

Adventures in FanFiction

Aggy's

THE
OTHER SIDE
OF
DARKNESS



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



A Red Hen Adventures in FanFiction Edition

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Rating: NC-17 for sex, subject matter and generally not being nice. The story contains consensual sex between adults. There is also some material involving Draco Malfoy which probably constitutes slash, but personally, I think that it's on the outer edge of the definition. However, you have been warned J.



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EMILIE GRANGER

checked the lab for one last time. Finally, she was satisfied that everything was cleaned up, tidied away or switched off. It was well

known within the Ministry of Magic Research and Development Section that Miss Granger had something of a fetish about order and cleanliness, in the lab at least — even if her office did tend to resemble the aftermath of a nasty poltergeist attack. Most put it down to the fact that her parents were some kind of Muggle scientists — they were a little hazy on the specifics, out of general discomfort with the whole concept.

Despite being only 26 years old, and so one of the youngest witches to be given charge of a lab, her focussed determination made her a force to be reckoned

with. Her lab was her private domain, her home from home, and had evolved into to a curious mixture of Muggle and magic – cauldrons stacked by microscopes, and jars of lizards eyes stored with bottles of hydrochloric acid. Hermione, herself, had never bothered about the odd juxtapositions. She concentrated on achieving effective and successful results, by whatever methods seemed most apt for the task, unconcerned that she frequently irritated the holders of more conventional viewpoints in the process.

She had even begun to adopt Muggle clothing at work – pointing out that however attractively “swishy” robes were, they had a tendency to knock over bottles, drape into lit fires and generally be a nuisance. She preferred things with sleeves, with a white coat over the top. Her eccentricities were grudgingly tolerated by her superiors, privately annoyed by the knowledge that she was too useful to risk alienating.

She closed the lab door behind her and walked along the corridor to wait for the lift that would take her to the surface of London. It was there when she arrived and the door opened immediately. Inside, one wall was completely taken up by a mirror – no doubt designed to create the illusion of space. Hermione always found the experience of being in a confined area with a full size reflection of herself mildly disturbing.

This time she took the opportunity to give

herself a quick once over. She had matured into a trim young woman since leaving Hogwarts – no one would call her beautiful, she thought wryly, but she had developed attractive, regular features. She had allowed her hair – always the bane of her life – to grow a little longer, and the weight had helped to tame it a little. At present it was firmly pulled back and secured in a pony tail. She wore no make up – she refused to dress to impress a collection of assorted scientific and magical equipment, which description she extended to her colleagues only half-jokingly. She straightened her jacket, adjusted her skirt so the small slit was actually at the back, and reassured herself that there were no runs in her tights.

She smiled at herself momentarily. She might only have been meeting Ron and Harry for supper, but that didn't mean that she didn't want to look presentable. She was vain enough for that. She also had a slightly uncomfortable piece of personal news to break to them. Fussing over her appearance distracted her a little from the thought.

At that moment the lift came to a halt and the door opened into a small, old fashioned anteroom. A small woman was sitting behind a counter knitting. Behind her were an assortment of bags, cloaks, coats, and, Hermione noted, a rather bedraggled looking owl.

“Would you be wanting your coat, Miss Granger?” she enquired brightly.

"Yes please Mrs Gumbelside."

"It's quite bright at the moment, but it looks like it might turn nasty later." The woman handed over the coat. "Here you are my dear."

Hermione put it on and opened the door in front of her. She stepped out into the entrance hall of the British Library. The discreet door, simply marked 'Private', gave no indication that many floors beneath the surface — beneath even the secure rooms housing priceless Muggle artefacts and documents, the Ministry of Magic maintained an equally secure facility. Any lost Muggle who opened the door by mistake would simply be redirected by Mrs Gumbelside. Any Muggle or wizard who opened the door with evil intent would be met by one of the most powerful Aurors the Ministry had ever employed. The resulting confrontation was likely to be short, vicious, and extremely disadvantageous to the intruder. It was widely speculated that Mrs Gumbelside would not even need to put her knitting down.

She walked briskly through the entrance hall, avoiding the milling people, and casting a swift eye over the notice boards festooned with posters advertising talks, courses, and exhibitions. There were some new ones, she noticed. Exhibitions mostly — 19th Century landscape painters, art and culture of West Africa, a newly discovered hoard of Romano-British artefacts... this last caught her eye briefly. The poster displayed a

glossy photograph of something metal — a sword hilt, she thought. It was delicately chased, in the way of Celtic decorative work. On the pommel, the craftsman had fashioned something like a monogram — a capital M surrounded by a circle. Hermione moved a little closer to see. It was certainly very lovely. The exhibition opened in about three weeks at the British Museum. She thought that it might be worth a visit if she had the time. Shoving the idea to the back of her mind, she left the building.

Out on the street it was dark, but the October evening was bright, as Mrs Gumbelside had said, with that familiar sharp, smoky, tang of autumn. Hermione turned left outside the Library, and walked briskly down the street. A few turns later she came to some steps leading downwards, and a sign reading 'Wine Bar'. She descended. Inside the lighting was dim — or discreet, as she preferred to describe it — and it was crowded with Muggles wearing dark business clothes. She waited for her eyesight to adjust to the darker conditions, and then looked round. In one corner, a hand, waving frantically, poked out over the sea of heads. She returned the gesture, and threaded her way through the crowd.

"Hi Harry. Hi Ron."

Harry stood up as soon as she got close. He had matured over the years into a tallish, lean young man, with a serious expression. His hair still

resisted all attempts to keep it neatly cut, falling forward to hide the scar. He still wore his glasses, despite periodic attempts by Hermione, Ron, and occasionally Ginny Weasley, to persuade him to try contact lenses. He had also acquired an air of watchfulness, an underlying quiet dangerousness from his years of fieldwork as an Auror. Sometimes Hermione felt an odd twinge of envy for Harry, being out there, getting his hands dirty. At school she had fantasised about fighting the dark as an Auror. Objective reason and common sense told her that her skills lay more in the library than the armoury, but there was some part of her that still craved action. At the moment Harry appeared to be relaxed, wearing Muggle jeans and a sweater – not a Weasley sweater, Hermione noted.

Harry was clearing some coats off of a chair.

"We staked a claim on the chair before anyone else could take it. Honestly. Are Muggle places always this crowded?"

"If you're talking about a Muggle central London wine bar on a Friday evening – yes, I'm afraid so." Hermione sat down. Ron Weasley was grinning at her from the other side of the table, and pouring her a glass of wine.

"Hi 'Mione. How's life at the sophisticated end of the building?"

In some ways Ron had changed very little since leaving Hogwarts. Slightly shorter and stockier

than Harry, with his trademark shock of red hair, he still made you instinctively want to check the seat before sitting down, just in case of unexpected surprises. What *had* surprised everyone was the fact that he, too, had got a job with the Ministry of Magic. He worked in the Development part of the Ministry, adapting items for magical uses. As he gleefully pointed out, it wasn't that far from what he had always done anyway.

"Life's fine," responded Hermione. "How about you? Blown up anything good recently?"

"Not so's you'd notice. Incidentally those books that your Dad gave me were great!"

Hermione's father has lent Ron his complete collection of James Bond novels. Ron had been particularly taken with Q, Bond's gadget maker, and had been trying to encourage everyone in his section to call him that. So far he had been singularly unsuccessful.

"I'll let him know. How's the family?"

"Fine thanks. Fred and George have been up for a visit"

"Have they got over the shock of you having a respectable job?"

"They regard it as a Percyian betrayal of everything that the name of Weasley stands for."

Hermione chuckled. Ron continued:

"However, myself and Weasley's Wizard Wheezes have come to an arrangement about a suitable consultancy fee..."

Both Harry and Hermione laughed out loud at this. Hermione did not ask after Harry's family. Harry had ceased all contact with them at the earliest possible opportunity.

"How about you, Harry? Anything happening in your life?"

Harry just shrugged.

"Oh you know the sort of thing. Get up, find matching socks, battle forces of evil, return home to TV dinner for one. Much the same as usual. How about you 'Mione."

Hermione sighed. This was the moment that she had not been looking forward to. She tried to adopt a light tone.

"Nothing much. Since Peter... um... left... things have been rather quiet."

They reacted as predicted.

"Peter left? When? Why? How?"

She quietened them down.

"Look it's no big drama. It wasn't working, that's all."

"Do you want us to find him and turn him into a Flobberworm?" This from Ron.

"No, no..."

"Are you all right, Hermione?" This from Harry.

"Yes I'm fine. To be honest I didn't actually notice at first."

They were speechless at this.

"He moved his things out — not that there were that many of them there in the first place

— and left me a note. I'd been working late at the Ministry for a few nights, and wasn't really paying attention to the flat." Which was a severe understatement. Hermione's flat was somewhere that existed purely to stop her having to sleep in the lab, or out of doors. "I found the note after a couple of days, buried under some stuff on the dining table. End of story. If I cared that much, I'd have noticed sooner."

"Ah well, I expect he wasn't good enough for you," said Ron cheerfully, pouring more wine. Harry looked hard at her but let the subject pass to other things.

Supper came and went, and they were enjoying coffee, when Harry said abruptly:

"Guys, can I pick your brains about something?"

Ron and Hermione both nodded.

"Although I don't promise to be much help," added Ron.

Harry looked at the table, twirling his empty wineglass.

"I'm not entirely certain where to start with this." He paused. Ron and Hermione waited for him to continue. "A couple of weeks ago I went out on an ordinary field mission. A group of former, or at least wannabe, Death Eaters, holed up in a cottage in Yorkshire somewhere. Nothing particularly unusual about that."

Both his companions nodded. Although Voldemort himself had fallen some years ago,

the networks that he had established had proved much harder to root out. The Death Eaters were still operating, on a footing that seemed closer to organised crime than anything else. Someone had plainly filled the power vacuum left by the destruction of the Dark Lord. There was no hard information as to who, but the form favourite in the eyes of most of the Ministry was Lucius Malfoy.

And the Ministry was no nearer to identifying these "new" Death Eaters, than it had been during Voldemort's time. With the overt threat from the Dark Lord removed, it was even more difficult to establish people's true loyalties. There was almost more Ministry activity now than there had been during the war years.

Meanwhile, Harry was continuing the story.

"We got there and there was the usual fight to get in." The others were listening closely. "There were four of them. The first three were nasty but no worse than usual. The last one had some kind of potion on him. He took a huge swallow of it, and then he came at us. He'd got off a few shots before if you know what I mean, but nothing that we couldn't handle. But once he'd had this potion it was if his power had been increased somehow. And he was physically *much* stronger – breaking furniture – that sort of thing."

Ron and Hermione were a little confused at this.

"Sounds like a fairly standard ability enhancing potion," said Hermione. "There are a number. All pretty unethical of course. It's not usual to enhance both physical *and* magical strength at once, but it's theoretically possible, and not particularly difficult if you have even a moderate ability to make a potion."

Harry was staring at the table again. Finally he said quietly:

"There was more." He paused again. "He... the one who took the potion... touched... Seamus." Hermione suddenly went cold. Seamus Finnegan had been one of their cronies at school. Given his rather... unpredictable... magical results, they had all been thrilled when he had succeeded in becoming an Auror. Whilst Harry, Ron and Hermione were close, Harry and Seamus also had the forged bond of shared dangers. "Not hard. Held the side of his face. Stroked it. It was almost... affectionate. And Seamus screamed and fell. We went after him.. the Death Eater... to capture him, but he wasn't going to surrender. And, as we couldn't risk getting close enough for him to do to us whatever he did to Seamus, in the end we had to kill him."

"Good," said Ron with satisfaction.

Hermione was less convinced. Dead was satisfying, but made it difficult to get accurate information.

Harry was now scratching absently at the

table top, not really attending to Ron.

"There's something else isn't there?" stated Hermione.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck.

"When the... man touched Seamus my scar began to burn."

"But doesn't that only happen in the presence of..."

Ron could always be relied upon to ask those sorts of questions thought Hermione wryly. Even now so long out of school. Harry shrugged, unwilling to go into the matter any further.

"How is Seamus?" she asked with no very great hope.

"He's in St Mungo's. He's basically catatonic. It's only the fact that he screams out every now and then that convinces people he's still alive."

Now Ron was silent.

"Do you know what the potion was?"

"No. We have no idea."

"Did you manage to save any of it?"

"No. And the Ministry have been going nuts about it. Sending out dire warnings that anyone who finds any of it must hand it in immediately on pain of death."

They were all chilled by the story.

Then Hermione remembered that Harry had begun the conversation by asking for help. Cautiously she said, "That last aspect of the potion doesn't sound familiar to me. I don't

think that I can help any more without actually having a sample of the potion to work on."

"Could you find out what it is if you *did* have a sample?"

"I though you said that you didn't manage to save any of it."

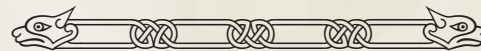
"Not officially." There was a pause. "'Mione..." Harry's voice was now a plea. "I *have* to know what did this to Seamus. I have to be able to stop it."

"If and we're only talking hypothetically here... If I had a sample of the potion, I might be able to run some tests on it, and *maybe* I could find something out about it..."

"'Mione, you're a star."

"This will have to be completely unofficial, you do realise this."

"Absolutely. I'll get the sample that we don't have to you as soon as possible."



There was a package waiting for Hermione when she arrived for work the following day. It was occupying the only clear area of the desk, in the small cubby hole off the lab that passed for her office. She stuck her head out the door.

"Cyrus, did you see who left this?"

The young wizard graduate student briefly glanced up from his notebook, where he was doing a fairly good impression of preparing a lab report.

"Nope. What is it?"

"Probably an early Christmas present."

"If it says 'Weasley' anywhere on it, destroy it unopened."

Hermione chuckled. The Weasleys were legendary. Or at least notorious.

She drew back into the office and shut the door, looking at the parcel. None of the lab's standard wards had been activated, nor had any of her, more specialised, personal ones. It was about 6 inches high by 4 inches square, covered in plain brown paper. Just about the size of a small potion bottle. Written on the outside was '*H. Granger. Personal*'. Sitting at her desk she looked at it for a long time.

There was something of a pattern in all of this, she reflected. Harry and Ron coming up with a mystery to investigate, and roping her in whether she really wanted to be involved or not. Something that was bound to get her into trouble if discovered. Although it was no longer a question of losing house points for Gryffindor.

Taking a deep breath, and with what she considered to be a wholly irrational and unreasonable sense of foreboding, she began to open the package. Her initial hunch was quite correct — she carefully unwrapped a bottle made of dark green glass, about one third full of some liquid which, upon agitation, appeared to have the consistency of cough syrup. The container itself was perfectly

plain apart from a symbol embossed on the front. It consisted of a capital M inside a circle. The proportions of the letter were odd, she thought. The upright strokes were further apart than usual, and the V in the middle was shallow. And there was a nagging familiarity that to it that she couldn't quite place. Narrowing her eyes she took a pad of paper out of her desk and began to make a careful copy of the symbol. If this was Harry's potion then it was hardly something she could carry about with her. Tearing the completed copy from the pad she folded it up and put it in her pocket. On an impulse she tore off the next four or five blank sheets. There was no trace on the pad that she had ever written anything on it. She didn't quite know what she was getting herself into, but there was no point in being careless.

She replaced the potion into its wrapping, and wondered about where to hide it. The bottle itself was unremarkable enough except for the decoration on the front. She looked around her small office. One wall was taken up with bookshelves, with the contents stacked at least two rows deep. Around the other walls were potion and ingredient cabinets crammed with bottles, jars and other containers.

Hermione began to smile. What was the maxim about hiding something in plain sight?



A week later she was considerably less cheerful. After seven straight late evenings, she had still got no further forward than devising a good hiding place.

She looked at the solution in the beaker which, despite the additions of catalyst and reagent together with the application of significant heat, steadfastly refused to react.

Despite her best efforts the potion had utterly failed to give up any of its secrets. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite true. She had identified several stimulants affecting both adrenaline and cortisol production, and also traces of Runespoor eggs to increase mental agility. She had even tentatively isolated a significant fungal hallucinogen. All of these were to be expected in a potion which enhanced physical strength and magical ability, but she could find nothing which explained an apparent ability to provoke catatonia. She suppressed an urge to stamp her foot. All her life the one thing that she had always been able to do was solve problems. To find one that would not cooperate caused her great frustration.

She flexed her shoulders to ease the tension. Stamping and shouting, whilst they might be extremely therapeutic, were not going to get her any closer to an answer. In fact, she recalled Peter shouting at her, during one of their rows, that emotional reaction was beyond her unless it served a practical purpose. It was shortly after that that he

had left without explanation. She shut her eyes. It was all so much simpler in her lab. Usually.

She was due to meet with Harry and Ron that evening to report back. She sighed. They weren't going to want to hear that she had so far drawn a blank. She checked her watch. It was time to finish up if she didn't want to be late. She carefully replaced the stopper into the plain potion bottle. It was now less than a quarter full. She was not being helped by only having a limited quantity of substance with which to work.

Meticulously she disposed of her results (or lack of them) and cleaned the equipment. It was critical that she left no traces, for both her own safety, and that of the other lab users. Once satisfied, she replaced the little bottle in one of the cupboards in her office, checked the wards, and left.

In the lift to the surface she resolutely stood with her back to the mirror. She knew she looked tired and frustrated, and didn't need to be reminded of it. As the doors opened Mrs Gumbelside gave her an old-fashioned look.

"Working late again, Miss Granger?"

Hermione just nodded. She did not have the time, nor to be quite honest, the inclination, for a long conversation.

"You look as if you're overdoing it, my dear. You need to be careful."

Hermione mustered up a smile.

"Don't worry, Mrs Gumbelside. It's only just

for a special project. It'll soon be over, and then I promise I'll sleep for a week."

"Just see that you do," the little woman chided her.

Grabbing her coat, Hermione left the building, breathing deeply of the fresh air. Or as close to fresh as it ever got in central London. Unsurprisingly it was dark. Just recently she had been arriving in the dark, and leaving after nightfall. Add that to working underground, and Hermione wondered if she would turn that semi-transparent white shade of some cave dwelling creature. She began walking briskly in the direction of the wine bar, in the hope that the air and exercise would clear her head a little.

By the time she arrived at the top of the steps leading to the entrance, she was feeling a little better, although no closer to any kind of solution.

Harry and Ron were already there. She sat herself down at the table. She noted that they had ordered a large bottle of sparkling mineral water. They were obviously working tonight. She poured herself a glass and sipped reflectively. Both of the men were looking hopeful. They obviously expected that she would have pulled a rabbit out of a hat for them. No such luck, she thought ruefully. This time it was her turn to fiddle with her glass whilst she sought for the proper words. May as well get it over and done with.

"Well..." she began eventually. "I've been studying the... sample... that you left me."

The men sat up.

"I can tell you that I have identified the agents that give rise to the obvious effects, such as strength and enhanced magical ability. This mixture appears to act as some kind of carrier for the active ingredient which allows the... removal... transference... whatever it is... of mind to happen. That much I am reasonably certain of. The rest is supposition."

"Go on," said Harry. Hermione's suppositions were usually dead on target.

"Um... OK. It seems reasonable to assume that the hallucinogenic properties of the potion enhance those areas of the brain linked with general psychic powers..."

"... shame Trelawney never got her hands on any..." muttered Ron, sotto voce.

Hermione glared. Ron subsided. She continued:

"This would increase the ability of the drinker to form a mental link with the subject, and thus exercise some degree of external control, certainly over the subject's thoughts."

Harry and Ron exchanged glances. When she was thinking something through, Hermione still had a tendency to sound like a lab report.

"That makes sense," commented Harry.

"Unfortunately, if you're asking me how we get from a form of enhanced telepathy to an induced

coma, or what the active ingredient is, or how we cure it — I don't have answers for you."

It was Harry's turn to examine the table.

"St Mungo's told me that Seamus has now lapsed into complete catatonia," he said quietly.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. I don't know what else to try. And I don't have that much more of the original sample left."

"Don't worry about it 'Mione. I know you gave it your best shot."

There was silence at the table, each wrapped in their own thoughts.

"Bet you who would know about it," said Ron gloomily.

The other two looked at him.

"Snape," he clarified.

They were dumbstruck. Eventually Hermione found her voice.

"Ron, you aren't *seriously* suggesting that I ask Snape for help are you?"

Harry was looking thoughtful though.

"Why not, 'Mione?"

"Why not? *Why not?* How many reasons do you need? I hate him. He hates me. He hates all of us. We'd be more likely to get a favour out of Mrs Norris. I'd rather carry on myself."

"Yes, I know all that. But he is about the best there is when it comes to potions."

"Not to mention the fact that if Harry's scar hurt it probably means that Death Eaters are

involved. And if Death Eaters are involved, the chances are that Snape was the one who made it in the first place," pointed out Ron.

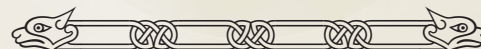
"Why does that not inspire me to leave for Hogwarts immediately?" asked Hermione dryly.

"Come on, Hermione," encouraged Harry. "What harm can it do to send him an owl. He can only say no."

"And he might be so pleased to get a chance to gloat that he actually gives us useful information," added Ron.

Hermione looked at the two of them and sighed. When all was said and done, they were her friends. And it would be worth an hour or so of blistering sarcasm if she got the information necessary to find a cure for Seamus.

"All right," she said eventually. "But you two owe me for this. Now, help me decide exactly what we're going to say in this message."



The screwed up parchment hit the back of the cold fireplace with considerable force. Severus Snape pulled out his wand, pointed it and snapped *Incendio!* The crumpled ball exploded in flame, burned brightly for a few moments, and then, finding nothing in the grate to ignite in turn, faded to ashes. He breathed deeply several times, trying to calm the uncharacteris-

tic show of anger. He stood very still, his eyes unreadably dark with something that could have been anger or maybe alarm. Finally he moved, to throw himself down into one of the two armchairs and stare into space.

The room was sparsely furnished. The two armchairs were really only a courtesy for his rare visitors. They were positioned facing the fire by convention, as the fire itself was almost never lit. A large plain table served for both eating, and working on the few occasions that Snape did not mark papers in the Potions Room itself. Two large chests contained his scant personal belongings. On one side of the fireplace was a narrow bed covered with serviceable grey blankets. The only sign of life in the room was the books — racked up on shelves and spread across any available surface. That, and a suspicious lump under the bedclothes, which had begun to move shortly after Snape had sat down.

The lump moved closer to the top of the covers, and then a head with a stubby little nose and a pair of enormous ears poked itself out. It made a cautious meeping sound.

The man in the chair looked towards the bed.

"You can come out now, Sphinx. I've stopped throwing things."

The nose and ears emerged a little more, to be followed by a rather plump body and a long whippy tail. Sphinx was a cat, for want

of a better description. She had turned up on Hagrid's doorstep one morning in a cardboard box, tiny and shivering with cold. Even Hagrid, with his flexible attitude to living creatures, had been hard pushed to call her attractive. She was wrinkled with a rat-like tail and completely bald. She looked like something rather threadbare and neglected. When he had seen her Snape had felt a momentary flash of empathy. The kitten seemed to respond to this, for the first movement she made was towards his lap. After that it seemed that he had little choice but to adopt the creature. She in return utterly adored him — a fact that he regarded with some irony. He was well aware that Nature had not seen fit to make him adorable in many eyes.

Since that time she had grown considerably, both in size and confidence, although still bald and wrinkled. She lived almost permanently under the blankets of his bed, and made a rather pleasant, if slightly sticky, hot water bottle on cold nights.

Now she had made her way up onto his lap, and was climbing the front of his robes, to butt enquiringly at his face. He pushed her down, stroking her absently. It was rather like stroking warm suede. She began to purr loudly.

Snape sighed. Eight years after he had left Hogwarts that Potter brat was still causing

him trouble. He had just received, and indeed destroyed, a message regarding the boy's most recent exploits. Not that smoking out a nest of would-be Death Eaters was much to get excited about these days. No, what had disturbed him was the account of the fate of the Auror – whatever his name was – who was currently in St Mungo's. Fortunately it appeared from the Ministry reports that no one was any the wiser as to the cause. He would need to put aside some time to deal with the situation though, before it got out of hand.

A scrabbling at the window caught his attention. Sphinx jumped off his lap and scuttled back beneath the blankets. Going to investigate, Snape discovered a small barn owl waiting outside. It was not a bird he recognised, and he rarely got unsolicited correspondence. Letting the creature in, he released the message from its leg. It flew down, landed on the floor next to Sphinx's food and water and began to help itself. From the bed Sphinx mewed in protest, but did not actually move to interfere.

Snape unrolled the parchment, looked at the signature and blinked. Shaking his head in disbelief he began to read.

Dear Professor Snape

I apologise for troubling you directly, but I am

writing to request your help with a private project.

An unknown potion sample has recently come into my possession, and I am attempting to analyse and compile a full list of the ingredients. Unfortunately, I am having some difficulty in identifying some of the rarer substances.

I would be grateful for the benefit of your advice and expertise in this matter.

If you feel able to assist, please send a message back with the owl.

Yours sincerely

Hermione Granger.

Laboratory Manager

Ministry of Magic

Of course. He should have known.

Potter was present at the incident when the Auror was injured. The Ministry has no indication of the cause of the injuries. Shortly afterwards Granger acquires an unknown potion, which contains elements she can't identify.

It was completely and totally inevitable that this would happen.

Severus Snape sank back into his armchair

with the distinctly unpleasant sensation of his past catching up with him.



Hermione Granger firmly closed the door of her wardrobe, and opened a drawer. Then she shut the drawer and opened the wardrobe again. Then she shut the wardrobe, then opened it, and then shut it. She went into the bathroom, and brushed her hair again, catching it back in a pony tail secured by a clasp. Then she released it, and braided it. Then she let the braid go and restored the pony tail.

She returned to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. She gave a sigh of exasperation.

The owl from Snape had arrived two days ago. The message had been curt.

Miss Granger.

Sunday afternoon will be the least inconvenient time to discuss this matter in my classroom. Kindly exercise discretion in your arrival.

Severus Snape.

It was now Sunday afternoon and she was fussing as if this was some kind of first date. The time made sense – the potions room would be deserted. Afternoon tea with Professor Snape

attracted fewer live guests than Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday party. The effort was not for his benefit, however. She doubted he would get any further than noticing that she was dressed.

No – this was one of her little rituals to boost her self-confidence. The more nervous she was about a meeting, the more trouble she took with her appearance. Snape had always had the ability to disconcert her. Not least because he was one of the few teachers she had ever met who didn't seem to respond to her intelligence. Throughout her school life her brains had earned her the approval of her teachers – even at Hogwarts. But that had never been the case with Snape. He had treated her with the same disdain he showed for all his students. Her enthusiasm had almost seemed to increase his irritation.

Despite telling herself firmly that she had achieved some professional success and recognition, and could face him as an equal, Hermione still felt as if she had been summoned to do detention.

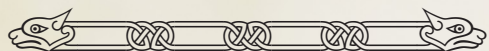
In the end she settled on trousers, with a sweater and matching cardigan. She briefly considered heels, and then opted for flat lace-up shoes and socks. Neat, professional, but not overwhelmingly so.

She was about to go back into the bathroom again, when she stopped.

I'm sorry I'm late Professor Snape. I was doing my hair.

No, that really wouldn't work.

Picking up her handbag, she checked that she had the small plain bottle, and the drawing of the marking on the original flask. She grabbed her cloak from the back of the chair and apparated.



She reappeared by one of the outer walls of Hogwarts. In the distance was the Forbidden Forest. Drawing her wand out from her sleeve she tapped the wall briefly. The wall obligingly rearranged itself into an archway, and she slipped inside, giving thanks to generations of Hogwarts students who had devoted considerable time and energy to devising concealed entrances and exits.

This particular one was infrequently used, largely because part of the route lay past the Potions Room. However, this time it suited her purpose perfectly. Quietly she made her way to the classroom.

She felt a twinge of nostalgia, mixed with regret that she was unable to seek out Dumbledore or McGonagall – or one of her other old teachers. Why couldn't Harry have met a Death Eater who posed him a tricky Arithmancy problem, she wondered glumly. A long chat with Professor Vector would have been a much more pleasant prospect.

The corridor leading to the Potions Room was as forbidding as she remembered it. It was dark and cold, and somehow gave the impres-

sion of being clammy, although she doubted that it actually was – most potions ingredients required a fairly dry environment. The ones that needed high humidity were usually kept elsewhere. At Hogwarts, they would be dealt with by Professor Sprout.

She shivered. How ridiculous. It was only Snape after all. Not Voldemort himself.

In front of her was a dark, ironbound door. A door familiar from seven years of study. It was closed. Hermione raised her hand and, steeling herself, knocked once, firmly.

"Come in," responded a familiar voice.

Pushing the door open, Hermione entered the Potions Classroom for the first time since her graduation.

For a jolting moment she was back in her schooldays. Nothing seemed to have changed. She would have bet that the ingredients, equipment, books were all exactly where they used to be. The air still held that familiar smell – disinfectants, ingredients and counteragents. The window glass was still smeared, and struggling to let in the light.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger."

Snape.

The same tall, cadaverous figure shrouded in unrelieved black. The same lank, greasy hair and sallow skin. The same silky voice, heavy with tired cynicism, ready at any moment to snap with

whiplash sarcasm, or sneering derision. The same unbearably still presence, which compelled attention no matter where he was in the room.

She had the bizarre impression that he hadn't actually moved from behind his desk in the last eight years. The piles of papers in front of him looked untouched. Only the slight traces of grey at his temples suggested that he had even bothered to age.

The only incongruous note was the low, soft, single melody line of an unaccompanied instrument. It was a oddly serene sound in the stillness of the room. A cello, she thought.

The unexpectedness of it distracted her mind as she listened, analysed and, finally, identified. "I didn't realise that you liked Bach."

His eyebrow quirked.

"I didn't realise that you had come to discuss my musical tastes."

She felt defensive already.

"I haven't," she said trying to regain some control. "I just wasn't expecting to hear the Bach Cello Suites as well."

"Consider it an unexpected bonus then, Miss Granger." His voice was dismissive, and he gestured at his desk. "Now, as you can see, I have papers to mark. I suggest you state your business."

Hermione was uncomfortably aware of her rising flush. She had been back in his classroom for less than five minutes and already she could

feel herself regressing to her first year. Never mind the work she had done so far. He had the air of someone about to take five points from Gryffindor merely for her being there. She swallowed.

"As I explained in my message, Professor, I have acquired a sample of a potion, that I am trying to analyse."

"Ah yes. And you have failed. Is that it?"

Hermione gritted her teeth. Broadly speaking that was correct, but she didn't like to hear it stated that baldly.

"I've run into one particular problem, yes," she replied, trying to keep her voice even.

"I didn't think that the Ministry of Magic employed people who ran back to school whenever they encountered a problem."

That nettled her.

"I didn't realise that I had come to discuss my chosen career."

He steepled his fingers and gazed at her coldly.

"I would have thought that your career was rather dependent on your ability to carry out precisely this kind of task. Unless of course you were appointed simply on the strength of your role as Potter's acolyte."

Hermione decided that the only way forward was to take the offensive. Possibly literally.

"Given how precious your time is, Professor Snape, I can hardly think that you invited me here just to criticise my life choices."

"I didn't invite you here at all, girl," he said sourly. "*You approached me*, if I recall correctly."

"And I assume you want to hear what I have to say otherwise you would have sent a flat no."

He looked at the ceiling.

"Explain," he said simply.

Hermione sketched in the background as she had been given it by Harry, and outlined her own attempt at analysing the potion. He did not offer her a seat, and she cursed herself for not having the presence of mind just to take one. She was damned if she was going to ask his permission, yet to sit belatedly would somehow be worse. Standing in front of him, she felt as if she were delivering a essay report, but he appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be listening to her intently.

When she had finished he questioned her closely about her techniques, the methods she had used and the approaches she had tried. She was half expecting a grade at the end.

In the end he ceased his interrogation and closed his eyes, almost as if in pain. Hermione stifled that fanciful thought. The desk was more likely to feel pain than Snape. Finally he stirred, and rose. The unexpected movement caused her to let out a breath she didn't know that she had been holding. Ignoring her he went to one of the bookcases. He removed a number of books, in what appeared to be random order,

piling them neatly. Then he reached into the back, and pulled out another small book.

Returning, he placed it on his desk. Hermione could see that it appeared to be bound in very soft leather, of a quality she had never seen before. He flicked through the pages until he found what he was looking for, and then spread the open book in front of her.

She studied the page. It was made of a thin, nearly transparent material and very very delicate. On it, in some kind of rusty brown ink was a familiar design. A capital M within a circle.

"Have you ever seen that before?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "It was stamped on the potion bottle."

Curiosity got the better of her, and she reached out tentatively to touch it the page.

"Don't!" Snape's voice was like a whipcrack. She jumped and froze.

"What is it made of," she asked nervously.

He regarded her assessingly.

"Skin," he said briefly.

Hermione felt something spasm inside her and swallowed convulsively. She wasn't going to ask from what creature.

Snape, however, seemed to twitch in... excitement... apprehension... Hermione couldn't quite tell.

"Do you have the potion with you."

She hesitated, and then an old Muggle expression came to mind... In for a penny...

"Yes, but..."

He interrupted her.

"Give it to me. Now," he commanded.

Well, he *had* asked for it. She retrieved it from her bag and gave it to him. He examined the bottle intently.

"There's no mark on this bottle, girl."

"No, there isn't," she agreed.

"You said there was a design on the bottle."

"There is. That isn't the original bottle."

He was silent, and in a moment of small triumph she realised that she had scored a point.

"It seemed more sensible to put the potion in something less... distinctive," she continued more calmly than she felt.

"Yes, well," was all he managed. "Are you *sure* this is the design?"

"Yes."

"No possibility of a mistake?"

"No." She sighed, and reached into her pocket to pull out the folded sheet of notepaper. "I made a copy of it."

He snatched the paper from her, long fingers hastily unfolding it. Studying it he murmured under his breath, "yes... yes... I thought so."

Hermione was now beginning to get impatient.

"You thought what Professor? You obviously know what it is."

He looked up as if he had forgotten that she was there.

"It's something with which you no longer need concern yourself, Miss Granger. Good afternoon to you."

"Wait a minute." She wasn't going to let him get away with that. "If you aren't going to tell me what it is I need that potion sample back. I have to work on a counter agent."

"I told you, this isn't a matter for you any more."

"Yes it damn well is!" Hermione was angry now. "There's a friend of mine lying in St Mungo's, and there's something out there that took his mind away. I'm going to find a way of stopping it."

He pulled a face.

"How very *Gryffindor*..." he made it an insult "... of you Miss Granger. However, I suggest you find another windmill at which to tilt." He turned away, clearly dismissing her.

Without being consciously aware of it, Hermione had been staring at the design on the pages of the book. Suddenly her mind supplied the answer to at least one question that had been nagging at her.

"I've seen that design somewhere else," she stated.

"Where?" he demanded, his attention back on her.

She met his gaze defiantly, and said nothing.

"I see. You wish to play games, Miss Granger. This, however, is not one of your schoolchild escapades. I need to know where else you have seen this design."

"Tell me about the potion."

They held each other's gaze, neither of them giving way.

Eventually Snape said in a measured tone:
"I have an idea as to what this potion is, but to be certain, I need to know where else you have seen this mark."

Hermione calculated.

"I'll show you."

"Tell me."

"No. I'll take you there, or I'll tell you nothing."

She could almost see Snape thinking. She hoped that he was mostly thinking that she had him backed into a corner. His mouth quirked, as if he had read her mind.

"Very well."

"We'll need to apparate."

"Then I suggest we make use of the nearby exit."

She headed for the door. He pulled his thick black cloak from a peg and wrapped it over his trademark black robes. In hostile silence they left Hogwarts.

Snape and Hermione appeared together into a long darkened gallery. The air was very still and dry, and there was an unmistakeable smell of old things overlaid by commercial strength polish. Here and there dull red security light glinted off glass fronted cabinets. Hermione looked around quickly, to check that the building security hadn't detected their presence.

In front of them was a large pair of doors, with a small official-looking sign in front of it that said
'LIFE IN EARLY BRITAIN — recent Romano-British

discoveries. Exhibition under construction'.

"In there," she hissed and beckoned him to follow.

Tapping her wand on the door, and murmuring *Alohomora*, she slipped through the doors, Snape behind her.

The interior of this room was equally dark, but much less orderly. There were boxes strewn around the floor, some half open, some covered with cloths. Some cabinets were stacked against the walls, others were open, devoid of contents. Hermione looked around, wondering where to start.

"Well, Miss Granger?" came the voice behind her.

"It will be in here somewhere."

"Where are we — just to satisfy my own curiosity?"

"The British Museum."

"Ah yes. The place where Muggles display the petty trinkets they have purloined from each other throughout their tiresome history."

Hermione went rigid at the insult, and managed to prevent herself from responding. She suspected that he was deliberately needling her, and she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of rising to the bait.

"I'm going to try and find this thing. You can either help me, or stand there and make clever remarks. It's up to you."

He didn't reply, and she made her way to the back of the gallery, where she began to check the display cabinets.

In the end the room was more methodically organised than it looked. She found what she was looking for in a cabinet, tucked into a corner and roughly marked 'Box 47 — weaponry'.

On one of the shelves was the sword pommel from the advertising poster. It was about eight inches long all told and on the pommel was the design on the potion bottle. Underneath a neatly printed label read:

Exhibit 813

Rare monogrammed sword hilt.

Believed to be unique.

Provenance Unknown

Hermione tapped the cabinet once to open it. The doors swung noiselessly open. Extending her hand towards the metal object she softly said "*Accio*." The hilt came to her hand. The metal had obviously been worn smooth by use, but it was otherwise unremarkable to her touch. She balanced it experimentally. It had been made for someone with larger hands than hers, she thought. She backed away from the cabinet and turned. And nearly collided with Snape who had glided up behind her silently. Reflexively she jumped back. His eyes were uncharacteristically bright and he was holding the potion bottle in one hand. For an awful moment she thought that he might have drunk some of it.

"Give it to me."

Hermione backed off again, and held the metal hilt behind her.

"*Give it to me, girl*," he hissed, advancing. His tone was menacing, but some cool part of Hermione noted that his eyes held a note of pleading.

She shook her head, still trying to back away. Something sharp poked into the small of her back. The edge of another cabinet. He had her trapped between the cabinets and the wall of the room. She tried to edge sideways, but there were boxes in the way.

"Look, there's security in this place. They're going to notice us soon. I should have thought that you would have wanted to get out of here and discuss this somewhere else."

"Nice try, Miss Granger."

He reached for her, grasping her arm, trying to pull it round to the front. She twisted into the grip, jerking her left shoulder forward to pull him off balance, and swinging her handbag at him for good measure. The bag bounced off him and fell on the floor.

Snape was strong — surprisingly so — but Hermione was desperate, and the fact of being physically wedged in was at least giving her some leverage. She shoved hard again, and this time he fell backwards against a display cabinet. The hand holding the potion bottle smashed against the glass. The glass cracked with the force of the blow, and Snape dropped the potion.

The bottle hit the floor, and shattered, leaving a sticky puddle of liquid and broken glass.

Snape swore between his teeth and rounded on Hermione.

"Now look what you've done."

Hermione was not stopping for a debate. She was pushing past him, when she remembered that her bag was on the floor. Pausing, she tried to retrieve it. Her hesitation gave Snape the opportunity to grab for her again.

He hauled her to her feet.

"Give me that object!" he shouted.

"Over my dead body!" she shouted back.

In response he shoved her hard against the wall.

Hermione felt her breath go, and she staggered. She reached out her hands to stop herself falling, and lost her grip on the sword hilt.

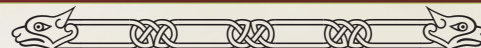
Almost in slow motion she watched it fall, hit the ground, and bounce into the glass and potion mixture.

Snape stared at it transfixed.

Then as one they dived for it.

Their hands closed on the artefact at the same time.

Hermione had the unpleasant sensation of having just touched raw flesh, and she was about to pull away when she felt a sharp tug, somewhere around her navel, and was only conscious of a rushing sound in her ears.



Some while later a figure dressed in shabby Muggle clothes, and wearing a brown warehouseman's coat entered the closed gallery. He tsked to himself as he saw the mess.

"Bloody 'ell, what's been goin' on in 'ere then," came a flat Cockney voice behind him.

A portly, cheerful looking Muggle had come in behind him. He was also wearing a brown overall. Putting his hands on his hips, and shaking his head, he sucked air through his teeth.

"Well, all I can say is I'm glad I'm not the one as 'as to tell the Professor that someone's been spilling sticky drinks all over 'is prize exhibits."

The other man did not reply, nor turn his silver blonde head to make eye contact.

"Spect you'd better get that cleared up before someone *important* finds it." He clapped the silent man on the back, and chuckled. Then he peered closely at his colleague.

"Ere, do I know you? Are you from the agency?"

"Yes. Yes I'm from the agency." The voice was quiet, but polished and cultured.

"Well, I'm Stan, an' if you want to know anything, just ask."

"Thank you... Stan." Again the incongruous voice, and avoidance of gaze.

Stan shook his head again and wandered off.

Dead posh for a glorified cleaner, he thought.

Nicely spoken, good haircut — he could see that right off. Bloke who's used to 'aving money. Never mind. Expect it's one of them city types what suffers from Stress, and needs a job what's Less Stressful.

The other man watched him go. His first instinct had been to kill Stan where he stood, but there were more important things to do here.

He pulled a soft red cloth out of his pocket, and very carefully mopped up the remains of the potion, glass and all. Then, when he was certain that he had every last fragment and drop, he wrapped the red cloth in a black cloth and deposited the rest in a bag which looked as if it had been made out of some type of reptile hide.

Then he went to examine exhibit case 47.
He quickly found the label.

Exhibit 813

Rare monogrammed sword hilt.
Believed to be unique.
Provenance Unknown

The space above the label was empty.

He cursed under his breath. That wretched... *female*... had got there first. Now it was doubtless in the hands of Potter and his happy band of followers.

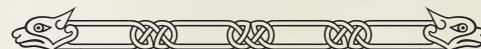
Well, they didn't have the potion. Not any more.

And at least he could get out of these filthy clothes

The agency "cleaner" pulled a long, thin piece of wood from within his coat and pointed it at himself, muttering under his breath.

The workman's attire changed to deep red robes, so dark that they were almost black.

With a face set in fury, Draco Malfoy apparated.



When the rushing sensation stopped, Hermione found herself unceremoniously dumped into a small, but very prickly bush. Disentangling herself, she scrambled to her feet and looked around. The scene in front of her did not exactly inspire confidence. She was surrounded by what could best be described as bare moorland. Patches of rock were visible through the sparse ground cover. The area was ringed with low hills. There was no appreciable tree line, and indeed, she had the strong impression that any plant taller than a stunted gorse bush had long ago given up the unequal fight for survival. The place exuded an overwhelming sensation of damp desolation.

It reminded her of parts of Dartmoor, visited with her parents on childhood holidays. She had not exactly paid attention. For all her secret desire to be a field agent, Hermione had never been that keen on actual fields. She had preferred to spend her time curled up with a good book.

Now she was plunged into her worst possible scenario.

"When you've quite finished admiring the beauty of the scenery, you might like to con-

sider the practicalities of our situation."

Hermione reconsidered her definition of worst possible scenario. Turning she took in the black figure silhouetted against the grey back-drop. He was staring at her with a supercilious expression on his face.

"What are you doing here?" she stammered.

Oh very impressive. That sort of question will really convince him that you are an asset to the Ministry.

His response didn't disappoint.

"I see the trip deprived of the use of your brain Miss Granger. I should have thought that it was perfectly obvious what I am doing here. Your... behaviour in the museum has resulted in both of us being transported to this place."

Hermione's brain had begun to function again. They had both grabbed for the hilt at the same time.

"The sword hilt is a Portkey?" she said, thinking out loud.

"Congratulations," came the icy response. "I'm gratified to see that you haven't lost your grasp of the blindingly obvious."

Hermione could feel her cheeks begin to burn again. He had always had the capacity to wrongfoot her, and she had never been able to stop herself showing it.

He continued.

"Now you've caught up, perhaps you would be good enough to indicate where it is so we can

both get out of here. I have little or no desire for an impromptu camping trip. Delightful as your company would no doubt be."

The open mockery in his tone nettled Hermione.

"Curiously enough," she retorted, "I had other plans for this evening as well."

He appeared unmoved — simply waiting for her to find the artefact. She raised both her hands. They were empty. She tried to remember what had happened when they had... landed, for want of a better phrase. It was all rather a blur she had to admit. She looked down at the ground hoping to see something there in front of her. Nothing. She could just feel Snape's eyes watching her. She had little hope that he hadn't worked out what she was doing. She didn't even need to turn round to know exactly what the expression on his face would be. She continued looking.

The silence of the place was unearthly. She did not remember the countryside being this quiet — birds sang, small animals rustled — even aeroplanes flew overhead. The normal, reassuring, noises of everyday life. But here there was nothing. Only a near tangible stillness. She began to wonder nervously if was ever going to be able to find the sword hilt.

Snape's wordless scrutiny of her was unnerving as well. In some ways she would have preferred a sarcastic commentary. She gritted her teeth. In a minute, she thought, she would shout

at him, just to make some sound. For a wild moment she even wondered if he were still there. He could have walked off without saying anything and left her alone. For all his overwhelming unpleasantness, he seemed to have some idea of how to get them back. She found the thought of being there without him suddenly frightening, and she straightened, turning abruptly.

He was standing, observing her intently. As she turned, he just raised an eyebrow.

Hermione bit her lip in annoyance at herself for giving in to irrational fear. The irritation actually steadied her somewhat, and her intellect began to function again. She pulled her wand from her sleeve.

"Manifesto."

Her voice sounded dull, as if she was speaking in a room muffled by heavy curtains.

She also suddenly had the sensation of being watched. Out of the corner of her eye she was aware that Snape had tensed.

The thought came to her unbidden: *Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.*

To her relief, she could also see a glow within the scrubby vegetation.

"It's there."

She bent down and picked it up. As her fingers closed round it something felt different. Just before they had been transported it had felt organic. Now it just felt like a lump of metal.

She opened her mouth to comment on it, and then thought better of it. Hopefully, they would be out of here shortly, and there was no point in giving him more opportunities than necessary to needle her.

It then dawned on her that she had not felt the familiar wrenching tug as they had both touched it. In fact she was still very much in the same place. Snape pulled the artefact out of her grasp and turned it over in his hands, examining it closely.

"It is ineffective."

Now who was stating the obvious, she thought, but did not say. She waited for him to elaborate on this remark. He appeared to be lost in thought though. From sheer habit of mind, Hermione began to review the sequence of the events in the museum. She had found the sword hilt. He had tried to take it from her. She had resisted. In the scuffle he had dropped the bottle, and she had dropped the artefact into the resulting mess. They had both reached for it at the same time...

The potion. Maybe...

"When we touched the artefact in the museum it had the potion on it. Could there have been something in the potion that triggered the Portkey?"

Snape jumped as if startled by her continued presence. He looked hard at her.

"Very probably," was his only response though.

Well, the rest of the potion was on the floor of the Romano British exhibition. Not a lot of help.

"I suppose we need to start thinking of another way to get back then," she said.

"We *need* to start looking for shelter," responded Snape abruptly. "I don't think that this is going to be a particularly welcoming place to spend the night."

Spend the night. Oh dear gods. Alone. In the middle of who knows where. With Professor Snape. Well, this was no time to have hysterics. She couldn't imagine a less sympathetic audience for a start.

He had already started walking away, his cloak wrapped round him. Hermione paused, slightly non-plussed. He stopped and looked at her.

"Well? Are you coming, or do you *want* to spend the night here?" He paused. "Oh, and Miss Granger, I would be grateful if you could restrain your urge to cast spells for a while."

With no further elaboration he strode away. Unable to formulate a sensible or polite reply, Hermione pulled her own cloak around herself and followed him.



After about an hour stumbling across moorland they came to a small bluff. Set in the face of the bluff were a number of small caves. At least

one of them looked big enough to accommodate two people comfortably. Hermione looked around. This appeared to be the only feature that would afford them any sort of shelter. Either Snape was plain lucky or he had some experience with this sort of terrain. Odd, she thought. He didn't look the sort to spend the long vacations hiking the hills and mountains of Britain.

The object of her thoughts was already investigating the cave.

"It'll do," was his laconic summary. "It's big enough, dry and there's only one entrance."

He surveyed her sourly. "I suggest you look for anything dry that will burn. I'm going to see if I can find something edible." Hermione just looked at him. "Unless, of course, Miss Granger, you possess wilderness survival skills of which I am unaware."

She shook her head mutely. He turned and disappeared round the corner.

Once he had had gone, she let out her breath. Between saying nothing, and making stupid remarks, it was no wonder that he thought she was an idiot. She resolved to get a grip, and take back some control in this situation. If only for the sake of her dignity.

She was now alone, and she involuntarily shivered. Although there was nothing she could actually put her finger on, the sense that she was being watched was increasing. And

there was an unwholesomeness to the air that almost physically invaded her. Reflexively she wiped her hands on her cloak, as if they were coated with something dirty. In order to distract herself she decided to explore.

She had a quick look in the cave. As Snape had said, it was dry, and big enough for the two of them to stretch out without being too close. A distinct bonus. Returning outside she began to collect all the dry and combustible material she could. Distant memories of the loathed camping trips came back to her, and she also collected stones to form a circle to contain the fire. Carefully she piled up the dry material – larger pieces of kindling, and made a separate pile to keep the fire going once started. A largish flat stone caught her attention. She had a sudden flash of her father heating up a similar stone and then frying eggs on it. She put it to one side just in case.

Moving a little further away from the cave entrance, she found a pool of water. Experimentally she dipped her fingers in. It was very cold. She wondered if it was drinkable. She felt the analytical part of her brain unfreeze for the first time since they had arrived. The stones that she had collected had all appeared to be some kind of igneous rock. There was very little vegetation or soil cover here. Therefore, if the pool was fed by a spring, rather than being standing water, it

should contain little sediment, or other detritus. Therefore, it should be safe to drink. QED.

Or, of course, she could just cast a *Purificus* charm, and have done with it. Although he had told her not to use spells. Part of her rebelled at that arbitrary command. A more reflective side pointed out that he seemed more familiar with the area. It might be wise to watch and wait a while.

Nevertheless, the process of reasoning had helped to restore her sense of inner balance.

She scooped up a handful of water, and then paused. Snape wouldn't be very amused if she poisoned herself. On the other hand, *not amused* appeared to be his natural state. And she was very thirsty. She sipped the water. It had a slightly mineralised taste, but otherwise appeared to be acceptable.

She was scouting round, looking for something to carry water in when Snape returned with a bundle of things.

He looked faintly surprised when he saw the fire. She wondered, apprehensively, if she had done it wrong, misremembered something. But he simply raised an eyebrow.

"It seems you *do* possess some wilderness skills after all, Miss Granger."

She didn't rise to the bait, but said mildly:

"The water in the pool over there seems to be safe to drink."

He deposited the bundle on the larger flat

stone. There was some sort of root, some kind of fungus, and some eggs. The sight of the eggs made her giggle suddenly.

"Something amusing you, Miss Granger?"

His tone caused her to swallow the sound immediately.

"No, sir." *Damn, where had that 'Sir' come from?* She sought to explain to cover her embarrassment. "I... When I was a child my family used to go on camping trips. My father always used to fry eggs on a hot stone for me."

The abrupt juxtaposition in her mind of her father cooking for her and being stranded here with Snape caused her amusement to genuinely die, and a lump to rise in her throat. And how long had it been since she had had that sort of connection with her family? She swallowed firmly and briskly swept up the roots and the... well, she was going to call them mushrooms, whatever they were.

"If we're going to eat these I'd better go and wash them," she stated, and strode away before he could say anything more to unsettle her.



Snape watched her go with a distant look in his eyes.

The sudden glimpse of her childhood had raised a sharp pang of envy that had briefly silenced him.

He tried to imagine his own father frying eggs on a large piece of rock in the middle of a field. He failed. In fact, he wondered if his father would even recognise him. Or, if he was still alive.

He ruthlessly shut down this train of thought. Dwelling on the past was a sterile and useless exercise. Better to concentrate on how they were going to get out of this situation. He rubbed his hand over his eyes. The oppressive atmosphere was fraying his already taut nerves. He wondered bleakly how exactly he was going to explain himself to the young woman stranded with him.

He was under no illusions that Hermione Granger was an outstandingly bright and perceptive young woman. She had been so as a pupil at Hogwarts. The Ministry would have been unlikely to allow her to manage her own laboratory if she had not fulfilled her early promise. At the moment she was still slightly disorientated, and struggling against seven years of conditioning to be afraid of him. This would inevitably wear off — sometime early tomorrow morning at the latest, he thought wryly. Then her formidable brain would engage, and she would demand an explanation.

And she wasn't going to like it.

He wasn't looking forward to the next few days at all.



As it turned out Snape's misgivings proved to be unfounded.

The first night that they had been stranded Hermione had lain awake, listening to his soft regular breathing, uncomfortably aware of his presence, despite the physical distance between them. At school Snape had always been an unknown quantity on a personal level. His acid tongue and sour demeanour had discouraged any but essential social interaction. Now she was dependent on him to get her out of here, and she frankly didn't trust him not to abandon her if it was in his interest to do so.

To distract herself from this unpleasant thought, she had methodically reviewed the best course of action. There were definitely some unanswered questions here, she had concluded. For one thing, he was entirely too competent in dealing with the situation. And she didn't think that he was a former member of the wizarding equivalent of the marines. Not that she hadn't been very grateful for the food and shelter that he had found – that in itself was contributing to her ability to think clearly – but he was also clearly a man with a purpose. On the basis of past experience she didn't think that marching up to him and saying "Professor Snape, there's something you're not telling me. What is it?" would elicit much information.

That only left her initial instinct to watch

and wait – staying close to him and keeping quiet. Apart from anything else, at the moment sheer survival dictated it.

She also registered that he hadn't simply Apparated himself back to Hogsmeade or wherever. She had used a charm to reveal the sword hilt, and he had ordered her not to use magic again. He was sticking to that injunction himself, she noted, doing things the despised Muggle way. Even to the extent of making a fire by sparking rocks together. Not that that hadn't been an educational experience in itself, but it was odd behaviour for wizard. Not to mention giving rise to interesting speculations on why and how he would have acquired the skill in the first place.

It was now coming to the end of the third day spent in quiet observation, and she was forced to say that things between them had not been as bad as she feared. Snape had not been exactly chatty, but his remarks, although few and far between, had been largely devoid of the sneering sarcasm she had come to expect of him. Away from his students, and fixed on some unknown personal goal, he was merely brusque. And their conversations over supper had been almost civil.

He had remarked that teaching at Hogwarts was little different than it was when she had been there – only the names changed. He did

observe that life had been somewhat less – stimulating – since she and Mr Weasley and Mr Potter had left. She had described her work at the Ministry, and on the previous evening he had rather curtly offered a suggestion to assist her work on improving the keeping qualities of certain types of healing potion.

Despite this rather fragile *détente*, he hadn't unbent far enough to discuss his plans with her. He simply seemed to assume that she would acquiesce in his decisions. Despite that, however, she sometimes sensed him watching her intently – almost warily – as if she was a semi-feral creature that might unexpectedly turn on him.

Some secret part of her felt a perverse triumph that there was at least one element in the scenario that he did not feel he could control completely.

She had still not been able to relax much, nevertheless, and had certainly developed no love for their surroundings. She still had the distinct feeling that they were being shadowed by something, and was trying hard to convince herself that this was mere fancy. The general air of uncleanness seemed to oversensitize her skin, and cause her to be almost skittish. She was nervous and unhappy, just being there.

To make matters worse she had not been able to shake off her nagging dread that Snape would abruptly abandon her there. He always appeared to know where they were, although there were

few distinguishing features that she could identify. He could find food and shelter – he had no need for her whatsoever, and she was certain that she was slowing him down. She was beginning to wonder whether his hostility towards her at school had sprung from a knowledge that she was just not up to the required standards. If that were the case, then this expedition would just prove him right. Professor Snape had never been one to tolerate dead weight gladly. Not in the classroom, and she had no reason to suppose that here would be any different.

