

Cantata for Three Voices in G Major

by wirefish1

The war's over, Voldemort's destroyed, and Hermione has strong-armed the boys into returning for their delayed seventh year. The wizarding world is not all set to rights, and many people are still finding their way. DISCLAIMER: Anything recognizable belongs to J.K. Rowling, and all I get is the fun of writing it.

1 Sept '98

Chapter 1 of 1

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1 Sept '98, afternoon, Room of Requirement

"I have you now," Morgana said, stalking from the dark niche where she had lain in wait, her long crimson robes billowing about her. He raised his wand, but she disarmed him effortlessly with a gesture of her pale hand. "There will be no defense, just submission." Her brunette locks swirled around her head, a Medusean mass that defied any sense of control.

The wizard cast about for a weapon, for an escape, but there was none. His office had only one door, and she blocked his access. "Please, I've done what you asked. Everything you asked."

The witch was upon him now, her amber eyes flashing. "Everything I asked for, 'til now." With a stroke of her wand, she knocked the wizard across his own desk and bound him to it silently. Her fingers grazed his robes, and she grasped his neck, whispering the curse that made him flail in exquisite pleasure. He cried out, resisting her attacks, struggling to rally his considerable skill against her, shaking his fair, lank hair from his grey eyes so he could stare at her in fear.

Morgana laughed, her voice low and smooth as velvet. "There will be no defense," she repeated, vanishing his clothing piece by piece until he was stripped naked before her. She drew the tip of her ebony wand across his leg, dragging a line of sweet agony upon him, inspecting his body with her cold gaze. The wizard groaned and quailed as she twisted his nipples, the dim light reflecting off her blood-red nail polish. She loosed a heavy leather whip from beneath her robes.

"Yes," she hissed. She rotated his body into position upon the desk and re-bound him against the cool wood of the surface. He pressed his face against the desk, crying out as she trailed the end of the whip over him. "So responsive," Morgana purred, and he heard the whip whistle through the air and felt the sting of the strike against his soft, pale flesh. "I'll mark you as mine," she growled into his ear, her breath sweet and intoxicating.

"Hermione, where are you?"

Startled, she dropped the magazine she was reading on the floor and kicked the stack over. "I'm coming!" she shouted back at Ron as she scrambled to reassemble the magazines, trying not to gawk at the garish drawings and leering photographs. Her face burned; she tried to forget the story she'd been reading and ignore the heat rising through her.

She'd never seen wizard pornography. She'd guessed there must be a wizarding equivalent of Muggle smut, but she'd assumed it would consist of moving centerfolds, not stories. She shoved the stack where she had found it, hoping that whoever owned it wouldn't realize it had been disturbed. For a moment, she considered taking the one she had been reading, and she flipped through the worn pages. The few illustrations in this issue consisted of whips and other objects of punishment, most of them magicked to appear in motion. If she took it, she would have to hide it or else explain why she'd kept it. She pressed the magazine down onto the stack and decisively brushed the dust off her jeans.

She jogged off towards where she had heard Ron's voice and found him and Harry sitting on a pile of mud brown trunks. "Did you find anything?" she asked.

Ron pointed at a box full of bottles. "Harry and I found three boxes and picked out as many identical bottles as we could.

"Do we have enough?"

Ron made a face. "According to Seamus and Neville, we do. In fact, we have enough for a dozen extra bottles and a few for broken."

Harry grimaced. "We don't want any broken, not once they're filled."

"I guess that just leaves us with the potion," Hermione said.

Ron hefted a large cauldron with things clunking around in it. "I found this and a bunch of stirring rods, all elm."

She peered inside it thoughtfully. "It'll need to be cleaned."

"I tried Scourgify on it already," Ron said. "It got some of the stuff out, but..."

Harry joined Hermione examining the inside of the vessel.

"Any suggestions, anyone?" asked Harry. "Scourgify is usually enough to clean up even Neville's potion mistakes."

Hermione shook her head. "We'll have to research that. My guess is whoever ditched it in here must have tried to clean it. Hopefully, whoever it was didn't try very hard."

"Should we take it to the dorms like this? Or work on it here?" Harry asked.

"Let's leave it," Hermione replied. "I'll come back down and work on it this evening."

Ron shoved the cauldron under a pillow and tucked the elm stirring rods under his arm. They left the Room of Requirement, chatting quietly about the upcoming feast and the last attempt for Gryffindor to claim the school cup.

The surviving students had almost all returned for their NEWTs since their scheduled seventh year had been subsumed by the vicious war. For Hermione, this had been an obvious choice, reasoning that the NEWTs scores would give her an edge in employment. Most of the rest had seen the return to school as an opportunity to rest after the trials of battle. Eager to settle the dust, the Ministry and Hogwarts staff and board of governors had agreed to make accommodations for the returning veterans.

