

A Change is Going to Come

by livvy6

NOW COMPLETE!!! An accident with a Time-Turner in 1993 sends Hermione Granger back to 1973, and she is unable to return.

<i>In Medias Res</i>

Chapter 1 of 74

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Author's Notes ~

This is a Time-Turner story that spans three decades. It is complete and contains a sweeping view of J.K. Rowling's Universe through the eyes of Hermione Granger between the years of 1973-2009. It is a love story. However, it is a slow building one.

This is not a songfic, but music became a character itself. Many songs from various years during this time period have helped to mold the mood and strengthen the bond between Severus and Hermione.

This chapter is called *In Medias Res*, meaning Latin for "into the middle of things." This chapter is a snapshot in the mix of what is going on between our two lovers. It is set in September of 1981. There is drug use that may be offensive, but this will not be a reoccurring event. Hermione is not a junkie. There shall be many things which may be hard to read for some. I will warn and prepare you for anything that might be upsetting with each new chapter posted.

Many thanks to the ladies who helped me with their marvelous beta skills during these first few chapters: Charmed Force, WriterMerrin, and JulyMorning.

This is a finished story.

September, 1981

Hermione sat at the bar listening to the music. The silver globe overhead spun like a glittering diamond, casting fantastic shapes and colors that made the young witch feel it had been silly to take that hit of Charlie earlier. The lights from the disco ball alone could have given her the same giddy effect.

What's the name of the game?

Does it mean anything to you?

Hermione closed her eyes and let herself be swayed by the music. Next to her, Deidre, her roommate, began to shake her.

"Hermione! Are you okay?" she shouted as she laughed.

Hermione turned dilated eyes onto her friend. "Sure! What's going on?"

Deidre grinned. "I want you to meet Charles and Timothy. Would you fancy a dance with Charles?" she asked sweetly as she cuddled onto what seemed to be Timothy's arm.

Hermione shrugged. "Why not?"

She allowed the blond-haired man to lead her on to the floor. The disco floor was just like that dance floor in *Saturday Night Fever*. Deidre and Hermione had seen it when they started hanging out together three years ago. Hermione wrapped her arms around Charles' broad shoulders as she swung her hips to the beat of the music.

I wasn't jealous before we met

Now every woman I see is a potential threat

And I'm possessive

It isn't nice

You've heard me saying that smoking was my only vice

But now it isn't true

Now everything is new

And all I've learned

Has overturned

I beg of you...

Hermione's half-lidded eyes sparkled in the flickering light. As the music washed over her, the memories came rushing back.

"I can't believe you, Hermione! How can you choose him over me? I've been your friend...he couldn't stand you!"

"Please, Lily, I'm not choosing. Look, James and Sirius never liked me anyway. It's not as if anyone ever cared..."

"I CARED!" Lily screamed as she pushed Hermione to the ground. "You just wanted me out of the way, didn't you!"

"Lily, NO! I never wanted to come between you two!" she protested.

Hermione shook her head and smiled at Charles. She didn't feel like dancing. She just wanted another drink and a snort of coke.

She seductively led the man off the dance floor and edged them closer to the bar. She pushed herself up to him and unbuttoned another button on her shirt, letting him see the top of her bra.

"I'll let you get a better view if you give me twenty quid, love," she purred into his ear.

He immediately opened his wallet and handed her two ten-pound notes. Hermione gave him a searing kiss before she went over to Paul.

Paul chuckled as he saw Hermione coming his way. He led her behind the black velvet drape into an alcove. Hermione handed him the money with an arch of her eyebrow as he gave her a baggie. She sat down gracefully in a chair next to a café table he had placed there for his customers to use straight away if they were so inclined. He examined Hermione with a critical eye as she expertly chopped the drug into tiny particles with a card. He admired her technique.

"Mione, you are a real expert. But you don't look like you've been doing Charlie that long!" he mused.

Hermione smirked. "Paul, I know more about cutting and dicing than you could even fathom!" she retorted as she focused on her task of pulverizing the white clumps into a fine powder.

"Oh, look at her! Miss High and Mighty! Who do you think you are? The Princess of Wales?"

She gave him a withering look, and he laughed at her.

"Fine, love," he said as he looked at her with soft eyes. "So, I gather the man who gave you this is now pretty much buggered, right?" he said as he fingered the notes.

Hermione took out her trusty five-pound note and did a line. She sniffed and rubbed her pert nose.

She laughed hysterically as she flopped back into the soft chair and replied, "Buggered and brassed-off! God, Paul. I'm going to have to watch meself!"

"I should say so, my girl! One day, you are going to steal from the wrong bloke, and when that happens, you'll be in for it! You might have to start going to the newer clubs, like *Ad Lib* or *The Blitz*. There are all these poncey lads in make-up and frills. Cor blimey! The birds are worse! I don't know what the bleedin' hell they are supposed to look like. I dunno," Paul said as he shook his head.

Hermione fiddled with her shirt and looked at her face in the mirror. Her make-up was rather heavy, but it made her look different enough not to be recognized. "Come on, Paul!" she whined. "I don't like all that new rave nonsense. I'm disco. I don't care to change. It's what I like!"

"Well, disco is dead, or dyin' anyway! It's 1981, for cryin' out loud. Time to move with the changes. Luckily for me, Charlie's still the hottest thing goin'!" He smiled brightly at the thought.

"So, come on, love. Give us a chance, then! Let's you and me go to a new nightclub next weekend. What do ya say?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione smiled weakly. "Sorry, Paul. I like the disco mood. Perhaps next year!" she said cheerfully as she turned to fuss more with her hair.

Paul sighed as he watched the thin girl fix her long, curly, red hair. She must have put a rinse in it. Hermione was a brunette. She was quite the looker. Since he had met her two years ago, she had quickly changed from being an uptight, boring, bookworm into a sexy, dangerous woman. He ran his hand through his short, black hair. Hermione turned and smiled at him.

"Paul, you are quite good-looking, you know?" she said sweetly.

Paul blushed. "Aw, go on!" he said shyly. A bit of pink was rising in his cheeks; he could feel it. He glanced at her and said sheepishly, "I'd ask you to be my girl, but I'd be afraid all you would want is me oats and barley!"

She smiled ruefully at him, and he could sense a gleam of sadness in her doe-eyes. There was a past, a secret, something, and he wished he could help. He really did.

Hermione sat down and snorted her remaining lines. "Oh, shit!" she swore as she itched her nose. "Oohh! That is fantastic! Fucking brilliant!" she breathed. She let her body go limp as she felt her mind soar. The music was growing and taking over in her mind. She snapped up and gave Paul a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, darling! Give me a ring this week, yeah?" she asked as she gave him a quick embrace.

Paul nodded as she squealed and ran out of the alcove.

Hermione Granger was an enigma.

"Hermione! Hermione!" sang Deidre. "Time to get up, love! The bookstore awaits!"

Hermione groaned as she tossed over in her bed. "Nooo!" she whined. "Do you have the kettle on?" she called out.

"Do you think me daft, woman?" Deidre yelled from the loo. "I know not to even approach you unless I have an offering of caffeine!"

She came out in her rollers and said, "By the way, Hermione, you have got to talk to someone about your nightmares! Good Lord! I'm surprised the bobbies didn't come round with all that racket!"

Hermione rolled out of bed and pushed past her roommate. "What are you on about, Deidre?" she said through a yawn.

Deidre came into the kitchenette they shared. She had on her bra and knickers with her hair in rollers.

"Good God, Deidre, go put some fucking clothes on!" Hermione snarled as she sipped her tea.

"Don't change the subject!" she snapped in return. "You were calling out for him again. I don't know what's been going on with you, but you've just not been yourself, love, not at all! Please, tell me. Who is Severus?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said curtly. She strode into her bedroom and slammed the door.

Deidre sighed and talked into the door. "Hermione. I'm supposed to be your best friend in the whole world. Three years you and I have been friends and, well, you just seem to be getting sadder and sadder. Then, there is this Severus character. What a name! *Severus*. It's like Sid Vicious, or something. Is he into punk?" she asked as she giggled.

Hermione nearly ripped the door open. She was furious. "Deidre, that name is off limits. I refuse to talk about it!" she said heatedly.

Deidre began to take out her rollers. "Hermione, love, I care about you, and you are so pained in your dreams. You scream, cry, and sob. You keep begging Severus not to do it. Did this *Severus* rape you?" she whispered.

"No," she answered calmly, her face more relaxed. "Severus was someone I went to school with...he was a very complicated boy who became an even more complicated man." She turned to the mirror and pulled her hair up into a bun. "I thought I could help him, and I couldn't. Now, nothing can be done. All I can do now is wait."

"Wait for what?" Deidre asked as she shook out her blonde curls.

Hermione frowned as she took a sip of her tea and grabbed her workbag. "Halloween," she said cryptically as she walked out of their flat.

Hermione walked towards her tube stop on her way to her workplace in the heart of London. She worked as a store manager in one of the many, many bookstores that lined Charing Cross Road. Every day for three years, she had lived the same small and uncomplicated life. After graduation from Hogwarts in 1978, she had drifted for a couple of months, kept on the run in the Muggle world, too afraid to remain in the Wizarding one. She knew what was happening and knew her life was in danger, being a Muggle-born. Dumbledore still had no way to help her return back to her own timeline. The Time-Turner that had sent her to this timeline had been broken beyond repair, and the Time-Turners the Ministry had currently were not developed enough for such a long time travel. Hermione had been devastated when she heard that there was no hope for her. Meanwhile, she had to stake out a life of her own until the Time-Turner she needed was created.

Wizarding London was a dangerous place for a Muggle-born witch. Voldemort and his Death Eaters were terrorizing the city. Dumbledore had desperately wanted her to join the Order, but she had refused. She knew too many things that she couldn't tell anyone. Besides, after the split she'd had with Lily, Hermione knew she wasn't welcome.

Hermione had met Deidre in the fall of 1978. Hermione had been browsing in a small bookstore, and Deidre had been working there as a salesgirl. Deidre's father had owned the store and had been looking to open another store on Bayswater Road. Hermione had spoken with Deidre, and the young woman had been so impressed with Hermione's knowledge of books, she had offered her a job at once. Hermione had been ecstatic. She told Deidre that she had not only needed a job, but a decent place to live. Shortly afterward, Hermione had met Deidre's father, Mr. Anderson, and explained she had just recently graduated from an obscure private secondary school in Scotland and that she had an intricate knowledge of mathematics, languages, and British literature.

Hermione's determination and strong work ethic had won over Mr. Anderson during her two-month time period. Hermione had been a dream come true for the storeowner. He had quickly placed Hermione as store manager and had Deidre help him open the new store.

Before Hermione knew it, it had been 1979. She and Deidre had been sharing a flat together near Bond Street. It had been and continued to be a perfect location, situated between the two bookstores. Hermione had spent the first year at the bookstore rather lonely, not wanting to bring undue attention herself. She had kept her true identity a secret and had completely shut herself out of the Wizarding world. She had, however, schooled herself in the art of interpreting the Muggle news. Unexplained disappearances, unsolved murders, even the non-grisly ones, had stuck out in the witch's mind. She had known all too well the language of the Death Eaters.

Deidre had worked hard to draw Hermione out of herself, and Hermione had begun to go out to the various nightclubs of London. It had been the waning of the disco years; however, Hermione had loved going to the discotheques. Soon afterward, she had met Paul and had started taking cocaine. She had never let on that she hadn't known what she was doing. She didn't want to make any impressions. She had just wanted to be another face in a faceless crowd. However, it had become impossible as she had begun to notice one Death Eater after another enter the nightclubs and leave with women on their arms. Those girls had never been seen again. Soon, Hermione had finally decided to do her part and thwart them as best she could. Taking cocaine had helped her nerve. She had always wondered if she would find Severus among them. So far, he hadn't been around.

Her heels clicked in time as she made her way up from the Underground. It had been three years. Three years since she had last seen Severus. He had left her crying and on her knees in the rain as he had walked away from her. She had begged and pleaded with him not to leave...not to return to Voldemort, but he had refused to listen.

She shook her head, ridding her mind of the thoughts of that sad day. She unlocked the front door of the bookstore and turned on the lights. Soon, her staff would arrive, and then she could sit for a while in the back and rid herself of her headache.

She sat at her desk, sipping her coffee, looking at the calendar. There were only thirty-one days left. Only thirty-one days left until she could leave this life and return to the Wizarding world. She didn't know much about Harry's past, except that it had been on Halloween night, October 31st, 1981, that Voldemort had been defeated. Of course she knew he would return, but she could have some peace in the world she missed before returning to her own time. She had promised Dumbledore after she graduated that she would come back as soon as it was safe. She didn't give him a date, however, just a time frame.

"Expect me around the fall of 1981, Headmaster," she said sadly.

"Hermione," Dumbledore asked delicately. "You've been crying. What's the matter?"

She refused to look at him. "Nothing that can be helped now, sir. The die has been cast. No one would listen. He wouldn't listen!" She burst into tears.

Dumbledore embraced the crying witch. "Please, can't you tell me anything?" he begged.

"I wish I could!" she said brokenly as she wiped the tears from her face. "I wish I could unburden myself and have this entire bloody business over and done with...but I can't. If I do, I risk changing everything in my world. I can't do it. Besides, all of this was decided years ago. It wasn't even me...it was the choices they all made before I came here! Then, after I arrived, the same stupid, asinine choices kept being repeated, and now everything will be the way it is supposed to be...no matter how much I loathe it! It would be better for me to be apart from our world and not upset anything more than I must."

Hermione sighed, and she sat back into her chair. One thing was for damn certain. She would know once and for all whose side Severus Snape was on. It would all be revealed Halloween night: the day the Wizarding world would come to know as the day Harry Potter lived.

Hermione went out the next weekend to *La Discothèque* and danced, drank and snorted cocaine as if it were her last chance to be free. She was dressed in her normal Muggle attire and came out from the back room where Paul had his table set up. She was high as a kite and looking wild.

I'm ridin' in your car

You turn on the radio

You're pullin' me close

I just say no

I say I don't like it

But you know I'm a liar

Because when we kiss, Oooh,

Fire

She saw him. He was with that nasty bastard. She carried her wand on a necklace, shrunken down to the size of a pin. They, well, he, wasn't doing a damn thing, except standing bored next to Lucius Malfoy.

Fire

Lucius was trying to grab at a couple of Muggle girls who were a bit too drunk to fight him off. Hermione couldn't risk any altercations in the disco, so she waited until they were successfully outside.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" she purred as she pointed her wand at Lucius' head.

Severus' eyes nearly popped out of his skull. Hermione smirked. The cocaine certainly did wonders for her nerve. She was dressed like a succubus, her skirt barely covering her ass and her top barely covering her tits. She had quite the pair, too. She could feel her nipples harden and the hair on her arms stand on end.

"Give me the girls, Lucius," she demanded.

"How dare you!" he snarled. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Oh, well, right now you can call me Miss Cockblocker. Now, get your nasty arse on out of here before I do something very regrettable to your bollocks!" she threatened.

The girls stood terrified next to Lucius' as his hand twitched near his cane. She knew from experience that was where he kept his wand.

"No, no!" she teased. "You're not fast enough. You know, for a Slytherin, you are quite predictable. I don't think you have a subtle bone in your whole body," she goaded.

He smiled malevolently. "Severus," he asked, never taking his eye off Hermione for a moment. "Do you know who this bitch is? I think she's a Mudblood. Indeed, from the look of her, a real Mudblood slut!"

"Her name is Hermione Granger, Lucius. We were in school together," Severus answered darkly.

A sick smile spread across Lucius' face. "No, it can't be! Not the little Mudblood founding you dragged in front of the Dark Lord?"

Severus remained silent as Hermione pressed her wand deeper into Lucius' temple.

"All right, all right," Lucius said as he released the two girls. They dashed to Hermione's side and shuddered as they clung to each other, not knowing what to do next.

Hermione kept her wand on Lucius and told the girls to grab her hand. She Disapparated on the spot and left the wizards alone in the alleyway.

They landed only a couple of blocks from the club. There was no way Hermione could Apparate further with two people in tow. She took the frightened girls in hand and Obliviated them. Once they came to, she ushered them into a coffee house and told them she got them away from a couple of bastards. They were terrified, but Hermione assured them that nothing had happened and they had best get home quickly.

As soon as the girls were safely in a cab home, Hermione Apparated back to the club. She had her wand out, prepared. Instead, there was Severus, his tall, thin frame leaning against the brick wall lazily. He had a smirk on his face.

"Bloody Gryffindors!" he rumbled. "Can't do anything without drama!"

"You've hung about here just to say that?" she asked smugly.

"No," he said slowly as he pushed himself upright. "Hermione," he said in a low, seductive tone. "You looked like the goddess Diana, saving those girls from a fate worse than death." He shifted his eyes to her wand.

"Put down your wand, Hermione," he whispered.

She raised an eyebrow. "Why should I?" she ground out suspiciously.

"I need to kiss you," he murmured as his chest made contact with her wand. She couldn't resist his eyes. The deep black pools never ceased to amaze her. She always wondered what she might find if she ever dove into them.

She felt his hand on her arm. She gasped at the contact. "Severus," she pleaded.

He leaned down and captured her mouth. *Oh my God!* she thought.

She wrapped her arms around him, and he pushed her against the brick wall.

"Severus!" she gasped.

He trembled as he held her close. "Think, Hermione, we could have been together all this time. Are you still intact?" he breathed in her ear as he brushed her thigh with his hand.

"Yes!" she said breathlessly. "You know you were the only one I ever wanted."

She came to herself and extricated herself from his embrace.

"Hermione!" he thundered.

"My answer hasn't changed, Severus! Your lord and master would kill you if he found out we were together. Furthermore, if he did, I would just be known as your 'Mudblood whore!'"

"You're just like Lily!" he spat as he scowled. "When it comes down to it, you're just like her!"

Hermione slapped him across the face. "How dare you! How dare you say that to me after all I risked for you! I stood by your side until you decided to leave me!"

She stood there panting and breathing heavily, furious at his implication that she had thrown him over unconcernedly as Lily had.

"Lily bailed out on you because she couldn't deal with it anymore! I stayed, and I fought all of them, forcing you to see the truth of your life, and what did you do? You left me crying on the ground to go off and *join* that filth!" she raged. "It was bad enough knowing you had to associate with them for the sake of self-preservation, but you didn't have to *become* one of them!"

He grabbed her and held her to him, ravaging her lips as his free hand slid delicately and smoothly over her breast and stomach. She had never allowed anyone to touch her so intimately. She wanted to fight him, but he was the only one she had ever wanted to touch her so intimately.

He nuzzled her ear and began to speak. "I know, Hermione. I know. I was wrong, and I promise I am not really with the Dark Lord. You know I never have been. As soon as I can, I will be free to be with you. I love you, Hermione. I love you, and I never stopped. I know I was a fool, letting my damn pride over losing to Potter interfere with what we had."

He kissed her hungrily, and she sank into his embrace. He was needy and desperate. Finally, he let her go.

"What were you doing with Malfoy and those girls?" she demanded.

Severus wiped his mouth. "I must keep up appearances, my dear," he growled. "If you had taken the time to notice, I was not all that interested. As soon as I could, I would have let them escape, or as a last resort, killed them before things got to be too bad."

"The Headmaster knows all this?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Well, I'm sure I'll be seeing you again...sometime," she said nervously. She didn't trust him. She didn't want to give anything more away about what she did know. She certainly did not want him knowing she would be back at Hogwarts in a month.

"Hermione, when this is over, you will be my wife," he said simply.

She chuckled. "Really, Severus? When this..." she waved her hand about, "is all done, you want to make me your wife?" she asked, jeering at him in the process.

His eyes narrowed. "We had something special, witch," he snarled.

"I know we did, *wizard*," she said pointedly. "Although you made the decision for both of us when you decided to leave!"

"I did not just leave!" he yelled.

"That's right!" Hermione said mockingly as she slapped herself on her forehead. "You pushed me away *deliberately* after I *begged* you not to go back to him. I fell down on my knees and begged you not to return, but you did it anyway!" she shouted.

"Hermione," he started. "I had my own choices to make...choices that you couldn't possibly have understood!" he said in a controlled voice.

"NO!" she shouted. "After all those years, I stuck with you when Lily left, after your Mum...when you had no one who really loved and cared about you by your side, ~~was~~ *there*, but I was so easily tossed aside, wasn't I? You threw me over for what? The false promises of the Dark Lord to avenge your humiliation over being rejected by a girl who never loved you!"

She turned to go back into the club.

"Hermione! This isn't over, I swear it!" he called out.

"I know it isn't, Severus," she said with a slight smile on her lips. "More than you realize."

Charlie = British slang for cocaine.

Oats and Barley = Cockney rhyme for Charlie = cocaine

Songs in order:

"The Name of the Game" by ABBA

"Lay All Your Love On Me" by ABBA

"Fire" by The Pointer Sisters

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 74

Hermione recalls what brought her to 1973 at the beginning of her third year.

A/N: My grateful thanks to Charmed Force, WriterMerrin, and July Morning for their beta skills. Thank you to all who have read and reviewed.

We are now starting at the beginning. I've shown you a part of the future, but now we are going to start with how this all came about and Hermione's reactions to it.

Thirteen-year-old Hermione Granger wished she had never been sorted into Gryffindor House. As she looked down the long table in the Great Hall, she watched Harry's dad and his friends laugh and carry on loudly. They were all so popular and well liked. She felt like she had during those first days before the troll, before Harry and Ron had become her friends. She sat alone, on her third day of being in this new timeline, ignored by her house. She picked at her dinner aimlessly, irritated with herself and with the whole situation.

She wasn't supposed to be here. She had just started her third year at Hogwarts and had been given the Time-Turner she had coveted for so long. However, a slip of the hand as she had absentmindedly fiddled with it during the first night's study session had found her on the floor of her common room, yet it hadn't been *her* common room. She had picked herself up from the floor, placed her hand on the desk where she had been working and found none of her books, parchments, or quills.

She began to breathe with a lot of difficulty. What had happened? She took off the Time-Turner and examined it carefully. What was she to do? She decided to go see McGonagall. Surely, she would know how to help her. Hermione fled the common room and raced towards Professor McGonagall's rooms. Everything looked so different! The carpets, paintings, and the tapestries were not all quite the same. This was Hogwarts, she was positive, but it wasn't her Hogwarts, not anymore.

Hermione usually was a very cautious and conscientious person. However, being very turned around and disoriented, she never saw the stairs move. She jumped back just in time, but the Time-Turner slipped out of her grasp and smashed against the stone stairs. She screamed, and the sound echoed throughout the darkened halls. She raced to retrieve the pieces before Filch and the other professors discovered her.

She sat on the stairs, awaiting her fate. Sure enough, she saw the familiar gait of Argus Filch coming towards her. Mrs. Norris was not with him. Strange, she thought.

"Who are you?" he demanded gruffly as he raised his lamp up to her face. "Give your name, girl!" he said.

"Hermione Granger, sir," she said nervously as she tried to shield her eyes from the light.

He lowered his lamp to gaze at her robes. "Gryffindor, eh? Your robes don't look nuthin' like I've seen," he said suspiciously.

"Please, Mr. Filch. I need to see Professor McGonagall or the Headmaster. Something terrible has happened!" Hermione said in one breath.

"What? It's not that blasted Peeves, is it?" he grumbled.

"No, sir. I can't really explain. It's complicated!"

"All right, then. Let's get on with it," he wheezed.

Goodness! Filch doesn't look any different. What has happened to me? Hermione thought.

The wizened man led her to the revolving staircase. He muttered something, the statue moved, and they began to move upwards. Filch knocked on the Headmaster's entrance, and the large, wooden door opened.

Inside sat a very concerned Headmaster Dumbledore behind his desk. Hermione sat down and, once Filch had left them, told the Headmaster what had occurred. He listened carefully and then stood up to sit next to Hermione.

He took a deep breath and spoke plainly. "Miss Granger, you are in 1973. It is the night of the Welcoming Feast. This is true in your own time, correct?"

"What?" she said dumbly. "Twenty years? Twenty years into the past! What am I going to do?" she screamed as she bolted up from the couch. She held out the broken Time-Turner to give to him. Dumbledore shook his head sadly.