At the moment they appeared to be following a small stream. It was flowing through a shallow ditch, snaking its way around boulders of varying sizes. She could see the first hints of darkness touching the hills – in the near distance now – they did at least appear to be getting closer to something. Assuming, of course, that that was their destination.

Snape himself had disappeared some while ago, looking for shelter he had told her. She tried to suppress the rising fear that he would just not return.

Hermione now felt a distinct drop in temperature – the nights had been cold, and she was grateful that she at least had a cloak – she had nearly put on a Muggle style coat before going to Hogwarts for her meeting with Snape.

Hogwarts. That meeting seemed a lifetime ago now. She felt a longing to be there – even

in Snape's cold, unwelcoming dungeon. She wondered if Harry and Ron had noticed she'd gone. Part of her wished that they were there with her. She missed Harry's quiet intuition and Ron's irreverent humour. Of course, they always told her that they valued her contributions as well. Now, she wondered if she had just been a way of getting information that was easier and more convenient than looking it up for themselves. A lump rose in her throat, and tears pricked her eyes. The feeling of being watched intensified.

Biting her lip and swallowing she tried to divert her thoughts onto a more professional course. She hoped that Cyrus was remembering to return everything to its proper place in the lab in her absence — she wouldn't be very pleased if she got back and had to completely re-order the place. She was dimly aware that she was focussing on triviality to suppress another wave of homesickness.

Sunset in this place was not a thing of warm reds and golds. It was more a creeping shadow, curling itself around the landscape, carrying with it a damp, depressing chill. It perfectly matched the current tenor of her thoughts.

Although Snape was competent, and not being actively hostile, he was still unapproachable and forbidding. Of all the people to get lost with, she had to be with someone who despised

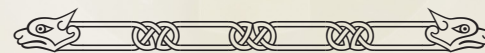
her. She felt an overwhelming need for comfort and a friendly face.

A curt voice intruded into her thoughts:

"I have located a suitable place. I suggest we make camp."

Snape could move as noiselessly as a snake when he chose to, and Hermione was deep in her own reflections. She started violently at the sound of his voice, and lost her footing.

Although she had chosen to wear flat shoes, she had not anticipated terrain any rougher than the Hogwarts' corridors. She stumbled, and tried to regain her balance, but couldn't get any purchase on the ground beneath her. Her right leg twisted painfully and gave way, pitching her into the stream. She felt a sharp pain at her temple as her head hit one of the larger stones scattered across the stream bed, and lost consciousness.



The first thing that Hermione was aware of was a stinging pain in her head. Other facts began to register slowly, one by one. There was an ache at the top of her right hip, and her ribs hurt for some reason. She was wet in places. And she was lying on the ground.

Memory kicked in and supplied the connecting information. She had fallen into a stream and hit her head. In front of Professor

Snape. If she could have summoned up the will to groan she would have done. This was just what she needed.

She didn't appear to be lying in the stream any more, so she could only assume that he had pulled her out. She bet that he had just *loved* doing that. She could imagine his face without even looking.

She lay still, trying to gather her disjointed thoughts. One thing was obvious. She was going to have to move and get up at some point. She could hardly lay here all night, and she did not intend to be the subject of any more of Snape's ridicule than was strictly necessary.

Cautiously she opened her eyes. Snape was bending over her:

"Welcome back, Miss Granger," he said laconically.

She swallowed — her mouth felt dry and metallic — took a deep breath and tried to push herself up on one elbow. To her surprise she felt the slight resistance of his hand on her shoulder.

"You knocked yourself out for a moment. I doubt that springing to your feet will assist matters."

She shut her eyes and swallowed again. She might have been longing for comfort a few moments ago, but she had more pride than to turn to Snape for help or support. She also had absolutely no desire to voluntarily offer herself up as a target for his derision.

She pushed against his hand.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "It was just a bang on the head."

He abruptly withdrew his hand, and sat back on his heels watching her. She struggled to her feet. Her right hip protested, but she ignored it. As she straightened she felt a wave of nausea pass over her.

Oh no — you are *not* going to be sick in front of Snape, Hermione, my girl, she told herself vehemently.

She breathed slowly through her mouth, willing the sickness to go away. When she thought that she had it under control she took an experimental step forward. The movement caused her head to whirl. Her diaphragm spasmed involuntarily, and she realised in a kind of detached misery that there was nothing she could do to prevent what was about to happen.

She sank onto her knees and threw up violently in front of her.

As the worst passed she became aware that an arm was circled across the back of her shoulders, supporting her, and that her hair was being held away from her face.

Snape, she thought in slightly bemused wonder.

She knew that she ought to pull away, but she desperately needed to feel some kind of human contact. At that moment she didn't think that she could bear to lose the warmth of his body against her side. Unconsciously she

leant into him, shifting her weight. He held her like that until it was clear that she was not going to vomit again.

Without removing his arm from her shoulders, he released her hair. Then she felt something cool and wet wiping her face and mouth. Her breathing relaxed a little, and then she felt the side of his hand against her lips.

"You have now managed to dehydrate yourself as well as give yourself concussion. I suggest you drink." His voice was dry, but not unkind.

"Drink?" mumbled Hermione, feeling slow and stupid.

"Yes. I'm afraid I neglected to pack the china tea service so you will have to manage with my hand. I assure you it is quite clean."

He tipped his cupped hand towards her mouth, and she awkwardly bent her head forward.

His skin was surprisingly soft against her lips, for a man who spent his time dealing with astringent substances. His touch was too practical to be a caress, but a stray imagining made her wonder what one from those hands would be like. She drank the water, half sipping, half lapping, her tongue catching against his skin. As she finished her lips met the palm of his hand in something that was almost, but not quite, a kiss.

It was only the swift tensing of his chest that betrayed his intake of breath, and he removed his hand from her face.

"I suggest we go to the camp now," he said expressionlessly.

Hermione began to get to her feet. This time she was more firmly restrained.

"I think not," he stated. "I have no desire for a repetition of your recent performance."

Obviously any impulse of compassion had been exhausted.

Then he surprised her again by effortlessly swinging her up into his arms.

This time her head rested on his shoulder, and she was once again aware of the strength in his wiry arms. She shut her eyes, allowing his regular stride to soothe her. He carried her in silence, until they stopped. Then he simply said:

"We're here."

She was aware of him putting her carefully down on the ground, but she felt too dizzy to open her eyes. She mumbled something as he let her go and his warmth disappeared. Then she felt a fumbling at the clasp of her cloak, and something within her fogged brain tried to object. Weakly, she reached up to push him away.

She heard him sigh in exasperation.

"Girl, your clothes are wet. If you don't want to add hypothermia to the list of your problems, you need to be warm and dry."

There was a pause and he added in a gentler tone:

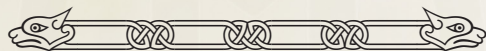
"I don't know what sort of a man you think

I am, Miss Granger, but I can assure you that you are perfectly safe. Molesting injured young women has never been a pastime of mine."

Her protest subsided in a faint flush of shame, and she lay still as he removed her cloak, outer garments, shoes and socks, leaving her in her underwear.

He lifted her again, and moved her to one side. Then she felt herself being wrapped in what felt like a thick, slightly coarse, wool blanket.

His own cloak, she thought distantly, as she drifted off to sleep, feeling oddly secure for the first time in days.



Snapé sat cross legged in the cave, head resting in his hands, watching Hermione as she slept.

It was necessary, he told himself, to keep a check on her after a head injury. It was in his own interest as much as hers. They were in enough danger in this place without adding physical injury to the list.

Still, he could still feel a very slight tingle in the palm of his left hand where her lips and tongue had briefly touched it. And a memory of the warmth of her body against his as she leant for support.

He closed his eyes, and repeated to himself the exact ingredients for a Deflating Draught. Any-

thing to keep this unaccustomed ache at bay.

He knew what it was, of course.

It was the effect of the place.

Under ordinary circumstances the girl would not look at him twice.

Wouldn't look at you twice, indeed. Let's be honest here, Severus, she wouldn't cross the road to piss on you if you were on fire.

They were alone... and the place played on weaknesses, vulnerabilities. Exploited them. In his case it was the fact that he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt a warm, human, body against his own. It was her misfortune that she was here with him. That was all it was. Unfortunate circumstance.

Even more unfortunate that her instinct to use magic had alerted the presences of this place that they were here. And just when they most needed haste, she had injured herself. A nasty dilemma for him.

He uncrossed his legs, and went to check her.

She seemed to be sleeping naturally, although it was evidently troubled. He laid two fingers against her carotid artery, checking the pulse. It was slightly elevated, but nothing to worry about. With his other hand he gently smoothed her hair back from her forehead. There was enough light for him to see the swelling. Better an unsightly bruise on the forehead than swelling to the brain, he mused. She stirred at his touch, and muttered

something in her sleep.

"Don't worry," he said in an uncharacteristically soft tone, "it's all right. Go back to sleep."

She quietened, and he let her sleep on.

Half the school would suffer fatal aneurisms, if they ever thought me capable of speaking like that, he thought sardonically. Maybe I should try it – it would significantly reduce my teaching workload.

Settling himself down, he continued his vigil.



Hermione's sleep was anything but peaceful. She was troubled by bizarre dreams – dreams where she was given a task to complete, something unidentifiable and unspecified, dreams of failing, dreams of family and friends turning away from her... And somewhere in it there was a voice of calm, soothing and reassuring. A familiar voice, one that she couldn't quite identify.

Eventually she woke properly, feeling sluggish and heavy. Her head was pounding, and when she tried to move, she found that most of her body ached.

Despite the pain her analytical faculties appeared to have returned. She fingered the cloth covering her – it was indeed Snape's own cloak. It had a slightly odd smell – Hermione thought that she could detect traces of various

substances, as if it had become impregnated over time with the tools of its owner's trade. Underlying it was a musky, slightly spicy scent. Not quite sandalwood, not quite cedar, cypress maybe... Something unique to the man himself perhaps.

Hermione clamped down on that line of thought immediately. Or it could be another potion ingredient that she couldn't identify. One act of generosity and her imagination was running away with her. It must be the effect of being stranded with him. She had no choice but to get on with him.

She was uncomfortably aware that she was only dressed in her underwear.

She went to push herself up, but the pain in her head, and the protests of her bruised body, reminded her of what had happened the last time she got up too quickly.

Gingerly, she levered herself up to a sitting position, and sat very still to find out what would happen. She was relieved to find that she didn't feel at all queasy. She looked around, careful not to move too sharply.

The cave was very similar to all the others in the area – small and dry. There was no sign of Snape. She felt a moment's irrational panic. Then she told herself that he was hardly likely to disappear on her after all the trouble he had gone to the previous day. If nothing else he was unlikely to leave without his cloak.

Cautiously she got to her feet and wrapped the cloak round her. She slowly walked out of the cave, the cloak trailing on the floor.

Outside, there was still no sign of her companion, but it was clear from the position of the sun that she had slept away the better part of the day. Glancing around she saw her clothes, spread out over some boulders. Going over to them she found that they were dry. She gathered them up and returned to the cave to dress.

When she emerged for the second time, Snape had returned, and was busying himself with something on the fire. He glanced at her briefly.

"Good morning, Miss Granger."

Hermione gave an involuntary glance in the direction of the sun.

Snape caught it, and his lips quirked slightly.

"It is a little later than usual, but I believe that it is still prior to the meridian."

Was that a joke?

Hermione was not certain how to respond, and to cover her confusion she held out the cloak that she was carrying:

"Um — here's your cloak, Professor." She paused, unable to decide exactly how to refer to what had happened between them the preceding day. "Thank you. I... er... hope you weren't too cold without it."

He stood and took it from her, studying her carefully.

"I am accustomed to the cold, Miss Granger. However, I would be interested to know how you are feeling."

"I'm fine," she said automatically.

He clicked his tongue in irritation.

"Miss Granger, as I believe I pointed out yesterday, you suffered concussion and dehydration. I doubt very much, therefore, that you are 'fine'. Carrying on in an heroic manner, whilst a characteristically Gryffindor action, will only serve to put us at more risk. Please do me the courtesy of an honest answer."

Hermione was stung by his tone.

"Well," she replied acidly, "my head hurts, my leg and ribs ache and I'm tired. On the other hand, I don't feel sick any more and I like to think that I have regained the use of most of my higher brain functions."

"Good," was his only response.

Then he startled her by moving close to her, and putting his fingers under her chin, tipping her face towards his.

"Hmm," he said consideringly. "The bruise looks dramatic, but I think it will be all right."

He tipped her chin a little more. "Look at me," he commanded.

Hermione found her gaze locked with his, unable to look away.

She had never really looked at his eyes before. 'Don't make eye contact with Snape' had been

one of the unwritten rules of Hogwarts. She had just had an impression of malevolent darkness. Now she was seeing those eyes at close quarters.

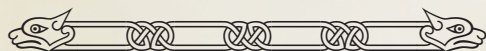
They were dark, certainly, but not malevolent. Deep, shadowed, pools, almost unreadable. But there was something... an emptiness? No, not emptiness, but isolation. A guarded, defensive, distancing of himself from humanity. They were the eyes of a man who had long since ceased to expect gentleness from the world – and therefore no longer sought it. But that decision was the forced choice of one who saw no alternative, she realised with a choking flash of intuition.

What had driven him to such a position? How could he stand to be so alone?

Instinctively responding to the insight she half raised her hand toward him. He seemed to flinch away from the movement.

"Your pupils appear to be focussing properly," he stated. "I think it will be safe to continue tomorrow."

He turned on his heel and resumed his work at the fire.



In the end Hermione slept for most of the afternoon. Still shaken, both by her injuries and by her sudden insight into the dour potions

master, she had sat staring blankly until Snape had brusquely sent her off to lie down – with the injunction to take his cloak for warmth.

Waking in the early evening, she felt much improved.

Emerging from the cave again, she found him preparing food. As usual, the raw ingredients looked a little odd. He was aware of her approach even though she said nothing.

"Are you feeling better?"

She remembered his instruction to her earlier.

"Yes," she said truthfully.

He just looked at her.

"Yes," she repeated. "My head still aches, and my leg is stiff, but I feel better than I did this morning."

Snape returned his attention to the fire. Protecting his hand with the end of his sleeve, he removed a hollow stone, that had been half buried within the embers. He decanted the contents into what looked like a hollowed out animal horn of some description. He handed the horn to Hermione.

"Drink this," he instructed.

Hermione sniffed at it. It smelt bad.

Snape sighed.

"It should relax your muscles and ease the pain in your head. I regret that I have not had the opportunity this afternoon to brew up a base of duck consommé to disguise the taste."

It struck Hermione that Snape was using

sarcasm to deflect attention from what otherwise might have been considered a thoughtful act. The infusion he had made had probably taken him a large part of the day, when you took into account that he had had to find all the raw materials including the containers. On impulse she decided to respond to the action rather than the words.

"Thank you," she simply said mildly. "It was kind of you to take the trouble."

Snape looked sharply at her, almost as if he thought she were mocking him, and opened his mouth to respond. Then he just looked away, and continued cleaning the food.

Hermione sipped the potion. Effective it might be, but it unquestionably tasted vile. She tried to avoid screwing up her face, but fortunately Snape had his back to her. A small devil took possession of Hermione at that point.

"Mind you," she continued innocently. "If you *could* manage duck consommé next time, I think it would improve it."

Snape made a choking sound, and glared at her. He seemed to be struggling for words.

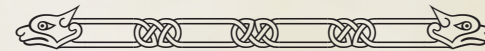
"Miss Granger," he said in the end. "I had almost convinced myself that being stranded with you was a bearable experience. I may need to reconsider."

The words were harsh, but the tone lacked the whiplash bite. In fact, viewed from a cer-

tain angle, it could nearly be a compliment. She could swear that she caught a hint of amused appreciation in his eyes. To stop herself considering the implications of this, she moved towards him and picked up one of the roots.

"Shall I get on with chopping this then?"

He shook his head disbelievingly. They continued in something like companionable silence.



Supper was the odd but reasonably appetising affair that Hermione had come to expect. Disgusting though it had been, Snape's brew had taken a lot of the edge off her various aches and pains, and the combination of that and the food was making her feel *extremely* relaxed. In fact, so relaxed that she was inclined to wonder about the exact ingredients he had used.

Now there was a good point, she noted. He had managed to find the right ingredients. How exactly had he done that? She looked over at her former teacher. He was sitting, shadowed as usual, wrapped in his own thoughts. Maybe this was a good time to get some information...

"Professor Snape?"

He looked over at her.

"Yes, Miss Granger."

She wondered how she was going to phrase this aptly, but the potion seemed to have loos-

ened her inhibitions.

"You know where we are don't you?"

He sighed, and looked up at the sky.

"Don't you?" she persisted.

"Yes," he said eventually.

Somehow this annoyed Hermione more than the sarcastic asides had.

"Yes," she repeated. "Yes. Is that it?"

"What more do you want?"

"Quite a lot actually. Firstly, this isn't Dartmoor is it?"

"No."

"Is it even England?"

He paused.

"Not as such."

"How can it not be England *as such*?"

"It's a type of England."

Hermione was not prepared to go round in these sorts of circles.

"Professor Snape. Ever since we arrived it's been quite clear that you are familiar with... wherever it is we are. You know where to find food and medicinal plants. You know the terrain. We haven't Apparated back to Hogwarts, so I assume that isn't possible or is too dangerous. In fact I don't think you've used any magic since we arrived. And you appear to be looking for something."

Snape was silent, studying the ground intently now. Hermione continued:

"Please, Professor, do me the courtesy of some

honest answers." She deliberately used his words back at him. "Where are we, what are we doing here, and how do we get... back?"

The silence between them drew out. Hermione was about to say something, when Snape spoke in a low voice.

"It is a long story."

"My diary is clear."

Snape sighed and poked the ground with his foot. It was a curiously vulnerable gesture thought Hermione.

"Have you heard of Hester Allworthy?"

Hermione searched her recollection.

"The name sounds familiar — oh yes, wasn't she one of the victims of Matthew Hopkins? The one the Muggles called the Witchfinder General."

"That's right. As far as it goes. Hester Allworthy lived in the 17th century. She actually was a witch, and a very powerful one. She was known for her work delving into the human psyche. Except she sought to use the darker human lusts as a direct source of power."

Hermione was transfixed. His voice had taken on the hypnotic compelling quality, that she remembered from school days, but without the biting edge. It sent a shiver down her spine.

"As you may or may not know, the deeper one goes into the study of Dark Magic, the closer one get to the edge of... what for want of a better term... most would call reality. Sometimes, when

the right mind – or wrong mind depending on your point of view – is in the right – or wrong – place... things... can make contact."

"And something made contact with Hester?" Hermione's mouth was dry.

"Yes. The exact details are not clear. But what is known is that Hester Allworthy made some sort of contact with a form of shadow reality – or a mirror reality if you prefer. A reality in which the unrestrained darkest aspects of human nature take on more... tangible... substance."

Hermione felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Snape's voice became even quieter.

"Not only did she contact it, somehow she managed to enter it. Whilst there she came into possession of a very particular substance. One which she managed to take back with her and bind into our... reality... in potion form."

Hermione thought she was beginning to understand, but was unwilling to interrupt Snape's mesmeric storytelling.

"She also enchanted a talisman to act as a bridge between our world and the shadow world."

"The sword hilt," breathed Hermione, almost without realising it. Snape nodded.

"Precisely. However, in 1645 Hester Allworthy was arrested by Matthew Hopkins and tried as a witch. She was burnt at the stake and her house destroyed. It was believed that all her work, including the potion and the talisman

were destroyed with it."

Hermione wrinkled her brow.

"But if Hester was truly a witch, and a powerful one, how did a Muggle manage to capture her?"

"Matthew Hopkins was not a Muggle. He was one of the most powerful Aurors that the wizarding world has ever produced. He adopted the disguise of a Muggle to allow him freedom of movement in the times."

"But I thought that most of his victims had proven to be harmless Muggles themselves."

Snape sighed.

"Those were ignorant and suspicious times, Miss Granger – and not just within the Muggle world. Matthew Hopkins was not responsible for all of the acts attributed to him, but he was a trifle... over-zealous... none the less."

Hermione digested this information, and then something that Snape had said came back to her. She swallowed as the implications began to dawn on her. She shied away from the enormity of them, and took refuge in a marginal issue

"Why the design? It looks like a monogram or a rune of some description."

Snape was silent a moment. Then he said in a careful tone. "It is almost certainly a type of rune."

Hermione has the sense that there was more to that than he was telling her, but there were other things troubling her at that moment.

"Hester's work wasn't destroyed was it?"

"No. The hilt survived. It found its way into the private collection of some Victorian gentleman. I forget the name now."

Snape was quiet again. Hermione knew, again, there must be more, and this time she was prepared to push for it. Eventually she said:

"And...?"

She had to strain to hear Snape's voice. If she hadn't known better she could have sworn she heard an undercurrent of pain when he began to speak.

"When... the Dark Lord... rose, he became aware of Hester's work. One of his goals was to reproduce it — so that he could use that source of power. He commanded his followers... the Death Eaters... to work on it. The hilt was eventually located and a group of them..." he tailed off, and then continued, the pain in his voice being replaced by an unyielding bitter hardness... "a group of *us* went to the house to retrieve it. The family did not survive the visit."

The implication was clear, but Hermione could not have moved or spoken if the hillside had fallen on her.

"However, the talisman is useless without the potion. Hester designed the enchantment so that the portal could not be opened without both constituents, at least not by humans. I believe the creatures of this place carry certain powers within themselves." He shrugged.

"There was hardly the opportunity for extensive research. In any event, we..." again that mocking pause... "... I... worked to reconstruct the potion from what was known of Hester's work. I got about as far as you did, Miss Granger — for which, by the way, I congratulate you, although you *did* have a sample of the potion to work from. I devised a potion which enhanced the strength and magical abilities of the drinker, but failed to open the portal." Silence. "As you may imagine, the Dark Lord had ways to discourage repeated failures."

Hermione felt a rising sense of appalled horror. And something else was beginning to bother her about this explanation.

Snape's voice had become utterly clinical now, as if he was reading out a homework assignment.

"I visited the site of Hester's house. A fresh building has been constructed on the ruins, but is apparently unable to keep long term occupants. The only part of the building to survive the destruction was the original cellar. There I found a small bottle containing some preservative liquid and two, shrivelled, berries. They proved to be the substance required for the potion to be effective."

Hermione could feel herself growing very cold. She pulled her cloak around her defensively. Snape did not appear to notice. She found her voice:

"That's where we are isn't it? That shadow reality?"

"Yes." Flatly.

"And you've been here before, gathering ingredients to make this potion for your... Dark Lord...?"

"Yes."

Hermione struggled to respond to this. Then she knew what had been bothering her about the story.

"If the potion is the second part of some special Portkey, why did the Death Eaters at the house in Yorkshire drink it? They didn't have the hilt. And I would have thought it was too valuable to use just to make yourself stronger. There are other potions that do that."

"Impressive reasoning, once again, Miss Granger. The potion in fact has two properties. Not only does it form a bridge between realities, it allows the drinker to connect with another human mind and draw off the emotion, as kind of power source. It leaves the victim in a state of deep catatonia."

Hermione had begun to shiver. She found her voice.

"You mean it turns you into a sort of human Dementor."

"An emotive description, but broadly accurate."

An awful certainty was beginning to creep over Hermione. Her shivering increased.

"And you've actually done this haven't you?"

Drawn off the emotions of other people?"

"Yes." A statement of cold fact. No excuses.

Hermione concentrated on her breathing in order to control her ragged feelings. How *dare* he do this to her. Just when she was beginning to trust him — to even *like* him...

"So what you're saying," she spat, her tone every bit as icy as his at its worst, "is that you created the potion that left Seamus Finnegan a vegetable in St Mungo's and then stranded me here with you. And that you have only *now* seen fit to tell me this. Were you planning at *any* stage to share this useful titbit of information. Or were you planning to string me along indefinitely?"

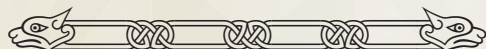
She stood, her rising anger temporarily overcoming her shakes.

"You must have been having a really good laugh about this." He moved slightly. She waved him down. "No, that's quite all right — it's a relief to know that *one* of us is getting some pleasure out of this little exercise."

She took another deep breath.

"Right now, I'll tell what *I* want. I want to find this berry — whatever it is — get back to my reality, and find a counteragent for this potion. With or without you, I don't much care. And I'm telling you now that *without* would be my preference. You deserve to rot here. You're an unscrupulous, immoral, callous and vindictive bastard. Just stay away from me"

She turned on her heel and strode towards the cave. She lay down feeling waves of fury coursing through her. As they subsided she began to shake again. This time they developed into uncontrollable shudders. Turning on her side she curled up into a ball. Sobs were building up inside her. She stuffed her edge of her cloak into her mouth. She was not going to give that bastard the satisfaction of knowing that he'd hurt her this deeply. Muffling the sounds with her cloak she let the tears come.



Severus Snape didn't move as the young woman stormed away from the camp fire. He sat, staring into the middle distance with unfocused eyes, as night proper fell, and the temperature began to drop.

There would be no question of sharing the cave with her tonight. It had become increasingly uncomfortable for him as the days had passed. Only years of fairly rigorous mental discipline had allowed him to retain his self-control. It wasn't that he was, in any objective sense of the word, attracted to her, he told himself. It was just this place. He knew that. It was homing in on the weak points — and one of his, he was honest enough to admit, was that he was lonely.

Now he was stranded here with an... all right...

attractive young woman, who was blessed with intelligence, and who had clearly learnt over the years to temper that with discretion. No wonder they were attacking the chink in his armour. His other weak spots he was used to — they were old friends. But this — this was a new well for them to tap. He tried not to wonder what might have happened if he and Miss Granger had met under other circumstances.

He had been well aware that their fragile peace would be ruptured as soon as she knew the truth. He shouldn't really have been surprised by the force of her reaction. She had always been passionate, especially when friends, or weaker souls — as she saw it — were threatened. He still remembered the business with the house-elves. Although he was prepared to forgive much for the consequential disruption to the Malfoy household. It was inevitable that she would have grown into a passionate woman.

Dangerous, in this place.

He sat.

The fire, left untended, burnt down. Now even that trace of warmth had gone. Discipline made him clear the camp as far as possible, but then he hesitated.

Cautiously he approached the cave entrance. He could hear jerky stifled sounds — the sounds of something in pain. Drawing closer, he could see her, curled up under her cloak shivering vio-

lently. Obeying some unfamiliar impulse of tact he remained where he was, simply observing her.

Motionless, he listened to the choking sounds diminish. Her body was still wracked with fits of shaking, however. Prompted by some feeling that he was not about to acknowledge, even to himself... *especially* not to himself... he undid the clasp at the neck of his cloak. Moving as silently as he knew how, he draped the cloak over her distraught form. For a moment she stiffened and he half expected her to throw it off. But then she just seemed to hunch more into herself. He turned away, unable to bear the sight of her distress any longer.



The morning sky was leaden.

Seated on the rock outside the cave, Severus Snape watched the day dawn.

The rising sun only succeeded in imbuing the surroundings with an unhealthy pink tinge. Snape's spirits were not lifted in the slightest. He was stiff and thoroughly chilled from a sleepless night.

Looking round, he took stock. Although, there did not appear to have been any discernable alteration in the scenery, subtle cues told him that they were approaching their goal. A change in the underlying geology here, the appearance of a different type of plant there. He hoped that his memory would prove reli-

able. He suspected that one mistake would cause Hermione to abandon him completely in favour of finding her own way home.

He was anxious to avoid that. Whilst she knew, roughly, what sort of a place they were in, she had little idea of the extent of their danger. The marginal presences that inhabited the place were gradually closing in. Attracted by magic, he knew that Hermione's use of the disclosure charm upon their arrival had alerted them to their presence.

On top of that, he had been forced to use some very low level charms the preceding day in order to brew the tisane for Hermione. It had been a gamble. Knowing they were close to where he wanted to go, balancing the benefits of a speedy recovery for the girl against the risks of attracting further, unwanted, attention, he had judged that they had a better chance of survival with both of them healthy and moving quickly.

The sky lightened a little more. It seemed to be the best they could hope for by way of daylight. He was about to move when he was hit in the middle of the shoulder blades by a soft bundle, thrown with considerable force.

She was up.

"Your cloak," she spat with unconcealed disdain. It was clear that her fury had not abated.

"Thank you," he said dryly, picking it up and pulling it around himself. It was still slightly

warm from where she had slept in it. Some part of him savoured that warmth and he told himself firmly that that was because he was chilled to the bone, after a night sitting still.

She was determinedly packing up the camp.

"Are you going to do something to help, or are you just going to sit there?"

Silently, and a little painfully, he stood, and moved to help.

They broke camp, and began the day's march in silence. She let him lead — just. She spoke once, just after they left.

"This... item... substance... that we're looking for. What is it and how do we recognise it?"

Her tone of voice stung. He took refuge in sarcasm.

"The general idea, Miss Granger, is that I will recognise it. And *I* am fully conversant with the details."

"Not good enough."

The cat has claws he thought. Miss Granger, Hogwarts star pupil would *never* have addressed him like that. He realised that his *nuit blanche* had left him too tired to argue the toss.

"We are looking for a plant, Miss Granger," he replied wearily. "A small bush to be precise. Fairly unremarkable in most ways. It grows about two feet tall, has small shiny dark green leaves, and red berries about the size of a ball bearing. It favours dark, damp shadowy places, often in the lee of rocky outcrops, and isolated erratics."

"And which part of this unremarkable plant is the useful one?"

"The berries, but not the red ones. Exceptionally, this bush produces a white berry. It is that berry that has the desired properties. The red berries are merely poisonous."

He was half expecting some sort of comeback from her, but she was simply silent.

The morning passed in festering hostility. The terrain was becoming increasingly broken, and often their concentration was wholly occupied in simply keeping their footing. The moorland was now interrupted with larger boulders, seemingly dumped at random. They were now close enough to the hills to see the rafts of bare rock, where landslides had scoured the cliff faces. The air was thick and greasy, Snape thought, as if a storm was about to break — except that storms didn't break in this place.

He kept his gaze ruthlessly focussed on the way in front of him. He avoided even glancing at Hermione, merely remaining aware of her tense, angry presence near to him. He also tried to avoid the other things. The ones that hovered on the edge of his sight, but which were never directly visible. The familiar whispering mocking presences, phantoms of his subconscious given form by the malevolence of the place. Alien thoughts insinuating themselves into this mind. He pushed them away, concentrating on his breathing... In... two, three, four... hold...

two, three, four... out... two, three, four... rest... two, three four. His life narrowed to that sixteen beat sequence, as he pressed on forward.

Eventually another voice intruded into his mantra. This one was familiar, and distinctly audible.

Hermione.

He risked a glance at her. She was close behind him, close enough to touch. Her eyes were focussed somewhere beyond him, and she was muttering something. He could only hear snatches.

No.. I know this... please... no...

So, she, too, battles demons, he thought.

Adrift in her own personal hell, Hermione had let her attention drift from the path. Her foot caught on a stone and she stumbled. Without thinking Snape caught her arm to steady her.

The contact seemed to pull her back from wherever it was she had been.

She pulled away as if she he had burnt her. "Don't touch me," she hissed venomously.

He dropped his hand. She had returned completely to the present now. He could see a soft sheen of sweat on her face.

"How much further," she asked, with difficulty.

Snape looked ahead.

"The last time I was here, there was a patch of bushes at the foot of the cliff."

Hermione just nodded.

They continued on, locked in their separate struggles.



When they finally reached the cliffs it was almost a shock. One minute they seemed to be as far away as ever, the next they had all but walked into them.

I'd forgotten the joys of this place, thought Snape sourly.

The whispering insinuations were steadily increasing in intensity. Snape thought that he could almost physically hear them moving. This was not over-active imagination on his part, he knew. The creatures of this place fed on human passions. Whichever ones were most easily provoked.

A passionate woman.

She was angry – and hurt and frightened, the back of his mind suggested. Easy prey.

And whatever she thought of him, it had become very important to him to get her out of this in one piece.

He did not have enough time to analyse the reason for this, as his thoughts were interrupted by a cry from Hermione.

He spun round to see she had drawn her wand, and was facing back the way they had come. Behind them the air shimmered, much like a heat haze, only this haze was taking on a defined form. It was loosely human in shape, in

that the sketched outlines of a torso, head and limbs could be seen. Hermione was shouting something at it. The shimmering air gained definition. There was a background murmur, reminding him stupidly of the sea.

He moved towards her:

"Try to keep calm, Miss Granger," he advised, as evenly as he could.

She did seem to hear him. She pointed her wand and called "*Expecto Patronum*." Her patronus sprang from the end of her wand, and the hazy being lost cohesion, but the underlying susurrations remained.

Snape was torn between admiration for her presence of mind, and alarm for the danger that they were in, now that she had used a charm of that potency.

He was now close enough to grab her arm, and pull her away. She tried to wrench out of his grasp but this time he wouldn't let her.

"Miss Granger, you have now written 'We are here' in letters big enough for the majority of the creatures of this place to read. I suggest we concentrate on finding the bushes, and getting out of here."

With no attempt at gentleness he half dragged her along until she suddenly dug her heels in.

"Miss Granger," he began, but she interrupted him.

"Over there. Is that them?"

He looked to where she was pointing. Sure enough, tucked under a the low ledge of a small outcrop, were two or three of the bushes. He could see the red berries from here. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see that the air around them was beginning to shimmer again. This time they appeared to be surrounded. Words were becoming discernible in the white noise.

"Let's hope there are some white berries there as well," he muttered.

This time he didn't have to drag her after him. If there were no white berries on these bushes, they were trapped, he reflected. Backed up against the rock, with these... creatures... closing in. Haste was alien to him, and was making him clumsy — that and the need to be aware of where the girl was. Fortunately she was now keeping close to him, and she was making a reasonably thorough search of the bushes.

A crackling, slimy, feel to the air made him shift sideways reflexively, and he could now see that the shimmering had resolved into a number of forms. He tried to ignore the increasingly audible taunts.

Too late to worry much about this now, he thought resignedly, and drew his wand. He cast a Perceptual Parallax Charm, to try to disorientate their sense of where they were. Primarily a visual charm, of course, but anything that slowed them

would be good at this point. There were now seven or eight of the things coming towards them.

He made a decision. One which relied on his estimation of Hermione's intrinsic sense of decency.

He backed towards her, and drew the talisman out of his robes.

"Take this. Crush the white berries on to it, and visualise where you want to go. I will concentrate on holding them off."

She looked hostile, but took the hilt.

Her words came back to him.

I want to find this berry — whatever it is — get back to my reality... With or without you, I don't much care. And I'm telling you now that without would be my preference. You deserve to rot here.

Well she would have her chance to make that happen now.

The forms were pressing closer, almost merging into one another again. The sibilant voices now took on familiar tones... *Pitiful, defiled, repulsive, treacherous*, they hissed. *Alone*, they sniggered. *Defeated*.

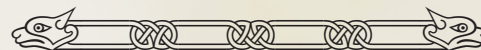
Sweating now, he cast a Density Charm — Fred Weasley had nicknamed it the Treacle Charm, he recalled inconsequentially, due to its property of increasing the density of whatever substance you cast it on...

The forms gained more definition and seemed to slow. Or was he imagining it? Battered by old fears and insecurities, fuelled by

unwanted recollection, he struggled to think of the next strategy. His knees began to buckle

Then he felt someone grab his hand, and slam something cold and hard into it.

Moments later there was a sharp tug at his midriff, and the world began to whirl.



Hermione staggered as she landed in the middle of her living room. Her sudden reappearance among familiar things was almost as disorientating as the first trip had been. But that was her rug on the floor, her books on the shelves... and her cat looking reproachfully at her from his cushion on the sofa.

However, her rug did not normally have a tall man in dirty black robes, crumpled on it.

Snape.

And in her hand was a sword hilt decorated with a capital M in a circle. Memory came flooding back.

Still shaken by the whole experience, she stood blankly for a few moments wondering what she should do. Then he stirred, and pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked around.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"My flat," she answered.

"Did you find the berries?" he asked, rather stupidly she thought.

A combination of anger, fear and exhaus-

tion made her sharp.

"No," she snapped. "I clicked my heels together three times and chanted '*There's no place like home*.' Are you going to sit there all day?"

Harsh, maybe, but she wasn't in the mood to be charitable. He should think himself grateful that she hadn't left him there.

Something within him seemed to close up tight at her words, and she felt a slight prick of remorse. She was about to add something softer, when he got slowly — painfully, her mind told her — to his feet.

"You are quite correct, Miss Granger. It is entirely inappropriate for me to be here. I will leave immediately." He paused. "May I have the talisman."

Of course. *She still had the hilt.*

The impulse of compassion died still-born.

"Absolutely not," she spat. "Not after what's just happened."

He glared at her.

"It is too dangerous to leave lying about."

"I couldn't agree more."

She drew her wand, and tossed the object in the air. Pointing her wand at it she said "*Annihi-late*". There was a cracking sound as the metal shattered into a number of pieces, which themselves exploded into fragments, which then disintegrated into still smaller parts. Eventually, a fine film of metallic dust settled over Hermione's Chinese rug. Snape watched in silence.

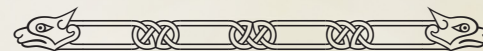
Finally he said:

"I'm glad to see that you haven't lost the Gryffindor pendant for the grand gesture."

Hermione had had enough.

"Get out of my home," she said flatly.

For a moment Snape looked like he was going to say something else. Then he just pulled his cloak around himself and Apparated.



An hour later Hermione Granger was relaxing in the bath, revelling in the feeling of being really clean. She had scrubbed at herself to the point of pain, and she kept topping up the water to scalding point. The only legacy of her experience was the fading bruise on her forehead. When that had gone she could pretend that it had never happened. For the third time she ducked her head under the bathwater to rinse out shampoo.

Out in the living room, Crookshanks stirred suddenly, and then arched his back and spat viciously. Fluffed up to nearly twice his size, he yowled, and fled the room.

The air above the dusty rug began to shimmer, and then to coalesce. The shimmer hovered for a moment, and then began to solidify. First it was vaguely human, then the body plan became more apparent. The air became translucent. It resolved into a tall thin figure. Milky

haze transformed into opaque black.

It sniffed the air like a dog.

Too soon... it hissed almost subliminally.

The figure left the flat, passing through the front door as if it wasn't there.

Hermione emerged from under the bath water and squeezed the water out of her hair. Wrapping a towel around her head, she got out of the bath and pulled on a fluffy bathrobe. Absently noting that Crookshanks had disappeared, she wandered into the kitchen in search of a snack. Preferably one that was not fungus based.



PART TWO





LIGHT DRIZZLE

was falling. There was no moon and the artificial street lighting had coloured the low cloud cover an oppressive grey-orange. The air was saturated with seeping wetness, which insinuated itself into every crevice.

The alley was littered with human detritus — bulging black plastic sacks, torn here and there to spill out cardboard pizza boxes, and decomposing vegetables. Tattered newspapers were plastered along the gutters and a stray gust of wind sent an empty vodka bottle rattling over a drain grating.

Oblivious to penetrating damp, or the acrid stench of urine permeating the air, a tall, slender figure picked his way fastidiously through the wreckage of other people's lives. For a moment he was silhouetted starkly against the backdrop of the main street, glittering with the fairy lights and gaudy displays of a celebration which had

long ceased to represent anything other than an excuse for excess and debauchery.

The dark man allowed himself a small smile. *The creatures still practised their fatal hypocrisy.* He twitched his black robes away from a pile of rotting ordure. He sniffed experimentally. He was hungry. He had a long journey ahead of him and he was still weak. Once he had returned to the source of power he would no longer need to root around in the troughs of human garbage...

Not far along was a doorway set back into the wall. A delivery entrance for something, now wire-grilled, chained and bolted against evildoers of the night. In front of the door was a shapeless heap of paper, cardboard and cloth.

The dark man approached.

"Are you hungry?"

A voice of soft velvet, promising warmth, safety, and shelter.

The pile moved, and grew a head covered with a garish knitted hat.

"Got'ny change," it said, in a hopeless monotone.

The man crouched down beside the figure and extended a finger to touch the cheek very softly. He stroked down the jaw line, and, swiftly as a striking snake he clamped his hand over the mouth, muffling the surprised cry

"We all need to eat," he murmured dreamily.



Severus Snape stared moodily into the fireplace, this time containing a fire. It was his one concession to the season, and the fact that he wasn't in a mood to freeze at the moment. He shifted his position in his armchair, causing a sleepy Sphinx to *mrrp* in protest. Absently he tickled the creature under the chin. She purred rather half heartedly, and settled down to nap again.

Snape resumed his sullen study of the fire. He had gone to the Hogwarts Christmas lunch much against his better judgment. Only the prospect of a house call from Madame Pomfrey enquiring after his health had spurred him into attending. That, and a lurking sense of responsibility towards Sphinx, who would expect the leftovers.

So that left him, on Christmas Day afternoon, sitting in his armchair trying to avoid the thoughts that had been nagging at him for the last two months. Ever since the incident with that wretched potion.

Snape had a lifetime's experience of suppressing recollections that threatened his equilibrium, but this afternoon the combined effects of no students to tyrannise, and several glasses of an excellent red wine, had left him dangerously introspective.

Of course, he was more than aware of how this had started. It was not as if it had been the first time that he had gone to that place. He could analyse the whole sequence of events. Her first

foolish use of the Revealing charm had attracted the attention of the... inhabitants... of that place. They had begun a subtle attack — feeding off their hidden doubts and fears.

Snape had no illusions about his insecurities. He could identify each one precisely, and, if necessary classify them alphabetically or chronologically as required. Appearance, loyalty, self-worth — he had examined them very closely and ascertained exactly where he stood on the scale of each. Pretty close to the bottom.

What can't be cured, must be endured, as his mother used to say.

So he endured. More than once, during his trips to that place.

However, this had been the first time that he had not been there alone. Miss Granger had become the unfortunate focus of his deeply repressed yearning for companionship.

It was, he reflected, really rather pitiful.

To be so affected by the simple presence of another. A student at that. *A former student* his mind reminded him.

A child.

Not so much a child any more. She had grown into a woman. Not beautiful, but attractive nonetheless. Her loyalty and passion were still evident. As was her intelligence. But she had changed. She had gained something indefinable. The student that he had taught would have immediately

demanded answers. The woman observed and collected information before attacking. The student was never still. The woman had gathered that energy into cutting focus.

The student would not have tolerated his company.

The woman obviously did not wish to. Yet she expressed no complaint. Far from self-indulgent hysteria, she had actually fought his attempts to treat her injuries.

She had even teased him. Not something that happened to him very often.

And she had thanked him. Also an infrequent occurrence.

He had watched her sleep — observations were a perfectly sensible precaution after a head injury, he told himself. She had looked more as he had remembered her then — younger, vulnerable, and troubled by the demons of that place.

He had felt her hostility lessen, and had almost begun to believe that she might find his company — not pleasant — but at least bearable.

And for a moment, when they had made eye contact he had had seen... something he struggled to name. Something that had made her almost reach towards him.

Something that he could never accept.

Now she hated him again.

Anger had finally torn from her what fear and pain could not — tears.

And she had gone to considerable lengths to hide them from him. That action had affected him more than any amount of histrionics would have. He had a deep distrust of women who used tears to manipulate. At least she could not be accused of that. He pushed down unfamiliar feelings of responsibility.

She had become unpredictable. Not a quality that would normally recommend itself to him. Yet, for all her contradictions, he had found her presence surprisingly restful.

She was, he grudgingly conceded, an impressive young woman.

Intelligent, complex, desirable. He was drawn towards the memory of the warmth of her body, leaning against him for support, her cheek resting on his chest as he carried her, her lips brushing the palm of his hand...

Snape stood up abruptly, dislodging Sphinx, who *meeped* in annoyance and scrabbled at his robes for purchase.

Wordlessly he deposited her on the bed. With an impatient gesture he extinguished the fire. Sphinx meeped again and shot under the blankets. In a whirl of robes he left his chambers heading for the Potions lab.

Once there he removed all the containers, jars and flask from the shelves at the back of the classroom. Needing the distraction of repetitive physical activity, he began, methodically,

to clean, catalogue and label



In her flat, Hermione Granger was also indulging in a fit of seasonal introspection.

She always regarded Boxing Day – she still used the Muggle term from her childhood – as her real Christmas Day. The 25th of December was for her family. That was the day when she put on something “feminine” for her mother – *Hermi dear, why do you always look so severe? Haven't you got a dress you could wear for a change?* – and paid her dues for the year.

She sighed at herself for feeling so sour about it. It wasn't that she didn't love her parents, it was just that she and they had... well... drifted apart. Their worlds did not touch and hadn't done so for a number of years. She was a witch, working for the Ministry of Magic. They were dentists working for the National Health Service. Not that there was anything wrong with that – it was just that they didn't understand what she did, and hadn't really since she had gone to Hogwarts. They were proud of her – or at least she assumed they were proud of her. They seemed to work from a fairly simple proposition – Hermione has achieved something, achievement is good, therefore Hermione is good QED. Beyond that they didn't really seek to go.

The first couple of hours of any visit were tolerable. News was exchanged, and Hermione got the digest version of the various family events — generally births and marriages, and the occasional death. Her parents then ascertained that she was not a) married b) engaged or c) pregnant. She could never quite decide whether the habitual negative to all three caused her mother relief or disappointment.

Her parents would then enquire after her work. She would ask after theirs. Her father might have some funny or unusual story to tell about a patient. They would dutifully ask after Harry, and Ron, and Crookshanks, and occasionally Professor Dumbledore if they remembered. Hermione would frantically try to remember the names of the Practice Manager and the dental nurses. Then the conversation would lapse. In the end they would resort to discussing Muggle television (which Hermione didn't watch) and Quidditch (which her parents couldn't follow).

All other embarrassing silences were filled with either Mr or Mrs Granger providing food and/or drink.

Hermione would stay overnight, and then make her excuses to leave first thing on Boxing Day — *I need to get back to Crookshanks, my neighbour always goes to visit her daughter in Harrogate over Christmas, and she's the only one that he'll trust.*

Back in her own flat she would open a bottle of something — strength dependent on how the previous day had gone, and cuddle Crookshanks.

This year's visit had been particularly painful.

Hermione's cousin Natalie had chosen this year to get married and give birth. The family were all delighted. Hermione's mother had produced a selection of photographs of baby Rebecca. Hermione managed to sound suitably enthusiastic, although babies had never really excited her.

After dinner, and a couple of bottles of wine, her mother had confided in her:

"Of course, they're all asking when *you'll* provide us with a little one, but I've told them all that you're too busy concentrating on your career." She put a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulder. "Don't you worry, *we* don't mind that there isn't anyone in your life at the moment."

Before she could gather her wits to answer, her mother had disappeared off to the kitchen to see if the next batch of mince pies was ready.

Hermione found herself unable to respond to this. Once more, her mother had managed to reduce her to being eleven years old, and unable to make any kind of choice without it first receiving maternal validation. That night she had curled up in bed fighting not to cry, in equal parts furious with her mother for disempowering her, and with herself for allowing it to happen.

She buried her hand in Crookshanks' furry stomach. The cat stretched luxuriously and purred.

"Every year," she muttered to herself. "Every year I swear that I'm not going to let her do that to me. That *this* year I will force her to relate to me as an adult. And *every* year I end up on Boxing Day, sitting in the chair, drinking whisky and trying not to have a migraine."

Crookshanks nibbled her finger affectionately.

Hermione took another sip of her drink. She had been feeling unsettled ever since she had got back from... wherever it was she had been stranded with Professor Snape.

Professor Snape.

Now there was someone else who could make her feel like an errant eleven year old.

Although, there had been moments during that trip when she had thought that he had *nearly* seen her as another person, worthy of respect. And then he had told her about Hester Allworthy.

She swirled the liquid in the glass.

She was still angry with him about that. Wasn't she.

Was she?

She honestly wasn't sure. She thought she was. It had certainly suited her to be angry with him for the time immediately after they had got back. It saved her from examining the incident too closely. And something had prompted her to keep it to herself. She had simply told Harry and

Ron that Snape hadn't been able to help. She was confused enough over her feelings surrounding the whole thing, without adding the unique Weasley/Potter perspective to it.

But the angry helplessness evoked by her trip to her parents, recalled her feelings on that night far too closely for her liking.

It's not like he's my mother, she thought, and then snorted at the idea of Snape bending over some frightened patient and saying *Open wide now, this won't hurt*. On reflection, maybe dentistry would be right up his street.

Hermione Granger had many faults, but she was at heart, a fair person, and reasonably honest.

She realised that she didn't feel as angry at Snape as she was telling herself she did.

"It was just that he was almost being nice to me," she explained to Crookshanks.

Mind you, she reflected, it's not like he had much choice in the matter. He was rather stuck with me.

Sympathy? For Professor Snape? She must be losing her mind. What was that thing when captives fell in love with their captors – Stockholm Syndrome the Muggles called it.

Except that I wasn't his captive. And I most certainly did NOT fall in love with him.

Although, he hadn't had to treat her head injury, or brew the potion to make her feel better. That had been quite – kind – really. And kind was *not* a word you used about Professor Snape.

He had also brewed up the other potion of course — the one that has put Seamus in St Mungo's. That was unforgivable. Even if he had been working for Voldemort when he had done it.

She sighed and rubbed her forehead.

Is that it, Hermione? You had just decided that he wasn't as bad as you thought he was, and then he told you that he was? He was a Death Eater for pity's sake. What did you think that he was doing? Hiding somewhere, making potions in blissful ignorance. You can't rewrite his past just because you want to like him.

Did she want to like him — was that it? She had always had a tendency to see things in black and white. Her friends were good, her enemies were bad. And it was a given that Snape was bad — unpleasant, petty, vindictive. But also, it seemed, capable of practical compassion, consideration and generosity.

And she could not forget that sudden flash of insight. The hopeless look in his eyes.

What had driven him to such a position?

She recalled the thought.

What was it that had made him join Voldemort in the first place?

Not that he was likely to tell her, even if she asked. Not after the way she had behaved.

She shifted underneath a dozing Crookshanks.

Maybe she owed him an apology.

And maybe he owed her an explanation.

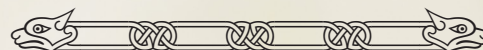
About the potion at least.

Two months on there had been no improvement in Seamus' condition and she was still determined to find a counter-agent to the potion. Her best source of information on that topic was still Severus Snape. She had been avoiding confronting that fact by research and experimentation of her own, but she had achieved nothing. Snape was the person who had recreated Hester's work, and who had obtained the ingredients from... that place. He was the person most likely to know if there was an antidote.

She briefly toyed with the idea of sending him a message, and then dismissed it. She needed the information and she wasn't about to give him the chance to refuse to see her. It was the Christmas holidays. He would have no classes to teach and it was very unlikely that he would have been called away.

She would visit unannounced.

In a day or two.



Blanche leant against the lamppost and rummaged in her bag for another cigarette.

Her feet were hurting her in the red strappy stiletto heels. The late December night was cold, and the wind was nipping at her bare legs. Her short denim skirt, skimpy top, and fake fur

jacket advertised the goods effectively enough, but provided no protection from the elements.

It was past one a.m. now, and she wondered if she should call it a night. The pubs had shut a couple of hours ago, and whilst there was always a chance of a stray punter, there was also the chance of a patrolling police car catching up with her. She was keen to avoid another trip to the local court.

She could feel the quarter bottle of cheap vodka in her jacket pocket bang against her hip. She debated whether or not to have a swig. Deciding against she lit up instead, and took a deep drag. Finish this ciggy, and then pack up and go home. She shifted from foot to foot to keep warm and ease the discomfort in her toes.

Then she saw him coming along the street. Tall and dressed in some kind of dark robes.

Probably a priest of some sort. Blanche had a couple of them as regulars. Apparently there was something in the Bible about Jesus and prostitutes. Or at least that's what they told her. Personally she didn't give a monkey's how they justified it to themselves as long as they paid her cash. She hoped that he wasn't going to want her to be the Virgin Mary or anything like that.

He was getting closer, and obviously interested. That was odd. Usually they sort of walked past as if they were really going somewhere else and then made a furtive diversion in her direc-

tion. This one was coming straight for her.

She dropped the cigarette to the floor and stamped it out. Pulling the vodka bottle from her pocket, she unscrewed the cap and took a drink.

As she replaced it, the man moved into the light circle of the street lamp, and she could see his features more clearly. Mid-forties she would have said. Ugly bugger. Big hooked nose, lank greasy hair. Gaunt features. And cold, cold black eyes, full of cruelty, burning with a feverish light. She couldn't see a dog collar so maybe he wasn't a priest — he looked as if he was on something bad, whatever he was.

Blanche had seen enough to know trouble when she saw it, but she was trapped now. She forced a fake smile onto her face.

"Looking for something, love?"

The man just looked at her. Blanche swallowed nervously and tried again.

"Look, love, it's late. Tell you what — call it twenty quid cash, cos it's Christmas. D'you need a rubber?"

He reached out a hand to touch her face, and she flinched away. It was not the blow she'd been expecting, but a soft caress.

"Perfect," he murmured. "Just perfect."

His voice was low and silky. It was also totally lacking warmth. Blanche was beginning to feel truly scared. With a swift movement he caught both of her wrists, put them together, and used his

left hand to pin them above her head against the lamppost. She wanted to twist out of his grasp, but somehow she couldn't move.

With his right hand he held her face close to his. She could see the yellowed teeth, and smell the sour breath.

He murmured one word to her:
"Crucio."

As his lips covered hers, she wondered if that was some kind of blessing.

And then the pain began.



New Year's Eve found Severus Snape much the same way that Christmas Day had. Sitting in an armchair, with Sphinx burrowed into a pleat of his robes. The creature had been haunting him all week, always sitting where she could see him, wide amber eyes fixed on him. Sometimes he could swear that he saw worry in those eyes, and then snorted at himself for such gross anthropomorphism.

Several discarded scrolls lay by his chair. Another one lay on his lap. Sphinx had eventually got bored with nibbling the ends, and left him to read in peace. The grate was empty this time. He hadn't lit a fire since Christmas Day. Neither had he been up to the Great Hall to eat, preferring to have the house elves bring him food in his cham-

bers. He had only barely lit enough lamps to read by. He was not in a mood for light.

Dumbledore had visited once — other than that he had been left alone.

There would probably be some kind of celebration somewhere in the castle at midnight, he thought sourly. Dumbledore rarely missed an excuse for a party. He, himself, was planning an early night. He still had reading to catch up on, and he wasn't a partygoer at the best of times.

He settled himself back to the scroll, which had arrived that day by owl post from a correspondent in France.

He was carefully checking his translation of the technical aspects of the information when his concentration was shattered by a knock at the door. A startled Sphinx whirled in annoyance and shot out from his robes and under the chair. He sighed in exasperation. He thought that he had made it more than obvious that he did not wish to be disturbed.

He waited for Dumbledore to come in. He couldn't imagine who else would call unannounced. The door failed to open. He sighed again, and called:

"Come in."

He didn't look up. He assumed that whoever it was would state their business and go. He had no desire to encourage a longer visit than strictly necessary.

"Good evening, Professor Snape."

Her.

He knew the shock must have registered on his face. It couldn't be, of course. It was simply Poppy Pomfrey, and some trick of the acoustic had made it sound like her. He swallowed, and stilled his features. He stood and turned to face his visitor.

It was her.

Standing there looking slightly uncertain. She was dressed in Muggle casual clothing with her cloak over it. Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. She wore no make-up. Her face was slightly flushed, and bottom of her cloak hung wet and muddy. No doubt both of those were attributable to the walk up from Hogsmeade. She was carrying a bottle.

He was grateful for his reputation at that point, as he could think of nothing to say.

She shifted her weight restlessly, and held up the bottle.

"Um, I brought this. I couldn't really turn up unannounced on New Year's Eve and be empty handed as well. Um, it's a Bordeaux. I hope you like red wine." She put it down on the top of one of the bookshelves.

He took refuge in sneering.

"As you so rightly point out, Miss Granger, you are unannounced. I presume this means that you no longer judge me worthy of the courtesy of notification of your visits."

She flushed, this time not through cold and exercise. She bit her lower lip, but didn't move.