Years of conflict ground down the will of the Ministry; the war thinned the ranks of combatants and civilians alike. The wizarding world craved peace. Tolerating the less prominent sympathizers seemed a minor price to preserve the stabilizing power of government bureaucracy. The public lacked sufficient appetite to hunt out the leaderless shreds of the Death Eaters and settled for making Voldemort's supporters help shore up the civilization they'd tried to topple.

But as the summer wore on after Voldemort's destruction, it became evident that the dark wizard's followers were set on prolonging the chaos. Small acts of sabotage got one-sentence coverage deep in the back pages of the *Daily Prophet*. No killings, no Muggle baiting, but just enough to cause local concern.

Harry hit on the idea first. Devise a way to help identify and locate the remainder of the guerrilla Death Eaters without overtly involving the Ministry. The Order of the Phoenix members and Minister pro tem Kingsley Shacklebolt rejected his suggestions, either vocally or by simply refusing to speak with Harry or any of the other students who were part of Dumbledore's Army. Remus Lupin alone cautiously supported their plans but advised that they should keep all Dumbledore Army plans secret from the Order members. After hours of arguing in secluded locations, Harry and Seamus presented a plan to the rest of the DA and split responsibilities amongst them, structuring their team into discrete cooperative cells.

The secrecy suited the students just fine. Most of their elder relatives and the Order simply wanted ordinary life to return. No more heroics. No more anxious watching at windows. The more canny of the Order members suspected the DA might succumb to recklessness. Few argued this point louder than Severus Snape, who scrutinized each DA member as if he intended to interrogate them personally regarding covert plans.

Snape remained as an advisor to the Order and the Ministry on the inner workings of the Death Eaters and on staff at the school. He declared for Dumbledore when he duelled the Death Eaters whom Draco smuggled into Hogwarts. Harry and the headmaster both witnessed the skirmish, but neither of them could confidently relate what had gone down, except that Draco reacted in confusion, wildly attacking everyone who moved, and Snape's first strike amputated the headmaster's withered arm at the elbow. By the time Draco was stunned unconscious, both Alecko Carrow and her brother Amycus were dead, and the remaining two Death Eaters were fatally wounded. The Order whisked both Draco and his mother into protective cover. Snape went into hiding at Hogwarts for the duration of the conflict, furthering the war effort as he could while evading execution attempts by a seething Voldemort. Both Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey credited the Potions master's work with prolonging and restoring the headmaster's life. Without his brewing and knowledge of the Dark Arts, Dumbledore would not have lived.

After the war ended, the Potions master was quietly honored by the Ministry of Magic with an Order of Merlin for his role as a counteragent. But word leaked out about the award. The resulting minor scandal was quickly hushed by the Ministry's press agents. Nevertheless, according to letters to the *Prophet's* editors, much of the wizarding public wondered whether Snape might try to peddle his espionage services to the next powerful wizard.

Despite the fact that he'd seen Snape turn against Voldemort during the battle of the Tower, Harry still distrusted the man, citing personal dislike and Snape's unclear motives. Ron followed suit for the same reasons as well as simple loyalty to his friend. Most younger Order members tended to agree with Harry and Ron, but they all knew it was best not to voice any outright distrust of the former spy to the adult members of the Order.

Hermione wasn't sure whom she believed, really. After all, she'd been captive in the dungeon under Malfoy Manor when Snape and others from the Order stormed Voldemort's stronghold in the final battle. He took on Bella himself and freed Hermione and the other captives. She tended to trust the adults' assessment, although she readily admitted that the students' bias against the acerbic professor wasn't without merit. She tried to not let his bitterness color her impression of him, but some days she wanted to cave to popular opinion, and she was uneasy about returning to his classroom.

At the center of their plans was an explosive compound that Seamus grudgingly admitted only Hermione was qualified to create. Given how long the complex potion required to be safely manufactured, they needed to start the process of gathering supplies the day they arrived at school, before the start of year feast. They agreed to Apparate at the Hogsmeade Station and slip into the school early in the day to gain the time they needed.

Hermione had gotten most of the ingredients via owl post or from the apothecary shops at Diagon Alley, being careful to spread her purchases around to avoid any direct link back to her or to Harry. But one of the items was restricted and could not be obtained without the direct involvement of a registered Potions master, and none of those they'd approached had been willing to work with a bunch of teenagers, seasoned warriors or not. She'd remembered seeing a phial of the crucial component in the Potions store, and she'd intended to take it, if she could figure out how to get past Snape's watchful eye.