"You can fix this, right, Professor?" she asked hopefully as she walked over to his desk and placed the broken pieces down gently. "You can do anything!" she exclaimed nervously.

"Hermione," he said tenderly as he stood to join her. "I am sorry to say that you can not go back to your time. I am sorry. We do not have the capabilities now. The Time-Turners we do have are primitive and lack any long-term traveling capabilities."

Hermione's eyes welled up with tears. "W-what are you saying?" she asked urgently.

Dumbledore patted the girl's cheek. "You must stay here and make for yourself a life in this time," he whispered softly.

"But, my parents, my friends...please, oh, please, sir! There must be a way!" she choked out.

He regarded her with sad eyes. "No, my child. I'm truly sorry." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Let's get you to the infirmary. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey is still the school's mediwitch, is she not?" he said with a smile.

"Yes," she answered numbly.

"Well, before we go, let's consult the Sorting Hat, just to be certain to which house you belong." Dumbledore placed the aged hat on Hermione's head, and it began to speak to her. It was nothing she hadn't really heard before, except that it now felt a tendency towards Slytherin. Hermione grimaced. She did have a bit of sneakiness and larceny in her blood after pilfering Snape's stores during her second-year.

It decided, though, on Gryffindor.

Hermione had no way of knowing, but in years to come, she would kick herself over and over for not demanding she be placed in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff...anything to get away from Gryffindor and Slytherin.

Hermione picked at her lunch and, finally giving up on it altogether, made her way to her Transfiguration class. She sat alone at her desk. She quickly saw the girl and boy who would become Harry's mum and dad. To Hermione's shock, Lily detested James and was constantly with Professor Snape. She had recognized him straight away. He wasn't hard to miss. Snape was still the same dark, gloomy person she knew, just with a higher voice and smaller form. His nose was quite unfortunate. He would have to wait until he grew up to fit into it better. Hermione had wondered if he was still the same mean person she knew or if he were nicer. She got her answer when he had caught her staring at him. His black eyes had narrowed and looked as if he was going to hex her. She had turned her face quickly and focused on her work.

Today, though, she was determined to try and get to know Harry's mum and dad. She tried to approach James in the hallway after class, but he was very busy trying to get Lily's attention from Snape. One boy did notice her, though.

"Oy, James! The new girl wants to talk to you," sneered a friend of James'.

Hermione was embarrassed as she lowered her head.

"Maybe she's got a crush on you, James. Poor girl, teeth like a beaver!" He started to laugh, and another squatty boy laughed right along with him.

Hermione looked up at him in horror. Then Lily came to her side.

"I can't believe you, Sirius Black!" she yelled.

"Sirius Black?" screeched Hermione. Her eyes grew wide in terror. She knew about him. He was the man the Ministry was looking for. He had killed Muggles and had just escaped from Azkaban!

Her face must have gone ghostly white, for James said, "Yeah, Snively, she's just about as pale as you. Maybeshe can be your girlfriend. Then you can stop stalking Evans!"

Lily whirled onto James and began to shout at him. Hermione slowly backed up and, when the coast was clear, escaped from the melee. It did not, though, escape her notice that a pair of black eyes had noticed her fear, her immediate dislike of Sirius Black, and her quick exit.

Hermione spent the rest of the fall term in the company of Lily Evans. She made herself scarce whenever Snape came around; he didn't like her hanging about when he wanted to visit with Lily. He monopolized most of Lily's free time. It was plain to see he was in love with her. The way he looked at her was lovely. His face shone, and he looked so happy it made Hermione want to cry. Why hadn't Lily married Snape? Perhaps that was why he was such a nasty bastard as a grown-up. He had lost the love of his life to one of his enemies, and then Voldemort had killed her. Hermione thought a lot about Professor Snape during those first months.

*That must be the reason he wears black all the time. He is still in mourning for Lily*she thought.

One day, while Hermione and Lily were taking a walk together after classes had ended, Lily asked Hermione if it bothered her that Severus wanted to be alone with her.

"No," Hermione answered. "Snape has so few nice friends. That Slytherin crowd is really mean."

Lily looked at Hermione with strange interest. "Hermione, why don't you ever call him by his name?" she asked.

"Snape?" she asked. "I don't know. He doesn't like me, and he doesn't call me, Hermione, just Granger. So, it seems right this way," she replied.

"Lily, do you like him?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"Sev?" she asked with her green eyes wide. "He's my best friend. I never thought of him like a boyfriend!"

"Why?" pressed Hermione. "I mean, I see how he looks at you, Lily. He loves you. I know he must. He absolutely adores you."

Lily's brow furrowed. "Sev has been my best friend since we were little kids. He doesn't come from a good home. He's not gotten a lot of love from his parents. I think I'm the only person who has ever really loved him just for who he is. I don't think I could ever do that to him, I mean, get into a relationship with him, and then if it didn't work out, where would he be?" she mused.

"You won't tell Sev I said anything about his family, right?" she whispered nervously as they walked back towards the castle.

"Not a soul," replied Hermione.

The next day, Hermione sat alone by the lake waiting for Lily. This was turning out to be a horrible new life. No Harry, no Ron. She wasn't fitting in well with her fellow Gryffindors, either. She began to realize that Harry had saved her. Being the best friend of "The Boy Who Lived" had its perks.

Then she thought of the Weasleys. She figured Bill and Charlie were alive. She wondered if she should risk showing herself to Arthur and Molly, but decided against it. She was disturbing enough lives as it was. She wasn't about to risk the balance of her real life in the future by mucking about in this one, just because she was lonely.

A voice shook her out of her thoughts.

"Granger, why is it that your fellow Gryffindors have frozen you out?"

Hermione turned and saw Snape. She whipped her head back around and stared at the lake. "I don't fit in very well. James and Sirius don't like me very much," she admitted.

"I saw your reaction to Black. I daresay you don't care for him either. Why is that?"

"I suppose that is my business," she snapped as she glanced at him.

"Of course," he replied as he continued to stare at her.

Lily came up to them and started to chat about her day. Hermione gave a small smile and tried hard to ignore Snape's glare.

The school year dragged on uneventfully. Hermione received her usual excellent marks. There was no one stopping her from studying and doing as much extra credit as she wanted. Even so, it continued to be a lonely life. However, she did try to make the best of things. She made friends with Hagrid and spent as much time as she could helping him with the animals and his pumpkin patch. She wished with all her might she could tell him she had known him, but she couldn't risk it. There were times she would sit and cry without warning, and the half-giant would gather her into his huge arms and hug her, telling her everything would be all right. As far as everyone knew, she was a poor orphan who had not shown her magical abilities until she was thirteen. Hagrid would pat her back and talk about his dad, who had died soon after he had come to Hogwarts. But she wasn't an orphan. She was just a misplaced person in the wrong time. Still, it was good to know she was cared for, even if those who cared were very few.

She spent a great deal of time thinking about her life. She wished she didn't know the things she did. Watching James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter was very difficult. She wondered why Harry had never told her about his parents' friends. She wondered where they were now. At least Peter. She knew Sirius Black was on the lam, but the question nagged her. Why did he become a killer? She knew about Remus, albeit only a little. Actually, Remus was the only one who liked her, and she liked him. It was so strange to know that she had seen the man he would one day become on the Hogwarts Express just hours before she had arrived in 1973.

Remus Lupin was a very shy boy and seemed to gravitate towards the withdrawn Hermione Granger. During the times when she was left out by Snape's need to be alone with Lily, Remus would "happen" upon the lonely girl. The first time he did, Hermione was quite nervous.

She sat on the hill that overlooked Hagrid's hut and watched the fall leaves whirl by her. She saw Remus come near to sit beside her.

"Why are you sitting with me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why ever not?" he replied.

Hermione gave a snort to show her derision. "Perhaps your pal Sirius wouldn't want you hanging about an ugly girl like me," she snapped.

"Sirius isn't my keeper," he said quietly.

"You could have fooled me," she muttered as she ripped up pieces of grass next to her.

Remus edged closer to Hermione. "I like you, Hermione. I think you are ever so nice. You are really smart, you know," he offered.

Hermione looked at his sandy blond hair and pictured how he would look in twenty years. He would not turn out so bad-looking. It was weird! Two boys in her year would be her professors; well, Professor Lupin would have been her teacher if she had remained in her own timeline.

"Yeah, I know I'm smart. My friends called me 'the brain,' she said wistfully.

Remus squirmed a bit before asking, "You know, no one has ever told us where you came from. Where have you been the last couple of years?"

Hermione already had this rehearsed in her mind. She looked into Remus' brown eyes and said, "My magic was a late manifestation. It was quite unheard-of; however, my foster parents were quite accepting about it all. So, I came here. Fortunately, I was able to join the rest of the third-years." She kept her eyes forward, not looking at Remus as she spoke. The wind kept whipping her hair about her face. She finally turned and saw how attentively he was watching her.

"I like your hair," he said shyly.

Hermione was shocked. No one "liked" her hair. "I-I have to go...bye!" she said hurriedly as she bolted from his side.

After the Christmas holidays, James, Sirius, and Peter resumed their tormenting of Snape. Hermione was incensed by Lily's blindness at how cruel they were. She finally decided to confront her.

That night as they got ready for bed, Hermione stood up to the redhead.

"Lily, I want to talk with you about Snape."

Lily kept brushing out her hair. "Yeah, Hermione? What about him?"

Hermione knelt next to her and looked into her green eyes through the mirror. "Lily, James and his gang are so very cruel. Why do you let Snape deal with them all by himself?" she asked in earnest.

Lily turned and her emerald eyes flashed in anger. "Look, Severus is not the easiest person to handle, Hermione," she said hotly. "You haven't been here from the start. These boys have had it in for each other, and there is no stopping it!" She glanced around her nervously.

Hermione was furious! Lily didn't want to deal with the realities. She didn't want to see how much Snape loved her, and she definitely didn't want to see how ugly things had been going right underneath her nose.

Lily grabbed Hermione and pulled her into her bed with her, pulling the drapes closed. She took Hermione's hands into her own and sighed.

"Oh, Hermione, let's not fight about the boys. You are the only one I can really talk with about things. You are so understanding." She hugged Hermione then and held on tightly as she continued to whisper to her, "I don't know what I feel anymore. The Slytherin boys are so cruel to Muggle-borns, and Severus doesn't see the problem. He thinks it's all a lark!"

Hermione pulled herself from the girl. "Lily, you can't spend your life with your head in the sand. One day, you will have to choose."

Lily turned her head to the side. "I can't bear to hurt him, Hermione. I can't! He loved me when no one knew me. He stuck by my side when I was so scared, knowing I was a witch. He's the one who even told me I was a witch...long before I got my letter, you see." Her head was bowed now in contrition. Hermione placed a hand on top of her head and kissed her hair.

"I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't know how far back you and Snape went with your friendship," Hermione admitted.

She looked up at her then, huge tears falling from her eyes. "I-I always see him as that scared, little boy. He was so thin and pathetic. No one loved him...no one! His mum and dad are evil people, Hermione. He'd die if I were ever to leave him!" She sobbed against Hermione's chest. Hermione patted her back and held the girl.

"Please, Hermione. Will you sleep with me tonight?" Lily asked desperately. "I'm so sad and confused. I feel so responsible. I do see what the boys do to Sev, I-I just can't seem to stop any of it!"

"Of course I'll stay," Hermione assured her. Lily nestled against Hermione's chest, and she stroked the girl's long red hair.

She's not strong enough for all of this. She can't face it, really. She feels so responsible, Hermione thought.

She was deep in thought, thinking Lily had drifted off, when suddenly she spoke.

"Hermione, I know that James Potter fancies me. He looks at me the way Sev does, just not as intense. Yet I know he wants to take me away from Severus. I can't seem to be free from any of them, Hermione. I'm afraid I'll be stuck with them until I die," she whispered.

A chill ran down Hermione's spine. *Dear God in Heaven! Lily will only live another seven years before Voldemort kills her and James.*

Hermione felt Lily's words were a premonition. Although she didn't understand how, she did know that Sirius Black was a murderer. Would he bring about the Potters' deaths? *I can't be involved. I must remain neutral,* she thought desperately as she hugged Lily's body close to hers. Lily was like a sister, a baby sister who needed to be petted and loved. She just wasn't cut out for all of what life was going to throw at her.

One thing was for certain, Snape would lose in the end, and James would win Lily. What would happen when that day arrived, Hermione shuddered to think.

"Hey, Granger!" called out Sirius Black.

Hermione closed her eyes as she picked up her pace. She walked double-time down the corridor. She was in no mood for Sirius Black. The damn boy was as irritating as Draco Malfoy!

"Granger! Hold up!" he shouted as he ran and caught her by the arm.

Hermione jerked her arm back from him. "I'm quite busy, Sirius. If you would be so kind as to let me be about my business?" she replied coldly as she turned on her foot to escape him.

Sirius grabbed her roughly by the arm. "What's your problem? If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were just another regular girl. As it is..."

"...As it is, Sirius, you don't know any better! Kindly remove yourself from my person," she yelled.

He didn't release her. "Look, you bitch! I know what you're on about. You keep getting Evans to meet up with Snape! I don't know your game, but you'd best stop it," he threatened her.

She looked at him incredulously. "I don't believe it! You actually think I have any say in anything that goes on here? I'm the new girl, and I just try to keep my nose out of other people's business, unlike some people."

He glared at her. "I don't know why you are in Gryffindor. You should be in Slytherin, you buck-toothed hag!"

Hermione set her jaw firmly and threw her bag onto the ground, brandishing her wand, pointing it straight at Black's throat.

"You think you're so clever. Where's your big talk now, you great bully!" she hissed.

He fixed his eyes on her and didn't back down. "Well, Granger, where's your fire? Why don't you just hex me and be done with it, eh?" he sneered.

In a flash, his wand was out, and he cast a Jelly-Leg Jinx on her. However, Hermione was quicker. Before he could finish, she had cried out *"Expelliarmus!"* and his wand flew to her opened hand.

Hermione noticed a small crowd had gathered. She didn't want to bring any more attention to herself. She flung Black's wand to him.

"You are a pitiful, pathetic coward, Black. You just stay far away from me!" she shouted. Then she picked up her bag and stomped off.

Later that evening, she sat on the hill she normally liked. She liked to see the familiarity of Hagrid's hut. It was almost as if time stood still here or there wasn't time at all. Harry and Ron could be just coming up behind her as easily as Lily and Snape. She breathed deeply and tried to clear her mind of the day's upsetting event.

She heard the crunching snow behind her, and she whipped out her wand to face the intruder.

"Oh, it's just you," she said, unimpressed.

"What are you doing out here, Granger?"

"Not that it's any of your affair, Snape, but I happen to be meditating," she snapped.

He sat down next to her after casting a warming spell. "I assume you cast a Warming Spell?" he said with a hint of condescension in his tone.

She scowled at him. *Git!* "For your information, I do happen to know how to cast a variety of spells. I'm not a dunderhead, you know."

"Dunderhead?" he chuckled. "I thought only my father used that word."

Hermione's eyes snapped to his. *Well, there's another piece of the puzzle!*

Snape leaned back and stared straight ahead as he continued his conversation. "I must say, Granger, I don't believe I've ever had such a pleasant birthday in all my life," he mused.

Hermione's icy demeanor quickly dissolved. "I didn't know it was your birthday. Happy Birthday, Snape!"

"Hmm," he replied as he stood up again. "No, I daresay seeing Black get his arse kicked by a girl of his own house was the best present I ever could have received. Good night, Granger."

He walked away, leaving Hermione feeling a bit sad. *They are all sad, really,* "Hermione thought. *"Well, perhaps except for James and Peter; they seem happy enough. However, Lily, Snape, Remus, and Sirius are so miserable."*

Hermione decided to head back inside to warm up in the common room. It did not escape her notice that it was just as chilly inside as it had been outside! *Well, piss on them*, she thought. *Black is a wanker, and I don't care! He deserved what he got, putting his hands on me.*

After she had some cocoa, she made her way up to her dormitory. She hadn't even closed the door behind her before a very irate Lily Evans ambushed her.

"What were you thinking?" she shrieked.

Hermione calmly walked past the girl and began to change into her nightgown. She spoke firmly with Lily and did not apologize for her actions.

"Lily, that boy put his hands on me. He also accused me of some pretty nasty things and then insulted me. I tried to avoid him, but he wouldn't leave me alone. I had to defend myself."

Lily tossed her hair back behind her back. "Sirius said you and Snape have some kind of 'thing' going on!" she snapped.

Hermione shook her head. "Honestly, that boy is so thick. Lily, he's a damn liar, and I can't help but say it." She felt her anger rise up inside her. "He's a cruel and heartless creature, and you mark my words, Lily, you will rue the day you ever laid eyes on that boy!"

Lily laughed as she sat on her bed, tucking her legs underneath her. "Oh, Hermione, don't be a silly goose! Sirius is just territorial about Gryffindors. You know his little brother, Regulus, is a Slytherin."

Hermione paused in her dressing. Her interest was piqued. "No," she said slowly. "No, I didn't. That's strange. Doesn't it usually follow for pure-blood siblings to be in the same house?" She continued to put on her nightgown.

"It's worse than that!" Lily said soberly as she sat down to take off her shoes. "Sirius is the first Black ever to be sorted into Gryffindor. It's been quite difficult for him, so he is a bit touchy about needing to prove himself. He wants to be known as a true Gryffindor. Although, it has got to be hard when a person has centuries of family tradition going against him."

She leaned over and squeezed Hermione's hand. "Please, try to not take Sirius so personally," she asked sweetly.

Hermione withdrew her hand, her brown eyes flashing amber. "Do you know what that prat said to me?" she spat. "He called me a buck-toothed bitch! What do you expect me to do? I won't stand idly by and be insulted."

"Well, Hermione, why don't you do see Madam Pomfrey and have her fix your teeth? I know just the thing! *Trust me*," she whispered as she began to change into her nightgown.

Hermione finished getting ready for bed and settled in under her covers. She had a difficult time falling asleep. She kept on wondering what Lily had in mind for changing her teeth. Soon though, she had fallen asleep with dreams of a brilliant, beautiful smile that finally made her feel pretty.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 74

Lily and Hermione's friendship grows closer, and Dumbledore tells Hermione she will spend her summer holidays between Lily's house and Snape's.

A/N: My thanks to July Morning and WriterMerrin for their support and beta work on this chapter. This chapter includes a "moment" I believe to be innocent between two fourteen-year-old girls. Nothing is explicit or graphic. However, I did promise I would warn readers in advance of anything questionable or distasteful.

The next day, Hermione followed Lily into the infirmary. Hermione was nervous. What was Lily going to do? She walked in, dragging Hermione behind her like she owned the place.

"Madam Pomfrey?" Lily called out cheerfully.

"Come on, Hermione!" she hissed as she pulled on the girl's hand. The infirmary was empty, and the girls padded around to find the mediwitch.

Finally, they heard footfalls, and Lily turned quickly to Hermione. "Whatever you do, just keep quiet and let me do the talking," she whispered.

Madam Pomfrey came around the corner. "Lily!" she said happily. "How are you...not sick I hope?" she asked with a sudden fear in her voice.

Lily smiled. "No, ma'am, just a small crisis. Hermione got herself caught in the crossfire...you can only guess between whom...and was hit with a Densageo Spell! I tried fixing it myself...her teeth were growing at an alarming rate...and she was just embarrassed to death. I know I should have come right here, but anyway, I did what I could, but obviously not good enough. I decided to stop and bring her here."

What a sneaky liar you are, Lily! Hermione thought.

Madam Pomfrey arched a brow at the redhead and took Hermione in hand. "Well, this won't be so bad. Just a bit of shortening of the front teeth is all. Although I must say, I am most disappointed in you, Lily Evans. You know better than to take on things that are better left to a professional!" admonished the older witch.

She took her wand and pointed it at Hermione's mouth. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and felt a tingling in her mouth.

"There now," Madam Pomfrey said as she handed Hermione a mirror. "How is that?"

Hermione was gobsmacked. She glanced at Lily, who gave a small squeal of delight. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, ma'am, it's all normal now," she said, which exactly wasn't a lie.

She and Lily left the infirmary, and Lily put her hand around Hermione's. "I'm so glad, Hermione," she said happily. "Now, let those toerags eat their words. You're beautiful!"

Hermione beamed as she smiled. She felt beautiful.

Lily's birthday came around on the thirtieth of January, and Hermione and Snape made sure it was a perfect day for her. It was a Wednesday, but Hermione and Snape were able to sneak off into the library and plan for Lily's day.

"I wish you would come into our common room, Snape, at least for Lily's sake," Hermione said graciously.

He snorted at the thought. "I wouldn't be caught dead there! No bother, I will have my time alone with Lily during the day. You can have her at night. Deal?" he asked curtly.

"Fine," she replied tersely. "By the way, how old will Lily be, anyway?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Fourteen," he said importantly. "Just like me. I turned fourteen on the ninth."

Hermione sniggered. "You seem proud of yourself," she said smugly. "What's the big deal?"

"Well, Lily and I are older than you, I reckon," he said snidely.

"Wrong you are," Hermione said gleefully. "It so happens that my birthday is on the nineteenth of September. So, you see, I am already fourteen ~~and~~ older!"

"Well, I suppose that would account for your bossy nature, then, Granger!" he hissed as he quickly stood up and whisked away from her.

Hermione shook her head and walked out of the library.

Valentine's Day came with a surprise that Hermione was not expecting. There had been a dance, and everyone seemed to have dates. Lily refused several offers to go with Hermione. "Besides," Lily had said, "it will help to keep the boys from hexing one another if no one has a claim on me." She giggled after she said that.

Hermione became aware that she was Lily's date, more than anything else. Lily largely ignored the young wizards who came around wanting a dance. She dragged Hermione onto the floor, and they danced together. It was great fun, and it had been nice to be away from the boys and their squabbling.

After the dance, Lily and Hermione went back to their dormitory. The other girls were still out with their dates. Lily told Hermione she had a Valentine's Day present for her.

"Lily! Why did you do that?" Hermione chided her.

"Oh, you can't begin to understand how much you saved me tonight. The last two Valentine's Day dances have been horrendous! I spent the whole time being pulled to and fro between Sev and the Marauders."

"The *Marauders*?" Hermione asked with laugh.

Lily giggled as she tossed Hermione her present. "That's what they call themselves. They are quite juvenile, aren't they?"

Hermione nodded as she opened her present. It was a blue satin negligee.

"Lily!" Hermione admonished her as she blushed. "Why did you get this for me?"

Lily laughed. "I got one for me, too." She took out a green one from her dresser drawer.

"Now, Hermione, you have to swear never to tell Severus I have this, especially in green!"

Both girls looked at each other knowingly and burst out laughing.

"Let's change!" Lily ordered as she hopped off her bed. Hermione felt strange. Before she had met Lily, she had never changed in front of people before, not even other girls. But Lily was different. She didn't have hang-ups about nudity like Hermione had. She felt a bit ashamed that Lily was more filled out than she was. She tried not to look, but curiosity got the better of her. Lily caught her glancing at her breasts.

"Oh, Hermione, it's okay," she said soothingly as she walked over to her friend. "Let's see, then," she asked.

Hermione turned beet red.

"Come on, Hermione!" Lily urged her. "You're very pretty. You have nothing to be ashamed about," she said seriously.

Hermione lowered her arms and stood in front of her friend, clad only in her knickers.

"Oh, they are lovely!" Lily exclaimed. She got up and put on her negligee. "Come on, Hermione, come sit with me on my bed. Severus gave me chocolates. You can help me put a dent in this massive box."

Both girls in their matching satin negligees sat in bed eating chocolate and talking about the boys. Once Lily heard the others coming back, she closed the drapes and cast a Silencing Spell around them.

"Every year, Severus gives me a huge box of chocolate, and every year I gain a stone afterwards."

"Oh, you exaggerate!" Hermione retorted.

"I think Sev wants me plump. He gets really mushy during the spring and makes eyes at me. All I can think of is that I'm a big, fat cow, and there he is, drooling over my cleavage."

She sighed and looked into the distance. "I started developing early. I started wearing a bra at ten! That was when I knew Severus liked me that way." She grew quiet all of a sudden.