"I assumed that if I sent you *notification*," she stressed the word, "you would have refused to see me."

Probably.

"If you are so aware that you would be unwelcome, I wonder that you still came."

So did she, judging by that look on her face.

Snape heard the words come out of his mouth. His standard reaction to visitors. It was usually enough to make them leave swiftly. Not her though. Hermione Granger was still standing there.

She took a deep breath.

"I came for two reasons." Her tone was determined. "I was thinking about what happened in... that place."

Not just her.

She continued. He noticed that her voice trembled very slightly, and that she was fighting to control it.

"I owe you an apology for what I said that evening."

He hadn't been expecting that. He couldn't keep the surprise from flickering briefly across his face. He wondered what she was hoping to achieve through this tactic, but she was still speaking.

"... and there's been no change in Seamus's condition. You are the only person who knows all about that potion. I want to know more about it."

Ah — information.

He nodded slowly. That made sense to him. She was trying to create a bridge between them to further her own ends. It was unlikely, otherwise, that she would feel the least remorse for her harsh words to him.

Reflexively he twitched his robes.

"I thank you for your... apology," he almost stumbled on the word, "but I regret to inform you that both it and your gift are in vain."

He turned away from the sharp look of disappointment on her face.

"The sample of the potion that was given to you, was almost certainly the last in existence. Even if there is more of it, to brew an antidote is likely to require some substance from the... alternate reality. And, if you recall, you rather dramatically destroyed the only means of accessing that place."

He walked away from her, more to give himself something to do than anything else.

"I'm sorry your trip has been wasted. Good evening, Miss Granger."

He knew his words were harsh, but they were true. And beyond that they had nothing to say to each other. He found himself counting seconds until he heard the sound of the door close behind her.

Except there was no sound of her leaving.

He turned again to face her. Whatever feelings might have been warring inside her, the

predominant outwards emotion was anger.

"Is that it?" she demanded, her voice slightly breathless. "I can't help. Sorry. Goodbye."

He wanted to end this encounter. He needed no more conflicting emotional demands made on him.

"What more is there?" he enquired, making his voice deliberately harsh. "I could have stated it more prettily, I suppose, but that would not alter the situation."

She was glaring at him, as fierce as he'd ever seen her. He was reminded again how tenaciously she would fight for something that she thought was right. It occurred to him that maybe she had come partly out of a genuine sense that she had done him an injustice. He was conscious of the bitter irony of that thought.

Then abruptly she looked away. Her shoulders slumped, and the fight seemed to drain out of her.

"I suppose it was a long shot." She shrugged. "I just thought that if anyone knew a way through this it would be you. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

She turned and moved towards the door.

Having decided, not two minutes previously, that he wanted her to leave, Snape found himself strangely reluctant for her to actually go.

"Miss Granger," he said sharply.

She paused, but didn't turn. In a low voice she said:

"I understand that you think that it's very Gryffindor of me to want to help Seamus, but I care about what happens to my friends. Please don't attack me, just because you don't."

He flinched at that. Not knowing how to phrase an appropriate response, he temporised:

"I was merely going to tell you that you had forgotten your wine."

That made her stiffen again.

"Keep it. Drink it. Throw it away. Turn it into Veritaserum if you want. I don't care."

She made another move towards the door.

He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. This wasn't going how he had intended it. Even then he could just have let her go, but he tried again:

"Miss Granger, please wait."

Her hand on the latch stilled. He continued:

"I understand that you are disappointed, but nevertheless what I have told you is true. Before you could recreate the potion, or any antidote, you would first need to recreate the charm cast upon the talisman."

She slowly turned to towards him, eyes dark with suspicion.

"Do you know how to do that?"

"No. As you well know, Miss Granger, charms are not my speciality. And in any event it was unnecessary. The original talisman was found intact."

"And there was nothing about it in Hester's writings?"

"I don't recall anything. But then I was concentrating on the potion."

She digested this information. She still had not removed her hand from the door latch.

"Where can I find Hester's work?"

He sighed at that. He knew that once he had opened the subject she would not leave until she had every last piece of information.

"I don't know."

He could see her draw breath to protest, and he forestalled her:

"I truly do not know. I know where it *was*, when I was last using it. What happened to it after that I cannot say."

"Where *was* it then?"

He sighed again. The edgy conversation was making him tense. Hermione had not quite run, but she looked as if she were going to. Part of him wanted her to leave him in peace, and another part wished that, if they were going to have this conversation, she would come into the room fully.

He was composing himself to respond when from under his chair came a very audible and determined "Meep!"

Hermione jumped visibly. Almost involuntarily Snape's lips twitched. That wretched thing had a twisted sense of timing.

Sphinx emerged from under his chair, and fixed Hermione with a penetrating gaze. She in turn looked as if she was struggling for words.

"Erm, is that a cat?" she managed eventually.

Snape felt an odd surge of protectiveness towards Sphinx. True, there were prettier cats about, but she had many admirable qualities.

"This is Sphinx, my familiar," he said a little repressively. "Sphinx, this is Miss Hermione Granger."

Sphinx mewed politely. Hermione choked back a snort.

"Hello Sphinx," she said a little unsteadily. She studied the cat, and then gave Snape a very hard look of her own. "Is it supposed to be bald?" she asked.

"She always has been, so I imagine she is, yes." He watched Hermione and Sphinx as they sized each other up across the room. "Hagrid found her on his doorstep one morning. She attached herself to me, and I've been stuck with her ever since." With an unexpected touch of self-mockery he added "Maybe she recognised that we had something in common."

Now where did that come from, Severus?

Hermione was looking at him intently. She had let her hand drop from the latch. To cover his discomfiture he said, with a little more asperity than he had intended:

"If you are insistent that we discuss this matter, then you may as well come away from the door."

Still eyeing him warily, she moved back down the few steps into the room, but made

no move to sit. He wasn't surprised. She had hardly had a warm reception so far. He supposed he should make something of an effort. He waved his hand at the empty grate and a fire sprang to life.

She was still watching him cautiously. He swallowed.

"Sit down," he said, adding "if you hang your cloak up by the fire the edge will have a chance to dry off."

Not very polished, he mused, but it seemed to work. She was taking her cloak off. The bottle of wine she had brought was still on the bookshelf where she had put it. As she was sitting down he retrieved it, and placed it on the large table. Picking up his wand he conjured two glasses, and with a tap on the side of the bottle, the cork slid smoothly out.

He poured and then looked back over his shoulder. Hermione was now seated in one of the chairs, even if she didn't look precisely relaxed. She was looking around the room. Not really surprising — students never saw his personal chambers. He expected that they probably thought that they were decorated with instruments of torture or something. He was aware of the speculation about himself and his lifestyle.

He moved away from the table towards Hermione. Silently he handed her a glass. She looked up, startled.

"You were good enough to bring the wine. I thought we might as well drink it."

He wondered if it were possible to sound more grudging.

He sat down, conscious of her eyes following him. To give himself time to think, he sipped the wine. It was full bodied and smooth — a good choice, he thought idly. There was silence. Now that they had agreed to discuss Hester, neither of them seemed in any rush to begin. He was reminded, in a curious way, of the silences around the makeshift fires — with both of them anxious to avoid conflict, and neither of them entirely certain what to say. He sipped again.

"Miss Granger," he said eventually, keeping his tone as neutral as he knew how, "you seem to feel that you owe me some kind of apology. I can assure you that you do not. Although I think that I must thank you for bringing this excellent wine."

He could feel that she was still watching him. This time he met her gaze, and she looked away, chewing her bottom lip again and fiddling with her wine glass. The silence stretched between them again.

Finally he said:

"Miss Granger, is there something that you wish to ask me?"

She jumped, obviously startled out of private thoughts. For the first time in his life, he thought, he saw her unable to articulate a question.

"No, yes... well... I mean... why do you ask?"

He smiled at that — he couldn't help himself, he really hadn't intended to tease her.

"Because," he replied dryly, "you're chewing your lip, and you always do that just before you ask a difficult question."

"Oh." She looked disconcerted.

"I urge you to ask whatever it is, before you need to go to the hospital wing." And one of us has to explain exactly what it is that you are doing in my rooms on New Year's Eve, he mentally added wryly.

She looked as if she were debating something with herself. Then she asked:

"Why did you do it?"

Snappe tensed at this unexpected tack, uncertain as to exactly what she was asking, feeling peculiar tendrils of apprehension clench his stomach. *Please don't let her be asking what I think she is.* Carefully, he placed his glass by the side of his chair, and replied:

"I told you, I was commanded by the Dark Lord..."

She interrupted, hastily, as if she had to get the question out before her courage failed her:

"No. I mean, why did you join the Death Eaters in the first place?"

The question hung in the air almost tangibly. *Why?*

Such a simple question. So simple that no one had ever bothered to ask it.

Don't panic, Severus. Breathe. Steadily. Deeply.

Voldemort hadn't cared about his reasons. Only his effectiveness. The other Death Eaters hadn't been interested. Not even Dumbledore had actually asked him *why*? He had listened to his outpourings but never requested an explanation.

Keep breathing. Balance the oxygen/carbon dioxide in your bloodstream. Concentrate on your heart rate.

Without any warning Hermione's question tore open half-healed, long ignored wounds. His vision blurred. The apprehension in his gut coalesced into a long forgotten feeling of helpless fear and rage. He wanted to shout that it was none of her concern, that she had no right to ask, let alone be told, anything, but the words would not form themselves in his mouth. His hands clenched on the sides of his chair, his knuckles whitening.

Control. Stay in control.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, however, for she suddenly jumped up, spilling her wine.

The sound of her glass hitting the floor brought the world back into focus.

"Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't intend... I had no right to ask. Forgive me, I'll go. I should never have come. It was a stupid idea."

She was already at the fire, with her hand on her cloak, when he said:

"Wait."

Was that really his voice? It sounded to his ears as if it was coming from a long way off, croaky and unused. Very deliberately he stood up.

Hermione had frozen to the spot.

What on earth was there about his past that was remotely worth hearing? Why would she even care?

Threatened and off-balance in a way that he hadn't been for many years, Snape reacted the only way he knew how.

"What possible interest could you have in my past, Miss Granger?" That was better. That sounded more like him. "Is this some kind of bet you have on with Mr Potter and Mr Weasley — and you are the one sent to see which of the competing theories is correct?"

That had hurt her, he could see from her face, hear from her sharply indrawn breath. She was shaking her head, as if the thought appalled her. Some region of his brain told him that he should stop but the need to strike out was too great. He moved closer to her, cutting her off from the door.

"Tell me Miss Granger, what was *your* theory? Unhappy childhood? Failed love affair? Serious head injury? Inherited mental instability? I'd be fascinated to know." Striking her with his voice now, using every vocal trick he'd ever learned to isolate himself from his feelings.

She was saying something now, but he

couldn't hear her. His voice became lower and more menacing.

"Or do you want the details so you can pity me? So you can finally know *exactly* how much better you all are than me?"

He watched her rub her sleeve roughly across her face, and one external fact penetrated his terrified anger.

She was crying.

Again he had reduced her tears, and again she was trying to hide it from him.

The anger was extinguished in a wave of self-disgust. Attacking the blameless. His favourite technique. He turned away from her, and moved so her path to the door was clear.

But once more, she hadn't gone. Her voice assaulted him from behind:

"How dare you? How dare you accuse me of that?"

She was angry, he thought irrelevantly. She was angry with him, not afraid.

"I'm sorry if I offended you by asking the question, but that doesn't give you the right to talk to me like that. There's no *bet*, no *competing theories*. Harry and Ron have no idea that I'm here at all. In fact they have no idea about anything that happened in October. They just know that you couldn't help me. Don't judge *me* by your own standards."

Her words pierced him like small knives. He couldn't stop himself flinching. Maybe she

saw that, because her next words were said in a softer tone.

"If you want to know, I asked because I was... confused."

"About what?"

"You. About someone who was concerned enough to make a potion to treat my concussion, and then who could calmly tell me that he had brewed the potion that sent one of my friends into catatonia."

"And so you want the full details of *my* past to clarify some psychological conundrum for yourself?" Sharply spoken, but his heart wasn't in it. He was bone weary, and cursing the circumstances that had made him so vulnerable to her — and especially the impulse that had led him to invite her to stay.

"I'd like to understand — yes." Voice still a little unsteady, but with a tinge of defiance.

He walked back to the chair and dropped gracelessly into it, gazing at the ceiling.

She was still standing by the fire, watching him. Making no move towards the door.

Miss Hermione Granger had plainly not lost her refusal to give up when she wanted to know something.

And a voice in the back of his mind said *Why not tell her?* Why not indeed? The unexpected emotional backwash had left him feeling drained, and slightly queasy. 'Sick unto

death' about covered it, he thought. If he told her, then maybe she would go away and leave him in what passed for peace.

He pushed aside the stray thought whispering to him that he *wanted* to tell. That he needed to hear it spoken out loud. To reduce the past to impersonal narrative. To set parameters. To bring it under control.

And that he wanted her to know. That *her* opinion mattered to him.

Somehow, the decision was made, bypassing conscious thought.

"It's a long story," he said eventually.

Another one.

"I'm not in a hurry," she said calmly.

This time, he noticed, she did not wait to be invited to sit. Carefully avoiding the mess of wine and broken glass, she seated herself opposite him, waiting for him to begin.

This was rapidly turning into the best New Year's Eve ever.

He found it difficult to know where to begin. At the beginning, one assumed. But where exactly was that?

"In the beginning," he said, with conscious self-mockery, "I was born. On reflection, I think that was my first mistake."

He noticed her shift slightly in the chair, but she didn't move and she didn't say anything.

"I was my parents' second child. My elder

brother, Marcus, was 5 years old when I was born. Marcus was the perfect son. He was good looking, popular, gifted at sports – and brilliant, of course. Brilliance is something of a family tradition. But do not imagine that I hated him, Miss Granger. Far from it. I adored him."

Marcus Aurelius Snape. Five years older than him. Hazy early memories... a sturdy blonde boy is being chased by his father round the garden. The same boy playing catch games with a half-sized quaffle. Birthday parties... the house overflowing with children... Marcus' friends. Afternoons with his parents' friends. Snatches of conversation... Marcus is grown so big now... when do you think he'll join his first Quidditch team... just like his father... And Severus... oh he's no trouble at all.

"I was no trouble to my parents. My father was an avid follower of Quidditch. I believe he thought that Marcus, even at that age, had the potential to be a professional player one day. He encouraged him at every opportunity. Although my tastes did not exactly run to standing outside on a wet afternoon cheering Marcus on to victory at some sporting event, I wanted to see him do well. There was no question but that he would be going to Hogwarts."

Older now – standing on Platform 9¾ putting Marcus' things on the train. His father is talking to someone... yes, we have great hopes for Marcus... house Quidditch team... well, you can only hope

can't you... Severus... well, he's clever, of course, but so different from Marcus... I expect he'll come out of himself one day... still, he's no trouble...

"With Marcus gone I was alone with my parents. I was still *no trouble* to them. I could not replicate my brother's sporting successes, you understand, but my reports showed the expected levels of achievement, and there were no disciplinary problems, so they were content to leave me to my own devices. We got regular owls from Marcus, who was, of course, picked for the house team."

He noticed Hermione draw breath as if to ask a question. He anticipated her.

"He was a Ravenclaw, Miss Granger. We all were. I was the first Slytherin in the family."

She subsided, but did not take her gaze from him.

"All of this was no more, nor less, traumatic, than any other childhood. Had things progressed normally, no doubt my parents and I would simply have reached an understanding that neither of us understood the other, and reduced our contact to the bare minimum."

He noticed an odd look flicker across her face at that, but did not pursue the thought. He was too immersed in his own memories.

"Things did not, however, progress normally." He focussed intently on the fire. "During the Christmas holidays of Marcus' third year there was an accident."

It is a crisp bright Christmas — not a white one, but one with lots of sunny, frosty, cheery days. For once it is cold enough for the lake at the bottom of the paddock to freeze, causing much amusement as the ducks slither unsteadily about in a flurry of anxious flapping. Marcus has invited his Quidditch friends from Hogwarts to stay for the New Year. The house is full of running, shouting, teenage boys. Marcus, with all the sophistication of 13 years old, has little time for his 8 year old brother and shadow. His friends, accordingly, regard the boy as fair game. Marcus makes no effort to stop the sly punches, pinches, shoves and kicks aimed at his brother. His father is heard to comment that 'a bit of rough and tumble will do the lad good.' He spends much of the holidays avoiding their casual cruelty.

The morning of that day Marcus and his friends have been more bored than usual, and are amusing themselves by tormenting the younger boy. Just after lunch he finally manages to escape with a book to the boathouse by the paddock lake. Although boat-house is rather an exaggeration — it is a tumble-down shed used for storing a dilapidated rowboat and various tools. Severus curls up in his cloak and hopes for an uninterrupted afternoon.

Then he hears the voices. The older boys. Marcus is talking about a den in the old boatshed. He is found by Marcus' crony — Daniel is it, the exact details are vague. Daniel, or whoever it was,

snatches the book. He tosses it to his friends. It is thrown back. Severus tries to get it back. Demands it back. Fights against the laughter of the boys.

And then someone takes it out of the boathouse and skims it across the frozen surface of the lake. The book, black and heavy, rests in the middle of the ice. Ducks quack indignantly, disturbed by the commotion.

If you want it, go and get it.

He is walking on to the ice, with his brother's friends jeering. And then the first crack. The sickening, slow motion, feeling of falling. The shock of ice cold water hitting his body, soaking his clothes making them stiff and heavy. Struggling. Wet cloak and cold legs pulled down by invisible hands in the depths. Rising panic. Twisting. An eerie sensation of translucent darkness — the underside of the ice, backlit by weak winter sunlight. Echoing, distorted voices. And the sound of ducks.

Then black.

"I woke up three days later. I am told that Marcus dived in to fetch me out. He disentangled me from the pond weed, and pulled me to safety. We both suffered hypothermia. I survived. He did not. No one has ever come up with a satisfactory explanation for this."

Hermione was as still as if she had been petrified. He moved in his chair, a low mrrp telling him that Sphinx had climbed on to his lap, whilst he had been speaking. He reached down to pick up his wine glass, and took a sip to moisten his throat.

"The family never recovered from the death of my brother. Marcus was my father's 'perfect' child — everything that he had ever wanted in a son — a "man's" man if you will. I... tried to take his place. I excelled at school. But, as I said, brilliance was the standard in my family. I may as well have sought his notice for possessing the ability to breathe. It could not measure up to a place on the house Quidditch team. I believe I have seen my father on no more than five occasions since my brother's death. It is entirely possible that he has died."

He took another sip of wine.

"As for my mother... at first I believed that Marcus' death had brought us closer together."

He broke off.

His mother. Beautiful, blonde, delicate Amarina de Vreiss Snape. Mourning the death of her favourite son. Observed by her other son, sitting in corners, on stairs, behind curtains, wrapped in his own devastating loss and trying not to disturb the sepulchral quiet of the house. Trying to ignore the collection of photographs and trophies in the main room, shrine to the beloved departed.

And six months after the tragedy, a sudden change.

Amarina, one morning, pulls back the curtains, throwing the windows open. 'Marcus would want us to be happy!' she pronounces, and from that time on she is happy. A forced, brittle, artificial, happiness. The boy lies awake whilst glittering parties fill the

house with light and music. And afterwards — after the guests have gone, the smell of her as she comes to say goodnight — soft skin, perfume, face powder and something else. Something that lies sourly on her breath. Something he only comes to understand later.

She kisses him, and her tears fall on his face. At nine years old he struggles to comfort the crying woman. Trying to explain why he was there and his brother wasn't. Trying to make up for that absence as best he could. Powerless.

And the years of living on the knife's edge begin. He never knows whether she will rail at him for causing the death of his brother, or hold him sobbing, drowning him in her sorrows. Declaring him best friend, her bright, brilliant Severus, to her party guests. And in the darkness, crying murderer most foul. Her lifeline and tormentor. Author of her ruin. Her support in truth, the one who helps her to the bathroom and puts her to bed when drink takes over again.

And then the final party. He hides as usual, watching, waiting for the guests to leave. Wondering how drunk she is that night. Listening to the shimmering crystal chatter. And then, his mother's voice, light, airy, dismissive... Severus? He's no trouble, thank the Gods, always does well at school... of course, he's no Marcus... he's good enough I suppose... well, you know what they say — what can't be cured must be endured.

A peal of brittle laughter.

The sound of the world shattering.

"Two days later my letter from Hogwarts arrived. You may appreciate that, at the time, it was rather welcome."

Another sip of wine. He composed himself to continue. He had almost forgotten the presence of the young woman in the chair opposite.

"So I arrived at Hogwarts."

Back on Platform 9³/₄. No proud father to see him off. Just Amarina, wrapped in a heavy coat and wearing dark glasses. A hasty farewell, and then she disappears. He feels rather lost amid the unfamiliar noise and bustle of the school. Then the Sorting Ceremony.

— Hmm... hmm... another Snape. I remember your family. Ravenclaw all the way...

His eyes shut, pleading for something that he could control. Some part of his life not totally ruled by the whims of others...

— Control... power you want is it?...

Yes... please, yes...

— Well, all right then... but I think you might live to regret it... SLYTHERIN!

"And so I ended up in Slytherin. And I think that it is fair to say that I have, indeed, lived to regret it."

Sphinx chose that moment to stand up on his lap and stretch, walking round in a small circle several times before settling again in a position almost identical to her previous one. Snape gave her an absent tickle.

"It will come as no surprise to you learn that I

was not picked for the Slytherin Quidditch team.

Unable to tolerate the Quidditch team is more like it. Repelled by the loud camaraderie and the unthinking hero-worship afforded to the players. And constantly singled out by them... Severus Snape... identified only as the brother of the Ravenclaw beater who died. '... saving his life...' is always left unspoken. The **SLYTHERIN** Snape. Enter Potter and Black. Everybody's hero and his dog. And the feeling of falling into cold darkness returns.

"I was not a popular student at school, and my peers were not... kind. However, I eventually learned the lesson that people get bored if their target fails to react, and they move on. Add to that a certain... facility... for being verbally unpleasant, and I was largely left alone. I continued to excel academically, however, and I found my niche in the field of potions."

The potions classroom. Almost unchanged over the years. Except that this room contains Professor Septimus Filby, a middle aged wizard, with a kindly face who takes the solitary, dark boy under his wing, recognising his talent. Showing pleased approval for his progress. Encouraging the boy to think beyond the classroom assignments. Helping with after class projects. Occasionally seeking his assistance with research.

The boy finds refuge in the calm exactitude. A calm orderly environment where steps correctly followed lead to an expected result. No dramatic

declarations, no unexpected changes, no sudden moves. A contained perfection. A place where he holds the control. The power.

"I could not, of course, remain at Hogwarts over the vacation periods. I had... family duties... to attend to. In particular my mother was... deteriorating. My father had virtually disappeared. I have no idea whether he saw my mother when I was not present."

He paused. The fire crackled in the background. Other than that the room was deathly still.

"So what happened then?" Her voice was very soft, neutral, in the quiet.

He almost jumped, at the reminder that she was still there. Her face was shadowed in the dim lamp-light. He fought an impulse to tell her to leave. But having started, he needed to tell her the rest.

"I'm certain, Miss Granger, that you have read widely enough to be familiar with the concept of transference."

Transference — the act of projecting on to one person thoughts and feelings that are more properly associated with another.

Lying awake during the holidays, listening to his mother tell of her problems with his father, declaring her love, still, for his brother, wondering if his father is even in the house... it is all too easy to imagine how life would be in another house, with another family, another father.

Someone who understands his fascination with

potions, who values his academic achievements, someone who shares in his discoveries, and takes pride in them. Pride in him. Someone like Professor Filby.

Snape ran a hand through his hair.

"I was always aware of the Death Eaters, of course, One could hardly be a Slytherin and not be. But I had reached a form of equilibrium, neither good nor bad. Merely tolerable. And then..."

And then...

One evening. After class. Assisting Professor Filby with one of his personal projects. Proud to be trusted in that way. And a voice comes from the door... Darling, are you in there? And his professor calls an answer. And she comes in. Carrying a baby in her arms, and followed by another child, of no more than three.

Watching in growing detachment as Professor Filby kisses the woman, and gazes adoringly at the children. Swings the toddler up onto his shoulders. The child giggling in glee.

— Severus, this is my wife Lorelei, and these are my two monstrosities. The babe is Helena, and this one — reaching up and tickling — is Simeon. Lorie, this is Severus, one of my students.

A friendly smile from the plump motherly woman, and conversation that he can no longer hear.

And the crushing realisation that no one will ever see him as Professor Filby sees his children. Their special relationship is revealed as childish fantasy. He is a fool for thinking otherwise.

He makes some excuse to leave. The Professor barely notices him going, wrapped up in his family.

"I wandered the corridors of the school without really knowing where I was going. Which is how I found myself near Gryffindor tower, and encountering James Potter and Sirius Black. As was usual for them they were heading away from the Tower. I realised then that it was the time of the month when Remus Lupin disappeared. I was... angry... hurt if you will. I resented their easy self-assurance, their belief that they were untouchable. And I wanted to see someone else suffering as I was, so I decided to get them expelled."

Hermione opened her mouth as if to say something, and then shut it again.

"What, Miss Granger? Does it surprise you that I indulged in selfish, spiteful behaviour? Or that I admit it?"

She made no answer, and he continued:

"You know what happened next, of course. Black told me to press a knot on the Whomping Willow to find Lupin. I was attacked, and Potter saved me."

Saved, once again, by the Quidditch hero.

Hermione subsided into her chair, and nodded slightly. She waited for him to go on.

"Of course Potter was the toast of the school for his heroism, and I was the villain of the piece once more."

Alone in the Slytherin common room — the potions room no longer a refuge — whilst his house-mates are at the final Gryffindor/Slytherin match. Unable to bring himself to watch the hero Potter, and his grinning fool, Black. And there they finally catch up with him.

Soft, seductive, understanding.

He deserves to be among friends. With people who understand him. With people who value his gifts. People who can show him secret knowledge. His real family.

Knowledge that will mean he will never be powerless again. He will be respected. The others will realise then who they are dealing with. They will be sorry for misjudging him all these years.

No one will ask anything of him. All he has to do is let them... help him. And then he can decide whether he wants to join them. Maybe something will happen sooner than he thinks.

"Then half the house came into the Common Room. It seemed that the match had been called off. Potter had somehow fallen off his broomstick and broken his wrist in three places. He was in the Infirmary and no one knew whether he would be able to play for the rest of the season. And so I joined up."

He drained the last of the wine from the glass.

"Does that answer your question, Miss Granger? Do you *understand*?"

He hoped so. He had never felt so exhausted

in his life. He wanted this over now.

She had listened intently, and was now very quiet, analysing and processing the information. He realised that he was waiting for another furious outburst, a tirade of condemnation like the one that followed his revelations about Hester's potion. It didn't come.

"I don't know if I understand," she said eventually. "In some ways I do, and in some I don't. It all seems so..." she struggled for a word.

"Childish?" he suggested bitterly.

She made a small gesture of denial, but he could see that he was close to the mark.

"I'm sorry if you were expecting some noble tale of deeply held convictions. The unpleasant truth is that I am a small-minded, petty and vindictive man, and I joined the Death Eaters for small-minded, petty and vindictive reasons. I wanted respect. I couldn't get it simply for being who I was, like Potter could, so I took it by force."

She was shaking her head again, but he continued.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I am no sort of romantic hero. I have examined my own motives closely over the years. The fact that they are despicable, does not make them any the less genuine."

She was looking at him again, with a look that he couldn't quite place. Not quite pity, not quite understanding... almost compassion. He blocked it out, waiting for the blow to fall.

"So," she said carefully, "if you're such a despicable person, what made you leave the Death Eaters?"

He was startled again by the question.

"Does it matter?"

"I think so. You've explained what brought you into them. Logically, if you are as small-minded and petty as you keep telling me you are, you would still be out there inflicting cruelty for the sake of it."

So much for hoping that the sordid truth would get her to leave.

He stood suddenly, disturbing Sphinx yet again.

"I need another glass of wine," he said roughly. "You?"

She gestured to the mess on the floor. He grunted, and gestured at it with his wand. The wine disappeared and the glass remade itself cleanly. He retrieved the bottle from the table, and refilled her glass, before pouring a large one for himself.

He wondered again why her opinion mattered so much to him, that he was prepared to go over old ground like this.

He seated himself again, and drank, trying to organise the next chapter of his life in his mind. He noted that Sphinx had given up on him and had sidled on to Hermione's lap. She was stroking her a little gingerly. Sphinx clearly had no such reservations, and her purr

could be heard across the room.

"I left because... I suppose I left because I eventually realised that the comfort and safety that they offered was false. I was never respected. Not by the Death Eaters — they knew what I was too well. By others, I was only feared. I also... overestimated... my taste for casual sadism. Brewing a potion requires finesse and skill and knowledge. Casting *Crucio* or *Avada Kedavra* only requires power. It ranks on the same level of subtlety as hitting someone with a brass candlestick. And... in the end, the Death Eaters were no more a real family than my own. Their driving motivations are gratification of their own lusts. They survive on mutual usefulness. Once that utility ceases, Death Eaters turn on their own with almost as much pleasure as they do their opponents.

"I discovered that the hard way..."

An evening... a family is brought in... husband, wife, two children... the children are taken away screaming... but this time the wife looks familiar, although he can't place her. He prepares a potion... he doesn't recall exactly which one... and hears a man's voice.

"— Lorie. I love you."

And recollection comes. Turning to look into the eyes of Professor Septimus Filby. Seeing recognition dawn. And seeing not hatred, or rage or even pain, but a deep, deep disappointment.

Freezing.

A harsh voice behind him.

Get on with it, Snape.

Still unable to move, and being pushed roughly out of the way. The potion being snatched from his hand and administered to the professor and his wife.

And later, before the Dark Lord, explaining his failure.

And feeling the kiss of Crucio.

"It was at that point I realised that I was utterly morally bankrupt. I decided to go to Dumbledore, reasoning that he was the only person likely to hear me out, and make use of my knowledge, rather than kill me on sight. He listened. He spoke to the Ministry." There was a pause. "We came to an... arrangement. Please don't ask me to go into exactly what."

She was silent again. He waited for the inevitable questions but nothing came. She moved suddenly, and he realised that she was rubbing at her face again.

Crying? For him? Surely not.

He felt an unaccustomed ache in his own chest.

"Don't pity me, girl," he snapped harshly. "I know what I am and I know what I've done. I'm perfectly prepared to take the responsibility."

Her head came up at that. When she spoke her voice was steady.

"I think I have to disagree with the term 'morally bankrupt'. It seems to me that choosing to leave, giving information to Dumbledore,

and coming to an arrangement with the Ministry to actively fight back, all indicate a sense of conscience."

"I pay my debts, Miss Granger. It is the last act of honour left to me."

There was nothing left to say. Except that she didn't seem to think so.

"You know, it's not that easy being a witch in a family of Muggles."

He looked up, confused by her sudden statement.

She must have misread his movement, for she quickly added:

"It's not the same I know, but it was still difficult. Being blamed for doing things when I had no idea why it had happening. Being made to sit on my own in class because things always spilled, or broke or fell over near me. Being always on my own unless someone wanted the answer to a question. Muggle children aren't much kinder than wizard children are." She laughed. "And my parents... as long as I was," she hesitated, "no trouble... were just happy to let me get on with it. They never really wanted to understand magic"... he heard the word *me* left unspoken... "still don't really. As long as the report cards are good they're happy."

Snape was unsure what to make of this information. He'd known she had inner demons. He'd witnessed some of the struggle in their previous encounter. He'd somehow always imagined her

as the adored child of doting parents.

"You seemed to have no trouble fitting in at Hogwarts," he said carefully.

She laughed shortly.

"Do you remember my first year? When we got caught with the troll? I was crying in the toilets because I'd just heard Ron Weasley say that no one could stand me."

"I seem to recall that you got over that stage."

"Yes, well, someone had to do the thinking for the boys, didn't they?"

It was her turn to sip her wine before continuing.

"I mean, of course they are my friends. It's just," she paused, "when you're supposed to be brilliant, you can't ever have an off day. Do you know what I mean?"

Yes. He most certainly did.

He nodded.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, like I said, it's not even nearly the same. I don't know why I said it."

"I doubt you would ever become a Death Eater, Miss Granger, no matter how bad your early experiences were."

"No. Probably not. Or at least I hope I wouldn't." She winced. "I'm sorry. That wasn't very tactful of me was it? I mean, you never really know, do you?"

He laughed harshly. "Take it from me, you aren't the type. And I think you know by now that tact is wasted on me."

She clicked her tongue in irritation, but said no more.

He wondered at that, but did not pursue it. He was still trying to come to terms with the notion that she was still sitting in the chair, sipping the wine. That she hadn't just left.

The fire had given the room an unaccustomed warmth. Sphinx was clearly settled on Hermione's lap, and the wine was beginning to relax him. She seemed to feel no need for further conversation, just staring at the fire. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the emotional roller-coaster of the evening he felt strangely calm.

He had never denied to himself that he was a lonely man. He had accepted this as the consequence of his life choices so far. But Hermione was the first person to actually sit and let him talk. Without interrupting, or shouting, or even judging as far as he could tell. Just simply listening.

He wanted to sit there, doing nothing more than enjoy her presence. He felt the ache return to his chest.

This was no good. Getting maudlin would solve nothing.

Draining his glass, he said:

"It must be late."

Hermione blinked, and looked at her watch.

"It's half past five," she said in slight disbelief. "I've been here all night."

Shaking herself, she added "I should go. I'm

supposed to be going out to lunch tomorrow, um... today I suppose it is."

Carefully dislodging Sphinx, she stood up to go. Sphinx gave a perfunctory protest, and headed for the bed.

He stood to watch her as she retrieved her cloak, following her to the door. She opened the door, and then paused to turn to him:

"Thank you for the explanation," she said sincerely. "For what it's worth, I promise that it will never go further than me."

She hesitated as if unsure of her next action. Then she took a couple of steps back towards him, reached up, and gave him a very brief kiss on the cheek.

"Happy New Year, Professor," she said quickly, and then disappeared through the door.

Snape stood staring at the door, transfixed. Slowly he raised his hand to touch his cheek where she had kissed it.

Just when you thought you had it all under control.

He walked back to chair where she had been sitting, and put both hands on it to steady himself. There, caught in the fabric of the upholstery, were some stray strands of brown curly hair. Her head must have rested there.

Absently he picked them off the chair, twisting them round his finger.

He closed his eyes as if in pain.

How do you hurt a man a who has nothing?

he thought savagely.

Give him something broken.

So much for peace.



Draco Malfoy paced the cellar of the small Suffolk cottage in growing frustration. He slammed his fist into the top of the long workbench. He glared at the cloth on the workbench, as if the fabric, sticky and stiff with dried potion and pieces of broken glass, would yield up its secrets under the weight of his displeasure.

Draco smoothed his blonde hair back off his forehead. It was a symbolic gesture, as he was never less than immaculate, his perfectly arranged hair setting off his flawless features.

The classical perfection of the image was only marred when you looked at his eyes. Piercing, grey and pitilessly cold. The eyes of a man utterly devoid of conscience.

Now those eyes were blazing with frustrated anger.

For over two months he had been struggling to analyse the potion, soaked into the red cloth, retrieved from the floor of the British Museum. Two futile months of dissolving and distilling, and he had barely managed to produce a thimbleful of liquid. And that had appeared to have no useful properties whatsoever.

He snarled aloud, his usually polished voice harsh with fury. He wondered why the mad old bat who had lived in the cottage and brewed the accursed thing in the first place, hadn't kept better records.

The truth was that his ability to make a potion was little better than average, and his analytical skills were rather worse. It had only been through his father's then influence over his former potions master that he had achieved a creditable mark at all. Outside the classroom, where actual ability really meant something, he was failing badly.

His father would not be pleased, he thought grimly.

The displeasure of Lucius Malfoy was perhaps less to be feared than that of Voldemort himself, but Draco would not have wanted to live on the difference. He was also under no illusion that blood relation would cause his father to be less severe.

He winced briefly at the memory of telling his father that they had lost the talisman. It was only the fact of the potion residue that had made him stop short of the full *Cruciatus*. What he had done had been bad enough. Further lack of success would remove any pretence of self-restraint.

He swore again, picking up an empty glass bottle and hurling it into the far wall. The sound of destruction made him feel a little better. It

was clear that he was going to get nowhere on his own. He needed someone who knew what they were doing.

He needed Snape. The one who had recreated the damned thing in the first place.

Or even that wretched little Mudblood, Granger. She had had her hands on a sample of it as well.

Neither of them would help willingly. It had become clear where Snape's loyalties lay during the last days of Voldemort. And Granger had never made any secret of the fact that she despised him. He doubted that anything less than *Imperio* would serve to gain their cooperation.

So be it. He had no qualms about using the Unforgivables to obtain his ends.

And *Imperio* on Granger might have unexpected additional bonuses.

Ignoring the potion soaked cloth now, Draco pulled his finely tailored robes around himself and began to pace, planning on how to entrap one or other of his prey.

He had almost devised a plan when his attention was caught by a soft scraping sound, almost on the edge of hearing. He froze, listening intently.

There it was again. On the floorboards above his head, a dragging sound, as if someone was walking very carefully.

Draco drew his wand out of his sleeve. There were enough wards around the cottage to keep away casual burglars. Therefore, if there was

an intruder upstairs, it was likely to be dangerous. Making no noise, he glided across the floor and up the stone stairs. A couple of whispered charms, and the cellar door opened silently. Moving carefully he entered the main room of the cottage.

In the middle of the room was the figure of a man. He was tall and rangy, wearing dark robes, and from the back Draco could clearly see shoulder length, straggly, greasy black hair. For a moment Draco's mouth dropped open in surprise. He had been downstairs busily plotting a kidnapping, and one of the intended victims had walked straight to him.

The he shut his mouth abruptly again. It was not given to Draco Malfoy to carefully analyse any given situation. If chance had seen fit to deliver him such an opportunity, he would just seize it without question.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape," he said urbanely, "how nice of you to drop in."

The man turned to face him. Draco did not lower his wand. He could see that it did indeed appear to be Snape, although his former professor was looking at him oddly, quizzically, as if he was trying to remember something.

"Snape," he said consideringly, "yes, that would be right."

Draco wondered if his old head of house had lost his memory somehow. He was study-

ing Draco very closely.

"Malfoy," he said eventually. "Yes, yes, the resemblance is striking."

The appearance was as he remembered but the voice and the manner were different. The eyes were still black and cold, but they seemed even emptier, and more compelling, now. The movements were still graceful, but possessed of a languidness that Draco didn't recall from classes. The voice was silky, but soft and slightly dreamy, hinting at ecstasy and hidden pain.

Eyes held by the mesmerising gaze, Draco felt his mouth go dry. Swallowing convulsively, he realised with a shock that this was actually exciting him.

Snape... Snape?... seemed to understand this, moving close enough for Draco to feel... not warmth, but an icy coldness emanating from his body. The man raised his hand to run a finger along Draco's jawline. The younger man shuddered at the touch, only partly from arousal.

"So like her," Snape murmured, "so very worthy of her..." He leant forward.

With something like shock Draco felt the older man's lips brush his, and the soft kiss of his breath filling his mouth. He felt a chill run down his throat into his stomach, and he shuddered again. It was like the touch of an animate corpse. He wanted to pull away but some base instinct was had almost literally frozen him.

One hand was buried in his hair, disturbing its impeccable order, holding his head steady.

The man kissing him chuckled against his lips. It was an incongruous sound.

"Yes," he whispered into Draco's mouth, "she liked it too..." He pulled back to look at him again. "It has been too long. In these months of my weakness I have fed on the leavings of mankind, but now... now I have returned to the source of my power to find one who is worthy."

Draco felt the other hand brush over his crotch, to cup him roughly. He hadn't even felt the man undoing his robe, and yet his hand was caressing him expertly. He felt a low moan rise in his throat, and involuntarily he pushed his hips against the other man's hand.

"Soon," Snape responded, "soon. We will be strong together my precious one... but first..."

Draco made small inarticulate cries as the cold pleasure mounted. Then the pleasure became pain, and the cries became screams. Then the pain intensified to a searing agony and his screams became pleas, and he couldn't tell if he was begging the man to stop or continue.

And then he felt his whole body turn to ice, and the inner core of himself being stretched out, like wire, to thread around the darkness that gripped him. And it penetrated him to his soul, and screaming helplessly Draco Malfoy emptied himself into the darkness.



Severus Snape strode into the Hogwarts staff room, body language more unapproachable than normal. The usual beginning of term chaos passed round him, rather as a river divides round a mid-stream boulder. The first staff meeting of term was an experience he endured rather than enjoyed. As Head of Slytherin House he was expected to be there.

He was aware of the covert, curious eyes of the other members of staff on him. This was his first contact with any of them, save Dumbledore, since Christmas Day, and he knew that he looked worse than he usually did. Dark rings under his eyes, did not complement his normally sallow complexion, and lank hair. Professor Vector looked as if she was about to say something to him as he passed, and then thought better of it. He was grateful. He felt anti-social, even by his own standards.

He avoided the current Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher — he couldn't even remember the man's name — and seated himself next to Professor Sprout, leaving an empty chair to his left. It would eventually be taken by Minerva McGonagall, but she would come in with Dumbledore. He inclined his head briefly in greeting to the dumpy little witch. Given that

she was responsible for the care of some of the more exotic, fresh ingredients that he needed for his work, he supposed he should make some effort to be civil. She shot a hard look in turn, but contented herself with a murmured, "Good morning, Professor Snape."

In truth it was not a good morning for him, nor had any of his mornings been since New Year's Eve and *her* visit. He found it difficult to think her name, even to himself. He had been sleeping badly, and been forced to resort to Dreamless Sleep potions on more than one occasion. When he wasn't sleeping, he ran over the events of that night in his mind – wondering what on Earth had possessed him to reveal himself to her in that way. Sentimental weakness, he had concluded in the end, with self-contempt. As if she was likely to seek out his company after that. He ruthlessly suppressed the memory of her lips lightly touching his cheek.

Pity, he told himself bitterly. That's all it was – all it could have been. He would rather have had hatred. His mood worsened.

He was forced to focus on outside matters when Dum-bledore and McGonagall finally joined the meeting. They were both looking very serious, and the muted conversation petered out. McGonagall sat next to Snape, acknowledging him with barely more of a gesture than he had given Sprout, and sat with pursed lips

and a severe expression.

Dumbledore opened the meeting welcoming them back as usual, running through room and timetable arrangements, staff cover, syllabus matters, provisional examination arrangements, governors' notices, and special announcements. The mundane necessities of running of any school – magical or otherwise.

Finally, he looked very grave, and drew a deep breath.

"Now comes the part that I am not looking forward to in the slightest."

The rest of the staff all looked attentive.

"You will be aware of the terrible recent deaths."

The staff nodded sympathetically. Snape felt a little confused. He had been too wrapped up in his own personal hell to notice events in the wider world. Dumbledore was going on.

"The death of Morgan Griswold has hit Fay and Laurel very hard of course. They will be returning at the start of term, but I ask you all to be sympathetic to them."

Snape could have sworn that there were some hastily covered glances in his direction at that admonishment.

"However," Dumbledore continued, "we are not expecting Robert Farnborough back for another couple of weeks. His mother's funeral is not until Tuesday, and I believe there are a number of things there that need to be resolved."

There were nods around the room. Robert Farnborough, a Hufflepuff prefect, would be missed for his calm good sense, and ability to keep some of the more boisterous first years in line.

"I don't need to tell you that the Ministry is looking into this very closely, but until it has been resolved we must all be on our guards, and remind the children to be careful, especially on exeats to Hogsmeade."

Dumbledore looked round the room again. Even his gaze seemed to linger on Snape.

"Thank you all once again. I wish you as pleasant a term as possible under the circumstances."

As the meeting broke up in a rather subdued atmosphere, Snape felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Like someone just walked over my grave.



Draco pulled his cloak around him, and sighed in irritation. Not far from him, shrouded in the shadows, *Snape*... for want of another appellation... was standing still and impassive. The derelict building — a Muggle... factory, was it?... a place where they made their pitiful mechanical things — was deserted.

Draco Malfoy was not a brilliant man, but he was possessed of a fair degree of cunning and an impressive survival instinct. Without question this Snape could do things to his mind

and body that made his mouth go dry at the thought. But physical gratification of his lust aside, this Snape appeared to have little more idea about potions than Draco himself.

He had taken this Snape down to the cellar to examine that hated piece of red cloth. Snape had smelt it briefly.

"It smells of home," he had stated. "I need more of it."

And Draco had begun to feel the need for it as well. An ache that had nothing to do with physical release, and everything to do with an insatiable hunger for power. Unable to articulate a question with such desire inhabiting his whole body, he had been unresisting as two hands on his shoulders had pushed him onto his knees...

Later, he made careful enquiries through his father. Snape was at Hogwarts preparing to teach another term of junior witches and wizards. Hermione Granger was buried in her lab at the Ministry.

As he had suspected this... creature... who was the image of Severus Snape, was not, in fact, his old Head of House.

Which put him back at square one — the need to find someone to prepare more of the bloody potion. But which also gave him an idea as to how to ensnare the *real* Snape.

The first two attempts to put the plan into action had been failures. Well, not exactly

failures, he thought moistening his lips as he remembered. Both Morgan Griswold and Estelle Farnborough had died fighting.

He had watched from the darkness as Snape, or whatever it was, sucked the life from them. His strange connection with the creature allowed him to feel the victim's terror as their life ebbed away. To savour the sweetness of the searing pain, and to share the unspoken knowledge that a magical life tasted like no other.

But although the creature had allowed both victims to get a good look at him, they had died before being able to pass that knowledge on to anyone else.

Hence the fact that Draco himself was pacing an abandoned area of Muggle industrial wasteland, with his Snape nearby, waiting for the right moment to implement his plan. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. How long could it take for Aurors to show up for heaven's sake?

And then he saw them — dark shapes appearing in the darkness. He looked at Snape, and the figure nodded, disappearing swiftly.

And then suddenly an agonising scream split the quiet night. A young woman ran headlong out from the shadows of the building, sobbing breathlessly.

"No, no... leave me alone, please... I beg you..."

She was pursued by a tall figure in dark robes.

She stumbled across the uneven ground, high heels hindering her passage. Unable to see prop-

erly she tripped over hidden rubble and crashed headlong into the ground. Her terrified cries echoed around the remains of the building.

The tall figure caught up with him, and bent over her.

A flash of light illuminated the ground. Voices shouted. The tall figure stood, glanced briefly in the direction of the light and then fled. Running figures gave chase but the assailant had apparated away.

A calming hand was placed on the young woman's shoulder.

"It's all right, miss, you're all right now, he's gone." A soothing deep male voice.

The woman was still taking shaky frightened breaths, as she regained control of herself.

"It was awful. I heard nothing and then he was just there, grabbing me and chasing me... I just ran... I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here." She was babbling in relief.

The hand was still calming her.

"Well, we got here in time, that's the main thing." A pause. "Miss, I have to ask you one question."

"Yes, anything I can do to help..."

"Did you get a look at him? Could you tell us anything about who he was?"

The woman was silent, crying again, but quietly now.

"Miss? Anything you can tell us about him will help."

She was hugging her knees to herself, rocking gently. Eventually, she said, brokenly:

"Yes. I did see him. And... and I do... know who he was... but I can't believe he would stoop so low... oh Gods, what if he comes after me again?"

The Auror was waiting, trying to conceal his eagerness.

"Miss, you'll be perfectly safe, I promise..."

"It was... I remember him from school... you'd never forget him... it was... Professor Snape."

The Auror nodded.

"Don't you worry Miss, now we know, we'll have him in Azkaban before he knows what's hit him."

The woman nodded, calmer now she had told what she knew.

The Auror seemed a little uncertain.

"Miss, is there anyone we can call for you? We should really get after the bastard before he gets anyone else..."

"No, you go... I'll be fine. I'll apparate home from here. My mother will be there. Please. Don't worry."

The Auror seemed to debate with himself what he should do, then called to his colleague. They had a quick discussion, and then returned to the woman.

"If you're absolutely sure you'll be all right."

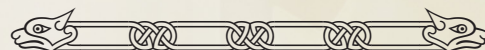
"Yes, really. I'd feel far happier knowing that you're going to arrest him. You don't need to worry about me."

With only one backwards glance the two

Aurors apparated.

The young woman sat on the ground seeming in no hurry to get up. After a while she flexed her fingers as if she had pins and needles. Her body shape appeared to be changing.

Minutes later the Polyjuice potion had completely worn off, and Draco Malfoy stood, gingerly placing his bare feet on the stony ground. That should be sufficient to get his dear Professor cut out and isolated. Now all he had to do was apparate back to the cottage and get out of these *ridiculous* clothes.



Snape had just finished breakfast, and was about to return to the dungeons to prepare for the first class of the day, when the summons from Dumbledore arrived. Normally the Headmaster couched his invitations in pleasant language, implying that he should drop by whenever he had a spare moment. This one was definitely an order.

Professor Snape,
Kindly attend my office immediately,
on a matter of the gravest importance.
Albus Dumbledore.

Not a summons to be ignored. Snape tried to ignore a rising feeling of dread.

Ten minutes later he was outside Dumbledore's office, with a curious reluctance to actually knock. As he lifted his hand, the door swung open and the headmaster's voice called:

"Come in, Severus."

He entered cautiously. The door swung shut behind him. The office was as he remembered it, cluttered with odds and ends, both useful and otherwise. Fawkes, the headmaster's phoenix, was seated on his perch, regarding him mournfully.

Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, with a very serious expression on his face. The portraits of the previous headteachers were all regarding him equally sternly. For a moment he wondered if Dumbledore knew about Hermione's visit on New Year's Eve.

Dumbledore did not stand, nor did he invite Snape to sit. Instead he picked up a scroll from the desk in front of him.

"Severus, I have had a most worrying message from the Ministry this morning."

Snape said nothing. He was unsure as to where the conversation was headed.

"I realise that you have chosen to... isolate... yourself from your colleagues over the last little while, but you will remember the recent deaths." It was not a question.

Snape nodded briefly.

"It appears there was another attack last night. A young woman."

Snape felt his stomach clench in an irrational thought that it might have been Hermione. Going after some mysterious attacker would be just the sort of thing that she would do.

"Who?" he asked shortly.

"The scroll does not name the victim," replied the Headmaster.

Snape did not feel reassured.

"The Ministry has not revealed all the information that it has to the press," continued Dumbledore. "In particular, it has not revealed the fact that the murder victims appeared to have suffered a particular form of brain damage."

Snape felt a peculiar falling sensation. *That damned potion.* He could have sworn that Hermione Granger had destroyed the last sample in existence. There must be another explanation. Dumbledore was still speaking.

"I am aware that you have, in the past, done extensive work on a potion which shows very similar effects." He paused to study Snape closely. Snape fought to keep his face impassive. "I also know that in October there was a raid on a house in Yorkshire in which one of the Ministry Aurors suffered similar... ah... cognitive impairment. Although he survived." He fixed Snape with a piercing gaze. "I am given to understand that a sample of the potion was recovered at the scene,

but never found its way into Ministry hands."

He paused again.

"I was wondering whether you could shed any light on this matter."

Snape was reminded of the evening, long ago, when he had given himself up to Dumbledore. The headmaster had questioned him in the same quietly insistent way. He swallowed. He could easily explain that Harry Potter *had* taken it away from the scene. He owed Potter nothing. But if he did that he would have to go on to explain that Potter had given it to Hermione. At best she would be disciplined, she might lose her job, and at worst she could come under suspicion for the recent deaths.

He couldn't do that to her.

He might as well be the one in trouble. Slowly he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't, Headmaster."

Dumbledore looked disappointed, and his expression grew even more grave.

"There is more, Severus. The Ministry are now investigating a number of Muggle deaths over the last few months. The victims were all mostly unregarded members of Muggle society. But there are worrying parallels with the deaths of Morgan Griswold and Estelle Farnborough."

Snape was acutely conscious of the gazes of the portraits and the phoenix, all seeming to accuse him of something. And the headmaster

still hadn't finished with him.

"Coming on to the attack last night. In this instance the attacker was disturbed before he could complete what he set out to do. The victim survived..."

Snape felt an odd rush of relief. If it had been Hermione...

"... and was able to identify her assailant."

The words hung in the air. Snape felt an awful certainty steal over him. He couldn't bring himself to articulate the question, as if by not asking, it would mean that this wasn't happening. Dumbledore supplied the answer anyway.

"She identified you, Severus."

He knew that he must have gone even paler than normal at that, but it was all he could do to remain upright. He moistened his lips, but could think of nothing to say.

"Severus," Dumbledore was as severe as he'd ever seen him, as severe as he had been on the night he renounced the Death Eaters. "I need you to answer me honestly."

Dumbly, Snape nodded.

"Did you kill those people?"

Snape swallowed again, unsure whether his voice would even work. Finally he said, as firmly as he could manage:

"No. Absolutely not."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, and steepled his fingers. Eventually he seemed to come

to an internal decision.

"You understand that matters are now out of my control. I find that I have to suspend you from your teaching duties, effective immediately. I believe that Professor Flitwick is currently giving your third year class something to do."

Snape nodded slowly, not certain where this was leading.

"The Ministry tell me that they will be arriving this afternoon to... invite you to assist with their enquiries. I imagine that you will have some things to attend to before they arrive."

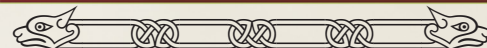
Dumbledore suddenly looked very tired. He returned his attention to the scroll in front of him.

"I believe that I have now done all I can for you, Severus. I hope that you will find some way to prove your innocence."

It was clear that he had been dismissed. In a haze of disbelief he left the Headmaster's study. After he had taken about four steps down the corridor, the analytical side of his mind had begun to function again.

I find I have to suspend you from your teaching duties... I imagine that you will have some things to attend to... I have now done all I can for you...

His stride became more purposeful. He had about three hours, maybe four at the most, to come up with some way of staying out of the hands of the Ministry Aurors.



Hermione Granger broke another piece of chocolate from the large bar beside her, and nibbled at it disconsolately. On her lap Crookshanks protested at her movement, but otherwise made no other sign that he was alive. With her free hand she tickled him behind the ears, and he began to purr.

At the French windows, leading on to what the property particulars had described as *THE BALCONY*, there was a tapping noise. Glancing over she could see that it was the bedraggled little sparrow that seemed to have taken up residence in one of her plant pots. Hermione was not one of nature's gardeners. The "balcony" was barely more than a wide ledge, and her mother, in a fit of trying to instil some sense of domesticity in her daughter, had bought her two terracotta pots and filled them with something — geraniums she thought.

Something that not even you can kill, darling.

Contrary to her mother's expectations, but completely in line with Hermione's, the geraniums had withered, leaving the pots a mess of half dead ornamental plant and an assortment of weeds.

About a week ago a rather pathetic looking sparrow had started making a nest in the foliage. Oddly enough, Crookshanks, who would pounce on anything remotely resembling prey

with the ferocity of one born on the African savannah, spent a whole afternoon watching the bird, and then ignored it completely. Hermione had taken to throwing bread and bacon scraps out for it, and a couple of days ago, had gone as far as buying a bird feeder.

Anything to distract her from the events of New Year.

She still couldn't work out what it was that had led her to go to Hogwarts that evening. Still less could she fathom quite what had driven her to stay, when he made it so very clear that he wanted her to go. Some intuition that his hostility was born from fear rather than malice perhaps. But as for asking about his past...

She shivered a little at the recollection. That dry, self-mocking unemotional recitation of his childhood. But what had struck her the most was his lack, not just of self-pity, but of self-compassion – any hint that he had in any way accepted that he might not have been to blame for the appalling self-absorption of his parents.

Or that he deserved any kindness, she thought, scratching Crookshanks even more vigorously. She couldn't forget the look on his face when she kissed him – a simple friendly gesture had caused him to freeze in shock.

She hoped that he was all right. Somehow she doubted that he was. Or that he would want to see her again in a hurry.

The doorbell rang.

Odd, she wasn't expecting visitors.

