted company. She was seizing her moment before he got to the stage where he told everyone to bugger off.

Severus did not look entirely pleased to find her at the door with Harry a few minutes later, but he let them both in.

"Ron and Draco are playing Quidditch," Hermione offered by way of explanation.

It took a moment for Severus to understand, but then he eyed Harry, and she could have sworn that he actually looked almost sympathetic.

"Sit," he admonished, gesturing towards the fire.

She and Harry sat.

"I have two more sets of exams to grade," he told them. "You may keep yourself occupied as you wish."

This was a little curt, but not out of the common way, so Hermione nodded and settled into her chair. Once Severus was scratching away with his quill, no doubt lambasting students' work left, right, and centre, she spoke to Harry about the blood wards.

There didn't seem to be any use in avoiding the topic tonight; Harry was not in a good mood as it was, any euphoria from the end of exams dashed by the lack of Quidditch.

Some would no doubt argue that she shouldn't be potentially making him feel worse, but given how close they were to the Final Battle, she was honestly doubtful that that could happen—not unless she told him repeatedly that they were doomed, anyway, and he'd probably just check her over for signs of Imperius.

As it turned out, he seemed pleased more than anything that she was speaking to him about the wards and giving him something specific to think about that didn't centre on what he was currently missing out on.

"Now, I know this is going to sound a little … odd, but you need to come up with as many … familial reasons as you can for how Voldemort has disappointed you."

"Familial reasons?" Harry repeated, sounding a little alarmed.

"Remember, this is a blood ward that we're activating. We're linked to him through blood, and we're showing that he's disappointed us as a family member."

From the look on Harry's face, this explanation hadn't helped.

"So you think about what he's done to the rest of your family," she went on gently, beginning to wonder if perhaps this wasn't the time to discuss this after all. "He killed your mother and your father, and he was responsible for the death of Sirius."

Harry's face tightened, and he nodded stiffly.

"He's tried to kill you even when you were a baby and were defenceless. You think about how he's taken Slytherin's name and turned it into something that's feared."

Finally, Harry seemed to be catching on. "How he's helped make everyone think that Parseltongue is only a talent possessed by evil wizards."

She smiled faintly and nodded. "I'm about as comfortable with it as you are, but this only works if we accept that he's a member of our family who has … erred outrageously to the point that it can no longer be tolerated."

Harry's face was very dark, and she knew that it was one of the most difficult things for him to ever think about, that night in the cemetery when his own blood had been used to bring Voldemort back to full power.

"We're going to get him," she reminded him, voice intense. "We're going to be able to do it because of the mistakes he's made."

Harry sniffed suspiciously; Draco had picked a bad time to be off on a lark with Ron, although she understood that this was their way of dealing with the fact that the Final Battle was only days away.

She gave up on subtle and joined Harry in his chair, forcing him to squish over. It was not really designed for two people, so she was half on top of him, but they were nicely cuddled, which she could tell that he needed right now. Severus was probably not going to be terribly impressed, but at the moment, she needed to deal with her best friend who was having a small emotional crisis.

She wrapped her arms around him without saying anything, and after a moment, he brought his own arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder. She couldn't tell if he was actually crying, but his shoulders shook a little.

It hadn't helped, she supposed, to have someone make yet another attempt to send him to Voldemort. She had to wonder, though, if Nott had really been working on Voldemort's orders because it would have destroyed the plans for the wards if Harry had been kidnapped mere days before that it would have come to fruition.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later that she looked up to find that Severus had appeared with two mugs of tea, and he didn't look nearly as perturbed as she had anticipated. Perhaps even he had noticed that Harry had been in a fair way to falling apart completely.

She directed one of the mugs to the table and took the other to offer to Harry, by which point Severus had gone back to his desk.

Harry accepted it cautiously, eyes slightly red-rimmed as he darted a glance at Severus, whom he had evidently realized had brought the tea.

"Did I just lose it in Professor Snape's quarters?"

Her lips tipped up.

"And Severus will never say anything," she reassured him, hoping he got the distinction. "Feeling better?"

He sipped at the tea, nodding slightly as he squared his shoulders. "It's a lot to get ready for." He eyed her. "You seem to be in good shape, though. I thought you were a bit down at dinner."

She smiled slightly at the fact that he had caught this even in the midst of his introspection and as he was trying not to pay attention to what Draco and Ron and the others were nattering on about. Perhaps that was the reason he had noticed her.

"That was unrelated," she answered.

"You didn't eat your mousse," he pointed out with mild accusation. "You're never in a good way when you don't eat your mousse."

She heard the quill abruptly stop scratching over at Severus's desk and knew that he was listening for this response as well. Great.

"It is not a matter that you need to be concerned about," she said with as much finality as possible.

He eyed her carefully, but she made sure that her face was schooled to one of calm collectedness. Severus's work at the desk resumed, and Harry seemed to give up, finally, too—at which point he told her that she was too heavy to be sitting on top of him all night.

She thought she'd done a pretty good job of keeping her reaction off her face as she rose to her feet, but Harry caught her arm a moment later, half-rising from the chair to do it.

"That's not why you weren't eating the mousse?" He stared hard at her and then whirled to face Severus. "What have you been saying to her?"

The quill was slammed down to the desk again as Severus rose menacingly to his feet.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If 'Mione thinks that she can't eat her mousse because she weighs too much, then it's obvious you've said something stupid to her!" Harry fired back.

"She doesn't—" Severus began, and then he glanced at her, and it was clear from his expression that she'd failed to conceal her emotions for the second time that evening. She evidently needed to get better at not letting her friends see what she was thinking. "Mr Potter," Severus said with a voice which was now scrupulously polite, "I need to talk to Hermione alone."

Harry stared at him carefully and seemed to see what he wanted to see, for he nodded, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and headed out the door—and back to their quarters according to the wards. Following his progress meant that she didn't have to pay attention to Severus, who was staring at her through very narrowed eyes.

He stepped deliberately around his desk and came to stand right in front of her.

"Please tell me that's not why you didn't eat the mousse."

She stared resolutely at his chest until he did that annoying thing with his finger. She might have fought him if he'd been forceful, but it always seemed to be very gently that he guided her face up so that they could look at one another properly.

"I take it that I misspoke earlier."

She shook her head. "I am far too heavy for it to be pleasant for me to sit on anyone while they're trying to grade or drink tea. I quite decided that on my own when I considered how I would feel if I had Ginny in my lap for hours on end."

Severus's lips tipped up slightly, but he was still regarding her carefully.

"That is very rational, but I don't think it prevented me from hurting you, which was not my intention."

"I don't expect it was," she answered. "It's fine."

"But not fine enough for you to eat mousse at dinner," he answered. There was a trace of impatience in his voice, as though she were not agreeing with him quickly or thoroughly enough. "There's nothing wrong with your weight, Hermione; I wouldn't say anything if you were a stone heavier."

She wasn't altogether convinced this was true but nodded anyway. It was a nice sentiment.

"Hermione," he said, frowning, "I think you're beautiful."

Her eyes snapped to his, and his expression of displeasure deepened.

"Have I really never said?"

She shook her head slightly, a bit wistful. He reached out and caressed her cheek, and she leaned into the touch.

"Very beautiful. And I assure you that no quantity of chocolate mousse will ever change that."

She laughed softly. "Thank you."

He leaned down to kiss her, and she responded wholeheartedly, although as he started to unbutton her jumper, she pulled back.

"You have grading to finish."

His mouth was occupied with nibbling on her ear, but he murmured, "I can finish it later."

"But you'll be much happier later tonight if it's already done."

"You're, er, ruining the mood."

She laughed. "Quite deliberately. Finish your grading, and I'll stop being a girl over here."

She knew that she should be content with her self-image all on her own and not depend on Severus, but it was hard not assign a lot of importance to his opinion of her in most things.

His mouth finally detached from her skin.

"It is a natural human desire to wish to be advised of your desirability."

This was said with a remarkably straight face, and she was impressed that he'd got it all out instead of just telling her that yes, she had been rather girlie. It was a stereotype, she knew, but she rarely saw men getting upset about their weight the way that women did.

But she had taken care to show him how much she desired him, and she didn't mind if he was returning the favour as well as basically admitting that he appreciated what she had done.

He settled back at his desk. Once the grading was completed, he could hand it off to Albus and then they could all concentrate on making sure they were battle-ready.

She checked the wards to make sure that Harry was all right and found that he and Draco were now alone in the common room; Ginny and Ron were on their way back to the Gryffindor dorm. Hopefully, this meant that Draco had finally noticed the state Harry was in and would do his best to make the Gryffindor feel better in ways that Hermione wouldn't—and had no desire to—attempt.

It took a little less than two hours for Severus to finish completely, and he set the last of the papers aside with a pleased huff of breath. She smiled up at him from her position in the armchair which she had turned slightly so that it faced the room as much as the fire. That way, she could see Severus whenever she looked up.

"How are the miscreants?" he inquired.

She had, in fact, just been taking a look at how the students were behaving but said, "Why don't you come over here and find out?"

He obeyed this challenge with a raised eyebrow. Once they'd connected mentally, she let him see exactly what she was seeing of the wards. Since they were connected so closely, she could also feel his wonder, and there was no need to ask him what he thought of this ability. She also perceived the glee with which he found a number of students who were out of bounds in quite ridiculous locations.

The students would be in quite a bit of trouble if you could do this all the time, wouldn't they? she asked with amusement.

And you think you're going to be much kinder next year?

She smiled. That can be our special skill when we patrol together, Severus.

You imagine that I'm going to let myself get roped into all the novice tasks that Minerva is going to give you? he asked distastefully.

I have a notion, she said agreeably, quite certain that they would make a good team.

He gave an external sigh, but she noticed that he didn't gainsay her. Really, it would be so much more fun if they could do it together.

They needed to do more than simply monitor students for the battle, though, so she sank deeper into the wards and let him see just how she could suspend them, using his, hers, and several other areas that were currently unoccupied or full of the youngest students who definitely wouldn't notice. She reached all the way out to the wards in the Forbidden Forest and let him see how she could hold a small section in abeyance so that it appeared it was not even there. Then she let it flicker back into place, an almost instantaneous transition.

That's … amazing.

Since his mental voice revealed all the awe that he rarely showed, she knew that he really thought so.

Acknowledging his feeling would only disconcert him, though, so she continued matter-of-factly, There is very little more we can do at this time of night. We are currently supporting all the wards, but if I were to stop them all, there are too many people who would notice.

Supporting all of them? he repeated with an edge of surprise.

She nodded, smiling. It's what makes it look like I can turn them on and off like that. It was a bit of teasing that I did with the little wards, but I need to wait until everyone is sleeping before I can attempt anything larger.

Because you might wake us as you did the first time?

That was only because I had very little experience, she answered, endeavouring not to make her tone sharp because it was still a fair question, even if she was embarrassed every time it was brought up. I let go very abruptly, and it was that jarring which woke you. In this case, it's merely that the powerful people would notice the absence of the wards around the building when they were awake, whereas I am able to manipulate the wards quietly enough when they are sleeping that they do not notice.

Because you have, no doubt, been doing this for months without any of us noticing.

Of course, she answered, amused. Like I said before, I have to be ready for the Final Battle.

He no longer seemed cross that she'd been practicing on her own. She, for her turn, was surprised by just how easy it was for the two of them to do this together. One might, she thought with a smile, say that they were supposed to be together.

You don't need to draw upon any of my power, he observed.

She shook her head. We've not done anything particularly difficult, nor have we done it for an extended period. In the Final Battle, I'm going to have to take the wards down quite theatrically as we act out the removal, hold them down while Voldemort and the Death Eaters appear, and get the wards up again before they realize that anything is wrong. That's what's going to take so much power.

And that's why you need me.

And that's one of the reasons why I need you, she corrected, though she knew that was not what he had meant.

Can we go get the students now? he asked, apparently judging the war talk closed and not wanting to get into a discussion on needing one another.

She laughed and assented, withdrawing herself carefully from his mind and severing the connection which would enable her to draw power from him. They needed to get used to the feeling of it, but the ability to take his magic from him was one which she would prefer not to have to use. It could harm him—kill him—if she took too much, but it was still their best chance.

They headed out for another evening of rounds, the glimpse Severus had had of the wards enabling him to find students even more quickly than normal, and no doubt leading the children to think even more highly of his ability to sniff out trouble anywhere, anytime. She allowed him to hog that glory, content to stride along at his side and periodically access the wards to ascertain that they were still heading towards the correct locations.

They rounded students up in fairly good order. Prefects would be continuing rounds later that evening, as they were on duty all the way until Monday. Now that exams were over, none of them had other calls on their time—other than the obvious desire to relax and be done with school entirely. Since they were nominally on duty even on the Express, they wouldn't quite be done until they stepped onto platform nine-and-three-quarters in London.

When she and Severus returned to his quarters, he coaxed her immediately to bed. He was quite vocal in his appreciation of all aspects of her body, making use of his rather impressive vocabulary in order to delight her with a vast array of complimentary adjectives during his extended exploration of all her body parts. He followed this up by Summoning a cup of mousse directly to bed, and she found that she couldn't possibly refuse him. It tasted divine, as always.

When he felt like it, he could be really extraordinarily considerate. She imagined it would be some time before she got another dose of attention quite like this, but by the time she curled up at his side to go to sleep, she felt very well cared for indeed.

Ron was not at breakfast Sunday morning, but the rest of them were, and based on the fact that Draco came close to hovering around Harry, she ascertained that he had, indeed, picked up on Harry's mood of the day before. At the moment, Harry looked torn between annoyed and amused by the blond's behaviour. An extremely solicitous Draco was actually pretty funny from everyone else's perspective, as he kept putting food on Harry's plate, fixing him tea, pulling lint off his robe, smoothing his hair, and just generally fussing over him.

The news that Harry would not be on the Hogwarts Express had been featured in the Prophet this morning, carefully leaked as this was the most reliable way they had of making sure that Voldemort was aware of that fact if they weren't certain of any spies in Hogwarts or of how quickly their information could be transmitted to Voldemort.

Although Hogwarts was self-sufficient in many ways thanks to its magic, there were still some items that would need to be ordered in especially for a celebratory party of the magnitude that was supposedly being planned for Harry, so Albus had quietly bespoken a large order of Butterbeer and mead from Rosmerta, the twins had been asked for an array of supplies which Hermione probably did not want to know about, and the house-elves were ensuring that there was a great deal of food still on hand. It looked, they all hoped, as though they were making a good effort to appear as though they were really going to have this party.

The day was spent in admonishing students to pack, reminding younger students of their holiday work and recalling to their minds the fact that they weren't allowed to use their wands over the summer. To anxious N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. students, it was explained again that their grades would likely reach them by the beginning of August. The students from the other five years who had been graded by their own professors would be able to see their grades before they left the school on Monday morning.

The Leaving Feast was that evening, and it was as lavish as always. Hermione had nearly forgotten that the House Cup needed awarding; ever since Severus had stopped taking points away from her for any and every fault perceived or completely made up, she'd barely paid attention to the totals; she was pleased to see that Gryffindor had won.

Slytherin was now in third place, and several Gryffindors informed her end of the table that the extra big loss over the weekend could probably be attributed to Nott's having attacked Harry. It was amazing how fast word travelled sometimes.

From Albus, she and Harry had learnt more confidential information; although Nott was quite adamant that it was all his idea, Kingsley was of the opinion that the young man had been Obliviated or Imperiused—or possibly both. Hermione and the Order members who knew about Tracey Davis suspected that it was her doing; she appeared to be someone Voldemort trusted for missions here at the school, and they knew she was good with Memory Charms, at least.

Since Voldemort tended to prefer the side of the Light be confused and uncertain, this would be right up his alley. Perhaps he had not taken their bait about the party and the secret warding on the solstice. Perhaps he had decided that it would still be safer to capture and kill just Harry and then come after the rest of them. There was even a chance that Nott or Tracey—or someone else—had been acting independently. Having Nott make the attempt with no useful information ensured that they could not find out too much.

Severus, she thought, was glowering marginally less than normal at Gryffindor's win, and she hoped she could attribute that it was her house. Or possibly, since his universe did not actually revolve around her, to the fact that he didn't have to appear to hate them all on principle; he wasn't pretending to be a Death Eater anymore. It could be difficult to work out exactly where the persona stopped and Severus Snape began.

After the Feast, there was a flurry of activity in the halls as students went to return belongings to one another—or in Luna's case, begin her annual hunt for her belongings, but she assured them that she was just fine on her own. Students were exchanging gifts, saying goodbye to friends whom they would not see over the summer, or having a last assignation with a boyfriend or girlfriend from whom they might be separated for some time.

It was this last occasion which apparently made Neville and Blaise a good deal less discreet than they usually were, for she caught sight of them in a little-used side corridor on the fifth floor. She was all of a few steps ahead of Harry and Draco, and she didn't think that Draco's forbearance when it came to teasing Gryffindors would extend to the more than half-naked couple.

Given that state of undress, it would be rather difficult for them to pretend that they were doing anything other than shagging like a pair of rabbits in the middle of the hallway. Hermione threw them an exasperated look as she formed a fake wall in front of them before breezing past the corridor as though it weren't there.

Draco and Harry, fortunately, didn't appear to notice that anything was amiss, and she managed to steer them away to quite another part of the building. She wondered what it was about the end of the year that made people completely daft.

It was another reason to be glad that they were going up against Voldemort for what they sincerely hoped would be once and for all in a few short days, though. This need for people to hide their genuine relationships could be dispensed with. She didn't like it, and she was sure that they didn't like it, either.

There were other reasons why the couples might feel as though it were the better part of valour not to reveal themselves, of course, but if the Final Battle helped destroy that dratted "Slytherins are evil" mantra, it would surely help. Draco and Harry firmly as a couple would likely help as well.

By the time they returned to their common room, Blaise and Neville were fully dressed and waiting in the corridor.

Harry and Draco looked quite surprised, as well they might, given that as far as Hermione was aware, the two other boys had never been seen in one another's exclusive company like this before.

Hermione gestured them in, pointing out, "I hardly think sitting in the corridor was particularly prudent."

"But entirely more circumspect than what we were doing earlier," Blaise pointed out suavely.

Neville flushed to the roots of his hair, and Draco's eyes narrowed. "Another Gryffindor who blushes, and I have a horrible suspicion as to why."

"What can we do for you?" she asked, thinking it better if Draco didn't continue to have the floor.