"What's wrong, Lily?" Hermione asked.

"I just know it'll probably be Sev whom I let touch me first," she said quietly. "I mean, after all, he's been so patient and good, never pressuring me, but I see it in his eyes. Soon, I'll be all grown up, and he'll be a man. I do owe him something, I suppose."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Lily, that's not true! You don't have to do that. You do what you want to do. Do you want Severus to touch you?" she asked.

"Not now, but maybe when I'm older I'll feel differently," she said hopefully.

Hermione tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. "Do you want to save it for when you are older?" she asked.

"Well, I just couldn't go all the way without being married! But I think I would like to experiment a little. I'm curious about what it would be like. Aren't you?" she asked.

"Sure, a little," replied Hermione. "But there's no one."

"Yes, there is," Lily replied in a singsong voice.

"Who?" Hermione said in a bored tone.

"Remus Lupin!" Lily fairly squealed.

Hermione's mind flashed to that day on the Hogwarts Express. Professor Lupin had made the dementors back away. He was very confident and sure of himself. He had looked so frail, but at that moment, there had been a fierceness about him that was appealing. Yes, Remus Lupin would be handsome when he was older. Besides, he was not too shabby now, just shy and retiring.

"Lily, he lets Sirius and James run roughshod over him," she complained.

"Well," Lily said thoughtfully as she popped a piece of chocolate into her mouth, "maybe Remus just needs the right girl to bring him out of his shell."

"Perhaps," Hermione said non-committally.

Lily's green eyes shone. "Tell me, Hermione, who do you think has the bigger penis? James or Severus?"

Hermione choked on her chocolate. *Oh God! That's the last thing I need to envision!* Professor Snape's penis! She was almost tempted to say that, for the longest time, she had doubted he even possessed one.

She cleared her throat. "Whom do you think?" she asked instead.

"Actually...Severus. He has such a large nose. I think he must have a huge penis." Lily fell apart laughing uncontrollably. Hermione got caught up in the laughter. They fell back onto the bed, and Lily turned over and kissed Hermione on the lips.

Hermione was shocked. She was frozen stiff in her confusion.

Lily was blushing. "I always wanted to know what it would be like to kiss a girl. Have you ever, Hermione?" she asked in a small voice.

"Uh, not really," answered Hermione.

Lily's green eyes grew moist as she rose up from the bed. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I just was curious."

Hermione's heart went out to her. It was obvious Lily Evans was a very confused young girl.

"It's okay, Lily," Hermione said quietly. "It was sweet."

Lily looked back, and her eyes shone. "We are best friends, aren't we, Hermione?" she asked.

"Of course," Hermione answered.

"Severus always wants me to reassure him we're best friends, but I think I can have two best friends. What do you think?"

Hermione thought immediately of Harry and Ron. "Certainly, Lily. Of course, you can," she said confidently.

"Oh, good!" Lily said in relief. "Will you sleep with me tonight, Hermione?" she asked shyly.

"Okay," Hermione answered.

The girls huddled under the covers, and Lily nestled into the crook of Hermione's arm. Hermione was greatly confused about this turn of events.

The spring came and, with it, all the romance and love that always accompanies the season. Hermione saw that Lily was not lying about Severus. The boy was clearly besotted. And as Lily had predicted, she had gained a bit of weight from the chocolate, and she found her breasts and thighs to be a bit larger than normal. Lily would come into the common room and giggle with Hermione about Severus staring at her chest. Hermione laughed but felt rather guilty. If Snape knew that Lily laughed about him behind his back, he would be devastated. He adored Lily; he worshiped her, really. She was the only female who existed for him. It was very sweet, but a bit overwhelming, especially for a girl like Lily.

Hermione watched her young, future professor struggle with his feelings day after day. What was amazing to Hermione was the close relationship Harry's mum had with him. It was very sweet, but unfortunately, Lily didn't seem to feel the same way. She loved Severus; she just wasn't in love with him.

Since Hermione was alone most of the time, she was free to wander and amuse herself without fear of upsetting the delicate balance that could result in the dismantling of her true reality. She knew there was no way for her to return now; however, she would not stop trying. *One day, she thought, I will find my way back home again.*

At the end of the school year, Dumbledore called Hermione to his office and explained his summer plans for her.

"I want you to stay with Miss Evans and Mr. Snape over the summer holidays. He and Miss Evans live close to each other. You can alternate staying with them. I think your presence will be a good influence for Severus. Also, staying with Lily, who is a Muggle-born as you are, would give you a nice sense of familiarity," Dumbledore added.

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about the arrangement; however, Dumbledore had told her to trust him, that he had his reasons. Besides, he had said that he was very concerned about Snape and that her presence might be a stabilizing force for the dark-tempered, young man.

"Hi, Hermione!" Lily said happily. She motioned her to come and join her in the compartment. "Dumbledore explained everything to us," she said excitedly.

Hermione smiled at Snape. He looked at her oddly but remained silent.

Lily was a bit nervous. "You're going to spend the start of the summer with me and my family, then in July, you'll go to Spinner's End and live with Severus' mum and dad. Then you'll come back to my house in August, and we'll go back to Hogwarts all together."

Hermione must have shown her fear, for Lily put her hand over hers and whispered, "It will all be okay, Hermione. Truly, it will. We'll have loads of fun. The three of us, well, perhaps four, if my sister wants to join us."

Snape gave a snort at that comment. Lily shot him an angry look.

She turned back to Hermione. "My sister, Petunia, well, she's a Muggle like my parents. I always thought she was a bit upset that she wasn't a witch like me. Anyway, sometimes she can be a bit cruel. I think she has problems still about me being different and all." Lily smiled then and changed the subject.

"I'm going to go visit some people and let Severus tell you all about himself so you can get to know one another a little better."

Snape looked at Lily in horror. Hermione thought he might as well have said, "Dear God, Lily, don't leave me alone with her!"

She flashed a big smile at Hermione and left. Hermione noticed Snape received a glare in response from the redhead.

Snape sat back in his seat and crossed his arms petulantly. "I hope you aren't expecting anything grand," he said snidely. "I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking, having you spend your summer with me. I don't care for going home, and it's my family!" He glared at her, and Hermione winced.

"Just don't expect much. And if you tell anyone what goes on in my house, I will make your life a living hell!" he threatened, his black eyes glittering in controlled rage.

Hermione was dumbstruck. She slowly removed her gaze from Severus and looked out the window. They sat in silence for a long time.

Finally, just as Hermione felt her eyes close and began to drop off to sleep, he spoke.

"I don't appreciate your presence. I want to make it very clear to you. I look forward to my time with Lily. I won't take second place! So, even though I have to put up with you, don't interpret my tolerance as acceptance into my relationship with Lily. It's just the two of us. You are not welcome. Don't try to force your way between us. Lily is mine."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock. She couldn't believe the force of feeling behind his words.

"Severus, you sound as if I have a romantic interest in her or something," she said off-handedly. She toyed with the fabric on her seat. She could feel the anger radiate from him.

"Don't be coy, Gryffindor," he snapped. "You can't pull it off! Listen, I don't want my holidays ruined because of you, so just keep your distance and don't interfere with my time with Lily."

"You must really love her," Hermione prodded.

Severus looked out the window and said coldly, "It's none of your business. My relationship with Lily is not for you to discuss with anyone. Just leave us in peace."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 74

Hermione spends the summer holidays between Lily's house and Snape's. A terrifying experience at Spinner's End changes the dynamic of Hermione and Snape's relationship, even if only acknowledged silently between the two of them.

A/N: I want to warn the readers that this chapter contains child abuse and attempted rape. I have written it in a way that makes the intent clear without being explicit. I apologize in advance if this chapter offends you, and I promise, it is not for gratuitous reasons that I have written about child sexual abuse. Later, there will be a connection made between this event and another event in a much later chapter. Thanks to WriterMerrin who advised me and beta'd this chapter.

The start of the summer was uneventful. Between continuous spiteful comments from Lily's sister, Petunia, and the cold shoulder from Snape, Hermione easily found herself to be out of the loop. This made for interesting examination. She watched very carefully how Lily, the loved child, was petted and coddled while Petunia was largely ignored and passed over. If Petunia hadn't been so mean and hateful, Hermione might have found it within her to feel sorry for her.

Snape made good his threat. He would come over every day to Lily's house and take her away for a walk, go to the park, or just to talk alone. He deliberately made Hermione feel unwelcome by whispering in Lily's ear, giving angry looks, and sometimes even telling Lily he really needed to talk with her privately. Lily would always ask Hermione to join them, but after a while, Hermione refused. At first, she would sit alone as Snape and Lily went off by themselves. She didn't want Lily to feel bad, but it became apparent that she was just a third wheel. The first time she declined to even go walking with them one day, Lily had looked hurt, but went with Snape anyway. Hermione gave her a half-hearted smile as the redhead allowed herself to be pulled away by a very determined Snape.

"You know, I was wondering when you were going to get smart and leave them alone."

Hermione turned and saw Petunia behind her with a sour look on her face.

Hermione walked away, and Petunia grabbed her arm. "I may have lost her because I hurt her feelings, but believe me, you will lose just as well. That Snape boy won't let you have her!"

Hermione let out an impatient breath. "Petunia, let go of my arm!" she said angrily. She pulled away and said, her eyes narrowed, "I don't know what you meant by that, but it's not a contest. Lily isn't a prize; she's a person! She can choose who she wants to spend her time with. It's not for me or anyone else to decide."

Petunia laughed in her face. "Oh, and you really think *he* lets her choose?" she sneered.

"Lets her?" Hermione repeated. "You are unbelievable! Between you and Snape, it's a wonder Lily ever gets any peace of mind!" She shook her head and walked back to the bedroom she shared with Lily.

Later that night, after she and Lily had settled in for the night, Lily started to talk to her about Snape.

"Hermione," Lily whispered. "I'm sorry you've been left out...it's just...well, Severus doesn't have anyone who cares about him. The past two summers have been very precious for him. He doesn't have a good home. I think his parents are very cruel to him. He doesn't like people to know, he's kind of proud, you know? That's why he likes

to talk to me alone. I just can't take our times together away from him. I know I'm being a bad friend to you, Hermione, it's just..."

"Please, Lily," Hermione assured her. "Don't worry, please, don't worry. I know Snape is a good friend of yours. Don't mind me. I usually just like to sit outside and read anyway. It's no problem, really."

So it continued for the rest of the month. Then came the day Hermione had to go stay at Spinner's End. All this time, Hermione had never seen Snape's house and wasn't so sure she wanted to go. She soberly packed her bag and said thank you to the Evanses for their hospitality. Snape came round to pick her up, and they walked slowly to his home.

"I do hope you remember what I told you about my house," he said abruptly.

Hermione nodded and kept silent.

Snape looked at her. "Tell me what I said!" he snapped.

Hermione jumped at the tone in his voice. "Um, you said not to tell anyone what goes on at your house," she replied.

"That's right," he said haughtily.

Spinner's End was a horrible place. It was filthy and needed cleaning as desperately inside as it did outside.

As soon as Snape led her in, she came face to face with Professor Snape...except he wasn't wearing teaching robes. She fairly jumped out of her skin. He was dressed in a Muggle factory uniform. He had the same grim expression, lanky, greasy hair, and hooked nose. Hermione fairly shuddered under his gaze. He reeked of beer and old sweat. He leered at her, making her feel dirty. She didn't like this man.

"So, what's this, eh?" he said gruffly.

Hermione's mouth gaped open. He didn't have the smooth, silky voice of Professor Snape. He reached in his shirt pocket, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

Snape addressed his father rather tersely. "Dad, this is Hermione Granger from Hogwarts. She can't go home this summer, so she's been staying with the Evans family. They are going to France for three weeks. Granger is staying with us."

"An' I suppose to eat our food an' take up our space, I reckon?" he said between drags.

Snape was silent. It seemed he didn't need to respond.

Hermione spoke up. "Sir, I intend to earn my keep. I'm Muggle-born, so I am used to cleaning without magic. I can do whatever needs to be done around here. I can help Mrs. Snape with the cooking and washing as well," she said passionately.

Mr. Snape smiled, but it was a nasty smile. "Me name is Tobias. Me wife's name is Eileen." He looked directly at Snape and said, "Well, lad, 'tis a good thing she come here innit? Your mum left today for Bristol."

"What? Why?" asked a confused Snape.

"Your stupid great-aunt is sick. She's gone to wave her wand and do her hocus-pocus nonsense."

He looked back at Hermione. "You know cleaning spells and such?" he asked roughly.

"Yes, some," Hermione said eagerly. I'm still learning, though. But if there are books on the subject I can learn!" Her face fell suddenly. "Although, I'm not supposed to do magic outside of school. Perhaps when Mrs. Snape is back, I can do magic with her."

Mr. Snape gave a snort. "Perhaps if Her Ladyship gets back in time, you can teach the old bint a thing or two about being a proper woman!" he sneered.

He turned to leave, and as he reached the door, he said to his son, "You'd best have my dinner on the table, my lad, by seven o'clock, or I'll take me belt to your backside!"

Snape nodded in reply.

Mr. Snape gave Hermione another once over. "It will be a real pleasure having you, Hermione," he said lustfully.

When he left, Hermione was shaking. "Oh shit, oh shit!" she said over and over. Snape took her by the shoulders and spoke fast and quietly.

"Look. I'll get you the spell books, and you can do the cleaning charms. Don't worry about the Underage Magic nonsense. My mum is a witch; I'm sure they can't tell the difference between who is using magic. The problem is that my dad is a pig, a foul, evil pig, and you need to stay away from him."

"And how do you suppose I do that?" Hermione demanded with her arms crossed.

"I'll tell him you are my girlfriend, okay? He's been on me since I started on at Hogwarts if I've gotten... uh... a girlfriend. I don't think he'd bother you if he knows we are together." His face hardened, and Hermione could see the beginnings of the older Professor Snape she knew lining his face. "He'll probably be overjoyed I'm not a faggot," he said snidely.

"Can you cook, Granger?" he asked suddenly.

"Some basic things," Hermione replied honestly.

"Well, I'll teach you some more things, and together we'll make dinner."

Dinner was delicious. Hermione could tell Mr. Snape was pleased. He polished off his fourth beer and announced that Hermione's cooking was a vast improvement on the tripe he usually had to eat.

"So, Hermione, you're a Muggle, then?" he asked as she began to pick up the dishes. "What is your relationship with my boy? Are you his girl?"

Hermione blushed and said, "Yes, we've been together for a while."

She was clearing off up at the table and felt a warm heat behind her. Mr. Snape grabbed her by her arms and jerked her back into his chest. He rubbed a hand across her intimately.

"Is my boy fuckin' you good and proper then?" he whispered in her ear.

"Uh, yeah." She replied stupidly as her body stiffened in revulsion.

"Good, then I expect you sleep to in his room. No use dirtin' another room. If you are already shaggin' anyway, you have my blessing."

Hermione removed herself from him. He laughed and went to go watch telly.

Snape came back from the store with more beer for his dad. Hermione dragged him into the kitchen and told him what his dad did to her.

Snape took her hand, led her back into the sitting room past his father, and opened the door to the stairs. He dragged her up into his bedroom. "Take off your underwear," he ordered coldly.

"What?" Hermione screeched.

Snape pushed her against the wall and placed his hand over her mouth. "Listen to me, Granger. We have to do things a certain way if he's going to believe this. Now hand over your knickers!"

She undressed as he turned his back to her. Hermione looked at him in disgust. He rubbed them into his bed sheets. Hermione was aghast.

Snape saw the revulsion on her face. "Look, my dad knows when someone is shagging or not. The nose is not merely for aesthetics! He'll be expecting to smell you on me and for the sheets to smell like sex. Now, don't wear underwear when you come to bed, it will help the smell to permeate the sheets." He face grew dark as she shuddered in her disgust.

"The least you could do is be a little bit grateful!" he snapped. "I could just make this all simple and just shag you, but I'm trying to be as considerate as I can *Gryffindors!* You all think things are so cut and dry. Well, in this house, you do what you must to stay alive!"

"What the bloody hell are you yelling at me for?" Hermione shouted.

Snape pulled her close to him. "Bloody is a right good choice of word! I know you are a virgin, Granger. If you want to walk out of this house that way, you would do best by following my rules!"

"Okay," she agreed. "Just don't try anything!" she warned him.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not interested!" he snarled.

Sleep that night was difficult. Since neither had slept with a member of the opposite sex, it proved to be an uncomfortable night. It was impossible to sleep in Snape's bed without accidentally touching each other. Hermione had a difficult time relaxing. Whenever they bumped into each other, she stiffened, and Snape huffed in exasperation. Hermione was exhausted as she stumbled downstairs to go to the outhouse the following morning.

She came out to raised voices.

"I said I'd get your beer while you were at work!" Snape yelled.

Hermione saw Mr. Snape backhand his son and push him out of the kitchen. "Don't you back answer me, my lad. Now don't come back for at least an hour!" he yelled.

"I want Granger to come with me!" he yelled as he looked at Hermione.

"Stop your sniveling, you little dunderhead, now get!" he snarled.

Hermione came down and Mr. Snape was waiting for her. "Mornin'," he sneered. Why don't you make us some breakfast?" he asked, his tone dripping with saccharine sweetness.

Hermione set to cooking. A horrible feeling of foreboding washed over her, and she felt her adrenaline begin to rush through her veins. She wanted to run, but where could she go? She was at the mercy of this looming, sadistic man. Hermione felt a familiar feeling akin to how her stomach would flutter during Potions class when Professor Snape would glide up and down the rows, glaring and biding his time to pounce upon an unsuspecting student and verbally shred them. She focused on whipping the eggs and tried hard to shut out the fear that was creeping over her when he suddenly grabbed her from behind. The ceramic bowl full of eggs fell onto the floor and crashed.

Hermione tried to fight, but Mr. Snape had his hand firmly around her waist. He slammed her prone onto the kitchen table. The first thing to go was her wand, as he ripped it from her jeans' pocket and flung it across the room. He had his hips pressed against her, trapping her. She screamed and screamed for help as her jeans were ripped down after he'd picked her up and slammed her supine on the table, but he clamped a filthy hand over her mouth. She felt fumbling, and a chuckle came out of Snape's father.

"So, my son doesn't have the bollocks to make you a woman? Well, I can do that for you, lass."

"*PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!*" shouted someone from behind her rapist. Mr. Snape froze up, and Hermione pushed him off her with her foot. She lay on the kitchen table, sobbing hysterically.

Snape ran over and helped her. Hermione felt like her hips were broken. She looked into his eyes and tried to talk, but the words wouldn't come out. She covered her face with her hands and continued to sob.

She felt herself lifted upright and clothed. Then a pair of warm arms were holding her close and walking her to the couch.

"Granger, I'm sorry. I knew what he was going to do. I knew if I fought him it would just be worse in the end. I couldn't risk getting thrashed unconscious and then leave you to fend for yourself," Snape explained.

She was shaking, and he held her tighter. "I-I s-sup-pose you're i-in t-trouble?" she stuttered as her body shook.

Snape laid her head on his lap and covered her with an afghan. "I don't know, Granger. I want to think not since this is a magical household. The Ministry knows this, and they won't know exactly who cast the spell. At least I hope so. I have always been too afraid to try it. I didn't want to risk getting expelled from Hogwarts," he replied softly.

"I'm so cold!" Hermione said as she shivered.

Snape helped her back into his rooms and tucked her into bed.

"Please stay. Please. I'm afraid to be alone," she said fearfully.

"Let me take care of a couple of things, and I will be right back, I promise," he said gently.

He left the door open, and she heard some shuffling noises and then the scribbling of a quill on parchment. He returned and got under the covers with her.

"Thank you, Snape," she whispered.

"You're welcome, Granger," he replied.

Hermione burrowed into his thin chest as he wrapped an arm around her protectively and curled up into a ball. She inhaled his scent. It was nice in a strange way. How,

she couldn't explain, but she felt safe.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 74

Mrs. Eileen Snape returns to Spinner's End, and is less than joyful to be reunited with her husband and son.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas who worked hard on this chapter: Snapekat51 and WriterMerrin. Here in this chapter is more violence from Tobias Snape. However, instead of Hermione, his anger is directed towards his wife and son. There is no abuse of a sexual nature, but child abuse and violence, nonetheless. Please read and review! I want to know your thoughts.

Hermione awoke to a woman's shrieks. "W-what's going on?" she mumbled. She looked out the window and saw it was dark.

"Severus!" a woman screeched. "What have you done? Do you have any idea how difficult it was for me to come home at such short notice?"

Snape was out of bed and in the process of pocketing his wand. He looked tense and fearful. Hermione jumped up and followed him down the stairs. As they slowly descended, Hermione saw an angry woman with black hair pulled back into a tight bun. The woman crossed her arms imperiously in front of her severe black dress. A memory of Professor Snape glaring at her in Potions class, his arms crossed in the same manner, flitted across Hermione's mind.

The woman, who evidently was Mrs. Snape, appeared incensed. "I try so hard to keep the peace around here, and what do I get for my trouble? A son who can't seem to abide by my wishes! You are ungrateful, Severus Snape!" she shrieked.

Snape stood quietly as his mother continued to rage. "So, what have you done with him? I swear, boy, if you have done anything to upset your father, I will beat you until you are black and blue!"

Glancing at Hermione, she snapped, "Who is this chit?"

"Mother, this is Hermione," Snape said, with a confused expression on his face. "Don't you remember? Dumbledore wanted Lily and me to take turns having her over for the holidays."

Mrs. Snape's brows furrowed as she inspected Hermione. "Well, you seem to have made a nuisance of yourself!" she spat.

Snape jumped to her defense. "Hermione was just being nice! She had offered to cook and clean..."

"Oh, really?" she sneered. Mrs. Snape scowled, looking Hermione over as if she were a cheap slut. "So, it's your father's fault for falling for her wiles?"

As Mrs. Snape stepped closer to Hermione, she screamed, "You deserved what you got! You come into MY house uninvited and start taking over...GET THE HELL OUT!"

Mrs. Snape reminded her of the older Professor Snape she knew: angry and cruel. Hermione ran into the kitchen and saw the still unconscious Mr. Snape on the floor, slumped against the wall. Although he was in a full Body-Bind, Hermione crept nervously past him to retrieve her wand from where he had thrown it earlier.

When Hermione returned to the sitting room, she found Snape and his mother shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Get that little slut out of this house!" Mrs. Snape screeched. Her face contorted in fury, and her hands turned white from clenching them so tightly.

Snape yelled back at her, "She has nowhere to go! Lily is gone to France and won't be back for three weeks. It's not Hermione's fault he's a pig!"

Mrs. Snape's face went white with shock, as if her son had struck her. "I suppose it's my fault, then?" she whispered dejectedly. She glanced at Hermione and then at her son. Her hand rose to grasp her throat nervously, and she turned her head away as she spoke.

"You have no idea what he will do to me when he wakes up," she whispered in a small, frightened voice. "No idea! I can't survive without him. If he goes, I will die, and it will be your fault, Severus!"

She turned back to her son, her eyes brimming with tears. "You don't understand what he's been like since you left this year. He's going to kill me! Is that what you want? You should have just let him be!"

Hermione's mouth dropped open in rage. "How can you?" she screamed. "How can you? One witch to another...how can you stand there and defend what he did? He was trying to rape me! I'm only fourteen! How can you?" Hermione began to shake and sob. This was insanity. What kind of people were they?

Mrs. Snape emitted a noise of disgust as she blew past her son and Hermione, striding into the kitchen. Hermione sank onto the couch.

Snape knelt down by Hermione and rubbed her shoulder. Hermione looked at him, alarmed. "What am I going to do?" she whispered.

"I'll think of something," Snape whispered. "If I have to kill the bastard myself, I'll do it, I swear!"

Hermione looked at him. He had a murderous glint in his eye. Hermione felt strangely protected and cared about. "Thank you for being so sweet to me, Snape," she whispered in return.

He looked at her curiously. "I can't have anything happen to you, Hermione. Lily would never forgive me," he said matter-of-factly.