Depositing Crookshanks on the floor, she wandered into the hall, and peered through the spyhole. A shock of red hair clearly identified at least one of the two men outside her door. She opened the door with a smile.

"Harry. Ron. Come in."

The two men piled into the flat and through into the lounge, Ron giving a mock glare in the direction of Crookshanks. Cloaks were summarily dumped on one of the armchairs, and Ron settled himself on the sofa.

"Well, aren't you going to put the kettle on," he said cheerfully.

"Do I look like a house-elf?" she grumbled but waved her wand at the fireplace anyway.

Harry eyed the half eaten bar of chocolate.

"Chocolate, 'Mione? Is it men or work?"

She looked startled at that.

"Men or work that's the problem," clarified Harry. Hermione was known for retreating into chocolate binges when she had a problem to solve.

"Oh, neither, really. I just felt the need for chocolate." She grinned. "It's a girl thing – you wouldn't understand."

Ron, meanwhile, was helping himself to the tea.

"I know what your tea making's like," he explained. "I fancied a cup of something that wasn't going to dissolve my stomach lining."

He deftly poured three large mugs. Hermione picked one up and sat down opposite him.

"So," she said, after taking a big sip, "did you just pop round to insult my housekeeping skills, or is there a purpose to this visit?"

Harry and Ron exchanged glances. Hermione maintained a look of polite enquiry. It was Ron who continued:

"Well, you know these murders...?"

Hermione did. No one who even passed a copy of the Daily Prophet could miss the lurid headlines. Not even wizards were immune to the pull of tabloid journalism.

She nodded.

"Well... you'll never guess what..."

She shook her head — Ron could never tell a story without editorialising in some way. Harry took over at that point.

"The thing is, I saw the reports in the Ministry. And the fact that they never released to the papers is that both the victims seemed to have had their minds... damaged... like Seamus."

Hermione went suddenly cold.

"Do the Ministry have any idea what might have caused it?" she heard herself ask.

Harry was shaking his head.

"No — other than that they're linking it to the raid we did in Yorkshire."

Hermione was thinking quickly.

"The potion was... used up," she said slowly.

"I used it up testing it."

She hadn't told them about Snape and the British Museum. She didn't think that this was a good time to start enlightening them.

"Yeah, but that's not all," chipped in Ron. "There was another attack. Only this time the Aurors got there first, and they got an identification." He paused for dramatic effect. "And guess who it was..."

Hermione was beginning to feel slightly queasy.

"Snape," finished Ron triumphantly.

No, was her first thought.

"Are they sure," she asked carefully.

"Yes, completely." This was Harry, taking over now that Ron had dropped the bombshell.

"Have they..." she swallowed, "have they got him."

"No," chimed in Ron with glee. "He's done a runner."

Hermione stifled her unexpected relief that at least he wasn't in Azkaban. Although she wasn't certain why she cared.

"The Ministry went to Hogwarts, but he'd already gone," elaborated Harry. "They haven't located him yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"He's had his licence to apparate suspended, and the Improper Use of Magic Office's got a trace out on him," added Ron.

The IUMO, Hermione knew, normally monitored the use of unauthorised magic by underage wizards. At need it could do the same for an adult wizard. If Snape used any sort of magic,

the Ministry would be immediately alerted.

Harry was watching her intently.

"Mione," he asked carefully, "there's no chance that Snape could have got his hands on any of that potion is there?"

Hermione was shaking her head.

"No. It never left my sight."

That was true enough. It was more likely that someone else had recreated Hester's work. But who?

"If I think of anything I'll let you know," she said, trying to inject a note of cheerfulness into her voice. "After all, it's hardly very likely that Professor Snape will turn up on *my* doorstep asking for help, is it?"

Ron chortled at that, and Harry murmured a quiet "Guess not."

"After all this excitement, I'm hungry," announced Ron, waving his wand to produce a huge pile of buttered teacakes.

Hermione dug up some plates and they all tucked in.

Whilst she was eating some part of her mind was wondering just where he *would* go for help.



Severus Snape was not coping with life on the run at all.

He was hungry and tired and hurt, and hiding in an alleyway, avoiding crowded areas, and anyone

who even hinted at being an Auror.

So far he had had a couple of close brushes with them. He guessed that they had tracked him after he had apparated away from Hogwarts. He had just had enough time to grab some money, perform a couple of Transfigurations, one of which had been on his clothes, and leave the grounds. That had been a week ago, now, and since then he had had little to eat, and had barely dared to sleep.

His head was beginning to spin through lack of sleep and food, and he was finding it difficult to formulate a coherent plan.

His first thought had been to get to London, and to avail himself of the reference sources. He was only too aware that his explanation was barely credible. It was only when he arrived that he realised that all the potential research facilities were being carefully watched by the Ministry. He cursed himself for such an elementary miscalculation. He had been away from the world of duplicity too long.

A briefly caught glimpse of a discarded copy of the Daily Prophet quickly convinced him that there was no refuge to be found in wizarding circles. The headlines screamed – literally, this being a wizard's paper – 'Ministry On Trail Of Unnamed Suspect'.

So he was alone, in the world of Muggles, being hunted by the Ministry. His wizarding money was

useless. His attempts to obtain Muggle money by pawning the gold coins, had worked, but he had achieved less than he had hoped. The dealer had clearly assumed that the coins were stolen, and as Snape was in no position to furnish a credible alternative explanation, he had to tolerate a very poor exchange rate. It had also resulted in a very near miss with the Aurors, who picked up the moment that his galleons had fallen into Muggle hands.

He was also beginning to have the unpleasant suspicion that he was being hunted by something other than the Ministry. At night, as he huddled, trying to look inconspicuous, he thought he heard voices right on the edge of hearing. At first he put it down to lack of food, and sleep, but the voices were familiar...

He shook his head to clear them, biting his tongue when he was poked, none too gently, by a Muggle police officer and told to move on.

One night it hadn't been the Muggle police, but a pair of street dwellers, indignant that he had taken their "patch". They were almost as unpleasant as he was, and decidedly unimpressed by threats from such a scrawny specimen. The incident had ended with him nursing some badly bruised, if not broken ribs, and being even more wary of sleep.

By the end of a week of dodging the Ministry, the Muggle police and fellow street people, together with the strain of tuning out the marginal voices,

he realised that he was running out of options.

Using some of his precious supply of Muggle money he bought himself a bacon roll from a seller near to the river. As he ate it, he tried to see his way clearly. He was never going to be able to prove anything as long as he was constantly hiding. It was more than likely that using magic would just get him caught, and he was singularly ill-equipped to deal with the Muggle world.

He ate in the inevitable January drizzle, and came to the reluctant realisation that there was only one person from whom he stood a chance of getting a hearing. Who might actually believe that he hadn't done it, and be prepared to help, if only in the short term.

Hermione Granger.

And even she was a long shot.

Apart from anything else he didn't have the first idea where she lived, other than it was in London. Which, as he was rapidly beginning to discover, was a large place. And the chances were, he told himself realistically, that her first action would almost certainly be to summon the Aurors. She owed him nothing, certainly not protection.

Maybe Azkaban wouldn't be too bad. It was not as if he was overflowing with cheerful thoughts, after all.

But he had no choice. It was Hermione or wait to be found by the Ministry, or whatever else was out there.

Which meant that he had to take a serious risk.

Finishing his roll, he walked along the river until he found a small shop selling Muggle newspapers. The shopkeeper eyed him suspiciously, as he searched for what he wanted. Finally, he pulled out a book marked 'London A-Z' and began to flick through it.

The paper seller glared.

"Oy, this is a shop not a library. If you want to read it you got to buy it, or bugger off."

Snape rummaged through his dwindling supply of money. He had just enough to cover the cost. He supposed it didn't matter if he ran out. This was definitely his last chance.

The shopkeeper snatched the money away from him, and counted it carefully.

"OK," he said finally. "Now, get out of here. You stink."

Snape tucked the book into his pocket and left. Now he needed to find a quiet spot and wait for darkness.

Eventually he found yet another dank, smelly alley – London seemed to be infested with them, he thought. When he judged it to be as safe as it would ever get he placed the book in front of him, and carefully extracted his wand from his clothing. Then, from a inside pocket he pulled out several twisted strands of brown hair – *her* hair. He had originally mocked himself for the impulse that led him

to keep them, and then for bringing them with him... but now they seemed to be his only hope. Placing them on the book, he tapped it with his wand and muttered "*Manifesto*."

A glow emerged from within the pages of the book. He flicked through it hastily, noting that she appeared to live in an area called Notting Hill. Then he heard voices. These were not subliminal, but clearly audible.

"The reports came from near here. He can't be far."

Abandoning the book, Snape ran for his life.

Hoping that the dark would provide him with at least some sort of cover, he dodged blindly, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his ribs and keep the shouting voices behind him.

He was aware that charms of some sort were being cast, but something, probably dumb luck, was enabling him to avoid them.

Eventually, however, his luck ran out. One of the Aurors got a clear line of sight to him, and he felt a searing pain hit his left shoulder and travel down his side. He stumbled and gritted his teeth. He had fought through pain before and could do it again. He kept going. This time the firebolt hit his leg and he fell to the ground, instinctively curling up and trying to roll away.

Dimly, in front of him, he could make out two more shapes. He numbly realised that they had him now. The two figures in front of him approached swiftly. One was tall and slender, and seemed some-

how familiar. The other one bent over him.

"Don't struggle, Professor. You'll find it much easier if you just relax."

The voice was cultured, and urbane. It sounded familiar, but Snape was too dazed with pain and fatigue to identify it. Somewhere in the back of his mind a soft voice was offering warmth and shelter and relief from the pain. All he had to do was surrender to them.

Snape was trying to remember why he didn't want to do that, when there was a shout.

"He's up again. Get him!"

There was a sizzling flash of light, and Snape tensed against the next assault, but it seemed to be directed at the slender figure nearby.

He heard an oath, swiftly bitten off.

Then both of the figures disappeared.

He tried to crawl further into himself, as the shouts of anger got closer and then stopped.

"I thought you said he'd had his licence suspended?" Someone was quite clearly very angry.

"He has."

"Well I just saw him apparate."

"Maybe he used a Portkey."

The angry voice did not sound convinced. "Well, we'd better get back to the Ministry and try and sort out this whole bloody mess. Just what I need — another bloody night's paper-work. At least we'll pick him up soon enough. The *Ignivivos* will finish him within a day."

And then the miracle happened. The voices went away, leaving Snape huddled and trembling against the wall of building.



Some time later he realised that it must be morning because there was light in the sky. His ribs felt like they had been kicked repeatedly, his left shoulder was agony, as was his right leg. He wondered whether he could even put weight on it.

The events of the previous night were hazy, but he remembered that he had to get to Notting Hill. He had no money, and he no longer had the A-Z. This meant that he would have to walk there.

He would do this.

He had no choice.

Hauling himself to a standing position, willing himself to ignore the pain coursing through him, he set off.

Eventually he lost all sense of passing time. Life narrowed to down to pain, and putting one foot in front of the other. Sheer willpower kept him upright and moving. Occasionally he would stop and ask directions. Usually it took three attempts before someone would point vaguely and scuttle hastily away.

With literally agonising slowness Snape made his way northwestwards through London.

Darkness came again, and eventually there

were no more passers-by to ask. Or at least none that would stop for him. Part of him supposed that he couldn't really blame them. With no idea how far he had travelled, or how far he had still to go, he found himself leaning against some railings by a small enclosed park. Having finally stopped, his legs gave way and he collapsed. He shut his eyes and wondered what it would be like to just stay here until someone or something came to take him. He wondered if he would care. He wondered if he would even *notice*.

He became gradually aware of something nipping at him. No, not nipping, but pecking. He opened his eyes reluctantly. Resting against his chest, in the dark, against all natural bird behaviour, was a grubby little sparrow. It was determinedly pecking at his nose.

He reached up to push it away. It dodged his clumsy arm, and resumed its insistent attack.

A thought was trying to make itself heard in his pain sodden brain.

"Sphinx?" he croaked.

One of his last actions had been to transfigure Sphinx into a sparrow. She had plainly been distressed at his hurried flight, and he had not wanted to leave her there to be disturbed by the Aurors. He had done the only thing that had occurred to him.

The bird fluttered once around his head, and landed again.

Now it had his attention it began a pattern of pecking him, and flying away a short distance, only to return to his shoulder, as if it wanted him to follow it.

Snappe decided that he must finally have lost his mind, and then decided that he didn't care. Following a sparrow was as sensible a course of action as any other. He began to half crawl in the direction the bird was flying.

Dragging himself across the road, he found himself outside a red-brick block of flats, of a type very common in Muggle London. It had glass double doors at the entrance. They were locked. Snape could see a series of buttons with names beside them, Presumably a way to alert the residents that you were outside.

Blinking, he tried to focus on the names. Some were illegible, smeared by seeping water. But one, in neatly lettered writing, read 'H. Granger'.

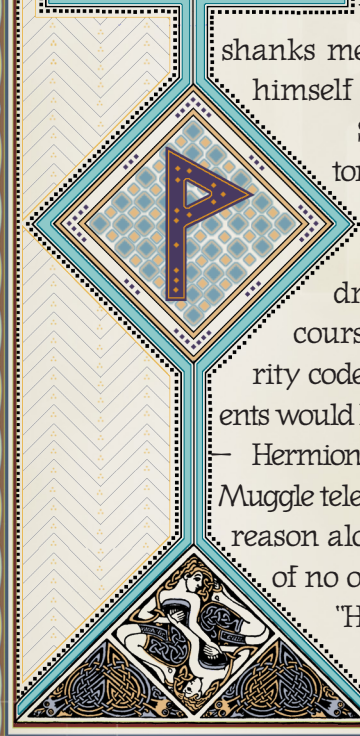
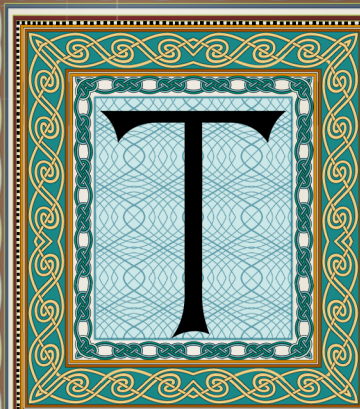
With the last of his strength Snape lifted his uninjured arm and pressed the button.

Then he collapsed, unmoving, against the doors.



PART THREE





THE BUZZING SOUND of the entry phone disturbed Hermione Granger from her desultory attempts to tidy her flat before she went to bed. Putting the book in her hand down on top of several others, she went to the intercom grille. Crookshanks meowed at her, and wound himself round her legs.

She wasn't expecting visitors, and it was unusual for anyone to arrive this late. Harry and Ron often dropped by unannounced, of course, but they knew the security code for the front door. Her parents would have telephoned in advance — Hermione needed to maintain a Muggle telephone connection for that reason alone — and she could think of no one else that it could be.

"Hello," she said into the grille.

There was no response. She sighed in annoyance.

"Is there anyone there," she asked sharply.
Again, silence.

Bloody kids, she thought. It would be their idea of a joke to ring the buzzer and then run away. It often happened several times before they got bored. Of course, she didn't actually have to walk downstairs to the door, but the sound was still irritating.

She waited for them to repeat the stunt, but surprisingly there was no further sound.

Someone must have made a genuine mistake then.

She picked up the book again, wondering where, in the chaos of the room, it could find a home. Crookshanks followed her, still meowing. She bent down to stroke his head.

"Sorry, old chap, but the food that's down there is the only food you're going to get. It's that or diet."

Crookshanks butted at her hand, ignoring the food dishes.

She became aware that there was something fluttering against the doors to the balcony.

An owl? How odd.

She twitched aside the curtain covering the French windows. There was nothing there. But she could still hear the noise. Crookshanks stretched himself up the glass, making an odd mewling noise, and pressing his nose up against the panes. Looking down at her cat, Hermione saw what looked like a small sparrow, flying

repeatedly into the window.

A sparrow? At this time of night?

What was more, she could have sworn that it was the one that had taken up residence in her dead geraniums.

Curious now, she pulled the curtains back a little more, and opened one of the doors. Her balcony, such as it was, overlooked the main entrance, and the street doors were illuminated in a backwash of orange light from the street lamp opposite. She gave the front of the building a cursory glance, and froze.

There was something by the front door. It was a dark shape, formless and unmoving.

The little sparrow was darting about in frantic circles, just out of reach. Crookshanks, oddly, did not appear to be paying any attention to the bird, but was butting urgently against her legs.

She couldn't make out any details, but there was a sense of *familiarity* tickling at the back of her consciousness. Something that told her she needed to know what was down there.

Making up her mind, she briskly went inside and closed and locked the French windows. Grabbing her door key, and slipping her wand into her sleeve, she descended the four short flights of stairs to the main entrance.

Looking cautiously through the doors she could see what appeared to be a person slumped on the ground. Close to, it was as still as it had appeared from

above. She began to feel a growing apprehension.

Slowly opening the door, she slid carefully into the night. The figure didn't stir as she approached, nor as she bent down by the side of it. She could see that it was a man, dressed in shabby Muggle-type clothing – shirt, trousers and a torn sweater – clothes that appeared to have been created by someone who had an idea of what Muggles wore, but had never really paid that much attention to it. He appeared to have been sleeping rough, and smelt none too good either, she thought, wrinkling her nose.

"Hello," she said cautiously.

The man didn't stir. Nervously she reached out a hand to hold his shoulder and shake him.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

A shudder ran through the man's body at the physical contact, and he slowly, painfully, turned his face towards her, so that she could clearly see it in the light from the street lamp.

Great and merciful Circe and Merlin and all the Gods of our fathers and their fathers before them...

Severus Snape.

Sheer shock deprived her of the power of thought for several moments.

He looked... dreadful did not even come close. Near death was more like it. His face was swollen and badly bruised – that much was obvious, even in the flat orange light.

She couldn't begin to think of anything

sensible to do or say.

His tongue flickered out to moisten his lips, and his throat spasmed as if he was trying to swallow.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

His voice was cracked and barely audible.

The sound of his voice caused her brain to start functioning again, but it was not a great improvement as her thoughts then began to whirl out of control.

Get a grip, Hermione, my girl, this is achieving nothing, and certainly not helping him.

Well, they couldn't stay on the doorstep all night.

"Can you stand?" she asked hesitantly. She wasn't very hopeful.

In response he pushed himself up to a sitting position and tried to get up. She noted, distantly, that he was not using his left arm at all, and that he was trying to avoid putting weight onto his right leg. She moved round to his right side. Crouching down beside him she said:

"Lean on me."

Snape appeared to shrink away from her.

"I can manage."

Hermione dredged up some semblance of rational thought.

"I don't think you can. You have to get inside. Let me help you."

Without waiting to discuss the matter further, Hermione threaded her arm under his, and across his back, bracing herself under his

armpits and grasping him firmly. She both felt and heard his hiss of pain.

Well, it couldn't be helped, she thought, with more ruthlessness than she realised she possessed. She had to get him in and upstairs — oh dear heavens, stairs — before she could even think about sorting him out.

She managed to get him to his feet, and to support him into the building. Once inside she lowered him down onto the stairs, where he sat breathing heavily.

It was quite clear that he wasn't going to manage, and she wasn't strong enough to carry him.

She wondered if *mobilicorpus* would work on a conscious body.

Only one way to find out.

"Professor Snape," she said.

He lifted his head at her voice. In the truer light of the entrance hall she could see the cuts and bruises, the dark shadows under his eyes, and the overbright, haunted, look. She steeled herself.

"I can't carry you up the stairs, and you can't walk up, even with my help. I'm going to have to use *mobilicorpus*. Try to keep as still as possible."

He just nodded.

She cast the spell, and began the tricky task of guiding him up the stairs without adding further to his injuries. Now she could see that the tears in his sweater appeared to have scorched edges, and there were similar burn marks on

the right leg of his trousers.

Her nerves were frayed by the time they reached her door. Snape's body moved with hideous slowness, and all the time she was expecting a curious neighbour to emerge from one of the next-door flats.

Not bothering with the key, she cast *Alohomora* in an edgy voice.

Steering Snape into the living room, she released the levitation spell so that he was caught by the sofa, lying half on his left side. She shut and locked the flat door, and cast a locking charm and a couple of wards for good measure. Returning to the living room she cast a full ward on the flat.

Satisfied as she was ever going to be, she gave her full attention to Snape.

He lay on the sofa with his eyes closed, his breathing shallow and ragged. His facial injuries stood out starkly against the unhealthy, grey, tint of his skin.

She just looked at him, running her hand through her hair, and at a loss as to where to start. Clean him up, she assumed, and then find out how badly hurt he was.

And then work out how... and why... he had ended up on her doorstep.

Shaking herself, she went into her study, opened the airing cupboard and pulled out a random selection of blankets. Closing the door,

she returned to the living room and dumped them on the floor by the sofa. Without breaking stride, she headed for the kitchen. She dug out a small pewter cauldron and filled it with water. Into it she tossed several clean cloths.

Back in the living room, she put the cauldron next to the blankets. The next thing was to get his clothes off. The facial injuries were not pretty, but none of them looked immediately life-threatening. She was more concerned about the fact that he wasn't using one arm, and one leg didn't seem able to weight bear.

She removed his shoes and socks, throwing them to one side, wrinkling her nose again in distaste. Then, hesitantly, she bent over him and began to pull up his sweater. He made a small noise of pain as the sweater rubbed against his body, and she stopped. As she straightened her glance fell on her wand.

Her wand.

Hermione felt a wave of shock-fuelled annoyance at herself.

Remind me again, Miss Granger, why exactly it was that you went to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?

She picked up her wand, and poised to cast. Then she paused again. This was no time to be... squeamish. And anyway, he'd seen her at less than her best. That thought fortified her, and she cast the spell.

"Deshabillus."

Snapes's clothes disappeared, leaving him naked on her sofa.

She could now see the vivid red-black bruises on the right side of his chest. One of them was quite clearly the imprint of a boot. She suspected that some of his ribs were broken. Snaking down his right hip and leg were deep red score marks – the unmistakable result of one of the various types of firebolt spell. Similar marks were visible extending over his left shoulder although his arm was trapped under his body. In a couple of places she thought she could see the pale whiteness of bone.

How in the name of hell had he kept moving with injuries like that, she wondered with a slightly disconnected feeling.

He was beginning to tremble. She didn't even know if he was aware of what was going on. Murmuring a warming charm over him, she pulled one of the blankets off the floor and over his lower body.

Then she knelt by him, and placed her left hand lightly over his bruised ribs.

Hermione was no medi-witch, and, although her theoretical knowledge was good, her actual *experience* of casting healing spells was no better than average. What was more, she had no other supplies in the flat either – no wound cleaning potion, no burn healing paste, nothing that

would make this any easier for either of them. She was going to have to start from scratch. And, for the first time, it occurred to her that she not only had a seriously injured man on her sofa — she had a *wanted* one as well.

Well, that could be dealt with later — there were currently more pressing concerns.

She was not very comfortable with the concept of improvisation. She preferred to meticulously check, and double check, her calculations, before she tried anything in practice. At the moment, however, she didn't have that luxury. Calling for outside help was obviously not an option. She was currently his best, if not only, chance.

Holding her wand in her other hand she touched it to his skin. At least two of the ribs were broken. She was no expert in dating bruises, but they didn't look very fresh. She could only hope that the fact that he had made it as far as the flat meant that none of them had punctured his lungs. Softly, she cast a simple *Os Reparo* — a bone setting charm. Then a healing charm on top, and the marks started to fade.

She heard his breathing ease, as the healing took hold, and realised that she had been holding her breath as well. Deliberately, she breathed in and out a couple of times to steady herself.

Now for the firebolt injuries.

"I'm going to have to turn you on to your front," she said, not certain that he could hear

her. Well, you were supposed to tell people what you were doing to them, weren't you? "I need to be able to see the burns."

"I think this may hurt," she added, unnecessarily.

She grasped his uninjured shoulder and pulled him so that he was lying on his front. He made a noise of pain. She turned his head to one side, so that he could breathe, and wedged a cushion under it. She, then, pulled away the blanket covering his legs. Now she could see both places where the firebolt spells had impacted — one in the middle of his left shoulder blade, and one near the top of his right thigh.

She shuddered, involuntarily. *Ignivivos* — living fire — spells were nasty things. From the point of impact, tiny burning charms extended under the skin, working their way like little worms, outwards and downwards, through flesh, muscle, and eventually bone and internal organs. Left untreated, the victim would literally burn slowly to death, unless something essential failed first. Healing the burns alone was useless, as the charms just carried on eating away from inside. Maybe not as bad as *Crucio*, but bad enough.

She wondered who had done this to him. She knew that the Ministry wanted him. Could they have done it? She didn't want to think so.

So — a threefold healing — point of impact, charms and burns. She really didn't want to get

this wrong. Examining his shoulder blade closely, she saw the angry point of yellow light pulsing in the wound. She considered her options. The toxic light was the source of the burning charms. So, it had to be removed. Leeches would be the remedy of choice, except that she didn't have any. Or any Leeching Elixir. That meant adapting a Leeching Charm, and finding something to neutralise the magic that got drawn out. She ran through the list of standard neutralisers in her head. *For burning, use cold or water.* That seemed simple enough. Water, she had.

She dragged the cauldron of water closer to her, and then pulled one of the cloths out by its four corners, scooping up a ball of water with it. Before the water could drain out of the cloth, she murmured a Freezing Charm. The cloth full of water became a solid ball of ice.

"I have to get the main charm out," she said, hoping that something was getting through to him other than sheer pain. "Try to keep still."

Carefully, she placed the ice pack over the open wound. He twitched slightly at the contact, and let out another low sound. Once he had settled, she cast the charm, hoping that her hasty alterations would be effective. He shuddered violently, and suddenly the ice became water under her hand. She barely managed to stop herself from hitting the injury, as the resistance was abruptly removed. The cloth began to turn an

acid shade of green-yellow from the seeping liquid, and she hastily dumped it back into the cauldron. It opened up, and yellow swirled into clear, the whole taking on the shade of bile.

Taking a towel, she gently dried around the wound and checked it. It was raw, and weeping, but the light had gone. Her hands were trembling a little, and she waited for her heart rate to steady itself.

One down, one to go, she thought grimly.

Dumping the poisonous water down the kitchen sink, and replacing it with clean, she braced herself, and performed a similar operation on his leg wound.

After that came the myriad of small enchantments burrowing their way through his nervous system.

Well, you didn't spend time in magical laboratories without learning how to deal with an assortment of blast and burn injuries. Theoretically, a neutralising charm combined with *Finite Incantatem* should deal with the problem. Hoping that theory translated into practice Hermione cast the double spell on Snape's shoulder.

At first there was no appreciable change. She put her free hand on his skin next to the entry wound. Heat was radiating from his body. She counted slowly, willing it to cool. After an aching long time, his flesh seemed to give up its unnatural burning. Carefully, she explored the areas

surrounding the weals, checking that the skin temperature had returned to normal. As far as she could tell, the charms had been countered successfully.

Moving down to his leg, she cast the same combination of spells on the second injury. After the same, nervy, wait the burning subsided.

Next step, cleansing.

Fetching more clean water, and warming it with a charm, she found another cloth, and began, as gently as she could, to clean the wounds. He stirred at this, moaning softly in protest. One arm tried awkwardly to push her away.

"Lie still," she said, trying to sound reassuring. "I know it hurts, but I have to make sure that the wounds are clean before I heal them."

He mumbled something, and tried to push himself up.

Hermione put down the cloth, to take him firmly by the shoulders, and restrain him.

"Professor, don't struggle..." she started.

At that, he seemed to resist even more.

"Please, *Professor*... let me do this..." Hermione was having to exert a considerable degree of force to hold him down, despite his badly weakened condition.

She would never have imagined that he would be so strong. And calling him Professor seemed to increase the agitation.

She supposed there was a sort of irony in

the fact that her ex-potions master was lying naked on her sofa, and she was still having to make an effort not to call him Sir.

She tried again.

"Severus..." his given name felt awkward in her mouth, "please trust me. I can't help you if you don't keep still."

Something in that sentence reached him, for he quietened.

She continued with her careful cleaning of his wounds, her work punctuated with his occasional grunts of pain. But he didn't try to fight against her any more. As she finished with his shoulder, and moved on to his leg, she began to specifically notice something that she had registered the fact of, but not the implications: he was naked.

He was more muscular than she would have expected, although he'd carried her easily enough when they had been in... that place. At school, the predominant impression had been of billowing, black, robes. Without the robes he was... rangy, without being scrawny. Nice back, narrow hips, the legs of a runner... the major muscle groups defined without being prominent...

And, for the first time, she was aware of the outline of the Dark Mark, stark and ugly on the inside of his left forearm.

Hermione, my girl, what do you think you're doing? You're supposed to be healing him, not

checking him out.

The thought seemed to violate his privacy in a way that the sight of his physical nakedness hadn't. Feeling uncomfortable, she finished getting the last of the dirt out of the ugly gouges in his leg.

Finally satisfied, she prepared to heal the actual wounds. This was the easiest part of the healing, and the one in which she had most practical experience. Still, she hesitated. What if she hadn't successfully countered the tiny burning charms? What if there was some fragment of the original spell still active? Healing him would seal it in.

Hermione felt a surge of self-doubt as intense as those she had experienced in the shadow reality. She had had no chance to check, or research, this cure. She had damned nearly made it up as she went along. If she had messed it up, it wouldn't be a question of bad grades — the man on her sofa would die.

He hand trembled as she held the wand over him. Get a grip, she told herself shakily. *He can't lie on your sofa like that, whilst you pull yourself together.* She still couldn't move.

A soft meow stole into her thoughts. Crookshanks stretched up her leg to pat the top of it, claws in. She looked at him, and he meowed again, more urgently.

"OK," she whispered, her mouth dry. "Here goes."

She touched the tip of her wand to one of

the deep tears in the flesh of his back, and muttered the words of the healing charm. The flesh began to renew itself, then the wound closed, turned from red to pink, and then from pink to a pale, sallowish colour. She repeated the action until all the wounds were healed, just leaving pinker traces, here and there, where the deepest injuries had been.

Snape's breathing was definitely easier now, and some of the rigid tension had begun to leave his body. A shiver ran through him. Hermione murmured a warming charm over him again, and then covered him fully with the blankets she had found earlier. On an impulse she went into her bedroom, and pulled one of the pillows off her bed. Returning to him, she lifted his head, and removed the cushion to replace it with the pillow.

She had forgotten about the facial injuries, in her concern for the *Ignivivos* spells.

Fetching the cloth again, she began to clean his face. The rubbing seemed to rouse him a little, but he made no sound of protest. Deftly, she healed the injuries. Snape's face returned to normal — although very pale, and with several days growth of dark stubble on his chin. Gently, she laid his head down, and then stood up.

Mechanically, she put the cloths back in the cauldron of water and took the whole lot out to the kitchen.

Having done that, she found herself back

by the sofa, looking at Snape. He seemed to be sleeping now, his breathing deep, and regular. She glanced at the clock. Gone midnight. Given what she knew about the workings of the *Ignivivos* spells, if she *had* made a mistake he wouldn't survive the night.

Well aware that there was nothing more she could do, she made herself get ready for bed, trying to find normality in the usual routine. Once in bed, she tossed and turned, not even comforted by the weight of Crookshanks, who was occupying the dead centre of the double bed with an unerring, feline, instinct for being in the most inconvenient place possible.

After about an hour, she gave up. It was near impossible to sleep when you didn't know whether or not the person in the next room was living or dead. Getting out of bed, she pulled the quilt round herself, ignoring the indignant squawk from her cat, who was ignominiously deposited on the floor. Trailing the bedding, she went into the living room. The room was dark, and she touched a small table lamp as she passed it. It lit the room with a soft light – enough to see by, but not enough to disturb him if he were asleep.

Approaching the sofa, she could see that Snape was in the same position that she had left him. As she got closer, the rise and fall of his chest reassured her that he was still alive. She

seated herself in the chair opposite, and watched him for a long time, willing him to keep breathing, praying that she had got the cure right.

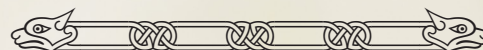
However, she could no more relax in the chair than she had been able to in bed. Lack of sleep, combined with deep shock and worry, lulled her into a half doze, from which she woke with a start, head muzzy, and full of the random, irrational, fears that inhabit the small hours of the morning.

What if he died whilst she was asleep? Would he know that he had been here? Would he know that she had killed him? Would the lonely man ever find peace?

She pulled herself out of the chair and across the room, to curl up on the floor next to the sofa, wrapped in the quilt. She rested her head on the edge of the seat cushions, close enough to his head to be directly aware of him.

This way, if anything happens, I'll know immediately.

Listening to his breathing, Hermione eventually fell asleep.



She woke some time later, with a feeling of heaviness across her shoulders. Her heart gave a lurch, as she struggled to identify what it was. Then she realised that he must have moved in the night, and his arm had fallen off the sofa, and was resting on her. She was relieved – if

he had moved, then he surely must be all right.

She was wondering whether or not she should move it back, when she became aware of a subtle change in his breathing. Carefully, so as not to disturb him, she moved so she could see his face.

His eyes were open, and looking directly at her.

She didn't dare say a word.

"Hermione."

Did he say her name, or was it just an exhalation?

"Are... are you awake?" It was a stupid question, but it was the best she could come up with.

"I think so."

"How are... I mean... are you..." She trailed off. There was no question that she could think of that wasn't even more inane than the previous one.

His next words shook her profoundly.

"Am I dead?"

"No. No, you're not."

"Pity."

Hermione felt an odd, twisting, pain in her chest at that. Not knowing how to respond, it was she who took refuge in irony.

"Well, if I'd realised that was how you felt, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble of trying to heal you."

She felt him flinch at that, and she barely heard him breathe:

"I'm sorry."

Before she could work out a reply, he removed his arm from her shoulders, and pushed himself weakly up on his other elbow, so he could see her

more clearly. There was an expression in his eyes that she couldn't quite read. Something not unlike what she'd seen on New Year's Eve – pain, smothered fear, an unexpected vulnerability. And an odd brightness, that could almost be unshed tears.

She moved a hand towards him, hesitantly, and was startled when he caught it in his own. Holding it tightly, he raised it, and pressed the back of it to his mouth.

"Thank you, Hermione," he whispered.

She felt the roughness of his lips, and his unshaven cheek against her skin, and her breath caught in her throat. She lifted her other hand to touch his face, pushing his dirty, untidy, hair back.

"You should try to sleep some more," she said gently.

She felt his lips twitch against her hand, and she softly drew away as he lay his head back down on the pillow.

She watched as his eyes closed, and his breathing deepened once more. She wanted to touch him again, but didn't dare to, in case she disturbed him. Right now, he needed sleep.

As did she. Calmer, and more confident that her cure had worked, she dragged the quilt back to her bedroom, and collapsed on the bed. Her last conscious realisation, before drifting into a dreamless sleep, was that it had not once occurred to her to turn him in.



Draco Malfoy threw himself down into the chair, his usual, poised, demeanour distinctly disrupted. Across the room, the slender figure of what he, still, could only think of as Professor Snape, lounged against a table, and watched him with hooded, sleepy, eyes.

"I'm hungry," the man murmured, in his silky voice, so familiar, and yet not.

Draco shivered, and refused to meet the other man's gaze. It set too many conflicting feelings jangling within him, and whilst no one enjoyed their... games... more than he did, there were more important things to consider.

Like how in hell to get some more of the damned potion.

His father was getting impatient, and he couldn't stall forever.

The events of the previous night had been a bloody fiasco. He slammed his hand onto the arm of his chair in frustration. Rising, he began to pace distractedly.

He had been so near to having the real Snape — the one who could brew the potion. And then the Ministry Aurors had intervened, heavy handed as usual, and they had had to disapparate in a hurry.

Now his... companion... was getting restless for fresh food. Draco could feel the craving.

deep in the pit of his stomach, a tight knot of desire. He needed it — the pain, the fear, the frantic clinging to the last shreds of life — that point when human existence was reduced to the single primeval fight for survival.

To see that flame clearly — and to snuff it out.

That was what he wanted.

Half rations, drawn from his own body, would not satisfy his companion for much longer. And hunting was difficult now that Snape had been identified.

He didn't think that the Ministry actually *had* Snape. No, his father would have told him if the bloody man was in Azkaban. He was probably hiding in some disgusting gutter, somewhere in London. It was not as if he had friends to turn to, after all.

They *could* search for him, and no doubt they would find him eventually, but that would take time and effort. He had nothing personal belonging to the real man to cast a locating spell. Even if he could get into Hogwarts without being spotted by Dumbledore, the Ministry would, unquestionably, have sealed off the dungeons. No, they would have to find him the hard way. And he had neither the time, nor the inclination, to do that.

Not when there was an alternative.

Granger.

He would be willing to bet that, if she had

had her hands on the potion, she would have got the better part of the way to working out what it was made of. And with some extra... incentive... she would be able to complete the analysis.

Between them, he and his partner should be able to provide that incentive.

He licked his lips at the thought of the snotty little Mudblood, on her knees in front of him, begging him to... stop or continue... he didn't much care which, as long as she was begging. The thought of her at his mercy excited him.

He would extract delicious revenge for every single time that she had shown him up in class. Every time that she, or her idiot friends, had humiliated him, defeated him, or circumvented him. He would make her regret every contemptuous glance she had ever sent his way.

His breathing quickened, and he felt strong hands on his shoulders, massaging, rubbing.

"I'm hungry," a languid voice whispered in his ear, sending shocks down his spine.

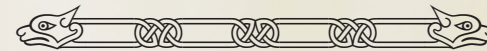
He turned into the caress, savouring the savage coldness of it. He tilted his head upward, and reached to bury his hand in the lank hair.

"Feed," he murmured.

Strong hands grasped his wrists. Draco was expecting to be pushed to his knees, but instead was spun around, and shoved forwards. The edge of the table caught him in the pit of his stomach, and he doubled over. His

face slammed into the table top, the wood grain rough against his cheek, splinters digging in.

There were hands pulling at his robes, grasping him between the legs, squeezing brutally. Draco began to sob, in a mixture of pain and anticipation. He felt coldness enter him, then brief pleasure, swiftly spiralling into agony, and then darkness.



Severus Snape woke to a feeling of odd disorientation. His last clear recollection was of a firebolt hitting him in the back, followed by searing pain.

Now he was lying, face down, on something soft. He was warm, and there was a curious sensation in his body. After a moment, he realised that the sensation was, in fact, the absence of pain. Fragments of memory returned. Flight from Hogwarts, living rough, being kicked and a smooth, urbane, voice, that he couldn't place, but which he felt was significant, somehow. And a tall, forbidding, familiar, figure. One which raised a disturbing suspicion in his mind.

Then the Aurors had come. And they had cast firebolts.

Notwithstanding all of the above, he appeared to be still alive.

He opened his eyes, and pushed himself up a little. He was appalled at how weak he felt,

but there appeared to be no other discomfort, save for a slight ache in his shoulder and leg. His surroundings looked vaguely familiar in the shadowed daylight, and it took a moment for him to place them.

Hermione Granger's flat.

How in the name of hell had he ended up here?

It was at that point that he registered that he was naked.

And how in the name of hell had he ended up like that?

Piece by piece his mind supplied the missing images. Dragging himself through endless streets. Arriving at her door.

And then random images only. Her voice, gentle, soothing... speaking his name, asking him to trust her. The pain gradually fading. And a half-remembered, half-imagined conversation in the darkness — a desperate need to prove to himself that she was real, the feel of her skin, her hand touching his face and hair...

She had healed him.

And thus far, she did not appear to have called the Ministry.

Too exhausted to deal with the implications of those facts, he pushed them to the back of his mind to examine later.

He swallowed painfully. His mouth was dry, and tasted foul. He needed to get a glass of water. He struggled to a sitting position, and

pulled the blankets round himself, wondering if he had the strength to stand.

There was a thud, and an indignant meow, and Hermione's big ginger cat hit the floor, disturbed by his movement. He heard a rustle from another room and footsteps.

"Ah, I see you're awake again."

He couldn't, for the life of him, think of a thing to say.

She walked round the sofa, and crouched down in front of him, examining him critically. She was wearing loose Muggle clothing, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail that owed more to practicality than style.

"Well, you look better than you did last night, at any rate."

She reached for the blanket, and he instinctively moved back. She paused.

"I need to see how those firebolt injuries are. I want to check that they're still clean."

Slowly, he settled himself back down onto the sofa, and lay tensely, as she pulled the blanket to his waist, exposing his back. She perched on the edge of the cushions as she laid her hand gently over the place where the injury had been. He felt her fingers explore the skin, probing the muscles with the tips.

Then her hand was gone, and he realised that he had been holding his breath.

"That seems to be all right," she said with... was

that a hint of relief he detected in her voice?

She flicked the blanket back over him, and reached for the lower portion. He felt himself tense again, and, with an effort, stopped himself flinching away. She seemed to sense it, because she paused, her hand resting on the blanket.

"I need to see the other one as well," she pointed out softly.

He nodded into the pillow. He knew that she was right — *Ignivivos* injuries were too dangerous not to be properly healed, but it was taking all his self-control not to push her back. He was acutely aware how vulnerable he was. It was something that he normally dealt with by retreating.

Something that was not currently an option.

She pulled the blanket to one side. He was grateful for the fact that she only revealed as much of his body as she needed to see the injuries. He didn't think that he could cope with being naked in front of her at the moment.

Again she placed her hand on the point of impact, this time near the top of his right thigh. The same careful exploration, and gentle, but firm probing of the muscles.

Then the blanket was replaced.

"OK," she said. He thought he heard a slight tremor in her voice, and then decided that he must have imagined it, as she continued briskly, "Can you breathe deeply for me?"

He did so.

"Does that hurt?"

He shook his head into the pillow. He wondered if his voice still worked.

"Good. Do you hurt anywhere else?"

He thought about this, and tried to moisten his throat.

"No," he managed.

He remembered his earlier desire for water.

Could I possibly trouble you for a glass of water? he tried to say.

"... water..." was what came out.

Without a word she stood and walked out of his line of sight.

For a surreal moment he wondered if he had offended her in some way, then she came back with a tumbler, and a jug filled with water. Pouring it, she offered him the glass. He hauled himself back to a sitting position, and took it from her.

Carefully he took a sip. He could feel the muscles in his arm cramp with the effort of gripping. He clenched his teeth. He was *not* going to add to this by spilling the water, and having to be fed like a baby. He finished the glass, and handed it back to her, trying to control the trembling of his hand.

If she noticed, she said nothing, just pulled up a small table so that it was next to the sofa, and put the glass and jug on it.

"When did you last eat?" she asked practically.

He shrugged.

"I don't recall exactly."

"Well, I think that you need something now."

He wanted to protest — more at the fact that she was... fussing... over him, than the fact that he wasn't hungry. Something in her voice, however, suggested that she would not be deflected. The same voice that had required an explanation of Hester's potion. The same voice that had refused to leave on New Year's Eve...

Meanwhile, she had gone to the dining table, and cast a spell. She returned to him with a tray, which now had a bowl of soup and some bread on it. He just looked at it, almost in disbelief.

"It's perfectly safe. Believe me, you aren't ready to try my version of Muggle cooking yet."

She had misinterpreted his reaction. But he let it go.

Making room on the table, she put the tray down.

"Help yourself." She paused, looking uncertain now that his immediate needs were dealt with. "I'll be in the other room, sorting some things out. Um... call if you need anything."

She disappeared.

It had been a slow job, but the food and water had made Snape feel considerably better. Finishing, he had lain down again and drifted into a surprisingly peaceful sleep. When he woke again it was dark, and something out of his vision was

providing a muted, restful, light.



As his eyes focussed, he saw that the tray had been cleared away, and that she was sitting opposite him, curled up in the armchair, with Crookshanks on her lap, just watching. At this distance, he couldn't read the expression on her face.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked quietly.

He remembered once asking her a similar question.

"Better," he said neutrally.

She nodded.

They were both silent. He had a fair idea of what might be going through her mind. He shut his eyes.

"I expect you would like an explanation," he said eventually.

"Well, I *do* have a few unanswered questions," she replied a little dryly.

Well, what was a bit more information, after what she already knew about him?

"How much do you know already?" He suspected that Potter had told her something about what was going on.

"I know about the murders. I know that the victims showed the same pattern of brain damage as Seamus. I know that someone identified you as being there. I know that you're on

the run from the Ministry. I know that they've suspended your Licence to Apparate and that the IUMO have a trace out on you." She virtually ticked the points off her fingers. "I don't know how, or why, you ended up on my doorstep."

He nodded.

"The rest is fairly straightforward. I was living rough. It was clear that I wasn't going to find out anything working on my own." He paused. "I located your flat using *Manifesto*. The Aurors were summoned, but I managed to evade them..." He didn't feel quite ready to tell her about the other two participants in the scene. "I was injured, as you saw, and I managed to get here."

That was a very edited version, he thought. Her forehead creased. He had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew he was leaving things out.

"That's how," she said eventually. "You haven't told me why."

He hesitated. Could he phrase it to himself, let alone to her?

"Because," he said quietly, "you are the only other person who knows about the potion, and who might understand what has happened."

And because I thought that you might just hear me out before handing me over to the Ministry.

She nodded. She was obviously framing a question.

Here it comes, he thought... *the question.*

He was surprised by what she actually asked.

"So... has someone else managed to recreate the potion?"

He was silent. It was a fair enough question, given what she knew about the potion, and its effects. However, he didn't think that he would share his suspicions about the nature of the killings with her just yet.

One step at a time, Severus.

Again, she misread his silence.

"Well, I know that whatever is killing these people is causing the same sort of damage that happened to Seamus," she started defensively. "We don't have any more of the potion, but isn't it a reasonable assumption that someone else does?"

He nodded, and found his voice.

"Yes, it's a reasonable assumption."

"So, we have to find what's left of the potion and destroy it."

Gods, she made it sound so simple.

"So who would be likely to have the ability, and the resources to do that...?" She was thinking out loud now. "We have to check the Ministry records..."

We?

He cut across her.

"I have to."

She blinked, and opened her mouth to speak. He forestalled her.

"I am a wanted man, Miss Granger. You have placed yourself at significant risk, simply by sheltering me. I am the creator of the potion,

and, as such, responsible for its consequences. I will deal with it."

Trust me, if I'm dealing with what I think I am, you don't want to be anywhere near me.

Why would she anyway, a treacherous voice whispered.

He glanced at her. He was surprised by the set look on her face. He continued:

"If you wish to do anything further, all I would ask is that you find out some information for me. You will be able to tell the Ministry that I coerced you into assisting me by some threat of physical violence. I leave the exact details to you."

She was nodding. He stopped.

"Have you finished?"

He blinked at her acid tone. It was worthy of him, he thought irrelevantly.

"You show up on my doorstep, in the middle of night, half dead. I damned nearly resurrect you, and then you calmly inform me that you intend to go and track down this killer single-handedly, out of some idea that you're responsible for his actions, which, by the way, I don't accept for a moment. Has it even occurred to you that the Ministry is tracking you, and you can't apparate, or use magic, without being detected?" She ran her hand over her hair in exasperation. "And you accuse *me* of being *Gryffindor*."

He had obviously made her very angry

again. He seemed to have a knack for it. She was impossible to fathom.

"I will manage."

Her tone was icily matter of fact.

"You'll get caught and sent to Azkaban. That's what'll happen."

Why would she care about that?

She was speaking again.

"Somebody obviously has this potion and is prepared to use it. You need me to find them. I can use magic, apparate, and what's more I have full access to the Ministry library and labs."

She was glaring at him, defying him to contradict her.

"You *need* me," she repeated. "You must have known that when you decided to find me. Can't you just accept proper help for once?"

He was speechless.

She was right. And he hated it. Hated the fact that he had had to come crawling to her door. Hated the surrender of control to her. Hated the fact that she had seen him so hurt and vulnerable.

Hated the wait he faced until her inevitable betrayal of him.

There was a tangible silence, and he tried to find the words to respond. Suddenly she broke eye contact, and got up hastily, turning away from him.

"Miss Granger..." he began.

She whirled to face him.

"Considering the fact that you nearly died on me

last night," her voice was frayed, "and you are now lying naked on my sofa, do you think you could *at least* bloody well call me Hermione?"

She strode away from him. He waited for the slam of one or other of the doors, but it didn't come. He pulled himself up, and turned, so that he could see over the back of the sofa.

She had stopped, leaning on a doorframe. He could see the rigidity of her body from where he was. He didn't know whether talking to her would make things worse or better.

"Hermione..." he said carefully.

She straightened, and turned, and slowly came back towards him. He watched her carefully, utterly unable to predict her reaction.

"I... I'm sorry," she said slowly, with forced quietness. "I... shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

Once again, an unexpected apology.

She rubbed her forehead wearily.

"Last night..." she shook her head. "Last night... when I saw the *Ignivivos* spells... well, I'm not a healer... never have been... I had no idea what to do, except I had to do something, so I guessed." She gave a tight little smile. "*Guessing* isn't something I normally do. And I could have wished for other circumstances in which to start." One hand absently reached up to rub the muscles in the opposite shoulder. "I didn't know whether I'd cured you, or killed you." She shrugged, a little diffidently. "I've had better nights."

Again, she had him off balance. He struggled to respond.

"I would say that you appear to have cured me."

A very ordinary phrase to acknowledge an extraordinary act.

She had shown him a very little of herself on New Year Eve, but he had been too wrapped in his own past to really consider it. Now, it struck him that healing him had taken enormous courage on her part, for a number of reasons. He felt an odd ache return to his chest, one that had nothing to do with his healed injuries.

And there was something else. Something that had never once been mentioned by her.

She was looking at the carpet, arms hugged round herself now — an incongruously *young* gesture for such a capable woman.

"Hermione," he tried again.

She raised her head, but seemed unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Thank you," he said simply.

She looked a little puzzled.

"For helping you?" she asked slowly.

For more than that...

"For not asking me whether or not I killed those people."

She came over to him, and sat on the edge of the sofa seat.

"I can honestly say," she said softly, "that it never crossed my mind that you had."

He had to look away at that.

She placed her hand gently on his shoulder.

"There was no *reason* for you to have. And I don't think you're the sort of person who commits acts of random brutality." She paused, and he could almost hear the slight smile in her voice. "But I expect that's just me being very *Gryffindor*."

The combination of warmth, and safety, and healing threatened to overwhelm him. He tensed against the wash of emotion, the almost uncontrollable longing to turn, and desperately cling on to any source of comfort.

She was lightly rubbing the top of his shoulder now, not seductively, Gods no, but almost as if she was responding to his unspoken thought. He tried to block out the sensation. His throat tightened. He would *not* break down in front of her. He couldn't bear the thought of her seeing him sobbing like a child. He had a nasty feeling that if he started he would never stop.

He lay there rigid, willing her to leave and praying that she wouldn't.

Eventually the movement stopped, although she didn't remove her hand.

"I think you probably need to sleep some more," she said, in a practical tone.

He was expecting her to leave, when he felt her body pressing warmly against his back. Both of her arms snaked round him, and he was clasped in a surprisingly strong hug.

Unable to stop himself, he pushed back against her, wanting to draw... something... from her.

Then she released him.

"Sleep well," she said quietly. "Help yourself to anything you need."

She had gone before he could answer.

He lay on his back for a long time, watching the ceiling. He wondered, bitterly, why the gods had chosen this particular moment to show him something that he could not even allow himself to want, let alone ever have.



Hermione sat, perched on a lab stool, watching the liquid in front of her slowly filter into the opaque bottle. This should be the final stage in the manufacture of the current batch of prototype healing potions. The Ministry were constantly seeking better, and more reliable, ways of healing people.

It's a pity I didn't have time to do this the other night, she thought wryly.

She wouldn't normally do something as basic as checking the filtration process, but her mind was still trying to come to terms with recent events. A procedure which was as close to staring into space as it was possible to get, whilst still appearing to be working, was just what she needed to give herself some time to think.

Far from being upset that his superior had taken over his job, Cyrus, in fact, was busying himself very deliberately on the other side of the lab, further minimising any chance that she might enlist his help. She suspected that he had a new girlfriend, and was trying to avoid anything that remotely smacked of extra work. For the first time in her life she was grateful for, rather than irritated by, the normal student tendency to exist in the lowest possible energy state.

There was also the question of Professor... him. He had rather tartly suggested that, given the circumstances, she should call him Severus. She was not finding that easy. Added to which he had been sleeping on her sofa – not even Crookshanks could find anywhere to sleep in the so-called second bedroom – for a little over a week now, and she was finding him a most... disconcerting... house guest.

He had withdrawn back into himself since that first day. However, she had conjured some more, clean, Muggle clothes for him, and handed him a spare toothbrush, telling him to help himself to anything in the bathroom.

She smiled to herself. She had actually gone to work, but a wicked part of her would have loved to have been a fly on the wall, watching Severus Snape making sense of an adult, single, woman's bathroom...

To her surprise, he cleaned up reasonably well.

Still pale and unprepossessing, but better than she'd have expected. Especially his hair. It seemed to get gradually less lank as the week went on. In fact, he was really quite fastidious about his personal habits, which made her wonder what exactly he had used on his hair at Hogwarts.

Next had been the sparrow. Rather diffidently, he had explained about Sphinx. Some bacon scraps, and a reverse transfiguration later, and the grubby little bird had become a slightly overweight, bald, wrinkled creature, who was *extremely* pleased to see her human again, much to his chagrin.

Then came the flat itself. Hermione had never really bothered about her home, waving a wand to clean it every now and then, but that was about it. On about the third day, she had returned home to find her living room tidy. He had shrugged imperturbably, and pointed out acidly that he needed space to read, not to mention room to make notes.

Not only that, but he was the first person ever to make use of her kitchen. She had a few Muggle things in there – her mother had been unable to comprehend that Hermione didn't need *anything* at all in order to make food – so she had a kettle, and a cooker and a refrigerator, all of which were pristinely clean, because they were totally unused. When she was hungry she would just find some sort of snack, and eat while

she worked. Snape, being unable to use magic to prepare food, had to do it the long way round, using things that she conjured for him.

One evening, she found that he had made her a proper meal, telling her, pointedly, that there was no point in allowing perfectly good food to rot, simply because she was too lazy to do anything about it.

She knew that part of it was obligation – *I pay my debts, Miss Granger* – but she was also becoming increasingly convinced that he needed to cover any act of thoughtfulness with enough sarcasm to preserve his personal *cordon sanitaire*.

Do good by stealth, she thought idly.

To her astonishment, she found that she was actually enjoying his company. He was still, sometimes, rather sour, but otherwise was a civilised and undemanding companion, who spoke little, and was content to let her occupy herself in the evenings, without expecting any particular attention. He listened to what she said, and their few conversations were interesting and constructive. Unlike Peter, she thought, who had seemed to regard it as a direct personal insult, if she didn't want to spend every waking moment of her free time *being and doing* with him...

If it hadn't been for the constant mild apprehension that Harry and Ron would unexpect-

edly drop by, or – though she would, at least, get some warning of it – her mother, she would almost have been content with the situation.

The last of the filtrate dripped into the bottle, and she stoppered it tightly. Meticulously she began to clean off her equipment. Domestic disorganisation did not extend to the lab. It wasn't that Hermione couldn't be tidy – she just didn't see the point of it when it was not necessary.

She sighed as she rinsed out the various pieces. Despite the relative harmony of the living arrangements, the truth was they were little further forward in their actual researches. As far as the enchantment on the talisman was concerned, she had some idea as to the sort of charms that might achieve the desired result, when used together, but the actual combination would need to be found by trial and error. Unless they were supremely lucky, that would take time. Time which, she suspected, they didn't have.

Confined to her flat, Snape had scoured the few, available, references and drawn a blank. There was the occasional mention of Hester Allworthy, herself, but nothing on her works. It was becoming obvious that they would need to look for source material.

Automatically, she began replacing things in their proper places. She barely acknowledged Cyrus, as he slid out of the lab, muttering something about the stock room. Where to

start looking? She picked up the bottle containing the healing potion and began to twirl it restlessly. Snape had mentioned a house... an original cellar... but where would that be?

Would he know? Doubtless not. Wizards apparated from place to place. They were not noted for their grasp of relative geography.