"We want to fight," Neville declared.

"The next time there's a battle, we'll keep that in mind," Hermione said coolly.

Neville sighed, and Blaise patted his hand, which made Harry's eyes go wide as saucers.

"Something's coming," the Slytherin said. "Nev told me about the party, and I'm not stupid."

"I've never supposed that you were," she answered mildly. "Which is why I'm sure it won't surprise you to know that you won't be able to speak of this when you leave the room."

"Not at all," he answered smoothly, taking this threat much more calmly than Draco had so long ago.

"If you're certain," she said finally, "we will not turn you away."

"I would not leave even if you did." His tone was as even as hers had been.

"Are you sure that you want to be a focal point by springing your relationship on everyone at this particular moment?"

"You don't find that we … sprung it upon you earlier in the corridor?" Blaise asked, amusement evident in his voice, and Neville went slightly pinker once more.

Hermione shook her head. "By this point in the year, I couldn't possibly be surprised by whomever I found arse naked in the corridor."

Harry choked. Draco wrinkled his nose.

"I'd already guessed," she clarified.

"I hadn't," Harry and Draco said almost in unison.

"Yes, but that's because you're clueless boys who are entirely involved in one another," Hermione answered tartly. "I doubt you'd notice another set of gay boys if they went by tap-dancing naked."

Blaise and Neville smirked slightly at this picture.

"If you're certain," she repeated to the two of them a last time.

Neville shrugged, his eyes straying to Harry and Draco. "Honestly, I don't think we have that much to worry about."

Perhaps it was difficult to be a focal point with those two around. Neville and Blaise thanked the three of them and headed off.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Draco asked immediately.

"Oh, I wouldn't have left it like that if I didn't think we could trust him," she said easily. "He's been very attached to Neville for quite some time. Besides, couldn't you see how eager they were to get some privacy?"

"That's why you hurried us along the corridor on the fifth floor?" Harry finally guessed.

She nodded.

"Which is a shame, really," Draco observed. "We might have wanted to see."

This resulted in Harry gazing at him narrowly. "Might we have?"

"Obviously only if they were tastefully attired," the Slytherin answered hurriedly. "It was for mocking purposes only."

"And yet when you think about the fact that the two of them clued in years before the two of you did…." She trailed off with mock delicacy, and Draco seemed to realize that trying to take this mockery any further would be unwise.

Once it became clear that the two boys wanted to resolve the issue of another gay couple having sex that they'd almost seen, she happily headed off to Severus's quarters. This would afford everyone privacy, and she was quite sure that nobody objected.

It was a relief to actually see off all the students who were leaving. The train was being guarded by a contingent of Aurors and professors; many of the latter would be returning to the castle as soon as the trip was completed.

It was suddenly very quiet, although she imagined that it was not quite quiet enough for Severus's peace of mind since Harry and his closest friends were still all present and accounted for.

The atmosphere was no longer like that of a school, however. They were quite serious, really, and Hermione almost wished, a little sadly, that they were ebullient students who had just graduated without a care in the world.

Pansy and Viktor, rather than choosing to leave for Bulgaria immediately, remained at the castle and looked entirely determined to fight for it; officially, Harry told them that he would be honoured to have them at his party, and unofficially, that he'd like them to assist with the warding. What they guessed after that was up to them, but it could hardly escape anyone's notice that they were going to be training in earnest.

Harry and Hermione, it was made clear, would be left much to their own devices, joining in only when they wished, while Severus and Tonks were in charge of practice which everyone else would be expected to attend. Everyone had seen her and Harry fight by this point, and this exception was accepted without difficulty. Filius and Minerva intended to assist with the training, as well, and there would be several periods where they would be getting ready for the warding.

All the necessary robes and accoutrements for the warding ceremony had been ordered, and herbs gathered for the casting. Hermione wondered if any of it would survive to be used in the real warding. Everyone was going to be taught all the proper procedures just as though the warding were still officially taking place and the fighting was a back-up in case Voldemort somehow found out and crashed—or because once the castle was safe again, Harry had every intention of ending it with Voldemort anyway.

To practice the warding, they were learning their locations on the grounds, wearing the robes, correctly placing the crystal bowls with herbs, and memorising and speaking the incantations without actually using any magic. Conveniently enough, this was also exact practice for the deception that they would be enacting on Friday, everyone simply didn't know that detail yet.

Severus took the students off straight away, seeming to want to instil in them the certainty that this was not the time for them to be developing any lazy habits. Ron groaned when he learnt that they were expected to be up at breakfast promptly every morning, would do whatever they were told in the meantime, and would be in bed at a decent hour.

It was remarkably like school, Ron pointed out not quietly enough, and Severus's acid rejoinder threatened immediate detention if the redhead didn't get his act together. Hermione was amused to note that no one had the guts to point out that now that they had graduated they shouldn't have to suffer through any of the man's punishments—certainly not detention, anyway.

Hermione took Harry out to the Forest, knowing that he would like the opportunity to stretch his wings. It took some clever manoeuvring for him to be able to fly amidst the trees, but since clever manoeuvring was what born flyers like Harry did practically without thought, he was happy. Once Harry regained his feet in human form several hours later, she found that his face was flushed and he seemed calmer and happier than he had been in days.

On Tuesday afternoon after several hours of training, she invited Severus out to the Forest, but he argued that he was needed to "mind the children".

"We wouldn't have to stay long."

"I don't have time for frivolities," he snapped.

Her herd had never been anything resembling a frivolity to her, but taking him somewhere he didn't want to go would be an exercise in futility.

"Right," she agreed. "I'll see you later, then."

A visit to her herd would now serve to soothe her.

It was a busy time, and she knew that, but there was a chance that one or both of them weren't going to make it through this battle. Now had seemed like the best time to make this visit.

She had just reached the edge of the Forest when he caught her up.

"Tonks is minding them," he said at her raised eyebrow.

He didn't offer more information, but the fact that he was here really spoke for itself. Once they were deep enough in the Forest, she transformed, he did the same, and she led him to the valley.

Castina came forward to greet them. Even as a leopard, Severus's eyes were very large as he took in the whole herd of beautiful creatures who were standing before him. Isaura came galloping over, quite excited to greet Hermione's mate and entirely convinced that a leopard made a very perfect play companion for a young unicorn.

Severus was rather resignedly sucked into this enthusiasm, although when Hermione saw him romping after Isaura some minutes later, she was certain that most of his reluctance had been for show. It wasn't every day, after all, that a person got to play with a unicorn filly.

Hermione walked with Castina and clarified the details of the war that was about to reach them.

He will bring a number of creatures, and he will likely attempt to come through the Forest.

We will do what we can, Castina responded.

You might not, Hermione answered, looking at the little unicorn as she played hide and seek with a black leopard.

As might you not, Castina answered with a trace of amusement. I made my choice a long time ago, Berit.

Hermione nodded, having known what Castina would say but needing to actually hear, she supposed, that the herd mare was making her own choices and not simply fighting Hermione's battle because Hermione was herd.

You were quite right, you know.

Hmm? Hermione asked, watching as Severus pounced on Isaura and very gently bore her to the ground, mindful of her limbs and somehow making the whole manoeuvre perfectly graceful. The entire herd could hear her peals of laughter.

About your mate. He is a good choice.

Hermione turned to look at Castina, seeing the age and wisdom in her dark eyes.

Thank you.

Despite the fact that Hermione would have been happy to linger for an age in the Forest with her herd, she went to retrieve Severus (stalking him, one might almost have said, solely for Isaura's amusement) after they had only spent a couple of hours in the valley.

Severus formally thanked Castina for her invitation, and Hermione knew that what had occurred between them had been forgiven, although she didn't suppose it would ever be forgotten. That was good enough for her.

Be good to her, Black One.

A request, as a parent would have made.

You may be assured that I will be, Severus answered solemnly.

Fare you well, Castina said, like a benediction in their minds.

Hermione smiled at her herd mare, pleased beyond anything that this meeting had gone so well.

Back in the castle in their human forms, she found that Severus looked far less tense than he had when they had left, and she liked the fact that it was playing with children—a unicorn child, anyway—which had achieved this. She had always hoped that dunderheaded students hadn't ruined him for children entirely, and now that dream seemed almost possible.

"You are looking particularly sappy," he observed as they continued towards Room One to see what progress was being made in his absence.

"I enjoyed seeing you with Isaura," she explained.

He cast a look at her from the corner of his eye, seemingly unable to ascertain whether or not she was joking. "I daresay I made quite a sight."

"You looked happy," she said softly. "You made her happy. You made me happy."

His mouth twisted up into almost a smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Everyone was working very industriously in Room One, possibly helped along by the fact that she had sent a message to Draco and Harry that they were on their way back. It had seemed safer that way because she did know the man she'd fallen in love with.

On Wednesday, they had a training session in the ceremonial robes. They needed to get used to the feel and flow of the silken material over their regular robes. To make their ploy successful, they had to be wearing them at the beginning, at least, and she suspected that they wouldn't have time for transfiguration afterwards.

Most of the former students still seemed to be under the impression that they were practicing for Sunday, not for Friday, and getting ready to fight in the robes just on the off chance; Voldemort did have a habit of coming after Harry around this time, after all, and they'd been learning how to fight and defend themselves for years, really, for whenever it was necessary.

The handful of people closest to Harry who knew the truth made sure not to reveal anything specific, though Hermione imagined that some of the others had guessed. The plan had the best chance of success if it looked as though they were keeping it the best sort of secret they could.

In the afternoon, a very unexpected request relayed from Tonks through Albus to Hermione informed her that Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy wished to speak with her.

Severus immediately "volunteered" to accompany her. Albus consented, pointing out somewhat dryly that he imagined she still remembered how to get there.

In response, Hermione took hold of Severus's arm and Apparated the two of them from the headmaster's office, which meant that Severus was almost smiling when they arrived in the sitting room where the Malfoys were once again located.

They'd not been standing there for more than a moment before Narcissa flew at Severus, wrapping her arms around him and holding him in a hug that shocked Hermione completely—though she tried not to let it show.

"My wife is pleased to see Severus alive," Lucius observed.

It was just the sort of thing that Draco would say in that conversational manner, telling her that she'd failed to school her expression adequately.

"So I perceive."

She'd always thought that it was Lucius's connection with Severus that had made him Draco's godfather, but perhaps she had been mistaken.

It was another minute before Narcissa could be persuaded to untangle herself from Severus, and by then Hermione had had her expression under control.

There was no way she could be reasonably upset with Severus when Harry wept over her periodically and Severus brought them tea while they were practically on top of one another in his room. She hated to be hypocritical. It had been a bit of a shock, but even if Severus and Narcissa had had sex before, she was quite sure that they weren't doing it now.

She was therefore able to sit down on the chair offered her with tolerable composure.

Narcissa was still explaining at this point that it had taken the Order members an odious amount of time to reveal to them whether or not Severus had survived after Hermione had gone to rescue him, and this was the first time that they had laid eyes on him in so long. She was very much relieved to see him in such good form.

"You have Hermione to thank for that," Severus said.

The Malfoys looked at her, and she realized that Severus was asserting her role in his life.

"You wished to see me," she said.

Lucius nodded, noting with intent eyes how Severus sat down beside her.

"The Order members do not visit with any reliability, but I am not quite so stupid as they suppose."

Hermione vouchsafed no answer to this and saw Severus's lips twitch.

Lucius also smirked faintly, which she took to be a good sign. "We receive the Prophet, but as it is the Order members who bring it, there is often a delay."

Hermione nodded again, wondering where this explanation was going.

"We have just received Sunday's issue, as Narcissa's niece came to see us today."

Hermione tried not to snort at this recognition of the connection. It sounded good, at any rate, if they were trying to get something out of her.

"In it, there is an article about the Chosen One, and it was revealed that he will remain at Hogwarts because he is being allowed to have a party at the school with all his little friends."

Hermione nodded, amused by the tone.

"It is clear that this was done in part to make the Hogwarts Express a lesser target."

She inclined her head, as the point was moot now anyway.

"I would like to fight."

This was so similar to what Blaise had declared that Hermione was almost startled.

"I wish to be there," he continued seriously, "and my wife has consented to accompany me."

"We're warding the school," she said finally. "The wards need to be taken down and re-cast."

Lucius considered this for a moment. "And has this information been brought to the Dark Lord's attention?"

"Of course."

"Then, as I said, I would like to fight."

"It would certainly look better for you when Voldemort loses for you to have allied yourself to our side at the end."

"And it would be safer to remain here. We have already told the Order members what we can. We have not been useless."

"But I believe we may agree that more heroism is better than less at this particular juncture."

So long as they won, anyway.

"Which does not diminish its being the correct action to take."

"Do you think so?"

There was a faint light of frustration in his eyes, but he kept his temper, observing mildly, "We chose to leave. You seemed the most likely person not to dismiss my request out of hand."

"An interesting notion you have of her," Severus answered, an edge to his voice.

Hermione smiled at Lucius suddenly, answering easily, "Oh, you're quite right about that, but I'm not sure you'll like the conditions I would have to place upon you to allow you to come."

"Whatever you require," he answered, and although she could tell by the slight lessening in suavity that he was uncomfortable, he didn't look away from her gaze.

She connected faintly with his mind. Are you certain?

He looked faintly shocked now but nodded, so she deepened the connection, sifting through all the thoughts that she found there as he declared, "I will vow to protect you and Mr Potter with my life."

Her lips tipped up as she saw what he thought of her and Severus as a couple. "Oh, I would never ask you to do that." If she and Harry were going to die, it would hardly do to take Draco's parents along with them. "I should ask only that you try not to injure me and mine."

His mind was quite open to her perusal; like Draco, he was rather capable of a grand gesture. His opinion of her was not exactly flattering, although he had a pretty good notion—however reluctantly formed—of her intelligence and power.

She found plenty on his opinion of Voldemort, which was largely that he'd gone stark raving mad and was no longer worthy of being followed. Lucius would be happy to have a hand in the man's death after he'd abused the Malfoys in the manner in which he had. There were some thoughts that she did not dwell on relating to crimes he had committed as a Death Eater, and there was a very dark area of his mind that contained his time in Azkaban.

It was at this point that she realized that he had come far closer to madness than she had ever suspected.

I can take the edge off, if you wish , she said, though you will not remember what I have done specifically.

He knew what memories she was looking at, and he managed a quiet affirmative that sounded stilted and yet very honestly desirous.

She was not a MindHealer, but she did not think that Lucius would be visiting one anytime in the near future, and this was Draco's father and Severus's friend; she felt compelled to do what she could. So she reached further into his mind and smoothed those horrible edges over, coming close to Obliviating some of the memories, sorting them carefully away where she hoped they would not bother him quite so much.

He had, she was now certain, enough of an awareness of the horrors that he had committed without needing to be visited by that particular one over and over again.

Hermione released him from her inspection, although it was quite clear by this time from his ashen appearance that he had not anticipated her perusal would be quite so thorough.

She looked then to Narcissa, who submitted to the same and made no bones about the fact that she was not perfectly happy with Hermione's lineage but was pleased that Severus was happy. Narcissa had every intention of dying before she let her son be injured again, and if she could work against the Dark Lord now, she would.

There was a deep and abiding fury that the Dark Lord's bidding had resulted in Lucius being incarcerated in Azkaban, and though Hermione probed even more deeply, she did not find that this led to any deep or lingering upset at Harry for his part in landing Lucius there. Draco's mother seemed to have recognized that Harry had only been fighting for his life, one of a handful of children against a group of grown men and women who were trained killers. At the very end, Hermione noticed that Narcissa had thrown up the thoughts that Hermione had been careful not to search for; the older woman and Severus had always been friends rather than lovers.

"I will inform Albus of your vow to me," she told them as she pulled out of Narcissa's mind, "and we shall see what he has to say about the matter."

Both the Malfoys vowed not to try to harm in any manner by word, deed, or omission anyone on the side of the Light, nor to assist in any manner by word, deed, or omission the side of Darkness as encompassed by Voldemort, any who served him, or any who were trying to injure Harry Potter.

That would have to do for comprehensiveness for this particular battle. Hermione hoped it would make an acceptable vow to everyone involved. It was of the class of an Unbreakable Vow, really, and while it would not kill them if they broke it, it would be quite unpleasant for them.

She and Severus Apparated back to Albus's office where Hermione informed him of what the Malfoys had wanted. He accepted the vow and consented to their joining in the battle if that was their wish. She imagined that there would be members of the Order who would be less sanguine about the idea, but with Albus on her side, she wasn't terribly worried. The Malfoys could be able fighters, she was sure.

They returned to Severus's quarters.

"Are you sure that was wise?"

She had a sense of déjà vu from when Draco had questioned her about Blaise.

"I do not believe that either of them will seek to betray us," she answered, moving to sit down. "You would have interceded if you seriously disagreed. I saw enough in Lucius's mind to know exactly what he intends, which is to get revenge on Voldemort if it is within his power, regain a little of the fallen honour of the House of Malfoy if he may, and protect his son, whom he has injured."

"What of hidden motives?"

She shrugged. "None that are particularly injurious to our cause. I saw more than he wanted, I assure you."

"That may have been what he wanted you to see," Severus pointed out.

She looked up at him with eyes that had seen more images than she wanted of what Lucius and by extension, Severus, had done in the name of their Dark Lord, and she shook her head. "He wished to make a good impression, but I now have quite an idea of the crimes he has committed against Muggles and Muggle-borns. I know how he feels about you and I being together, and I have been furnished with a comprehensive list of what he thinks about me. He didn't exactly distinguish himself."

Severus was now frowning fiercely. "Yet you invited him to battle."

A faint smile tipped up her lips. "I do not require everyone who fights on our side to like me nor I them. He acknowledges me as an equal in this, even if it is rather reluctantly. It has not escaped his notice that his son is connected to Harry Potter. Re-establishing himself will take effort, and he knows it. I think Narcissa will keep him in line."

"You believe she has so much power over him?"

"He recognizes her influence above all others, and I have done what I can to make him more … reasonable," she said diplomatically. "Narcissa has every intention of protecting her son, and she loves her husband, too."

His tone was slightly arch. "Does she?"

Hermione laughed softly. "She took pains to ensure that my pique might not spoil her husband's endeavour, showing me that the two of you were only friends. I realize you are not involved romantically currently, and I recognize that that is all that is my business."

Severus gazed at her very intently. "But you were not, I think, quite so sanguine when she first threw herself at me?"