He got up and went into the kitchen. Hermione cradled herself in her arms trying to keep herself from falling apart. She was only important because of Lily. If Dumbledore had sent her here, and she hadn't been such a close friend of Lily's, would he have let his father rape her? He sure enough had taken his blessed time before hexing the bastard, that's for sure! Hermione's mind snapped into place. She was going to leave this hideous place and take care of herself. No one else could be arsed for her sake, so why stick around for the nasty bastard to wake up?

Hermione dashed upstairs to the bedroom. She had just closed the door when she heard horrible crashing noises and wailing cries. She didn't want to know what was happening. She grabbed her suitcase and raced back down the stairs. She was going back to Hogwarts if she had to walk every step of the way. Then, she was going to

give Dumbledore the tongue-lashing of his life.

She opened the door at the bottom of the stairs that led into the sitting room, and the screams became sharper, and the shouts more bloodcurdling. She was so angry and disgusted by these people she wanted to hex the lot of them! She went to the front door and stopped. *Damn the man!* she thought.

She wasn't going to let this go down without taking a pound of flesh for herself.

She grabbed her wand, leaving the suitcase by the door. She peeked into the kitchen and nearly screamed at the sight of Snape's father beating his wife while Snape laid bleeding and crying on the floor. She threw open the door and screamed at the top of her lungs, '*STUPEFY!*'

Mr. Snape was thrown against the far wall, the impact of the crash making a crack in the wall behind him. Mrs. Snape looked at her in shock. Her black hair was out of its bun, dress torn, and there was blood running down from her mouth. Her left eye was also swollen shut.

Snape was holding his head. Hermione went to work. She opened drawer after drawer until she found a clean rag to press against the gash in Snape's head and then went to attend to Mrs. Snape.

The witch looked at the young girl and said painfully, "There is a book on the shelf next to the cooler. It is a book of first-aid spells."

Hermione dashed over and retrieved it, flipping through the pages until she found the spells she needed to stop the bleeding. She went over to Snape, who was curled up in a ball on the floor, crying pitifully.

She touched his arm lightly. "Please, Snape, I need to stop the bleeding," she whispered.

He flinched from her touch. Hermione turned to Mrs. Snape. "Where are your wands?" she asked.

Mrs. Snape was silent, but pointed shakily towards the far wall. Hermione saw two wands in the corner, both snapped in two.

Hermione stood up. "Oh, no!" she moaned. She walked up to Mrs. Snape and said, "You **MUST** inform the Aurors! He's not going to stop. You have to do this!"

"What do you expect me to do?" the older witch said, looking up at Hermione furiously. "I can't keep this house without him. If he goes away, I'll be on the streets!"

Hermione was growing weary of this woman. "You'll be dead inside a year if you let him continue to beat you, and then where will your son be? How can you let him beat your child and do nothing?" she shouted.

"You know nothing about our life!" snarled Snape.

Hermione turned to him. "I'm glad you decided to join the conversation!" she snapped. She turned back to his mum. "I may not know about living under an abuser's thumb, but I know what's going on here is wrong and intolerable. Do you **WANT** to die?" she yelled.

Mrs. Snape lowered her head, and Hermione snatched up the book to find more healing spells. As she forcefully tore through the pages, she said, "I just can't believe how beaten down you all are!" Picking up her wand, she began healing Mrs. Snape's cuts and bruises.

"I'm sure that there must be some sort of assistance for you! Besides, even if you have to leave Spinner's End, wouldn't it be better in a one-room flat, safe and sound than in this place where you have to tip-toe around, not knowing when *he's* going to blow up!"

"I shall never give up my house," Mrs. Snape said darkly.

Hermione glared nastily at the unconscious man on the floor. *And he just knows it, too! I bet he just smiles at that thought!* She healed what she could for Mrs. Snape and then turned to repair Snape. He glared at her the entire time she mended him. Hermione didn't care.

"Snape, you must do something!" she hissed.

"What? It's not like they can send him to Azkaban! He's just a filthy Muggle!" he spat.

Hermione winced at the venom in his voice. He was angry, but there was contempt in his voice. It sounded as if he had contempt for more than just his father. Hermione was confused. She had thought for a while now, ever since Malfoy had called her a Mudblood second year, that Snape was a pure-blood. After all, he was a Slytherin. It had been quite a shock when she had found out that he was a half-blood.

"What are you saying, Snape? Am I just a filthy Muggle as well? Is that why you waited so long until getting your father off of me?" she seethed.

He looked at her angrily. "No!" he sputtered. "This has nothing to do with you, Granger!"

Hermione's fury and indignation exploded. "Well, that makes sense. So that's why you told me that it was because of Lily that you saved me? I'm not worth anything except being Lily's friend. If I hadn't been, you would have let him hurt me. You would have just sat there and turned a blind eye. All you love is Lily! Everything is about her!" she spat.

She got up, disgusted by the sight of him, and ran to the front door. She picked up her suitcase and took off. She didn't know how she was going to get to Scotland; she might have to go to the police. She should go to them and have that son-of-a-bitch locked up! She made it down to the corner when an Auror Apparated in front of her.

"Miss Granger?" a black wizard asked.

Hermione took a step back and gazed up at his dark face. He was a kindly person. She could see it in his brown eyes. He was tall and looked rather impressive. He held himself with restraint and had a sophisticated air about him.

"Yes," Hermione said in a small voice.

"I am Kingsley Shacklebolt, from the Auror Department at the Ministry of Magic. I need you to return to the Snape house with me," he said smoothly.

She followed him, but protested the whole way. "They are terrible people! The father tried to rape me, and his wife yelled at me as if it was my fault!" she said furiously.

"Don't worry about Mr. Snape," Kingsley said reassuringly. "He will be dealt with by the local authorities."

Kingsley led her back inside, and Snape looked at her guiltily. "Hermione, I-I am sorry," he whispered uncomfortably.

Hermione glowered at him. She turned to Kingsley and pleaded softly, "I don't feel safe here. I want to go back to Hogwarts!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger," Mr. Shacklebolt said sympathetically. He looked over at Mrs. Snape, who was speaking with another Auror. "Mrs. Snape is aware that we will be checking in from time to time," he said with a small smile. He reached into his robes and gave Hermione his card.

"You keep that and if you need help, just tap it and say 'Auror Office,' and I will get the message to Floo here immediately. Okay?" he asked with a warm smile.

"Okay," agreed Hermione, grudgingly. But her heart wasn't into it. As far as she was concerned, the whole Snape family could just sod off!

The next couple of days were full of tension. Hermione was still furious at Snape and was not ready to forgive him. Mrs. Snape was nearly paralyzed with fear. Every noise outside made her jump, thinking it was her husband coming home.

Snape tried to calm her. "Mum," he had reminded her while they were eating dinner one evening, "the Aurors said we would be informed if dad was let out of jail."

Mrs. Snape had nodded and tried to eat. She finally had pushed her plate away and howled, "I can't do without my wand!" She had placed a hand on her forehead and began to cry.

For the last two days, Hermione had been watching Snape. He was very uncomfortable with the more delicate displays of emotion, she had concluded. He didn't have a wand either and was still shaken up by the beating he had received from his father, but he had yet to show his fear...at least consciously. Hermione continued to be disgusted with his mum. The past two nights, Snape had been experiencing night terrors. Hermione had moved into the spare room next to his and could hear his screams. She was sure the whole town could hear him, but his mother had made no effort to soothe or comfort him. All she could think of was herself.

Hermione had taken the initiative to go into his room, kneel by his bed, stroke his hair and forehead while whispering encouraging thoughts. She repeatedly told him he was going to be all right, that she was with him, and no one was going to harm him. It had seemed to do the trick, and after a while, he would start to sleep soundly.

Hermione didn't know if Snape was even aware of her continuous nighttime visits. However, she wasn't about to tell him. The boy was fiercely proud. He wanted no pity or sympathy from anyone. When Hermione had offered to see if she could find a way to get his mum a new wand, he had blown up at her.

"We don't need your charity, Granger!" he had shouted. "I will take care of my mum. Just you keep out of it, you insufferable *girl*!"

Hermione blushed red. She had become accustomed to his blustering and ranting. He was just afraid she would think he was weak. After all, she had seen him bleeding and crying on the floor. She felt he wanted to keep punishing her for seeing him so vulnerable.

A week later, Kingsley Shacklebolt came, and he took them to Diagon Alley to get new wands. Hermione pleaded to stay behind at the Ministry. She didn't want to risk seeing anyone, especially if the Weasleys were out shopping. The fewer people she interacted with, better the chance she wouldn't upset her timeline too much. But she didn't tell Kingsley that.

"I would rather not go, sir. Snape has his pride, after all," she whispered to the Auror.

Kingsley smiled broadly and gave her a conspiratorial wink. He then left her there alone in a waiting room, and she curled up with a book.

They were back before she knew it, and with them were the beginnings of faint smiles and content faces. Hermione was so glad for them both. Kingsley explained to Mrs. Snape that she could get a fairly decent job at the Ministry, as a cleaning witch. Whatever money she still lacked, she could get in aid from the Ministry. It seemed Mrs. Snape would not need to rely on her husband's money for her survival.

The next week was much better for everyone. Mrs. Snape wasn't going to start work until Hermione left to return to the Evans family, so she took the time to really get the house clean and also teach Hermione cleaning and cooking spells.

Hermione and Mrs. Snape stood in the kitchen, and the older witch looked around disappointingly. "I've never been allowed to do the spells I've always wanted, Hermione. I don't know why Mr. Snape never seemed to like the idea of my doing magic. Well, he's not here, so I can do as I please," she said with a triumphant gleam in her black eyes. She raised an eyebrow and glanced at Hermione. "However, you seem to be bright and eager. Let's see what you can do!" She gave Hermione a half a smile. Hermione returned the smile, noting that Mrs. Snape probably hadn't had a reason to smile for quite a long time.

The witches went to work, and Hermione found she was a dab hand at cleaning spells. Snape pitched in as well and learned his fair share of spells. By the time Hermione had to leave, the house and Mrs. Snape fairly shone.

Snape walked Hermione back to Lily's house and remained silent the whole way. Finally, as they reached the door, Hermione said, "Snape, I made a promise to you that I would never tell anyone about what goes on in your house, and I won't. It'll remain between us. Nevertheless, I *shall* have words with Dumbledore about your father."

Snape's mouth dropped open in shock. Hermione took her suitcase and went inside. Soon, Lily was running towards her, hugging her tightly, and telling her how much she missed her. Then, she saw Snape and mumbled her excuses. Hermione watched Snape take Lily's hand, and they walked off together towards the park. Hermione closed the door and went inside to have a lie down.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 74

Fourth year starts with Snape's suspicions about Remus Lupin. As the year wears on, Lily expresses more of an interest in Hermione while maintaining her focus on Severus as her future. An incident between a Gryffindor and a group of Slytherins will force Hermione to put aside her fears about meddling with time and take action.

A/N: Thanks to WriterMerrin and luvsev for their beta work on this chapter. Lily and Hermione are getting older although they are only fifteen. I have placed a Slash lite warning since these girls are still underage.

Hermione started her fourth year with no major upsets. She had kept her word to Snape that she would never reveal what had happened at Spinner's End. She did, though, make a pointed effort to have a sit-down with the Headmaster.

She sat across from Dumbledore, her foot shaking as her arms were crossed in front of her. She lit into the Headmaster, telling him about the attack and near rape by

Snape's father.

"I was there alone with no one to help me. It was awful! Mrs. Snape accused me of terrible things while all Snape could do was think about how if I got hurt, Lily would never forgive him!"

The tears fell down her face, and she brushed them away angrily.

Dumbledore looked at her calmly. "Have you yet forgiven Severus for his poor choice of words?" he asked.

"No," she said petulantly. She looked up at the Headmaster defiantly. "I don't want to forgive him. He doesn't deserve it. All he cares about is Lily! Nothing matters as long as Lily still cares for him."

"Are you feeling a little envious of their friendship, Miss Granger?" he asked delicately.

"No," she said, more relaxed in her tone. "I don't begrudge them. The problem is that I was in real danger of being hurt very badly, and my rescue rested on what Lily Evans thought of me. /didn't matter. I'm not important enough to save. I could care less what Snape thinks of me; it's just I was at his mercy, and it was sorely lacking." Hermione looked down at her lap, feeling small and vulnerable.

Dumbledore was silent for a while and finally said, "I have a meeting this evening with Severus concerning his father. I'm sure some things will come up in our conversation." He gave Hermione a warm smile and then directed them towards a happier topic. "I was very glad upon receiving the update from the Auror Department about the changes at Spinner's End. You went through a frightening and inexcusable ordeal, Miss Granger. However, you seem to have made a world of difference for Severus and his mother. I'm sure neither one shall ever forget your kindness and sympathy."

Hermione gave a weak smile and got up to leave.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore called softly.

Hermione turned to face him. His arms were spread open, and he had a very sorrowful look on his face. Hermione burst into tears and flung herself at him, crying her heart out.

"I was so scared!" she cried. "I was so afraid and alone!"

"I know, child," he whispered as he held her shaking body. "I promise, I will never let you be so vulnerable again without a way of escape. It's my fault. I wanted so badly for Severus to be saved that I was blinded by it. I didn't think of your safety, and I was wrong."

Hermione pulled herself away and wiped her eyes. "Thank you, Headmaster. I needed that."

Dumbledore smiled. "You are a very strong and brave witch, Miss Granger. You have lived through this and are adjusting to living in this timeline as well. You should feel proud of yourself. I know I am."

Hermione beamed.

I'm telling you, something is fishy about it!" Snape insisted for the umpteenth time.

Lily rolled her eyes. "Hermione, will you put that blasted book down and help me talk some sense into this boy?" she pleaded.

Hermione had been listening all along as Snape argued with Lily about his theory. He was positive something was going on with James Potter and his gang. Hermione kept her mouth closed. She just wanted to enjoy the outside. Hermione didn't know for certain, but she was rather inclined to believe Snape. The signs were obvious. However, she refrained from choosing sides.

"Look," she said diplomatically. "I don't want to get involved! You both have your viewpoints and are determined to stick with them. Anything I could add would be inconsequential. Besides, I just don't think it's anything we should be sticking our noses into!"

"You see, Severus?" Lily chided. "Even Hermione thinks you should stop speculating!"

"He is a werewolf, Lily, I just know it!" he insisted.

Lily rolled her eyes at Hermione. Hermione closed her eyes in disbelief. Even though she thought Snape was being a bit obsessive on the matter, she still couldn't understand Lily's blatant obtuseness. It was plain as day that Remus was a werewolf. However, it did concern her, remembering that the night she came here, Remus Lupin had been made the DADA Professor. Would Dumbledore knowingly hire a crazed werewolf?

"Hermione," Lily began importantly, "I think we should return to the common room. And Severus," she said stoically, "I think you had better let the matter drop." She put her arm into Hermione's and pulled her up the hill back into the castle. Hermione turned to look back at Snape. He was scowling and angry.

"Don't look back, Hermione!" Lily hissed. "He's got to learn to stop going on about things the way he does!"

Hermione went with her silently back into the common room. When they arrived, the Gryffindor girls of all ages were around, waiting, it seemed, for Lily to arrive. Lily had become the angel of Gryffindor. She had grown up a bit physically, becoming prettier by the day, it seemed. The girls all wanted to be her best friend, and the boys all wanted to date her. Lily, though, still only had room for two people in her heart: Hermione and Snape.

Hermione felt it was in that order as well. Hermione felt at times that Lily might have an attraction for her, which was confusing since she knew she was Harry's mum. Snape, on the other hand, was growing increasingly possessive of the red-haired, green-eyed beauty, and Hermione silently pleaded for him to slow it down. Lily was a bright thing, a butterfly that had to come and go as she pleased. Hermione understood this and let her do just that. And it pleased Lily to be adored. Hermione didn't resent her. She was a nice girl, never snubbed anyone who wanted to hang out with her, except when it came to boys.

As far as Hermione knew, James and the "Marauders" were still on Lily's shit list. It was becoming apparent as well that a confrontation was going to come to a head between James and Snape over Lily's affections. James could have any witch he wanted, but he wanted Lily. On the other hand, no one wanted Snape, and all he had was Lily. Hermione remembered the old parable from Sunday school about the rich man who took the poor man's lamb from him when he had acres full of his own. He had wanted that lamb because the poor man cherished it and loved it. The poor man was devastated when the rich man forced the poor man to hand over his beloved pet.

Hermione, of course, knew the ending. James would marry Lily, and Snape would be devastated. What concerned her was when. She couldn't interfere. They had to make their own choices, no matter how hurtful they would be.

Lily still adored Hermione, and they were still thick as thieves. They still at times slept in the same bed together when Lily asked, much to Hermione's confusion. Lily would rest her head on Hermione's chest and snuggle into her. Hermione thought they were getting to be a bit old for such things, but Lily needed this closeness, and she did not have the heart to refuse her. Hermione thought she was giving herself the same excuses as Lily did every day about Snape's neediness.

One evening, Lily and Hermione sat in Lily's bed, feasting on goodies sent from the Evans' earlier that week. To Hermione's delight, an owl arrived and surprised her with her very own care package. She saw the note attached from Mrs. Snape. It was a delicious mincemeat pie.

"Who's that from?" Lily asked curiously.

"From Mrs. Snape," Hermione answered happily.

"Oh," Lily said strangely. "I've never met her. Severus has never let me come to his house. What's it like?"

Hermione was uncomfortable. "Well, you should ask Snape, Lily. I made a promise not to tell anyone."

"I'm not just anyone, Hermione!" she cried out.

"I know, Lily," Hermione said lovingly. "Still, I promised."

Lily snuggled close to Hermione. "You know you've gotten prettier since last year, Hermione," she said softly.

Hermione blushed. She knew she had developed a bit over the summer. She still wasn't as blessed as Lily; however, she had enough to be proud of.

Lily nudged closer to Hermione, and she whispered things in her ear that Hermione had never thought of before. Lily was so open and free, Hermione had to admit it to herself that she found Lily's knowledge appealing. Hermione went along and learned new things about herself she had never thought of before.

Afterwards, they sat on Hermione's bed, drinking butterbeer and talking about boys.

"Your body is beautiful, Hermione," Lily whispered. "So, when will you let Remus touch you?" she asked saucily.

Hermione nearly choked on her butterbeer. "I don't think so, Lily!" she said.

"Hermione, would you like to touch me? I need practice," she said, blushing.

"I don't know, Lily. Don't you want to wait for Snape?" she asked.

"I don't want to get freaked out. It'll scare him, and he'll think it's his fault. I trust you, Hermione, practice with me. I'll teach you," she replied. "I don't want to be ignorant, Hermione."

"What makes you think Snape will even notice? Do you think he's doing the same thing in his dorm room with some boy?" Hermione retorted.

Lily laughed. "Eww! I can't imagine boys kissing and fooling around. Especially the ugly guys in Slytherin!" She shuddered.

Hermione giggled. True, the thought of Snape kissing Avery or Mulciber was a bit frightening!

Lily's eyes grew soft. "I'm going to let Severus touch me this year. I've decided...for Valentine's Day. I think he should be the first...boy, I mean. I think he deserves to be. He's always been so good to me," she said shyly.

Hermione spent a very erotic evening in Lily's bed. Lily was very amorous and taught her many things about her body. She said she saw women while she in Paris over the summer kissing and holding hands. She said she figured that was how to practice with boys so they wouldn't be stupid when the time came.

Lily awakened Hermione in the middle of the night.

"W... what?" Hermione said, disoriented.

"Hermione," she whispered. "This won't change us, will it? You and I are always going to be best friends, right?" she said anxiously.

Hermione sat up. "Lily, I think you may have to clarify this situation," she said. "I mean, what do you mean when you say 'best friends?'"

Lily snuggled back down next to Hermione. "It means that you and I will always be there for each other, even when we are married and have babies. We shall always be friends, and our kids will be friends. I figure I will have to marry Severus. After all, I've known him the longest, and he is so in love with me."

Hermione frowned and tilted Lily's face to look at hers. "Lily, you should marry the boy you love. Do you love Snape?" she asked.

Lily giggled. "Of course I do!"

"No," Hermione urged. "I mean are you *in love* with him?" she asked.

Lily's green eyes shone brightly in the moonlight. "I should be in love with him, shouldn't I? We have known each other for so long, and I know he loves me. But I just don't have those urges to be his girlfriend. However, I have to make sure. That's why I'm going to let him touch me. I need to know if there is a connection or spark between us."

Lily looked so downcast. "Promise me, Hermione, that you'll be here for me if it doesn't work out. I think I'll be so embarrassed and Severus probably won't want me to be his friend anymore if I tell him I don't feel anything for him like that."

"I promise, Lily," Hermione whispered. "But you have so much time before settling on a bloke. Take your time, Lily. What you feel today may not be what you feel in a year or two." *Lord knows, I should know that lesson! I feel I've aged fifty years since coming to this life!*

"Okay, Hermione." Lily answered. "I will."

The fall passed into winter, and the fighting between James and Snape grew worse and worse. It was not uncommon for Snape to stay overnight in the infirmary. Hermione, being the one no one really paid much attention to, was able to see what was happening from an objective point of view. She saw how James and Sirius ganged up on Snape, with Peter egging them on and Remus trying to pretend nothing was happening. It was becoming a vicious war between them.

One day, during Potions class, Sirius hit Snape with an Engorgement Charm right in the crotch. Of course, Lily was his lab partner, and it had been so hilarious for all the Gryffindors to watch the look on Lily's face as the tenting in his robes grew. Snape turned about five shades of red before running out of class. The next day, Sirius Black was placed under a Freezing Charm and had his privates shrunken down with a Shrinking Solution.

On the other hand, Hermione and Mary MacDonald, another Muggle-born Gryffindor witch, were being targeted daily by Snape's housemates. Mulciber and Avery were the most vicious, but they had some sense of self-preservation to leave Lily out of the worst of it. It seemed foes and friends alike respected Severus Snape's magical abilities.

Hermione realized that no one knew for sure if she were a Muggle-born or not since the story had spread that she had been found in an orphanage before coming to Hogwarts. Nonetheless, it didn't matter to the Slytherins. The fact she was an orphan proved she did not have the proper pedigree that a pure-blood should possess. There

were mysterious jinxes that were thrown her way, tripping her or causing her to drop her books or finding certain belongings disappear under her very nose. She put a stop to most of it when she found a way to place a 12-hour Shield Charm around herself as a means of protection.

Hermione was not stupid. She knew that the Slytherins hated she was making such brilliant grades. In fact, Snape, Lily and Hermione were the three brightest students in their year. It galled the pure-bloods to no end that two *Mudbloods* should be doing so well. There could be only one excuse: Lily and Hermione must be letting Snape lay some serious wand to them for the grades they received. When Hermione first heard the rumor, she was incensed. She had endured Draco Malfoy's taunts during her second year, but she was older now, and the stakes were higher and far more dangerous.

Since Lily had the protection of Snape, she never experienced the cruelty of Slytherins first-hand. However, Hermione and Mary MacDonald suffered, and they suffered greatly.

One evening just before the Christmas hols, Mary came into Gryffindor tower with a black eye. She tried hiding it with a poor make-up charm. Charms weren't Mary's best subject, so Hermione spotted it before the others. She carefully took the girl off to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and demanded to know what had happened.

"Nothing, really," she muttered unconvincingly.

Hermione pursed her lips. She looked hard at Mary. She was a slight girl, not very tall and almost frail looking. Many girls called her "mousy," and it was common knowledge that little Peter Pettigrew had his heart set on her.

Mary never really knew how to deal with the Slytherin bullying, not like how Hermione did. After Snape's father tried to rape her, her magic and her ability to stand up to bullies had grown ten-fold. The Slytherins knew that if they wanted to mess with Hermione, they had better be prepared for a fight. More than one ill-mannered Slytherin had walked away from her beaten and bleeding. Dumbledore knew what was happening outside Hogwarts. He knew what the pure-blood families were up to with Lord Voldemort. It was seeping into the castle and the children were drawing the bloodlines amongst themselves. It was becoming a volatile time to be growing up. Mary didn't have the magical abilities that Hermione possessed and had been neglected by her fellow Gryffindors. She had truly been alone until Hermione decided to help her.

"Mary," Hermione said firmly. "You promised me that you wouldn't keep secrets from me. What did they do to you?"