Hester Allworthy had been captured by Matthew Hopkins... Hopkins... And then it hit her. Matthew Hopkins had been mentioned in Muggle Studies. He was classified as a Muggle crank, and, therefore, disregarded. His true identity had been kept secret. Which meant that they were looking in the wrong place — they needed to look in *Muggle* reference works.

Leaving the potion bottle on the bench, and giving the lab a cursory check, she locked up. She strode down the corridor, and fidgeted as she waited, impatiently, for the lift. At the top she retrieved her coat from Mrs Gumbleside, who beamed approvingly at the sight of Miss Granger taking a half day.

Emerging into the entrance of the British Library, and closing the nondescript door behind her, she turned right, and headed into the library proper. A short while later, she was flicking through a small volume entitled 'A Short History of Witchcraft in Suffolk and Essex'. It was written by a Muggle, and mostly wildly inaccurate, but it did contain a chapter

entitled 'Matthew Hopkins — The Witchfinder General'. She skimmed through. It was fairly sketchy. The official story was that Hopkins had been a gentleman, living in Manningtree, in Essex, who had developed an obsession with witchcraft. He had devised some fairly lurid ways of proving that several, almost certainly harmless, old women were witches, and then had had them burnt. The author of the book seemed to think that Hopkins had been three quarters deranged.

But there was a reference to Hester. Hopkins' last victim, a single woman, living in a cottage in the village of Downham St Cross, a few miles over the Suffolk border. Arrested, charged, convicted, and burnt in 1645.

Snape had said that the cottage was still there.

She closed the book slowly. Returning it to the desk, she made a brief enquiry about the name of Allworthy.

The woman behind the desk shook her head.

"Not really something we can help with. Hmm... 1645... you'd want local parish records if you want to go that far back. Or the Land Registry might be tell you something about who owned the land. Chances are it was some kind of tied cottage — you know — owned by a nobleman, and occupied by farm workers or something."

Hermione nodded.

"Hmm... the Land Registry... thank you."

The woman smiled.

"No problem. Nice to actually get some use out my history degree for a change."

Musing, Hermione walked away. Making a sudden decision, she slipped into the Ladies toilets. Checking there was no one else there, she apparated.

A moment later she arrived in what, to all intents and purposes, was an empty cupboard. The Ministry of Magic and the British Muggle Government had reached a number of secret accords over the years. One of them was a high level agreement as to the shared use of knowledge. Just as the Ministry had access to undergrounds levels of the British Library, so did it have special access to a number of other repositories of information — the Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, the Land Registry, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford, were just some of them.

Straightening her clothes, Hermione left the cupboard, and stepped into the Restricted Section of the Land Registry.

Amongst the land records for the parish of Downham St Cross, she found a very old, delicate, parchment. Seating herself at one of the heavy oak tables, she gingerly unrolled it. It was written in the legal Latin of the day, in a tiny cramped hand, the letters of which had faded almost to invisibility. Pulling out her wand,

she tapped the fragile document, murmuring a translation charm. Before her eyes the letters rearranged themselves into familiar words.

And the shock caused her to very nearly stop breathing.

And in recompense for his most gracious and valuable service unto our person, whereof we stand much indebted, we do grant unto our beloved servant, Jean Etienne Sulpice Montnégre de Malfoi, all that manor, land and demesnes situate at and known as Downham Manor in county of Suffolk, and further comprising the lands, rents and profits of those several parishes known as St Faith, St Cross, St Margaret...

There was more, about rights and duties, but Hermione was transfixed on that passage.

Jean Etienne Sulpice Montnégre de Malfoi.
Malfoy.

Hester's cottage had been owned by the Malfoy family.

Who else but the Malfoys would have the resources to recreate Hester's potion? Who else would want to?

Carefully rolling the parchment up again, she replaced it, trying to figure out the implications. Certainly, she needed to get back to her flat to tell Prof... Severus... even her mind stumbled on his name.

She hid herself again in the apparition point in the cupboard. She was about to return directly to her flat, when she paused. She had spent all day in the lab, and wanted to sort some of this out in her own mind first. She decided to apparate to a small alleyway about fifteen minutes walk from her flat. The exercise and fresh air would help to clear her head.

Appearing in the alley, she walked out into Muggle London, her mind preoccupied.

She did not notice the two silent figures who appeared in the alley just behind her, both tall, one dark as night, the other silver blonde. The dark one sniffed the air, and both set off in noiseless pursuit.



Draco Malfoy couldn't believe his luck.

The stupid little Mudblood couldn't have made it easier for him if she'd walked up to the cottage and knocked on the door.

But no, here she was, strolling blithely through the streets, as if nothing could happen to her.

She was about to discover her mistake.

He could feel the rising heat of pursuit, the sharp anticipation of her, trapped and terrified, unable to flee, fighting for her life, and the climax when her struggles ceased, and her essence became one with his.

He wondered what guilty thoughts she hid – Potter? Weasley? He shuddered at the thought. Or, even, the bratty sister... Jinty was it?

Ahead of him, his companion picked up the pace, responding to Draco's thoughts. Or maybe he was reacting to the tall man... it was getting increasingly difficult for Draco to distinguish what impulses were his, and which ones were driven by the Snape avatar.

He wasn't sure that he wanted to examine that too closely. He was coursing with a glorious rush of power that he had never before experienced. A power that promised him that he would ultimately defeat his father, and be in control.

Then Lucius would feel what he was capable of... oh yes...

Lost in his plans, and breathing heavily, not only from the exertion, he almost cannoned into the brooding figure, who had come to a standstill on the pavement.

"What?" hissed Draco, angry at the distraction.

The figure looked around and sniffed again, almost like a dog scenting its quarry.

"Near. She is near."

Draco looked around the other man to see her, not thirty yards ahead, on the opposite side of the street, examining some kind of stall selling the sort of cheap, gaudy, trinkets that Muggles liked to drape over themselves.

He hissed in frustration. He could see his

grand design, taste the rich, dark, promise of domination. He could almost touch it. All it needed was her, and she had stopped to go shopping. How could she do this to him? He would exact payment for this.

She was moving on... and stopping again, bending her dark head to look at something else for sale. Draco almost moaned aloud. He wanted to drag her off the street, take her there and then.

"Come."

His companion was plucking at his sleeve.

Tearing his eyes away from the sight of the Mudblood, pawing at some more, useless, Muggle garbage, he followed the other man as he moved out of sight. Making their way up the street, hidden from sight by the traders, and their paraphernalia, they cautiously overtook her. The Muggle stallholders paid them little attention. Then, when her attention was fully elsewhere, they crossed, and slid into a dark alleyway, where he cast a muttered *Silencio* and they waited.

When she finally did pass their hiding place, he was about ready to explode with the tension.

He pressed himself deeper into the shadows, concealing himself until the last minute. His eyes closed, and he leaned his head against the damp brickwork, as the sensations from the... other Snape filled his mind.

There she was, walking past, confidently — then a touch on her shoulder. The moment of startle-

ment, the first pulse of adrenaline through her body. Draco licked his lips. Her head turning.

Won't she be surprised when she sees who it is?

And she was, her eyes widened, and her pupils dilated slightly. But not scared. Not yet. In fact a little... irritated.

"What are you doing here?"

A pull on her clothing to get her into the alleyway. An odd lack of resistance.

"All right, I'm coming. This had better be important. It's not exactly safe for you to be out of the flat at the moment."

Anger, making her heart beat faster. His own, echoing it.

Backing her against the wall... she was uncertain now, resisting, but still not scared.

"What is this about?" More insistent. "*Severus!*"
Severus? That was interesting...

Touching her warmth. Feeling it seeping from her into him... them...

Seeking her lips. Wanting to taste that delicious, intoxicating, fear, to drink from it as it increased, spiralling upwards into pure terror. Following her head as it turned away, cheek grazing on the wall — the soft brush of a tongue and the coppery tang of blood, taken secondhand.

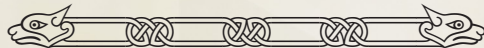
Anger. Resistance. Fear. Disgust

And so the dance to hold on to the light begins, he thought fuzzily. His hands clenched, nails digging in to his palms, the faint points of pain keep-

ing him grounded for now. When *her* pain started he would lose himself utterly, he knew it.

And there *was* pain. *His* pain. Experienced through a direct connection. Somehow the little bitch had got her wand out, and managed to cast, despite the embrace of the Snape-thing. Damn, but she was strong. A savage, cutting, agony sliced through him. He sank to his knees, sobbing, as she shot past, too intent on getting out of there to notice him.

She would pay for *that* next time as well.



Hermione just ran through the streets with the sole objective of getting back to her flat as quickly as possible. She was profoundly grateful that Muggles paid little attention to witches in their midst.

When she finally reached the building, she fumbled with the security lock, too shaken to use magic. Once inside, she sank onto the internal staircase, shivering.

What the hell had all that been about? A week or so of pleasant behaviour, and he tries to grab her in an alley?

And the feel of him... cold, like something long dead. She had felt part of herself draining into him, as he had touched her. She thought she would never be warm again, that she would never be *clean* again.

Was this what it was like to be kissed by a Dementor?

She shook her head, fighting for control.

There was something wrong, very wrong, in this.

In a form of self-defence, she forced her mind to analyse, despite her shuddering body. Apart from anything else, he could be back at the flat any minute. She had to decide what she was going to do.

Remembering his touch, she felt her gorge rise. Yet when she had healed him, he had felt warm...

Warm...

That was it. She had touched him, hugged him even, felt his skin. It was nothing like what had touched her in the alleyway. It couldn't have been him. Could it? Surely not... unless he was concealing something else from her. Something about the potion...

Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet, forcing herself up the stairs, before she second-guessed herself into complete paralysis. Letting herself in, she shrugged off her coat, dumped it on the floor in the hall, and walked into the living room.

And saw Severus Snape, sitting calmly in an armchair, reading a scroll, with Sphinx on his lap.

She froze, watching him warily. How the hell had he got here this quickly? And without passing her? How could he look so serene? Instinctively, she shook her wand down her sleeve, just in case. He looked mildly surprised to see her.

"I thought you would be later."

Hermione didn't respond. She circled carefully, searching his face for any hint that he acknowledged what had happened earlier. There was nothing beyond his usual demeanour, other than a slightly puzzled concern.

"Is there something wrong?"

She was aware that she was still trembling.

"Have you lied to me?"

Damn, her voice was shaking.

He paused.

"No," he eventually said, evenly. "Why do you ask?"

She ignored the question.

"Can you apparate?"

"Not without being detected by the Ministry. I rather thought that Mr Potter had given you the full details of my present restrictions."

"Where have you been this afternoon?"

He had put down his scroll, and was looking at her intently now.

"Why do you ask?" he repeated.

She could feel the panic rising again, and fought to suppress it. The graze on her face was stinging, and she raised a hand to rub at it. Her shivering was getting worse.

He got up and moved towards her.

"Stay away from me."

He ignored her.

"Hermione, what happened?" He sounded worried.

She stared at him for a long time, trying to reach a decision. Her wand was only a flick of the wrist away. And, he couldn't retaliate without the Aurors knowing. Unless, of course, he was lying to her about that... in which case she was probably dead... unless...

Which is it going to be, girl? Is it two faces or a candlestick? You'd better make the right decision because the wrong one will kill you.

Without really intending to, she made eye contact with him. In that split second she was back in that other place, with him, looking into her eyes, studying her pupils. And she remembered her flash of insight...

She felt her knees begin to buckle, and he stepped forward quickly, catching her arms to support her. She didn't have the strength to object. Shakily, she let him guide her over to the sofa, and sat, fractionally before her legs gave way. She wished she could stop shivering. Hugging her arms around herself for warmth as much as comfort, she tried to order her rattled thoughts.

"I was on my way back from the Ministry... and I decided to walk through the market. Something attacked me. It looked like you. I thought it was you."

"Evidently."

She shrank deeper into herself. She wanted the whole horrid mess to go away.

"It... touched me," she started, trying to find a

way of explaining. She didn't see him turn swiftly towards her as she spoke. "I felt myself... draining away... I can't describe it better than that. I managed to get my wand out and cast something... a cutting charm, I think... I know you're not supposed to use it on people... and it let me go, and I ran. I got back here, and when I saw you, I... I don't know..." She trailed off. "I'm sorry."

She wondered if she would ever be able to stop shaking.

She was not aware that he had moved at all, but she felt a blanket being draped over her shoulders. Convulsively, she pulled it round her. Then, she felt him sit beside her.

"Hermione," he said, in the gentlest tone she had ever heard him use, "I think that I am the one who owes *you* an apology."

She started to shake her head, but he continued, "Please listen. I have not lied to you. But I..." he sounded uncomfortable, "I haven't told you the whole truth. At least, I have not told you all of what I know about what is going on."

She shuddered under the blanket. He continued.

"When we returned I believe... *something*... came through with us." He paused, and she heard him take a deep breath. "I believe that something has taken on my appearance."

She was silent, gathering her thoughts. There were so many questions... pick one at random...

"How did it manage to get through without

touching the talisman?"

He was silent for so long that she wondered if he was going to answer her at all. Then he spoke.

"The talisman and the potion are two parts of one enchantment. That enchantment was constructed to allow us... humans, that is... to pass between the realities. The active ingredient in the potion subtly alters the nature of the one who drinks it, or even touches it, to align his or her essence with that other reality. The talisman then opens the gateway. But it requires another element to activate the passage... a catalyst if you will. That catalyst is the presence of violent emotion."

He was silent again, but Hermione sensed that he hadn't finished.

"The beings of that place carry the ability to transfer as part of themselves, and, therefore, have no need of the potion. But the gateway must still be activated to allow them to cross over." Another pause. "Hester... and the Dark Lord... both used fear and pain. They were very effective."

A sick feeling was coming over Hermione.

"At the beginning we were arguing in the Museum. I was furious with you. And at the end..." she swallowed, "I hated you... I remember it." She stopped as the implications of it sank in fully. "If I had had more control over myself none of this would have happened."

"And if I hadn't made the potion, none of this

would have happened either," he said slightly sharply. "Apportioning blame is unlikely to be helpful at this moment."

She found his acerbic tone oddly reassuring. Her sense began to reassert itself.

"I wish you'd told me that before now. I might have been less inclined to follow you — it — into an alleyway." She shook her head. "You know, these are things I needed to know. I *am* able to handle it."

"I know. I put you in danger. I'm sorry." His voice was very low, and, this time, sounded genuinely remorseful. He put a hand on her shoulder, rather awkwardly, she thought, as if he was the one who didn't quite know how to handle it.

She thought that she should try to pull herself together. She made an effort to keep her body still, but couldn't sustain it for more than a few moments. Then she realised that he had asked her another question.

"Hermione." Still very soft. "How... exactly... did it touch you?"

She didn't want to tell him, didn't want to reveal the sickening intimacy of it. She retreated back into herself a little.

"Please... I need to know how it hurt you."

She shut her eyes. She preferred it when he snapped at her. That, at least, was a Snape she recognised. This gentle concern was not helping her to regain control.

"It... kissed me..." she said eventually, shudder-

ing at the memory. "And it touched me... maybe licked me... where I hurt my face..." She wondered at his swift intake of breath. "But not for long," she added hastily. "I managed to break free."

"Very few people would have had the strength to resist its touch at all, let alone have the presence of mind to fight back effectively." His voice was matter of fact, but still soft, maybe even a little impressed.

"Will I ever be warm again?" Another disconnected question running round her mind.

His hand moved from her shoulder to rub her back.

"Yes. This feeling will pass."

The small gesture of comfort was the last straw for Hermione. She crumpled down into herself, and began to cry silently.

He put his arm across her back, supporting her shaking body. She turned into him, half intending to tell him she was all right, then realised that his other arm had come up to hold her firmly. His warmth began to penetrate her icy coldness a little, and, almost unconsciously, she rested against him as her body finally began to calm.

There was a careful tenderness to his actions that she found curiously touching. Tenderness was not a quality that one immediately associated with Severus Snape.

Although recent events were beginning to show him in rather a different light.

But before she could sort out the implications of this, her mind told her that there was something that she needed to tell him. Pushing herself away from him a little she said:

"Malfoy."

He looked startled at this apparent non-sequitur. She was shaking her head.

"I have to tell you this. Hester's cottage was on land that was owned by the Malfoys. I found the records at the Muggle Land Registry."

He hadn't released her, but he had gone rigid now. Looking up, she saw that he was paler than usual.

"Malfoy." He muttered something that sounded to Hermione like a curse. "Of course."

Now she was lost.

"Of course?"

He sighed.

"When the Aurors found me and... injured me... as they were attacking, I remember two other people there. One of them spoke to me. I recognised the voice, but couldn't place it." He paused and then added mockingly, "I seem to recall I had just been hit by two firebolts."

Hermione decided to make no comment about that. Nor on the fact that there appeared to be yet another snippet of information that he hadn't shared with her.

"It was Draco Malfoy."

"Do you know who the other person was?"

asked Hermione.

"No," he said guardedly.

"But you suspect...?" She was pretty certain that there was more. When he didn't immediately answer she pressed him. "Please... if I'm going to be any kind of help you need to stop"... *protecting me?*... she settled for "treating me like an inept first-year."

Not strictly accurate, but good enough.

He nodded, seeming to acknowledge the point.

"I don't know, but I suspect that it was the creature that you met in the alleyway."

Hermione digested this, and then tensed again as a horrified realisation came to her.

"Gods," she whispered. "I thought that thing in the alleyway was you. I asked it what it was doing out of the flat. If Malfoy was there... it... they know that you're here."

He let go of her.

"I have to leave."

"We have to leave."

He looked as if he was going to protest, but she cut across him with asperity.

"Don't start that again. They were after *me* in that alley, and they'll turn up here, sooner or later, looking for one, or both, of us. When they do, I don't think they're going to take 'Sorry, you've just missed him' for an answer, do you?"

He gave her a very hard look at that, and then just bowed his head.

"We need to leave immediately," he said.

"Agreed."

They both got up, Hermione shrugging off the blanket.

"We should go to Suffolk," she said.

He looked quizzically at her.

"Downham St Cross," she elaborated. "Hester's cottage. That's the only place we stand any chance of finding any information about this enchantment. We've got to find a way of sending this thing back."

As she moved briskly past him to gather up some things, she missed the intent gaze he fixed on her retreating back.



Draco Malfoy and his companion stood on the other side of the street, watching the red-brick building that the Muggles called a block of flats. Grubby little rat's nest, he thought contemptuously. Typical bolt hole for that disgusting little Mudblood. Surrounded by swarms of her own kind.

The fury at losing her from the alley had settled into a kind of calm ache, burning in the pit of his stomach. Making her suffer was becoming a slow obsession for him. A need which defined his current existence.

He could no longer tell how much of that stemmed from within himself, and how much

was prompted by the, increasingly urgent, demands of his companion. It had taken a while to recover from the unexpected attack earlier. It had never crossed his mind — either of their minds — that she would be capable of resisting. The taste of her lingered in Draco's mind, the memory of the passion that she was able to generate. The fear... the blood. He needed her. Or did the *other* need her? Was he able to distinguish?

It had taken a frustratingly long time to find her hideaway. The other one could sense her — even more so after tasting her blood so briefly. But it was weak. It had needed time to recover, and feed from Draco, before setting off in pursuit. It needed proper nourishment, and soon.

There was no sign of movement from the flats. Draco was not bothered about being seen by Muggles, but he knew that the Mudblood would feel the presence of the other as well if they got too close. That sort of contact left a mark. The two men crossed the road, unhurriedly, and approached the street door. A neatly lettered card confirmed that H. Granger lived there. Draco smiled and opened the door with a soft *Alohomora*.

His companion was becoming agitated, sniffing the air restlessly.

"She is not here."

"Where else would she have gone?"

"She is not here," insisted the other, its voice sounding so like Draco's old potions master.

Now there was an interesting thought... she had called him Severus... was the little tramp closer to Snape than he first thought...?

He could feel frustration and hunger rising — not his.

"Patience," he said, a little thickly. "There may be other food up there for you."

They climbed the stairs to the front door. There was no sound. Draco opened the door with a touch of his wand, and they entered.

Inside, it was still, deserted. There wasn't even a trace of that mangy ginger cat that she liked so much. There were unmistakable signs that it was her flat — her coat hanging up, books and scrolls scattered around — but of her there was nothing. And if Snape had ever been there, there was no indication of it.

The other was prowling, tensely.

"This is *her* place," it hissed. "She was here."

Draco was checking the other rooms quickly. An untidy bedroom, an even more untidy study room, a virtually unused kitchen... nothing. Glancing into the bathroom, he noted that there were two toothbrushes on the side of the sink.

So there has been someone else here... little slut.

He licked his lips. That information could be quite useful.

He returned to the main room, to find that the other had gone. The door to the bedroom was wide open, and approaching, he saw the gaunt

figure standing very still, breathing deeply.

"This is her place," it said again, harshly this time. "And there was another here."

"Here?"

"I can feel the *wanting*."

It whirled to face Draco. Its eyes were utterly black, almost without whites. He swallowed, suddenly nervous. Anger, frustration and power were roiling inside him. He felt his control slipping.

"You promised," it said, low and threatening. "You said there would be food. I *need* food."

"There will be," he said, backing off a little out of instinct, although physical separation would mean little to the creature.

"You are unworthy of her," it pronounced. "You have failed."

The voice sounded so much like Professor Snape at his worst, combined with his own father, than Draco flinched painfully. He could feel the contempt, the disgust with his own incompetence, searing into him. He fought to justify his actions, as the figure just swept peremptorily past him.

"There is no one here worthy of my gift," it said coldly. "I must return."

"No, wait..." Draco tried to protest, to cover the fact that he didn't know how to return the creature...

It fixed him with a glittering empty stare.

"Find a way," was its only response. "Now we must go back to her place."

The cottage, Draco thought confusedly. It

was weak. Where would it get the strength to apparate.

And then he knew. Coldly, the creature was advancing on him. He felt fear rise up in his throat. Fear that belonged to him alone.

There was no shared power of arousal this time. Just pain.



Under other circumstances, the sight of Severus Snape, dealing with the Muggle public transport system, might have been amusing, thought Hermione. Now, although she felt a lot better for actively doing something, she still felt a little too rattled to fully appreciate the irony.

They had left her flat almost as soon as the decision had been made. She had had no idea how badly she had injured the other Snape, so they had to assume that they had little time to get away. First, though, both Crookshanks and Sphinx were transfigured into birds — Sphinx back into the sparrow, and her cat into a rather large starling. If Malfoy and that thing were going to show up at her flat, she wasn't leaving the familiars to bear the brunt of their frustrated rage. She, then, only stopped to heal the graze on her cheek, and grab her cloak and her purse, stuffing her entire supply of Muggle money into it.

Snape was still wearing Muggle clothes. He

had wanted to object, but she pointed out that robes were hardly usual garb in the Muggle world, and they really didn't want to attract more attention than was necessary. As it was, the two of them simply resembled a pair of rather eccentric academics.

The trip from Notting Hill to the main line railway station was not an experience that Hermione wanted to repeat in a hurry. As Snape couldn't apparate, they were forced to use more orthodox means of transport.

Reaching the Underground station, Hermione discreetly tapped the turnstiles twice to let them through. Following the crowd they descended into the depths of London.

Together with what seemed like three quarters of the Muggle population.

The platform was beyond crowded. There was no room for more people, yet still they pushed on. She was shoved, ungently, from behind, bodies physically pressing against her. Fearful of being separated from Snape by the crush, she tried to hold on to his sleeve. After she lost her grip on that a couple of times, she caught his hand. She thought she saw an odd look cross his face at that. He didn't withdraw, although, otherwise, he was taciturn to the point of discourtesy, glaring at any other passenger who barged into him.

The train arrived, and the mass of humanity

carried them into a carriage. They really had no other choice. They were virtually held upright by the crowd. Hermione realised that not only did she have hold of his hand, but they were now pushed together by the sheer weight of people.

If Malfoy, and the other Snape, did manage to catch up with them, they wouldn't be able to do anything, she thought. They wouldn't have the room for one thing.

The lurch of the train, as it started off, threw her closer against him. She was acutely aware of the scent of him, quite distinguishable to her amongst the other bodies. Her own soap, and a trace of musk and cypress that must be his alone. She was close enough to feel his heartbeat, and slightly shallow breathing. He was tense, that was obvious. It must be the crowd, she thought. Travelling in the rush hour in central London was definitely not for the fainthearted.

There was another jolt as the train took a corner fractionally too fast, and she momentarily lost her balance. One of his arms came round her to steady her, and was trapped there by the shifting movement of another commuter. He wasn't looking at her, but neither was he making any attempt to remove his hand.

Being held by him might almost have been a pleasant experience, if it hadn't been for the other people in the carriage, and the corner of a Muggle businessman's brief case, that was

wedged painfully in the back of her knee.

The train careered from station to station, the merciful release of pressure at each stop too brief, as the carriages filled up again with people, all fighting to get home.

Eventually, they arrived at Liverpool Street station — the main Muggle railway line terminus for north east London. It seemed as if the entire train emptied there. Snape and Hermione were swept along again, as humanity stampeded its way to the exits. She barely had time, or space, to surreptitiously tap the turnstiles to let them out.

They emerged into a wide, high, brightly lit area, also teeming with people running, talking on small objects that Hermione identified as mobile phones, eating food or trying to find a quiet corner to just sit. It was a mess of noise and confusion. There were shops selling all sorts of things, small motorised trolleys everywhere, people shouting, and incomprehensible announcements every few minutes.

Snape was looking almost as disorientated as she had done on her first trip to Diagon Alley.

Did he never use the Hogwarts Express, she wondered. She also noticed that he had not let go of her hand. She pulled on it gently.

"We need tickets," she reminded him.

That seemed to bring him back to himself, as he nodded, and let her tow him along.

At first, she seemed to be aimlessly wandering, looking at the floor, and then she stopped suddenly, almost causing him to cannon into her. Discreetly, she glanced around, and then stooped. When she straightened, she was holding two discarded tickets. She moved them along the station concourse some more, until they were standing with a loose group of Muggles, who were all gazing at the timetable display with the rapt attention that wizards normally reserved for championship Quidditch.

Again, she looked around, and, using Snape's body to shield her from casual onlookers, she tapped the pieces of grubby card with her wand. Instantly, they were transfigured into two valid tickets. She looked up briefly at the timetable, and then at the myriad of kiosks between the platforms.

"We've got about 25 minutes before the train," she said briskly. "Stay here."

Choosing the closest kiosk, she bought coffee, rolls and pastries for both of them. Returning to him, she handed over the food.

"Here," she said. "I doubt if either of us have had much to eat today."

With a look that she couldn't read, he took the proffered food.

"Thank you."

She half waited for the acid remark to follow, but it didn't.

"You're welcome."

He sipped the bitter coffee. "You seem very familiar with this... environment. I don't think I've been on a railway station since I graduated from Hogwarts."

She shrugged. "My parents have never quite got to grips with the concept of me appearing out of thin air in their hallway. They prefer to 'meet me at the station' I think that way they can convince themselves that I'm really a normal girl."

He looked at her sharply at that, but before he could pursue the subject, she was touching his arm again.

"Come on," she said, "they've put the platform number up."

She was touching him a lot at the moment. He didn't seem to be objecting.

Silently, he followed her on to the platform. He did pause, though, when she opened the carriage door to get on to the train.

"First Class?" he said, with surprise in his voice.

She turned in the doorway to look at him, and saw that his eyes were tinged with amusement for the first time in days. She gave a genuine smile.

"Well, do you *want* to play standing sardines for the next hour or so, until we get to Manningtree?"

An answering smile played across his lips.

"Good point."

He should smile more often. It totally changes the way he looks. Then again, I don't suppose he's had a lot to smile about.

"Anyway," she continued, "what's the point of being able to transfigure tickets, if you can't get a semi-decent journey out of it?"

"Another good point, Miss Granger." A twist of irony in his voice, but not a vicious one.

Great heavens, he was actually teasing her.

"I know. It's a shame you can't still give me house points," she answered back, enjoying their sudden banter. "Now are you getting on the train, or waving me off?"

He followed her onto the train.

With unexpected luck, they managed to get single seats opposite one another, which meant that they were spared near neighbours. They finished their coffee and food just as the train was pulling out of the station. The compartment was still reasonably full, but their fellow passengers seemed to be more interested in their newspapers, or electronic gadgets than anything else. She was grateful to be out of the hideous crush, and she guessed that he was as well, from the way that he shut his eyes, and rested his head back.

The train moved out into the darkness. At first, she gazed out of the window, watching the lights of the stations and houses of north east London pass by. As they moved out of city, the lights grew further apart, and she could observe the man opposite her, reflected in the carriage window. The motion of the train was hypnotic, and her mind started to drift.

She still found it hard to reconcile the man she had come to know over the past months with the bad-tempered, and often cruel, teacher she remembered from school. Even after it had become clear that he, too, was actively working towards the downfall of Voldemort, he had never become accessible as a person.

She wondered now if it had anything to do with his own potions master — if he never wanted anyone to feel like that about him, and needed to crush the possibility at the outset. And perhaps he didn't want the responsibility of being anyone's mentor. Or didn't feel able to take it, she amended to herself.

But for some reason he had chosen to let her in.

She couldn't help but wonder why, but she was grateful that he had. She was beginning to value her relationship with him. And not just for the intellectual stimulation either. Although there was no denying that it was nice to have someone she could just relax and be herself with, without worrying whether she was threatening, or annoying, him.

No, it was more than that. He was, unquestionably, prickly and undemonstrative, but, when she had badly needed it, he had been gentle, showing kindness and tenderness. And he had asked very little of her in return.

Much less than she was prepared to give.

She tried to think beyond their immedi-

ate situation. And realised that, somehow, her vision of the future had subtly reshaped itself to include him.

The insight almost made her laugh out loud. She could picture herself breaking the news to Ron and Harry.

Well guys, the good news is that I think I've finally found my ideal partner. The bad news is that it's Professor Snape.

It was true though. If what she was feeling for him wasn't love, then it was getting perilously close to it.

Now, she rested her head on the seat back, and shut her eyes.

It was all well and good that she felt like that, but there was no guarantee that, once this was all over, he wouldn't head off back to Hogwarts, thoroughly relieved to see the back of her. She doubted that he had any great expectations of life, after his past experiences. It was more than likely that he would just glare at her, and tell her that she was too old to have crushes on teachers.

The motion of the train was now beginning to make her feel queasy. She was relieved when the train guard announced that Manningtree was the next stop.



The elderly car bounced its way around hairpin bends and narrow lanes. Snape looked moodily, but rather pointlessly, out the window. He could see very little, due both to the night, and the filthy state of the glass. By his side, Hermione was quiet, wrapped in her own thoughts, as she had been since they had left London.

The driver had initially tried to engage them in conversation, but had quickly given up in the face of blank non-communication from both of them. He knew that he was intrinsically anti-social, but he wondered at her. She normally made more of an effort with the niceties.

He wondered what she was thinking. Since October she had been dragged through an alternate reality, found him dying on her doorstep, sheltered a wanted man, been attacked and was now running for her life. Not to mention the large chunks of his past history that he had subjected her to. It was no wonder she was feeling introspective. She must be counting the hours until he was out of her life.

Although, she did seem to be touching him a lot.

Don't be ridiculous. You've just noticed the fact that she's touching you at all.

There were lights in front of the car now, and it pulled down a long, narrow, street lined with houses. Eventually, they came to a stop outside a Muggle public house, which advertised overnight accommodation as well.

"This do you?" asked the driver, a little sulkily. Hermione seemed to wake up at that.

"Um, yes, that's fine, thank you. How much do we owe you?"

Whilst she was settling up with the driver, he got out of the car and looked around. The winter air was bitter. He could see that there was an open area opposite the pub. It was very dark, and the occasional, muted, quack suggested that there was a pond of some sorts. No doubt this was the place that Hester Allworthy burned to death over 350 years ago. He didn't remember it from his last visit. But then again, he hadn't exactly been sightseeing.

"I think we need to organise a bed for the night, don't you?"

He jumped at that, momentarily disconcerted.

"It's nearly half past eight. We need somewhere to sleep." Sounding amused.

Of course. What did you think she meant, fool.

He followed her into the pub.

Inside the cheery décor announced that this was the Rose and Crown, and Your Hosts were Beverly and Roger who offered you a Warm Welcome. Hermione seemed to have perked up since getting out of the car. She was chatting animatedly to a friendly looking woman behind the bar. Once or twice, he caught her gesturing in his direction.

Then she came over to him, and began to

speaking rather quickly.

"They've apparently only got one room left. I'm afraid it's a double, but I thought I'd better say yes. I really don't fancy sleeping in a hedge." She paused, and he noticed that she was chewing her lip again. "I expect we'll be able to improvise something."

For once, he didn't feel like making her day worse by snapping at her.

"It'll be fine," he said neutrally.

She nodded, but he noted the look of relief on her face as she turned back to the landlady. He didn't like this situation one little bit, but he couldn't see an alternative. The prospect of sleeping in a hedge didn't bother him much — he'd slept in worse places — but he couldn't inflict that on her. Not on top of everything else.

It was bad enough that he had to rely on her to finance everything. When this was over he would at least repay her that much, he vowed to himself.

The landlady had now emerged from behind the bar, and was gesturing for the two of them to follow her. As they climbed the narrow, uneven, stairs, she asked cheerfully:

"So, what brings the two of you to Downham St Cross so late on then?"

"Oh — the usual things. Delayed trains, missed connections," answered Hermione.

The landlady — Beverly he assumed — was nodding sympathetically. Apparently, this all

meant something to her.

"Any plans for your stay?"

Gods, the woman was nosy.

"Research," said Hermione vaguely.

"Ah right. Get a lot of professors here, we do. The church is very historical. You should try to see it... right, here we are. No 6. It's all set up. Any problems, just give me a shout."

Beverly unlocked the door, and let them in.

"Breakfast's seven till nine, in the bar," she called, as she headed off back down the stairs.

He followed Hermione into the room. It was fairly large, and decorated in a sort of pseudo-traditional Muggle cottage way. It was clean and comfortable, with a wardrobe and a small dressing table. There was a chest of drawers by one side of the bed.

Bed, singular.

There was only the one, double, bed, but there was a sofa under the window, which looked big enough to sleep on. That, at least, was a relief. Hermione, meanwhile, was investigating a door to one side.

"Bathroom," she said succinctly.

They looked at each other. She was the first to look away.

"Are we going to try and find this cottage tonight? Can you remember where it was?"

He spoke past her.

"Not clearly. I think it was near the church."

"Why don't we go and have a look around? If nothing else, I could use the fresh air."

He nodded.

They left the room, locking the door behind them. Beverly was engrossed in serving a customer, and so they slipped out unnoticed.

The air was still chill and his jacket did little to warm him. Hermione pulled her cloak around her as they walked. He resisted the urge to put his arm across her shoulders. In silence, they walked around the...village green he supposed it was. Then he stopped.

"That seems familiar."

Insofar as he could tell anything in the patchily lit darkness.

There was a twisted hawthorn bush, and, by it, a path led off into the shadows. He felt a prickling on the back of his neck.

Determinedly, Hermione set off on the path. He was more than tempted to tell her that they should wait for daylight, but it seemed this was something that she had to do to exorcise the demons of the day. So be it.

Stepping carefully on the uneven ground, they moved out of the lightwash from the village. Hermione pulled out her wand, and muttered *Lumos*. Light spilled out from the end, allowing them to see where they were going. To the right, he was aware of the bulk of the church, looming as a slightly deeper shadow

against the black background.

As they made their way along the path, he felt a growing sense of oppression and rising apprehension. His stomach started to churn, and he was about to draw breath to tell her that this was foolish, and they should turn back, when he heard her hiss in annoyance.

"Wards!"

He stopped. She turned to him.

"Wards. And not very subtle ones at that. Malfoy's no better at charms than he is at potions."

He heard the contempt in her voice, and felt a quick rush of shame that she had spotted it before he did. Maybe he was beginning to rely on her too much. Discomfort harshened his voice.

"Well, now we've cleared up that little point shall we continue or not."

Her chin came up, but she didn't comment. She just turned back to the path and went on.

Despite his awareness of the enchantments, the sense of oppression did not appreciably lighten. Ahead of them, the light from her wand traced the outlines of a low squat building.

He knew where they were now. Hester's cottage.

He was about to say something when she abruptly stopped, extinguishing the light from her wand.

"Gods," she whispered, "it's in there. I can feel it." Her voice was full of sudden fear. He moved up behind her. She had her hand to her cheek.

"What do you mean?"

"It's *in* there. I know it is." Her voice was shaking, and her body was rigid from the effort of not doing likewise.

He tried to make sense of this.

"It touched you, tasted your blood. Maybe the connection persists."

"Does that mean it can sense me?"

Did it?

"Maybe."

Her next words astounded him.

"Come on." She moved forward.

"Hermione..."

"No." Her voice was shaky, but firm. "I have to know whether it really is there, or if this is another of Malfoy's little tricks. I have to see it."

Not trusting himself to reply sensibly to this, he followed her. The path skirted the side, and then round to the back, of the house. At one point, it drew sufficiently close for them to see through one of the downstairs windows. Hermione sheltered herself in the hedge as much as she could, and peered in. Moments later, she had dropped down again.

"Oh dear Gods," she whispered, her voice full of disgust.

Wondering what she had seen, he took her place at the window. And felt something deep within him freeze.

Inside was a long, low ceilinged, room. There was a fire, and a pair of armchairs, together

with a long, bare, wooden table.

He could see Draco Malfoy. Silver blonde hair, perfect features as he remembered. But he now had the air of someone suffering from a long fever. His skin was stretched over the bone, to near transparency. His eyes were outlined by rings so dark that they could almost be bruises. His eyes burned with unholy brightness. He looked as if something was consuming him from the inside out.

And the other man. Tall, sour, frightening. Lank greasy hair, sallow skin, ugly features. Cold, fathomless eyes, full of cruelty and contempt. A creature of crawling filth. Hard, pitiless, unbending, sadistic, murdering...

Him.

He knew what it was. And she had mistaken it for him.

Oh gods.

As he watched, Malfoy sank to his knees in front of it... him... leaning his head forward.

Suppressing the urge to vomit, he was about to turn away, when the creature glanced up and around, sniffing the air, like a dog scenting quarry.

It knows we're here.

The danger reactivated his frozen limbs.

"We have to go now," he said flatly.

Mercifully, she didn't choose to argue. This time it was him pulling her along the narrow path, trying to put as much space between

himself and that *other*, trying not to acknowledge the terrified sickness in his gut.

When they spilled back into the village lights by the hawthorn bush, he felt himself slowed by her. She was looking at him, closely. He wondered if the terror showed in his eyes. He hoped not. Finally, she spoke.

"I don't think I want to explain to Beverly why you've just rushed in to her pub like a madman."

She was right, of course. Forcing himself back under control, he nodded. In silence once more, they returned to the Rose and Crown.

Once up in the room, he sank heavily onto the bed, shrugging off his jacket and kicking off his shoes and socks. She was quiet for a long time. He closed his eyes, trying to blank out the thought that that was how people... she... saw him. Trying to will away the image of himself, feeding from Draco Malfoy.

Remembering why he loathed the Death Eaters. Fighting down the reawakened fear.

"I'm going to have a bath." Her calm statement penetrated the fog surrounding his mind.

"I'll sort out the sofa," he answered.

He heard the bathroom door close, and the water begin to run.



Emerging from the bath a short while later,

Hermione felt distinctly more grounded. The hot water had gone a long way to settling her nerves, and allowing her space to think.

It was also fortunate, she thought, that she was still able to do magic, as they had not exactly had time to pack. She hoped that Crookshanks and Sphinx were managing to fend for themselves. She was beginning to feel a sneaking fondness for the quaint little bald creature, who had attached herself to Snape.

A fondness not only for the cat...

She ran her hand through her hair, gone slightly frizzy from the humidity of the bathroom, and sighed. Once she left that room, she was going to have to deal with him.

What he had seen in the cottage had obviously deeply disturbed him. She had never seen such a look of uncontrolled fear in his eyes before. It had badly unnerved her. Up until then she had believed, somehow, that he knew what was going on, and could deal with it – even if he was rather selective in what he told her. For the first time, it occurred to her that he was finding this as difficult as she.

And he was even more reluctant than she was to ask for help and support.

There was no denying that she had fallen for an exceptionally difficult and complex man.

Good move, Hermione.

She conjured a bath robe and wrapped it

around her, tying it at the waist. She ran her fingers through her hair again, promising herself that she would deal with it properly in the morning. For the moment, she just wanted to try to find some kind of resolution to the day.

Opening the door, she emerged into the main room. It was lit by one small lamp, and in the half light she could see Snape, still sitting on the bed, his head bowed into his hands. He appeared to have made no move towards rearranging the sofa.

Something about his posture made her pause. He was so obviously in pain. Helplessly, she realised that she had no idea what to do or say that might reach him.

She padded on bare feet around the bed. He didn't move. His jacket was crumpled on the floor at his feet.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked cautiously.

He didn't answer, and she wondered if he'd even heard her. Then:

"Is that really how I am?"

The question was low and pained, and she wanted to be certain that she understood exactly what he was asking.

"What do you mean? Is what how you are?"

"Like that...*thing*. Is it really a true reflection of me?" Almost despairing.

"No. No, of course not."

She was at a total loss as to how to deal with this.

There was something almost broken about him.

Gods, please let me not say the wrong thing...

"You thought it was me in the alley."

Damn, she hadn't thought her mistake would affect him this deeply.

"I was startled... I wasn't expecting you to have an evil double."

He didn't respond to her attempt at irony.

"And in the flat...?"

She put as much conviction into her tone as she could muster. "I was badly frightened, and I didn't know what was going on. For all I knew, the potion could have had some side effect of lowering core body temperature or something..."

It sounded weak even to her own ears, but she was struggling to connect with him. Struggling to pull him back from whatever darkness was gripping him.

"Why did you do it?"

Another non-sequitur. This time, though, he anticipated the next question.

"Save my life, before you ask." Harsh and bitter.

"Why did you tell me about your childhood?" she countered. One of the questions that had been troubling her on the train.

He shifted a little at that. Again, he was silent so long that she thought that he wasn't going to answer. When he finally did reply, his voice was heavy with self-hatred.

"Because you asked. Because, astonishing as

it may seem, even I get tired of people believing that I bite the heads off live babies every morning before class." She winced. There was no trace of humour in his tone. "I thought that, just for once, I'd like to be despised for the truth, rather than for the rumour."

This has to stop. Now.

She sat down beside him on the bed, and laid a hand on his shoulder. He flinched at the touch, as if she had hit him.

"I don't despise you at all," she said quietly. "I know you weren't very happy to see me in your office, but since this started you've been..." *gentle, tender, loving...* "kind. Without you, I'd probably be dead now."

He stood up at that, abruptly shaking her hand off, and strode over to the curtained window.

"Without me," he said acidly, "you wouldn't ever have been in any danger at all."

She rose and walked slowly over to him, uncertain as to what to say next. As she came up behind him, he swiftly turned, nearly overbalancing her. She stumbled slightly and he grasped her upper arms to steady her.

She was near enough to him to feel the warmth of his body, and to catch the faint trace of his familiar, yet alien, scent. Her throat tightened. He didn't release her arms. She looked up at his face and met his gaze. She saw pain and fear — and something else, that caused her stom-

ach to contract with a delicious apprehension.

Please Gods, don't say I'm reading this wrong...

She reached a hand towards him, laying it on his chest. She felt him draw breath under her touch. Slowly, she slid her hand up to rest on his shoulder. He was absolutely still, motionless with an intensity that made her heart beat faster. Then, without warning, he moved to pull her to him, his lips crushing hers with a ferocity that startled her.

His kiss was an odd mixture of passion and inexperience. It was fierce and ungentle, and just a little bit clumsy. She wondered in that moment, just how many opportunities with women he had actually had. Few, she guessed, with a pang.

As if sensing her thoughts he pulled away from her as roughly as he had embraced her. Pushing past without looking at her, he returned to sit on the bed, burying his head in his hands again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he repeated, voice muffled. "That was unforgivable..."

Hermione touched her slightly bruised lips gently with her fingertips. She looked at his hunched, defensive form.

He looks like he thinks I'm going to attack him. Maybe he does.

She made a decision and took a step towards him. Her intellect was telling her, quite firmly, that what she was about to do was unwise at best, and would probably have disastrous con-

sequences. However, deep inside, she had an instinctive, calm, certainty that this was absolutely right. He needed it. Hell, *she* needed it, never mind him...

And, right now, they both desperately needed each other...

Reaching the bed, she sat down on it, very close to him, and slid an arm across the back of his shoulders.

"Severus," she said, very softly.

He tensed, but didn't reply. She began to stroke his back.

"Severus," she repeated, "look at me."

He slowly straightened, but would not meet her gaze.

She reached across with her other hand to cup his face. Turning it towards her, she smiled into his wary eyes.

"Like this," she murmured, and then leant forward to place her lips on his, probing at his mouth very gently with her tongue.

In contrast to his earlier behaviour, his response was hesitant, letting her lead as the kiss deepened. His arms came round her to hold her awkwardly. She felt a tight knot begin to build in her stomach, as he rubbed her back uncertainly. Gradually, she felt him begin to relax under her hands, and, without breaking contact, she pulled him down on the bed with her.

She had had more expert lovers. Peter, whilst

not beginning to understand her mind, had at least known what he was doing physically. But he had never come close to the raw unfinished passion of this man. And she was finding that the idea of guiding him, exciting him, showing him what excited her — that was arousing her far more than finesse ever had.

With one hand, she pulled Snape's shirt out of his trousers, and began to deftly undo the buttons. He let out soft gasps, as her fingers brushed his skin, finally pushing his shirt fully open and trailing across the bare flesh. He gave a small sob as her fingertips caressed his nipples. Moving her mouth away from his, she kissed softly down the side of his neck and across his chest, pausing to run her tongue around each nipple in turn. He brought his hands up and buried them in her hair, choking out her name, raggedly.

She was deliciously aware of the hardness in his trousers against her body.

She was now aching to be touched, but he seemed re-luctant to do so. She pushed herself up a little and undid the belt, so that the robe swung open and he could see her. His eyes fixed on her body in an expression of almost disbelieving wonder. It brought a lump to her throat, and she took one of his hands and placed it over her breast, so he could feel the nipple hard against his palm. He cupped it as though it would break.

Gently, she covered his hand with hers, guiding him, showing him what she liked. Hesitantly, he began to explore her.

He had beautiful hands, she thought dreamily. Fine boned, soft and strangely delicate, moving slowly over her body. His shy uncertainty only heightened her desire. His hands made their way down her belly to the top of her thighs, and then she felt him pause.

"It's OK," she whispered. "I like being touched there."

His fingers brushed over her thighs, a little awkwardly. Again, she covered his hand with hers, and slid them both between her legs. She felt his intake of breath as he touched her intimate place, cautiously moving his fingers along her folds, now slick and wet with desire. His touch gradually became more confident, and she began to gasp in pleasure. She cried out when he found her nub, and he stopped quickly.

"No, don't stop, go on," she managed to say, although her mind was now spinning.

Responding to her, he found her entrance and slipped a finger inside her, and she felt her peripheral vision begin to shut down. Vaguely, she thought that this hadn't been what she intended — she had wanted to bring him with her — and then all thought ceased, and she distantly heard herself crying his name as the world coalesced in a point of light.

When awareness returned, she realised that he was watching her with that same focussed stillness. She stretched out to stroke his chest. His shuddering breath made her smile. Her touch became firmer, tracing circles around his nipples, arcing down the outline of his muscles. He shut his eyes.

Her hand reached the top of his trousers and then rubbed down across his crotch. He moaned softly, as she undid the zipper. Instinctively, he lifted his hips so she could pull his trousers and boxers down, kicking them off. Once free, she stroked her fingers up the length of him, savouring the hardness, feeling him buck gently under her caresses. He was very close to the edge. Rolling over on to her back, she put her hand on his hip, pulling him with her and into place.

To her surprise, he just lay there against her for a moment, then he raised himself to look at her beneath him.

"You are... incredible..." he breathed.

Hermione felt the lump return to her throat. No one had ever looked at her like that, spoken to her like that, in that tone of... awe.

"Kiss me," she whispered, half choked.

His kiss was passionate and hungry. Putting her hands on his hips, she guided him into her wordlessly. He entered her... carefully was the only word, as if he was still unsure. He thrust

tentatively at first, and then with an urgency that bordered on desperation. She rocked her hips against his movements, and he made inarticulate sounds deep in his throat. She gloried in the feel of him deep within her. He had controlled himself for so long, in order to pleasure her, that it was only a short while before she felt his body go rigid.

He called out her name, as he spilled himself into her.

He collapsed on top of her, shaking, burying his face in her neck. She held him as his shuddering breaths subsided, soothing him, stroking his hair. As he slowly calmed, a languid, sleepy, feeling came over her and, with it, the desire to just curl up against him and doze. She reached out to pull the quilt over the two of them, and the movement disturbed him.

"Hermione?"

"Just reorganising the bedding, love. Nothing to worry about."

Somehow, they managed to get themselves under the quilt. She snuggled up to him, and was surprised to find that he was tense again.

Does the man know how to relax?

"Hermione?" Sounding uncertain, incongruously young.

"Hmm?"

"It's been... a long while... for me." A pause. "Did I hurt you?"

She felt the prick of tears again.

"No. Gods, no. It was... amazing."

She wondered at the fresh shudder that ran through his body. She held him tighter, and he responded with a fierce embrace. She began to drift off again.

"You have nothing to worry about, believe



PART FOUR



EVERUS SHAPE

me," she repeated sleepily.
"I love you."

returned to reluctant consciousness from one of the best dreams that he could ever remember having. He had been alone with a beautiful woman. She had taken him to her, kissed him, caressed him, embraced him... enfolded him within her. He had felt warm, safe... loved, even... A rare moment of absolute peace. It had been so real that he could remember the smell of her skin, the taste of her lips, the heavy satin of her hair. He could hear her gentle, melodious, voice, telling him that she loved him. The loss of her was tangible.

If he concentrated hard enough, he could still imagine that she was holding him, head nestled in the crook of his shoulder, arm resting

heavy across his chest. Her scent lingered in his nostrils, he could feel the warm brush of her breath as she exhaled...

He couldn't hold on to the dream, and, with a familiar sense of resignation, extended his awareness into his body, and out into full wakefulness.

To realise, with an emotion that fell somewhere between shock and disbelief, that he hadn't been dreaming. Or, at least, there was a head resting on his shoulder, and an arm flung across his chest, and they were both firmly attached to a woman. A woman who was curled up against him, like a sleeping cat. Moreover, they were both naked.

The events of the previous night slammed themselves back into his recall.

Gods.

The cottage and that... *thing*.

Trying to kiss her... he suppressed a shudder, as he remembered grabbing at her.

And then her coming to him. Kissing him. And more...

He closed his eyes, once more willing himself to be asleep, but this time for different reasons.

How could he have allowed this to happen? The turmoil he had been in, after the visit to the cottage, was no excuse. To have lost control so badly – to have been so needy in front of her that she had taken him to bed out of *pity*...

What other explanation could there be?

Gods.

He felt queasy.

And he thought he had heard her say that she loved him.

Don't be ridiculous, fool. Why, in hell's name, would she say something like that to you?

And yet, he wanted... *needed*...

He *needed* to get this business over and finished, and to get back to Hogwarts, and his life there. He needed to be away from this tiny little village with its twee little Muggle pub, and its historic Muggle church, and its resident psychopathic killer complete with mind-sucking sidekick.

He *needed* to get away from the thing that wore his face, from the woman still in his arms, from all the painful, conflicting, emotional demands that this situation was putting on him.

Careless of the sleeping figure beside him, he sat up, threw off the quilt, stood up and grabbed his discarded clothing. Ignoring the sleepy question from the bed, he headed for the bathroom, and firmly locked the door.

There was a choice of bath or shower. Not a morning for prolonged reflection. He turned the shower on. Glancing round, he noted that she had conjured some basic toiletries. Picking up the soap, he climbed into the shower. It was at quite a comfortable temperature. He turned up the water until it was hot to the point of pain, and began to soap himself with unneces-

sary violence. He scrubbed the lather through his hair, with the vague thought that he might, at least, erase her scent from him. But it was the soap she had used the night before. The hot water merely intensified the familiar smell, and made him ache all the more.

Snarling under his breath, he spun the temperature control around. The water sputtered from a moment, and then abruptly became arctic. He gasped at the shock of the unrelenting, freezing, jet hitting his skin. Grimly, he sluiced the soap from his body.

Stepping from the shower, he rubbed himself off with a towel. Her clothes were there too, neatly folded — unexpected tidiness from the woman who, normally, simply dumped things as the mood took her. Turning, so he could see neither the clothes, nor his face in the mirror, he got dressed.

He finished up, and was about to return to the bedroom, when he stopped with his hand on the door handle, uncertain of his reception, or how he was going to handle it. And she was probably feeling just as bad as he was, if not worse, he told himself bitterly. After all, how did you come to terms with the fact that sympathy had led you to fuck, not only a former teacher, but possibly the most hateful one that Hogwarts had ever employed?

He shivered as the vision of the *other* drifted

across his memory.

He shook it away. Cool detachment, that was what was needed. That was what he was good at. Not excursions into the complexities of human interaction.

And, whilst he knew that she hadn't acted out of anything other than pity, that she had never told him she loved him — as long as he didn't hear the words from her lips... *I'm sorry, it was a mistake...* he could at least hold on to the dream...

Normally ruthlessly honest, this time he pushed down the question of what he would do if she *had* said those words and meant them...

He opened the door.



Hermione was disturbed out of sleep by Snape's abrupt departure towards the bathroom. She had mumbled a question but he hadn't replied. When she heard the water running, she guessed that he was showering. Fair enough, she thought, he hadn't had a chance the night before.

The night before.

She rolled over on to her back to face the ceiling, as she listened to him moving about the bathroom. Minutely, she examined the yellowing artex. What was his reaction to her going to be? Last night, it had been unmistakeable.

As had been hers. From that perspective, she had no cause for regrets at all. A slight smile played over her lips at the memory.

But what now?

Should she have initiated it in the first place? He was not a man who easily let others take the lead. Acting on instinct, it had seemed the right thing to do. In the cold light of day, she was not so sure. Their situation was complicated enough without adding this to it. Her smile faded, and she felt a familiar apprehension rise.

At that moment, the door to the bathroom opened and Snape emerged, fully dressed, hair wet, and roughly smoothed back. She pulled the bedclothes around her, and watched him carefully. He stalked round the bed to the window, without saying anything, and twitched the curtains aside, studying the street below. His body was rigid with disapproval.

"I fail to see how lying in bed will assist in furthering our knowledge of the situation," he said coldly, without turning.

Hermione flinched, and was glad that he couldn't see it. Whilst she had expected some reserve from him, his glacial tone shook her. It was as if the man who had looked at her like she was something unbelievably precious, who had touched her so shyly, and so intensely, who had shuddered in her arms as he took comfort from her — as if he had just ceased to exist.

Worse... had never been there.

Blinking back tears, she fumbled among the covers for her bathrobe. She was damned if she was going to cry in front of him again. Pulling it on, she slid out of bed, and headed for the bathroom.

She didn't intend to have a shower — in any case, there were no dry towels, and she hated using damp ones. Taking a little longer than was strictly necessary to clean her teeth, tidy herself up, and get dressed, she fought to get herself under some kind of control.

It was obvious that he had sounded the note for what was to follow. Everything about him — his voice, his demeanour — clearly announced that he did not welcome the intrusion into his privacy that the previous night represented.

Fair enough. If that's his decision.

A half memory filtered back in to her mind. Curling up against him, warm and safe. Words of love murmured in sleepy contentment.

Oh Gods. She hadn't, had she? She couldn't have...

Well, she wasn't about to go chasing after someone who obviously didn't want her. At least, not *want* in any meaningful sense of the word. She didn't intend to call him on it either, despite their earlier skirmishes. Those had merely been unwarranted and hurtful remarks. This time was very different. There was no way she could face laying herself open to the sort of damage he would inevitably inflict. She would rather cut

her losses and get out as soon as possible.

And if she had said anything... unwise... to him last night he either hadn't heard, or wasn't acknowledging, it. Her heart clenched.

Come on, girl, show some backbone. Pride is about all you've got to work with at the moment.

