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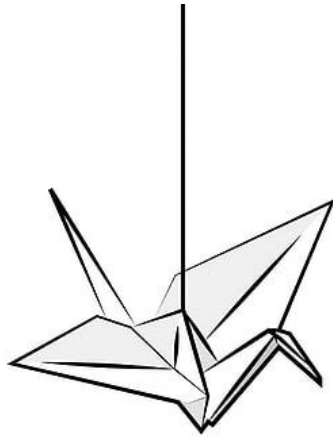
VOLUME I

WRITTEN BY
SEN LIN YU



Harry Potter is dead. In the aftermath of the war, in order to strengthen the might of the magical world, Voldemort enacts a repopulation effort. Hermione Granger has an Order secret, lost but hidden in her mind, so she is sent as an enslaved surrogate to the High Reeve until her mind can be cracked.

Illustrated by Avendell



CHAPTER 1

Hermione had long given up hope of seeing in the darkness.

For a time, she thought maybe if she just let her eyes adjust, eventually some faint outline would become visible.

There were no glimmers of moonlight slipping through so deep in the dungeons. No torches in the hallways outside the cell. Just more and more darkness, until she wondered sometimes if she might be blind.

She had explored every inch of the cell with her fingertips. The door, sealed with magic, had no lock to pick, even if she had anything but straw and a chamber pot. She smelled the air in the hopes it might indicate something; the season, the distant scent of food or potions. The air was stale, wet, cold. Lifeless.

She had hoped if she just checked carefully enough, she'd find a loose slab-stone in the wall; some secret compartment hiding a nail, or a spoon, or even a bit of rope. Apparently

the cell had never held an audacious prisoner. No scratches to mark time. No loose stones. Nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

She couldn't even talk aloud to relieve the unending silence. It had been Umbridge's parting gift after they had dragged her into the cell and checked her manacles one last time.

They had been about to leave when Umbridge paused and whispered, "*Silencio*."

Prodding Hermione's chin up with her wand so that their eyes met, she said, "You'll understand soon enough."

Umbridge giggled, and her cloying, sugary breath ghosted over Hermione's face.

Hermione had been left in darkness and silence.

Had she been forgotten? No one ever came. No torture. No interrogations. Just dark, silent solitude.

Meals appeared. Randomised so she couldn't even keep track of time.

She recited potion recipes in her head. Transfiguration technique. Reviewed runes. Nursery rhymes. Her fingers flicked as she mimicked wand techniques, mouthing the spell inflection. She counted backwards from a thousand by subtracting prime numbers.

She started working out. It had apparently not occurred to anyone to restrict her physically, and the cell was spacious enough that she could cartwheel diagonally across it. She learned how to do handstands. Spent what felt like hours doing push-ups and things called burpees that her cousin had been obsessed with one summer. She found that she could slot her feet through the bars of the cell door and do crunches while hanging upside down.

It helped turn her mind off. Counting. Pushing herself to new physical limits. When her arms and legs turned to jelly, she'd slump down into a corner and fall into a dreamless sleep.

It was the only way to make the end of the war stop playing in front of her eyes.

Sometimes she wondered if she was dead. Maybe it was hell. Darkness and loneliness and nothing but her worst memories hanging before her eyes for forever.

When there finally was a noise, it felt deafening. The screech in the distance as a long abandoned door swung open. Then light. Blinding, blinding light.

It was like being stabbed.

She stumbled back into the corner and covered her eyes.

"She's still alive," she heard Umbridge say, sounding surprised. "Get her up, let's see if she's still lucid."

Rough hands dragged Hermione from the corner and tried to pull her hands away from her eyes. Even with her eyelids squeezed tightly shut, the pain from the sudden brightness felt like knives driving into her corneas. She wrenched her hands back to press them over her eyes again, ripping her arms from her captors' grasp.

"Oh, Merlin's sake," Umbridge said in a sharp, impatient voice. "Overpowered by a wandless Mudblood. *Petrificus Totalus*."

Hermione's body stiffened. Mercifully her eyes remained closed.

"You should have been smart enough to die. *Crucio*."

The curse ripped through Hermione's immobilised body. Umbridge wasn't the strongest caster Hermione had been cursed by, but she meant it. The pain tore through Hermione like fire. Unable to move, she felt like her insides

were twisting into knots, trying to escape the pain. Her head throbbed as the pain built and built without any release.

After an eternity, the pain stopped, and yet didn't. The curse was ended, but the agony remained coiled inside, as though her nerves were flayed.

Hermione could feel her brain scrabbling to escape; to break free of the suspended agony. Just break. Just break. But she couldn't.

"Take her up for appraisal. Let me know promptly what the healer says."

She was levitated, but the world remained a blur of sound and agony. So much sound. It felt as though the vibrations were grating across her skin. She must have been kept inside a barrier ward because suddenly the air exploded with noise and light.

She tried to hold on by focusing only on the tap of footsteps. Straight for ten paces. A right. Thirty paces. A left. Fifteen paces. Stop. One of the guards levitating her rapped on a door.

"Come in," said a muffled voice.

The door grated open.

"Put her over there."

Hermione felt her body drop onto an examination table.

She felt a wand prod her.

"Recent spell work?"

"Immobilisation and the cruciatus," answered a new voice. Hermione thought she recognised it, but her mind was too awl with agony to place it.

"While immobilised?" The healer sounded peeved. "How long?"

"A minute. Maybe more."