"It was nothing," she said uncomfortably. "They just were being silly, wanting to have fun."

"What kind of 'fun,' Mary?" Hermione pressed.

"Mulciber and Rosier cornered me in the library with a Notice-Me-Not Spell and made me kiss Regulus Black," she said while trembling.

"How did you get your black eye?" Hermione said angrily.

"They wanted me to do more to him than kiss him on the lips," she whispered. She began to cry. "I couldn't stop myself; I think they put a curse on me!" Her sobs grew stronger. "I tried to resist, and Mulciber hit me. That's how I got the black eye. They told me I was a filthy Mudblood and that was all I was good for." She collapsed into Hermione's arms and sobbed. Hermione was furious. This was getting out of hand. How were these boys able to cast Unforgivables without attracting the attention of the Ministry?

"Mary," she asked. "Did they make you do it?"

She shook her head.

"How did you get away?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"It was Snape. He said that they'd had their fun, but they had to be careful lest Dumbledore get too angry. He got me out of there, and I j-just ran. They were arguing." She sniffled, and Hermione handed her a handkerchief.

"Had Snape been there the whole time?" she asked.

"Yes, but I don't think he liked what they were doing. I mean, he wasn't laughing like the others were. But, you know how strange he is; no one can really know what's going on in his head. His face never shows any emotion," she said scornfully.

Hermione patted her on the back. She knew better. The truth was that Snape was very capable of displaying emotions; it was just he had to be so careful. Just like his blood status, Severus Snape lived in two worlds. He was going to have to choose someday, but unfortunately, Hermione had a feeling she knew what that choice would be.

Hermione healed Mary's eye and got her back to Gryffindor tower safely. She then walked back out again and headed straight for the dungeons. She'd had enough. Something had to change. She couldn't continue living this way, and neither could Mary. Maybe she wouldn't be able to change the world from hating her, but at least she could stop being terrorized while in school. Someone had to stand up to these bastards.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 74

Hermione confronts Avery, the Head of Slytherin, and terms are meted out between Slytherin and Gryffindor concerning Mary MacDonald.

A/N: Thanks again to WriterMerrin and luvsev for their diligent work. I hope you will enjoy this chapter! Please review!

Hermione gripped her wand tightly as she descended the spiral stairs that led to the dungeons. Her breathing was irregular, and she felt that old feeling of adrenaline and nervousness that she had felt the day Snape's father had attacked her. However, this time she was prepared to fight if necessary. She reached the long corridor that led towards the Slytherin common room. Soon, she came face to face with some of the cretins that had assaulted Mary.

"Well, well! Lookie here! It's one of the Gryffindor Mudbloods!" one of them sneered.

They certainly looked sure of themselves. They came to bar her way, and Hermione stopped.

"Rosier, isn't it?" Hermione asked haughtily.

"How dare you address me! What are you doing here? Wanna taste of what your friend got today?" he sneered.

The other two boys laughed. Hermione saw them reach for their wands. She was faster though.

"*LACARNE INFLAMARE!*" she screamed, and Rosier's robes burst into flames. The boys were shrieking and casting Augmenti spells to douse the flames. Hermione kept walking. She listened for any retaliation from behind her. Finally, she reached the Slytherin common room door.

Of course, the witch on the entranceway would not let her pass. Not only did Hermione not know the password, she wasn't a Slytherin. Non-Slytherins were not allowed to enter the common room. *No matter!* Hermione thought carelessly. *I'll just hex every single one until I get the lot of them out here...especially Severus Snape!*

No sooner had she finished thinking out her plan than three angry Slytherins came marching around the corner. Hermione was ready for them. She wasn't going to take any chances with any clever spells!

"*REDUCTO!*" she bellowed.

The three of them flew backwards in an explosion of sound and broken masonry. That got the attention of everyone in the dungeons. Hermione slipped back into the darkness as they came out of the common room one right after the other. Hermione saw Snape and then Professor Slughorn, Head of Slytherin house. Avery was telling Slughorn something, and the portly wizard obeyed him. Hermione watched in shock as Slughorn ambled his way back to his rooms. She slowly came out from the darkness, brandishing her wand, ready to duel. Avery was the ringleader. He was older and, in Hermione's estimation, more levelheaded than his friends. However, he was still vicious and ruthless. She would have to be very careful with him.

The other boys were furious and ready to hex her into oblivion when Avery and Snape alike silently raised their hands, motioning the others to lower their wands.

Avery studied her while the rest of the Slytherins watched him. Hermione knew no one was going to move unless he did. That was good for Hermione. Finally, he addressed her.

"All right then, Mudblood. You have our full attention." He kept his eyes on her as he said, "Regulus, Nott, please wake up our friends."

The two boys snapped to attention, and Hermione noted that Avery must be very powerful and influential to get those boys to obey him so readily. She had to think fast.

"I have tried to come peacefully. However, I was put upon and had to resort to defending myself with violence," she said coolly.

Avery glanced at the three boys who were awake and sitting meekly on the ground. Avery turned his gaze back to Hermione and kept his tone smooth and diplomatic.

"I see," he replied. "Well, you did what you had to do to protect yourself. You shouldn't be punished for besting anyone in a duel. Even if you are a Mudblood," he said cordially.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and kept her composure. He was testing her resolve. Very well, she would play his pissing contest!

"What message do you have for Slytherin House, Gryffindor?" he asked curiously.

When Hermione did not reply fast enough, he said pointedly, "You do have a message, do you not? I mean, after all, you did go through so much to come down here," he deduced.

Hermione stood straight and tall as she faced him. "Yes, I do. I wanted you to know that I recognize you as being the leader of these wizards. Since I recognize your position, I wanted to let you know that earlier today these...*people*..." she said nastily as she glanced at the cowering boys on the floor, "assaulted Mary MacDonald. She came to Gryffindor tower with a black eye and told me she had been placed under a sort of compulsion curse in order to perform a sexual act upon one of your own."

Avery took in a sharp breath. "Who was the person accused of casting this curse?" he said with controlled anger.

"Mulciber was the one who struck her. However, she could not distinguish if it had been Mulciber or Rosier who cast the curse," Hermione said evenly.

"What else do you have to say, Gryffindor?" he said briskly.

Hermione noted he was refraining from addressing her as "Mudblood." Obviously, she had made an impression. She decided to return the same courtesy.

"I come in a spirit of respect and fair play." At this, some Slytherins sniggered. Avery raised a hand to silence them. Hermione continued. "Mary MacDonald is a weak witch. Her magic is not as powerful as most. Until today, she has been under no one's protection. Unlike other Muggle-borns who are under the protection of more powerful witches and wizards, Mary has been largely ignored due to her retiring and humble nature.

"You may have noticed that I do not accept protection from anyone. I am more than capable of handling my own troubles. However, I have standards. I do not seek to set upon more than one witch or wizard at a time. Tonight I was forced to take drastic measures that normally I would never attempt. As you can see, I am more than capable of handling multiple assailants if the need arises. But I have not come to brag about my abilities. Rather, I have come to warn you, Avery, that since your friends have decided to play dirty, it shall be returned to them in double portions. Mary MacDonald is under my protection now, and if she is harmed again in any way, the perpetrator shall have to answer to me. I wish I could say that I would fight fairly, but I know that would go against your Slytherin traditions. So, I shall give back measure for measure. You have now been warned," she said imperiously.

Avery had a slight smile on his face as he remained silent. At last, he bellowed, "All you lot get back into the common room, and take these berks with you!" He turned to face Hermione and sheathed his wand. Hermione was wary of his move.

"Please," he said silkily. "You have proven yourself more than just a mere Mudblood. Your actions warrant respect. I would not dream of hexing you unless you were in full awareness of it. However, we have no quarrel, you and I. I am sure we can come to some sort of *agreement*," he said smoothly.

"Fine," Hermione replied. "However, I wish for Severus Snape to be a witness. Also, I have words for him."

"Very well," he said. "Please, sit here."

Hermione watched as he conjured up a plush seat for her to sit upon next to the common room door. She sat as he went inside briefly and returned with Snape. The three of them sat down in order to lay out the terms of the agreement, and Hermione began to speak.

"Mary MacDonald is off limits," she said simply. "She has been traumatized and for no better reason than because she could be easy prey. If it is not respected, I promise the retaliation will be brought back to you in spades."

"All right," Avery conceded. "I shall speak with my Slytherins. Now, it is my turn. Hermione, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, Hermione Granger."

"Ah, Hermione. Is it true that you are an orphan?" he asked pointedly.

"What are you on about?" she asked suspiciously.

Avery clasped his hands together. "Come now, Hermione, we were doing so well! I am only curious to know about your heritage, your background. Severus has told me you are an extremely powerful witch."

Hermione remained silent.

Avery smirked. "Of course, it would be the height of bad manners for you to admit it." He studied her face and said, "I hear you are an orphan, that you have absolutely no idea concerning your blood status."

"You have done your research well," she said non-committally.

Avery smiled maliciously. "I have a feeling you should have been in Slytherin, Hermione," he mused.

"That's interesting," replied Hermione. "The Sorting Hat had quite a time with me. It was torn between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, but then it made a strange observation about what it called my 'Slytherin tendencies.'"

"Oh, really?" Avery said with unadulterated fascination. "What might those tendencies be?" he asked.

Hermione smirked. "Oh, I have a bit of larceny in my blood. I have no issue with bending the rules if it's for a good cause."

"How utterly boring!" Avery said dispassionately.

"Not if you count yourself as being a good cause," she replied quickly.

Avery laughed. "I do like you, Miss Granger. I shall call you Miss Granger. You have my word that the Mudblood MacDonald will be left alone from this day until her graduation. After that, I cannot give you any more guarantees," he said regretfully, for which Hermione strongly doubted the sincerity.

"Agreed," she said. "I shall endeavor to make sure Mary receives nothing but the best in defensive training. I am, after all, about fair play."

She stared at him fiercely and then said, "I require a moment with Snape, if you don't mind."

Avery stood, and Hermione and Snape followed suit. "That's quite all right if it is with you, Severus. Good evening, Miss Granger," he said with a curt bow.

After he had left, Snape turned and glowered at her. "You are either the maddest or bravest witch I have ever seen!" he said angrily. "What the hell was all that about?"

Hermione stepped closer to his face. "I want to know what the hell you were doing in the library letting those animals humiliate Mary!" she hissed.

He glanced around him nervously. "I did what I could. You don't understand. I can only do so much!" he whispered.

Hermione shook her head. "I just don't know, Snape. This is going to get back to Lily...you know that!"

"I know," he replied. "It's all I can do to protect her. I think that is the only thing Potter and his lot have in common with me: keeping Lily safe."

Hermione smirked. "And the irony of it all is that they think she needs saving from you," she said.

"Well, I guess after today, Potter will have more to poison Lily's mind against me," he said bitterly.

"I can't deny that," she replied. "I wish it were not so. However, you are doing a very good job of helping Potter with his cause," she said wryly.

"You can't possibly understand, Granger!" he snapped.

"Oh, can't I?" she sneered. "I know what it's like to be put upon. I know what it's like to be rejected not only by people in other houses, but also by those in my own! You could be true to yourself, reject their creeds, pure-blood mania, and join me!"

"I would be slaughtered in my sleep, Granger, and then where would Lily be? I have to do this for her!" he said desperately.

"You really are up the creek, aren't you?" Hermione said shocked at the realization.

Snape snorted. "*That* would be an understatement. I am not my own person, Granger...haven't been for years. The day Lily came into my life, it all became about her. I love her," he said simply.

"Snape, you are a fish, and she's a bird. Where will you live?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he said as he walked away.

LACARNE INFLAMARE - a spell used by Hermione to set Snape's robes on fire in SS. It is not used in the book but in the movie. I decided to use it here since I knew Hermione knew how to cast such a powerful and impressive disarming spell.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 74

Severus and Lily take their relationship to the next level, only for things to begin crumbling once Severus is attacked by Remus and is saved by James.

After the Christmas holidays, everything came out about what had happened to Mary MacDonald. Lily was furious! She refused to speak to Snape for two whole months. Hermione thought Lily was being extremely cruel and tried to reason with her. Lily, though, was stubborn as an ox. She made it perfectly clear that she wanted Snape to suffer for the choices he had made.

With Lily being on the outs with Snape, it meant that Hermione had to be on the outs as well. Hermione had to meet with him secretly to reassure him that Lily hadn't gone off and started dating Potter or was going to hate him forever. Hermione reassured him that he just had to wait it out, and she would come around.

In the meantime, Lily remained as carefree and happy as ever. She had her group of friends, but Hermione remained her favorite. When Valentine's Day came around, she refused to even accept the chocolate Snape bought for her every year. He was devastated. Lily had no guilt whatsoever for cutting him off. Instead, she said she wanted to spend the holiday with Hermione. It had been a while since they had been intimate, but Hermione knew she was desperately missing the adoration she had always counted on from Snape.

It was a difficult night. Hermione stole glances at Snape and tried to reassure him. Later, Hermione slipped away from Lily for a bit and spoke with Snape alone.

"I know you are about to have kittens, but trust me, Snape, she's not interested in anyone else. In fact, I think she's really missing you!" she said reassuringly.

She rubbed his arm as he tried to gain composure. "Will you be with her tonight, Granger?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, Snape. I will be with her all night. It's going to be a girls' night, and I promise, I will try to get her to warm up towards you, okay?"

"All right," he muttered.

He looked so dejected and sad. Hermione wanted to tell him something to give him hope, but she couldn't build up something she didn't know would happen. She wished she could tell him that Lily wanted him to be the first to touch her or something to lift his mood, but she couldn't.

"I promise, I'll watch over her and make sure Potter stays away," she said with a smile.

"Thanks, Granger," he said stiffly. "You are a nice person."

"Well, thanks, Snape!" she said a little flirty.

A look crossed his face, and his mood became dark again.

"Hermione!" Hermione and Snape both turned to face a shocked and upset Lily. "What are you two doing?" she demanded.

Hermione recovered quickly and went to Lily's side. "Lily, give him a chance, he's so sad. He misses you!"

Lily gave an apologetic smile. "Don't wait up for me, love," she said softly.

That evening, Mary had gone off with Peter somewhere, and Lily was with Snape, so Hermione had the room to herself. She wasn't in any mood to go to bed soon, so she took a walk. She was just returning to Gryffindor tower when she heard heated voices.

"I can't believe that bastard! You're not going to let that slimy git get away with it are you?" Hermione heard a voice say. She walked cautiously forward and saw Sirius Black and James Potter in a heated discussion.

She walked up to them slowly, and they turned, both looking guilty.

"What's going on?" she asked nonchalantly.

"None of your business...*traitor!*" Sirius growled.

Hermione set her jaw and glared at him. "Would you care to qualify that statement?" she asked testily.

James put his hand on Sirius' chest. "No, mate, just let it go!" he said.

"NO!" he shouted. "What kind of Gryffindor are you anyway? You practically threw Lily and Snivellus together tonight!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sirius! You know they are friends. They had a falling out, and now they are making up!"

"You mean making IT!" he retorted.

Hermione slapped him hard across the face. "You have a dirty mind!" She stalked past them and went up to her room.

She fumed for a long time and then finally got ready for bed. She was worn out and exhausted. Lily came in just as she was settling down.

Hermione bolted upright. "Well?" she asked breathlessly.

Lily was blushing. She practically ran to Hermione's bed and began to gush.

"Oh, Hermione, it was wonderful. Severus was just incredible! He is so talented." She giggled. "He was so excited that he nearly came in his pants when I took off my bra!"

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Did you have sex with him?" she breathed.

"No, we just fooled around. Oh, Hermione, the things he did with his tongue! He was just like I thought he would be." Her eyes were bright as she got changed for bed.

"Hermione, he gave me a love bite on my breast!" she said exasperatedly.

Hermione's eyebrows almost went up into her hairline. She started to laugh uncontrollably. Lily started laughing too. Hermione's eyes were watering. "I-I take it he's a breast man?" she asked as she gulped for air.

Lily giggled.

"Was he a good kisser?" Hermione asked.

"I think so," Lily said. "However, I only have you to compare him to!" She laughed. "He was so reverent, as if he was worshiping me. His touch was so delicate."

She finished dressing and lay down languidly on her bed. "Oh, Hermione, he is so huge! I was right about his nose." She stopped talking and looked at Hermione guiltily. "I probably shouldn't have said that. I mean, I should keep that private, shouldn't I?"

Hermione was nervous. "Well, I don't know. I know girls talk about their men, but Snape is so paranoid about people making fun of him, perhaps you shouldn't unless he tells you it's okay."

Lily barked out a laugh. "Fat chance!"

She turned and looked at Hermione again seriously. "Now, what has been going on with Remus?" Lily asked slyly, drawing Hermione out of her thoughts. "I saw him looking at you tonight! I swear, Hermione, you are going to be as big chested as I am! Remus looked at you like he would love nothing better than to tear your dress off!"

Yeah, and devour me like a wolf! Hermione thought facetiously.

Hermione thought of the grown man on the Hogwarts Express battling that Dementor, and she felt funny inside. "I don't think so, Lily," she whispered. "Remus isn't my type."

"Who is your type? Sirius Black?" she teased her again.

"I think not!" Hermione said heatedly.

"Oohh! Do I detect a flicker of something? Sirius has got you all hot and bothered, hasn't he?" she prodded.

"No," Hermione said calmly, and she lay down on her bed. "He and I just had words tonight, is all."

"What about?" she asked concerned.

"Nothing... everything... look, Sirius and I don't get on together is all," Hermione answered.

Hermione lay in bed for a long time, thinking about Snape and Lily. What had happened? Had she inadvertently tampered with time? What if Lily marries him? Will there be no Harry Potter? Hermione felt very, very worried and, for the first time, was afraid for her true future.

Spring came and with it a change that disturbed everything that had been going along calmly. Lily and Snape were not together "officially," but they were physically. It seemed Lily was returning to the common room every night with a dreamy look on her face. Hermione felt guilty. She knew who had put that look on her face and how he did it. When the end of April came around, Lily told Hermione she and Snape still had not had sex, but she was thinking about letting him.

"He asks me, Hermione. It's so cute; he almost has a whine in his tone. I know it's cruel. It must be awful being a boy. Their stiffies get so hard, and it seems painful."

Hermione's face was practically purple. She didn't know anything about penises. She remembered the only time she ever had a close encounter with a penis, and it had been horrific. Hermione wondered if she would ever find anyone she'd fancy.

Remus had come around, talking and trying to get close to her. He was really nice, but she just didn't feel right. She couldn't get the picture of the grown-up Remus Lupin out of her head. She had finally told him she just didn't fancy him, but that she wanted him to be her friend.

"Is there someone else you fancy, Hermione?" he had asked timidly.

"No, Remus," Hermione had said as she sighed. "I wish I felt what I want to feel. I want someone of my own; I just haven't felt the attraction."

"Well, maybe, you might feel differently later, Hermione. Just don't forget me and write me off forever, okay?" he had asked shyly.

"Okay, Remus. I won't say 'no' for forever, just right now."

He had walked away happy and with a spring in his step. Hermione had wondered if she had made a huge mistake by capitulating and giving him hope.

Soon after Lily and Severus started their relationship, it seemed everything was going wrong. There was a lot of tension in the air, and the fighting between Snape and the Marauders was getting quite bad. Every time Hermione looked at James, he seemed to be following either Lily or Snape with his eyes. He wasn't very good at hiding his jealousy.

One morning, Lily, Hermione, and Mary went down to the Great Hall for breakfast, and all over the room were pictures of Snape in the form of Wanted Posters.

Lily and Hermione looked at one of them, and it said,

Severus Snape: Wanted for Excessive Wanking

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head slowly as the entire hall burst into laughter. When Snape came in, he took one look at the posters, and without blinking, he pointed his wand at James Potter and blasted him fifteen feet away from where he stood, crashing him into a far wall, with a brilliantly executed Stupefy.

Lily was furious at James and Sirius, and Hermione was angry with Lupin for not sticking up for Snape and at the same time furious at the Slytherins for not coming to Snape's aid.

Then it happened.

For a long time now, Snape had his suspicions about Remus being a werewolf. Lily knew about it and so did Hermione. Lily had never really taken Snape's accusation seriously until one night the common room was abuzz with a rumor that Sirius Black tried to kill Severus Snape and that James Potter tried to stop him.

Mary MacDonald swore up and down it was the truth, that Peter had told her the whole story. There was some bloodthirsty animal that had wandered its way onto the Hogwarts grounds from the Forbidden Forest, and Sirius knew about it and lured Snape there get him killed by the animal. It was only because James risked his life to save Snape that he was even alive!

Lily nearly went nearly blind with anger. Hermione was weak with shock. *This must have been what Harry said first year about Snape owing his father a life debt!* Hermione went straight to the infirmary first thing in the morning to see Snape. He was white with fear and rage all at once.

"Where is Lily?" he demanded.

"She's with James and Sirius. I don't know if there will be anything left of Sirius to bury if Lily has her way," she joked.

"What about Potter?" he asked angrily.

Hermione blinked in confusion and shock. "I-I don't know! We were told James was the one who saved your life. Lily was so grateful," she answered.

Snape was shaking with rage. Hermione was frightened. "Snape, please, calm down!" she begged. She saw a twitch near his mouth. She knew that twitch. She'd seen him twitch like that whenever he got really angry with Harry. *Oh my! It's starting...and I had nothing to do with it! This is all Sirius' doing!*

She watched Snape as thick tears started to roll down his face. He turned from Hermione, curled up into a ball, and sobbed.

Hermione pulled the curtain closed around them and went to Snape's side. She knelt on the floor as she had when she'd stayed with him over the summer and he'd had his night terrors. She stroked his hair and forehead and told him it was all going to be all right. Then something happened that was so strange, she knew things had changed between she and the boy who would become her Potions master forever.

"I can't lose her, Hermione. I love her," he cried.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Oh, I know you do, I know. She's been so happy, S-Severus. She walks into the common room, and her face is so bright and dreamy...I know it's you that makes her feel that way. She told me."

"Really, Hermione?" he whispered. "Do I really make her happy?"

"For a long time now, Lily has thought long and hard about going to this next step with you. She said she always thought it should be you. She even once said that she'd probably marry you, and then she and I would be best girlfriends, I'd get married, and then we'd raise our kids together," she said excitedly.

"Don't lie to me, Hermione. Please," he begged.

"I wouldn't lie to you. I swear, she said those things."

He released a breath. "Lily will be mine!" he said breathlessly. Hermione saw a hard glint in his eye. It frightened her.

"You'd best go, Hermione. I expect Lily will be here soon," he said importantly.

"All right, Severus," she whispered as she left him.

Hermione never really heard the fight, just raised voices. She saw Lily's hands gesticulating in the air, verbally thrashing Severus as they stood on the hill looking over Hagrid's hut. Then he was shouting at her. It ended with a calming of voices and a dream-like state that came over Severus' face. However, Lily was far from happy.

Later that night, Lily came back into the common room and went right up to their room. Hermione followed her, and she said, "I'm really not in the mood, Hermione."

Hermione ignored her words. "I saw you and Snape arguing tonight, Lily. Please talk to me," she begged.

Lily turned around and said, "I can't believe this! I thought he would change, you know? I thought he loved me! I confronted him about what Mulciber did to Mary, and you know what he said? 'It was just a bit of fun, like a joke or something!' I said, 'Severus, it is Dark magic,' and he just couldn't see past it!"

Hermione was reaching her limit. Lily just didn't see the bigger picture. She was one of the lucky ones. She didn't know about Laura Danbary in Ravenclaw or Sylvie Johnson of Hufflepuff. Those were the real horror stories. Severus kept her coddled and petted. Now, she was lashing out at her very own protector!

"Lily," she said calmly. "There are things that you don't know. Things that you may not understand because you don't see the big picture."

Lily looked at her coldly. "Oh, I see the big picture all right. You want to make excuses for Severus too. Why? He's never liked you."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Lily, please don't ruin your friendship with Snape over this. Believe me, things are not always what they appear to be!"