She consciously straightened her spine. Dressed, she felt a little less vulnerable to him. Determinedly, she returned to the bedroom.

He was still staring, moodily, out of the window. She checked the clock. It was eight fifteen. Breakfast was still being served in the bar. She struggled to make her voice as cold as his.

"I have no intention of furthering *my* knowledge of anything on an empty stomach. I'm going downstairs to eat."

Steeling herself, she walked behind him and out of the door. She didn't look to see if he was following her.

Breakfast together had entirely too many implications of intimacy to be anything approaching comfortable. Snape had followed her, albeit not so closely that she could slam the door in his face, and she would have been very tempted. They ate their way through their food in silence, Hermione preferring to do without marmalade and salt, rather than ask Snape to pass it. She didn't feel up to conversation, and he could never be described as chatty, even on a good day. It was a chilly and uncommunicative meal.

After they had eaten, they fetched their coats and went out to find Hester's cottage in the daylight. Studiously ignoring the man by her side, Hermione carried out a rather deliberate survey of the village. It was a village, indistinguishable from any other village in that part of England. Originally built with the wealth of the wool merchants – riches which disappeared rather abruptly with the introduction of cheaper, and more practical, cotton – it was an odd mixture of ancient and modern. The pub, and the houses surrounding the green, were obviously original – whitewashed walls, with low thatched eaves. The outskirts – in particular the road they had driven the previous day – faded out into nineteen-thirties' bungalows, and a disconnected cluster of council houses. As well as the pub, the village boasted a small post office and general store, a bus stop bearing an out of date timetable, and something that called itself The Rose Cottage Tea Rooms. As they passed, Hermione could see that the windows were heavily shuttered and it bore the handwritten sign, 'Closed for Annual Holidays'. She imagined the owners working all summer, to spend the most dismal three months of the year in sunny Tenerife.

It managed to be both picturesque and deeply depressing at the same time – in other words, a traditional English village.

She sighed.

If Snape heard her, he gave no sign of it.

The watery, winter, sun showed that the green did, indeed, have a pond, currently inhabited by some rather forlorn looking ducks. They quacked, half-heartedly, in the direction of the two pedestrians, as if they were hoping for food, but held out little hope. Snape didn't even glance at them. Hermione felt an odd surge of empathy – despite her confident stride, *bedraggled* pretty much summed up the way she was feeling at the moment.

They were approaching the pathway leading to Hester's cottage. In the daylight, they could see that the local council had, helpfully, put up a little green sign that read PUBLIC FOOTPATH. Something they had missed in the dark.

If they had waited for the morning they would have had considerably less trouble, she thought ruefully. And they would probably not have seen Malfoy and the... other. And the later events of last night would never have happened.

She shook her head in irritation. She really had to get some kind of focus before they got to the cottage. Malfoy and his companion were dangerous and she needed her wits about her.

Snape had paused at the entrance to the path, seeming almost uncertain. Some part of her acknowledged that to face that creature again must be very difficult for him. Another, more

deeply injured, part of her felt an uncomfortable pleasure at the approaching confrontation.

He was looking at her, his expression closed.

"If you wish to remove yourself from this situation, this will be your last chance," he said flatly, brutally, as he set off down the path.

Stung, she opened her mouth to snap, and then shut it again as something occurred to her. She opened her mouth to call to him, and then hesitated on his name.

Well, he could go hang before she'd call him *Professor Snape*.

"Severus," she said, in as neutral a tone as she could muster.

He halted about ten yards from her, but did not turn.

"Come along, if you're coming." Cold. Acid.

"Wait a moment, there's something we need to settle." Again, she was fighting to keep her voice even, not to match him edge for edge.

He turned, with obvious reluctance, and folded his arms, glaring at her.

"I'd rather not have to shout." That was a little better, she thought.

Pointedly, he moved back towards her, so she could speak quietly.

"Make it brief," he instructed, proximity by no means softening his tone. "This is hardly the time or the place for an open debate."

She struggled to find words to say what was

on her mind, a sufficiently neutral phrasing.

"This *thing*," she began, cautiously, evenly, "you say that it feeds on strong emotion..."

A flicker passed across his face at that, understanding, mixed with a hint of consternation perhaps. He was being cold and cruel, but he wasn't stupid. He had the point.

"Maybe," she continued carefully, "if we could, perhaps, try to avoid... um... unnecessary antagonism..."

He seemed to her to be struggling with something, deep inside him.

"Very well," he said curtly, but neutrally, and turned on his heel.

This time, Hermione followed him.

The light rendered the path less physically hazardous than the night before, but the same sense of oppression stole over her. She felt her throat tighten, and her heart rate increase. She told herself not to be silly — she had worked out last night that this was Draco Malfoy's way of discouraging unwanted visitors. But, then again, last night she hadn't been on spitting terms with Snape. His back was in front of her, rigid and controlled. To distract herself, Hermione began to analyse the exact nature of the wards.

They were fairly simple — as they were bound to be if Malfoy was responsible. A Cooling Charm to lower the temperature, a localised Density Charm to generate that feeling of

oppression and an Apprehension Charm for obvious reasons. A reasonably bright first year could have managed it.

There was something else too, she mused thoughtfully. Something that raised a prickle on the back of her neck. She hadn't felt it the night before. Maybe Malfoy had increased his security since that *thing* had sensed them. It didn't seem to provoke a physiological reaction other than that slight tingle. In fact, now she came to think of it, that tingle extended beyond her neck. Her whole body was edgy, and there was a sudden sting on her cheek, where she had grazed it on the wall in the alley.

She froze.

"Severus," she hissed urgently, all thoughts of the tension between them pushed out of her mind for the time being.

Something in her tone must have reached him, because this time he turned and came straight back to her.

Without waiting for him to enquire, she launched in:

"It... they... whatever, know we're here."

"What makes you think that?" His expression was sceptical, but his tone was neutral.

"The wards are different." He raised an eyebrow. She fought down annoyance. "Look, I was trying to identify the different charms that Malfoy used..." he was looking closely at her, "... just as a

way of... um... settling my mind... and I realised that there's one that wasn't there last night."

"Go on."

Well at least he was listening, and that last remark was almost spontaneous.

"It's not as obvious as the others. It's more a prickling, or that feeling you get just before a storm."

"I felt nothing." A statement, rather than a challenge.

"I think..." she hesitated, reluctant to stir the memories, "I think it might be specifically directed at me."

"You have a reason for this belief, I assume?"

"My cheek began to sting. Where it... touched me."

He nodded briefly.

"I see."

Here it comes, she thought, mentally bracing herself. But he didn't attack her for her arrogance in believing that she was the focus of the creature's desires.

"Then we should assume that it already knows that we are close, and is preparing for our arrival."

Hermione did not find that exactly reassuring.

"Maybe we should try a different approach," she suggested, attempting to re-establish some control over what was going on.

"Your suggestion?"

"Um... I don't want to be caught out here. How about going through the churchyard, and seeing if we can get an idea of what they're

doing from there?"

He made no comment, just looking at her with that hooded expression she remembered so well from class.

Well, Snape might have reverted to type, but she had been through too much recently to regress to being a deferential pupil. Ignoring his scrutiny, she challenged him, as evenly as she could.

"I really don't think that standing on the path is the safest place to be right now. Is it the church, or do you have another idea?"

"Church," he said non-committally.

Returning to the start of the path, they turned left and entered the churchyard by a small wicket gate.

The area surrounding the church was the usual, haphazard, mess of stones of varying ages. Some new, some old, some leaning at a crazy angle and others, lying in the grass, or half-propped against their neighbours. Most of the inscriptions were so eroded, or slimed up with lichen, that they were illegible. Here and there were placed larger tombs, evidently constructed by the more well-to-do of the village worthies over the years. The upkeep of the various graves similarly varied. Some were obviously tended regularly, others were barely visible under a tangle of weeds and brambles. They edged their way through the obstacles to the south wall of

the church, and paused in the lee of a buttress.

Snape had an odd look of distaste on his face. Not contempt, more aversion. Curious, she thought, considering the sorts of things that he habitually kept in his classroom.

"I suppose that all this is... familiar... to you," he gestured, disdainfully, at the graveyard. "Ornate buildings. Buried bodies."

Again, a strange response from a man who lived in one of the biggest, and most elaborate, castles in the world, and one, moreover, which contained more than its fair share of dead people. Albeit that most of the Hogwarts dead still actively participated in life.

"Well, in a way," she responded cautiously. "I used to go to church with my parents at Christmas and Easter. It was just one of those things that you did. And most people are cremated, not buried, these days. Pretty much all of these are old. Why do you ask?"

The question was out before she could remember that they were barely on speaking terms. She waited edgily.

"The old tradition does not believe in confining the spirit, either before or after death," was his eventual response. It didn't invite further enquiry, but neither did it flay her to the bone.

Well, at least he seemed to be honouring the truce.

She had never really stopped to think about his philosophical beliefs. It might be worth reading

round the subject when they got back...

She was drawn from her speculation by his sudden movement. Cat-like, he was moving along the south wall. She followed him, and they paused by the final buttress. There was a plain-ish, wooden, door in the church wall beside them, incongruously small for the scale of the building. From there, she had a clear view of the front of Hester's cottage.

It was a long, low, building, with overhanging thatch. In the daylight, it could be seen that the walls were punctuated with small, many-paned, windows, set well back into the thick masonry. There was little about the cottage to distinguish it for good or ill. The whitewash was fairly clean, the hedge was reasonably tidy and neatly trimmed, and the thatch was well maintained. There was nothing incongruous, or out of place — nothing to draw any attention one way or the other.

Snape was gazing at it intently, but if there was movement inside, she couldn't see it from here.

Another, unpleasant, thought occurred to her.

"Severus," she said wondering how exactly to phrase this. He didn't respond, but she carried on anyway. "That *thing*... um... doesn't it have to eat?"

That got his attention for some reason.

"After all, it tried to feed on me in the alleyway, but it didn't succeed. So, isn't it going to be hungry? It'll have to go out eventually, and get

something..."

She trailed off. She had made it sound like popping up to the post office for a loaf of bread.

Snape did not appear to have noticed. He had gone pale, and Hermione remembered that he never had told her exactly what he had seen, when he looked through the window. She roundly cursed that part of her that still wanted to reach out to him in support and comfort.

His eyes met hers, and for a brief moment she saw the haunted look of the previous night, before the expression closed again.

So, he is still in there. Just buried too deeply to emerge at the moment.

The thought steadied her, and she held his gaze firmly.

"The... creature will need to feed," he confirmed flatly. "At the moment it is surviving on..." he stopped, and she thought she saw him physically flinch, "... Malfoy."

The implications of that were more than she wanted to contemplate at that moment. She shuddered.

"How long can that go on for?" she asked after a moment.

"As long it chooses to leave Malfoy alive," was the blunt answer.

She was considering that, when she felt a sudden flash of panic. Pain flared in her face. She was about to say something, but his arm slammed her into the

door. She hissed, as the door knob caught her in the back. She was about to protest, when he said:

"They've left the cottage. They're coming this way."

There was absolutely no possibility of making it across the graveyard without being seen. Hermione shook her wand down her sleeve, and tapped on the door behind her, muttering *Alohomora*. The door swung open, relieving the uncomfortable pressure on her kidney. They both slipped inside, and she used her wand to lock the door again.

They were in a dark, low, room, which also seemed to be too small for the building. It contained a desk, and a cupboard the size of a large wardrobe. It felt slightly damp and smelt of stale clothes. The surfaces were littered with various sorts of ecclesiastical books, giving no indication that anyone used them with any regularity. A stone staircase led off one corner.

Without discussion, Hermione made for it, Snape following her. She wondered about that until she remembered that she was the only one who could safely use magic. He had a certain incentive to remain reasonably close to her.

He must really hate that, she thought with a flash of insight, quickly repressed. Insight or no, she was still angry with him for his earlier attitude.

At the top of the steps was another locked door. Hermione dealt with this one as easily as the last

one. It opened into the main body of the church.

It was like many of the churches that her parents had taken her to during her childhood. It had a high ceiling, rows of uncomfortable looking pews, and the walls were decorated with mournful paintings of religious virtue, mostly in shades of brown. Here and there, someone had tried, unsuccessfully, to lighten the mood with brightly coloured banners and children's paintings. It was gloomy, the only light source coming through the assortment of stained glass and clear windows. The maker of the windows had had something of a passion for crimson, and the winter sun fell into the building in splotches reminiscent of watery blood. The stale, chill dampness extended up here. She was willing to bet that it was still cold, even with the heating full on.

Snape looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Is it outside?" he said brusquely, his voice taking on eerie resonances in the cavernous space.

She nodded. The last time she had encountered the thing, she had been surprised and unprepared. She wasn't about to let it take the advantage this time. She began to study the memorial plaques attached to the walls as a distraction, and to focus her mind.

Snape approached her, but did not look at her directly.

"We have an interesting situation, it seems."

His voice sounded rather brittle. "It knows that we are in here. We know that it is out there. Something of a stand off."

"Fascinating," she agreed, with a splinter of irony.

The rattle of the main church door echoed through the building like a book being dropped. Hermione froze, and noted that Snape did as well. Then, as one, they headed down towards the altar. It was a large wooden table, covered by heavy damask hanging. She dived underneath, and held the cloth up for Snape to follow.

With only a slight hesitation, he did so. She cast a concealment charm around them — it would fool Malfoy: she was less certain about the *other* — and they waited tensely.

There was just about enough room for the two of them under there, but he still seemed to be pulled into himself, avoiding any form of contact with her. She was too busy trying to sense where the *other* was to feel more than a passing hurt... irritation...

Then, it was in the building. She could feel it searching. Her cheek was burning at its presence. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, trying to still the rising panic, control the shivering that was threatening to start, willing it to go away. She had fought it last time, she would fight it again...

It could sense her... smell her... but the sense was blurred. It wanted her, to taste her deeply,

to absorb her, to feast on her... but it couldn't quite find her, somehow. She felt it reach to her, trying to coax her out with a promise of safety and comfort. She was hurt. She didn't deserve to be hurt like that. The one who had hurt her was wrong. It would take that away from her.

She would fight it...

She could feel her pain and anger intensifying in the wash of that insidious encouragement. He didn't have the right to treat her like that. She was clever. She was strong. She was beautiful. He should value her. He should respect her. He should *worship* her...

Fight it...

And that would happen. It would give her that power. Power beyond anything she could dream of. She would crush those who would thwart her, who would see her less than she really was. No one would ever push her away, cheapen her, again. Those who hurt her would suffer.

He would suffer.

All she had to do was let it have that tiny, little, part of her that no one else wanted... her self.

Such a small price...

Fight...

Hermione tried to find a way of blocking her mind, of evading the seductive tendrils seeking to attach themselves to the buried doubts and fears swirling in her mind. Struggled not to

want the vision of herself powerful, invulnerable, invincible.

She could only form one conscious word in her mind.

No.

No. No. No. No. No.

And then, interweaving, was another voice. A high, whining, intrusive voice complaining that there was nothing in here but things left by Muggles to bolster up their stupid superstitions. The voice wanted to leave, but the presence wanted to stay. Stay with her.

Irritation. The voice knew what it wanted as well. It wanted food. The presence could not get food without the voice. The voice was weak and unworthy, but the presence had to rely on it. After the food, the presence would be strong, and then it would find her, and they would join in ecstasy, such as she had never known.

The sense of the presence receded and Hermione became aware of her surroundings once more.

She was curled up in a ball with her arms clasped tightly around her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks. Deep in the pit of her stomach was an almost overwhelming desire to vomit. She was being supported by a strong arm around her shoulders, keeping her upright.

Snapé. Again.

She fought the urge to push him away. If he didn't want her that was fine, but no more of

these unexpected gestures of support. She was too strung out to deal with the inconsistency.

With an effort, she forced down the rising bile, and made her body stop rocking. As she stilled, he let his arm drop. After an aching long time, there was a clang, and then quiet.

Waiting until she was sure she could speak without her voice cracking, she said, "It's gone."

Thankfully, he didn't ask if she was sure.

Painfully, she released her knees and crawled out from under the altar. She was aching and strained all over. She rubbed the tears off her cheeks, and sniffed, wondering if there were any tissues in the building. Devoid of the desire to search, she blew her nose on the damask altar cloth, suppressing the reflexive childhood urge to mutter an apology to the Almighty.

Hugging her arms round her, she walked up the side of the church to get her circulation back, determined not to collapse with the shakes this time, telling herself to keep looking at the memorial plaques. She had dutifully read two, barely seeing them, when she was brought up short by a painful blow to the shin.

Looking down, she saw a low tomb, very elaborate, and fashioned out of black marble. The top of it was no higher than her knee, which explained why she had overlooked it before. It was wreathed about with entwined vines, fruit, and another motif, which despite

being completely abstract, made her stomach twist again with nausea. The top of the tomb was, likewise, covered in a pattern that seemed to consist of various types of plant. She was about to look away when a sort of shift took place in her mind. In the way that a random assortment of figures suddenly clarifies to reveal the underlying pattern, the vegetation seemed to coalesce into another design.

A snake entwined around a circled M.

She knelt to see the inscription more clearly. She read it out loud.

"This is the tomb of Dorothea Allworthy Montnégre de Malfoi – 1620 – 1698. Requiescat in obscurum."

"May she rest in darkness," translated Snape softly behind her. Then, in a brisker tone. "Grossly over ornate, and utterly tasteless. Classic Malfoy."

Dorothea Allworthy Montnégre de Malfoi.

Hester's daughter. It couldn't be anyone else. Died at the age of 78 – an extraordinary lifespan in seventeenth century England. A witch, clearly. Married a Malfoy. No wonder the thing sought out Draco. He was practically its heir.

Something else troubled her.

"Why would there be a Malfoy tomb here, of all places?" she mused aloud.

"Who knows," said Snape sourly. "Knowing the Malfoys I suspect they were hedging their bets. They were ever lovers of the grandiose, and this was probably their way of throwing

a sop to the local establishment, just in case it could ever be useful to them. I doubt that Dorothea is even in there."

Hermione shook her head and stood up. She needed to get out, to escape the pervasive defilement left by the creature.

"I suppose we should go and take a look at the cottage, whilst we've got the chance," she stated, infusing her tone with as much confidence as she could muster.

Snape nodded, and they headed for the main door.

Just before she cast the spell to open it again, he spoke abruptly.

"I thought you would prefer it to falling into that thing's sight."

The moment under the altar table.

She was still too shaken by the encounter with the creature to trust herself to reply.

She just nodded and they left.



The fresh air was a welcome shock to Snape after the oppressive damp of the Muggle church. He didn't like them. He found them too restricting, too circumscribed, too insistent on that way or no way.

He was also grateful to be able to put some distance between himself and Hermione.

The girl had been hurt by his attitude this morning, that much had been obvious. And, he noticed, that she was again fighting to keep it from him. And there were moments, when she was thinking of something else, that the chill left her voice, and he could imagine that last night had never happened.

Better that it should be so.

But he was still shaken by the encounter with the *other* in the church. Not so much its presence, although that had been bad enough, but the effect that it had had on her. It had clearly directed its will against her. And the astonishing fact was that she had managed to summon the courage to fight, folded into herself, oblivious to him, or anything else.

He had listened to her, the repeated No a plea barely louder than breath.

Of course, it would want her. It might find a use for his petty corruption, but it would be irresistibly drawn to her strength. To the power offered by the perversion of good to its own purpose.

He wondered what it had offered her. What she had refused.

He had told her that he had held her to prevent her from falling, and so he had – in a way. But that wasn't the whole truth. He had wanted in some way to support her, to offer something to her. Not to let her struggle alone.

She had barely responded to him as they left the building.

Yes, much better that it should be so.

She had, unknowingly, succeeded in awakening something, deep inside him. A possibility that scared him too much to look at, other than obliquely. And he had deliberately pushed her away to protect himself from that feeling.

He had never claimed to be a nice person.

She was stalking a few paces in front of him now, intent on Hester's cottage. Her body language was as rigid and rejecting as he had ever seen it. Suppressing his thoughts with the ruthlessness of long practice, he followed her to the far side of the churchyard.

She was examining the front door of the cottage as he closed the metal gate behind him. Coming up behind her, he stopped at a safe distance, and said:

"I assume that it is warded."

"Yes," she said, without turning.

She drew her wand, obviously preparing to cast. He interrupted her before she could say anything.

"Do you really think that is wise?"

This time she did face him. Her expression was closed and her eyes were angry.

"That *thing* knows we are here," she explained, in a measured voice. For an instant he heard an echo of his own tone, when explaining something obvious to an obtuse class. "Concealing our presence is

pointless. On that basis, I would have thought we should opt for speed. I have no idea how long it's going to take Draco to find suitable... food... I don't want to be here when they get back."

Not just her.

He nodded curtly, trying to not to feel that he should have seen that for himself. She had returned her attention to the door.

"I can't detect anything particularly complex here." She raised her wand again. "*Alohomora.*"

The door swung open.

"Of course," she continued, for all the world as if she was giving him a tutorial, "I expect that the various detecting charms are now fully registering our presence."

She stepped over the threshold before he could say anything. Perversely discomfited that she had preceded him, Snape followed. He labelled the feeling annoyance, without examining it too closely.

The layout of the interior was familiar, both from the previous evening, and that first visit so many years ago. There was very little furniture, even less than he, himself, possessed. Doors led off the room, to bedrooms and a bathroom, as he recalled. The room extended beyond the living area into what, for want of a better term, could be called a kitchen. It contained an enamel sink and an elderly cooker. Both were chipped and dirty, and didn't look

as if they had been recently used. Opposite was a large cupboard, with one door missing. The long, wooden, table was still bare, and he could see that the rough top showed clear signs of being regularly scrubbed. The edge nearest the centre of the room was cut and jagged, as if a sharp blade had been driven into it repeatedly. He didn't want to think about the sort of use the table might have seen.

There were no signs of occupation, human or otherwise.

At the far end was a door, roughly painted white, with a gate latch on it.

He watched, as Hermione passed through the kitchen, with a brief glance of distaste, and began to peer carefully at the white door.

He swung his gaze away from her, and found himself looking at the fireplace, now cold. The chairs were in the same positions as he remembered. He shivered.

Himself, standing in front of the blazing fire. Draco Malfoy, on his knees... leaning in... hungry... empty...

"Severus..."

Her voice brought him back to himself. His stomach lurched, and he breathed deeply through his mouth to quieten the nausea.

He turned. She had come away from the door, and was looking at him with an expression that he couldn't quite place. Reluctant concern might be closest to it.

"What?" he said rather sharply. Pushing her away again.

She looked as if she was going to ask a question, but then decided better of it.

"The door off the kitchen leads to the cellars."

"I know." Again sharp. She ignored it.

"It's warded, but apparently no more so than the front door."

He nodded. She seemed to be waiting for something. A rather tense silence fell between them. Snape began to feel uneasy under her scrutiny.

"Was there something else?" He couldn't quite bring himself to say her name. "I understood you to be in some haste."

A flash of irritation, and she looked away.

"It seems rather easy, wouldn't you say?" she said carefully. "Given that there might be something valuable down there, I would have thought that Malfoy would have set a better guard on it."

He opened his mouth to snap at her again, and felt the will to do so drain away. It was a sensible observation. And, under the circumstances, she had a right to a sensible response. He shut his eyes, feeling tired again, wanting, yet again, to be out of the place, out of the situation.

"Severus..." Her voice again. This time with a distinct edge of worry, mixed with exasperation. "What is going on? Is there something *else* you haven't told me?"

He shook his head.

"If Hester's original work is down there, then the wards up here are mainly for show," he said, sidestepping her question. He continued, more out of an impulse to stop her enquiring further. "I was working on the potion at Lucius Malfoy's family home in France. Shortly after I had to stop, I gather that the writings... ah... left... his possession. They were lost, to all intents and purposes. However, Hester's works have a strong affinity for this place. I suspect they somehow returned to the place she created for them."

Hermione digested this.

"So, they're likely to be concealed, and protected. Can you find them, and get past the protection?"

She was entitled to honesty on this point, at least.

"I don't know," he said finally, as flatly as he knew how, not wishing to pursue the discussion.

She seemed to accept that, although she looked as if she wanted to object.

"Shall we get on with it?" he suggested curtly, forestalling any further conversation.

After a moment she turned and went back to the cellar door. Snape followed close behind her. This time she wasn't going to go plunging in, if he could help it. If Draco Malfoy had left any surprises down there they were likely to be nasty and unsubtle, but reasonably simple. If *Hester Allworthy* had left any traps, then they were in trouble.

Tapping the door with her wand Hermione

muttered a few words under her breath and the door swung open.

Before she could take the first steps down there he said: "Wait."

"We're in a hurry, remember," she said tartly, not pausing.

He reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder to restrain her. She froze as if he had slapped her. He made an effort to modify his tone of voice.

"Let me go first." She didn't move. "Please."

He thought for a moment that she was going to shake off his hand. Then, she took a pace back.

"As you wish," she said neutrally.

She had only given a little ground, and he found himself uncomfortably close to her, as he moved past. He caught the faint scent of her soap, and now he couldn't avoid noticing that her eyes were reddened from her distress in the church. Despite his attempts at distancing himself, the sight still made his throat tighten. He opened his mouth, half intending to say something... anything... but before he could, she had turned away, to give him room to move freely.

He took one step down the stone stairs, and then paused as the enclosed well was suddenly illuminated.

"Alternatively, I could just let you break your neck," commented Hermione, acidly, from behind him.

It sounded like she had given the option

some consideration. He supposed he couldn't really criticise her for that.

Carefully, they both descended the stairs.

The cellar ran the whole length of the house, with stone pillars supporting the weight of the building above. Pillars, together with some strategically placed charms, Snape suspected. He had never been much concerned with the mechanics of these things. The light from Hermione's wand threw the contents of the cellar into relief, as she emerged from the stairs behind him.

This showed more obvious signs that someone lived there. There was a workbench, upon which stood various items of equipment related to potion making — flasks, stands, jars. Malfoy appeared to have left a grubby red handkerchief lying there as well. There was another fireplace, roughly under where the upstairs one would be, also cold, but this one contained a cauldron. There were some bookcases, upon which a number of books and scrolls were rather haphazardly scattered.

Like a moth to a flame, Hermione moved towards the books. Snape would have smiled at that, if the situation between them hadn't been quite so uncomfortable. He constantly forgot how single minded she could be when in pursuit of something.

He didn't have time to follow that line of

thought, as she had returned to him, a mildly disgusted look on her face.

"Nothing useful over there. Basic manuals, standard reference works. He's even got his 'Magical Drafts and Potions' from the first year." The contempt in her tone was obvious. This time Snape's mouth actually twitched, despite himself. Fortunately she didn't notice, already heading for the fireplace.

He moved over to the workbench, unable to prevent himself from casting a professional eye over it. The scattered disorganisation of it caused him to growl in irritation.

"It's at times like this I wonder why I bother teaching at all," he remarked sourly to himself.

"You shouldn't have encouraged him with all those extra house points," came the swift rejoinder.

He looked up, quickly enough to catch the changing expression on her face. She had been absorbed in her study of the cauldron and obviously spoken without thinking. Her face was now carefully schooled, but he hadn't missed her sudden apprehension about his reaction. He winced inwardly, and looked away.

He was handling this badly, even by his standards.

He picked up the red cloth and examined it. It was stiff with some sort of dried liquid, and appeared to have shards of glass embedded in it. He sniffed it gingerly. The smell was familiar.

"This cloth was soaked with Hester's potion," he announced flatly.

"Malfoy has a sample?" asked Hermione, turning away from the cauldron. Was it his imagination or could he detect an edge of relief to her voice that the subject had changed.

Snape cast his eye over the bench. Now the contempt was his.

"Well, he has a potion soaked piece of cloth. I see no signs that he has been able to replicate any quantity of the potion, even as far as determining the base ingredients."

"Certainly not if the cauldron is anything to go by," agreed Hermione. "And," she added, "I think that if Malfoy had any of the base he would have used it to enhance his own abilities, never mind the... other... properties."

Snape nodded. That was undeniably true. The Malfoy he had seen the night before had not looked like someone with increased physical and magical capacity.

Hermione came over to him, to look dubiously at the cloth. Cautiously, she reached out and touched it with one finger. She jerked back as if it had burnt her. She shuddered.

"I can *feel* it," she whispered, touching her hand to her cheek where it had been grazed.

Snape quashed his rising sense of nausea. The other had tasted her blood. She was now as sensitive to it, as it was to her.

How had she found the strength to resist it?

Meanwhile, Hermione had turned quickly away from the bench.

"So where would she have hidden it then?"

He didn't even pretend to misunderstand the non-sequitur.

"A good question." He began to pace, examining the walls of the cellar.

It made sense that the woman's works would be here somewhere. The... creature... had returned here — to her place — not to Malfoy's castle. Draco Malfoy had sought to extract the secret of the potion here. Hester exerted a powerful pull on those entwined with her, whether by blood or shared evil.

He wondered if that applied to him as well.

"So, if they're here, they're hidden," she stated. "Presumably, too well for Draco to find."

They began to search. They examined scratches on the walls, cracks and chips in the mortar, jointing along the vaults, unevennesses in the flagstone floor, as swiftly as they could whilst being as thorough as possible. Snape felt his eyes begin to blur with the strain of peering for microscopic clues to the mind of a madwoman.

He began to be possessed with a strange sense of unreality. He was in the cellar of a house belonging to a man he loathed, trying the unearthing of the remains of a past that he had spent a significant number of years determinedly

burying. He was accompanied by a former pupil, who had little reason to even like him, let alone do... what she had done... for him.

He stood up, easing off his back.

"Come on Hester, you evil old witch," he muttered. "What have you done with the damned things."

Hermione looked up at that. She had had no more success that he.

"It must have been something very precious to her," she remarked. "Something she wanted to be certain wasn't found by anyone she didn't want."

"I wonder why Malfoy chose to put her in a cottage here rather than in France," he wondered aloud, more for something to distract his mind, than in any expectation of a response. He was surprised, when Hermione answered.

"Maybe he was living here at the time."

He looked at her suddenly.

"Malfoy owned *another* house here?"

"More than a house. A manor and about five or six parishes together with all the income. I found the royal grant at the Land Registry."

He felt a sour frustration building up.

"You didn't think to tell me this before?"

She looked defensive.

"Well, at the time, I seem to recall that we were more concerned with actually avoiding Malfoy, than delving into his family history," she said with asperity.

She had a point there.

He looked away. There was some significance to this, he knew.

And then it came to him. Hermione had asked the question in the church and he had passed over it.

"Come on," he said abruptly. "We're looking in the wrong place."

He strode towards the door. He was aware that she was following, from the sudden shaft of light that arced up the stairs in front of him. He walked straight out of the cottage into the cold air, back along the path, and into the churchyard. He paused at the small door they had used to enter earlier, and waited for Hermione to catch up.

"Not that I'm not grateful to be out of that place," she said slightly breathlessly, "but could you explain to me what is going on?"

"The writings aren't in the cottage."

"They're in the church?" she began, puzzled. "But where would they..." She trailed off and he saw the light of dawning comprehension. She was nodding. "Of course. Dorothea's tomb."

"You asked why there would be a Malfoy tomb in the church."

She already had her wand out, and was tapping the door with it. It opened as smoothly as before.

"Who would look for something belonging to a wizard in a Christian place of worship? Especially something belonging to a Dark Witch."

They were back in the dingy vestry. Purposefully, now, they climbed the stairs to the main body of the building. Threading their way around the pews, they got back to the ugly, low, black tomb.

"All we have to do is work out how to get into it," murmured Hermione softly. She began to trace the design with her hand, thinking, sketching out the snake and moving towards the circled M.

With a premonition, that he couldn't really explain, Snape's hand shot out and seized her wrist before it could touch the rune. Her startled eyes met his.

"Careful," he said. "It would be inconvenient if whatever is here were to be activated by touch."

She seemed to be breathing slightly fast, and he could feel the rapid pulse in her wrist under his grip. She nodded slowly.

"What do you suggest?" Her voice sounded a little unsteady to him.

"I would propose that you cast a disclosure charm to see if anything is revealed."

She nodded again but didn't move. He waited. Finally she said, a little diffidently:

"Um... I'm right handed."

He was still gripping her right wrist firmly. Discomfited, he dropped it, and moved back a fraction.

Hermione tapped the tomb with her wand, muttering the words of the charm.

An eerie, greenish, glow surrounded the ornate, black, sepulchre. Currents whirled and

edded within the phosphorescence. As the disturbances settled, it was clear that there was a vivid patch of green above the M.

In addition there were intense areas of colour in the centre of each side of the tomb. Within that colour symbols were forming. A vertical line, crossed with a left to right descending oblique stroke at the north end, a lightning slash at the south point, what looked like a triangular P at the west, and a jagged fishhook at the east.

A Dark Rune spell.

Snape nodded, thanking whoever he might that he had managed to stop Hermione touching it. His guts lurched at the thought of what Hester's booby trap might have consisted of. He wanted as much information as possible, before he went anywhere near it.

"What can you tell?" he asked quietly.

Hermione was shaking her head.

"Well, I don't mean to sound flippant, but it's almost like four catches and a handle. The charms around the sides have to be released first and then the top one... I would assume that it all has to be done in a certain order though." Her brow furrowed in thought.

"You are correct," he said, rising disquiet sharpening his tone again.

"Do you know the sequence?"

"I don't know the sequence for sure," he

replied carefully, "but I know enough to estimate the most probable combination."

She looked at her hands at that. After a few moments she looked up again, her face resolute. Whatever her internal debate had been, it was now resolved..

"Guesswork, then. You *know* how much I like that." She raised her wand. "Let's hope that you know as much about the Dark Arts as we always imagined. Which one first?"

She was looking at him tensely, obviously waiting for his instructions.

For a moment, he couldn't speak. She had been in that church, barely hours ago, and he had seen her terrified nearly senseless by the thing that looked like him. Now, even after his treatment of her, she was sitting here prepared to risk her safety, possibly her life, on his best guess.

"Hermione," he said eventually, "give me your wand. This should be my task."

She moved it away from him, looking annoyed.

"Don't be ridiculous." She said flatly. "In the first place this isn't your wand. In the second place, the Ministry will be alerted as soon as you touch the first seal. If they're not here by the time you reach the second one, they will be before the third one. Either you will be arrested, or the sequence will be wrong and hell knows what will happen. Assuming I'm not dead myself, or in custody for helping you, I'm going

to be faced with a half open tomb, with no idea how to proceed, together with that *thing* after me. I prefer to take my chances with your *estimate of the probabilities*, thank you."

Her tone brooked no argument, and he found he couldn't actually muster one that wasn't irrationally emotional.

For the first time, it truly struck him that she had proved to be a remarkable ally. Better than he had any right to expect. *Far* better than he deserved.

It also occurred to him that she would make a formidable enemy.

No wonder that thing preferred her to Draco Malfoy.

He suppressed a shudder at the thought.

"Do you know anything about Dark Runes?" he asked evenly. He doubted it. Dark Runes were decidedly not part of the general Hogwarts syllabus. Even in his days as a Death Eater, there had been few enough practitioners of that particular Dark Art.

Hermione shook her head. The set of her shoulders betrayed her apprehension about the whole process, but she was calm, and she held her wand in a steady hand.

"Very well, I shall try to explain as we go along."

He took a deep breath, and began to speak softly, precisely, outlining the steps as much to clarify his own mind as to inform Hermione.

"The tomb is aligned with the church. The minor runes are set at the north, south, east

and west centres of the tomb. They must be initiated in a certain sequence to activate the central one. In order to open the casket, the runes must be countered in reverse order."

This had better be right, Severus.

"The whole spell is formed from four interwoven powers, symbolised by the compass points. Nauthiz guides the power, Eoh invokes the transformation, Sygel activates the power of the four and Wynn compels obedience..." He was almost talking to himself now.

Time to make the decision.

"The South one first."

Hermione touched her wand to the centre of the south side of the tomb. Green light pulsed under the tip. He watched her eyes close briefly and her body go rigid. She was muttering words under her breath as the light flared briefly and then died.

The intense area of colour, delineated by the disclosure charm, faded to a muted glow.

She looked at him, breathing a little heavily. "That seemed to be right. What's next."

He let out a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding. The next choice was between the north rune and the west one. Would obedience come before power or not? The risks for Hermione in this were enormous. And she had little enough reason to trust him. He thought that Hester would have wanted to ensure that she

had compliance before unleashing any power.

His throat was dry and aching from the tension.

"The north rune," he said hoarsely.

Again, Hermione placed her wand, this time on the opposite side of the memorial. Again the surrounding luminescence flared. This time, a stronger reaction passed through her body. Her lips moved, but he couldn't hear the words. Another bright patch gradually faded.

This time, he could see her visibly pull herself together, as she removed her wand from the site of the rune charm. She nodded briefly.

"So far so good," she said, with a slight waver in her voice. "Next."

Half way there, he thought. Don't lose it now. Don't lose *her*.

"The west one."

Once more, the placing of the wand, and the flare of light. This time a tangible shudder passed through her, and a faint sound of pain escaped her lips. He fought the urge to touch her — to break her concentration now could prove fatal. As the light faded, and she began to relax, he could see her body sag slightly. Another poisonous spot went dull.

He could see the faint sheen of sweat on her forehead, and her throat moved in convulsive swallowing. He wanted to reach out to her, but she was closed to him, fighting to get her breathing under control.

"OK," she said shakily. "The east one I assume."
He just nodded.

She touched her wand to the final site, and this time her gasp was clearly audible. Now her hand trembled as she dispelled the last rune charm. The toxic miasma settled to a lacklustre throb.

Hermione sat back. He could see that she was trying to control the shaking in her limbs.

"Are you all right?" It was a stupid question, and he couldn't help himself.

She shot him a glance, and then nodded. She took some deep breaths to steady herself.

"What about the centre one?"

"It should be inactive now."

Damn, he was shaking himself.

She reached out and laid her wand on the centre M. There was a sudden flash of light and a grating noise. She pulled back, and they both watched the lid of the tomb shimmer faintly, and then phase out of existence.

Snappe leaned forward cautiously, to see what was inside.

There was a space, enclosed by black stone walls, about the size of a small adult woman. It did not contain the remains of Dorothea. In fact, it did not appear to contain anything at all.

Bitter disappointment and frustration welled up within him.

He could feel Hermione's eyes on him. He knew that she would have looked as well. His

mouth went dry. How did he tell her that he had put her through that for nothing?

Over his shoulder he was aware of her casting another disclosure charm. This one revealed nothing. She leant in to test the base.

In order to give himself time to think, he began to check the sides.

Nothing. There was no sign of anything there. That anything had ever been there.

He had been so certain that the sarcophagus held the answer...

"It's empty." Low and dangerous.

He could hear that the build up of tension and fear over the past two days was beginning to fray her voice. He stood up, trying to formulate a response. She stood as well, body so taut that he thought that, if he touched her, she might shatter.

"It's empty," she repeated, rising stress edging her tone.

Their gazes locked, and her expression was unreadable. Angry, scared... something else too shadowed for him to fathom... They were both silent for several moments.

Unable to control his own acrid sense of defeat, he retreated into his old, familiar, response pattern.

"Obviously," he said caustically.

Without warning, she drew her hand back and hit him hard, open handed, across the face. The force of the blow rocked him off balance.

Stinging pain flared across his cheek. He could feel it beginning to bruise. For the moment, fury had won out within her.

"You really are the most complete and utter bastard that I have ever met," she spat in low, venomous tones. Even he could detect the layered undercurrents in that statement.

Well, she undoubtedly has the right, Severus.

She had turned away from him, and her shoulders were rigid with tension. How the hell did he say he was sorry in any meaningful way?

"Hermione..." he began, uncertain of what exactly was going to follow.

She turned to face him, and raised her wand. He braced for another assault, but instead she took a step forward so she could touch his cheek with the tip. Her lips moved. The dull pain faded. He touched his face with his fingers. If there had been any bruising it appeared to have gone.

Once again, she had completely thrown him.

He was about to speak again, when she held up her hand.

"Don't, Severus, just don't." She looked away. "I need to go back to the pub I think. I need some rest."

He wasn't about to argue with her.

She turned and headed for the door of the church. Without another word, he followed.



The disruption to the wards on the cottage door had been obvious, even to Draco.

They had been here. *Her* and Snape. Snooping about. Invading his domain.

He was beginning to hate her more than he could believe possible. It was not enough that she had humiliated him at school. Now, she threatened to take his power away.

He was conscious of the dark figure behind him. He had managed to appease it for the time being.

A young girl. Barely eighteen, cycling home from school down deserted country lanes.

Her last mistake.

Lying in wait. Stopping her. Asking for directions. The *other* coming from behind. The chase. The capture. Pain, fear, and satisfaction.

One less Muggle polluting the world.

Food had calmed the insistent hunger gnawing at his guts, but not the panicky sense that control was passing from him.

The earlier experience in the church had shaken him. He had realised that the other's need for the Mudblood had very nearly overridden his tenuous domination. His grip was slipping. The other was drawing more and more from him, carelessly ripping at his essence, no longer bothering to excite, simply plunging him into cold terror. This power was beyond seduc-

tive. It threatened to consume his very being, snapping his last threads of self, one by one.

A hand rested on his shoulder. Hard, insistent, pressing him to his knees. He resisted the urge to plead like a child.

"It is nearly time," the sibilant voice murmured. "Time for you to enter."

Tendrils of ice spread down Draco's shoulder into his chest, then on through his guts and into his groin. The chill infused his entire body, diffuse at first, then focussing more and more intently, until, laser-like, it pierced his heart.

Pain knifed through him, stopping his breath. Distantly, he was aware of his heart ceasing to beat, paralysed by the internal glaciation.

He could feel existence slipping away from him and into the other. There was no more he and it... just a merging into they...

And there was a strange sense of double vision. He knew the other was touching him, and yet, he could feel his hand resting on the shoulder of another, the blonde head in front of him bowed in supplication. He could feel the fear, the pleading, the hatred, the desire...

Two bodies, one perception, no life.

And then sense of them ...her... was everywhere now... he... *they* could feel her presence splashing itself across their awareness like bold, sweeping, strokes of colour. They followed her trail, across the room, to the entrance to

the cellar. They touched the door, like a lover, tracing the path her fingers had made.

They drunk in the residue of the charms, the lingering trace of her perfume.

And that moment when she was aware of him. They could feel the pain, the anger, the need, the *wanting*... they reached out to taste the air, sipping at the dregs of stale arousal.

They tracked the fading tension into the cellar. She had been there for a long time, they could feel it. Searching, probing, seeking... Her essence was everywhere, mingled with *his*... the one who would take her, but dare not...

They felt a brief contempt for the one who could not seize the prize offered so freely.

She was so much more deserving of them...

Yet, a faint disquiet arose within them. They did not all want this. A weaker side feared her. But the stronger presence stilled it. It would absorb and grow.

She had sought something too. Knowledge. The knowledge of Hester. It was not here, they knew that already.

They needed the knowledge, and she would find it for them. She would release it in preparation for their joining. Then, she would be ready for them, truly worthy of them. She would surrender to them and they would be invincible in the power of two worlds.

The task would be the proving.

Then she would come to them. They could feel the pull.

She would come. She could not resist. She wanted what only they could offer her.

The time for appeasement was over.



Hermione fought her way out of a fitful sleep, one which was punctuated with fleeting dreams – and a nagging, pervasive, feeling that something obvious had been overlooked. Not quite the anxiety dreams of her student days, but something similar.

Beverly had been a little surprised to see them back so early, but gave them the key to their room without comment. Once inside, Hermione had simply removed as many clothes as she could, whilst still remaining decent, and collapsed on the bed.

Moments later, she had been asleep.

Waking, she realised that she was wrapped in the quilt, which was odd, as she hadn't recalled actually getting into bed as such.

He must have done it.

Oh dear Gods, this was getting complicated.

A dull ache in her right hand reminded her of what had happened in the church. Inwardly, she cringed, both at having hit him at all – although part of her was inclined to feel that he had richly

deserved it – and at the additional turmoil that would now have to be sorted out.

...complete and utter bastard... her words came back to her.

Bastard for the wild goose chase? *Not his fault that the tomb was empty.*

Bastard for getting her into this in the first place? *Wasn't it you who approached him, my girl?*

Bastard for treating her like he had this morning, after last night? *Yes, well...*

She rolled over on to her back, and sat up slowly.

Evening had begun to fall, and the room was full of dull twilight. There were none of the fiery hues of a crisp, winter sunset, simply a progressive blurring round the edges, as unremarkable day imperceptibly darkened into night.

Snape was sitting, staring out of the window again.

He hadn't drawn the curtains, and the room began to fill with distorted shadows, thrown by the street lighting. He gave no sign that he had heard her moving. She drew her knees up, hugging her arms round them. Resting her chin, she just observed him in silence.

His body was tense – no surprises there, she mused. She could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she'd seen him relaxed. She pushed that thought aside. But his shoulders were slightly bowed, almost an expression of defeat.

Despite her best intentions, her heart went out

to him again. She had always had a tendency to flare up and then quickly forgive. The anger and frustration and fear of the last days having now been vented at him, her compassion was reasserting itself. She wondered what would happen if she just got up, and put her arms around him.

Best not to. Enough damage has been done for one day.

Half-light finally ceded to darkness as she watched. His silhouette gained definition as the contrast sharpened. Silence stretched between them, not oppressive, yet not restful. More infused with a sense that their existence had somehow been suspended in a moment of unresolved probabilities. That the tossed coin had landed on its edge, leaving them neither heads nor tails, both wave and particle. An oddly perfect equilibrium.

The first move would disturb the system, send it spinning back into motion. The coin would fall, the probability would be determined.

The game of consequences would begin again.

As it must.

"Severus..."

He didn't move.

"Severus, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologise for." His voice was expressionless.

Well, at least he had spoken to her, even if he still hadn't moved.

"I shouldn't have hit you."

A long pause, then: "I truly believed that the tomb held the key to the enchantment." Still dull, lacking any of the familiar bite.

"Well, yes," she conceded, "it seemed only logical."

"The logic was clearly flawed."

There was another unresponsive period of silence.

Hermione began to push the pieces round in her mind. Nothing in the cottage. An empty wizard tomb in a Muggle church. A *Malfoy* tomb at that. No better wards on the cottage than Draco could devise, whereas the tomb itself...

"Severus," she said cautiously, "doesn't it strike you as just a little odd, that there should be such heavy enchantments on an empty tomb. I mean, it's a lot of effort to go to to protect a useless piece of ugly stonework."

"Who knows how her mind worked?" he said with a trace of his usual ill humour.

Hermione paid him little attention. Her mind was still chasing something elusive about the tomb. The enchantments...

She nearly had it, she could feel it.

"Severus," she said again. He didn't answer, but she continued nevertheless. "When I was opening the tomb, you named the runes and mentioned their properties. Tell me about them again."

He looked at her for the first time since she had woken, but the darkness was now so deep that she could only see the movement, not the features. For

a moment, she thought that he was going to refuse, but then he just shrugged, uninterestedly.

"If you insist."

"Yes. I do."

He looked back out the window again.

"The rune of the north point is Nauthiz. It is the general rune of constraint. In its dark uses it activates repressed needs, particularly the emotional," he paused briefly, "...and sexual... ones, and guides that power. The more extreme the need, the stronger the power."

The darkness seemed to be making it easier for him to talk. His voice was freer, more confident, more comfortable in the role of teacher.

"The rune of the east is Eoh, or the death rune. It represents the yew tree, which, in some readings, is thought to trap the souls of the dead. Dark Rune practitioners use it for location spells. It can also serve to gather and hold power, and as an invocation of profound change or transition."

Hermione closed her eyes, and for an instant she was back at Hogwarts, listening to him lecture on Shrinking Solutions. Only the awareness that she was sitting on a bed, half-wrapped in a quilt, told her she was elsewhere.

"West is marked by Wynn, the dark rune of control and compulsion. It forces others to submit to your will and authority. And the south rune is Sygel, symbol of invincibility... inevitable triumph. It is also used to activate

the other runes."

He fell silent again, lost in his own thoughts. Hermione tossed this information about her mind. She could see the pattern, slowly coming clear. But he had missed one.

"You said those were the minor enchantments. What about the centre one?" she prodded gently.

"The centre one," he repeated, almost reluctantly. "Yes, I suppose you may as well know. The centre rune — the symbol on the sword hilt and the bottle — is Ior. It invokes movement, transitions, shifts. It opens the mind to the influence of other minds. Some call it the rune of transportation. It serves to unite the streams of power." There was a hesitation. "Some readings also call it the rune of the fetch."

Hermione sat very still. Her speculations about the tomb were halted dead by her dawning understanding of, precisely, why Snape had been so devastated the previous night. He was still speaking, his voice dry and precise, devoid of expression.

"The part of man that is the beast. The part that may be ridden between the worlds. The part that displays the inner nature of the one that it serves."

It wasn't just the fact that she had thought it was him. *He* had thought it was him as well. Recognised it as himself, in some way. His inner nature given form. His fetch.

Gods.

She pulled herself together.

"Severus," she said sharply. "That thing is not you."

He gave no signs of having heard her.

"Are you listening to me? I said that thing is not you." Her voice was harsh, demanding, emphasising each word. "If it's the inner nature of anyone it's Draco Malfoy. He's the one feeding it with his nasty little fantasies. It certainly doesn't serve *you*, not if the state you're in at the moment is anything to go by."

He flinched at that, and she wondered if she had gone too far. Then, he drew a shaky breath.

"You thought it was me." He sounded uncertain this time.

"Yes, and I told you I was wrong. I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I really wish you could accept that. Because, I don't know what else to say, or do, to convince you otherwise." Frustration was giving an edge of exasperation to her voice.

"You don't know what sort of a man I am. What I did." Derisive self-cruelty was creeping back into his voice. Hermione barely resisted the impulse to go over and shake him.

"No. I don't. Not fully. I don't imagine I ever will. But I know that you were a Death Eater, and I'm perfectly prepared to accept that you did things that I would consider repellent. But we're not talking about a man who committed repulsive acts, which he now appears to deeply

regret, I might add, we're talking about evil given human form. I don't know why it looks like you. As it must have come back with us, I can only assume that it could just as easily have taken on *my* appearance. It may be many things, but it is *not* your fetch. No matter what magics Hester used to construct the gateway,"

She was breathing heavily, irritation heavily overlaid with desperate need to make the man in front of her hear her.

"That thing is evil," she stated quietly, deliberately gentling her voice. "I *know* this. It touched me, it kissed me, it tasted my blood," she still found it hard not to shudder at the remembrance. "What you were... what you *are*... has nothing to do with it. When it comes near me, I can still feel the... filth... of it. If there was any of it within you, I would have felt it. There isn't. I can assure you of that."

"And, under the circumstances, I think I would know." It was the closest she dared to get to a direct reference to what had happened between them the night before.

"Hermione, I don't want your pity." Quiet. Hurt.

"You don't have it." Careful response.

"Then, why?" Odd tone. Defensive, almost plaintive.

So many reasons...

She sensed that he was far too fragile to accept the whole truth.

"Because I care about you. Because I needed

you. But mostly, because I wanted to."

"Women do not fuck me just because they want to." Simple, bitter, brutal, statement.

"I do not fuck men just because I pity them." Matching him tone for tone.

A challenge issued and accepted.

She uncurled herself from the quilt, ignoring the protests of her stiff limbs. Slipping off the bed, she walked softly over to where he was still sitting by the window. She leant past him to pull the curtains closed. Then, she sat on the sofa beside him, and drew him close to her. At first, he just rested, rigid, against her. Then, suddenly, he turned into her embrace and wrapped both his arms around her like a drowning man.

They sat, holding each other, for a long time. Then, he pulled away from her a little. She could see the outline of his head, just distinguishable in the glow filtering through the curtains. He bent and his lips touched hers.

Gentler than before, and more sure. A slow exploration of her mouth, sometimes deep, sometimes barely touching, tongue softly tracing the outline of her lips. She responded, tasting him, nibbling at his sensual mouth, burying one hand in his hair. He ran a finger along her jawbone and down her neck, brushing over her breast. She shivered in pleasure, arching against him, feeling an ache begin deep within her. His mouth left hers to explore

the same path as his finger, along her jaw, and down her neck to pause, at the base, tasting her skin. She drew in the scent of him, cypress and musk, mixed with roses — her soap again — and let out a sigh of pleasure.

He stilled suddenly, pulling her fiercely to him and burying his face in her hair. She felt a shudder run through him, swiftly suppressed.

"Hermione," he whispered, voice muffled against her shoulder. "I can't do this... not now..."

She put a hand up to stroke his hair.

"It's all right," she murmured softly.

"...that *thing*... all this... I need time... I'm sorry..."

She was still caressing his hair gently.

"It's all right," she repeated. "I understand. I need to get it sorted out in my head too. Just... don't push me away... please..."

His embrace tightened in response.

Once more they simply held each other in the darkness.



As they sat there, Hermione began to remember their other problem.

"Severus," she said without moving.

"Hmm?"

"I think you might have been right about the tomb."

That got his attention, and he pulled away

enough to be clearly audible.

"What do you mean?"

"I think it does hold the key to the enchantment."

He waited for her to explain. She sat up as she strove to marshal her thoughts.

"I think we were looking at it the wrong way. You said that the minor enchantments performed in the correct sequence activated the central one — the transportation rune."

She could feel him nodding.

"Well, if you bound the same enchantments, in the same sequence, into some sort of object, wouldn't it act like the talisman did?"

She felt him go very still. She continued, thinking aloud.

"The tomb might act as a gateway, but it couldn't be a talisman, it's not exactly portable. And there's nothing in the tomb from that other place to activate it. I would have felt it, like I did with the potion. And I was pretty upset when I was touching it, and it didn't activate anything either..."

She needed light. She disentangled herself from him and got up from the sofa, searching for the table lamp. Finding it and flicking it on, the room was bathed in a muted rose glow. After so long sitting in the dark, she blinked even at that, little, brightness. Snape was still sitting on the sofa, watching her intently.

"The tomb didn't contain Hester's work — it

was Hester's work," she concluded. "She must have put the sequence on the tomb to... to what... leave a message to her descendants... I don't really expect it matters... Anyway, we need to work out a way of binding those spells into an object."

She began to look around the room.

"We need something to act as a talisman."

Snape had not responded.

"I should have seen it," he eventually said, bitterness tinting his voice again.

Hermione was only half listening.

"What?" she said distractedly.

"I was just thinking that it's a good job that one of us hasn't completely lost the use of their brains."

That got through to her.

"Oh, for pity's sake, don't start that again. We both missed it. Our mistake. End of story. Now, if I'm going to recreate this thing, I need you to help me."

Totally wrapped up in working out what she was about to do, she turned to him, and fixed him with an unconscious glare, speaking in exactly the same, impatient, tone that she used to chivvy Cyrus in the lab.

"Releasing those seals was damned hard. Binding them is going to be harder. And, as you pointed out, I have no knowledge whatsoever of dark runes. You're going to have to tell me what to do. Again. Now, do you think that it matters what we use as a talisman?"

She turned to pull out a small drawer, and managed to miss the look of utter, dumbfounded, amazement on Snape's face, and the beginnings of something much deeper.

She rummaged through the meagre contents of the drawer and pulled out a small, hard backed, book. She looked at it, and sighed.

"I don't suppose the Gideon Bible is really the right choice."

"And, although they richly deserve to have something awful done to them, I don't think that any of these will serve either." His voice behind her was still threaded with sarcasm, but the tenor of it had changed. Surprised, she looked round. He was looking with distaste at a small shelf, upon which someone had placed an assortment of cheap ornaments.

"Oh Gods, I'd forgotten how appalling Muggle tat can be sometimes. I think that a large hammer is the only answer to that lot."

"At least none of them are moving or waving," he pointed out dryly.

And, at least, he seemed to be back and functioning again, she thought with relief. Disarming the enchantments in the church had left her weak and shaking. She really didn't want to figure out how to actively create them on her own.

"We need to find something *suitable* to use," she said, a smile tugging at her lips.

"The enchantments are powerful," he responded.

"Something metal would probably be best. Conductive properties are also useful, although not essential."

They resumed their search of the room.

In the end it was Hermione who found it, tucked at the back of another drawer.