She smiled. "Perhaps not quite so much, no."

He seemed pleased by this small showing of jealousy, and she supposed that it could be seen as a bit reassuring, another way of letting him know that she wanted him. So long as the jealousy did not become debilitating—witness some of his earlier behaviour towards Harry—there was no reason to be overly concerned.

It was she, after all, who spent her nights in Severus's bed.

By Thursday, the tension had edged its way up a number of notches, and Hermione was finally forced to call an end to the training session that was resulting in more and more people snapping at one another. This resulted, of course, in Severus upbraiding her rather severely, but she didn't respond in kind, her temper frayed enough that she knew she would say what she regretted. Instead, she let him give her a giant scolding as everyone else sneaked out.

Once the others had made it to safety, she moved to the door herself. She was hampered from leaving by the fact that he grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her around, and any idea that he might have decided to attack her went right out of her head when she found her mouth seized in a bruising kiss.

Severus had apparently found a new way to work out his frustrations, and since she'd much rather be shagged within an inch of her life than be insulted by him, she gave herself over wholeheartedly to this plan. She barely had enough sense to throw up a few wards, as she didn't have the least desire for anyone to find the two of them in flagrante delicto; it would really ruin the superiority she was still able to feel at having seen half of them being terribly indiscreet.

Their union was fast and furious, the sort that could have been accomplished in the twenty minutes they'd been in the library the time that Harry had thought that's what they were doing. They were sweaty, sated, and riding on an endorphin high in no time—at which point she realized that Severus did not seem to be nearly as mellow as she was. He was trying to pull his shed clothing on with sharp, jerky movements without really looking at her.

Since she'd just had a fun new sexual experience and felt pleasantly shagged out and a good deal less tense about the battle the next day, she figured that Severus had to have a particular problem. She therefore stopped him getting dressed by the simple expedient of planting herself in front of him. Since she was still entirely naked and now kneeling on his trousers, his efforts were rather effectively halted.

It was her turn to use her fingers under his chin to get him to look at her. There was a trace of resentment on his sallow face and worry about what was coming tomorrow, which she expected. What concerned her was the trace of shame that she could also see.

"I'm going to sit here naked until you tell me what's upset you," she pronounced.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: The Final Battle

Severus seemed to consider several replies. As his eyes wandered to the level of her chest, he asked with what was almost a light-hearted voice, "And you think that such a statement will induce me to tell you the problem?"

Hermione smiled at this success but then watched as his eyes slipped lower and he frowned. Looking down at herself and then twisting a little, she found the spots on her hips where he had clasped her rather roughly at some point in their encounter. There were a series of rather red finger-shaped marks that looked as though they might bruise.

Ah.

"I believe," she said in a conversational voice, "that you saw in my memory what happened when I came upon the people who were torturing you."

His eyes snapped up to hers, clearly not having expected this topic to be brought up here and now. She remained silent until he nodded.

"There were seven of them," she continued, "six Death Eaters and one terror of the wizarding world. You recall that?"

He nodded once more, still looking faintly nonplussed.

"I knocked them out without thinking about it. Having seen me do that, do you really think that I would let you do anything to me physically that I did not wish?"

His eyes widened infinitesimally, and she knew that she'd made her point.

"You have scratches down your back," she pursued, "and I haven't heard you complain. No doubt you'd tell me if I were too rough on you?" He regarded her sardonically. She raised an eyebrow. "I did Stun six Death Eaters and Voldemort. You might be too scared of me to say."

He hauled her into his arms and kissed her for her effort.

"Point made, Hermione."

She smiled at him. "I'm not saying that I'll want every time to be quite like that one, but the circumstances are rather particular, and I'd rather have sex than get yelled at." His lips twitched. "I appreciate that you're worried about hurting me, but I promise to keep you apprised."

"Very well."

This, she assessed, was his desire to close an awkward topic; she moved so that they could both get dressed, which included mending a tear here and there with a charm, leaving Hermione once again grateful that she was a witch.

Once they were decent, they went up to the Great Hall where a single table had been set up for meals. The second large table displayed an elaborate map of the school. There, they'd been planning where everyone would be placed for the warding. With the larger group, they'd organised as if for the real ceremony, and with those who knew about the actual plan, for the pretend warding-cum-battle of tomorrow morning.

Voldemort was not completely stupid, and if he were to become suspicious, he would likely leave before she and Severus could trap him here with the wards. This meant that everything had to go off without a hitch as far as tomorrow's mock un-warding went, and that meant they had to plan every detail.

The diagram showed that their forces would be spread over the entire castle. Hermione and Harry were going to be located just inside the main doors where she would be able to keep a physical eye on the proceeding and be ready to meet Voldemort with Harry, Albus, Severus, and Draco. The probability had been judged high that the egotistical maniac would try to take the castle through the main doors. He would no doubt anticipate meeting Albus there, possibly even Harry as well, but he would hopefully be taken by surprise by such a group who was quite ready for him.

They had argued back and forth about whether or not Voldemort would send any sort of advance guard to verify the situation before he appeared himself. Severus had made his best guess, finally, that the man would not risk himself until he was assured that he could make a grand entrance.

Once both he and his Death Eaters had arrived, Hermione could reset the wards and help Apparate all their people back to the castle.

Tonks relayed the necessary information to Kingsley; otherwise, they avoided speaking to anyone who worked at the Ministry. They would retrieve those who would be participating in the morning.

Additional Order members had all been put on alert and would also be retrieved in the early hours of the morning, though any who were not here at Hogwarts still thought they were on alert for the actual solstice.

It was only tonight that Albus and Hermione sealed up the school tightly before he announced that no one was going in and out because they were actually going to be doing the warding tomorrow rather than Sunday.

There was a bit of stunned silence at the beginning but a growing chorus of nods as people seemed to accept the idea and see the wisdom of doing the warding before Voldemort expected it.

Albus explained that they had Voldemort exactly where they wanted him, that he thought to find them unprepared on the solstice when they would actually be well-protected by then. The secret, Albus declared, of when the warding was actually being held had been kept with the utmost care.

They didn't really think the likelihood that there was a spy for Voldemort in their midst right now was high, but they all remembered Peter Pettigrew, and they were taking as few chances as they could.

It was going to be a bit of a shock for everyone tomorrow—at least for those who didn't guess the possibility of it still going all pear-shaped or of Albus knowing more than he let on—but everyone who had stayed had been willing to fight, and Severus had been working them hard enough that two days hardly made a difference.

It was the way that they intended to defeat Voldemort, anyway, and they were committed to it now.

They retired early; they might not actually sleep, but there was no more to be done for tomorrow except to be there and ready to fight. Being well-rested was the best way to achieve that. The un-warding ceremony began at six twenty-three which meant that most of them would be up hours before that.

Hermione was relieved that she no longer had Head Girl duties that would mean the necessity of a patrol later in the evening; she kicked off her shoes as soon as she got through the door and had no intention of putting them on again until the morning.

They might not have their regular duties, but since so many of them weren't sleeping alone, it would no doubt still be hours before sleep was achieved.

Hermione shared this observation with Severus as she emerged from her turn in the bathroom. He snorted.

"I imagine Albus had that in mind when he sent us off at half seven."

Probably the man had. And she, for one, was very grateful for the time that she now had. Since Severus was tugging her into his arms, she was pretty sure he felt the same.

He kissed her, and she melted against him, twining her arms around his neck as she gave herself over to all the feelings that he always roused in her when they were being intimate like this.

Although she was reasonably certain that she had convinced Severus there was no lasting harm done from their encounter earlier in the day, it was impossible not to notice that all his actions this evening were extraordinarily gentle.

He undressed her carefully by hand, first removing her robes and then what lay underneath, fingers trailing fire over each exposed part of her body, ghosting up her sides as he removed her shirt and making her breath catch, tracing along her belly and hips before he undid her trousers. Her arousal leapt higher as his hands lingered on her inner thighs for a moment before he continued.

With the grace that characterised so many of his movements, he managed to remove her trousers and socks in a coordinated movement, fingers still roaming across her ankles and feet and finding sensitive areas that she hadn't even known existed.

He was so very wonderful, and she felt, sometimes, as though he had utterly failed to notice just how amazing he was.

"You are wearing altogether too much clothing, Severus. Let me help you with that."

It took a little more work to get through enough of his layers to reach skin, but they had the time for her to do it slowly and methodically, and she still enjoyed the notion of being the one to reveal this facet of him, to liberate this part of Severus for their mutual enjoyment.

He only had one piece of clothing left when his hands came up to cup her breasts through her bra, the heat of his palms clearly detectable through the thin cloth, her nipples already hard nubs. Apparently, he thought she was the one who suddenly had too much clothing left. His hands shifted, the pads of his fingers brushing across the swell of her breasts, and she smiled at him a little breathlessly. He pushed the straps off her shoulders before finally reaching around her to unclasp her bra so that he could draw it off entirely.

She thought it was her turn now, but his hands were faster, so she allowed him to help her step out of her underwear before she reached for his.

She pulled down his pants the old-fashioned way, remembering the first time she had undressed him and her worry that she would mess it up and hurt him. Since she took the opportunity to stroke him—this was an important area of skin, after all, and she was making sure to touch as much as possible—she didn't think she had to worry that he was in pain.

Once they were completely naked, they tumbled into bed, and Severus continued to map out every inch of skin with fingers and mouth as though trying to memorise her by touch and taste rather than sight. He was capable of such sternness, hard movements and harsh words that had made him a legend amongst Hogwarts students and alumni. It would always make up part of who he was, but it was so far from being his sole defining characteristic that her mind boggled at how little everyone else understood him, how little she had understood him in the beginning.

Not that she wanted anyone else to experience any of this, but it was still so much to have missed, the depth of emotions that made this possible. Because he was capable of such tenderness, of soft touches and slow, drugging kisses. It made her feel cherished, and she did her best to lavish as much attention on him so that he would know that no matter what happened tomorrow, he meant the world to her and he always would. He was her mate, and in those delirious moments when they kissed and touched and twined together as they drove one another to ecstasy, she felt at peace.

As he slept with his limbs entwining hers, she comforted herself with the knowledge that if she did die tomorrow, she would have spent her very last night on Earth in the exact manner that she wished. Their lovemaking had been utterly unhurried and felt like an affirmation of everything that they felt for one another.

She did not want to die, of course, but she had to admit the possibility. Fearing death could make her like Voldemort, would make tomorrow loom and threaten the worst possible outcome as a selfish one. Accepting the possibility of her death, she could move forward calmly. She would live or she would die, but she would do everything in her not inconsiderable power to bring Voldemort down with her. Harry had the same intention, and between the two of them, she thought they had the best chance of success out there. The only thing she really feared was Voldemort taking over, and they were all stepping up to make that as unlikely as possible.

She feared losing Severus too, of course, but she had been living with that possibility since his mortality had been brought home to her so forcefully in sixth year before she had even realized just what he meant to her. It was something else she would do everything she could to prevent, but there were no guarantees for tomorrow.

The thought of losing the chance to have a long and happy life with Severus was chilling, and she would do what she could to stay alive, but she recognized that her two goals might become mutually exclusive. And defeating Voldemort was crucial for the continuing survival of the wizarding world.

She finally had to meditate to force herself to sleep. Waking a few hours later, she slipped quietly away from Severus. She had already promised him that she wouldn't go out into the Forest this morning, so she went down to the courtyard and changed into a unicorn in a quiet corner.

The morning was silent, and she wondered if it was her imagination that even the birds sang less than was their wont.

Albus joined her an hour later. Since he already knew her Animagus form, she continued to stand there absorbing light. She was going to need all the energy she could get for this endeavour.

"There is a great deal taking place in a few hours."

There is, she agreed.

"I wanted to thank you, my dear, for taking such good care of Severus. I have not seen him this happy in, well…." He smiled faintly, although the smile was touched with a great deal of sorrow. "I do not believe I have ever seen him this happy. That is a great gift."

He is my mate, she responded simply.

"So I gather. And unicorns mate for life."

She nodded, glad that there was someone to whom she did not need to explain this.

This understanding reached, he disappeared back the way he had come, and she reflected that he was very old and very wise—most of the time, at least—and not nearly as batty as he pretended to be.

Since she knew that Severus would not be terribly pleased to wake alone, she returned to his bed and kissed him to wakefulness. It was, she hoped, an auspicious way to begin the day.

It was four now, the sun already risen, not a cloud in the sky, and pathetic fallacy was really not doing its part to show what was looming in their very near future. It looked, actually, like the perfect sort of day for a warding ceremony.

She and Severus took turns in the bathroom, dressed quietly, and made their way out of the bedroom. She thought they were heading straight up to the Great Hall, but Severus stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Come sit by the fire for a moment."

He seemed very serious, so she did as she was bid, wondering what he needed to tell her right now that was making him look so grave.

To her surprise, she found that when she'd sat down, he was kneeling at her feet. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Hermione Jane Granger, you are very fond of telling me that I am your mate. I thought that it was about time for me to declare my own feelings on the matter."

It felt as though her heart had frozen and the blood had ceased to pump through her veins.

"I have always preferred solitude, and over the years, I have perfected the art of acquiring it. I am disagreeable and nothing to look at." She opened her mouth to protest, but he squeezed her hand and continued, "But you look at me, and you see me. For inexplicable reasons, you want to be with me. You've insinuated yourself into my life and I bloody well like it that way. You've insinuated yourself into my heart."

She exhaled loudly, realizing that she had to keep breathing or she was going to pass out.

He produced a black velvet box which he opened to reveal a ring that looked to be made of platinum shaped like leaves and vines which curled around a star sapphire surrounded by small diamonds. She somehow doubted that he had popped out to the shop and bought this recently, and that meant it was inherited.

"I would like to make you my mate. Will you bond with me?"

She looked down into his dark eyes, so intense with the emotions that he rarely shared. He was a very private man, and here he was on his knees pouring his heart out to her anyway when he knew that one or both of them could die and thus make these words completely unnecessary. She beamed at him even as tears formed in her eyes.

"I love you, Severus Snape, and nothing would make me happier than bonding with you."

They came together in a crushing embrace, arms tangling, lips mashing together, all their feelings communicated in that one blissful moment.

Unfortunately, they could not dawdle. Severus drew back and removed the ring from the box to slide it onto her finger where it immediately resized itself so that it fit snugly. She could feel the protections emanating from it and knew that no one but she could now remove it.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you are."

She was somewhat startled by this prompt compliment, though she could feel the force of his conviction.

Severus Snape, she realized, was something of a closet romantic, and she really, really wanted to get the bloody Final Battle out of the way so that they could explore all this in a great deal more depth.

Before she could bask in the moment properly, she was being pulled to her feet so that they could hurry to the Great Hall. They stood for a few moments at the entrance just surveying the interior and seeing that most people were up and milling about, talking quietly, sipping tea or coffee. There was a meal that Hermione was certain she was not going to eat on the table that did not have the mock-up of the grounds.

Albus was up by the head of the room, surveying everything from that direction.

Tonks hurried in a few moments later, checking when she found Hermione at the door and handing over two wands that Hermione realized after a startled instant must belong to Narcissa and Lucius. She was glad Albus had thought of that.

Fawkes, will you tell Albus that I'm about to retrieve some of our guests?

Looking to get this party started, are you, Girlicorne? he asked with amusement from his position on Albus's shoulder.

But of course.

He assented, she told Severus that she'd be right back, and then she Apparated to the house where Narcissa and Lucius were waiting for her.

She handed their wands to them but pointed out, "I think it might be best if you refrain from using them right away."

Lucius smirked slightly, and she could see that he looked better than he had when she had seen him on Wednesday.

"I'm going to Side-Along with both of you," she continued since there wasn't really time to waste.

Lucius stiffened marginally. "We know how to get to Hogwarts."

Narcissa laid a soothing hand on his arm as Hermione said, "I'm quite certain that you do, but we are going directly to the Great Hall."

This quite undid Lucius's effrontery.

Narcissa stepped into the breach smoothly. "We would appreciate your assistance."

Hermione took each of their elbows, deciding that the full-body hug she preferred when Apparating Severus was really not necessary under the circumstances. A thought later, they were in the Great Hall.

Albus, who always seemed to enjoy being one step ahead of everybody else, did not appear to have informed anyone of their coming before she arrived—or so she gathered from the fact that she had to throw up a shield to prevent herself or her guests from being Stunned or otherwise incapacitated.

"It's marvellous to see that all your reflexes are in such good order this morning," Hermione said dryly. "As many of you know, this is Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy. They are going to be assisting us this morning. If any of you have any problems with this fact, I invite you to address yourself to Albus or myself. We have already vouchsafed them. Do I make myself clear?"

There were some doubtful looks, but it was hard to miss the fact that Albus was beaming cheerily at everyone, and no one looked as though they were going to immediately remonstrate with her or the headmaster.

Once the frozen tableau had broken, Harry and Draco rushed over.

"You're standing with my parents," Draco said quietly as though she might not have perfectly realized.

"They're here to protect you." Everyone still looked pretty tense, so she tried again. "Draco, perhaps you should introduce everyone. I don't believe it's been done properly yet."

Draco, thus prodded, did so; in her experience, one could usually count on a pure-blood's upbringing to kick in in these sorts of situations. It didn't matter if it was all a formality because they already knew one another. This was the proper way to do it, and it was pretty much guaranteed to be polite.

"I'm going to leave you here and trust that you'll all continue to get along for a few minutes," she said lightly. "I have to speak to Albus."

She didn't really need to speak to the headmaster, but she was ready to be done with this happy foursome for a while. She'd have to trust that Narcissa could hold them all together on the off-chance that any grievances might suddenly be raised, though Hermione certainly hoped they all knew that now was not the time for that sort of thing.

Before she could leave, Narcissa laid her hand on Hermione's arm. The Gryffindor paused and looked up into the silvery eyes that were so like her son's—and like Sirius Black's, Hermione realized in a flash. It was much easier to see that when they were not clouded with disdain.

"Thank you," the woman said.

Hermione thought, for a moment, that this was for vouching for them, but then she saw that Narcissa's eyes had indicated her husband. Apparently, her interference in the man's mind had been remarked upon and approved of.

"You're welcome," Hermione said softly.

She had no idea what had brought her to this point in her life, but here she was, edging towards cordial terms with all the Malfoys. Who would ever have thought?

Since she'd said she was headed over to see the headmaster, Hermione did exactly that, Severus joining her with alacrity, and the older man's twinkling eyes informing her that he knew exactly what their object was.