Lily was far too angry to listen. "It's not so hard for James and Sirius, though, is it? I don't see them going around casting Dark magic on people or approving of those who do!" she yelled.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "Perhaps, Lily, it is because they don't have it as difficult as Snape does. Gryffindors accept James and Sirius. They have a home here. Snape doesn't have a home! You said it yourself a long time ago that he had no one, just you. It's still true. What do you think would happen to him if he just openly sided with you, James, and Sirius? Forget the fact that Sirius is so blind that he can't even comprehend seeing anything remotely good in Snape. The fact remains that if Snape were to express his true feelings, he probably would be beaten within an inch of his life, and then the minute he walked out of Hogwarts, he would be killed on sight. Don't you see, Lily? There are lines being drawn. You've heard about Lord Voldemort. You know he is recruiting. Snape has to be very careful, especially cautious since he is just a half-blood himself."

Lily calmed down after that and sat on her bed. Mary came inside, and Hermione waved her hand to let them be alone. Hermione sat next to Lily and took her hand in hers. Lily turned to Hermione and whispered, "What am I going to do?" she whispered.

Hermione held her hand tightly in hers and said, "You are going to go home this summer and get away from all this. You are going to talk to Snape when you can, and you are going to listen and trust him. He loves you, Lily."

"I just don't know if it's enough, Hermione," she said softly.

Hermione sighed. *I know, Lily, I know.*

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 74

After Hermione's fourth year ends, she spends another summer between Lily's house and Spinner's End. Things begin to shift slowly, and Hermione realizes Lily isn't the only Muggle-born Severus wants to protect.

A/N: Again, my thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for all their hard work!

Summer was arriving, and Dumbledore had a decision to make. Where was Hermione Granger going to stay for the summer? Staying with the Evanses was fine; however, there still was the issue of the three weeks in July when the family went on holiday. According to the Auror Department, Mr. Snape had been put in jail for assault and battery on his wife and son. It had been one of so many reports that the police finally had enough of Tobias Snape. He was serving a five-year prison sentence for battery

and child abuse. At least, for the rest of Hermione and Severus' school years, there would be no Tobias Snape to darken their days.

When Dumbledore asked Hermione about keeping the same holiday schedule as last year, Hermione said she was fine with the arrangement. She had kept a correspondence with Mrs. Snape and was looking forward to seeing her. Eileen Snape loved her job at the Ministry, and it brought in just enough money to get by. It was still a hard life, but she was finally free of her abusive Muggle husband. She was her own person again.

When Lily and Hermione arrived at the Evanses, Hermione found things to be just as calm and happy as the home she had stayed in the summer before. Mr. and Mrs. Evans were delighted to have Hermione back and made her feel very welcome. There was only one fly in the ointment: Petunia.

Petunia had never hidden the fact that she hated Hermione. She was seventeen now and was dating a rather rotund and self-important young man named Vernon. She told her parents that first night Hermione and Lily were there that she had accepted an offer to go with Vernon and his family to Scotland for the summer. His family had a nice summer cottage there, and the hunting, fishing and riding were excellent. She was very cool about it all, and it seemed all settled. Hermione felt very uncomfortable as the family began to row.

"Petunia, you mean to say that your last year before you go off to University, you want to spend it away from us?" Mrs. Evans nearly shouted. "This is our last vacation as a family! I was really hoping that..."

"...Hoping what, Mum? Hoping that Lily and I would finally 'make nice' so you all can pretend we're one big happy family? No thanks. Besides, you've already got your replacement!" Petunia gave a scathing look in Hermione's direction.

"I say, Tuney, that's just not on!" shouted Lily. "Hermione has been nothing but nice to you!"

"I don't care!" she shrieked. "I'm sick to death of not being the 'good daughter!' It's not my fault that Lily is a witch and I'm not! I refuse to stay in this house another minute. I'm going to call Vernon and have his parents come round to collect me. I'm done with the lot of you!" She threw down her napkin and ran out of the dining room.

Hermione rubbed her forehead. *Good Lord, what next?* she thought.

After Mr. and Mrs. Evans went to go talk to Petunia, Lily sat down and began to cry. Hermione put her arm around her, and Lily flung herself into her arms.

"She's just a jealous, spiteful cow! She's always been jealous of anyone who has meant anything to me! First Severus and now you! Well, Hermione, if you want to come with us to the Continent, you can! No Spinner's End for you!" she said happily.

"Thanks, Lily," Hermione said. "But I think Petunia may eventually change her mind. Besides, I really am looking forward to Spinner's End this year."

"Why?" Lily asked affronted.

"Well, I've been keeping up writing Snape's mum. She's done so well for herself now that her husband's in prison, and she's agreed to teach me some spells! You know what an opportunity it would be, seeing that neither of us have Wizarding parents...it's like a whole other world!"

"How do you think you and Severus will get on together?" she asked timidly.

Hermione sighed. "Oh, I suspect as we did last year, just without the drama. He has his little secret projects and whatnot. He likes his privacy. I expect I shan't see much of him, really. Believe me, Lily, we're only friends because of you!" She laughed.

Lily's face relaxed, and she finished her meal. The rowing continued upstairs, but Lily seemed not to mind so much anymore. Hermione ate what she could, but couldn't help wonder if what she said were true. Were she and Severus friends only for Lily's sake?

Lily was furious. For the last two weeks, Severus had not been seen or heard of. Hermione went down to see Mrs. Snape, and she welcomed the girl with open arms and let her in. The house was bright and cheery. Mrs. Snape also had a lovely pink in her cheeks that proved she was healthy and happy. She ushered the young witch into the kitchen, and to Hermione's great relief, it no longer contained the dreaded table where Severus' father had tried to rape her. She said nothing, but sat down graciously at the new table and watched Mrs. Snape prepare the tea.

"I'm so sorry for my son's lack of manners, Hermione. He has been very busy with work."

"Work?" Hermione parroted. She was shocked. Lily had said nothing about Severus taking a job.

"Oh, yes. He is living over with a very wealthy family named Malfoy. The father, Abraxas, is on the Board of Governors, but he is very sick. Something about Dragon Pox. Anyway, Severus is visiting at the Manor in Wiltshire. But, don't you worry! Severus promised he would be back in time to stay and visit with you in July!"

Hermione was very concerned about how Lily was going to take the news. After all, she was accustomed to a certain kind of treatment from Severus. If she knew he was staying with that Muggle-hater Lucius Malfoy, she would blow a gasket! Hermione was torn. What was she going to do? She decided to lie. Let Severus tell her the truth when he came back. Yes, that was what she would do.

Later that night, after everyone went to bed, Lily sat at her vanity, brushing her hair, deep in concentration.

"I just can't believe I won't see him for an entire month!" she pouted. "How could he do that without even telling me?"

"Well, you'll have to ask him that, Lily. Perhaps that wasn't his idea, you know. His mum is alone now, and she could use the money. You know how proud he is," Hermione reminded her.

Lily set her brush down and turned down her side of the bed. "Don't have to tell me twice," she muttered softly to herself. She was quiet for a while and said sadly, "I can't believe Tuney left the way she did." She turned around to face Hermione and stroked her face. "You're all I got left, Hermione. Promise me you won't abandon me, ever!"

Hermione hugged the redhead as she snuggled into her chest. "I can't promise that, Lily. Sometimes things happen and we have no choice in the matter. I could die tomorrow, and while I wouldn't be abandoning you, it may feel like it," she whispered. "It's all a matter of perception. I can promise you this, Lily; I will never deliberately hurt you. And if I ever do, I will make it up to you, somehow."

Lily reached up and kissed Hermione on the lips. "Please, Hermione, I need to be close to you," she whispered.

Hermione let Lily kiss her. Hermione had not expected more than a brief encounter with the redhead, but she found herself on the receiving end of Lily's newfound carnal talents.

She was puzzled. Hermione had been sure that these interludes with Lily were now over, now that she and Severus had experimented. Lily told her she wanted to know how another girl would react to what Severus did to her, so Hermione went ahead, but kept things reigned in a bit. She wasn't about to let Lily dictate the explorations of her budding sexuality.

In all honesty, Hermione rather liked the feelings Lily brought out in her. The memory of Mr. Snape, with his rough hands, beer breath and rough handling of her body made

her want to experience something that would not bring those thoughts back. Lily's white skin and delicate touches were soothing and light. Hermione knew this was just a healthy exploration for the both of them. Lily's heart was with Severus.

The next month, Lily and Hermione spent their days together, talking, playing, kissing and having fun in the town. Hermione knew it was all short lived. Once Severus returned and Lily came back from France, it would all be over. August would find Lily and Severus alone at last, and Hermione was sure that by the end of the summer, Lily would no longer be a virgin even in the technical sense of the word.

Lily still teased her from time to time about Remus. "He's such a nice bloke!" she'd say. Hermione had to admit that she found herself thinking more and more about the man, Professor Lupin, than the boy, Remus. She thought of how competent and calm he was, helping Harry after that dementor attack. She thought of his mustache, sandy brown hair, and sedate eyes. She remembered the sound of his voice, how smooth and soothing it sounded. There was an attraction, but if she were really attracted, why could she not feel anything for the boy who would one day become that man? It puzzled her.

She began to fantasize it was Professor Lupin who was doing the things Lily did to her. That it was his tongue, his lips and his hands. She needed more though, she wanted to experience a man inside of her, taking her and possessing her. She was sure Lily felt the same and thought of Severus doing all the things Hermione did. They never spoke on it. Not once. Hermione often wondered how Lily could compartmentalize her feelings like that.

Severus came back from the Malfoys' with new black robes. He was rather striking. Unfortunately, he came the day the Evanses were leaving. A brief snog behind the garage was all they could do before Lily had to leave. She cried and cried while Snape looked as if his heart was being ripped in two.

"Please take care of him, Hermione!" whispered Lily.

"I will, we will both miss you!" Hermione replied sadly.

"Me too, love you, Hermione!" she called out as her parents began to back away.

"I love you, too!" answered Hermione as she waved goodbye.

Hermione and Severus waited until the car was out of sight. "Ready, Hermione?" he asked.

"Yes, Severus," she answered.

The days flew by, and they were truly lovely days. Hermione spent a great deal of time with Eileen. She asked Hermione when she came to stay to call her by her Christian name. Hermione was touched. She was eager to learn various household and cooking spells. Eileen said Hermione was a natural and praised her accomplishments. Sometimes, Severus would invite Hermione to the basement where he brewed and experimented.

"You know that besides Lily and me, you are the best at Potions in our class," he said out of the blue one day as she helped him chop some ingredients for a potion he was making.

"Whoever was your teacher before you came to Hogwarts must have been very good," he mused.

"What makes you say that, Severus?" she asked. "Muggles don't have Potions classes."

"Well, I assume you took some sort of science course...the way you think before you act, the deliberation you use. The precise movement, that isn't normally something you are just born with; you are taught that. I noticed from the start, when you first came to Hogwarts. You have always been a fair hand with potions. So, whoever your teacher was, he or she was very good," he said.

"It was a 'he,'" Hermione said softly.

"What was his name?" Severus asked.

"Oh, Pierce. Mr. Pierce," Hermione thought quickly going back to her actual Muggle school days.

"What was he like?" Severus asked.

"He was exacting, exasperating, infuriating and overall was a very rude and disagreeable person," she replied, trying hard not to laugh. *After all, how many chances will I have to tell Professor Snape what I think of him to his face? Even if it is his younger self?* she thought.

"And you still managed to retain knowledge? I'm shocked. He sounds like he was a real git!"

Hermione laughed. "He was a git. However, he was brilliant, dedicated to his craft, and he took 'no cheek,' as he would put it. I feared him, but I respected his knowledge. He pushed me to learn. True, he could have been nicer, but he was what he was," she said with a smile.

Severus laughed. "No cheek, indeed!"

Hermione looked over at Severus. She smiled at the freedom in his face. How could this boy become so cold and cruel in later life? Maybe it will be different now; perhaps she might have made a change. She felt cold inside. Lily had to marry James, and his heart would be broken. He would need her. He would need her desperately then. But how would he handle knowing she wasn't even supposed to be here? Perhaps that was why he didn't like her back in her real life! Hermione forced the worry into the back of her mind and focused on the work in front of her. She couldn't afford to have him thinking anything was amiss.

They spent the rest of their time collecting ingredients for his stores that he bottled to keep fresh while away at school. It had been nearly impossible to do so while his father had been around, but now he could do as he wished. Hermione was so proud of him and his mum.

Hermione realized towards the end of her stay that Severus had stopped having nightmares. She was relieved that he was opening up to her so freely. The last day, before Lily's return, they lay down together in the park and watched the clouds as they floated by slowly.

"Hermione?" Severus asked suddenly. "Would you be my friend if Lily were to ever leave me?" he asked.

Hermione felt a strange sense of foreboding. "I won't forsake you, Severus. I will always be your friend. Even if times come where we may not be able to show our friendship and have to hide it, I shall always be your friend. I promise," she swore.

Severus turned his head and said, "Hermione, I was with the Dark Lord this summer."

Hermione sat up. "The 'Dark Lord?'" she asked.

"Well, that is what Tom wants us to call him. I have only known him as Tom Riddle, but after I met him, I was instructed to call him the Dark Lord."

"Severus, why?" she asked.

"I had to, Hermione. The pressures are so great. He's growing so powerful. I have to be in the loop so I can protect Lily," he insisted. "Besides, I have you to look after too now," he added shyly as he lay back to gaze up at the sky.

"I can take care of myself, Severus," Hermione said uncomfortably.

He searched out her eyes. "Maybe I want to, Hermione," he whispered.

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione. "Is it worth it?" she asked.

"I think so. Besides, now that I will have more power behind me, Potter and Black will think twice before messing with me again!" he said bitterly.

Now it truly begins, Hermione thought desperately.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 74

Lily and Hermione's relationship begins to strain because of Severus while Severus and Hermione's relationship is tested, and they come through closer than ever.

A/N: All hail and praise to luvsev and WriterMerrin, the super betas!!

It was 1975, and Hermione, Lily, and Severus were starting their fifth year. Obsessed with the coming O.W.L.s, Hermione was frazzled from the very start of her fifth year.

They were the three top students, and it was getting rather competitive. Lily decided that they should spend as much time together as they could to study. Then whoever got the top spot, got the top spot. Hermione agreed. They were too close to let grades come between them.

Lily had not confided in Hermione about the last part of the summer, which was strange. She usually was so open about her relationship with Severus, especially when it came to sex. However, she was becoming more withdrawn and less open with her. Hermione wondered if Lily was trying to slowly end their intimate friendship. Lily didn't invite her into her bed anymore, not that Hermione minded. She felt she was too old now to be messing about that way. She liked boys and had known it for a while. The problem was there just was not one boy she liked in particular!

Every time Hermione turned around, James and Sirius were fighting with Severus. The nervous tic that had started last year had now spread throughout his body. He was constantly on full alert. At any given moment, the Marauders would jump out, wands drawn, ready for a fight. Lily seemed to be as equally furious with both parties, which Hermione thought was cruel. She tried to force the redhead to see reason, but one day, Lily took Hermione by the hand and sat out of the way during their free hour. Lily kept shushing her whenever she tried to ask why she had dragged her outside. Finally, Hermione saw James and Sirius walking along, laughing and joking. Suddenly, they were attacked from behind, blasted with a Bat-Bogey Hex. Lily was shaking her head in exasperation. Hermione gasped as she saw Severus like a cobra, grinning malevolently at his prey. He slipped away before he could be caught.

"See?" Lily said smugly. "Now you know why I have no sympathy for either side! They both do it to each other. I don't know why, perhaps because they are boys. At any rate, I won't give Severus a lick of sympathy. He deserves what he gets!"

Hermione's mouth gaped open. "You can't be serious!" she said desperately. "Haven't you noticed his gait? He's twitching all the time! It just not right! It's him against at least two, sometimes three if Peter jumps in the mix!"

Lily pursed her lips angrily before shouting, "Do you even hear yourself, Hermione Granger? You just saw Severus attack TWO boys simultaneously! He is a very powerful wizard. Sometimes he needs to be kept in check. Obviously, he can handle it." She shook her head. "Sometimes I just don't get you, Hermione. You are so logical, but when it comes to Severus, it's like you can't help but to feel sorry for him!" she said.

Hermione blinked her eyes and took a step back. "I can't believe what I'm hearing, Lily! I thought you loved Severus?" she said, shocked.

Lily's green eyes flashed in anger. "I do love Severus, Hermione! I've been his best friend and have loved him longer than anyone else here! It's just that I see him for who he is, not what I hope for him to be. I think you have the problem seeing things straight, Hermione."

She tried to push past Hermione, but Hermione wasn't going to let her get away without a piece of her mind.

She grabbed Lily's arm and said, "If it's so damn clear to you about everything, then why is it that you have conveniently forgotten how James and Sirius treated Severus when they first met him? They had decided a long time ago that Severus is no good and never will be!"

She let go of Lily's arm and continued her tirade. "I just don't get it, Lily! Sirius and James have never been nice to me. They constantly make fools of themselves just to impress you and give hell to Severus every chance they get! Maybe I'm a bit more sympathetic to Severus, but it's only because I know only too well what it's like to be treated as he is!"

This time it was Hermione to stalk away in anger. Just when she thought she was alone, Lily came up behind her.

"You called him Severus," she said oddly.

"So?" Hermione asked, confused.

"You've never called him anything other than 'Snape.' Is there something going on between the two of you?" she demanded suspiciously.

"No!" Hermione yelled. "I've just known him long enough to have made a friendship with him, is all!"

Lily looked at her strangely. Then her face relaxed. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I've been terrible to you." She wrapped her arms around her friend and gave her a tight embrace.

"I've just been so wrapped up in things that I've not given you any attention. I suppose it's only natural that you and Severus would find friendship, you both are so alike, you know," she said thoughtfully.

Hermione turned and looked at Lily carefully. "I don't want to pry, really I don't. It's just that you and I haven't talked about what's been going on with Severus. Did you sleep with him last summer? Are you together?"

"Oh, Hermione, that's so nice you've been thinking of me," she said sweetly. "Come," she said, putting her arm in Hermione's. "Let's get to class. Later we can talk more in detail after curfew. I've not paid any attention to you in a while. I've been neglectful."

Lily's eyes glittered. "Hermione, I couldn't do it. I wasn't ready. I don't know how I feel. It's just that even though I love him as a friend, I'm not sure if we are really meant to be together."

Hermione's heart plummeted. She should be happy. After all, Lily wasn't supposed to marry Severus; she was supposed to marry James Potter. However, she didn't feel good about it. She felt horrible.

That evening, Hermione talked with Lily in her bed. "Hermione, I've been talking with James Potter a little," she admitted.

"Really?" asked Hermione, trying to look shocked.

Lily licked her lips and took a deep breath. "Hermione, it's just been a long time coming now. I care about Severus, but he is getting so wrapped up with those guys in his house. I don't think I ever reached him after we fought about what Mulciber did to Mary. He makes so many excuses for their deplorable behavior. Whenever I talk to him about it, he just wants to turn it back onto James and Sirius. I just think he and I are moving in separate directions," she explained.

"Is that what you both were discussing last summer?" Hermione asked softly.

"Partly. I wanted him to make a choice. If we were going to take that next step and have sex, I needed to know if he was going to formally make a decision to be by my side and not be with them any longer!" Lily looked hurt and affronted.

Hermione studied her friend. She had been positively sure Severus would have promised her the sun, moon, and stars to keep her. It was so ironic! She didn't realize everything he was already doing to help her and keep her safe. She wouldn't believe it if he told her. Or even if she did, she'd say it was a coward's way. Hermione wanted to laugh. *When did I start becoming a Slytherin?*

Lily's emerald eyes were awash with tears. "Hermione, I'm losing him. James saw me crying the other day and told me Severus wasn't worth my tears. He told me that Severus calls others girls Mudbloods. *Mudbloods*, Hermione! That's you, me, Mary, Laura, Sylvie...all the rest! I just can't believe this is happening!" she said desperately.

Hermione hugged Lily. "Please, remember things are not always what they seem, Lily! Severus loves you. He loves you more than his own life!" she said fiercely.

Lily jerked free from Hermione's embrace. "Then why won't he prove it? Why won't he step over and join the Gryffindors against Voldemort?"

Hermione sighed. "Lily, we've been over this! Severus is in Slytherin house. He doesn't have the freedom to do as he pleases. You have to trust him!"

"I don't know, Hermione. I just don't know anymore," she said sadly as she hung her head.

They were quiet then, and suddenly Lily's lips were on Hermione's, urging her to open her mouth. Hermione broke away from her kiss.

"It's late, I'd best go to sleep," muttered Hermione.

Lily looked so dejected and sad as Hermione left her bed. Hermione felt bad, they had never discussed that aspect of their relationship, and she didn't know how to go about it now. It seemed strange now with all the changes Lily was experiencing. Hermione thought it would be prudent to just stop it now in order for Lily to focus on her male relationships. After all, time was moving fast. It was going to be 1976 before they knew it, and Lily had only five years left to fall in love with James Potter, break Severus' heart, get married, give birth to Harry and die.

Hermione had to keep that in mind: Lily was going to die, and although Hermione wanted to change what she could, this must not.

As Valentine's Day neared, tensions were at their height. Lily had cooled things off considerably with Severus, although they were still friends. But Lily was starting to distance herself from Severus intentionally. He was saddened and heartsick. Hermione felt compelled to be there for him. After all, she had given her word that she would never desert him. During those evenings when Lily was gone, they would go to the library or up to the Astronomy Tower and study for their O.W.L.s, talk about Potions and Charms, and Severus would share with Hermione some new spells he had created.

"Here, Hermione, look at this!" he said excitedly. "I've been working really hard to make my own spells and make my potions better. Watch!"

All of a sudden, she was lifted up by her ankle and was dangling upside down. She was wearing a skirt, and she was screaming at him to let her down as her skimpy, pink knickers were in plain view. Why she had ever worn them was beyond her. She just had an urge to feel sexy, and these knickers were see-through. Severus could see everything, and on top of it, they didn't cover much area to begin with.

"Let me down, you prat!" she screeched as she watched his mouth go slack and his black eyes nearly jump out of their sockets.

He released her, and his cheeks were flaming red. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I didn't think about you not wearing trousers or jeans," he mumbled, afraid to look at her while he spoke.

"Severus Snape, that was low-down and immature! I'm rather humiliated now, so I think I'll be going off to bed!" She started to pack up her things, and Severus stopped her by grabbing her hands.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I really am. I wouldn't hurt you for the world! I hope you know that. I just wanted to show you what I'm going to do to Potter the next time he tries to hex me!" he said with a mad glint in his eye.

Hermione sat on the floor with Severus' hands still in her own. "Don't you think it's time to stop all of this foolishness?" she asked.

"No!" he shouted as he pulled his hands back from her. "I'm not blind, you know! I see what is going on. That bigheaded git, Potter, is trying to steal Lily from me! He fancies her! I told her last year, and she just blew it off like it was nothing. But I see how she looks at him sometimes."

He rubbed his eyes and ran his hand through his lanky, black hair. "I'm losing her, Hermione. I'm losing her, all because I won't do what she wants. She just doesn't get it that everything I do is for her well-being, her safety!"

Hermione watched helplessly as he began to cry. "I-I don't know how to live without her! If I lose her, I'll die inside, I know it! How can she defend him? He and Black, they hate me so much! They always have. How can she do this to me?" he asked furiously

Hermione took him in her arms and held him as he cried. This was getting desperate. Lily's breaking of Severus' heart might come sooner than expected. Hermione had no idea that what was going to happen just in a matter of months was going to change everything...forever.

The O.W.L.s helped a great deal to keep them all focused. Still, Severus and Lily managed to row every once in a while, and Hermione took it upon herself as peacekeeper of the group.

One day in early February, James Potter stopped Hermione on her way to the Great Hall for study period. At first she was suspicious and gripped her wand carefully, waiting for Sirius to jump out at her. She glanced around her nervously.

"Don't worry, Hermione. Sirius is already in the Great Hall. I really want to talk with you alone," he said.

Hermione couldn't help herself. He looked so much like Harry. It had been heart-breaking her first year in this timeline to see him. Many times she felt compelled to call out Harry's name to get his attention, but then she'd realize that he wasn't Harry. She looked into his warm hazel eyes, and that kept her steady. After all, Harry's eyes were just like Lily's: brilliant emerald green.