"How about this?" she asked.

She held up a metal letter opener about eight inches long. It looked like a small dagger, although it was far too blunt to ever be any use as a weapon. It was clumsily decorated, and, whilst it might once have been silvered, the blade was now blotched with tarnish.

Snape came over to her, and took it in his hands, turning it over and over, as he examined it. It was dull in the subdued lighting.

"Yes, that should do. The metal is inferior, but should suffice."

She felt a sudden clutch of fear. They had reached the moment of truth — when she actually had to put theory into practice. And once again, she had no way of cross-checking, or testing, her theory beforehand. She had only her own instinct, and the fact that Snape hadn't denied her. Suddenly, there was something that she needed to know.

"Tell me," she said, "do you *know* how to do this, or will it be your *best estimate*? Honestly."

He was very quiet.

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, *honestly*, no, I don't know for certain that this will work. However, your success in the church gives me cause for some confidence."

She noted that he hadn't said *our* success. There was still a long way to go.

"Shall we get on with it, then?" she said, a little more harshly than she intended, wanting to do this before her nerve failed her.

He just nodded.

"First, the talisman has to be aligned with the points of the compass."

She nodded. Moving to the window she placed her wand on the sofa, and murmured a simple direction finding charm. Her wand spun, so the tip was pointing north. Hermione laid the dagger beside the wand, with the blade pointing south.

"Yes, that way round is correct." Snape had come up behind her. He drew breath to continue the instruction, but something had occurred to her. A blunt dagger was no use to anyone. She cut across him.

"Wait, there's something I want to do first."

Picking up her wand, she touched the metal trinket. When she pulled it away, the ornament had been transfigured into a wickedly sharp stiletto.

He didn't say anything, but she felt a perverse need to explain herself anyway.

"It made me feel better," she said a little defensively.

"Are you ready now?" was his only response.

Neutral, unchallenging.

"Yes."

She seated herself on the sofa. She suspected that this was going to be hard. She didn't want to collapse half way through and disrupt the spells.

"Then, first, you need to set the rune *Ior* into the talisman."

Rune setting, she understood. The outline of the rune was traced onto the talisman, and then a small enchantment bound it there. The tracing had to be exact. Even the slightest error could lead to unwanted results. Generally, unpleasant ones. She raised her wand to begin.

"Wait. The rune has to be exactly drawn."

"I understand the proportions."

"The proportions for the dark runes are different."

He sat behind her, close enough for her to be aware of his chest, barely touching her back. His right arm reached around her side, and he laid his hand over the back of hers, matching fingers, always careful not to touch the wand. Guiding her movements, he marked the shape onto the blade of the little dagger, as she spoke the words of binding. As she finished, it flared bright. The light faded and she could see the *M* figure, now engraved into the patchy metal.

"Now for the *other* enchantments." His breath was warm on the side of her neck. She swallowed and nodded.

He moved her hand to place her wand at the

right hand tip of the miniature pommel, the east point. Carefully, he traced a sharp, fishhook, shape. She began to repeat the words of binding.

As she spoke, she could feel her wand begin to tremble, and tensed to, physically, steady it. Dimly, she was aware of the pressure of another hand on hers, keeping it in place. She could feel something welling up from under the wand, something unclean, something that was searching, seeking... it was looking for her, she knew it... she could feel the tendrils winding themselves around her... into her... the other hunting her...building its power... preparing her for their joining...

And then, the binding was done and the sensation faded.

She was breathing fast, and her heart was pounding. Snape was holding her right hand very tightly in his. His touch steadied her. Swallowing, she simply said: "Next one."

He shifted her wand to the opposite pommel tip now, using it to mark out an angular P at the west point. Once more, she began the spell.

Now, she could feel it again. And this time, it had found her and she would submit to it. It would mould her into its own, it would control her, shape her, direct her. She would do its bidding unquestioningly. And there would be glory in it, yes, and riches. It would reward her for serving faithfully. And there was pressure, an

almost tangible thing, forcing her to kneel, prostrate herself, beg to be part of this overwhelming being, beg to surrender her will to the darkness. Some part of her felt her body begin to obey, and she tried to cry, no, but there was no one to heed her protest. Clinging to her self, with every ounce of willpower that she possessed, she choked out the final words of the binding.

And the compulsion lessened, and was gone.

Her breath came in painful gasps, and her heart was racing. In fact, it was beating so hard that it was creating a physical echo, resounding off the back of her ribcage. Then her perception cleared, and she became aware of Snape's left arm across her diaphragm, holding her against him, painfully tightly, so closely that his heart-beat seemed to be an extension of her own. She rested her head back against his shoulder, as her breathing slowed. She lifted her left arm a little shakily, and laid it along his, squeezing his hand where it held her, in mute gratitude for supporting her, grounding her, helping her through this. In response, his grip loosened a little, and his own breathing relaxed.

"Next," she managed. Her voice sounded old and croaky, as if she had somehow become the ghost of Hester.

This time, he guided her right hand to the top of the dagger hilt, the north end. He made one straight vertical stroke, and then crossed

it with a sharply raked, left to right, oblique stroke. She began to cast for the third time.

And was plunged into sickening, formless, grey despair. She was empty, she was nothing, she was powerless, she *needed*... oh great Gods how she *needed*... there were things in the grey — greasy, roiling, leathery, slimy, unclean, things that wanted to touch her, drain her, use her to fill their emptiness. She was hollow, not flesh, not muscle, not sinew, not bone, just a diaphanous membrane, laid over aching, agonising, gnawing *hunger*. Something had to fill this, it wasn't possible to exist like this, she would die, she deserved to die, she had to have something to sustain her, something to maintain her will, that faint spark guttering in the void. And, she saw the thin thread of proffered salvation, the guide that would show her how to use this, focus this, send out her own hunger to feed from others, others who had what she did not, what she needed to possess for survival...

Clinging to the diminishing flame with all her might, she fought the need to seize that thread, to reach out like a falling man to grasp the branch, knowing that it would break, but clutching anyway...

Syllable by painful syllable, she completed the third binding.

The void began to dissolve around her, and her normal surroundings emerged. This time,

she was physically shaking, and she realised that her face was wet with tears, her breath coming in jerky sobs. Snape was still holding her tightly, rocking her gently now, his chin on her shoulder. His mouth was close to her ear, so close she could feel the whisper of his breath, hear the low, hypnotic, murmur of his voice.

"Come back, it's all right, you're safe, you're not alone, come back..."

Gentle, rhythmic movement... soft, repeated words of comfort... all falling into the lingering memory of the void. Inexpressibly soothing.

Her body began to quieten, and her breathing to even, but she didn't yet trust herself to speak. Instead, she again reached blindly for him with her free hand. He stilled, and fell silent, as she held on to him, turning his hand so he could return her grip with equal fierceness.

To her relief, he did not ask if she was all right. He simply waited until she was calm, before he said: "The worst should be over now."

She certainly hoped so. Steeling herself, she said, "Last one then." Her voice was still slightly shaky, but he made no comment.

He placed her wand at the tip of the dagger blade. In one firm stroke, he drew a jagged, lightning slash, S figure. Closing her eyes, Hermione prepared to complete the enchantment.

He had said that the worst was over. And so it was, in one sense. And in another, this was

the hardest one of all. This time she felt no fear, no compulsion, no hunger. She was suffused with light, a bright, hard, glittering light. Light that had physical form, light that could be moulded, shaped, wielded. With this light there was nothing that she couldn't do, nothing that she couldn't achieve. She was brilliant, beautiful, powerful, glorious. All the abasement, the suffering made sense now – how could anyone be worthy of such magnificence without being purified first. Now she had the light, she was the light, the light was her, together they were Goddess. She was invincible. She would conquer. The universe would not dare deny her.

All she had to do was reach out and it would be hers... just surrender... just reach out...

And, in the back of her mind, she knew that it was a lie, an empty promise, fool's gold... but she wanted it anyway, wanted it with a longing she could never acknowledge, and she wondered, just for a moment, what she could do if she just took it, claimed it as hers...

A tiny shift was all it would take, a change of emphasis here, a juxtaposition of words there, and she would be radiance given form... she could do it... she could see just where the alteration needed to be made... she heard the words in her mind, formed the shape of them in her mouth...

...and knew that she couldn't do it. That the price was too high. That she wasn't prepared to surrender

that stubborn, persistent, inquisitive, bossy, driven, demanding part of herself in return for false glory grown from a handful of dust and ashes.

Anger began to burn inside her. Anger at the lies, the deception, the manipulation.

How dare it do this to me? How dare it?

Fury lent a hard edge to her voice, as she bit off the words of the final binding.

The vision faded, and the light took on a much more mundane, Muggle, quality. She was shaking again, this time from anger, and pure physical tension. Nausea swam in the pit of her stomach. She opened her eyes. The very ordinariness of the room brought her to some control.

Snape was still holding her to him. She felt his voice in her ear.

"It is done."

At that, she let her wand drop out of her hand. Before she could move, his hand closed over hers, and he brought it back, crossing both their arms around her body. She could feel him trembling against her back, his breath in her hair.

Finally, he asked the question.

"Are you all right?"

Was she? She didn't know. Was that what Dark Magic felt like? What it offered you? Was that what it had offered him?

"I... I'm not sure. I need some time to think about this."

He didn't press her.

"Just tell me something," she said suddenly, needing to articulate at least one of the questions. "Is that what Dark Magic always feels like?"

He was silent for a moment. When he did speak his voice was cautious.

"It is different for each individual. But it is never an easy thing to wield."

"Why would anyone ever want to touch something that... dreadful?" she burst out. She felt him stiffen, and realised, too late, what she had said. She tightened her grip on his arms to stop him pulling away from her.

"Severus..." she began, but he interrupted her.

"No," he said calmly, "you have the right to ask the question." He was quiet again, and although his grip had loosened, he did not let go. She was beginning to realise that his long silences meant that he was struggling with something he found difficult to verbalise. So she waited. Eventually, he continued, very slowly, "It is difficult for those... who have never been completely dependent on the whims of others... never been powerless... to appreciate the ...lure... of that kind of power... the apparent ...safety... that it offers. Of course, the offer is empty, the refuge an illusion. But at a given moment, the need to believe that it can be real becomes overwhelming... and the payment demanded is something that one has been taught to hold cheap. To trade a thing of

such little value for the possibility of ...control... over one's life ...seems... acceptable. Of course, the details of the bargain only become completely clear over time." He fell silent.

Hermione felt an appalled sense of understanding come over her. Not the impulsive sympathy that she had felt for him on New Year's Eve. Not the naïve reaching out, believing that she could, in some way, comprehend his motives. He had been right to lash out at her, she reflected. It had been an arrogant action on her part, demanding his confidences, expecting an explanation for something like this.

No, insight now sprung from direct empathy. From the fact that she had seen that deceitful promise, and she had considered it, weighed it, revelled in the image of herself that it projected. And, she had been a hair's breadth from taking it, one step from that line. She saw with cold, almost impersonal, clarity, exactly how, given another set of circumstances, the pieces placed in a different arrangement on the board, the outcome could have been different.

She fought the urge to be sick.

"I saw it," she whispered hoarsely. "The power, the glory... I was brilliant and beautiful... I could have had it." She felt his arms tighten again. "I... wanted it so badly... I nearly... took it..." She trailed off, ashamed. "And I was so angry that it wasn't real..."

She waited for him to say something, anything, probably *I told you so*. What he did say left her speechless.

"Dark magic is a hard thing to wield, I told you that. It is powerful and complex and seductive and, occasionally, very beautiful. To hold that tool in your hand, and not be tempted by it is, I think, impossible. To use that tool, without being consumed by it, and to turn away from it at the end, requires an exceptional degree of strength. Consider only that you did not take the final step." He paused there, and when he continued his voice was low and intense and a little rough, "and Hermione... never again let anyone tell you that you are not brilliant. Or beautiful."

Feeling the prick of tears at his unexpected words, she rested back against him, letting the visions recede. A feeling of calm and safety crept over her as she sat there, cradled in his arms. She wanted to stay like that, didn't want to move. So, she was resistant when he pulled her to her feet.

"Come along," he said briskly, "let's go downstairs and see what the evening food is like in this place."

Hermione protested.

"I just want to sleep."

"I'm sure you do," he remarked dryly. "However, as I recall you have eaten nothing since breakfast, and, amongst other things, you have handled some very difficult magic. You are, almost certainly, dehydrated, and your salt and potassium

levels will be depleted, to say nothing of other trace minerals. I also anticipate that your blood sugar levels are now bordering on the hypoglycaemic. Food appears to me to be a priority."

Hermione didn't have the strength to argue, and allowed herself to be led downstairs, and forcibly fed with soup, bread and cheese. She had forgotten how implacable Snape could be when he wanted something to happen, she thought, idly, as he insisted that she eat at least two bananas and an orange from the fresh fruit selection.

"Potassium and vitamin C," he curtly informed her, when she pulled a face.

After the meal, he simply told Beverly to add it to their bill, and then steered her back upstairs again.

In a haze of exhaustion, she got ready for bed, and slipped under the quilt gratefully. After a while she was aware of Snape coming out of the bathroom, and opening the wardrobe, searching for something. She pushed herself up onto one elbow.

"What are you looking for?"

"Blankets," he said tersely. "For the sofa."

Hermione considered this for a moment. The whole thing was faintly ridiculous, but she wasn't certain that he would see it the same way.

"Severus," she said finally, gently, "the bed is big enough for both of us."

He stopped his searching, and stood up slowly, not looking at her.

"Hermione," he began hesitantly, "I don't think that..."

"Look," she interrupted him, "I'm not... suggesting... anything. I'm just saying that the bed is big enough to let both of us get a decent night's sleep." She took a bit of a chance on her next words. "And I'm pretty certain that you need one as much as I do."

He didn't say anything to that, just closed the wardrobe door. She lay back down in bed, waiting. A moment later, the light went out, and she began to mentally curse his stubborn idiocy. Then, she felt his weight on the bed, and the movement of the quilt as he settled himself beside her. Comforted by the thought of him, lying next to her, Hermione drifted into sleep.

Sometime later in the night, she half woke to feel a hand, touching her. Sleepily, she turned, reaching for him.

He didn't push her away.



A subtle change in the light disturbed Snape from sleep, pulling him back to consciousness. For the second morning in a row, he registered that there was a warm presence beside him. A soft, comforting, female, presence.

He had a half memory of waking, with the certain conviction that this couldn't be real, of

reaching to touch her, laying his hand on her back, her skin warm and soft under his fingers, and her, moving into his embrace, curling against his body, settling into sleep again. And to lay there, with her holding him like this, felt so perfect that it almost hurt.

He couldn't bear to disturb the moment.

Something that he had barely permitted himself to even contemplate, appeared to have just happened to him. He was with someone who genuinely seemed to want him. Who had placed herself at risk to help him. Who had grasped Dark Magic, opening herself to it, trusting him to show her how to wield it, and survive, soul intact. He was damned certain that that was a level of faith he didn't deserve.

He felt a rush of unfamiliar emotion, choking him, seizing him with the desire to hold her, to never let her go. Was this love, he wondered? He allowed the unfamiliar possibility to edge its way into his mind. All he knew was that he could no longer imagine an existence that wasn't shared with her.

Of course, some deep, cold, hard, part of him pointed out that this was hardly *normal* circumstances. Once they got back to their respective lives, harsh reality would show this for the illusion that it was. There would be discomfort, embarrassed silences, and then she would excuse herself from his life, with as much grace as she could muster.

But until that happened... *if* it happened...

His thoughts were interrupted by something much more prosaic. His right arm had gone to sleep, where she was lying across it. It was now quite uncomfortable, and he had a pressing need to get the circulation back. Carefully, he edged it out from under her, flexing the fingers. The movement disturbed her.

"Severus?" Sleepy, momentarily disorientated.

He pushed himself up on his, slightly numb, right elbow, to look at her, noting the wary expression in her eyes. Unsurprising, he supposed, after his reaction of the previous morning. Her hair was still tousled from sleep, falling across her face. For once giving in to instinct, he reached out with his other hand to push it back, and tuck it behind her ear.

"I just needed to get the blood back into my arm," he said dryly.

Her expression cleared at his touch, and she smiled.

"Sorry."

"No need to apologise."

He lay there, eyes on her face, not wanting what he knew – what they both knew – had to come next. In the end, it was she who said it.

"I suppose we should get up, and get on with it."

No need to ask what *it* was.

No, he wanted to say. *Let's just stay here, not move, let it all happen to someone else.* But in his heart he

knew that there was no *someone else*. They had all the pieces in place. It was time to make the play.

Reluctantly, he rolled away from her, out of bed, and headed to the bathroom to dress.

No matter how long they both took, how much time they spent flicking round the room, making certain that nothing was forgotten, in the end they had to leave. As they checked and cross checked, he noticed that she was getting more and more edgy. His own responses were also increasingly terse. By the time they left the room, they were barely speaking – not out of hostility – they simply had no desire to discuss what was about to happen, and idle chit-chat was impossible. He was relieved that she didn't seem to be hungry. His own stomach was distinctly unsettled, and the smell of food, and Beverly's cheery morning chatter, was more than he could cope with. Hermione pocketed the talisman, and the room key, and they left, slipping out the front door whilst Beverly was occupied with the details of another guest's Full English Breakfast.

Outside the weather was grey again, coating the village in bleached-out daylight. How suitable, he thought grimly. Whilst not exactly raining, the damp seemed to permeate every fibre, leaving him feeling clammy and uncomfortable. He was acutely aware of Hermione beside him, walking tensely, shoulders set.

Unable to think of anything sensible to say, they strode on in silence.

As they passed the duck pond, she suddenly stopped and turned to him.

"Listen," she said abruptly, "I've been thinking. That *thing* obviously wants me for some reason. And it can sense me, we know that."

He nodded, unsure of where she was going with this.

"Well, I can sense it too. And I think, on some weird level, I can actually communicate with it. I mean, in the church yesterday, I'm sure that it could feel my thoughts... I don't know. Anyway," she continued grimly, as if she had to get this out, "if it's after me, then I think that I can distract it, to let you get close enough to use the talisman."

He gritted his teeth against the desire to protest. She misinterpreted his silence.

"Well, can you think of a better idea?" she asked, a trifle defensively.

No. And it was a good idea.

He said as much.

"Then what?" she demanded.

This was a moment that exacted honesty, if ever there was one.

"I don't like the idea of you being the bait for that creature. Being alone with it is... too dangerous." That was the closest that he could get to admitting that the thought terrified him.

He stopped, waiting for the angry outburst from her. But her eyes just widened a little, in surprise, and then she spoke, her voice softer:

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm not wildly keen on the idea either. I only didn't mention it until now, because I was trying to come up with an alternative."

It didn't make him feel better at all, but he just nodded in assent. She reached into her pocket, pulling out the enchanted dagger and offering it to him.

"Here you are," she said wryly. "You're certain that it will work without the potion?"

He nodded. They looked at each other for a long moment. He thought that she was going to say something, then she just looked away.

They resumed their interrupted walk. Behind them, the ducks quacked mournfully, as the prospect of a snack faded away. *I've always hated ducks*, he thought irrelevantly.

Too soon, they were at the beginning of the path to the cottage. The point of no return, he thought fancifully, although, for him at least, that point had been reached some while ago. She had paused very briefly at the entrance. He didn't look at her — couldn't bring himself to, not now, not at this moment. Any feelings that he had for her, real or imagined, needed to be pushed down, suppressed, ignored, or he would never get through this. He swallowed, mimick-

ing the thought with physical action.

"Let's get on with it," he said, hearing his own voice, harsh, uncompromising.

She just started up the path.

They were about two-thirds of the way along when she said flatly: "They know I'm here."

The ward must have been activated.

"We weren't aiming for stealth," he pointed out tonelessly.

With no attempt at concealment, they continued toward the cottage. They were within the shadow of the walls, near to where they had hidden two nights ago, when Hermione held out a hand to stop him.

"They know I'm outside," she murmured. "Stay here and watch. I'll try and distract them somehow. If you see an opening, take it."

He nodded, not at all content with this, but seeing no alternative.

"Just out of curiosity, what did you have in mind as a distraction?"

She shrugged, her eyes very bright with — fear, adrenaline — he couldn't tell.

"I thought I'd make it up as I go along. You seem to bring that out in me."

She moved to turn away and he couldn't help himself. He grasped her arm tightly.

"Hermione, be careful," he whispered urgently, cursing the ragged edge to his voice.

Again, her eyes widened slightly, then she

wordlessly put her hand over his, and squeezed gently. Then, she firmly removed his hand, and walked away from him down the path. He positioned himself against the wall of the house, close to the small window, where he could see her. She followed the line of the house to the front door, looked at it appraisingly, squared her shoulders, and, to his utter amazement, rapped sharply twice on the door.

The silence from the house seemed almost as stunned as he was.

She knocked again, and this time called out in a loud voice, sounding almost irritated.

"Malfoy! I know you're in there. You and that disgusting *pet* of yours. If you want me, here I am."

Part of him wanted to cheer at her sheer nerve, even as the rest of him wanted to strangle her. This was decidedly not what he had meant by being careful.

However, the door of the cottage opened, and she disappeared inside. He moved up along the wall, until he could see through a window that gave him nearly a complete view of the interior.

It was little changed from the previous day, save for the fact of occupation. His double was standing in the centre of the room — in fact, *lounging* was probably a better term. Whilst still radiating unclean evil, its posture spoke now also of easy, relaxed, confidence, a change that disturbed him profoundly. Hermione stood facing it, a little

way inside the door. She had purposely left it ajar, and sound filtered out to him, eerily disconnected from the images in front of him.

Don't think of it as you. Don't think of what it looks like. Concentrate on her. She won't survive if you lose it now, Severus.

"Miss Granger, how delightful to see you." His voice, and yet not. Sibilant, silky, urbane, and possessing a curious *double* quality, as if two people were speaking at once, one voice dominating the other.

"Wish I could say the same." She was cold, cutting. She looked around her, slowly, deliberately. "Where's Malfoy?"

The thing smiled. Snape fought to suppress the shudder that teased at his spine.

"Ah, young Draco. Such a promising young man."

"I'm touched that he brings out your paternal side." Flat, hostile. "Where is he?"

She was standing tensely, he could see, weight on the balls of her feet, poised to move if necessary. *Be careful. That thing is dangerous.*

But it was moving back now, spreading its arms, the expansive host.

"Draco, dear boy, where are your manners? Do come and greet our guest." There was movement from one of the armchairs. Snape hadn't registered until now that either of them were occupied. "Draco, you remember Miss Granger, I'm sure."

Snape felt his mouth go dry with shock. The

blonde figure now resembled nothing more than a day old corpse. His jaw was slack, his eyes vacant and open, barely blinking. There was little trace of the luminous, aristocratic, perfection of his features. Snape had the impression that his flesh had been removed and replaced with an oily grey putty, which clung precariously to the bones. A lifeless membrane, which he supposed had to be skin, held the total in place. He moved around the chair in jerky, disconnected movements, like a marionette in the hands of an inexperienced puppet-master. He licked his papery lips.

"Granger," he croaked.

Snape could see that Hermione was shaken, although she was struggling to control herself. A brief shifting of her weight told him that she was fighting not to back away from it.

"Can I have her, now?" he whispered.

No!

"No," murmured the other, echoing his thought.

"But you promised," the Draco-thing whined, querulously. A thin trickle of saliva ran down his chin.

The other moved over to Draco, gently stroking a finger along the muddy jawline, wiping away the spit, and speaking fondly, as to a beloved child, tone belying the words.

"That was before you failed me so dreadfully, my shining one. Before I knew that the only one worthy of Hester's legacy was this one." It gestured at Hermione. Snape felt himself go

cold. "Who would have thought that her beautiful gift could be given to such a one as this?" Its tone was dreamy, languid. "And she has brought me tribute." Like a snake, it fixed its eyes on Hermione. "Haven't you."

Snape saw the faint tensing that betrayed her surprise, and watched her purposefully look away from the shambling figure of Draco Malfoy.

"Tribute? To you? Hardly." Her voice was a little high, brittle, conveying her tension to Snape.

"Oh but I think you have." It was ignoring Draco, and beginning to move towards her. Snape, unconsciously, readied himself to move. She took a step back, still holding on to her self-possession.

"Is he still alive?" An attempt to divert.

"Who? Draco?" The thing seemed faintly amused by the question. "More or less." It considered. "Well, probably rather less than more. Do you wish me to kill him? It would be an easy thing."

Snape breathed deliberately, trying not to hear his voice, calmly offering to kill Draco Malfoy, as if it were some trifling errand. She was replying.

"No, I think not." Voice calm, trying to match its tone. He could hear the traces of strain at the edges. She was leaning back now, almost imperceptibly, as if she was trying to counteract a physical force being exerted on her.

"Compassion. How delightful. But that can be easily cured. And there will be time enough for games with Draco. After you have given me my tribute."

"I don't know what you mean." It was closing on her.

"The talisman. I know you found her secret. I know you touched it." Hunger in its voice now, raw, demanding, eager. "I can *smell* the darkness on you." Its tongue flicked out, tasting the air in front of her.

Snape saw her flinch quickly and her hand lift, to be stayed as soon as it moved. *Her cheek*, he thought. She *felt* that.

"And *him*," it continued greedily, "I can smell *him*. Was he good? Did you *want* him?" She was flushed red now, but holding her ground. "It will be better with me, you know, better than him, better than you can imagine."

"I seriously doubt that," she spat, anger lending colour to the words. "And if you think that this is any way to get what you want, then you're stupid as well as loathsome."

That made it stop. Snape let out his breath. She was walking a *very* fine line, and it was killing him to have to just sit and watch.

"So you do have it," it said complacently.

"No," she retorted, chin up. "But I know where it is."

"Where?" Impatient again.

"Near."

Now that she had its undivided attention, she was beginning to move round the room, forcing it to turn to look at her. Snape realised what she

was doing and began to move towards the door. Away from the window, he had to rely on the voices filtering through the half open door.

"Where?" Repeated, feverish, desire.

"Get *that* out of my sight, and I might tell you." Her voice was lower now, with something like a seductive edge.

Oh, be careful, dearest heart.

"Draco, go and sit in the corner."

Snape had the, faintly nauseating, idea of Draco Malfoy, curling up, obedient as a lap dog.

"Good boy." The silken words completed the image.

"Now," it pursued, "tell me where."

"What do *I* get out of it if I *do* tell you?" Purring now.

He heard a slight change in the resonance of her voice, which told him that she had moved deeper into the house. She must have been trusting that he had picked up her cue, for she was trapping herself in there with that thing. By now, he had reached the door and could see through the narrow opening. She was halfway down the room, not quite at the beginning of the kitchen section. The thing was facing her, back to the door, careless in its eagerness to get at the talisman. He couldn't see Draco, but after what he had seen, he was inclined to dismiss him as a serious threat. Cautiously, desperately trying not to attract the attention of the other, he eased the door open.

When the gap was large enough to admit his body, he slid inside, keeping low. The thing was still intent on coaxing the talisman from Hermione. For her part, she was shifting the conversation, now enticing, now refusing, keeping up the false negotiations. He could see the strain written clearly on her face now, slight sheen of sweat, spots of high colour in her cheeks, eyes over-bright. Her body was bow-string taut, unconsciously swaying back and forth, external evidence of the inner struggle.

The thing was barely fifteen feet away from him, standing by the long table. He looked around for something to use as a weapon, silently cursing the bareness of the furnishings. Eventually, he noticed some kind of stone jar, which appeared to have been in use as a form of doorstep. Not very subtle — hardly in the same category as a potion, or even a charm, but those options were not available. He was forced to work with what he was given. Shifting his balance, he inched towards it, reaching out to grasp the rim. Trying to tune out Hermione's voice, verbally fencing with that eerie, doubled, echo of himself, he focussed into working his way back to a place from which he could successfully attack.

Don't listen to her voice. Don't even think of her there at all. Don't think of it as you. It is just something to be removed. A piece of Dark Magic.

A part of that other existence. Discrete. Divisible. Destructible.

And he was in position. He tensed his muscles, adjusted his balance, tested the weight of the jar, and moved... and, as he did so, there was a hoarse croak from beside the fireplace...

"Master..."

Draco bloody Malfoy.

He barely had time to curse before the thing whirled on him, utterly evading his blow. Before he could recover, it had fixed him with an unpleasant sneer... *do I look like that?*... and skittered back towards Hermione, its robe catching on the jagged edge of the table. Angrily, it pulled away, leaving torn threads clinging to the wood. Hermione moved, but not fast enough. It caught her and pulled her to it, holding her closely, parody of a lover's embrace.

Snape froze, watching Hermione struggle.

The thing was watching him intently.

"Now, here we have an interesting situation," it said, musingly, in its doubled voice. Snape tried to focus on the voice, analysing irrelevancies to prevent the reality of the situation paralysing him. The echo was familiar, but where from?

"Master..." came another feeble whine from the direction of the fireplace.

Of course, Malfoy. Malfoy before that *thing* drained him out. It had integrated the boy's cocky self-assurance into its own persona.

"You did well," praised the voice. "You will be rewarded."

Snape found his own voice.

"Let her go. I have what you want." He ignored Hermione, frantically shaking her head at him.

"Yes, I know," replied his double. "And I have something that you want. You do *want* her I take it?" The implication in its voice was nasty and unmistakeable. It didn't wait for a response. "In fact, I find that she is something that I want as well." It eyed Snape in a measuring fashion. "Frankly, I find this a tedious place. I would prefer to return to my proper domain. But I want *her*. She has... interesting... qualities that will be wasted on others." It shrugged. "You hold little interest for me. I offer you your life in this world in return for the talisman. Otherwise, I will stay here with her, and you will die."

Memories of the other place prickled at his mind. The whispered voices, echoing his thoughts. *Why would she want you? How could she bear to touch you? How could you begin to think that you deserve her? That you could please her?* He moistened his lips. Hermione was still, now, watching him intently. He could see the fear in her eyes, the disgust at being touched by... no, not him...it... and under that, something else. Confidence in him, that inexplicable trust that she placed in him.

The creature was also watching him, gauging him. He could feel the pressure, the doubts increas-

ing, fuelled, he knew, by the thing in front of him.

Well, he might hold his own life cheap, but he certainly didn't hers.

Drawing on years of painful experience before Voldemort, Snape tried to convey the impression that he was considering this offer. He slowly lowered his arm, and placed the jar on the table. Gathering his nerve, praying that she would trust him enough, he said:

"Very well. I accept your terms."

He forced himself not to turn away from the look of triumph on the creature's face. Hermione had still not taken her eyes off him.

"Give me the talisman," it demanded.

He reached into his pocket and removed the dagger. The thing's eyes glittered with something verging on lust. It let out a small sigh, obscene satisfaction. It pressed against Hermione, and he saw her eyes close briefly, and an expression of disgust cross her face.

"Give it to me," it breathed caressingly.

He settled the hilt in the palm of his hand, and then, with deliberate calculation, drove the talisman, point first, into the top of the table.

"Come and get it," he said flatly.

"Go," it commanded him.

He shook his head.

"I want to watch you take it."

Suspicion flickered briefly in the depths of its empty eyes, and then lust took over again.

Step by step, pulling Hermione with it, it moved towards the table.

Closer. Just a little closer. Almost...

It reached out one slender hand to grasp the hilt of the dagger... and in one fluid, precise, motion, Snape seized the stone jar, and with a fierce backhand swing brought it crashing into the side of the creature's head. It gave a shout of pain and fury, stumbling, and loosening its hold on Hermione. Dropping the jar, he pulled the dagger back out of the table top, and looked up in time to see her turn towards it and bring her knee viciously up into its groin. This time it screamed, hitting her violently across the face, as it shoved her away.

She stumbled backwards from the force of the blow, blood on her chin, where her lip had split. His attention divided between the thing in front of him, and her, Snape was unable to move fast enough to stop her catching her foot on the base one of the chairs. As if in slow motion he watched, as her momentum caused her to pivot around the trapped foot, and fall, striking her head heavily on the stone fireplace. She lay still.

Movement in the corner of his eye, called him back to the present. The thing was coming for him, still in a half crouch. Snape's awareness narrowed to the creature, and the cold metal in his hand. Emotions, long buried, newly awak-

ened, were crowding into his nerves, whirling, spinning themselves into something sharp and hard and lethal. He took two steps back, and the face of the thing lit with the sure knowledge that it had won.

He hefted the dagger, and threw it at himself with all his strength.

Once more, time took on that unsettling, stretched, quality. The knife flew end over end and finally embedded itself, point first, in the other's shoulder.

And Severus Snape let go his iron grip on every particle of emotion he had ever denied in himself. His grief for the death of his brother, his hurt at the behaviour of his parents, his rage and hatred at what he had become — the love he was only just beginning to acknowledge for the woman lying motionless on the floor — and the sick fear that she was already leaving him.

A point of light began to appear around the dagger, spreading outwards until it enveloped the other completely. The patch of light became three-dimensional, receding into another place. The figure of the other began to thin, and then elongate backwards, and then the light folded in on itself, over and over, until it was a point again — and then it went out.

A thin, keening, wail from the fireplace reactivated his brain. Malfoy, separated from the other, was rocking pitifully, muttering

incoherently. Hermione still had not moved from where she had fallen. Almost absently, Snape picked the torn threads from the other's robe off the edge of the table and put them in his pocket. Ignoring the weeping Malfoy, he moved to Hermione's side. Blood was smearing her chin from the cut on her lip. But worse was the pool of darkness surrounding her head, where it had struck the stone. The stain that he had not allowed himself to see earlier. Her breathing was shallow. Gently, he raised one of her eyelids with his thumb. There was no reaction from her pupils. Cautiously, he supported her head, and explored the injury with his fingers. Warm, sticky, matted, hair and a spongy feel to her skull. Fracture, then, he thought with a curious detachment. A serious one. Not life threatening, provided she could be got quickly to a decent medi-wizard. Unquestionably fatal, if not.

And certainly beyond his ability to heal even under the best of circumstances.

There was really no decision to be made.

He reached across her to pick up her wand, where it had fallen from her sleeve. It felt foreign, hers. Her blood on his hands made it slippery. With his free hand he gently stroked her cheek.

"Don't worry, dearest. It's going to be all right," he murmured, with no idea if she could hear him or not.

Then, carefully placing the tip of the wand to the injury on her mouth, he spoke the words of a simple healing charm, and sat back to wait.

The Ministry Aurors were through the door before the flesh had finished knitting.

"Stand away from her." Harsh demand. He complied, setting the wand down beside her.

Three of them, he thought, still feeling somewhat disembodied. Two he didn't recognise... and Harry Potter. He was kneeling by Hermione, checking her pulse, and then looked up to glare at him.

"Get her to the medi-wizards. Now."

One of the other Aurors, crouched by her, drew his wand, apparated. Hermione disappeared with him. Snape simply watched Harry in silence. His colleague appeared to be trying to get sense out of Draco.

Harry Potter walked up, very close to him, and said in a low, venomous, voice:

"I'll be fascinated to hear your explanation for... this."

Snape just looked at him. He could see exactly how it looked. Draco Malfoy reduced to near catatonia. Hermione Granger seriously injured. Him, on the run, already under suspicion for murder, and found crouched next to her, with her blood on his hands. He wondered how Potter would react to being told that the murders had been committed by his evil double from an alternate

reality, and that said double had just been dispatched off, taking with him the talisman that might have served to corroborate the story. With his fear for Hermione's safety allayed, and reaction beginning to set in, he reflected that, from a certain perspective, it was almost funny.

His lips twitched briefly. It was a mistake. Harry Potter hit him, clenched fist, square across the jaw. He rocked back at the blow. That only left Weasley, he thought sourly, and all three of them would have taken a shot at him.

"Strangely enough," Harry spat, "I don't think that this is at all amusing. You'd better pray that Hermione recovers."

You can count on that, Potter.

"I presume from your attitude that you *have* no explanation to offer."

Realistically, he could offer none without implicating Hermione. He stared at Harry in silence.

Breaking eye contact with a sound of disgust, Harry looked at his colleague.

"Get St Mungo's to deal with Malfoy," he said wearily, "and let's take this one," he gestured at Snape, "to Azkaban."



PART FIVE

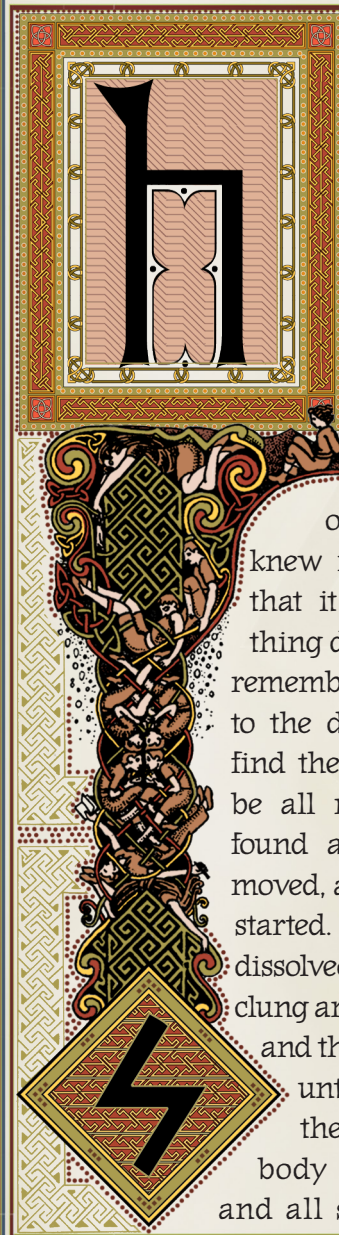




EMIONE GRANGER

was running down the corridors at Hogwarts, with an essay clutched in her hand, frantically trying to find the person that she had to give it to.

She didn't know why, or what it was for, she just knew it was critically important that it was handed in or something dreadful would happen. She remembered that she needed to get to the dungeons. If she could just find them, then everything would be all right. But every time she found a familiar way, the stairs moved, and she was back where she started. And the stone around her dissolved into a thick grey fog that clung around her legs, and her arms, and threaded its way into her hair, until she couldn't move, and the fog lightened and her body got heavier and heavier, and all she could think was that



she hadn't handed her essay in on time...

And then, she became aware of whiteness. A white ceiling, in particular. Odd, she thought. She could have sworn that the ceiling at the Rose and Crown had been much dirtier. She tried to focus and the brightness brought tears to her eyes. Instinctively, turning away from it, she realised that her head hurt. A lot.

A figure swam into her blurry vision. It didn't look hostile, but it didn't look right either. It was not tall enough, and the hair wasn't dark enough, or long enough, and the serious expression behind the glasses (glasses?) didn't look right either.

"Hermione... Hermione... can you hear me?" A voice from a long way off, familiar and not-right as well. Anxious, calling for help.

Help? Why did she need help?

Then another figure was at the bed. It seemed to be mostly white, like the room. Her forehead was felt, her skull was prodded, her wrist was held.

"She's coming back to us, Mr Potter. Give her a chance, that was a nasty bang she took there." Older voice. Competent, practical, with the hands of a professional carer. Recalling Madam Pomfrey, but not the Hogwarts matron. She remembered her dream. She still had to hand the essay in. She struggled to say something. Hands restrained her.

"It's OK, Hermione, you're safe now, it's over,

you're going to be fine." Evoking the memory of another voice, darker, richer, comforting her... *it's all right, you're safe, you're not alone...*

She couldn't hear him, she wanted to know where he was...

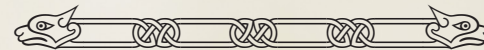
"Severus," she tried to say, but couldn't form the word. The not-right figure next to the bed heard something though.

"Snape?" it said, in a tone laden with contempt and disgust. "Don't worry 'Mione, he can't hurt you any more."

No, no, you don't understand, she wanted to say, I need to know where he is, what happened, but the white was fading to grey, and the stone was solidifying under her feet again. The essay was in her hand once more, and the stairs were moving.

As she began to search again for the dungeons, a fleeting thought drifted away from her like dust.

He would never call me 'Mione.



The next time she woke the throbbing in her head had eased considerably. She opened her eyes gingerly, blinking against the brightness. Movement beside the bed caught her attention. A round blob with a red halo resolved into the face of Ron Weasley. He was grinning inanely.

"Welcome back, 'Mione."

She smiled weakly, and looked around the room. It was obviously a hospital room, indistinguishable from just about any other hospital room. Mostly white. Very, very clean.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"St Mungo's. You were apparated here after," he paused, uncharacteristically for Ron, "after Harry found you."

He looked uncomfortable. Hermione took in as much of her surroundings as she could from a prone position. A vase of flowers stood by one side of the bed, and a basket sat on the other side. Without needing to look she guessed that it contained – or at any rate had *once* contained – chocolate frogs, and supplies of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

"Nice flowers," she said, to fill the silence.

He grinned.

"Mum sent them. The basket was from me and Harry – it's a traditional Weasley family remedy."

"Have you eaten *all* of it," she asked, in a feeble attempt at humour.

Ron pretended to be outraged.

"Course not," he said virtuously. "But then again, these things do go off you know..."

She managed a small laugh at that, and shut her eyes again, trying to order her thoughts. Something that Ron had said, now registered.

"Ron," she said, opening her eyes to look at him. "You said that Harry found me. How did

he find me?"

Ron looked awkward again.

"Dunno the full details," he said shifting slightly. "All I know is that he found you in some cottage in the middle of nowhere. You'll have to ask Harry the rest."

"Ask Harry the rest of what?" came the smiling voice from the doorway.

Ron jumped up in relief.

"Mione was just asking about what happened. I said you were the one to ask."

The smile on Harry's face slipped a little, but he quickly recovered. She was beginning to feel a faint sense of unease stirring.

"Harry," she said, seriously, "tell me what happened. The last thing I remember is falling and hitting my head. How did you find me?"

Harry's face went closed.

"He made a mistake," he said briefly.

He? Which he?

She sighed, with a trace of her usual manner asserting itself.

"Harry, just tell me what happened."

Ron grinned again.

"Sounds like she's feeling better. Tell you what, I'll leave you to your chat, and go and send owls to everyone who wanted to be told, when you were awake." With unusual tact, he slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Hermione pushed herself carefully up, until

she was sitting upright. Harry moved to adjust the pillows until she was comfortable.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for a while?"

"Absolutely." She was now certain that something had happened. Something bad. "Tell me."

Harry ran his hand through his unruly hair, a habit from boyhood that he had never managed to break.

"Well, you know that Snape disappeared, when we went to arrest him," she nodded, and he grinned ruefully, "well, yeah, I suppose you would really wouldn't you. We lost him, but the IUMO had a trace on him," he frowned, "I told you that didn't I?" She nodded again. "A lot has happened over the past three weeks."

Three weeks? How long had she been here.

Harry continued.

"Well, about three days ago the IUMO magic alert was triggered, so we followed it up. We apparated to this cottage somewhere, and inside we found Draco Malfoy turned into a snivelling vegetable, and you with a fractured skull. He was..." he hesitated, "beside you, and your blood was all over his hands. He must have used your wand to cast a spell or something. I guess he thought that we wouldn't be able to trace him, if he didn't use his own wand. Anyway, we got you out to St Mungo's."

She went cold.

"And him?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Azkaban," said Harry with grim satisfaction.

"So, don't worry about him, he's safely locked up."

She felt sick, and her vision blurred. She shut her eyes and leant her head back against the pillows, shaking her head.

Azkaban. Oh Gods.

Harry had his hand on her arm.

"It's OK 'Mione."

No, it was most definitely NOT OK.

"Did he say anything?" she asked, faintly.

"No. Not a thing. I asked for an explanation, and he just smirked. I don't think he's said anything to any of the other Ministry people either."

She fought to process this information. *Why hadn't he just told them what happened?* She opened her eyes.

"Harry," she said, "when the Ministry searched the cottage, did they find anything like an ornamental dagger, a bit battered, about eight inches long, with a capital M on it?"

Harry was shaking his head.

"No, nothing like that."

"And Draco and Sev... Snape were the only other people in the cottage?"

"Yes."

Which meant that he had probably managed to send the *other* back, unless...

"Was there anything... odd about S... Snape when you arrested him."

Harry snorted.

"Nope, nothing at all. Same supercilious, miserable, git that he ever was."

Hermione felt a paradoxical sense of relief at that statement. She rubbed her head, where it still ached a little. Harry looked sympathetic.

"You said I fractured my skull," she said curiously.

"Yes. Quite badly, apparently. The medi-wizard said that if we hadn't got there when we did you'd have died."

She shut her eyes again. She remembered the thing hitting her away, stumbling backwards, catching her foot, falling, and then nothing. A fractured skull. If the Aurors hadn't got there in time, she'd have died. He had cast some charm with her wand, knowing that the Ministry would arrive immediately. He'd said nothing about what had happened. If she, also, said nothing the matter would go no further — he would remain in Azkaban, she would carry on with her life as if nothing had happened.

I pay my debts, Miss Granger.

The man's sense of honour was built on a quixotic streak wide enough to host the Quidditch World Cup. The idiot. The stupid idiot. The bloody, bloody, stupid, idiot man. How could he have begun to think that she would go along with this.

She felt tears pricking at the back of her eyes, and one escaped to fall down her cheek. Angrily,

she rubbed it away. She opened her eyes again, to see Harry looking at her in alarm.

"Hermione," he said anxiously, "you really are going to be all right, you know. He can't hurt you now."

She shook her head, sniffing a little.

"Harry, you don't understand, you really don't understand. He didn't hurt me at all. Far from it..." she trailed off at his look of incomprehension.

"Listen," she continued, in a firmer tone, "there's something that you need to know. You'd better sit down because it's going to take a while, and I don't think that you're going to like some parts of it."

Eyeing her apprehensively, Harry seated himself by the bed. Hermione took a deep breath and began to explain. She told him nearly everything — the potion, the other reality, the *other*, the murders, Draco Malfoy, helping Snape, the attacks, the cottage, the talisman, and the final confrontation. She reduced the account of their personal dealings to the bare statement that he had been helpful and cooperative. Of Snape's background history, she said nothing at all.

When she finished Harry put his head in his hands.

"Oh dear Gods, what a mess."

"You can say that again," she said miserably.

"I should never have involved you with the potion in the first place."

Hermione felt a brief surge of irritation. Was she destined to be forever surrounded by men, determined to heap blame on themselves at every opportunity?

"I could have said no," she pointed out, with asperity. "I didn't have to continue looking after we got back from the other place. I could have summoned the Aurors when he turned up on my doorstep. I made my own choices in this, thank you very much."

Harry looked a little hurt at her tone. She realised that she had become used to dealing with Snape, whose feelings were much less apt to be affected by lapses in superficial politeness. She consciously moderated her voice.

"Sorry, Harry, I'm just a little... off-balance... right now. I think what's more important is working out what happens next."

"Well, the Ministry will have to be told." He glanced at her. "I don't think they're going to be very happy... with either of us."

"Well, I expected that. Um... Harry, you know, I don't have to say where I got the potion from. I can just say that it arrived in an anonymous package, with a letter or something, and I was too curious to let it go."

"Sure thing 'Mione. And we could just shut up, and let Snape rot in Azkaban. But we both know that that isn't going to happen." His voice was carefully neutral, as if he hadn't quite decided

what to make of her revelation. "I think we're just going to have to take it on the chin, as they say."

She nodded, and rested back against the pillows. She closed her eyes, and wondered if Snape was all right.



Severus Snape lay flat on his back, on the bed in his chambers at Hogwarts, and looked up at the ceiling. The room was cold, not even enlivened by the presence of Sphinx. He assumed that she was still hopping around Hermione's balcony. He had not bothered to light a fire. Food sent down via the house-elves was sitting, untouched, on a tray.

It was three days since he had returned to the school, six since his arrest.

The intervening three days had been spent in Azkaban. Three days of questioning by the Aurors. Three nights of listening to the Dementors, schooling his thoughts to give them no reason to notice him. Three days of determined refusal to call her to voice or mind, guarding his feelings closely. Unpleasant, but then again he'd spent much of his life in close proximity to the likes of Voldemort. He had survived.

As soon as the bureaucrats had turned up in his cell, murmuring meaningless words of apology, indicating his imminent release, he

knew that she had told the Ministry what had happened. Dumbledore received him back into the school, with a grave expression on his face. He returned immediately to his chambers. He made no attempt to contact the other staff, not they him. Poppy Pomfrey had once come down to check if he needed anything.

Nothing that she could supply.

He wasn't even certain that the student body knew that he was back.

And Dumbledore's only words to him had been to advise him not to contact Hermione until the Ministry had finished considering her case. He had only been able to nod agreement. The fact that, logically, she must be recovered from her injuries, if she had been able to recount the story, was scant comfort.

He missed her.

Her smile, her common sense, her quick intelligence. Her warm compassion, and her courage in trusting him so much, that, for a moment, he had begun to believe in himself again.

Alone in his rooms, no longer distracted by the simple need to survive, the feelings that he had begun to acknowledge in Hester's cottage were making their presence felt. That act of recognition had in no sense been a catharsis. He was struggling with the upsurge of emotions long denied, or forgotten, and having little success in resolving any of them.

He wanted to talk to her, to take comfort from

her presence, from her touch. He ached to hold her again. Her absence only underscored just how isolated he had managed to become. He wondered if she would still want anything to do with him.

He wanted to do just about anything, rather than lie here, waiting for the headmaster and governors to decide his fate.

He wondered what the Ministry would do to her.

His bleak mood was interrupted by a scratching at the window. Reluctantly getting up, he opened the casement. One of the school owls flew in, and landed on his desk, looking at him reproachfully. Carefully, he untied the parchment from its leg, and broke off a morsel from his untouched lunch. The owl finished it off, and then disappeared through the window.

The letter was brief.

Severus,

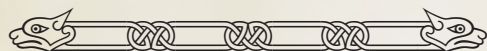
*I would be grateful if you could
stop by my office when convenient.
We have some matters to discuss.*

Albus Dumbledore

The tone was friendly, and at least addressed him by his given name. It didn't seem like a letter that heralded his dismissal. Dumbledore tended not to play those sorts of games with people. He tried to

feel reassured. Tried not to worry about Hermione.

He might as well go now, he supposed, shrugging a little. It wasn't as if he had a hectic social calendar, at the moment.



The school was quiet as he walked through it, the majority of pupils in their afternoon classes. The few that he did see kept a safe distance. Not that he could draw any inferences from that. Pupils *always* kept a safe distance from him. Reaching the familiar door, he raised his hand, and the door swung open.

How did he do that every time, he wondered irrelevantly.

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, looking benign.

"Come in Severus, take a seat."

Nervously, cursing himself for feeling like a child facing detention, he chose a chair opposite the headmaster. Dumbledore's desk was clear of anything other than the usual knickknacks and trinkets that he usually kept to hand. Fawkes was perched on the headmaster's shoulder. Snape glanced at the portraits, to see if he could gauge the mood from any of them. He sat stiffly, waiting for sentence to be pronounced.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers.

"I think the first thing to be said, is how very

glad I am that you have been able to prove your innocence." Snape waited for the rest. "However, it cannot be denied that your rather ...unorthodox... methods have raised a few eyebrows. There are certainly some who believe that, had you left matters in the hands of the Ministry, the truth would have been revealed in the end."

Snape moved to say something at that. Dumbledore held his hand up to silence him.

"There are those, however, who accept that it is occasionally necessary to adopt a more ...direct... approach." The glint in his blue eyes told Snape exactly which view he held. "The governors appear to be prepared to accept my recommendations in this matter."

Snape began to feel himself relax a little. But Dumbledore hadn't finished.

"However, before I come to that, I confess that the connection of Miss Granger with this matter gives me cause for a moment's thought."

Snape stirred at that, and found his voice.

"Headmaster, I assure you I did nothing to coerce her..."

Again, Dumbledore waved him silent.

"Ah, Severus, I am quite sure that you did not. Miss Granger is an intelligent and resourceful young woman, possessed of a singular degree of determination. I have no doubt, that once she had decided to involve herself in the matter, she would have been next to impossible to dissuade."

No argument from him there.

"No, what concerns me a little, are the more... personal... aspects."

Snape sat up, startled.

"I have read the account that she gives, and I sense there are some... ah... omissions from the narrative." He fixed Snape with a piercing gaze. "Severus, tell me honestly, I am aware that you and Miss Granger were not on best terms when she was a student. May I assume that any... differences... between the two of you have now been resolved?"

Not entirely certain of precisely what was being asked, Snape sought his words carefully. Not least, because he did not want to risk speaking for Hermione's feelings.

"No, headmaster," he said eventually, "There are no difficulties between us that I am aware of."

"You understand," pursued Dumbledore, "that I expect my staff to be restrained, courteous, and professional at all times," Snape nodded cautiously, as the headmaster continued, "and, even if my expectations are occasionally unfulfilled, I still have them."

Snape really had managed to lose Dumbledore's meaning now, and said so.

The headmaster's face broke into a beaming smile.

"Of course you don't, dear boy, I was quite forgetting these."

He reached into a drawer and pulled out two enve-

lopes, made of thick, creamy, vellum, reminiscent of the letters that students still received at the beginning of each school year. He handed one to Snape.

It was addressed to him. He opened it. Inside was a letter, written on Hogwarts headed notepaper.

Dear Professor Snape,

Owing to the recent, unforeseen, departure of the current Postholder, a vacancy has arisen in the field of Defence Against the Dark Arts. We are happy to offer this Post to yourself, effective the beginning of the summer term. We would be grateful to receive your response as soon as possible,

*Yours sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore*

*For, and on behalf of, the Board of Governors,
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

He had to read the letter twice.

"Defence Against the Dark Arts?" he said stupidly.

"What happened to Professor ...um..." He supposed

he should have learned the man's name.

Dumbledore looked regretful for a moment

"Ah, poor Professor Waldstein. A nasty encounter with a kelpie I'm afraid. Hagrid seemed to think that it would be good idea to keep one in the school lake. They were trying to catch it, and the Professor managed to get a bridle on to it. Sadly, he was unlucky enough to sneeze during the Placement Charm. Fortunately, we managed to get him back, and he was only slightly nibbled, but he has been advised to take a long convalescence." He brightened. "Well, do you accept?"

Snape nodded dumbly.

"Splendid!" said Dumbledore enthusiastically
Snape found his voice again.

"But, what about the potions syllabus."

"You will have plenty of time to hand over to the new teacher." Dumbledore was still holding the other letter, turning it over in his hands. Then, he handed it to Snape. "This one is not for you. I could send it by owl, I suppose, but I wondered if, as a favour to me, you might be willing to deliver it by hand."

Snape took the envelope and turned it to look at the name on the front.

Miss Hermione Granger.

He looked at Dumbledore, and nodded again.

"If I might make another suggestion, although please feel free to ignore an old man." Snape shot

a suspicious glance at him. Albus Dumbledore was usually at his most deadly, when overcome by a fit of doddering old age. "If you aren't busy, tonight might be a good time. I have reason to suspect that our Miss Granger will welcome a friendly face this evening."

Snape stood to leave, and then paused.

"Thank you, Albus."

Dumbledore waved his thanks away.

"Don't thank me, Severus. I'm just glad to have you back in one piece." He smiled. "And Severus, I wish you luck and happiness."



Hermione stood before the big walnut desk, smart in her well cut business suit, trying to keep her face impassive, as she listened to the sententious tones of the man in front of her. Cornelius Fudge had changed very little over the years. He still oozed wounded self-consequence whenever he felt a threat to the dignity of the Ministry, and hence to himself. He was currently embarked on a detailed enumeration of her failings, in the eyes of that august office. At his side, hovered a thin little witch called Euphemia Entwhistle. She was of indeterminate age, with iron grey hair, and a taste in clothes which reminded Hermione, forcibly, of a village production of an Agatha Christie play she

had endured as a child. Her father's receptionist had had a small part and had blackmailed friends and colleagues into buying tickets.

Miss Entwhistle was, in fact, Hermione's immediate superior at the Ministry. From the reproachful glances that she was casting at her subordinate, Hermione suspected that she had recently been on the receiving end of a lecture from Fudge, about allowing junior staff too much latitude. She tried not to sigh, as Fudge droned on. She was fairly certain she knew what the outcome of the meeting would be. She wished that he would just get on with it, rather than forcing her to endure his disappointed, paternal, lecture.