She greeted him politely and then subsided beside him, taking a look at the wards and ensuring that everything was in order.

The last of the Order members were arriving now. Kingsley had not only arrived, he had brought Percy Weasley with him, of all people, the complacent look on Albus's face at the tearful reunion that resulted—most of the tears were Molly's—showing that he had been in on the surprise.

Hermione overheard only a bit of the story which went along the lines of Percy finding it difficult to go back to his family when he realized the error of his ways, so he had gone to Kingsley instead.

If he was here now, Hermione was trusting that Kingsley and Albus had done the thing properly. It made her a little nervous, but she supposed it wasn't any different than expecting everyone else to trust her about the Malfoys. At least last time she had checked, Percy hadn't made as irrevocable-seeming a choice as Severus had done at the same age, so a reconciliation and change of heart was definitely possible. Having had her own run-in this year with Weasley stubbornness and blindness in the face of new information, she could understand Percy worrying about the reaction of pretty much everyone who wasn't his mother.

This made it the full Weasley clan in attendance, and Molly seemed equally happy and distraught since it meant that she could lose all of them. Hermione had no idea what Ginny had said to her mother given that the youngest Weasley would not be seventeen until August, but she had apparently carried the day. Knowing what the youngest redhead had been through even in her first year at Hogwarts, Hermione really didn't believe it would have been fair to refuse her. Like it or not, she was already a part of the war.

The twins didn't need to open their shop for several hours, so no one would miss them until it was too late, and Charlie and Bill had each taken a full week off work "to be home for the solstice celebration this year".

Kingsley confirmed that he had left word at the Ministry about his unavailability, but Hermione was promptly sidetracked as the wards apprised her of the arrival at the Hogwarts gates of Remus with nearly two-dozen of the ex-werewolves from the safe house.

She had been wondering where he was. She was staring very pointedly at the headmaster by the time the Disillusioned troupe had arrived in the Great Hall and revealed themselves.

"They were very insistent, my dear," Albus said, sounding the same sort of complacent that he had about Percy's arrival. "They wish to see the end of Voldemort and Greyback, and they wish to defend you. I only permitted those who could fight to come."

Hermione wanted to send them all back, but she wished to do that with most of the people in the room, and she realized that she simply didn't have the right. Heather, Mary, Gary… so many of the people whom she had grown to care for so well in the months that she had known them. All of them aware that Greyback was out there with Voldemort…. No, she could not blame them for coming.

"Very well," she said as calmly as she could.

She hoped desperately that she wouldn't have to see too many of these people die. Her mate—her fiancé, and she damn well wanted to see what came next—her best friend, Draco, Ron…. It was more than a quarter of the graduating class, over a third if she discounted those who were under arrest or in hiding.

Luna and Ginny. Viktor, standing quietly beside Pansy. Almost half the ex-werewolves who were finally on the brink of getting their lives back, and how wrong would it be if some of them didn't make it to the first full moon where they were completely free, not taking part of her cure or locked up in the safe house but released to the wide world?

Now she really knew how Harry felt, people around him dying for his cause. She might not have made them come, it might be something that they would have chosen to do even if they had never met her, but if they died, she knew who she would blame.

Castina's voice sounded loud in her mind. Dementors have entered the Forest.

At what location? Hermione asked. In what numbers?

The southern edge of the Forest. We are away from our valley. They are moving fast in … large number.

Something in Castina's tone as much as her avoidance of giving an actual number made Hermione realize that they were in trouble.

Castina, she said with a hint of iron in her tone.

Images flashed through her mind, and Hermione realized that this was the whole host of Dementors, all those who had left Akzaban under Voldemort's aegis and all those who had bred since then. Hundreds.

Hermione steadied her mental voice. They cannot be engaged seriously until our battle begins. We must not appear to have reason to be suspicious.

The herd mare's voice was clipped. Understood.

Hermione didn't like the idea of allowing Dementors to roam through the Forest any more than Castina did, but they both knew what had to be done.

Hermione summoned Harry—Draco came with him—and threw up privacy charms even though they were on the cusp of the revelation anyway.

"Dementors in the Forest," she said quietly. "They're moving for the wards."

"As anticipated," Albus said calmly. "It will take them a little while to reach their positions."

Until they crossed the wards, there would be no reason for those at the castle to be aware of them—not unless they happened to be able to communicate by thought with denizens of the Forest.

And pretence was finally abandoned.

"Everyone," Albus said, raising his voice so that he could be easily heard, "I need you all to remain calm."

The entire room stilled, almost preternaturally so. Hermione supposed that any sentence from the headmaster which started that way meant that there was definitely cause for alarm.

"I have just been advised by some of our allies in the Forest that a host of Dementors has been spotted advancing within its boundaries. This means Voldemort is on his way."

A murmur went up around the room.

"Fortunately, we are prepared to fight him, but I must ask that you trust me and follow the plan exactly."

He explained how they would be feigning the un-warding in order to ensure that Voldemort and his army all arrived on the grounds. He never actually said that this was the back-up plan but somehow left that impression, as though this was a worst-case scenario rather than what they had envisioned all along. Without going into any details, he told them that they were to perform the un-warding just as they had practiced, without actually casting, and he told them that when it was necessary, they would feel a pull to Apparate and should do so, as this would be bringing them to safety.

She could see that everyone didn't understand, though a dawning awareness on some of the faces looking up at her indicated that the truth of this plan was starting to impinge. Whether they suspected the truth or not, Albus spoke with such calm assurance and they were so used to following him that it seemed to be a fait accompli. There was the whole group of them who knew the actual plan, and of those who were left, the vast majority of them knew, for example, that Albus was capable of disbanding the wards that prevented Apparition. At this point, the actual details did not matter.

"We are going to do everything within our power to defeat Voldemort today," the headmaster said with that thread of power in his tone that belied all the times he acted only an old man.

Albus sounded so very certain, and she and Harry were standing there, and Draco and Severus, too, a solid wall of support and of firm intention to stop Voldemort.

"Into your robes, if you please, and remember to wait for Fawkes's signal to begin our version of the ritual."

Everyone moved to obey immediately, slipping the light silk robes over their everyday dress. The ceremonial silk had been charmed to cover the robes that they were wearing underneath so that they would not slip aside and betray them too soon.

In a few moments, everyone was ready with their robes and bowls and herbs. Hoping that this plan had as few flaws as possible, Hermione and Harry and Albus sent their friends out to take up their locations.

One of the most potentially dangerous positions was by the gates where Voldemort, his Death Eaters, or other creatures could be planning entry or exit once the wards were down. Unfortunately, the removal of the wards would most definitely include participants at a main entryway. Since they were working so hard not to arouse Voldemort's suspicion, they hadn't wanted to put all Aurors down there, either. Ron and Minerva had volunteered. Neville, Tonks, and Kingsley would be at the perimeter of the wards in the Forest, hardly an enviable area to protect, either.

Hermione and Harry had formed part of the group that had clustered around them to hug them—not in goodbye, but just in case. Ron refused once again to allow Molly to join him, Tonks did the same for Remus, and Hermione prayed as she watched them go that this wasn't the last time she saw them. She was sure that Molly and Remus were doing the same.

Once everyone else was gone, Hermione took the vials of blood that she needed from Harry and herself and tucked them, together with Solace's, into an inner pocket. She was now as ready as she would ever be for the casting of the blood wards.

Together, she, Harry, Severus, Draco, and Albus moved to stand at the doors to the castle. She drew a deep breath and took full possession of the wards as smoothly as she had done countless times in the past. That this was now the most crucial time ever would not change anything.

Severus came to stand behind her, ready to be a physical support as well as a mental and magical one. The wards were still running at full power, and she felt as each of the people arrived at the positions they had agreed upon. Hagrid was down in his hut at the edge of the Forest in yet another position of danger.

She could detect the weak spots in the wards, the areas where more attention should be concentrated if they were really doing this daft warding scheme—which at the moment seemed very stupid to her.

Severus pressed a kiss onto the top of her head.

"Don't begin to doubt yourself now, love. It's time to do this properly."

She felt a tingle of warmth curl through her. He'd never called her "love" before; there was no real reason for that to make her feel insensibly more resolute, yet it did. Perhaps it was the desire to hear him say it many more times in a very long life. They did have to do this properly, and there was no room for mistakes.

Castina advised them that what looked like a whole clan of vampires had also entered the Forest. The Dementors had halted far enough back from the wards that they could not be seen, although Hermione suspected that it was going to be a hell of a gloomy stand for Kingsley, Tonks, and Neville.

It had probably not taken very much work on Voldemort's part to convince the Dark Creatures to come back here where they had not been allowed to feast last time. There were so many of them, a fact which she had kept to herself because she didn't want to demoralize people who would need every happy thought they possessed to fight the Dementors.

Once battle was engaged, Kingsley would be calling in the Aurors. Assuming they responded—they wouldn't be at work, and they hadn't been put on alert for obvious reasons—it would be they who would have to fight what enemy forces remained on that outer side of the wards. She would try to keep as many of the Dementors off the grounds as possible.

Hermione sank deeper into the wards and felt when Severus connected with her. She was permitting him to see what she saw and feel almost all of what she felt. Her last secrets were meant to keep him safe.

Six twenty-three arrived, and Fawkes rose from Albus's shoulder to hover gracefully above the entranceway and let out a loud trill that penetrated the entire castle. He settled back on his human perch, and Hermione felt through the wards as everyone began to chant just as though they were really trying to bring the wards down, bowls of herbs at their feet and wands in their hands, speaking the words but putting no magic behind them.

While Hermione, Severus, Harry, and Draco stood to the side of the doors where they could not be easily seen, Albus had moved to stand right in the doorway, arms outstretched. If this were happening for real and they didn't have a wards-mistress in their midst, it would be the headmaster who directed the lowering of the wards, using the wizards who were casting around the perimeter as beacons to assist him in magically finding the wards. Together, with the combined power generated by the ritual, they would bring them down.

Hermione responded as the wards would have responded, lowering the layers of protection bit by bit, place by place. There went the wards that prevented arrival by air and unauthorized Flooing. The ones that prevented Apparition. The ones for Dark Creatures, Dark Magic, Dark Marks, self-harm, detection by Muggles….

Since they were trying to make this look perfectly authentic, Albus, Harry, Draco, and Severus were using a complex Protean Charm to make all those crystal bowls levitate and then the herbs within burst into flames—as would have happened as a result of the magic generated in the ritual had they actually been performing it, the bowls acting as conduits for the disbanding magic to ensure that it was released in a controlled manner.

On and on the wards went, layer by layer, until, at twelve minutes past seven, every type of protective ward that had ever been on the grounds of Hogwarts appeared to be completely absent. At this moment, the fires abruptly extinguished and the bowls fell to the ground; there was nothing like Fawkes and Hermione's combined effort to ensure that a bit of magic was done in a synchronized manner.

Hermione was sweating with the effort of making everything appear quiescent, and she could already feel the bolstering presence of Severus's mind and magic, a bedrock in her head. The level of concentration and power required to fake such a large magical occurrence was very high. She had practiced bringing small portions down slowly, but this scale was extraordinary.

It felt a bit as though she had taken all the wards and pulled them inside of herself, cramming them tighter and tighter and tighter until she felt as though she were going to burst, as though Hermione had disappeared and a ball of chaotic magic had taken her place, quivering and unstable.

But nearly an hour after it had started, the grounds seemed wide open and empty, just as they ought to.

Severus had his arms wrapped around her, and she struggled to remember who she was and what she was doing; the reminder that both of them were physically present was a very welcome one.

Realizing that she could pare down the chaos in her head, she began to dissolve the wards that no longer mattered for this battle; if they lived through it, they would be re-casting anyway, and right now, there was no need for the wards that password-protected the common rooms or prevented males from entering female dormitories. Dark Magic would be used here today, and no one needed alerts about that fact. Protections against inclement weather that they would not be feeling in the middle of summer were similarly abandoned. Down through the list she went, and she began to breathe a little easier.

Silence reigned, and then there was the tell-tale pop of Apparition.

It was right onto the middle of the grounds, and they found that Voldemort had, indeed, sent someone ahead of him. Tracey Davis stood there, and it was clear that she was still mildly surprised to have arrived in the middle of the grounds with nothing to stop her. She let out a tiny bark of laughter.

Hermione wondered if the other woman had watched Disillusioned from beyond the gates to ensure that they were performing the ceremony before she Apparated directly onto the grounds. It was what Hermione would have done, anyway, and it was the reason that they had put on such a good show.

Albus, as though just becoming aware of her presence—though Hermione didn't imagine for a moment that his eyes had been as closed as they looked—said, "My dear girl, I am afraid that now is not the most auspicious time."

"I'm very sorry, headmaster," Tracey said with a passable attempt at contrition and urgency, "but it's an emergency, and I need to see you very desperately. May I come up to speak with you?"

She had begun to walk across the grounds, and Hermione itched to go for her wand—despite the fact that she wouldn't even need it to down the other woman.

"Of course, Miss Davis," Albus answered in his most benign voice. Hermione imagined that he was using his most twinkly eyes, too, as though to confirm to Tracey that he was completely old and senile.

It was well enough acted, for it was only as Tracey mounted the steps and Albus looked down at her that Voldemort appeared on the lawn a few feet away, Wormtail at his side. He looked as malevolent as he had when Hermione had seen him torturing Severus, his eyes slitted and red, his pale wand gripped in one long-nailed hand. He was too tall and too thin for it to be natural, and Hermione wondered anew what he had done to himself to cling to this mortal plane.

She had no idea how Tracey had alerted her master, but Hermione Silenced the woman, and Severus went with a Stunner at the same time that Harry used the full Body-Bind. The Slytherin girl fell to the steps with a muffled thud. Voldemort laughed.

"A little too late for that, old man," he sneered. "I had not quite believed that you would actually be stupid enough to re-ward the castle now. How did you think you could keep such a thing from me?"

Hermione thought there could be less talk and more action; the longer it took Voldemort to Summon his Death Eaters, the longer she had to keep the wards quiescent, and it really felt as though there were too many of them to keep inside of her like this.

She felt the Dementors and vampires advance, a mixture of fractured images from the unicorns and proximity to the wards, and she Apparated Kingsley, Tonks, and Neville back to the Great Hall without thought before they could become the first casualties in the war. She trusted that they would keep quiet until they had assessed the situation.

The host of Dementors rolled over the area where the wards had been, and she needed to act. But Voldemort still hadn't summoned the Death Eaters. She already felt chilled, a fact which she thought had to be tied in with the wards because the Dementors weren't anywhere near her physical body yet.

She began to reshape the wards in her mind, pulling them back closer to the castle with the intention of keeping the Dementors and vampires out but still trapping the Death Eaters and Voldemort inside.

Severus's astonishment washed across her, but he practically pushed his magic at her to ensure that she could do what needed to be done.

Ron, Tonks, and Minerva were safe, at least, from the most immediate threat. Voldemort had indeed decided to make a grand entrance in front of the man who had opposed him longer than Harry had. Voldemort hadn't even bothered to put up anti-Apparition wards; apparently, he felt secure in the knowledge that none of the other participants in the ritual knew that he was here and that Albus would never run away from him and leave the school unprotected. The latter, of course, was quite true.

Hermione had reported to Tracey once upon a time that the participants in the ritual were now supposed to wait at their positions, meditating and recovering their energy before the re-casting, leaving them, to all appearances, sitting ducks ripe for the slaughter. As far as Tracey knew, Harry's location had been still to be determined but would be in the castle. This had seemed the best way to ensure that he wasn't ambushed directly; Voldemort would likely want to dispose of Albus and then go Harry-hunting.

Albus skirted around Tracey's prone form without giving her so much as a glance. He hadn't even pulled his wand as he took several steps closer to Voldemort.

"I had hoped that no one would betray me," Albus said calmly.

Stated like that, even Hermione had to admit that it sounded foolish.

She could have cheered as Voldemort called Wormtail's name curtly and pressed his wand to the other man's Dark Mark, finally Summoning the rest of his followers.

Hermione teased up the wards furthest away from Voldemort, the ones that were around the furthest extremities of the castle and which blocked the Dark Creatures in the Forest from coming any closer.

"I was not altogether certain that Tracey," he said with a disdainful look at the fallen form, "had it in her, but she brought me all the news that Potter's Mudblood had on the event."

Hermione held back a snort with an effort. Even being the reason—as far as he knew—that he was about to trounce them, she still didn't rate an actual name.

Albus's voice was very cool. "You don't really expect me to believe that, do you, Tom?"

Voldemort's eyes narrowed to slits. "Yet here I am," he hissed, "and here are all my loyal servants."

The Death Eater appeared en masse, more than a hundred of them, all with their wands out. Greyback stood on the left-hand side of Voldemort, Wormtail still on the right, silver hand glinting in the sun.

"Yes, here you are," Albus said slowly and clearly, and now it was time.

In the blink of an eye, Hermione had raised the wards once more, helping all her people Apparate a moment before she released the anti-Apparition wards behind them.

Severus's fingers were digging into her hips, grounding her and keeping her upright as the magic righted itself, and she struggled to get used to the feeling of the wards being on the outside and her being on the inside again.

Everyone was now ranged on the lawn on either side of where Albus and Voldemort were standing.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then everyone was firing at one another—only to find that there were wards between them which prevented anything from getting through. The flurry of spells stopped as quickly as it had begun.

These were some of the wards that she had rearranged just now, and they weren't going to hold forever; as soon as they took too heavy a blow or she had to concentrate completely on Voldemort, they would fall. They also wouldn't prevent the Unforgivables, but since this was looking to turn into a pitched battle, most of the Death Eaters weren't casting the Killing Curse all the time; it took a lot of magic.

Voldemort had frozen, red eyes widening slightly.

"Impossible," he said, an angry swish of his wand, however, proving that he had been unable to affect the wards and unable to Apparate. "It is not possible!"

Severus's hands were a warm pressure as they rested more gently against her now, a steady physical presence.

She was peripherally aware of a silver-coloured lynx darting off the grounds and knew that Kingsley was on the ball and the Aurors would soon be alerted.

Hermione and Harry stepped forward as one and found that Severus and Draco had come with them. Harry cast a sympathetic shield between himself and Voldemort; she and Harry could fire at Voldemort if necessary but very little that he could retaliate with would get through.

Now to convince the man that he needed to stand around and chat with them without flinging about any Unforgivables while she got the blood ward ready.