James took her by the arm and led her to the side in order to speak privately.

"Look, I know you and I haven't really gotten on together, but I do think you are a smart girl and all. I know you are best friends with Lily. I just want to know if she ever talks about me."

Hermione was not impressed. "No," she said coldly. "Lily has made it a point to not talk about your newfound relationship."

"I take it you don't approve?" he asked snidely.

"Why should I?" she snapped. "You have been nothing but a bigheaded git for the last two years! You don't respect Severus or me. Why should you expect a courtesy that you won't practice yourself?"

He looked cowed. "Gosh, Hermione, I'm sorry. There is just a lot of history between Snape and me. Look, I'll tell you the truth. I've already told Lily I've loved her since the first time I saw her. I knew she was the girl for me. She'd never given me a thought, just kept hanging about with Snape. I guess I've been jealous. I know I've been a huge prat at times, but I really love her, Hermione. I do. Can you please try to see if she'll consider going to the Valentine's ball with me? I've asked, and she said she'd think about it. I know she's gone with you the past two years. Could you help her decide?" he asked humbly.

"It's her decision, James," Hermione said simply. "I can't make her mind up for you. However, I will say this. Stop antagonizing Severus! That will make the biggest impression on her. Think about it, okay?"

He rumbled up his disheveled hair. "Okay," he mumbled. Then he turned and walked away.

"Helping the enemy?" a voice purred from behind her.

Hermione swung around and froze in shock as Severus came out of the shadows.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Trying to scare me to death?"

"I can't believe I trusted you, you filthy *Mudblood*! All this time, you've been trying to turn Lily against me so Potter can get his paws on her!" he spat.

Hermione knew this Severus Snape. He was talking like the professor she knew and feared.

She wanted to run away in terror, away from those black eyes that seemed to penetrate through her. But she summoned up the courage to stand up to him. She walked over and smacked him across the face.

"First of all, don't you ever...EVER call me a *Mudblood* again! Now, I realize you are angry and want to lash out, but that word is off-limits! It's dirty pool and too low for you, Severus Snape! I'll forgive you this one time, but ever call me that again, and all you will see of me is my back!" she yelled.

He hung his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I thought you were trying to help him!" he said anxiously.

Hermione hugged him and said, "Apology accepted. Just so you know he is trying to get Lily to accept his advances and is anxious for my help. However, I told him clearly it was up to him to do his own wooing! I also told him that ending this feud between the two of you would probably soften her up. So, I'll give you the same advantage, Severus. Leave James and Sirius alone," she warned.

He was silent and morose as they walked into the Great Hall. Hermione knew his heart was heavy and that he was hurting. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to stop the pain coming his way.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 74

The fateful day in June of 1976 did not change, and Hermione finds herself unable to stop the events from unfolding.

A/N: Thanks to my awesome betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin

Valentine's Day was a red-letter day for Hermione and her timeline. Lily did not accept James Potter's invitation as his date; however, she did dance with him, which was a triumph in the boy's mind and Hermione's as well. Lily also danced with Severus...much to Hermione's disappointment. The tension was thick and electric. Who would win Lily's hand?

In the meantime, Lily kept Hermione confused by her attempts to be close to her. Hermione would wake up at night with Lily snuggling against her. Sometimes, she would start kissing her, and before Hermione knew it, their nightgowns would be off, and they would be kissing, touching, and bringing the other to orgasm. They never spoke, just the gasping of Lily's voice could be heard as she whispered Hermione's name and the soft moans of Hermione as she climaxed over and over.

James Potter began a campaign to sweep Lily off her feet. He was quite the fool at times, doing ridiculous things to try and get her attention. He had stolen a Snitch and played with it constantly to draw attention to himself. He rumbled his hair often and swaggered, talking boastfully about his latest Quidditch moves whenever Lily was in view. He even began to hex people in front of her, just to show off his magical prowess. Hermione groaned inwardly at these ridiculous displays. Lily treated him like dirt. She was not impressed with his boasting and strutting. She had made her peace with Snape, and the three of them were back together, studying, talking, and hanging out like old times.

O.W.L.s were upon them, and the pressure was overwhelming. Hermione had worked out a studying timetable so they could work effectively and also have free time to let off steam and relax.

A couple of weeks before O.W.L.s were to begin, Severus finally got James with his *Levicorpus* spell, which shocked many people and gave him some respect amongst his fellow Slytherin brothers. All Hermione could do was stand back and shake her head. She felt there was a train crash coming their way, and she could do nothing but watch it happen and see who survived the wreckage.

One day, after a grueling Defense Against the Dark Arts examination, Lily dragged Hermione out to the lake to have a dip. They were joined by a number of other fifth-year girls. Soon they were lightly splashing each other with their feet and laughing heartily. Hermione stretched her arms and neck and caught Avery standing off alone, in the shadow under a grove of trees, smirking evilly. He caught Hermione's eye and beckoned her to come to him. Hermione felt compelled to join him.

She took out her feet and shook off the excess water. She started putting on her socks and shoes when Lily said, "Hey! Where are you going?"

Hermione didn't want Lily getting involved. She just made up an excuse about forgetting something and for her to relax and enjoy herself.

"I'll be right back!" she assured her.

Lily went back to chatting with the other girls as Hermione cautiously made her way into the grove of trees where Avery laid in wait.

"Avery," she said curtly.

"Miss Granger," he said genially with a slight bow. "I am so glad that you could join me for the festivities."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "What 'festivities'?" she asked suspiciously.

Avery crossed his arms as he leaned against a tree. "You know, I think I have more respect for your mind than half of the girls in Slytherin," he said with admiration in his eyes. "I think far too many people underestimate you. I know that you are aware of the Dark Lord's intentions...that Severus is being groomed for his service."

Hermione tried to look neutral. She had figured as much; however, it didn't make the situation any easier to accept.

Avery continued as he looked out amongst the various groups of students enjoying their post O.W.L. exam day. "Severus doesn't realize it, but he will be given his test. How he performs will either bring about his acceptance or rejection by the Dark Lord. Those who displease the Dark Lord, well..." He left his sentence open-ended as he spread his hands in mock helplessness.

"What test are you talking about?" she demanded as she gritted her teeth.

Avery continued to look out over the green. "We have indulged Severus for far too long in his obsession with Mudblood Evans. It is time that he officially announces his allegiance," he said with a knowing look at Hermione.

Hermione tried to reach into the depths of Avery's blue eyes. They were cold and impenetrable. She couldn't read anything in them.

"What are you going to do to him?" she whispered.

Avery chuckled. "Don't worry, Miss Granger. I am more than positive Severus will not let us down. I just thought you would appreciate the...how do Muggles say it...ah! 'The behind-the-scenes look,'" he said smugly.

"What have you done?" she breathed as she glared at him.

"It's not what I have done, Gryffindor! It's what your housemates have agreed to do," he whispered as he looked down at her viciously.

He turned his head and grasped Hermione's chin forcing her to watch. "Look, Hermione. Look at the brave Gryffindors! I have made an arrangement with them. That James Potter is very enamored with that Mudblood Evans' child. He can have her. It's time for Severus to release her from his protection and let her come under someone else's," he explained.

"What did you do?" she demanded angrily.

"I made a trade, Miss Granger. It happens all the time. Severus can no longer keep his plaything. She is a distraction. However, Regulus has been most useful as liaison. He made arrangements for a formal change of protection from Severus to James Potter."

Hermione was incensed. "Do you mean Potter has dared?"

Avery laughed heartily. "James Potter? The Gryffindor Golden Boy? Oh, no! He's far too *noble* and *good* for such an agreement. No, this exchange took place between Sirius Black and myself. Oh, Sirius! You can take the wizard out of Slytherin, but you can't take the Slytherin out of the wizard."

Hermione was pale with fear. "I just don't understand why you all insist upon making Severus your pet!" she seethed.

Avery weighed her concern in his mind. Hermione could tell he wanted to make things plain to her. "Hermione," he began, "Severus never had a chance. From the day he was sorted into Slytherin, he had been marked. We have this ritual you see." He explained when Hermione's face grew confused.

"We have a ritual that takes place at the beginning of every school year. It helps to sort out the hangers-on from the truly talented and gifted. From Severus' testing, we were astonished at his abilities. He is a truly powerful wizard. Not only merely powerful, he excels in dark magic. You could say he was born to do it. That kind of ability cannot go unchecked by the Dark Lord. He was placed amongst the names of those with extraordinary talents. So you see, Severus never really had a choice. It was to either accept his destiny to be one of the Dark Lord's followers or live an agonizing existence."

"What do you mean by that?" Hermione asked timidly.

Avery's face grew cold and hard. "The Dark Lord does not fight, as you Muggles say, 'like a gentleman.' He takes those you love from the bottom up and kills them. Oh, perhaps he may underestimate the depth of feeling... the person may not care. However, he will reach that one person that cannot be given up. Severus would never forgive himself if he knew he was the cause of poor, sweet Lily Evans' demise."

Hermione continued to gaze upon him, horrified.

Avery chuckled. "Severus is a Slytherin. He knows how worthless his blood status truly is. Imagine, a half-blood, or really a quarter-blood! His witch mother, sired from a

Muggle, continued to contaminate her line by mating with a Muggle herself. Severus is barely one step higher than a Mudblood, and he knows it well."

Hermione gritted her teeth lashed out at the bigot. "You think power and cruelty can win over love and what is right?"

"Oh, please, Miss Granger, recite the precious lyrics to that Muggle song, what is it? 'All you need is love'?" he said, mockingly.

Hermione was fuming. "Your Lord may win the battle, but he shall lose the war. I know it. Severus may continue to play your games, but his heart will never belong to you!"

The young wizard's face softened. "That may well be, Hermione. However, I can assure you his heart will never be accepted by her."

He pointed towards the group of witches frolicking in the water. Hermione's face fell in sorrow. She wasn't shocked or surprised. She had always known this day would come.

Avery looked on Hermione's anguish with pleasure. "Now, will come the coup de grace! Watch and see everything come undone. After today, everything will change."

"What makes you think that Severus will accept this 'exchange'?" she sneered.

Avery looked soberly into Hermione's eyes and brushed a stray lock from her cheek. "Oh, my dear girl, Severus has absolutely no idea what will happen. But rest assured, when the moment comes, he shall do what is expected of him."

Avery cast a Disillusionment Spell around them and ordered Hermione to be silent. "Let's get a bit closer, shall we?" he asked.

Hermione stood and watched as James, Sirius, Peter, and Remus sat on a bench. James was playing with his Snitch and rumpling his hair. Lily was still relaxing with the other girls. Suddenly, she saw Severus walking across the green lawn; he had his face buried in a piece of parchment and deep in thought. Suddenly, Hermione saw the look of the hunter in Sirius' eyes.

"Now, it begins," Avery whispered as he placed a firm grip on Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione was helpless to intervene as the orchestrated fight played out in front of her. James and Sirius were both humiliating and torturing Severus as he lay on the ground struggling against a jinx.

Then, as if timed to perfection, Lily raced over and screamed at James and Sirius to leave him alone.

"You think you're funny," she said coldly, "but you are just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter! Leave him alone!"

"I will if you'll go out with me, Evans. Go out with me," said James quickly. "Go on... Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again!"

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

Sirius mumbled something to James and then caught Severus just as he about to reach for his wand. His reflexes were too late, and Severus hexed James with a Slicing Hex. Hermione gasped as James' face turned to pure hatred. He shouted, and in a split-second, Severus was up in the air. They lifted him up by his own spell, the spell that Severus had once tried on her. He was dangling upside down, and his underwear was on display for everyone to see. Hermione was horrified. She wanted to cry and hex the lot of them for humiliating him.

The crowd was cheering and laughing. Tears poured down Hermione's cheeks. She reached for her wand, and Avery brought his wand to her neck. "No you don't, Gryffindor. You will watch this to the bloody end!" he swore.

Hermione watched as James, Sirius, and Peter howled with laughter. The only one who wasn't laughing was Remus. He remained seated on the grass looking at a book. Hermione turned to Lily, waiting to see what she was going to do when suddenly she saw a flicker of a smile from the corner of her mouth. Lily was *enjoying* it!

"Not such the sweet, delicate flower, is she now?" Avery whispered into Hermione's ear.

Hermione glared at him and continued to watch. Several people continued to watch the fight.

"Let him down!" said Lily.

James gave in to Lily's wishes, and Severus came crashing down in a heap on the ground. He desperately tried to right himself when Sirius attacked him with another curse. He fell over stiff as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out, and James and Sirius looked at it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," James said earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

"There you go," he said as Snape struggled to his feet again, "you're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus..."

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Hermione closed her eyes in pain as Avery laughed softly at her side. "Bravo, Severus!" he said gleefully. She reopened them in time to see Lily screaming at James.

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just gotten off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can...I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK."

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

"She's crying," Hermione whispered.

Avery sighed. "She's so very tiresome, that girl. She's just angry with Severus, and she's lashing out at James. It's so sad to see inter-house squabbling! Of course, it's always the innocents that suffer."

Hermione glowered at him. She knew exactly what he meant. James, Lily, and Severus had been played for fools in order for Avery's and Sirius' own selfish gains. They made her sick!

She turned back and saw that Severus was back up in the air. She turned to Avery as she saw the underwear being jerked from his thin body. "Stop it! You've gotten what you wanted...just make it stop!" she shouted angrily.

Avery said nothing as he released the Disillusionment Spell from them. He said nothing as a jet of light blasted from his wand, knocking James, Sirius, and Peter off their feet. The Slytherins and Gryffindors were all fighting now. Spells, hexes, curses, and jinxes were being cast from every direction.

Hermione watched Severus as he adjusted his underwear and robes, scurrying off in embarrassment and fear. Hermione waited until he was safely a great distance away on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She softly walked up behind him and saw he heard the crunch of her footsteps. He jumped and brandished his wand, pale and angry.

Hermione raised her hands. "I was held by Avery. He forced me to watch it all." More tears poured down her cheeks. Severus lowered his wand.

"Don't you pity me!" he raged as spittle flew from his mouth, his hands curled into shaking white fists

Hermione looked at him sadly. "I hated what they did to you. I wanted to hex all of them!" she yelled.

He sank to his knees, and an anguished cry tore from his mouth. Hermione flew to the ground and held him as he cried bitterly into her lap.

"She'll never forgive me! Never, never..."

"...You don't know that, Severus!" she reasoned with him.

He pushed away from her. "Don't I? Wasn't this all a part of the plan? I've now passed my test. I've proven my loyalty to the Dark Lord. Lily will now be safe with Potter," he said bitterly.

Hermione took him by the shoulders. "This doesn't necessarily mean the end for you two! You can explain it all to her, you can!" she insisted.

He bent over again and lay on her lap. "I can't, Hermione, I get so tongue-tied, I can't think straight!" he said as he continued to cry in anguish.

Hermione was firm. "You'll hate yourself for the rest of your life if you don't at least try to explain how you feel!"

"I hate myself now," he whispered.

Hermione shook her head. "NO! Stop that right now! You will explain, you must! No matter the outcome, you have to try!" she insisted.

Severus picked himself up from her lap and looked at her desperately. "Did you hear what I said?" he asked sadly.

"I saw and heard it all, Severus," she whispered as she wiped the tears off his face with her robe.

"Do you hate me, Hermione?" he whispered.

"Severus, is there really a difference between pure-bloods and Muggle-borns?" she asked.

"No," he mouthed.

Hermione smiled. "That's all I need to know. I won't give up on you. No matter if everyone hates me for it, I promise I will never abandon you."

He held her to him, holding her tightly as if he were afraid she would disappear if he let go. He cried soundlessly, sobbing as she laid his head into her lap. Hermione stroked his hair and forehead and hummed lightly. Soon, he was soothed into sleep, and Hermione watched over him in his repose.

A/N: Passages in italics are taken directly from JKR's *Order of the Phoenix*. Much thanks for Rowling's hard work.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 74

Hermione and Severus hang on to their friendship and trust in each other to get through the fallout of Lily's rage over the infamous "Mudblood" incident.

A/N: I have to give special recognition to WriterMerrin for working her tail off to get this to me in a timely manner. You are wonderful. And to the ever-constant luvsev, you are a great cheerleader! I want to thank everyone for the awesome reviews. I enjoy and cherish each and every one!

Hermione stayed with Severus for a long time. So long, in fact, they missed dinner. Hermione went back to Gryffindor tower exhausted and weary. When she walked into the dormitory, Lily was sitting at the window near her bed.

"Lily?" Hermione called out to her.

She didn't turn her head from the window. "Where were you, Hermione? I haven't seen you in hours. I needed you."

Hermione didn't know what to say.

Lily whipped her head around and looked at her accusingly. "Where were you?" she demanded.

Hermione decided to be honest as she could. She didn't want Lily knowing she had been with Severus all this time. She couldn't handle any more drama today. So, she decided to omit that part and focus on where she had been during the confrontation. "Lily, I was with Avery. He cornered me, and I couldn't leave."

"That ruddy bastard!" she breathed. "Are you okay? What did he do to you?" She grabbed Hermione and hugged her fiercely. "You can tell me, Hermione. What happened?" she pressed.

"Lily, he made me watch what happened today. He had me at wand point...I-I couldn't get away."

Lily looked at her sadly. "Then you saw what happened," she said sadly.

Hermione nodded as she sat on Lily's bed next to her.

Lily burst into tears. "Oh, Hermione! Severus called me a Mudblood! Right in front of everyone...how could he? How could he hurt me so badly? After everything we've been through. I can't make excuses for him anymore. He's made his choice!"

She wiped her tears and blew her nose. She looked up at Hermione and gave a little laugh. "I never told you, but we were going to have sex. All I wanted was for him to say he would publicly declare that he wasn't with those rotters who want to be like Voldemort! He wouldn't, Hermione. I just didn't mean enough to him!" she raged.

Hermione kept her temper under control. "Lily, perhaps it wasn't a question of 'wouldn't,' but rather 'couldn't.'"

"NO! No, Hermione!" she declared firmly. "I refuse to believe it. We all have choices. He made a choice, and he wanted them and their sick, twisted, and perverse idea about what makes a true witch or wizard. Everything I am, they hate, and he has embraced their lies. I'm through with Severus Snape! *Through!*" She faced the window and sobbed.

Hermione sighed as she rubbed her head. *This isn't good!* she thought. She got up to change for bed when Mary came into the room.

"Hermione, Severus Snape is outside the door of the common room. He wants to talk to you," she said.

Lily shot Hermione an angry look.

Hermione had to smooth this over before the redhead really blew up. "Lily," she said calmly as she put her robes back on, "I'm going to see what this is all about and let you know. He probably wants to apologize and needs to test the waters, okay?"

Lily huffed as she crossed her arms around her chest. "You can tell him from me that I have no intention of talking with him. Not now or ever!" she said venomously.

Hermione sighed and gave Mary a sad look. She went down to the common room and walked out the door, closing it behind her. Severus was standing there, anxious and terrified.

"Please, Hermione, I need to speak with Lily, like you said. I need to apologize. She has to know I didn't mean it. It was just a test!"

Hermione put her hands on his shoulders. "Calm down, Severus," she said lowly. "You need to be patient. She's in a right state. She's been crying and carrying on...she may not be in the correct frame of mind for this right now." Hermione gave him a pleading look. There was no way she was going to tell him the message Lily had just given her.

Severus was undeterred. "No, Hermione. I must see her. I need to explain! I swear I will sleep out here all night if I have to...I love her. I can't lose her!"

Hermione swallowed and looked at him soberly. "All right, Severus. I'll tell her. But I want you to promise me...Severus, look into my eyes! Promise me that if things do not go as you hope, you will meet me in the Astronomy tower at midnight. There will be none of this sleeping out here in front of the common room door! You will only anger the Slytherins and just give James and Sirius a perfect opportunity to hex you again! You can threaten it, but don't you dare do it! Now, promise me!" she demanded.

"Okay, Hermione, I promise," he said as he stood trembling.

Hermione watched him as she went back inside. He was twitching like mad; the desperation emitting from him was potent. Hermione hoped against hope she could make Lily see reason.

She went back into the dorm, and Lily was already changed and reading in bed.

"Lily?" Hermione called. The redhead ignored her. *Oh no, she isn't!* Hermione seethed. She walked over and ripped the book out of her hands and crossed her arms, glaring at the witch.

"Give me my book back, Hermione!" she warned.

"No!" Hermione yelled. "Severus is down in front of the common room door, and he refuses to leave. He's going to spend the night out there if you don't talk to him!"

"Mary?" Lily called out sweetly. "Do be a lamb, and tell Severus to get away from the door before I have James Potter hex him into oblivion."

Mary hurriedly put on her robe and walked out. Lily lay down and snuggled into her pillow.

"How can you be so cruel?" Hermione breathed.

She sat up in bed, furious. "Me! Me? How dare you! He called me a Mudblood in front of the whole school. He said it himself; 'I don't need help from Mudbloods like her.' That probably goes for you as well."

"Lily, you know how prideful he is. You embarrassed him by forcing James to release him from that curse, and then James had to rub it in his face! He lost it, Lily. He was pushed into a corner, and he lashed out. I'm not saying what he said was right, but can't you show some compassion?" she shouted.

Mary came back and said, "That's it, Lily. He's fucking insane. *You* are going to have to deal with him, or so help me, he's going to have a complete meltdown! Look, I've done my bit, goodnight!"

Lily and Hermione had never seen Mary so indignant before. The witch went straight to bed and had nothing more to say to either of them. Lily and Hermione stared at each other for a while before Lily whipped back her blanket and put on her robe, grumbling and cursing under her breath the entire time. Hermione sat on the edge of her bed. All she could do was wait for what she was sure was going to be a terrible outcome.

Lily came back to the room crying and in a rage. She slammed the door and let out a frustrated shriek. She ran to Hermione and hugged her.

"It's over. He couldn't even deny it that he's with them. Avery and Mulciber! Those damn arseholes! He's chosen them, Hermione. It's all over," she cried.

Hermione looked at the clock. It was fifteen minutes to midnight. She had to sneak out and find Severus. She didn't know how she was going to get past Lily. This was a nightmare!

She guided Lily to her bed and told her to sleep. "Stay with me, Hermione. I need you," Lily whispered as she clung to Hermione's hand.

"Lily," Hermione said nervously. "There is a very desperate and frightened boy out there who may do himself harm. I respect that you have ended things with Severus. However, his frame of mind is not stable. I must go to him."

"Why?" she cried out. "He hates us...we're *Mudbloods*, remember?"

"Lily," Hermione said. "I'll be back as soon as I can." She went to Mary and woke her. "Please watch over Lily until I return, okay?"

Mary nodded and went to console Lily. Hermione knew that by leaving now, she might be shutting the door on her relationship with Lily forever. *Well, if that's what it will take to get Lily to fall into Potter's arms and fulfill her destiny, so be it.* This wasn't Hermione's timeline; this wasn't her reality.

"Hermione," a voice said softly.

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. She walked cautiously into the common room, and there, sitting quietly in a chair, quite alone, was James Potter.

"James! You nearly gave me a heart-attack!" she hissed at him.

"Sorry," he said as he grinned. "I know you are going to see him, aren't you?"

"How do you know my business?" she demanded angrily.

"Listen, I might hate the ruddy git, but I do know heartbreak. It doesn't do well to be a bad winner. I know I've won Lily's heart. I know she will never forgive him for what he said to her. It doesn't mean that I can't feel sorry for the poor bastard."

He stood up and said, "You've been a true friend to him. God only knows why, Hermione. You're too good for the likes of him."

At this, Hermione puffed up angrily and opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind.

He raised his hands in defeat. "Sorry, sorry. This is how it is: I'll never like Snape, and he'll never like me. But he's a bloke like any other wizard and deserves someone to watch over him. I'm sure he's feeling like shite, and I figured you might be heading out to be with him to make sure he doesn't do something stupid."

Hermione looked at him with shock. "James Potter, there's a heart in there after all!" she teased him.

"Hey, I feel responsible for the prat," he said with a lop-sided grin. "After all, Sirius got carried away, and I saved his life. Now what kind of life would I have saved him for if he were just going to end up a bitter, angry tosser?"

You have no idea! Hermione thought sarcastically.