She had heard nothing from, or about, Snape since she had been discharged from St Mungo's, save a terse note from Harry, saying that he had been released from Azkaban. She had been told, in no uncertain terms, that she was not to get in touch with him in any way. She assumed that he had been told the same. She hoped that he was all right.

Fudge was now shuffling some papers, and she decided that maybe she should pay attention.

"In summary, Miss Granger, you have admitted to Possession of a Restricted Substance, Failure to Disclose the Whereabouts of said Restricted Substance, Attempting to Manufacture the same Restricted Substance, Theft of a Dark Magical Item, Assisting and Harboursing

a Fugitive from the Ministry, Practice of a Dark Art," Fudge shuddered dramatically at this, "and Creation of a Dark Magical Item – which I might add also involves the small matter of an additional offence against the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts legislation. I won't even go into the question of misappropriation of Ministry equipment and supplies, and the appalling breach of the trust which we must be able to have in all Ministry employees."

He paused for effect.

"Not very impressive is it, Miss Granger?" he asked, rhetorically.

"No, sir," she answered evenly.

Fudge glared at her. He leant back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

"There *are* those who feel that you should be subject to the severest penalties for your misconduct." Another dramatic pause. "However, we take into account the fact that Professor Snape *appears to be* innocent in the matter of the recent ...ah... deaths."

Hermione tried not to bridle at his use of the phrase *appears to be*. But then, Fudge had never been comfortable with Snape's role within the Death Eaters.

"We also take into account the fact that the Dark Items in question have been destroyed, and did not appear to have been used to harm any person, wizard or Muggle. Similarly, the potion,

itself, appears to have been destroyed. We also give you credit for the good work that you have done for the Ministry during your years here."

He moved his chair back and regarded her gravely. Here it comes, she thought.

"Miss Entwhistle and I have discussed this at length," another mournful glance from her superior, "and we have, regrettably, concluded that your position within the Ministry is no longer tenable. We cannot tolerate employees who disappear off on a frolic of their own, whenever the mood takes them, with no regard for proper protocols, or the responsibilities of their position. We, therefore, *have* no option but to terminate your employment with the Ministry, effective immediately. We would ask that you remove all personal items from the building, and return any items of Ministry property in your possession, by the end of the week. There will be no further disciplinary action taken against you. The Ministry will also strive to avoid unnecessary publicity over this..." he grimaced in distaste, "... sordid incident."

He looked down at the papers in front of him. She stood there, not knowing whether he had finished or not. He glanced up again, appearing surprised to see her still there.

"You may go, Miss Granger."

Without a word, she turned, and left the Minister's office.

With a faint sense of unreality, she apparated from the Ministry, back to the anteroom that led to the laboratories under the British Library. Mrs Gumbelside regarded her with the same air of disappointment that had characterised her conversation with Fudge. She took the lift down to the lab, walking along the corridor with a curiously numb feeling. When she entered her own – soon to be former – lab, Cyrus gave her a half wave and an embarrassed smile. She sketched an acknowledgment, as she unlocked her office.

Her personal space was as cluttered as her home office, despite the order in the lab. Rum-maging through, she found a box. Pulling out her wand, she began systematically to reduce items to a size that made them portable. Books, notes, her own personal supply of ingredients, all went in. Carefully sorting through the bottles and flasks on the shelves, she separated off the ones that rightfully belonged to the Ministry.

Her hand stilled on one bottle. About five inches high, made of dark green glass. The front of the flask was stamped with a capital M within a circle. The rune of the fetch. Hermione shuddered at the recollection, and tried to ignore the sudden pang as she thought of Snape.

The bottle that started it all, she thought sourly. The bottle that formerly contained the Said Restricted Substance, as Fudge had described

it. She wondered if it were technically Ministry property, or hers. Part of her mind also wondered if there was any of the potion left clinging to the sides. Something that could be used as the basis for a cure.

She looked at the bottle consideringly. She should hand it over to Fudge.

Oh, what the hell. What's one more infraction to add to the list that that idiot already has.

She reduced it and dropped it into the box with the other things.

She completed the rest of the task with dispatch. She had no particular desire to spend any longer here than necessary. Now that it was no longer *her* place, she didn't wish to prolong the goodbyes. She found no pleasure in the side-long looks of awed disapproval that seemed to follow through the official corridors. Taking a last look round, she exited the office — no longer *hers* — and, out of sheer habit, locked and warded it. Then she paused. With a few sweeps of her wand, she disarmed the personal wards that she had put in place, and then looked at the bunch of keys resting heavy in her hand.

Cyrus was moving about at the far end of the lab, engaged in his habitual non-work as far as she could tell. He looked up, as she jangled the keys. He wore an expression of regret, tinged with faint respect. He shrugged a little, as she met his eye.

"Um... I guess you're off now then, Miss Granger."

"Pretty much. I've got to sort out the stuff that I have at home, but I think I'll send that over. If Fudge thinks that I've kept anything back, he can always get someone to check." She had a feeling that he wouldn't do that. He didn't want this to get any more public than it already was.

Cyrus was nodding.

"OK. Well ...um ...goodbye, and thanks for everything. Um... good luck. I hope you find something else."

Hermione smiled.

"Oh I expect I'll survive," she said more confidently than she felt. On an impulse, she hefted the keys again. "Here Cyrus," she said, lobbing the bunch in his direction, "catch." He did so, with a surprised expression on his face. "Just lock up after yourself when you leave, will you. I don't think that this is my problem any more."

Nodding farewell, she picked up the box, and headed for the exit.

Mrs Gumbelside gave her a hard stare when she got to the antechamber for the last time. Finally, she seemed satisfied that Hermione was not making off with the Ministry silver, so to speak, and wished her a stiff "Goodbye and good luck."

Instead of leaving through the front entrance of the British Library, she apparated directly to her flat. She was not in the mood for strolling through Muggle London at the moment.

Her flat was dark, and chilly. She found it

hard to feel comfortable there now. When she had returned the rooms had felt ...different... somehow. As if an unclean spirit had passed through. Objects had been moved, and she knew, on an instinctive level that Draco Malfoy and that *thing* had been here. There was no whisper of anything left, but she needed to do something to dispel the sense of oppression that lay over the place. That, or find somewhere else to live. A wave of her wand sent light and heat coursing through the apartment, but did little to improve the atmosphere. She dumped her box of stuff on the dining table, next to an envelope addressed to Beverly at the Rose and Crown in Downham St Cross. The envelope contained a cheque to cover their accommodation and food. Hermione, too, paid her debts, wherever possible. Hanging her suit jacket over a chair, she sank onto the sofa. She needed to sort out the things to go back, but didn't have the energy right at the moment.

As she landed on the cushions, there was a stereo noise of protest — a deep meow, overlaid by a distinct *meep*. Crookshanks raised a big, ginger, head to look at her. From the depths of his coat, emerged the bald, wrinkled, face of Sphinx. Hermione's first action, on discharge from hospital, had been to transfigure both birds back into their more usual shapes. Not knowing when, or even if, Snape would be

released from Azkaban, she had, if not adopted, at least taken over the temporary care of, his familiar. She would have to get in touch with him, sooner or later, if only to give the little creature back. In the meantime, Sphinx seemed perfectly content to be nestled in Crookshanks' fur by day, and snuggled under the bedcovers with Hermione at night.

She wondered why she felt so flat. It wasn't as if Fudge's decision had been a shock to her. She had had a pretty good idea of what the consequences would be, as soon as she told the story to Harry. Hell, she had had a pretty good idea of what the consequences would be, from the moment that she failed to tell the Ministry that Snape had arrived on her doorstep. The decision had, at least, left some options open to her. Private tuition, perhaps. She had some money saved up. She could even work abroad, if it came to it. In some ways she wasn't even sad to have gone. Maybe it was time to stretch her wings a little.

She tried to look positively at the situation, but her vision was still clouded by the image of Snape. She reached out to pet Sphinx, and was rewarded by a chirrup and an enthusiastic purr. She chewed her lower lip absently, wondering, once more, if he were all right. It would be just like him to be sat in some dungeon somewhere, blaming himself. He needed

someone to tell him to pull himself together.

She was missing him.

His bad temper, his brusque manner, his sharp tongue, his acerbic wit, his warmth and steadiness, his unexpected vulnerability, and his unsentimental compassion.

Sod the Ministry. Tomorrow, I'll owl Dumbledore. I refuse to believe that he doesn't know where Severus is.

She sat for a long time, lost in thought, until she was disturbed by the doorbell. Odd, she thought. Harry and Ron were being decidedly distant at the moment, and no one else knew the code for the downstairs lock. She was tempted to ignore it — she was not feeling in the mood for visitors, right now — but it rang again, insistently this time. Grumpily, she got up, and wandered to the door, pulling at her blouse, and straightening her skirt. Out of habit, she looked through the spyhole, and almost froze in shock. A tall figure, dressed in black robes, dark, unkempt, hair...

Him.

She opened the door, trying not to fumble the catch. Snape stood there.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," he said with a twist of his old formality.

She just stood there, dumbly, looking at him. He was thinner, she thought. It didn't suit him. He was paler than usual, as well, and there were tired lines and dark smudges around his

eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping well. His expression was unreadable. Finally, he said:

"May I come in."

With a start, she realised that they were both still in the doorway.

"Yes, yes, of course," she said, a little sheepishly. She stood back, so he could enter, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"It seemed rude to apparate directly into the room," he offered by way of explanation.

"Ah. They re-instated your licence then," cursing the stupid statement as soon as it left her lips.

"Demonstrably." His voice was dry, but not cutting.

He walked into the living room, to be greeted by a furiously enthusiastic burst of meeps, mrrps, whirrs and other noises of Sphinxian welcome and approval. He looked slightly embarrassed, as the little creature tried determinedly to climb up his robes, onto his shoulder. Hermione couldn't help smiling at the sight of such unashamed adoration. So much easier for cats, she thought.

"I assumed that she had moved in here, when she didn't come back to Hogwarts."

"Um... I transfigured her back, after I got out of hospital. You were... I mean... I didn't know when you were going to be..." she trailed off, not quite knowing how to go on.

He carefully removed the ecstatic, bald, cat

from his robes and put her down on the sofa. Then he turned, and moved closer to Hermione, close enough that she could touch him, if she only stretched out her arm. Close enough for her to catch the trace of his cypress and musk scent. The intensity of the expression in his eyes made her breath catch momentarily.

"Are you all right?" he said, very quietly.

She gave a half nod, half shrug.

"No lasting damage, I'm told."

"And the Ministry?"

"Sacked me." Flat, unemotional, statement.

He nodded, as if the news were not entirely unexpected.

"And you?" she asked, equally quietly. "Are you all right?"

His lips twitched a slightly crooked smile.

"Likewise, no lasting damage, I believe."

She did reach out then, and placed her hand on his chest. She could feel a flicker of reaction, a tensing of the muscles, and his heartbeat, fast, under her open palm.

"Severus, why?" she asked simply. "Why didn't you just tell them what happened?"

Her hand rose and fell, with the rhythm of his breathing.

"I thought that, under the circumstances, you deserved the choice. As to how the facts were... presented... to the Ministry."

Her fingers resonated to the deep vibrations

of his voice.

"And did you, for a moment, seriously think that I would tell the Ministry anything other than the truth?"

"I suppose I should have expected that you would wreck my one attempt at a grand gesture," he agreed with a hint of dry self-mockery. His tone became serious again. "But I am greatly in your debt, Hermione."

"And you pay your debts. So you told me."

He was still watching her intently, but warily, as if he were gauging her response. He hadn't moved to return her touch at all, letting her determine their level of closeness.

Had he really expected her to return to her life, leaving him in Azkaban? That, after everything, she would just walk away.

"Tell me," she said very gently, very carefully, "do you factor being betrayed into all of your dealings with the world?"

She felt him flinch, sharply, under her hand, as if she had slapped him again, and, for a brief instant, unguarded pain flared in his eyes, causing her heart to contract. Then, he looked away, although she noticed that he did not break their contact. He opened his mouth and she could see him physically struggling to find words.

"Old habits die hard," he said, in the end, with a quiet bitterness, that she suspected covered a much deeper hurt.

She took a step closer to him, moving inside the circle of his warmth, her body now just brushing his. His hand came up to cover hers, still resting on his chest. The feel of his skin sent a tingle running through her.

"Some habits need to be broken," she said softly.

At that, he turned back to her, and she reached up to place her mouth on his, in a slow kiss. His mouth opened under hers, hesitantly, as if he still needed to be certain that she meant what she was doing. She slid her tongue inside his mouth to taste him, and his free arm abruptly came around her, to pull her into him. The kiss deepened, lips and tongues, exploring, searching, caressing. She embraced him now, hands running up his back, over his robes, into his hair. He was holding her fiercely to him – she could feel the heat of him, the beat of his heart sensed through her skin. She moved her hips close into him, and felt, rather than heard, him gasp into her mouth. There was a hard pressure against her and a point of flame ignited, deep within, which began to spread through her blood, along her nervous system, and out into the very edges of her.

She pulled away from him, just enough to breathe, feeling an overwhelming need to get out of the clothes that constricted her, that chafed against her sensitised skin. His own breathing was ragged.

"Hermione," he managed unsteadily, "there's something you need to know before..."

She kissed him again. There was nothing that he had to say that was more important than this right now.

"Later," she whispered, and pulled him towards her bedroom.

He didn't resist.

Nor did he resist, when she began to slowly undo the buttons on his robes, releasing them one by one, until she could slide the heavy, black, material from his shoulders, to let it drop onto the floor. Still less did he resist, when she took his hand in hers and raised it to her mouth, brushing the tips of his fingers with her lips, taking them into her mouth, kissing the soft skin, exploring the callus where his quill had rested, tasting the myriad tiny scars and burns, legacy of a lifetime of acid and fire and hot metal. Cupping his hand around her cheek she bit lightly into his palm, lifting off the salt sweat of his arousal. As he watched her, she undid the buttons of her blouse, and once again placed his hand on her breast, holding it there, pressing her aching nipple into his fingers. He closed his eyes as he began to caress her, gently working the lace of her bra, the combination of hot touch over harsh fabric making her shiver with delight.

She now raised her hand to his chest, work-

ing at the buttons of his plain, black, shirt until it was open to the waist. She ran her hand over his exposed skin, feeling him shudder as she traced the contours of him, letting her fingers softly stroke his nipples. He was too thin, his ribcage painfully evident. A lump formed in her throat, and she slid her hands round his back, under the shirt, pulling it loose, and catching him to her in a sudden, impulsive, hug, almost at odds with the mood. He returned the embrace with equal strength.

"I would never have left you there," she whispered, fiercely, against his skin.

His arms tightened almost painfully around her.

"I know," came his voice, low, and so muffled in the embrace as to be almost inaudible. "Forgive me."

She lifted her head to kiss the base of his throat, then trailed her lips up the line of his jaw. Placing her mouth next to his ear, she murmured:

"Make love to me, Severus."

He moved his head to kiss her again, with a passion that sent shocks of response echoing through her body. He slid one hand around her waist, under her blouse, freeing it from her skirt. She pressed against him again, as he ran his fingers up her back, stroking her spine, and finally, deftly, undoing the catch of her bra. She released him, just long enough to shrug off both garments, as his hand moved round to cup one breast, rubbing his thumb

over her painfully hard nipple. The fire within her flared at his touch, and she let out a sigh that was half way to being a sob.

That sound seemed to release something in both of them. Together they moved towards the bed, Hermione pulling him back on top of her, as the edge caught at the back of her knees. A wave of need and desire swept over her, and she fought out of the rest of her clothes, pulling at him to do the same. He matched her insistence, hands running urgently, almost roughly, over her, kneading at her breasts, sweeping down her stomach to linger at the top of her thighs. His mouth followed, exploring her breasts, taking one nipple and then the other between his lips, suckling her, making her cry out and arch her back, pushing herself into him. His hands had found the place between her legs now, and his fingers were teasing, delving, stroking, making her body shudder and jump. Incoherent noises of pleasure and desire escaped her lips, her focus entirely on the sensations coursing through her.

The hardness was pressing against her thigh again as well, a hardness that stirred wicked, delicious, images in her mind. Without dislodging his hand, she moved, so she could see his face. He sat back a little, watching her like a cat, eyes hooded and intense, clouded only by a faint trace of lingering uncertainty. Not taking her gaze from his, she ran her fingers lightly down his chest and

over his abdomen until she reached the top of his legs. Without pausing, or breaking eye contact, she drew her hand along the length of him. The uncertainty vanished from his eyes, as his whole body shuddered, and he choked out her name. Slowly, she circled him, caressing him, sliding her thumb over the head, smearing the fluids there over her skin. Intently watching his expression she brought her hand back to her mouth and deliberately licked off the salty liquid, running her tongue openly over her own skin.

She hadn't thought it possible for black eyes to get any darker, but his somehow did. Or, maybe they took on another dimension of depth entirely.

"Gods, woman, do you have any idea what you do to me?" Voice, no longer silken, but harsh and ragged, and naked with hunger and need.

The fire burned blue-white within her, and all thoughts of teasing him any longer fled from her mind. She pulled him to her, but he was already moving, pushing her onto her back. She steadied him, as he positioned himself, reaching between his legs to stroke him, guide him into her. She threw back her head, his name on her lips, and arched again as he thrust into her, her own love and need for him filling her, matching his rhythm stroke for stroke, the pitch of sensation rising ever higher, until something inside her convulsed, the flame turned from blue to

white, and she was falling over the edge into his voice, which was crying out her name.

When she could think again, she realised that he had rolled away from her and was lying on his back. She could see the rise and fall of his chest in the half light spilling in from the living room. Nervously, she pushed herself up. She had thought that they had resolved at least some of their issues. She reached out to touch him.

"Severus?" she said cautiously.

He turned back towards her, reaching a hand to stroke her face.

"I just didn't want to have to explain how I'd injured you by collapsing on you."

She smiled, the apprehension leaving her.

"Well, ordinarily I wouldn't mind, but I'd rather not see the inside of St Mungo's again for a bit." She moved closer to him, and he tucked his arm around her. Happily, she curled into his embrace, and drifted into sleep.



When she woke again, he was propped up on one elbow, looking at her, his eyes unreadable in the dim light. She smiled at him, reaching up to lay her hand lightly on his chest.

"Severus, what is it, love?"

She saw his eyes flicker at the endearment, and wondered at it for a moment. Wondered if she had

pushed things a bit too far. Then he smiled. It was an oddly boyish, lopsided smile, that lifted the corners of his eyes, and took several years off his age. He placed his free hand over hers, and lifted it to his lips, kissing it, much as she had done to him earlier. She stroked his cheek, as his tongue traced patterns on her palm. Heat began to stir inside her again. From the sudden, intense, look in his eyes, she guessed that her body was signalling that fact clearly to him. She was about to pull him towards her, when he took her hand away from his mouth, and just held it tightly against him. He studied her again, as if he was trying to commit every detail of her to memory.

"What is it?" she repeated, half amused, half anxious.

"I'm trying to clarify something that appears to me to be inexplicable," he said finally. "You have given me something most extraordinary, and, for the life of me, I cannot see why."

She smiled at the shy question, tangled in the diffident statement.

"I love you," she said softly. "Will that do as a reason?"

He caught her to him in a swift embrace.

"Dearest heart," he murmured, turning to kiss her deeply. The combination of his touch and the endearment made her heart race.

"Was it really so unfathomable?" she teased gently, when they broke apart again. She was a little startled by his reaction.

"Hermione," he said quietly, "I know what I am. Even after what happened between us, I couldn't be certain that you would still want to.. me... once it was all over."

She felt tears suddenly prick her eyes at the simple, matter-of-fact, statement. She pulled him to her briefly, fiercely. Then she moved her head to nibble gently at his earlobe.

"Be reassured on that point," she murmured. "I want you."

To emphasise the point, she ran one hand down his back, skimming over his hip, and dragged her fingertips lightly over his groin. He made a sound, almost like a growl, deep in his throat, and she felt him quiver and begin to tighten under her touch. He lay her down on the bed again, his mouth seeking hers. As she responded to his caresses, he stopped, and just looked at her, bewildered awe reflected in his eyes.

"I love you, Miss Granger," he whispered, not even trying to disguise the raw emotion in his voice.

Heart filled with something inexpressible, she just pulled him back down to her.



Later, when she was lying, heavy and sated, curled closely against him, she remembered that he had been trying to tell her something.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?" Sleepy enquiry.

"You said you there was something you needed to tell me."

"Was there?" He sounded muzzy and confused for a moment. Then, he started up beside her. "Of course. The letter. It got... pushed out of my head for a moment."

He disengaged himself from her, rolled off the bed, and began to pick through their discarded clothes. She pushed herself up to watch him.

Who'd have thought that the Potions Master would turn out to be so damned sexy, she thought mischievously, enjoying the sight of him as he searched their garments. Finally, he found what he was looking for, and returned to the bed, holding an envelope. He handed it to her. He didn't say anything, but he wore a slight smile, and she thought she saw amusement lurking in his eyes.

She looked at it suspiciously. It was heavy, cream, paper, luxurious to the touch, setting off familiar resonances within her. He was studying her again. Her skin prickled deliciously, and she wondered if she would ever get used to the sheer intensity with which he watched her. On the whole, she rather hoped not.

"What is it?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"I haven't read it. Why don't you open it and find out?"

She didn't think he was lying about not having

read it, but she did think that he had a fair idea of the contents. Eyeing him sceptically, she ran her finger under the flap of the envelope. She pulled out a single sheet of thick paper, folded in two. The letter was brief, and handwritten, words dancing under the familiar Hogwarts crest.

Dear Miss Granger,
An unexpected vacancy has
arisen at Hogwarts School of
Witchcraft and Wizardry for an
instructor in the art and science of
Potion making. We are delighted
to be able to offer you the Post of
Potions Mistress, effective the begin-
ning of the summer term. We would
be grateful to receive your response as
soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore

For, and on behalf of, the Board of Governors,
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

She didn't believe it. A bubble of happiness began to rise up inside her. To return to Hogwarts, to teach, was beyond anything she had hoped for. Then the effect of the letter hit her. She was being invited to teach Potions. His job. She looked at him. She could still see the sparkle of amusement in his eyes. She waved the letter at him.

"They've offered me a job at Hogwarts. Teaching Potions."

He nodded.

"I thought that might be the case."

"But what about...?"

The boyish smile had returned now.

"I appear to be destined to be the latest in the long line of Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers."

Relief flooded her. She was grinning stupidly, she knew it. She couldn't help it. She hugged him again.

"I just had this horrible thought..."

He hugged her back.

"Don't worry, I haven't been dismissed. Albus Dumbledore is a more forgiving superior than Cornelius Fudge, it appears."

She laughed happily, resting against him, exulting in the thought that she would be with him. Then something struck her.

"Severus," she said suddenly. "Does Dumbledore know? About what happened... us, I mean?"

"I didn't tell him anything, if that's what you're asking. But he asked me if we had resolved

our differences from the time you were a pupil, then he gave me an oblique lecture on appropriate conduct, and then he asked if I would hand deliver that letter to you as a favour to him. So I would say that he has a pretty good idea."

"I'm glad he still knows everything," she said, contentedly. "It would somehow shake the world if he had to be told things."

There was a pause, and then Snape spoke, with an oddly serious tone to his voice

"Are you going to accept the offer?"

She struggled away to look at him again.

"Yes," she said curiously.

He nodded, his eyes slightly shadowed.

"And... will you still want to continue ... together... us?" Quiet, and slightly inarticulate, but the inference was clear.

"Of course, I will," she said, touching his face. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Living and working in the same place can be... crowding. Awkward, sometimes. I want you to be sure."

She kissed him again, lightly, just brushing his lips.

"I'm sure." She placed a finger at the base of his neck, and began to trace light circles on his skin. "Something occurs to me, though." He just looked at her. "You claimed to be in my debt. Well, I don't start teaching until the beginning of the summer term. Help me find a cure for

Seamus. I've still got the original bottle. There may be some traces left that can help us."

His chest began to tremble under her lazy movements. She eyed him, and realised that he was actually trying not to chuckle.

"I'm serious," she said.

He shook his head.

"I know," he said, eyes glittering with laughter. "I was just thinking that that's how we got into this in the first place."

"So, will you help me?" she persisted, amusement edging her voice as well.

"Don't you ever give up?"

"No. Will you help me?"

He caught her hand and brought it up to his mouth, to kiss the inside of her wrist.

"Of course, my dearest heart," he whispered against her skin, the touch of his breath sending fresh shivers through her. "Anything you desire."

"Anything?" Her lips curved wickedly.

"Anything." His eyes were serious now, dark, and bottomless.

"Then, kiss me, Professor Snape."

She lay back on the bed, as he bent to obey.



Snape stood, glowering, as the last potions class of the day left the room, with an alacrity which only just stopped short of headlong flight.

Despite repeated injunctions to tidy away, there was at least one bench that still showed signs of scattered ingredients, hastily concealed behind a set of scales. He sighed, tapping his wand on the table top, muttering under his breath. The remnants of scarab beetle and ginger root whisked themselves into the non-hazardous bin. Selina Hope and Bluebell Coleridge, he thought sourly. Two young ladies, who were far more concerned with attracting the attention of the Ravenclaw boys on the other side of the room, than they were in understanding the finer points of the Wit-Sharpening Potion that had been the subject of the day's lesson. Which was a pity, because few of his pupils needed their wits sharpened more than Hope and Coleridge.

He stalked around to the area of the room that was reserved for his own personal projects. There were a number of potions in varying stages of preparation. Picking up a long handled spoon, he stirred one reflectively, instinctively assessing the thickness and texture by its resistance to motion. It would be ready for removal and filtration soon, he judged. Moving along, he came to a large bowl, in which a liquid had been left to settle. A thick layer of sediment at the bottom told him that the viscous, colourless, top layer was now ready to be skimmed off, and used. The carrier mixture of Hester's potion was ready. They could now

attempt the creation of an antidote.

Thoughts of Hester's potion led, naturally enough, to thoughts of Hermione. She had now been at Hogwarts for just over a fortnight, having packed up herself and her familiar, with no obvious reluctance to leave her flat, or her former life. Dumbledore had gently suggested that she take rooms near to Gryffindor Tower, for the time being, and they had both agreed that this was a good idea. Their ...relationship... was still in the fragile, early stages, and he, especially, had to get used to the presence of another, in a place where he had become accustomed to solitude.

Her presence was by turns delightful, and deeply unsettling, to him. Hogwarts had for so long been a refuge, a place to hide alone, barricaded against the world, that sharing that space was, occasionally, a matter of conscious effort. Much as he wanted to let her in, sometimes he could not suppress the reflexive urge to retreat back to simpler territory, almost wishing that nothing had ever happened, that he didn't have to deal with all the conflicting, unfamiliar, feelings within him.

And then, the other times, when she was with him, holding him, touching him, he felt such a joy, that he wanted it never to end. He imagined just folding himself into her, staying wrapped within her forever. Those were the

times when he would wake suddenly in the night, doubting that she could really be there, reaching out to her for reassurance.

She did not spend every night with him by any means, pointing out with a wicked smile, that it would do nothing for either of their reputations to be caught sneaking about the castle like guilty fifth-years.

Last night, she had spent in her rooms, telling him firmly that she had to master the potions syllabus at some point before the summer term started. And it had been one of those nights for him, when fear and self-doubt visited. Missing her at meal times, as she began to sort out administration with Minerva McGonagall, and irritable from lack of sleep, he had been more vicious than usual with his classes.

The sound of the door to the room disturbed his thoughts.

"Class finished ten minutes ago, and I am busy," he said in an arctic tone, without looking round. "Either collect your property and leave, or make an appointment to see me later in the week."

"And a good afternoon to you too, Severus," came the amused response. "I take it that the fourth years were trying today."

Hermione walked across the room to look at the liquid in the bowl.

"*Trying* is the natural state of a fourth year. Today they reached the dizzy heights of intoler-

able. Gods preserve me from rampant, female, hormones," he said with feeling.

"Whatever you say, Professor," murmured the woman beside him, blandly.

"Adolescent, female, hormones," he qualified.

"Better," she agreed, then, changing the subject, "is the carrier ready? It looks it."

He nodded. She reached into the pocket of her robes and pulled out the green flask with the M rune on it. He noted that she carefully placed on the bench, turning it so the design faced away from her.

"I don't know how useful this is going to be. I decanted it pretty thoroughly."

"It may not matter."

She looked sharply at him.

"Why not."

He went over to his desk, and opened a drawer, reaching his hand inside to touch the underside of the desktop. Attached to it, was a small roll of parchment, tightly bound and sealed. Something that he had kept secret, even from her, secured in the one place that he could be certain that she would not look. It had been something of a risk, hiding it in the classroom, but he had relied on the fact that her innate sense of honour would prevent her going through his private desk. He detached it, and brought it over to her, placing it beside the bottle, careful not to let it touch.

"What's that?" Her voice was wary.

He broke the seal, dispelling the ward that he had placed on it. Carefully, he unrolled it, revealing several long, black, threads. She looked uncomfortable.

"What are they?" She shivered, and extended a cautious finger to touch one lightly. She jerked her hand back as if it had burnt her, crying out softly. Her hand went to her cheek. "These belong to that *thing* don't they? I can feel it. Where the hell did they come from? Why didn't you *warn* me?"

She was obviously shaken. He felt a pang of remorse, and reached out to put his hand on her arm.

"I didn't realise that you would still be sensitive to it, or I would have prevented you touching it."

She was still breathing a little fast but she was recovering. She put her other hand over his briefly, a quick reassurance.

"Where did they come from?" she repeated in a more controlled tone.

"The cottage," he said briefly. "I didn't think it was good idea to leave them lying around."

"How do they help us?" was her next question.

He couldn't help but admire the fact that, shock, or no shock, her first assumption was that he had had a purpose behind saving them.

"The creature's essence was of that place, that shadow reality. You will recall that it carried the ability to perform the transfer within itself, which was how it could be sent back

without the potion."

She looked at him quizzically. A frown crossed her face.

"OK, forgive me for being very stupid here, but I don't see how that helps us. We don't want to transport anything. We want to awaken Seamus. He's here, not there." She bit her lower lip, as she thought. The temptation to explain died within him, lost in the sheer fascination of watching her work it out for herself. She began to pace as she reasoned aloud.

"The potion is necessary to transport us and not *it*. But the Death Eater, or whoever, in Yorkshire wasn't trying to send Seamus anywhere, it was..." she stopped abruptly, her face twisted in distaste. "Oh Gods, it was feeding on him, wasn't it — like that thing was from Malfoy?" She shuddered, hugging her arms around herself briefly at the memory, turning away.

"The potion both activates the transfer, and forms the bridge allowing 'feeding' to take place. The creature had no need of the potion for either." He made the statement as dispassionately as possible, not taking his eyes off her.

"Therefore, if those threads contain the essence of the creature, which they do, then they should also form the bridge, as you put it. So, we now have an isolated sample of the active ingredient which initiates that process and we should be able to identify a counteragent," she concluded

for him, flatly, her back still to him.

"Yes." There didn't seem a lot else to say.

She was still for a long time. Unusually for him, he felt the need to break the silence first.

"Hermione..."

She turned at the sound of her name.

"Don't," she said, but her voice was gentle. She walked back to him, and put her arms round him. He returned the embrace, simply holding her. She rested there a moment, and then moved away. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "So much has happened over the last few weeks, that I suppose I had managed to push the memories away, make myself conveniently ignore what actually happened." A smile touched her lips. "The bad parts, anyway. Seeing this, just brought it back."

He opened his mouth to say something, but she placed her finger on his lips. He waited.

"Don't," she said again. "Don't say you're sorry, or tell me this is somehow down to you. It's hardly your fault, if I choose to stick my head in the sand for while."

He didn't know how to reply to that. She had managed to take his breath away, yet again. In the end, he just held her hand, taking her finger away from his lips.

"So," he said eventually, lacing his voice with irony, "do you want to see if we can solve this, or shall we just stand here until some lost and wandering first-years see us, and start spread-

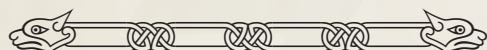
ing rumours around the school."

That made her laugh. It still amazed him that he could do that, make her laugh. In fact, sometimes that surprised him more than... other things.

"OK," she said briskly. "Let's get on with it."

They didn't solve it that night. Or the next night. Or any night, in the couple of weeks left until the end of the spring term.

Hermione told him that there was just too much going on, and they'd be able to concentrate on it more during the holidays, but the truth was the problem steadfastly resisted solution. They couldn't even get much further with the few dregs of the original potion sample.



Most of the work now fell on him. Although she hated to admit it, handling the fibres actually caused her physical pain, legacy of the attack in the alley. She insisted on pressing on, and he went along with it, but after having to hold her through nightmares for three nights in a row, he told her point blank that he would take over. She, predictably, was furious, and he got a fair taste of just what was likely to happen when they were at odds on a subject that they were both passionate about. She cared, deeply, about finding a cure, and he cared, deeply, about her. It had ended with him telling her,

coldly, that as long as she couldn't handle the materials confidently, she was at a serious disadvantage in the work. It was callous, and true, and he hated himself for using it against her. She had simply walked out on him, and disappeared for the rest of the day.

He had worked on, pushing down his irrational fear that he would never see her again. That evening she had returned, entered his rooms, walked up to him, and just put her arms around him.

"I know you're right," she said against his chest. "But I still hate it."

"I understand," he responded gently. "But I'm still going to insist on taking over the analysis."

And he had done so, but to little effect.

On the second day of the Easter holidays, Hermione announced that she wanted to spend some time in the library. This, in itself, was nothing surprising. He had half expected her to ask for rooms adjoining it. She didn't explain what she was doing, just vaguely muttered something, and disappeared. She didn't explain herself that evening, either, just seemed distracted over supper. After they had finished eating, she kissed him deeply, searchingly, and then excused herself, saying that she had something that she wanted to work on, and didn't want to distract him from sleep. Puzzled, and trying not to be unduly worried, he slept alone, albeit rather fitfully. The next day, she

didn't appear in the lab at all until mid-afternoon, when she arrived, dumped some books down, and hoisted herself up so she was sitting on the bench, crossing her legs, resting one foot on a tall stool. It was an action that would have earned any of the school pupils detention.

"Severus," she said without preamble. "I've been thinking."

He put down the small beaker he was holding.

"Go on," he invited. Hermione's thoughts tended to be worth paying attention to.

"I was reviewing some of the results, and something struck me, so I did some research."

He settled to listen to her.

"You know that neurons in the brain transfer information via neurotransmitters."

He nodded.

"Well, comparing the results of your analyses, and the results of these tests," she opened one of the books at a place she had marked and shoved the page at him, "the active ingredient in the potion looks a lot like a neurotransmitter."

He studied it. She had attached the two sets of results side by side. The profiles were very similar. She was still speaking.

"We already know that the hallucinogens in the potion enhance the telepathic receptivity of the drinker. So, what if the ingredient mimics the actions of the neurotransmitters – making 'ringers' if you like? When the drinker makes physical

contact with the victim, and uses enhanced psychic ability to connect with the victim's brain, the ringers intercept the neurotransmitters between the neurons, setting up an alternate neural pathway, and causing the information, emotions, whatever the drinker is seeking, to be diverted from the victim to the attacker."

He considered the question. If she was right, then he could begin to see a way to a solution. She continued.

"I did a projection based on that assumption last night." She unrolled a scroll. "Now, neurotransmitters are normally self-regulating. The projection suggests that if a diversion of that sort took place, the victim would suffer a rapid and catastrophic depletion of their own neurotransmitter supply, leading to catatonia, and death in extreme cases. Which is what we saw in Seamus, and Draco Malfoy. Harry interrupted the process for Seamus, and I can only assume that the *thing* was able to internally regulate the process sufficiently for the 'feeding' to be controlled, hence the fact that Malfoy survived for so long."

He took the scroll from her and studied it. It must have taken her the best part of the night, he thought. It was a breathtaking piece of work. The logic was flawless, the reasoning closely argued. He glanced up from the scroll. She was watching him, her expression almost defensive, as if she

expected to have to fight to justify her conclusions. He had a sudden memory of her, the first day in his class, hand in the air, knowing she had the right answer. She didn't have her hand in the air any more, but the underlying conviction that she had the solution hadn't changed.

He nodded slowly.

"The hypothesis certainly fits the facts," he said. "Not only that, if correct, I believe that it carries within in the basis of the cure."

"You think I'm right then?" A little cautious.

"Yes, I do."

Her face relaxed into an expression of relief.

"I had an awful moment, when I was convinced that you would think that I was an *idiot*."

Sometimes, he was so wrapped up in his own disbelief that she would choose him as a partner, that he forgot that his, outwardly confident, lover had her own, buried, insecurities. It hadn't occurred to him that she would worry so much about his reaction. Oddly touched at the thought, and unsure how to express it, he took refuge in irony.

"Rest assured, Miss Granger, I have held many opinions about you, but idiot has never been one of them."

She looked a little sheepish, and shrugged diffidently.

"You know, sometimes you see something really clearly, and then you wonder if you've

missed the obvious."

The prospect of her ever missing the obvious was so absurd that it made him smile. He caught an answering smile from her. He picked up her work again, and re-read it, turning and idea over in his mind, and refining it.

"If this is correct, and I have no doubt that it is, then if the victim's brain can be stimulated to begin producing neurotransmitters again, and the reuptake mechanism can be blocked for long enough to permit optimal levels to be re-established, that should effect a 'cure,'" he stated.

She was nodding, as he worked through it. He stared at the two sets of profiles, side by side.

"I think," he said, "that we aren't looking for a counteragent at all. I think that if the structure of the ringer substance, as you call it, is altered, we can provoke necessary chemical response."

She slid off the bench, and came to stand by him, very close, studying the information. She absently tucked her hair out of the way, as she considered his suggestion. He found her beautiful at the best of times, but there was something intoxicating about her when she was thinking. Something to do with the fact that she was almost completely unguarded, and he could see the essence of her, so very clearly.

"So where would you make the alterations?" she mused.

He pointed to the pages in front of them.

"There, and there, and there. Where the disparity between the profiles is greatest. The points where the 'bridge' will be the weakest."

She was nodding again, more vigorously.

"Yes. Yes, I can see how it can be done." She paused. "It will be a tricky charm, but it's possible." She turned to him with a blazing smile. "We did it!"

"We haven't created the charm yet," he pointed out, amused at her enthusiasm.

She waved him away, eyes sparkling.

"We will."

He was lost in her eyes for a moment, fighting the desire to pull her to him. He wondered just how he had managed to get to a position where he was seriously contemplating kissing a woman, a guest of the school and future member of the teaching staff, in the middle of his classroom, where anyone could walk in, without warning and see them. He was even more intrigued to realise that a large part of him didn't actually care.



Hermione followed Harry Potter down the corridors of the secure psychiatric wing of St Mungo's. The surroundings made her uncomfortable, and not just because they brought back memories of her own recent, brief, stay. This particular part of the hospital was only a short step from being

a prison. Magical healing being what it was, the vast majority of 'minor' complaints were fairly easily treatable. People only tended to end up in St Mungo's if they were a danger to themselves, or others, or, like Seamus, inhabiting the shadowy realms of the living dead.

The place smelt cold, disinfectant overlaid with the lingering odour of stale food, and other things, that no amount of cleaning could disperse. Chilly tendrils wound round Hermione's nerves, bringing back unpleasant recollections of her encounters with the *other*. She shivered, more at the memory, than the temperature. The atmosphere did not encourage conversation, and their footsteps echoed on the tiled floor, bouncing back at them off the white walls.

The corridors were lined with doors, white also, fading into the stonework, the only distinguishing feature being handles, and the occasional heavy lock. Flaps in the bottom of the doors allowed food to be pushed to the most dangerous, she assumed. Were Neville Longbottom's parents in one of these rooms? Was Seamus? Was *Draco Malfoy*? As if he caught her thought, Harry paused by one of the doors. There was a small rectangular slot at eye level, covered by a latched flap that dropped down. Unhooking it, he let it fall, and then stood back so that Hermione could see in.

"Malfoy," he said quietly.

She peered in. The room had a metal framed bed, with a mattress covered by a sheet. Blankets were piled in a heap on the floor next to the bed. There was no other furniture in the room, save a bucket. By the light filtering through a frosted window, high in the wall, she could see Draco Malfoy lying on the bed, curled into a foetal position, wearing a standard hospital gown. Only the shock of white blonde hair betrayed the fact that it was him. She could hear a faint, whimpering, sound. Otherwise, there was no sign of life at all. An acrid smell drifted out of the room, making her stomach turn. She moved away, and latched up the wicket, feeling sick.

Harry nodded to her to follow him. He had been unusually uncommunicative since they had met at the entrance. She knew that the Ministry had disciplined him for his part in the events of January and February. She suspected that he had only held onto his job because Fudge did not want to face the adverse publicity that would result from the summary dismissal of Harry Potter. She was far from feeling resentful about it — she was perfectly content with the way things had turned out for her — but she sensed that Harry still felt some awkwardness about it.

Part of her also wished that Snape had come with her, but he had refused when she suggested

it, pointing out that it would be unlikely to make for a smooth meeting with Harry. She had to acknowledge that he was right, but she still missed his caustic presence. The issue of Snape was one that she still had to broach with Harry.

Turning into a side corridor, Harry halted before another door. This one did not appear to be locked, or if it was, the locking wards were keyed to Harry, for the door swung easily open. This room was considerably more pleasant than Draco's. It had a clear glass window with floral curtains. There was a table and a chair, and someone had arranged a vase of fresh flowers in an attempt to cheer it up. Seamus was lying on the bed, covered with a sheet, apparently unresponsive. Hermione felt her heart go out to him.

A movement behind her made her jump. A medi-wizard in a white coat bustled into the room. He was about Snape's age she thought, shortish and stout, with gingery receding hair and a matching gingery moustache. He introduced himself to her as Dr Phineas Affpuddle. He seemed to know Harry. He listened to her explanation with an air of polite condescension, and indicated that if she wished to try the potion, he had no objections.

She pulled the bottle out of her pocket, and unstopped it. Both men watched her impassively, as she nervously approached the bed. Carefully, she tipped a dose of the potion into

Seamus' mouth. Then she closed his mouth, tipped his head back, and massaged his throat to activate the swallowing reflex. All that was left to do was wait. Neither she, nor Snape, had been able to predict how long the potion would take to work, and they had disagreed on the potential number of doses. She thought that the effect would be fairly rapid, given that they were using an altered version of the substance that had done the damage in the first place. He thought that progress would be slow and gradual, necessitating frequent doses to bring the chemical levels back to normal. If the issue hadn't been a friend of hers, she would have taken more pleasure in the debate.

She began to count under her breath. Snape would expect her to give an account of the procedure. As she reached ninety, Seamus began to twitch. His heart gave a somersault of relief. Dr Affpuddle pushed past her, as the man on the bed began to mutter incoherently. The doctor passed his wand over Seamus a number of times, and turned back to Hermione. This time, his attitude held an air of cautious respect.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger, it seems that this potion of yours has had an effect."

She nodded, trying to give the impression that she had never been in any doubt of it.

"I think that you may need to repeat the dosage at regular intervals until full con-

sciousness returns." She smiled inwardly. *Call it a draw, then, Severus.* She handed the bottle to the doctor. "Can I leave this with you?"

The doctor practically snatched the flask from her, assuring her that everything would be perfectly safe in his hands, and almost pushing her and Harry out of the room in his haste to be alone with his patient.



Harry and Hermione sat just inside the doors of St Mungo's. Someone had created an area with potted plants and soft seats, no doubt designed to reassure anxious visitors, and give them somewhere to wait. Every so often a thin little witch would bustle up and offer them pumpkin juice, or cauldron cakes, or chocolate frogs. It was a little like being back on the Hogwarts Express. Hermione contented herself with coffee. Harry refused a drink. The silence between them was still a little strained.

"Will they use the potion to cure Draco?" she asked, more by way of making conversation than out of real curiosity.

"I don't know," replied Harry reflectively. "I'm guessing not. Lucius Malfoy is becoming a big problem for the Ministry. I think they're going to hold Draco as hostage to Papa Malfoy's good behaviour."

Hermione felt a vague distaste at the cal-

culatation of the plan. She remembered the firebolts embedded in Snape's flesh. Sometime the Ministry was an ambiguous organisation.

"That potion was nice work, by the way" Harry said after a while. "The doctor said that it couldn't be done."

She sipped her coffee meditatively, considering the best way to phrase her response.

"Well, we managed to find some of the active ingredient, which helped a lot."

Harry's eyebrow raised.

"We?" he said questioningly.

"I worked on it with... Professor Snape." A slight evasion, but she thought she'd better take this one step at a time.

It was a wise decision. Harry nearly choked.

"Snape!" he spluttered. "I would have thought that you'd seen enough of that bastard to last you a lifetime."

She sighed. This was not going to be easy.

"Harry," she said carefully, "I told you that we got on all right, didn't I...?"

"Yes, but all the same," he interrupted. "Did it have to be him? I mean, he's the one that made it in the first place."

She was a little irritated at the 'older brother' attitude. She tried approaching the subject from a different direction.

"You know I've been offered a job at Hogwarts?"

"There were some rumours in the Ministry." He

gave a sudden, mischievous, grin. "I gather that Fudge was furious. He was heard muttering about Dumbledore condoning abhorrent conduct." He was serious again. "Are you going to take it?"

"Yes. I've already accepted. In fact I've been there for a couple of weeks." She felt vaguely guilty that she hadn't told him earlier. But she had had no communication from *him* since Snape had been released from Azkaban, and she had been ducking the question, with the excuse that she was working on the cure for Seamus.

"I admire your nerve. Working with him." No need to ask who *him* was. "What will you teach?" he continued. "Arithmancy?"

"Potions," she said simply.

Harry looked at her, startled.

"What about him?"

"He's going to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"So, he finally got it. I bet he's pleased." Harry's tone was scathing.

"Yes," she said mildly. "He is."

They weren't going to get anywhere if he couldn't even bring himself to say Snape's name, she thought miserably.

Something in her lack of reaction got through to Harry.

"Mione," he said in a worried tone. "Is there something going on here? Are you sure you're going to be all right working with him?"

There was no help for it. The indirect approach was just not working. She steeled herself.

"Harry," she said quietly, "there's something you need to know." He opened his mouth to say something but she held up her hand to silence him. "Hear me out, please." He shut his mouth again. "Whilst we were dealing with Malfoy and that *thing*, Professor Snape..." *no, damn it*, "... Severus and I became close."

Harry had gone very still.

"Close?" he said carefully, experimentally. "You're telling me that the two of you are friends?"

She sighed.

"No," she said, still quiet, calm. "I'm telling you that we're lovers."

He was silent. She waited him out. There was absolutely no way that she intended to apologise, explain or justify herself.

"I see," was all he said. Then, "did he tell you that I hit him?"

"Yes, he did."

Harry nodded.

"I thought that he had hurt you." He sounded betrayed.

"Well," she said evenly, "I wasn't in any position to tell you different, and Severus elected not to tell you anything at all. So, I don't think you can be blamed for the conclusion. And I do appreciate that fact that you came after me, you know."

He nodded to himself, not looking at her.

"Are you happy?" he asked finally.

"Yes. Yes I am," she answered.

"Well, I suppose that's all that counts really, isn't it?" His tone was strained, bordering on sarcastic. "Just don't expect me to like it 'Mione."

"I don't. But I do expect you to respect my choices," she said a little more sharply than she intended.

"Well, you always did do things your own way," he said, and the hurt was apparent in his voice now.

She ran her hand over her hair. She would almost have preferred him to shout and storm, rather than this quietly wounded air.

"Harry, I didn't intend for this to happen. I was as surprised as anyone, believe me. I certainly didn't intend to hurt anyone else in the process, and I really am sorry for that."

"Mione, he's, what, twenty years older than you, he was a Death Eater, he's ugly as sin and got the most vicious temper I've ever come across. I'm sorry, but he's just not a nice man. Forgive me for not immediately being thrilled for you."

She paused, struck by the fact that when she looked at Snape, when she thought of him, she no longer saw the age, the looks, the past. She saw the intelligence, the wit, the compassion, the strength, the infuriating sense of honour... she no longer saw the man who had taught her potions so many years ago. She realised she was smiling.

"No," she said reflectively, "I suppose he isn't a nice man, in many ways." She looked at Harry. "I don't expect you to believe this, but he is a good man."

Harry let out a sour snort, and stood up.

"Maybe so, but it's going to take me a little while to come to that conclusion for myself." He ran his hand through his hair. "I need to get back."

Hermione nodded.

"Let me know what happens with Seamus."

"Sure," he said distractedly. He turned to look at her for the first time since she had dropped her bombshell. "'Mione, do me a favour. Let me tell Ron. About you and... about you."

"Of course," she nodded again. "You know where to owl me."

"Yeah. Take care of yourself 'Mione."

"And you."

Without any further goodbye, he wandered off through the entrance and apparated.

Hermione just sat in the foyer staring into space. Whilst she hadn't expected unbounded joy, the open hostility had shaken her. And angered her. Not so much on Snape's behalf, but for the fact that Harry hadn't trusted her judgement. That he wanted to break the news to Ron, as if she weren't capable of it. Upset and annoyed, she stood, leaving the rest of her coffee undrunk. She walked out of the building, and apparated to the edge of Hogwarts, return-

ing to the life she had chosen.



It was the beginning of the summer term. Hermione had had one brief letter from Harry since their meeting at St Mungo's. It told her that Seamus seemed to be making a full recovery. She already knew that, as Dr Affpuddle had owled her on several occasions asking advice on administration and dosage of the potion. He made no mention of Ron. Ron, himself, had made no attempt to contact her. Despite her anger with them, they were still her friends and their coldness hurt. Snape, with unusual tact, didn't raise the topic at all.

Other than that, she felt that she was prepared to face the term. Snape had given her his syllabus for the rest of the year, with the sour comment that no doubt she would re-write it over the summer.

"Maybe some parts of it. Somehow I don't think I can deliver that speech about foolish wand waving to quite the same effect."

She heard the quiet chuckle behind her, as he came up and put his arms around her. She leant back into the embrace, letting his presence calm her nerves. A scratching at the half open window signalled the entrance of an owl. She looked round, half hoping to see Hedwig, or even

Errol. It was an unfamiliar barn owl. She sighed. It landed and hopped over to her. She untied the message from its leg. It was addressed to her, and she unrolled it as the owl flew away. Snape hadn't released his hold on her.

"Who is it from?" he asked, incuriously, over her shoulder.

"Dr Affpuddle. It seems that Seamus has been pronounced fit and well, and is being discharged today. Dr Affpuddle was so impressed with the potion, he wondered if I would care to consult with him regarding a number of other intractable cases under his care."

"And would you?"

"Maybe. Who knows. I'd like to get through my first term's teaching first."

He hugged her more tightly.

"I foresee no difficulties."

She suddenly needed to say something.

"Severus, I do love you, you know."

His lips brushed her neck.

"As do I you, dearest heart."

He paused, and then went on in a serious voice.

"You are aware that I have no sentimental fondness for either Mr Potter, or Mr Weasley. However, I ...regret... that your choice appears to have cost you your friendship with them."

It was the first reference he had made to the split between her, Harry and Ron.

"I think they're just a little ...shocked... by the

whole thing. I expect they'll come round in time."

He held her more tightly.

"I did warn you that this wasn't going to be easy."

She leant back into him again, hugging her arms over his.

"You did, indeed." She tried not to think about the likely problems – Harry, Ron, her parents, other people's reactions. All bridges that would need to be crossed in time. She just knew that she was certain of the man standing behind her. She tightened her grip on him. "But somehow, I think that it's going to be worth it."



AUTHOR'S NOTES

This came about following some shameless bullying from Clare009, and a long conversation with Anne in Starbucks. So if you like it, it's all down to me, and if you don't – it's not my fault, they made me do it... "vbg"

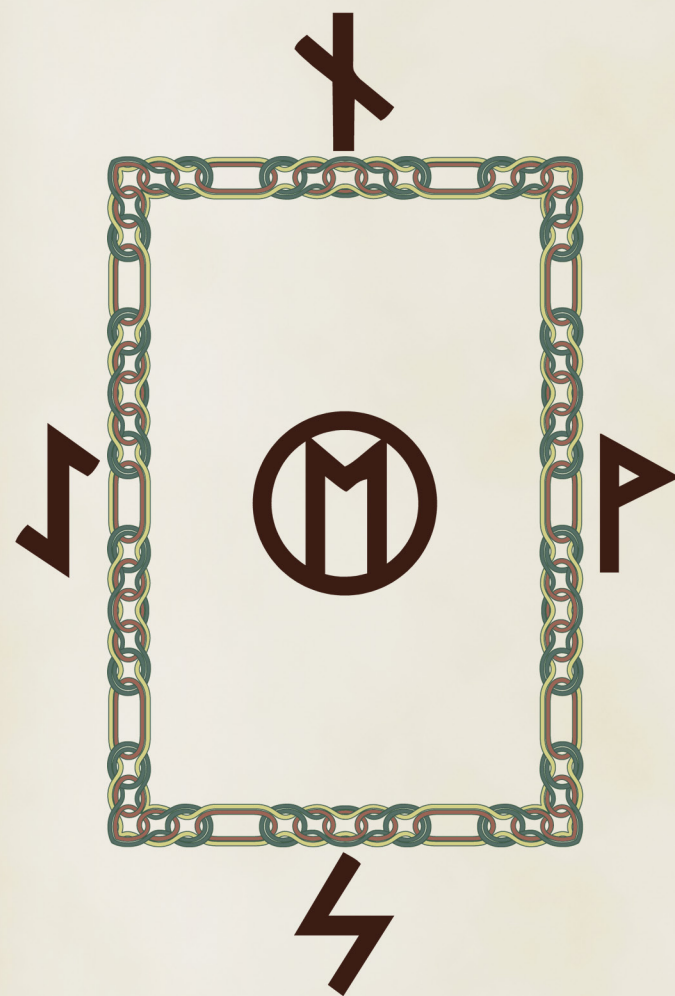
(Most) deliberate borrowings are done with permission. My biggest debts of inspiration are probably to PAWN TO QUEEN, MARRACH, and A HIGHER PRICE. I humbly grovel and apologise for any subconscious, and unintentional, borrowings from their or anyone else's fic – I have no doubt there are loads anyway – please take it as sincere homage "g" Tell me about it, and I'll credit you.... There is one almost direct lift from the LORD OF THE RINGS. And a couple from the WIZARD OF Oz. And one from THE LION IN WINTER.

As for Sphinx – the name is not borrowed from the wonderful writer "g" but from the breed of cat that she most closely resembles. In fact she is based on a real cat of my close acquaintance, who, is, in fact, called Esmé. Confused yet? "g"

Thanks to Anne for kicking around the psychology of Snape with me, and thanks to Clare009 for alternately bullying, betaing and providing reassurance/validation at 2 o'clock in the morning when I am convinced that I can't write a decent laundry list, let alone any form of fiction. "hugs" guys!

Author's Note Part 3: The wards around Hester's cottage are a shameless crib from an idea of Clare009. The spell *Deshabillus* is not my invention, and is not canon, but for the life of me I can't remember where I read it. So if it's your brainchild, let me know and I'll be suitably appreciative "g"

Author's Notes Part 4: In this section I have taken some liberties with the meanings of runes. No disrespect is intended to genuine practitioners of rune magic, and/or scholars of the Elder Futhark. J



COLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Frontspiece illustration is modified from commercial clip art from Dynamic Graphics. Page decorations were constructed utilizing commercial clip art from the incomparable Marwan Aridi. Additional celtic motifs were selected from the work of George Bain, Courtney Davis and Marty Noble, all familiar to collectors of Dover Publications. These were all modified in Macromedia FreeHand and Adobe Photoshop, Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop.

Fonts used: the Journal family, from Emigré foundary for body text. Also utilized are P22 foundary's Josephine Hopper, Micaelangelo and Da Vinci Forward scripts as well as Regallo A Playa from T-26. Titling and page numbering are set in Lindisfarne Runes from Bitstream. Other typographic accents were provided by Base Twelve Sans from Emigré, Bitstream's Colmcille Ornaments, David Nalle of Fontcraft's Dahut, and DTF's Futhark Gothic.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)