"Hello, Tom," she and Harry said in unison.

Voldemort's nostrils flared, but they had clearly garnered his attention.

Through clenched teeth, he told his followers, "I want those wards demolished."

The Death Eaters obediently started trying to break through her wards, firing at them repeatedly. So far, the Order members hadn't needed to fire back, but they had their wands ready and were on high alert in case they needed to dodge any Unforgivables.

"You don't really think I'd be stupid enough to tell her anything, do you?"

"I saw her memory of the events," Voldemort spat. "You were given Veritaserum and then Obliviated, you stupid Mudblood."

"I was given Veritaserum by the Ministry, too," she responded with enough condescension to be sure to annoy him, "and I still kept all my secrets. I told her exactly what would bring you here today. We, you see, have reliable advisors as to your behaviour."

As expected, this transferred Voldemort's ire to Severus who obediently moved so that he was standing at her side. This allowed her to wandlessly withdraw the three vials of blood that she needed without Severus being in the way; they hovered behind her, and she cast a notice-me-not charm on them.

"You are a profound disappointment, Severus." Voldemort's voice was particularly biting. "It will give me great pleasure to kill you."

"I will not allow it," Hermione declared.

He gazed disdainfully at her. "What makes you think you can stop me?"

She spoke very coldly and very clearly: "The fact that I have already done so in the past."

His eyes widened marginally as the import of her words sank in.

"You," he snarled in disgust and disbelief.

"Me," she said, taking a step closer, Harry, Draco, and Severus following. "You will not be permitted to kill my mate."

As Voldemort, Wormtail, and Greyback scoffed, Hermione Vanished the vials so that only the blood remained, hovering in the air. It was a little difficult to do without looking, but she was motivated.

"I'm going to have that pleasure now, girl, and you are a fool if you think that he cares for you. He was after your power."

The blood combined at her command, moving faster and faster and faster in a vortex of flashing crimson. Urged by her to find the blood she, Harry, and Solace sought to judge, it moved to hover over Voldemort who did not appear to notice it, her charm holding. Still it spun, winking at her in the light of the sun.

She smiled at him, and she and Harry stepped further down the stairs. "I made Severus a gift of my power. You are not going to be able to poison me against him now, although it is rather amusing that you would try."

He didn't seem to like being called amusing and brandished his wand.

"I will enjoy killing you, Mudblood."

On that thought, the blood that had been swirling above him suddenly exploded and rained down over the area where Voldemort stood. Not so much as a drop of it landed on him or the ground, however. Rather, it hovered in minute particles all around him.

"What petty trickery is this?" he demanded, a wave of his wand having no visible effect in dispersing the liquid.

The Dementors had started trying to push against the new wards that she had laid to keep them out, wards that she had drawn up short of the Forest so that the perimeter was smaller and she could be certain that she excluded them all. She felt chilled to the bone. Fortunately, Voldemort's attack had not gone exactly to plan, so the Death Eaters were now the ones between the Order members and the host of Dementors. Some of them had actually turned back to cast Patronuses towards the Dementors. It eased the assault on her wards, slightly and left her relieved—and well aware of the irony—that some of the Death Eaters were up-to-date on their Dark Arts Defence.

Voldemort sneered at her. "I do not fear blood."

"You should," she answered, wondering why her breath did not appear in the air, it was so cold. "It was, after all, how you so cleverly regenerated yourself, was it not?"

"I used you to regenerate myself," Voldemort said with all his considerable malevolence directed at Harry.

Harry nodded, taking another step closer to his rival, and she followed. She had to concentrate on the blood wards now, sparkling in the air and slowly moving closer to Voldemort, although he did not appear to notice. Greyback and Wormtail, amusingly, had had the sense to get out of the way, stepping back from their master bit by bit and eyeing the pinkish cloud with misgiving.

The bombardment of the Death Eaters on her wards had not let up, and she could not put any more energy into them, not while she was forcing the Consilium Cognationis to take effect as she was doing. She was already drawing on Severus's power as it was.

Fawkes, she called. My wards are failing.

Harry's tone was practically chatty, just the sort of irreverence that annoyed Voldemort. "Normally, that accusation would be causing me a great deal of grief and guilt."

The phoenix let out another piercing cry, and the vast majority of their forces fired as she brought the wards down; she'd hoped they'd figure out the signal given that it was what had called them to start the warding ceremony. Those Death Eaters who didn't react quickly enough to the onslaught went down, although many of them had fired quite quickly as well. Wormtail and Greyback blended into the fray.

Albus, Draco, Severus—and the elder Malfoys, she noted distantly with surprise—had shields up around their core area so that she and Harry would not be disturbed by the furious battle that was suddenly being engaged on either side of them. Inside Harry's shield, it was eerily calm.

Voldemort was regarding Harry with glittering hatred. "No matter what anyone tells you, Harry Potter, it is your fault that I'm standing here right now."

A half dozen of the wolves made a rush for where Greyback had last been standing, and she was pretty sure that Remus had gone after Wormtail, but she let those details fall away, for she could only really concentrate on Voldemort—who did not seem to mind that his followers were fighting and falling all around him.

"Oh, I'm quite certain that it is," Harry agreed, clearly surprising Voldemort again. "Unfortunately for you, it's also the reason I'm going to defeat you today."

She felt several more Patronuses dash through her wards and felt the press of the Dementors ease a little.

"You have no special powers," Voldemort sneered. "I can touch you. You have no protection from your mother, and she was the only reason you lived all those years ago, a mistake that I am going to remedy today."

The droplets of blood, still sparkling slightly but almost too small to see now, moved even closer to Voldemort, a shimmering red haze.

"You're right again," Harry said cordially, and she was impressed with how chipper he was continuing to sound. "I wasn't the least bit special before you came that day. You, however, made me what I am."

This declaration seemed to stymie Voldemort, which was no wonder, really, given how long Harry had denied—or tried to deny—all connection between them.

In silent agreement, she and Harry moved to the part of the discussion that they had actually rehearsed as opposed to the ad-libbing that they had been doing up to this point.

Harry was regarding Voldemort through narrowed eyes. "I am going to tell you something, Tom Riddle, something that you have wanted to know for years, something that you lost some of your best Death Eaters for.

"'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…'." He paused and regarded Voldemort mockingly. "I'm sure you remember the beginning of the prophecy, but I think you will agree it might have been better if Severus hadn't brought you any of it at all."

Severus betrayed by a slight shift that he had not been aware that Harry knew of his complicity in this. Albus had told the Gryffindor in sixth year, thinking to force them to cordiality with a lack of secrets between them, and Hermione had taken away Harry's wand and threatened to let him cause her injury before he had calmed down enough to listen to her and finally accept that this was a huge and bitter regret, something Severus would have undone if only he could have.

"This is the other half of the prophecy." Hermione could see that Voldemort's attention was riveted upon Harry, and the older man paid no heed whatsoever to the tiny drops of blood that were now almost coating him, a faint sheen in the air. Harry continued, "'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 …. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…'."[38]

Voldemort's red-slitted eyes narrowed as he heard the entire prophecy for the first time.

"That was what you did, Tom," Harry said implacably. "You marked me as your equal, and you set me up to defeat you. Because I have a power that you know not."

"What power?" Voldemort demanded.

She and Harry stepped closer. "Have you not yet guessed?" Harry asked pityingly.

Voldemort's hand was clenching his wand in a white-knuckled grasp, but he wanted answers, so he made no move to attack them even though they were only a few feet away from him now.

"Here I am standing next to Hermione, and you can't imagine what power I have?"

Still nothing. She was guessing he tried not to think much about her—not unless he was slinging baseless insults, anyway.

"Tom, I'm surprised at you. What have you been searching for this entire year?" Harry grinned and answered his own question. "You've been searching for Purity and power. How can it have escaped your notice that it's standing right in front of you?"

And for the first time since he had been standing in front of them, Voldemort looked not only startled but also just the slightest bit afraid.

"You can't be—"

"The second Pure Adult," Harry said with a malicious smile. "If only you weren't so stupid, you wouldn't have driven off the two Slytherins we chose as mates."

Hermione was concentrating too hard on driving the little drops of blood closer or she surely would have laughed that he'd managed to get that dig in. The blood was nearly adhering to Voldemort's skin now, and before he could make a concerted effort to stop it, Harry distracted him again.

"Before this ends, there are a couple more facts that we need to make you aware of. Salazar Slytherin had a daughter."

"He didn't," Voldemort negated.

This was so very close to what Draco and Severus had said that Hermione had to still the urge to giggle once more, and she knew that all the magic running through her was starting to go to her head. But she could feel the blood wards had nearly taken effect.

"He did," Harry answered. "They quarrelled, and she was disinherited. She married a Muggle."

From Voldemort's sneering expression, this seemed to explain everything as far as he was concerned.

The Dementors were still trying to breach her wards to get to all the people on this side. She wondered if the Aurors were out there yet.

"Unfortunately for you," Harry went on, "they made up before Salazar's death, but she was well enough hidden that you never discovered that her line survives to the present day. You are not, in fact, the only heir of Slytherin."

The occasional stray spell was hitting the shield that the others were maintaining around her and Harry, but nothing had got through. If other people on their side were not engaging the Death Eaters, then Severus, Albus, and the Malfoys were blasting anything that got near this centre area.

Voldemort was eyeing Harry suspiciously. "You're descended from Godric. I already know that."

Harry laughed. "Quite amusingly, you're correct. I'm not the heir of Slytherin at all."

And given all the information he'd been forced to process, Voldemort finally made the right conclusion and looked to her with absolute disgust.

"Other than to make me more determined to cut your…." He hesitated as though he had to decide if he could still call someone who had some of Salazar's blood in her veins what he was about to call her, but he forged ahead, "…Mudblood to the ground, is there a reason that you're informing me of this fact?"

"There is," Harry said, smiling grimly, "because that night in the graveyard, you ensured that you not only had Solace Slytherin's blood in your veins as well as Hermione Jane Granger's, you also had mine, Harry James Potter's."

Hermione felt the blood come to a stop. The wards had adhered and now needed only to be activated. They both knew it was time.

She and Harry spoke in unison: "And together, as your blood, we are here to pass judgement upon you."

The blood exploded with a blinding flash of light, and it was everything Hermione could do not to lose hold of the spell. She felt a perceptible increase in the flow of Severus's magic into her, settling out into the school wards because it could not really piggy-back in to the Consilium Cognationis; he was not considered family of Voldemort.

When they were able to see again, it was to find that the blood had turned golden white and translucent and was now covering every inch of Voldemort. He tried to raise his hand and belatedly use his wand, but Harry and Hermione did not want him to. The wards held, and he could not move from the position he had been in when the wards activated.

Hermione felt his continued effort to move and fought against it with all her will knowing that Harry was doing the same. She could feel that the ward had formed with Harry as the focal point, the closest to Voldemort, then Hermione, and finally Solace.

Voldemort's magic fought against them now that it had perceived the threat that they represented, but they had become a part of him and forced the blood wards to stand, to prevent Voldemort from rendering any spell, verbal or non-verbal.

It felt as though Hermione's magic was slipping away so fast that she could almost see it go. The world had begun to haze out slightly around the edges, and she knew that the only reason she was upright was because Severus was holding on to her.

She didn't remember when he'd got close enough to start doing that.

Most of the wolf Animagi crossed the wards, and she realized that they had gone to engage the Dementors. There had been less of a presence against her wards, she realized belatedly, which must have meant that they were turning towards other targets. If they had been heading for the town or overpowering the Aurors—if they were out there—they had to be stopped. Wizards in animal form were the best way to slow them down.

It was now time to pass judgement, and her attention snapped back to the blood wards. They glowed brighter as she began to think of every instance she could possibly recall to mind that showed how Voldemort had disgraced his blood.

Solace's Muggle husband dismissed as worthless. The reputation of the house of Slytherin tarnished and vilified; Slytherins had been looked down upon and accused of being dark wizards even after Voldemort's seeming destruction. Pure-bloods whom he had destroyed because they were in his way. Muggle-borns killed when they were only trying to fit into the wizarding world. Muggles who were going about their business and wouldn't have known a single thing about the wizarding world except that they were attacked by it, all part of the world that Solace's line had chosen to value and be part of.

Sirius Black, the Longbottoms, Lily and James Potter. Cedric, killed needlessly, the Tri-Wizard Tournament subverted for Voldemort's personal gain, his father's body desecrated. The Basilisk used by Tom Riddle to hunt Harry Potter, to attack her.

Proud Slytherins brought to their knees. Draco tortured and nearly killed for trying to choose another life path. Her mate's life made miserable for decades. He'd been forced to commit actions that were abhorrent to him. He'd been injured repeatedly day after day. Voldemort had tortured and tried to kill the head of Slytherin, her mate, because Severus had been strong and powerful and brave.

Voldemort had tried to end the life of the man she loved, of her best friend, of so many people whom she admired. He had declared openly today that he wanted to kill all of them. She poured into the wards all the love she had for Severus and for the wizarding world and for the Muggle one.

Beside her, she could feel Harry doing the same, feel the agony for all the people he loved whom Voldemort had destroyed, feel how desperately he loved Draco and wanted a world free from Voldemort's hatred and intolerance. The blood wards pulsed angrily and turned an ugly muddy colour.

Voldemort's eyes flashed red. He was still fighting. She could feel him redouble his energy as the blood wards reached their verdict. She knew that she had Harry had managed it—if only they could support the wards long enough for them to carry out their sentence.

They had assessed Voldemort, and they had found no remorse in his heart for any of the actions that they had listed. His guilt was confirmed.

She buckled to the ground as the school wards faltered. A group of Death Eaters had apparently decided that Voldemort didn't look to be doing so well, and they'd begun to try to break through the wards at the gates. The wards were taking such a beating, and they had already needed to be re-cast. They could not sustain themselves.

The wolf Animagi appeared to be doing their job, too, because the Dementors were being pressed against the wards once more. The affliction on both sides was proving to be too much for her.

She had known it was going to be a struggle, but somehow, she had not realized it was going to be quite as bad as this.

Castina! she called weakly.

The herd mare was already fighting the Dementors, Hermione realized as she connected with Castina's mind. The centaurs were there, too, and perhaps it was they who were fighting the vampires. Some of the unicorns were with the group by the wards, more were in the Forest where some of the Dementors had broken away, trying to find another route to the townspeople and an easier target.

I come, the herd mare answered.

Hermione thought distantly that she should tell Castina to stay and fight the Dementors, but she could not seem to find the words. Knowing the unicorn was coming made her feel better somehow.

If the wards broke down completely, the Death Eaters would be able to Apparate, and the school would be completely unprotected. All the people whom Hermione loved—Order members, friends, ex-werewolves—could be overwhelmed.

Harry had slid to the ground at her side. Voldemort was fierce and malicious, his power battering at Harry and her, trying to drive them both off, trying desperately to free itself. They probably didn't know half of the things that Voldemort had done to keep himself alive against all odds, and it was their magic and the blood wards which were now forced to counter that. She couldn't feel the details of what was being unwoven, just that there was so much darkness there, so much evil….

There should have been three of them to perform this spell; she and Harry were powerful, but even they had their limits. Harry was still fighting with everything that he had, but her power remained divided.

Severus was feeding her his magic steadily for the school wards, had been feeding it to her steadily since this started, grounding her as he had promised to do. She knew that he was weakening just as steadily, that they were all dying, losing too much magic locked to this spell and to the wards.

She had sworn that she would do everything in her power to see that he lived through this battle. Albus had already guessed, and now it looked as though she was going to prove him right.

Before Severus could ascertain what her intention was, she severed their link and unMasked herself completely, more than she had ever done before, more even than when she had gone to Lucius Malfoy to rescue Severus.

She was no longer protecting her core or holding any reserves of magic; instead, she was using it all. She rose to her feet.

"Hermione!"

She did not allow him to touch her; she could not let him call her back now so she threw up a ward all around her and Harry and Voldemort. No one could reach them now. A wave of magical energy stabilized the flagging wards around the grounds, and she stopped thinking about them. There. The others were safe, and this would end.

Turning her attention back to Voldemort, she saw that the wards had lightened and were no longer such a putrid colour as they had been. Without Solace having actually said—for the woman had designed the wards but never used them—Hermione knew that when they reached white, she and Harry would be successful. The glow made it difficult to see anything else.

There was a clamour of voices that were trying to make themselves heard around her, but she could not listen to them.

Harry was the focal point of this spell. Because of what had happened in the graveyard, he was regarded as a nearer relation to Voldemort. They both had so little power left, and she knew what would happen if she let him remain the focus.

She couldn't let it destroy them both, and she could feel his magic as well as she could feel her own right now, knew that it was almost exhausted. Nothing in the world would prevent him from fighting, though. She held out her hand, knowing that they had to do this together, and Harry grasped it, hauling himself to his feet so that they stood side by side once more.

There was a lot of white noise now that seemed to be blocking everything else out, and she found herself rather relieved by that fact. Together, she and Harry stepped forward, closer to the blood wards, watched them lighten further as she and Harry continued to pour their magic into them, as she pushed and nudged until the greater amount of magic was coming from her so that Harry still had a little for himself.

The wards grew rosy pink and then lighter and lighter until they had only the faintest blush to them.

Protect yourself, she instructed Harry and waited until he had scrambled to throw up what shields he could.

She and Harry reached out and touched the wards that had coalesced around Voldemort's body. They flashed a blinding white.

There was an instant of dead silence, and Hermione had the strangest notion of absolutely nothing. She felt as though she were completely empty. Looking down at herself, she saw that she had ceased to glow, and some distant part of her brain knew that meant that she'd burnt out her core.

She doubted she was capable of MindSpeech anymore but tried anyway.

My mate.

And then there was the explosion that she had known was coming, and everything went dark.

Chapter Sixty: The Afterlife

Being dead, Hermione discovered, was a great deal more clichéd than she had anticipated. She was left with the sense that some time had passed since she'd been conscious and alive. She had no body, just a mind—or a soul, she supposed—that was now self-aware.

There wasn't really anything to see; it was all white. There was a great deal of light. Sometimes she could swear that there was music, almost too faint to hear and comprised of words that she could not understand.

It seemed as though many Muggle books and movies had gotten it right; she'd never put much stock in near-death experiences before. She wondered if she was going to have to spend all eternity in this mist. Unless something happened or someone came to talk to her soon, she was going to wind up bored out of her mind.