1 Sept '98, evening, Welcoming Feast

The bewitched ceiling presented a perfect late summer evening, and the pre-feast assembly seemed more raucous than usual, the loudest clusters inevitably comprised of returning veterans. Hermione found herself mentally listing the faces she knew she'd never see again, both those whom she had fought beside and those she'd struggled against. The Slytherin table seemed to have thinned the most, decimated both by casualties and shame at affiliation with the losing side. A flash of brightness at the entry way caught her attention; she watched as Draco slouched in, his blond hair catching the light, with Pansy Parkinson at his side. His hair, usually neatly trimmed and sleeked back, had grown shaggy, and he appeared to have stopped shaving. He'd also abandoned both his walking stick and his black tailored suit and was dressed instead in simple school robes.

"Look at Snape," Ginny hissed at her, digging her elbow into Hermione's ribs and nodding towards the door.

He stood just inside the door, hands folded at his waist, robes pooled around him, and the stream of students spilled around him as he just ... stood. No, not quite just...he was gazing around the Great Hall as though he'd never seen the space before, head and eyes moving slowly as he visibly drank in the scene. When he seemed to have satisfied himself, he took an indirect route to the High Table by way of the far side of the Slytherin table, the students of his house greeting him but receiving no obvious response as he strolled leisurely along, still contemplating the Great Hall itself more than the people gathered there. Once he reached the High Table, he took a place at the end closest to the Gryffindor side of the room and busied himself with arranging his napkin and place setting as the rest of the teachers chatted.

The Sorting and headmaster's welcoming speech proceeded with few surprises. Dumbledore introduced the Auror from the French Ministry, Francois Thomas, who had been assigned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hermione sat up at this, staring at the newcomer. Thomas had vivid white hair and was dressed in custard-yellow robes, resembling a reversed fried egg. At the announcement, a golden water goblet fell from the Gryffindor end of the staff table and clanged noisily on the stone floor. Heads swiveled towards the sound, and Dumbledore stopped mid-sentence to watch as the vessel rolled under the students' table. A Gryffindor first year retrieved the goblet and set it carefully on the edge of the table before Snape, who regarded the small girl impassively. The disruption over, the headmaster concluded his remarks, and the tables filled with food and drink.

"Think he did that deliberately? Snape?" Harry asked Hermione under cover of the clatter of serving spoons and requests for mashed potatoes.

Hermione shrugged. "There was a whole article about it in the *Prophet* two weeks ago, along with a lot of letters to the editor."

Ginny leaned toward them and said, "It must sting...he had Defense for two years, after wanting it his whole career, and it's been taken away again. We learned a lot in his classes, and it was easier having the same teacher twice in a row."

"The letter writers were all against letting a Death Eater, even a decorated former Death Eater, teach anything related to the Dark Arts," Hermione said. She gave them a summary of the subsequent press, how the public had besieged the board of governors for Hogwarts with angry letters, how Dumbledore had tried to support Snape and allow him to select his own subject, how finally the headmaster had been overruled and he'd been forced yet again to locate a Defense instructor. But this time, the Ministries of several nations coordinated to identify a candidate. "From what I could tell," she concluded, "Madame Maxime recommended him."

"And Draco?" asked Ginny. "I thought Mum said Mrs. Malfoy had left the country. So why's he back?"

"My gran said he's trying to save the family reputation," Neville interjected, reaching around Ron to grab a roll. "His dad got released from Azkaban, you know, and he's claiming the Order held the family ransom."

"Ransom?" Harry spluttered into his juice. "We protected them! If it hadn't been for the Order..."

"But Harry," Hermione said, "neither you nor Dumbledore will talk about what happened on the tower that night. Nor Snape," she added, bobbing her brows toward the end of the High Table where the Potions master was sitting.

Harry shook his head. "It all happened so fast, I couldn't swear to who did what to whom, and until my Bodybind Spell got canceled, I couldn't do anything."

"At least that explains why he's back," said Ginny.

"I wouldn't want to be in his shoes," said Hermione and huffed in response to the startled expressions of her friends. "Think about it. He actually defied Voldemort and lived, and he's in a house with more than a handful of sympathizers. I wonder if he'll be able to sleep at all while he's here." Collectively they craned to look at the surly knot of older Slytherin students who were rumored to have ties to Voldemort.

"Now that you mention it, I bet Snape's less than happy to have them in the school," said Harry. "Remember Remus telling us about how he'd started testing every bit of food and drink and all his utensils with Poison-Detection Charms?"

Hermione nodded. "I think he's still doing that, from what I could tell when he sat down tonight." She bit her lower lip. "That tells me he's going to be even more unbearable this year."

Ron groaned and dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. "I can't imagine how much worse he could be. Thanks a lot, Hermione, for convincing Mum I needed to come back."