Then she became aware of the voices. It didn't seem as though they were talking to her; like the music, they were hovering on the edge of her consciousness. A number of voices, she thought, sometimes talking all at once and over one another.

They often sounded sad or worried, and she couldn't quite reconcile this to her idea of the afterlife or heaven. She supposed she could be in hell, but she hadn't ever thought much of that idea, either, and while it would be a long slow torture, she supposed, to be here and alone for eternity, the notion still seemed off. It felt too peaceful for that, too supportive.

It was impossible to track the time because not only did she lack a frame of reference, she sometimes faded out of this consciousness a little. She usually only noticed when she abruptly became aware that she hadn't been aware before. But although she could not be certain, it did not feel as though it had been merely minutes or hours.

As time progressed—at least, she thought it did—she began to fancy that the voices became closer and easier to understand. Almost, she could recognize who was speaking.

And then, finally, she realized. There was Severus and Harry and Draco and Ron. Albus, Minerva, Remus, Tonks…. Most of the Weasleys, she thought, some of the ex-werewolves….

It was many of the people from the Final Battle, and since she refused to believe that they were all dead, it meant that she could hear people who were still living. She hadn't totally dismissed the idea that dead friends and relatives could observe those still living, but she hadn't thought it would ever be like this. She had liked Albus's notion of the "next great adventure", actually, and this was … very boring. Not something new and different at all.

Still, though, if she was stuck in a bunch of white mist forever, she'd much rather know what Severus and Harry were doing than not. Being powerless to talk to them, to assist if they were in trouble was not ideal, but it didn't look as though Hermione had very many options here. Wherever here was.

She tried to focus on the voices and gradually discovered that she could tell where they were in the castle. Everyone she was hearing seemed to be at Hogwarts, and the more she thought about it, the more she understood; actual words, images, and lives came into focus.

This was when she discovered that her body was in her quarters.

It was a body, moreover, which wasn't dead.

This blew her heaven and afterlife idea out of the water, although it didn't answer the question of where "she" was if her body was in her quarters and she was clearly separate from it. But she could see it there now in unicorn form and found that there was always at least one person in attendance at her bedside. The most common attendants were Severus and Harry, and they managed to sit side by side more often than she would have anticipated.

Her awareness grew. She could track everyone's progress throughout the school, knew when people from the Ministry arrived, when Poppy released patients from the Infirmary.

It was remarkably similar to the awareness she had when she was connected to the wards, and this was how she finally arrived at what she thought was an accurate assessment of her present circumstances. Her consciousness, rather than being in her body but connected to the wards of the school, was in the wards. She was currently completely disassociated from her body, and it was the wards of Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry that were supporting her.

This explained the warmth of affection that she felt around her. The school had apparently endeavoured to take care of her even when she was no longer able to take care of herself.

Those last few minutes of the Final Battle came back to her. She remembered that horrible moment of burning out her core to protect Harry and Severus. She'd pushed all her magic into the wards and into the Consilium Cognationis that had killed Voldemort, and it appeared that the wards, foreign as this idea was, had given the magic back. Or at least, they'd caught her up and sustained her when her empty body had collapsed.

She was less certain why her body was still there. That unicorn body that was curled up rather incongruously on her bed was unconscious—and no wonder, as its consciousness was in the wards looking down at it—but it was still living.

She was sure that the body shouldn't be alive. She'd burnt out her core, been utterly unprotected in the face of an explosion, and that should have been the end of it all.

Yet here she was, inside the wards, and there her body was, healing, she supposed, and what did that mean?

She thought she was going to have to haunt the wards listening to everyone to get an answer to that question, but the castle itself provided the answer she sought. Because while Hermione had been unaware from the moment that the explosion had hit her, the wards had continued to function. Her consciousness in them had been overwhelmed for a time, but the wards still knew. And she was part of the wards right now. Maybe she was the wards; she had pulled them into her before in order to trap Voldemort, and now they had pulled her into them to keep her safe. So she could see people, hear people, be aware of everything that was going on at once.

And although she felt the school's misgivings, it did not ultimately refuse her when she wanted to see how the Final Battle had ended—twenty-four days ago, as it turned out. This didn't shock her as much as perhaps it should have, but there was some part of her that would not have been surprised to learn that it was ten years since the Battle. The wards and the castle did not perceive time in a human manner, but they gave in to her human desire and allowed her access to what occurred after she had burnt out her core.

After the explosion cleared, no trace of Tom Marvolo Riddle remained. He was vanquished utterly, and all that showed what they had done were the two very still forms who lay upon the scorched earth. Harry was half under her, looking white as snow, pale and drained. She, on the other hand, looked burned as though by a white hot heat, and from what she could see, she was as dead as she had assumed that she would be.

Someone yelled, a cry of monumental grief and outrage, and Hermione was rather surprised to discover that it was Severus, who rushed to her side to scoop her broken body into his arms even as Draco came to cradle Harry.

The Death Eaters had been knocked unconscious, apparently affected by their connection to Voldemort, and the fighters for the side of the Light had been able to disable and bind them all. Some began to search for the injured while others rushed past the wards to fight the Dementors.

In a flurry of scarlet plumage, Fawkes appeared next to Hermione's body and after examining her for a moment, shook his head and trilled a very sad trill that made Severus's body shake. He hopped over to Harry next, and the sound he made was much more encouraging. She remembered that Harry turned into a phoenix and liked heat; perhaps that had had a very concrete advantage in the end. Draco heaved a sigh of relief before looking guiltily over at his stricken godfather. The phoenix leaned down and several pearly tears dropped into Harry's slack mouth.

Castina and her mate reached Hermione's body as it lay in Severus's arms.

A dreadful premonition of what was to come swept through Hermione. Castina and Ashwin were looking down at Hermione's body in a very solemn way. If she'd possessed a body that was capable of crying, she would already have been in tears.

As it was, she could only watch in horror as the unicorn whom Hermione loved above all the others willingly repaid the debt that she believed she owed to Hermione.

She remembered the visit to the Forest that she had made with Severus, the benediction that she had felt she was receiving. Now she knew why when she had seen Castina for the last time very early Thursday morning, she had felt that Castina had been saying goodbye.

They were about to head into battle. The Final Battle as they had all believed that it would be. Hermione's place in it had been particularly precarious. It had never occurred to her that it might not be her death that was being anticipated.

She wanted to scream at Castina not to do what she was about to do, but it was no use, of course, for it had already happened. Hermione was only reviewing past events, utterly powerless to stop them.

I have lived a long time, Berit. Castina seemed to have grasped what had happened to Hermione when the others had not, for she addressed herself to the castle, voice soft but resolute: I do not regret my passing now that I have seen one of the great evils pass as well. That is your doing, and I would not have you sacrifice yourself for it.

Castina had never told her that a unicorn could sacrifice its life for another and could, in effect, cheat death after all—at least from the perspective of the person left alive, anyway. In all her reading, Hermione had never come across mention of it.

Looking down at them, Hermione ached. Ashwin was giving up his life for her, too, for a unicorn never lived without its mate. They were both calm, serene even; she could feel no sorrow in them.

Watching two of her herd members choose her life above their own hurt. She had saved Severus and Harry, and she had thought she had known the price. Pain and grief clawed at her, and she had no outlet for her tears here in the wards. She hadn't wanted anyone to die for her. She would never have chosen this.

And yet, she didn't suppose that Severus or Harry would have chosen to have her sacrifice her life for them if she'd given them the choice. It wasn't how this worked.

Between so many more wizards to fight them and the concerted effort of the rest of the herd, the last of the Dementors were dealt with, driven back against the wards and pierced by unicorn horns, falling to mist and then to nothing.

Hermione knew that the unicorns hated the Dementors and had perceived that they were fighting ferociously, but it was not until the herd passed through the wards and entered the grounds that Hermione understood precisely what was happening.

All the humans were moved out of the way: Harry, who was still in Draco's arms, Albus, the elder Malfoys, Ron. Severus was still holding her body in his arms, and when Albus would have urged him to his feet, Castina permitted him to stay.

The unicorns circled closer and closer around Castina and Hermione's body cradled by Severus, the entire herd working together to obscure them in a swirl of living white. It was as though energy were being generated, flaring brighter and brighter, reminiscent of the white light which had judged Voldemort and purged him from this world. The wards did not have eyes, but Hermione still found that she had to look away for a moment, as though she would be struck blind even viewing this memory in a non-physical form.

The light died away abruptly, and when the unicorns dropped back, there was now only one unicorn at the centre of the herd. Castina was gone, and Hermione's slender unicorn body was the only one that remained, Severus still cradling it in his arms as tears dripped down his face and fell to speckle her coat.

Hermione stared in shock at the sight. She could not quite believe that he released those tears in front of everyone.

The unicorns melted away, back to the Forest before anyone had the chance to question them.

It was Severus and Albus who lifted her body with magic and brought her inside. They had brought her to what she now realized she had so blithely referred to as her quarters because that was what the castle considered them. They were, in fact, the quarters that the castle had offered her and Severus when it wanted to induce her to stay.

Here in these rooms, she realized, she had real windows, and these had been cast open next to her bed so that the unicorn need not feel that it was the slightest bit imprisoned. Sunlight, moonlight, and starlight could shine down upon the body and keep it nourished.

Hermione saw that the humans were rather at a loss as to what to do with a unicorn patient. Castina had offered her life for Hermione's, and it was clear that the body was not dead—but neither was it awake. They were not to know that it was because her consciousness was completely out of reach at the moment; as far as they were concerned, she was in a coma, and she imagined that after twenty-four days, they had to be losing hope.

The wards also revealed to her that somehow, they had only lost three humans on their side. Greyback had managed to snap Heather's neck, but not before she had wounded him fatally. Kirkpatrick, the Auror who had fought Hermione during her Defence N.E.W.T., had been kissed by a Dementor. And fun-loving Seamus had been brought down by a Killing Curse cast by Rudolphus Lestrange.

Peter Pettigrew had been holding Ron under the Cruciatus when Remus finally caught him up, and the rat had not survived the duel. Ron had recovered and had been declared a hero with Viktor when the two of them had dramatically rescued Blaise and Pansy who had been cornered by several family members and former friends. Neville and Ginny had gone after the Dementors in their Animagus forms, harrying them while the other wizards used their Patronuses to prevent them from attacking or fleeing before the unicorns could destroy them.

There had been a number of injuries, some quite grave, but none as severe as Hermione's. By now, everyone had been released from the Infirmary.

Looking down at her unicorn form, she had to wonder if she was actually human at all anymore. Between her consciousness being in the wards and her body being a unicorn—not to mention the fact that it was a unicorn who had died for her—it was entirely possible that she'd never go together again as she was supposed to.

But it was time to find out because it was long past due for her to be in the Forest. There was an entire herd in mourning and a mate who she felt certain would be waiting. They deserved the immediate conveyance of her deepest sympathies and regrets.

Severus was the one sitting with her body right now, and as it was half four in the morning, he was tired and drowsing. Even as she watched, his head nodded down to his chest. He would not interrupt her now, and this, she was certain, needed to be done by her alone.

She thought about all the times that she had moved from her body to another person's mind, how she had travelled with Harry or Apparated through Lucius's Dark Mark to Voldemort, how she had connected with the wards all through the Final Battle. Looking at all of that, how could she find it difficult to get her consciousness back to her body now? Hermione in the wards could see her body quite clearly, could even mark the faint rise and fall of the unicorn's chest.

She closed her eyes—or at least stopped looking at the unicorn that was in front of her, as wards still didn't have eyes. Concentrating with all her mental energy, she thought about what it felt like to be a unicorn, thought about what it felt like to be transformed. She reminded herself of all the bodily functions that she felt, the heart pumping, the horn emerging from her forehead, the skin and shiny coat that covered her, the act of breathing in and out, the acute hearing and sense of smell….

Gradually, she sank into these remembrances, for the castle and her consciousness both knew where she really belonged. She practiced taking deep, slow breaths and gradually felt as though a chest were taking them with her, as though a body was wrapped around her.

She opened her eyes.

Normal sight that she had used for nineteen-odd years greeted her. Well, she amended, seeing out of either side of her head was a comparatively recent development, but she had proper eyes again and was definitely in a body. She rose to four legs that weren't nearly as shaky as she imagined two arms and two legs would have been in human form and was grateful for tall ceilings because she was now a unicorn standing on a bed.

She blinked and focussed on Severus sleeping in front of her. Although he should have had plenty of time to recover from the drain to his magic that she had caused, he looked terribly drawn, and she had a sinking feeling that his current condition had more to do with the still form she had been until moments ago than any other after-effect of the war. She had not meant to make him so sad, but choosing between her own death or his had been a no-brainer.

Slipping past him, she made her way quietly out of the castle, bypassing without thought all the wards that were supposed to alert anyone to her waking up or leaving the room. The secret passage in the dungeon was not designed for a unicorn's egress nor could she theoretically wield her magic in this form, but the door opened when she arrived at it and closed behind her. She did not question it.

It was raining, sheeting down on her to soak her coat and make it difficult to see, and she recognized peripherally that it had been raining since she had learnt of Castina's death. Fortunately, she had never needed her eyes to get to the valley where her herd lived, so she continued to make her way through her Forest and towards her second home.

It was very quiet, and she wondered if its denizens were still recovering from being positively overrun by Dementors, vampires, and all the other creatures who had invaded for the Final Battle.

As Hermione travelled towards the valley, she saw marks of the destruction that had passed, scorched wood, bare patches, rocks that had not been there previously, whole areas laid to waste.

The Forest seemed to be almost quivering with anticipation, or maybe that was just her imagination. This far beneath the trees, there was only the occasional stray drop of water, most of the precipitation blocked out by the great leafy canopy.

She made her way through the Forest steadily, feeling that both running and dawdling would be wrong under the circumstances. Although she had not advertised her presence, the unicorns were waiting for her. The new herd leader had no doubt sensed her easily. Hermione didn't even know who that would be, and it hurt to think about.

Ashwin approached her immediately, and Hermione felt human sentiments make her tear up inside even if she still could not cry.

I'm so sorry, she sobbed, abandoning any attempt at formality. I am so sorry, Ashwin.

He did not turn away from her but moved closer and nuzzled her gently.

There is nothing to be sorry for, Berit. His voice was low and soft. Castina made all her own choices, just as you have made yours.

But it means that you— she said brokenly.

It means that my time here is at an end as well, Ashwin answered calmly. That fact is not to be feared, little one. Like Castina, I have lived for many years, and I know, as she did, when it is time for me to leave the earthly plane.

She looked at him and found in his eyes resolution, sadness, and the same gaping emptiness that she had felt when she had feared that Severus had been lost to her.

Unicorns mated for life, and Ashwin's mate was gone. He had waited as a courtesy to Hermione, but he would wait no longer.

There were still mysteries that she did not understand.

Ashwin smiled mentally at her. It is time for me to go.

I would go with you, Hermione offered immediately.

This journey is mine alone, Berit, Ashwin answered. It is for me to rejoin Castina.

But you will get to see her again? Hermione asked piteously.

Of course I will, Berit. Unicorns mate for life. You don't really think life ends with death, do you?

There didn't seem a sensible way to answer that question, and she remembered again Albus's description of death as the "next great adventure". Unicorns, it seemed, had a better grasp of this than humans did. Ashwin longed to rejoin his mate, and she might not understand how it was done, but that was immaterial.

Who leads the herd now? Hermione asked, projecting an image of little Isaura at the head of the herd.

Ashwin smiled, though it did little to combat the loss in his eyes. He would not be whole again until he and Castina were together once more. Not at this time, Berit. Aila leads the herd.

Hermione did not know Aila very well, not as she knew—had known—Castina, although Hermione remembered that she had been one of the unicorns who had escorted Severus back to the safety of the grounds in January. It was also she who had allowed herself to be examined by the fifth-years when Professor Grubbly-Plank had been teaching Care of Magical Creatures.

From what Hermione had seen, she was a perfectly lovely unicorn, but Hermione couldn't help but feel that the herd would be different and that her home would never be the same without Castina and Ashwin here.

I will miss you, Hermione said, though it was so little of what she was trying to express.

And I, you, Berit. As Castina does. But the darkness has drawn back for a time, and that is what matters.

That, of course, was what they'd been fighting for. It was the reason she'd given her life, and the reason that Castina had given hers. Hermione would just have to remember that: Castina had died for a reason, and the best way that Hermione could honour her was to live the life that had been gifted to her.

Thank you, Hermione breathed, mental voice choked with all those human tears. Thank Castina when you see her.

Ashwin tossed up his head, stared at her for an infinitely long moment during which she could have sworn that she saw the entirety of his life with his mate stretched out before her, and then he was running through the Forest and passing out of her sight, and she knew that she would never see him again.

She turned to face Aila.

Welcome back, Berit, the new herd mare said.

I am sorry for your loss.

We all grieve. And Hermione could sense that she was included in this. We will miss Castina, but she left when it was her time. You and your mate must visit us again when you are feeling better.

Hermione nodded, pleased that Aila seemed to understand that staying here right now made Hermione feel as though her heart were going to break in two. She needed to get away from the memory of Castina for a little while and return, as Aila had said, with Severus, who would be able to hold her up if she broke down.

Before she left, Hermione went over to Isaura. Castina's time or not, Hermione still felt responsible, and to the unicorn who had just lost both her parents, an apology was owed. Isaura seemed to understand all of this better than Hermione did, but she was still sad. The herd would take care of her, Hermione knew that, but she couldn't quite stop her human sensibilities from saying that the little unicorn had been abandoned and it was Hermione's fault.

But Isaura seemed to understand, from eyes that were bright and wiser than her years would suggest, that neither of her parents could have stayed without the other, and it was clear from her direct gaze and the impetuous youth that made her nuzzle Hermione's neck that she did not in any way blame the human for the loss she had suffered.

She also imparted to Hermione Castina's last gift: several long, silken strands of her tail hair, coiled neatly and tucked away in the hollow of Isaura's favourite tree. Unicorn hoofs were singularly unsuited to grasping strands of hair, but Hermione found that when she Banished the hair back to her lab, it went without seeming to mind that she was in her Animagus form.

That Castina had entrusted it to Isaura before the Final Battle only further enforced the fact that she had known what was coming, but this seemed only to clog Hermione's throat further.

She promised Isaura that she would come back to play with her and that she would bring the black panther who had played so kindly with her over a month ago. This was almost enough to make Hermione smile, but what she really needed to do was get back into her human form before she drowned in the tears that were bottled up inside of her.

As she made her way back to the edge of the Forest and the wards, she realized that she was once again in unicorn form and uncertain if she could become human again. She didn't have the slightest notion if she had her wand with her or if it would work, but her core, so far as she could discover, was intact again. It had apparently come back from the wards with her consciousness, or it had been reattached to her body with Castina's sacrifice … or the castle's prodding … or some other process that Hermione had not identified. It was all part of one particular awe-inspiring event that could not be repeated.

As she approached the wards, she recognized that she really did need to regain human form because they most certainly needed to be re-cast, and she didn't think that she could do that when she had four hooves.

The wards had taken quite a beating with the Final Battle. She'd been aware of it only as it impacted her casting of the Consilium Cognationis during the battle itself. When she'd been in the wards after she returned to consciousness, it had been all she could do to work out who she was and that she was alive. Afterwards, she had been focussing on all the external facts, on what had happened during the battle and who was alive and looking after her. Now that she was on the outside looking back at the wards again, she could see just what distress they were in. As she crossed them and entered the grounds, she could see that there were wispy bare spots where they had all but failed.

They'd be in trouble if another megalomaniacal psychopath appeared in the next couple of months. The Dementors seemed to be permanently dispersed, though, and she had seen no evidence of the vampires or the Death Eaters. It was probably the perfect time to re-cast now.

What she really wanted was that vacation she'd thought about so fondly what felt like an age ago. She wanted to travel to an undisclosed location with Severus so that they could rest for a time.

She needed, she knew, to cure more werewolves and prepare for her apprenticeship and teaching and any number of other things, really. But surely she'd earned a holiday first.

Being unconscious and thinking herself dead for most of twenty-four days was not quite the same.

No matter how she looked at it, though, it was time to be human again, and she wished it to be so.

Looking down at herself, she drew a breath of relief. She was human again, and her core seemed to be telling her that despite all the abuses she had put it through, it was fully functional once more. The soft glow reassured her, but she found that even as it faded down into her skin, she could still feel it right where it was supposed to be, that internal warmth that marked her as a wizard.

Everything felt … looser, which wasn't quite the right word, but she had been able to slide between the wards and her human body and her Animagus one, and her magic had seemed to work even in that latter form when it shouldn't have done. She would worry about that later, she supposed, as the wards informed her that Severus was awake and was, from the look of it, in a fair way to panicking.

The rain continued to fall, but it did not touch her, as she didn't fancy returning to her quarters looking like a drowned rat.

She passed back through the secret entrance and made her way to the entrance to her new quarters, pleased that she was connected to the wards and had her unicorn memory, for she'd paid no attention when she was leaving to where the rooms were located.

There was, no doubt, a password on this gargoyle, just as there was on the one outside her and Harry's quarters—although she supposed they weren't that, anymore, since the school year and the war was over—but she didn't know what it was and didn't check, just slipped past the wards, the gargoyle obediently jumping out of her way.

Severus, it transpired, had made it out of the bedroom and into the sitting room, and he froze, his face set in hard lines, when he saw her there in the doorway.

"Hermione! How dare you run away from me again?"

"I didn't," she said blankly. "I wouldn't. I just … had somewhere I needed to be."

He strode up to her, looking as though he wanted to reach out and shake her.

"Somewhere you needed to be?" he repeated in accents of incredulity. "You just up and bloody disappeared after you've been in a coma for nearly a month!"

"I came back," she said, not sure what else he wanted her to say.

"Did you forget something?" he asked, voice scathing.

She frowned at him, saw the worry lines that etched his face and made him look years older than he had before the battle—when he had asked her to marry him. She looked down at her hand and saw that the ring was still there. She wasn't sure this made any sense given what she had been through, but it made her happy.

"I had to go see my herd," she struggled to explain.

"You had to go see the herd before you spoke to me?" He still seemed angry but perhaps marginally less likely to curse her.

She nodded. "I had to go see Ashwin before he … left."

"And it was the departure of this animal that compelled you to leave as you did?"

Hermione was going to forgive that aspersion on Ashwin only because she could see that Severus was upset.

"Unicorns mate for life."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Ashwin is Castina's mate," she said, her lips trembling. "He was only waiting for me because he knew I'd want to say goodbye, but then he … he went after her."

There was silence for a moment, and Hermione was afraid that she was going to have to walk past Severus so that she could get to her room and cry in peace. And then, thankfully, Severus swept her into his arms, and she was able to sob unrestrainedly against his chest.

Severus pulled her down into the armchair by the fire, one of the two armchairs that had been in Severus's quarters from the feel of them, and rocked her back and forth while she cried all the tears that she had been trying to cry for what felt like forever. He stroked her hair and kissed it from time to time and murmured nonsense to her which left her feeling as though the world was not, perhaps, such an empty place as she had feared it to be.

Severus withstood the entire tempest, making no attempt to stop her tears or indicate that he'd had enough of the witch sobbing immoderately into his chest. Hermione was finally left feeling drained but more human than she had before.

"The others will want to know that you are awake," Severus observed.

"I'm a complete mess. I daresay they don't need to be woken this early in the morning to see that fact." Her voice was husky from all her tears. "I would rather spend the time with you. And I would never run away from you, Severus, not a second time. That first was because I thought you did not care for me. I—I hope the case is very much different now."

His finger brought her chin up so that she was no longer addressing her words to his chest.

"Is your memory so short, Hermione?" he asked wryly.

"We've made it to the other side of the war," she answered hesitantly. "I nearly died, you thought I'd just up and left you…. I would not make you remember anything you had rather lay forgotten."

His finger dropped from her face, and his voice, when he spoke, was cool. "I am certain that many people repent of rash decisions made on the eve of battle."

"I'm not saying," she said, recognizing after a heart-stopping moment exactly what he was doing, "that I think my decision was rash. Just that I would not force you. I want to marry you, Severus," she said forthrightly when the previous statement didn't seem to make a dint in his armour.

He looked at her with shadowed eyes. "Do you?"

"Very much so," she repeated. "Desperately, actually. You're the reason I'm here."

She did not think she would not have come back if Severus had been gone.

His gaze was intense. "And you are the reason that I am here. I woke up and you were gone, and I had no idea what had happened or if you would ever be coming back."

She blinked in surprise at this confession. More than three weeks by her bedside had clearly been very rough on him.

"I'm sorry," she said, honestly repentant. "That was not my intention. I had to go to Ashwin, and you were asleep. I hoped I could come back without your even knowing I had been gone."

The words were low. "Don't leave me again."

She was even more stunned by this request and stared at him in unflatteringly blank astonishment. She rallied after a moment.

"I do not intend to leave you, Severus. You're my mate."

"A fact which you reiterated while you cut yourself off from me and killed yourself," he snarled.

She frowned slightly, correcting, "While I protected you. It was taking too much magic from everyone, and I could not let you all die. I was certain that Albus would explain it."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Oh, Albus had plenty to say on the matter, but Harry and I had a great deal to say to him in return. He's not been back in days."

She found her lips curving up into a grin at this casual admission of Severus and Harry forming a united front against the headmaster.

"I would not have survived if you had died, Severus," she answered without any levity. "The only solution that presented itself was ensuring that you lived."

"And you're so certain that I could live without you?"

Looking at him, she found traces of that same darkness in his eyes that she had seen in Ashwin's, and she was not sure if that was Severus or a unicorn's mate. She wished, immediately, to make him promise to live, but she recognized her own hypocrisy and bit the words back.

"Then we will simply have to live together," she answered. This seemed to be the only possible solution to their quandary. "Castina made that possible, and it is the only way that I can repay her."

"How is it," he asked, "that you know about that?"

Sighing slightly, she explained to him her recollection of the time that she had been in a coma—her mind floating around in the wards while her magical core and her body got straightened out. Or something.

"I think the castle made sure to protect me at the same time that Castina did," Hermione confided. "A real group effort."

"I'm glad," he said softly.

She smiled at him, and he leaned down and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave herself over to what she had thought, for what turned out to be nearly a month, she was never going to experience again.

If possible, it was even better than she remembered, such heat and need and affection all bundled together into the pressure of their lips against one another.

It might have gone on for an age, only when he drew back marginally to allow them to breathe, she yawned widely.

He was regarding her through narrowed eyes. "I'm not sure that I have ever seen you yawn since you overtaxed yourself with the wards the first time."

"A coma is not quite the same thing as sleeping," she responded, unable to prevent herself from yawning again. "I was in unicorn form and getting light, but I think my human form is a little confused."

He rose to his feet, bringing her easily along with him.

"Then we will put you to bed."

He carried her all the way up the stairs to the bedroom, and since she was comfortable in his arms, she offered no protest. He laid her down very gently and helped her burrow under the covers which her unicorn form had not been using. He rose, but she reached out a hand, clutching at his sleeve.

"Don't leave me."

"I will be sitting over there." He indicated the chair where he had been seated when she woke.

"Come to bed," she requested, not wanting to be out of contact with him.

Silence, but then he was unbuttoning his robe and sliding in beside her in his trousers and shirt. He spooned up around her, just as she wanted, and she fell asleep to the reassuring feeling of his steady heartbeat against her back.

Hermione woke several hours later to the sound of soft voices.

"Isn't that the cutest thing you've ever seen." Cooed, almost, a bit mockingly.

"Hush, you'll wake them." A whispered admonishment.

"He should have woken us when she woke up." Censure.

"Maybe she just turned back into a human." Suggested mildly.

"And he climbed into bed with her completely unconscious form?" Said very dryly.

She sorted all these remarks out in her head and realized that Draco, Harry, and Ron were present in her bedroom—her and Severus's bedroom—and judging from Severus's heart rate and breathing, he was feigning sleep as steadfastly as she was.

"Are you sure they're decent under there?"

Hermione felt a burble of laughter well up, but she didn't really want her first morning waking up in the arms of Severus since the Final Battle to include this comedy routine, so she reached for the wards and Apparated the three boys back to her and Harry's common room.

"You might want to consider changing the password," she observed mildly.

Severus pulled her closer. "But it is terribly amusing to imagine the looks on their faces wherever you sent them."

"Probably not far enough to keep them from coming back." She checked the time. "It's past ten in the morning now, and we'll probably be lucky if they don't send Albus. Or the entire Order."

"Is that your way of saying you don't want to stay in bed with me any longer?"

"Oh, I'm seriously considering warding the entire room so that no one can get in, but I thought I'd make a stab at politeness and reassuring everyone that I was alive first." She sighed. "And I need to get ready for the re-warding."

His grip tightened marginally. "You've been in a coma for twenty-four days. Rest a little."

She laughed softly at his admonishment, remembering a time when he had not been able to admit in the smallest degree that he cared for her. "I have done. But the wards nearly came down in the battle, and I will feel much better once I no longer have their weakness preying on my mind."

He sighed. "Oh, very well. I'm awake, I'm getting up. Does that make you happy, woman?"

Watching him crawl out of bed with every showing of rumpled reluctance, she had to still the urge to laugh again. Or drag him back into the bed and never mind her good intentions. She sat up.

"I daresay it would make me happier if you were wearing as little clothing as Ron suspected," she teased.

Severus grimaced right on cue. "I don't know how you put up with that boy."

"Some days, I don't know either." This particular morning, however, was not one of them. "We could shower before breakfast?"

As if there was going to be breakfast at half ten in the morning when she'd just said that she needed to go tell everyone she was alive.

He looked askance at her. "If we get in the shower together, we will still be there when Albus breaks down the door."

She couldn't help laughing at this image. "So we'll have to make do with cleaning charms and go brave the masses, is that it?"

"That's it."

She thought his grumpiness was mostly just for show.

Climbing out of bed herself, she was dressed a moment later in black corduroy trousers and a pale blue knit jumper with a darker blue robe open overtop. Cleansing charms had made her feel nominally tidier, and she had twisted her hair up at the nape of her neck. She would benefit, she knew, from a real shower later in the day. Not that she'd been dirty as a unicorn, mind, but it felt as though she hadn't showered in a very long time.

Severus, frozen, was regarding her steadily.

"Do you own that clothing?"

She looked down at it once more. The robe was of a very fine material and was a particularly nice shade of blue, but it did not resemble the dress robes that she owned (which were a very dark red) or any of her school robes (which were black). This robe had piping the colour of her jumper decorating the cuffs and hems.

"The jumper and trousers are mine," she answered, trying to sort through her thought processes beyond her desire to be dressed and thinking this would be a nice ensemble. "I guess I conjured the robe."

"Is that your normal manner of dressing?" he asked pointedly.

She sighed as she saw what he was getting at. Most people probably didn't—or couldn't—dress themselves in this manner. She'd done something of the same, however, when Severus had been insistent that they go to training without changing after the first new moon at the safe house.

"I didn't even know where my clothing was," she realized. "This seemed the easiest way to deal with it."

"Which you did without a wand?"

She looked down at herself as though to make sure the length of holly wasn't there, but she was aware she'd not worn her wand sheath to bed, and she knew in her heart that her wand had not survived the explosion that had signalled the end of Voldemort.

"I shall have to have another one made, I suppose."

She conjured a piece of holly that looked like her old wand although it was wood only, then Summoned her spare sheath, the old one that she had retired when Harry had given her the new one at Christmas.

"For the time being, this will have to suffice." She buckled the sheath into place and slid the wand into it. "Is that normal enough for you?"

"It is not my intention—" he began.

She waved this aside.

"You can be trusted with my secrets, but I should not advertise my abilities to the world. I realize. Now," she added, lips quirking, "did you need me to dress you as well, or are you doing so in your own sweet time?"

His lips twitched in response, and he moved to get dressed in a rather more ordinary manner than the one which she had just employed.

By the time they were both ready to go, it was nearing eleven o'clock, and Hermione found herself oddly reluctant to go out and face all these people. Her friends, she reminded herself. She knew, thanks to the wards, that there was no media on the grounds. All she would likely have to worry about was an excess of solicitude—and possibly some yelling for having nearly got herself killed. Or, she amended, for having got herself killed.

Severus was not stupid, and it would have been hard to miss how her steps got slower and slower the closer she drew to the door.

"You've already been out once this morning," he reminded her.

"Accessing the wards. I avoided everyone."

"You've seen your friends."

Her lips curled. "They've seen me, I'm sure you mean. I didn't open my eyes."

He turned her so that she was looking at him completely. "There is nothing to fear outside these doors, Hermione. Your friends will be anxious to see with their own eyes that you are safe and whole."

She nodded. "I know."

He looked into her eyes. "We may stay here for as long as you wish."

She could see that he meant it, and given that the scenario about Albus beating down the door to find them in the shower probably wasn't much of an exaggeration if she delayed much longer, she appreciated this willingness on his part.

"Let's go, then," she said, drawing a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "I'm sure I can manage it if you are with me."

"I will be by your side every step of the way," he affirmed.

His willingness to speak openly with her about their relationship and his feelings was a very positive change, and she only wished it had not taken the lives of Castina and Ashwin for this to become evident.

She blinked away tears. That was not fair, and she knew it. There were many differences now that the war was over, and Severus had been trying to change even before then. She would wish forever that Castina and Ashwin were still in the Forest with Isaura, running free under the moonlight with their herd, but they had gone so that she could be here now with her mate, ready to rejoin all her friends.

When she offered Severus a nod, he preceded her out the door, guaranteeing that she was going to go as well, for she did not want to be separated from him.

And then it was just the ordinary dungeon corridor, and she didn't even need to worry that there would be all sorts of students lurking about because it was well into the summer now.

They made their way slowly up to the Great Hall where Hermione could feel that most of her friends were. She squared her shoulders and kept walking with Severus because it would be far too cowardly to turn tail and run back to their quarters at this point. If Severus was with her, she reminded herself, she could face all of them.

To her surprise—yet again—he reached out and laced his long fingers through hers, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze and not releasing it as he pulled her along towards the group of people in the room ahead of them. If he kept her off-balance like this for the near future, he'd no doubt be able to get her to go wherever he wished and do whatever he wanted. Feeling well-supported all the way.

And then they'd arrived in the Great Hall, and it was plain that Harry, Ron, and Draco had been up there for some minutes, at least, regaling everyone with their sudden expulsion from her and Severus's quarters and their more and more outlandish ideas of why and how it had occurred.

Ron's notion, as they entered, was that Severus had done it in his sleep, automatically sensing students and returning them to where he thought they belonged.

"If that were the case," Draco said, "he'd have dunked you in the lake, isn't that right, Severus?"

Everyone turned to look at the two of them in the doorway, and Hermione had to still the urge to hide herself behind Severus. Fortunately, Harry was one of the first to reach them, and she'd never been scared of Harry. Plus he looked so anxious with a still-pale face that she couldn't help but want to wrap her arms around him and not mind that he was crushing her ribs as he tried to reassure himself that she was alive and well.

"Hermione," he breathed, "I wasn't sure I was ever going to see you again."

Hugging him tightly in turn, she didn't bother to correct this somewhat daft statement. She knew what he'd meant.

After this, it was a blur of more hugs: Ron, Draco, Albus, Remus, Tonks, Minerva, Hagrid, Pansy, Viktor, ex-werewolves, ex-students, the entire Weasley family…. And while it was clear that some of them still wished to scold her, the moment right now was celebratory.

Albus summoned lunch early and bid them all sit down to the meal. This ensured, she noted, that she didn't get the chance to bolt right away and gave everyone else a setting wherein they could chat so that it appeared less like an interrogation.

Fawkes arrived to perch on her chair and even promised to whisk her away if she was completely overwhelmed, which made her laugh and admit that she had every intention of toughing it out if at all possible.

Fortunately, most people didn't seem to have much expectation of her remembering anything that had happened, and Severus did an awe-inspiring job of deflecting any of the questions that she did not desire to answer. Most of the people in the room had been his students at one time or another, or they were ex-werewolves who were well aware of his place as her mate and therefore accorded him the rank of beta. Hermione was quite content to let him protect her.

By the time the rather boisterous meal broke up—Hermione having been toasted a number of times—she was ready to re-enter her quarters and not emerge for a year even if that meant Albus breaking in on them with the assistance of Bill and a team of expert curse-breakers.

Severus had quite clearly seen that she was done in, and he wanted to lead her back to her quarters, but the others who had just got her back didn't seem to want to let her go so quickly.

"You will have the chance to see Hermione later," Severus told them sternly.

It was rather amusing to have a spokesperson, she thought wanly.

"But when?"

"Since you are all already here," Severus said, "you might do us the honour of joining us at our bonding ceremony."

There was dead silence. Hermione turned to look at him incredulously, not quite able to fathom that he'd dropped that on everyone—and with no discussion with her—quite like this.

It's stopped them thinking about you and the Final Battle, hasn't it? he asked archly.

Huh.

Carry on, she said magnanimously.

"Bonding?" Ron spluttered.

"On the twenty-third," Severus said promptly. "After we re-cast the wards. Out on the grounds, I think. With Albus officiating, if he is willing?"

It took only a moment for Hermione to realize that this was the day of the new moon, and she wondered how long he'd been planning this.

"Delighted, my boy," Albus said happily with no indication that he hadn't known it was going to happen.

"But that's hardly fair," Draco whinged. "Now it will just look unoriginal when Harry and I announce our bonding."

Harry was now looking at Draco rather the way that Hermione had been looking at Severus a moment ago.

Severus's voice was bland. "It is hardly my fault if the two of you were slow to make your announcement."

"Just because we recognized the impropriety of making such a declaration while Hermione hovered between life and death doesn't mean that we shouldn't be able to—"

"She's been fine since you saw her this morning."

"She wasn't conscious then! And if you think that I'd do anything so improper as making such an announcement at the beginning of a meal—"

"We'll make it a double ceremony, then," Hermione intervened before Draco and Severus could extend their already ridiculous argument.

"But—" Draco began.

"If you even think of telling me that you wouldn't like to have a double ceremony with me and Severus, you're going to find out just how wet that lake is, Draco Malfoy," she threatened.

His mouth snapped shut with an audible clack.

"A double ceremony would be lovely," Harry answered her, grinning very much in the old way and making her think that it would not be so long before they were all back to normal.

Severus smiled faintly at her, his dark eyes dancing with amusement, and she knew that this meeting had gone as he wished.

Tomorrow, Hermione had a million things to do. She had to speak to the Minister about the ex-werewolves and start to think about her cure in earnest. She needed to ensure that the neutral Slytherins were all right, and she'd have to check about whether or not Draco had already convinced the Ministry to rescind Harry's Quidditch ban…. Between the two of them and Severus, they were probably already making sure that no one got overzealous about who they were punishing, but Hermione would need to take a look at that, too, for her own peace of mind.

Her parents could finally know that she was safe and sound, and she was going to have to figure out how to tell them about everything that had happened. She'd just have to find the words somewhere to adequately explain how they had won the war and how she had fallen in love with Severus Snape.

Much as she cared for her parents, it might be better, she reasoned, not to try to explain anything about werewolves, unicorns, and the problem of Pure Adults.

Or maybe she could ease them into it one shocking revelation at a time….

Yes, she decided, she'd get Severus to help her draw up a battle plan tomorrow, the first of many challenges that they would get to face as a couple. They were in this together, and she was very much looking forward to it.

Epilogue

Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy, and Severus Snape were four of the most famous wizards in the wizarding world. They had been for over a month ever since they had defeated He Who Must Not Be Named on the grounds of Hogwarts.

It still wasn't entirely clear how they had done it, but the Prophet had reported that Harry Potter had spoken to the Minister directly and reassured her that the spell that had been used—which had packed terrific force behind it and caused an explosion that the villagers of Hogsmeade had said they had felt even in their beds—was one which could never be duplicated. It had apparently been designed to kill Voldemort and would never be used again.

The Prophet reported that the Minister had been quite satisfied with Mr Potter's explanation, and as he and Headmaster Dumbledore had carried out a short interview with the paper while Miss Granger lay in a coma, the newspaper was convinced of his veracity as well.

Andrew Stebbins kept abreast of the news in the Prophet as a matter of good business sense since he needed to be aware of public opinion; he could thus be prepared for the correspondence he was likely to receive at the Auror Department.

In this particular case, he was inclined to think that they had all done a very good job. Unlike all the citizens clamouring for more interviews and parties with the four as the guests of honour, Andrew rather thought it was time to let them have a little peace and quiet. The three younger had only just graduated, after all, and most of their time since then had been spent fighting a war or recovering from it.

They were all still holed up at Hogwarts, but since it was one of the few locations where the press could not gain entrance and only visitors approved by the headmaster were permitted, Andrew couldn't blame them for this choice, either.

The furor surrounding the end of the war was only starting to die down. The Auror Department was still abuzz with activity, although their job had been made easier by the fact that Azkaban had been completely re-warded the week before. Andrew had not been there, of course, but he had been well-informed on the matter given the number of people who were writing to the Department wanting to know what was being done with all the prisoners now that the Dementors no longer guarded Azkaban.

He duly informed any concerned citizens, therefore, that a whole team had been brought in specially, including a premier expert on warding, and the prison had been done over from the first stone to the last. For security reasons, Andrew did not know exactly what had been done, nor did he have the slightest idea who this team had been comprised of, but he had seen the look of respect in Kingsley's eye. As a result, he was able to respond to any concerned inquiries with a heartfelt guarantee that the convicted Death Eaters were safely behind bars.

It was looking to be quite a typical Thursday afternoon, and Andrew was therefore very much surprised when Kingsley (who, it was rumoured, spent a good deal of time at the school himself), stopped by Andrew's office to hand him a gilt invitation.

"It's for this afternoon," Kingsley reported to him. "You'd better open it now."

Very confused, Andrew saw that the invitation was addressed to him rather than being a piece of mail to be filed or distributed to one of the Aurors. Opening it, his confusion only grew because it turned out to be an invitation to a ceremony of bonding—or rather, a double bonding—between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, and Hermione Granger and Severus Snape.

"Well, are you coming?"

There was amusement on Kingsley's face, and if Andrew hadn't known him so well, he would have suspected that this was a joke of some kind. But although he knew that his boss had a sense of humour, the man wasn't really the type to play practical jokes on anyone. Not on Andrew, at least.

"Coming?" he stammered. "To this bonding ceremony? Now?"

"Yes," Kingsley replied, his look of amusement only deepening. "You wouldn't want us to be late, would you?"

Andrew, of course, prided himself on his punctuality, but— "I'm still working."

Kingsley smiled broadly. "I believe I can vouchsafe you for the afternoon, Andrew. Come along."

Not knowing what else to do, Andrew followed his superior out of his office and to the Apparition Point. He Apparated to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a place which held many fond memories but which he had not returned to since he had graduated nearly thirty years ago.

Looking down at himself, he was torn between the realization that he was completely improperly dressed and the overpowering certainty that there had to be some kind of mistake.

He prided himself on his job, it was true, but he didn't fancy that any of these young heroes at Hogwarts had the slightest idea who he was or what he did.

Kingsley, however, was striding through the gates, waving politely at the two Aurors who were standing there. Andrew felt horribly self-conscious but when he greeted them politely and moved to step past them onto the grounds themselves, they didn't make the slightest attempt to bar his way and declare that obviously he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He continued on, wondering how this could have happened. It was true that the War Heroes (as they were being called collectively in the Prophet) knew a number of Aurors. They were friends with Kingsley, from what he had seen, and Auror Tonks had worked at the school for an entire year.

But Andrew had never so much as seen them, let alone spoken to them. Why they could possibly want him here, he couldn't fathom, and his sense of confusion only grew when he and Kingsley walked across the lawn to the array of chairs which had been set up near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was clear now that this really was for friends and family only.

There were the Weasleys all seated together, and Ron Weasley had been friends with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger from the beginning, if the Prophet was to be believed. Auror Tonks was there with her fiancé, Remus Lupin, Harry Potter's godfather and once a werewolf.

There were the elder Malfoys—who were doing "community service", a Muggle notion that would allow them to repay the society that they had wronged while recognizing that they had been on the right side of the war in the end. Next to the Malfoys were two Muggles—or so he gathered from their clothes—whom Andrew guessed must be the bride's parents. They looked slightly overwhelmed but very happy.

There were a number of others who looked to be about the same age as the three younger War Heroes, so Andrew imagined they were friends from school. There were a number of professors, too, some of whom Andrew recognized from his own Hogwarts days.

And that was it. The Minister wasn't even present, so why, Andrew wanted to know, had he been included?

He had, he acknowledged, performed a trifling service during the Final Battle. For Kingsley had come to see him, oh, it must have been three months ago, now, and spoken to him of a new form of communication, very secret and to be used only in moments of dire need. He had made it clear that he would address these missives directly to Andrew, and Andrew—though he prided himself on his professionalism—had been all agog to see how this new communication worked.

To say that he had been stunned when something that looked like a smoke-grey lynx appeared in his home and spoke with Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice would be a gross understatement.

But he had been honoured to be trusted with this undertaking, and Kingsley was quite correct that he was just the man to admire this new form of communication and do what was instructed properly. Even his amazement at the medium had been dashed by the message.

For Kingsley had assured him that it was not possible to duplicate or fake these messages, so Andrew was faced with the sudden and appalling news that Hogwarts was under siege and Auror reinforcements were required at once to Apparate to the edge of Hogwarts and fight the forces found there.

For a moment, Andrew had been too stunned to move. Should he, he had wondered, report this to the Minister? A moment's thought had cleared his head. A protocol had been clearly established. Kingsley was both the head of the Department and the head of Magical Law Enforcement, and while these requests were usually made in person, his orders still held.

Kingsley had made it clear all those months ago that he was trusting Andrew with this task, and Andrew had realized then that he had to live up to that faith. He had therefore rushed to the Ministry and sounded the alarm which summoned all on- and off-duty Aurors to send them forthwith to Hogwarts.

The Aurors weren't exactly used to getting orders from him saying that they had come from Kingsley, but he had put the authority of twenty-six years of exemplary service into his voice along with the sure knowledge that he was doing what Kingsley wished.

The Aurors had done as they were bid.

They had, he found out hours later, met with a force of Dementors that was terrifying to behold, and they might have been overrun were it not for the fact that the unicorn herd—Andrew almost wished he had been there, to see that—had emerged from the Forbidden Forest and destroyed the host of Dark Creatures.

There was no saying what the Dementors might have done, terrorizing the town of Hogsmeade or breaking through the wards and attacking the beleaguered people fighting the Death Eaters on the ground, but between the Aurors and the unicorns, they were defeated.

So Andrew admitted that he had done his duty in this situation, but he still couldn't see that that was sufficient reason to be invited to the wedding. Not all of the Aurors who had fought at the battle were here, and they had surely had a more active role than he.

Yet the fact remained that the invitation had been handed to him, and here he was. Given how rife media speculation had been, he was sure it was a good thing that this was a private ceremony.

In the privacy of his own mind, he admitted that he had not been entirely convinced that the marriage of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger was a wise one. He didn't like to gossip, but he'd kept up with the Prophet, and so he was tolerably well informed about the antagonistic relationship the head of Slytherin had had with the Gryffindor students throughout their school career.

He was almost two decades her senior. Andrew couldn't believe it was a good idea.

Seeing them here now, however, it was quite plain even from his position in the fifth row back, that they were completely in love. Looking at them, in fact, Andrew was quite sure that they belonged together.

He was much too old to have been taught by Professor Snape, but a number of the younger Aurors in the Department had been in his Potions classes. When he was mentioned, it was always with the liveliest horror or in the context of tasteless jokes about his being a vampire and their being able to go after him on a raid one day.

Andrew had seen unflattering pictures of the man in the Prophet, and there were flurries of letters about him from time to time at the Auror Department: Death Eater activity, outrageous teaching practices, appalling treatment of Harry Potter, etc., etc.

Looking at the man as he stood up next to Hermione Granger, Andrew thought he looked years younger than he had in the last picture Andrew had seen. His formally cut robes of deep green made him look less sallow and much healthier than that last picture. The radiant Miss Granger was gazing at him blissfully, and Andrew imagined that anyone would look their best in that context.

She was wearing cream-coloured, closely tailored robes that seemed to be a mix between a Muggle wedding dress and the formal robes that were normally worn by bonded couples. Her dark hair was piled on top of her head in a mass of curls with several shining strands woven through it. She wore no other adornments and was quite properly barefoot, as were her bond-mate and the other bonding couple.

Andrew was quite sure that he had heard rumours of a rivalry between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, too, but looking at them, he could only see the deep affection between them. The Gryffindor was dressed in green that matched his eyes, and the younger Slytherin was wearing grey, and seemed to be completely captivated by those emerald eyes. The Boy Who Lived Again, Andrew noted, also hadn't once taken his gaze off the blond man standing beside him.

Andrew might not know why he was here, but it was an honour.

A ceremony right next to the Forbidden Forest was a little unusual, although to be sure, it was a lovely July day. He could have sworn as he walked from the Apparition point to the Hogwarts gates that it was going to be too hot for an outdoor wedding, but now that he was seated on the grounds, he found that it was quite tolerable indeed, and though the sun was shining down at all of half one in the afternoon, it didn't seem unbearable at all.

Looking at the two couples and the headmaster—who was resplendent in robes of brightest purple with a phoenix perched on his shoulder—Andrew found that it was almost impossible not to believe in soul-mates, a notion which he had always scoffed at. It had seemed a little too far-fetched and fantastical to him, but looking at these four people, he found that he was being steadily converted.

The headmaster began the ceremony by declaring that it was only proper that these new beginnings in a new world brought about by the people standing in front of him came about on the new moon which would be occurring in a few minutes' time. Although the moon phases still played a part in older rituals, it was rare that younger couples paid any attention to it nowadays.

As he was watching the scene unfolding in front of him, however, Andrew overheard someone speaking quietly behind him; apparently, the castle wards had been re-cast that morning, and it seemed that the people standing in front of him had been largely responsible for their being erected.

Examining them more intently, he found that Miss Granger seemed almost to be glowing, and the three gentlemen looked to be in excellent health and colour as well. Andrew would have imagined that re-casting the wards would have left them too tired to do anything of import, let alone be bonded, but it looked rather as though the casting had energized them.

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape spent the entire time looking in one another's eyes except for the one moment, right after they had been bonded, when the young woman looked to the Forest and smiled. Following her gaze, Andrew froze.

His only regret about not being at the battle had just been obliterated, for the Forest was full of unicorns, a whole herd seemingly, and Andrew couldn't fathom how he hadn't seen them before; though they were standing very still, they were all glowing with an inner light. The headmaster regained Andrew's attention as he pronounced the couple bonded, and when Andrew looked back at the Forest, the unicorns were gone.

The unions were completed, both couples kissing with evident delight. It was clear they were all devoted to one another, and Andrew felt very privileged indeed to have witnessed the day even if it turned out to have been a clerical error of some kind.

Once the ceremony had finished, the lawn was rearranged in the blink of an eye for the reception, a rather impressive piece of magic. There was now a smooth area of lawn for dancing, small tables for conversation, and buffet tables piled with food.

Andrew resigned himself to being forgotten in a corner somewhere. At least if he could tuck himself away, he wouldn't spend the entire ceremony feeling as though he stood out completely in his totally inappropriate work robes.

They were in good repair, certainly, but didn't begin to approach the formal wear that should be worn to a wedding. Since he knew so few of the people, apart from a few work colleagues, he didn't suppose that he'd want to do any mingling anyway.

Now that he knew that the Forest was full of unicorns, he did not feel quite so leery of it as he had done, but his school years reminded him that there were still plenty of other creatures in it, and he didn't want to get too close. It seemed to be the only place to get out of the way, however, so he chose one of the small tables near the Forest's edge and sat down and tried to be inconspicuous.

He was much surprised when he was greeted not many minutes later by Hermione Granger-Snape who had Severus Snape, Harry Potter-Malfoy, Draco Potter-Malfoy, and Ron Weasley in tow. Andrew rose immediately to his feet, not quite sure how to deal with this influx of very important personages.

"Mr Stebbins, how kind of you to come." Hermione Granger-Snape was twinkling happily at him, and he had no notion of how she could know who he was, but there was no lack of recognition in her eyes. She seemed to know just what he did, too, for she complimented him on his filing job.

He could detect no hint of insincerity in her voice and therefore thanked her with only a trace of a stammer.

Her smile deepened. "It is a pleasure to have you here. Surely you don't mean to sit down all afternoon?"

He shook his head a trifle hopelessly. "I'm completely ill-dressed, Miss Granger. Er, Mrs Granger-Snape. I wouldn't want to disgrace your lovely reception."

She laughed. "Nonsense. You look fine to me. And please call me Hermione. Come, and I'll introduce you to Varda Sheppard."

Looking down at himself doubtfully, Andrew found to his shock that he was now wearing quite the loveliest set of dress robes that he'd ever seen. They were a rich dark brown, and he was quite certain he didn't own anything of the like. He was even more certain that he hadn't been wearing them a moment ago.

He looked up in bewilderment and encountered only grins from all the men facing him. Harry Potter patted him on the shoulder.

"It's best just to do what she says."

Not knowing what else to do, he allowed Hermione to draw her arm through his and lead him away. As they left the gentlemen, he heard Ron Weasley speak.

"Who on Earth is he?"

Harry Potter laughed. "Don't you remember? If not for him, Ron, we mightn't be here, and Voldemort might not have been defeated."

Andrew was certain he must have misheard, but Severus Snape continued, "Your memory is lamentably short, Mr Weasley. It is Mr Stebbins who is in charge of all the correspondence at the Auror Department. It was he who encountered several … interesting letters at the end of August."

"What…. Oh!" It seemed that Mr Weasley now understood what they were talking about even if Andrew was still in the dark. "Well, better than inviting Scrimgeour, anyway."

There was a chorus of laughter behind him, and Andrew had to wonder just what letters it was that they were talking about. The thought was driven right out of his head, however, when he met Varda, who was quite the loveliest woman he had ever seen. Hermione left them alone with a smile.

Andrew was now sure he had had very good reason to file all those complaints about former werewolves given human status under "nonsense". The Minister and Kingsley had made it clear that Hermione's cure was to be trusted. Having now met her, even for the briefest of periods, he found that he was quite in agreement with them.

He saw Hermione hurry back to Severus Snape. He spoke to her, and whatever he said made her throw back her head and laugh, the silvery sound floating through the air and lifting Andrew's spirits. He watched as the dark-haired man slipped his arm around Hermione's waist, and she beamed up at him.

Andrew still didn't understand quite how these people knew him, but it was clear that he'd been doing his job. If that had somehow assisted in the saving of the world and helped bring these four people together, then he was very gratified indeed.

*finite incantatem*