James continued. "So, I figure you might need a little bit of help. So here." He tossed a cloak to her. She recognized it at once. It was Harry's invisibility cloak. Her eyes watered as she struggled for the words.

"Thank you, James," she whispered.

James put his arm around her and walked her to the door. "Look, I know that Filch is on the fourth floor, so watch it, eh? And you can just slip the cloak under the sofa when you get back."

She turned to him as she reached the entrance. "I-I don't know what to say, James!" she said thickly.

"Look, this doesn't mean I'm going to leave the prick alone! I still don't like him, and I still think he's an evil git. I think you are in over your head, Hermione, but you are a big girl, and well, you really never did get a fair shake from us Gryffindors, did you?" he said guiltily. "I guess I owe you."

"Thank you, James. And I promise, Severus will never know I got this from you," she said as she smiled.

"That's a girl!" he said warmly.

She stepped out and pulled the cloak around her cautiously, hurrying her way towards Severus, where she was needed the most.

The Astronomy Tower was the prime area for lovers and romantics alike. It was an odd place for two soon-to-be outcasts. Severus had been genuinely shocked to know she had kept her word.

She had crawled up the steep, circular steps to the doorway, only to open it and have a wand shoved into her face.

She staggered back and tried to make a grab for her wand as she was roughly pulled inside.

Snape was pointing his wand straight at her and lowered it with a sigh. "Hermione, you came!" he said surprised.

"Why? Are you shocked?" she asked incredulously. "I'm the one who told you to come here and at this specific time!"

He sat down hard on the ground. "I didn't want to hope," he said sadly.

Hermione spread the cloak on the floor and sat down on it. Snape sank into her arms and started to weep. "She's gone, Hermione. Gone forever! What am I going to do without her?" he sobbed.

Hermione held him and stroked his hair, shushing him. "You are going to get up in the morning and finish your O.W.L.s, and then you are going to take me home with you. I'll stay with you and your mum, and I will pamper and coddle you while you can work in your lab, making your potions experiments. I'll assist you, and I won't leave you. The pain shall pass, Severus. The hurting will lessen," she said soothingly.

"Lily will want you to be with her," he said sadly.

"I think Lily can do without me, Severus. You need me more," she whispered.

He raised himself up and said darkly, "Hermione, by making this choice, you are drawing lines in the sand. Lily may never forgive you. She will see it as a betrayal," he warned.

"I think I know what the truth really is, Severus," she replied. "There are things I wish I could tell you, but suffice it to say, I know more of the bigger picture than you realize. I am willing to accept the consequences."

Severus embraced her. "Hermione, I never thought you would ever become so dear to me," he whispered.

She pulled away from him and held his hands in hers. "Now, you will go back to your dorm room and get some sleep. Tomorrow is the last exam, the Leaving Feast, and then you and I will ride back on the Express together... just the two of us. How does that sound?" she asked.

"Wonderful," he replied. "However, I can't guarantee we won't have company dropping in on us," he said sadly.

"That's quite all right, Severus. After all, Avery has me protected. He approves of our friendship, for now. So, I suggest we take advantage of it as long as we are able!"

"Thank you, Hermione," he whispered shyly.

"You're welcome, Severus," she replied.

Hermione snuck back into her dorm room successfully after putting James' Invisibility Cloak back underneath the couch. It was difficult to let it go. She sat and held it for a long time, running her hands over the fabric, thinking about her times with Harry and Ron, wondering if they ever thought of her now, or if too much time had gone by...

She slipped into her dorm room and was thankful to see Mary and Lily fast asleep. She quickly changed her clothes and slipped into bed, thinking of Severus and how pained he had looked. He had seemed so tortured Hermione could not stop thinking that this may be the birth of the Professor Snape she knew, the cold, unfeeling, cruel man she had known as a young child. She hugged the pillow close to her and felt her stomach clench. She wouldn't let it happen! She would never let him fall that far into despair. She didn't know what she would have to do to keep it from happening, but she was willing to do whatever it took to keep him from falling off the edge into hopelessness.

She tried to sleep, but the images of his pained face haunted her. He loved Lily so much! He had given so much of himself to her the thought of him losing so much frightened Hermione. If it terrified her, then it must be pure hell for Severus to endure.

The next day, Lily did not say anything to Hermione. The day went on as usual, with the final O.W.L. examinations and Leaving Feast. Hermione watched Lily as she sat with Mary MacDonald and some older Gryffindor girls, laughing and talking happily as if nothing were wrong in the world.

Hermione found herself on the outside again. She sat alone and tried to enjoy the food and the excitement of the end of term, but she couldn't. She didn't know how things would be sixth year; she dreaded to think how she would have to share a room with Lily if they were on the outs. Well, she didn't have to think of it now; the summer could change everything.

Hermione went to get her things packed so she would be ready first thing in the morning to leave on the Express. She had met with Severus briefly after the Leaving Feast and made their plans to meet so they could ride back together.

"How have you been today, Severus?" Hermione asked him softly as they milled outside the Great Hall.

He lowered his head and muttered, "Fine. My brothers were very proud of me and threw a party to officially welcome me into their inner circle."

"This is good, Severus," she said encouragingly.

He looked at her with empty eyes. Hermione fairly shivered as she recalled the Professor she knew so well. His eyes had carried the same haunted, vacant expression.

"Severus," she pleaded as she grasped his hand. "Don't despair, please!"

He looked at her strangely. "I feel like I've lost my soul, Hermione," he whispered. He looked down at her hand grasping desperately onto his.

His eyes met her again. "I'm glad you are coming back home with me, Hermione. You have always understood the reasons for the things I've had to do."

"I will never stop being your friend, Severus," she swore.

He looked at her intensely and pulled her into a darkened alcove. "Swear it, Hermione. Swear an oath...a Wizard's Oath...that you will never stop being my friend!" he begged.

"I swear," she whispered firmly.

He kissed her hand then and embraced her. "Thank you, Hermione. Thank you for not abandoning me," he whispered.

"I couldn't, Severus, even if I wanted to, I can't," she said simply.

He looked at her strangely. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"I can't tell you that, Severus. Just know that I have and always will want the best for you. I will never purposefully hurt you or turn my back on you. I will be your friend, even if the whole world turns its back to you. You will never lose me," she said with her voice full of emotion.

A swirling of magic around them crackled and snapped. They glanced around themselves in awe.

"Do you want me to make an oath to you, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione sighed. "Promise me that you will always remember that I will never wish you evil, only good. Promise me that you will always remember that I am your friend, and I care for you," she asked.

"I swear," he said in a strangled voice.

The magic swirled again in its intensity of glistening colors. Severus grabbed Hermione, kissed her firmly on the cheek, and walked away. She stood there with her hand on her cheek, wondering what they had done and what the repercussions might be for their promises to each other.

Hermione drew herself out of her thoughts and focused on her packing. Lily walked in and strode up to her.

"Hermione, I think we should talk," she said coolly.

Hermione regarded her standoffish demeanor and replied accordingly. "I didn't think there was anything else to say, Lily. Tonight you made things quite plain that you don't wish to have anything to do with me," she replied matter-of-factly.

Lily sighed. "Look, I was angry that you went off to see Severus when you knew how much he had hurt me, but I am ready to forgive you," she said simply.

Hermione was unimpressed. "Lily, I understand you were quite hurt and embarrassed by what Severus did so very publicly. However, as hurt and angry as you might feel, believe me, he feels a thousand times worse!"

Lily's face was set like stone. "Are you going to choose him over me?" she demanded.

Hermione's face snapped up, and she looked deeply into her emerald eyes. "Lily, this is not about choosing sides. I care about you, and I care about Severus...just as I always have. I refuse to be dragged into your quarrel! If he ever so much as says a word against you, he will be taken to task, just like I will have to do to you if you keep on saying cruel things about him. I won't stand for this bickering!"

Lily's face softened a bit and pulled Hermione towards her bed so they could talk privately and said, "My parents are spending the summer abroad. Petunia is getting married in a couple of weeks, and then after the wedding, they are headed for the continent. I was hoping you and I could spend the summer together," she said as her hand began to slide up Hermione's stomach.

"Lily," Hermione began to protest.

"Shh," Lily breathed as she covered Hermione's mouth with her own. She slid a hand inside Hermione's shirt to cup a breast.

Hermione pulled Lily's hand out from inside her bra. "Lily, I think that Severus needs some company. He is feeling rather bad off right now..."

Lily stood up and looked at Hermione angrily. "Well, it's his own damn fault! It's not mine that he called me that vile name!" she spat. "Hermione, I want you to be ~~withe~~." "

Hermione was finding it difficult to look into Lily's emerald eyes. "I think we need to spend some time apart, Lily. Perhaps things will be better in the fall after everyone has had a chance to cool down," Hermione replied.

"Fine!" Lily snapped as she stormed out of the room.

It was going to be a very long night. Hermione wished she could leave for Spinner's End immediately.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 74

Summer at Spinner's End in 1976 changes everything for Severus and Hermione.

A/N: This is my very favorite chapter in the whole fic. Perhaps it is because I spent two weeks researching for the information I needed about life in July of 1976 in Manchester, England, or it could be that I just really like what unfolds between Severus and Hermione. I had stated at the start of this that music had become its own character. I will provide the titles and links at the bottom of the page for those of you who would like a stroll down memory lane.

Now, remember, I am a Yank and was born in 1975. I hope you won't judge me too harshly if I have made errors :)

Many thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin, my awesome betas! I hope you all enjoy this! Please review!!! As I said, this is my favorite chapter!

Severus' mum met them at King's Cross. She was thrilled to hear Hermione was going to spend the whole summer; at least that was what she said. Hermione thought she might have not been telling the whole truth.

Spinner's End was in the dodgy area of Manchester and was a part of a series of connected houses built in the Victorian times when the mill had been working at full capacity and jobs had been plentiful. Now in 1976, people were being laid off all over the country, and the mill had finally closed its doors. It was a solitary area that had once been full of the hustle and bustle of community. The rows of attached houses had all at one point been occupied by the factory workers and their families. Spinner's End was empty now, except for the house at the very end. It had not been remodeled much, just a basic washing up room placed inside on the second floor, but there was no shower, bathtub, or toilet. Outside the kitchen door was a community watering hole that a number of houses had shared. It still worked well, although the water had to be treated before being used. It had been bearable when Hermione only had to stay for three weeks, but now, she was staying the summer and would need to know how to live the way the Snapes lived.

It was very hard to keep oneself clean, and cleansing spells only did so much. There was a large wooden tub that was filled every Saturday night, and everyone bathed, but during the week it was a birdbath at best. It helped to explain Severus' lack of hygiene a bit better. He had not been raised by any other standard. Hermione figured that anyone else would start to change one's ways when teasing began at school, but Severus was an obstinate and contrary person at best. He was the way he was, and he was not about to change for anyone.

Magic came in handy when it came to needing clean water. Eileen Snape may have been rusty in other areas of magic, due to Mr. Snape's control over her, but her housework spells were imaginative and clever. Severus told Hermione that his mum had created some of her own housecleaning spells. He swore she possessed a brilliant mind and had been very bright in school, just shy and withdrawn.

One day, as Severus and Hermione were working outside in the small vegetable garden, she asked him about his mum's marriage to his dad.

"Severus, how is it that your mum married a Muggle? Weren't her parents upset?" she asked.

Severus kept his eye on his weeding. "No. My mum's dad raised her alone. Her mum died in childbirth. My grandfather raised my mum, and then when she was a seventh-year, he died. This is the house my mum was born and lived in all her life. That's why she can't bring herself to leave."

Hermione was surprised. "So, your grandfather was a factory worker?" she asked.

"Yes, and a Muggle as well. My grandmother was a witch. I think my mum thought if she married a man like her dad had been: a factory worker, a kind and down-to-earth bloke, that she'd be happy too. She said her dad never had any problems with her being a witch. He thought it was great fun!" he said happily.

Hermione noticed how content he sounded talking about his mother's family. "I bet you wish you had known them," she mused.

He shrugged, and his hair fell forward, obscuring his face as he worked. "It would have been interesting, I think. My grandfather fought in the Second Muggle War, around the time of Grindelwald. My grandmum had just escaped being murdered by the soldiers who had come to kill the whole family. She fled into Muggle London. My mum said it was easy in those days because there were so many displaced people. A solitary woman with no papers and no past didn't seem out of the ordinary. She met my grandfather when she first came here looking for work. He had been wounded badly in the chest and stomach. The army discharged him, and he had been allowed to return home and work in the factory. He also joined the Home Guard. He brought her here to this house and worked at the Mill. I think they married in 1941 or 1942. My mum told me her mum had gotten pregnant right after they married."

"How old was she when she died?" Hermione asked quietly.

Severus glanced at her before replying. "She was eighteen. She was only sixteen when she married my granddad. She got pregnant again when my mum was still a little baby. There were complications, and she died, and the baby died too." He continued to look at her curiously until Hermione broke the silence.

"How old was your grandfather?" she asked.

"He was around twenty-five, I think," he said as he went back to his work. "My mum told me one of the neighbor wives took care of her whilst he worked. She had a couple of kids of her own. She practically raised my mum for a while."

"Was your granddad good to your mum?"

"Yeah, that's why she thought marrying Tobias would be a good thing. She told me her dad worked hard, but when he would come home, he always had time for her. He helped her with her schoolwork and encouraged her to keep with her studies. When the time came for her to go to Hogwarts, he had worked hard enough to afford the tuition, even though his health had never been fully restored after being wounded in the war. My mum reckons that was what killed him. He just ran himself into the ground. Anyway, she came back here after graduating, and there were a bunch of young men looking for work and a wife. Tobias snatched her up, got her pregnant with me and then preceded to make her life a living hell," he said tersely.

Hermione resumed her work, thinking how Severus called his father "Tobias." She looked up at the dingy, little house and wondered how many happy times it had seen over the years before pain and despair had taken hold. She glanced at Severus every now and again, his black hair blocking his face from view.

He was quiet for a long time after that. Hermione finished her half of the weeding and lay down in the grass, closing her eyes to relax. Suddenly, there was a shadow blocking the sun. She opened her eyes, and Severus was standing over her. He was quiet and looking pensive. Hermione sat up, and he offered his hand to help her off the grass.

Hermione tried to get Severus' mind off Lily. He was hurting badly, and there were times when he would just sit and stare off into the distance, as if in a trance. Sometimes, Hermione just sat with him until he came out of it. Other times she would lay her hand on his, and he would look at her hand gently stroking his own. He would breathe easier, and the haunted look would come out of his eyes. There never were words spoken between them during those times. There was no reason for them.

Sometimes, Severus would disappear for hours at a time. One day, Hermione followed him, concerned. It was the most heart-wrenching thing she had ever seen. He sat under a tree across from Lily's house, just staring at it. Hermione wondered if she should turn back or if she should join him. She debated for a while and then decided to go ahead and join him. If he got angry, he got angry, and she would never follow him again. She took a deep breath and walked slowly towards him. She sat down on the cool grass right next to him. He sat with his arms around his knees, looking more sad and helpless than she'd ever seen him before.

She remained there and silently watched the house with him. After a while, the coolness of the shade and the smell of the grass lulled her to sleep. She was just going to lie back for a minute and rest her eyes when a gentle stroking of her face and hair awakened her. She opened her eyes, and Severus was leaning over her, touching her tenderly.

Hermione was shocked by the intensity in his eyes. She didn't know what he was thinking as he looked down at her, touching her so cautiously. She didn't know what to say either; she didn't think she would remember to breathe if she didn't remind herself. *I must be looking absolutely petrified* she thought as he continued to lightly skim his fingers across her face and hair.

Finally, he pulled himself away and stood up, helping Hermione up as well. He kept her hand in his as they walked back to Spinner's End. They were quiet the whole time as they walked, and he never once let go of her hand. Things were changing, but they had no need to speak of it. The moment spoke for itself.

Later that night, Hermione was in bed trying to sleep when a soft knock came from the other side of her bedroom door.

She got up and opened the door a crack. Severus was standing there, shirtless, in his jeans. She opened it enough to let him in, and she dashed under the covers. All she had on was her camisole and knickers. Severus walked in silently.

"What..." she began, and he placed a finger on her lips.

"Lie down, Hermione," he whispered.

She slid down into the bed and pulled the sheet close around her breasts. She felt her stomach drop in nervousness as the bed dipped as he climbed in next to her against the wall. He leaned over her, and she could feel the warmth of his body through the crisp sheet. He rested an arm across her pillow above her head and placed his other arm by her opposite shoulder. She reached up with one hand and tucked one curtain of his long, black hair behind his ear.

"Thank you for being with me today, Hermione," he said softly.

"You're welcome," she replied with a timid smile.

He seemed unsure of his words, but managed to get it out.

"I-I won't... go back there, Hermione."

He lifted the arm that was next to her shoulder and stroked the exposed skin of her shoulder and collarbone. He concentrated his eyes on the skin he touched and continued to stroke it lightly.

"You have always felt so soothing," he whispered. "All the times you came to me, comforted me, kept me close to you...I can't tell you how safe and loved you have made me feel," he murmured.

Their eyes met, and she could feel his breath warm on her cheek.

"I want to kiss you, Hermione," he whispered.

He kissed her cheek, so very close to her mouth that she sighed softly. He ran his fingers across her lips, and she closed her hand over them and slowly drew them away.

"Severus, is it too soon?" she asked quietly. "I don't want to be someone you come to when you're lonely. I care too much about you and our friendship for it to become something that has no real meaning."

"Hermione, I need to know what it would be like to kiss your lips. Believe me, you are the only girl I'm thinking of," he replied.

"Not like this, Severus," she insisted. "Just a kiss will change everything. I would like to do it when I can see you and face you in the light. We could easily start something that would be very difficult to stop."

He nodded, and she could feel his hair brush against her cheek. She didn't want him to leave; she wanted him so badly to stay. Apparently, he felt the same way. There was a telltale hardness burning against her thigh. Hermione had never felt so aroused before. She finally realized what had been missing with Lily. Hermione wanted that hardness inside her. The very scent of him made her want him to push that rigid flesh inside her. If he didn't leave now, she wouldn't be able to refuse him.

He got up and left quietly. Hermione slept very little that night.

The next morning, Eileen Snape sat at the kitchen table looking at her son and Hermione as they ate breakfast. Hermione felt strange, like she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and was about to be punished.

"Severus," Mrs. Snape said quietly. "Go bring in the water for the washing, and take your time."

Severus was pale as he got up from the table and went outside. Hermione was scared to death as Mrs. Snape turned in her chair and faced her.

"I know Severus was in your room last night," she said simply.

Hermione's hands started to shake. "Nothing happened," she croaked.

"I know," she said. I've been scrying on you and Severus for the last three years," she said as she stood and gathered the plates, taking them to the sink. She peered out the window at her son as he slowly gathered the water for the washing. "I know my son has been neglected and has had little love in his life. I blame myself for that. I should have been better to him."

She turned and faced Hermione, looking intensely into her eyes. "Do you love my son?" she asked.

"I don't know," Hermione said honestly. "I love him as much as a friend can love another friend, and I do feel more towards him than just a brother, but it's so new. I don't want to rush into something only to ruin what we have."

Mrs. Snape nodded and traced her mouth with one finger. Hermione saw another memory in her mind of Professor Snape doing the same thing. He had been in class working on some essays during her first-year Potions class. She had been focused on her potion but had glanced up and had seen Professor Snape deep in thought, tracing his mouth in a similar manner.

Mrs. Snape looked at Hermione with a concentrated stare. "Keep trying to find your answer, Hermione," she said mysteriously.

Severus came in timidly. "Is it all right?" he asked.

"Of course, Severus," she said smoothly, never taking her eyes off of Hermione until her son was ready to hand over the water bucket. She took out her wand and vanished the water of its contaminants. She began to wash the dishes slowly and methodically.

"You know," she called out to the teenagers as she continued washing. "It's July for heaven's sake! Severus, I think that you should take Hermione out on the town. Go to one of these discos that seem to be all the rage."

Severus walked over to his mother, and they whispered between themselves. Finally, his mother hushed him.

She walked over to a cupboard above the larder and pulled out a jar. She pulled out some Muggle pounds and held them out for Severus to take.

"Go on," she insisted. "Go take Hermione to a picture show, dinner, and dancing. Have a nice day. I've wanted to do this for a long time, and I've saved up for you." She kissed her son on the cheek, and he blushed uncomfortably.

Eileen Snape looked at her son. "You're so tall! I can't believe I ever gave birth to you. You need to eat more, Severus. Hermione, will you promise to make sure he eats properly at school when he returns? We can only do what we can during the summer!" She smiled at her son and kissed his cheek.

"Go on, the both of you!" she chided playfully.

Severus pocketed the money and gave a Hermione a grin. She smiled brightly back at him, and they took off upstairs to plan their day.

They laughed as Hermione worked to transfigure outfits they could wear. She got Severus into tight bellbottoms and a black button-down shirt.

"Oh!" she said excitedly. "Get that Slytherin belt with the silver buckle! That will go fabulous with the outfit!"

He came out of his room, and Hermione sucked in her breath. He looked very nice in his outfit, and his black leather boots were perfect. Hermione stared at him lustfully. He was turning into a man more and more every day. She could see the future Professor Snape in him.

"Hermione?" he called to her.

"What?" she asked, coming out of her thoughts.

"I asked if this was okay," he said mischievously.

Hermione felt her face burning. "Oh, you know you look good, now get downstairs! I'm going to wash and cut your hair. It needs a good trim-up!" she said in her usual bossy voice.

Eileen Snape watched through her kitchen window as Hermione washed her son's hair. She smiled. Hermione was good for Severus. She felt better now, knowing she would be leaving him in good hands...

Hermione decided she was going to wait until the evening before wearing her transfigured outfit. "Severus, there is no way I can walk around in the daytime with the outfit I'm wearing to the disco!" she argued.

He looked at her darkly. "Oh, don't be so concerned! I won't go all crazy on you!" She teased him as she laughed. "So, what are we going to see at the show?" she asked as she went to put on her make-up.

"We can find out what we like when we get there," he said nervously.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said in a strange voice. "Are you going to wear your hair down?"

"I can," she answered throatily as she looked at him.

He was leaning against the wall next to the mirror, playing with her hair, twirling a curl around his finger as she continued to finish her make-up. "Okay, I'm done!" she said. "Not that it will matter much. I daresay with all this heat, I'll be positively melting!"

They went to a fish and chips takeaway and ate lunch outside in the shade. Afterwards, they lay down on the blanket, holding hands and enjoying the soft breeze. It was such a sweltering summer, the shade felt delicious, especially after a good meal.

They fell asleep and were pleasantly surprised at their long nap. They got up and folded the blanket, stowing it away in Hermione's backpack. They made their way towards the movie theater and spent the rest of the afternoon window shopping before going to see the movie. They watched an American film called "Taxi Driver."

"So what did you think about Travis Bickle?" asked Hermione as they left the movie theater.

"Everyone has his or her breaking point, I suppose," he replied softly. He snaked an arm around Hermione's waist as they walked down the street. Hermione felt awkward walking like that, but she still liked the feeling of his hand resting on her hip. She had never been so aware of her curves before. Between feeling his warm hand burning against her hip and noticing for the first time how she walked with a sway, Hermione felt for the first time like a woman.

They went into an alley, and Hermione changed into her outfit for the disco. "I feel like an idiot doing this!" she said as she swiftly changed with Severus as her lookout.

"You feel like an idiot? I'm the guy who could get an eyeful if I wasn't so damned nice by keeping my back turned!" he snapped.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'm finished!"

Severus turned around, and Hermione was dressed in a very provocative short dress that hugged all of her curves and shimmered gold. "Let's go," she said seductively.

The disco was full of people, and the houselights with the mirrored ball above mixed with the hypnotic rhythm of the music that had Hermione itching to dance. Dance, being a very loose term for what a lot of the young people were doing on the floor.

After they'd had a few drinks, a song came on that was happy and fun. Severus led Hermione onto the dance floor and took her into his arms. They laughed as Severus spun her around and then drew her back to himself.

Oh, what a night,

Hypnotizing, mesmerizing me.

She was everything I dreamed she'd be.

Sweet surrender, what a night!

They looked into each other's eyes and moved gracefully and cautiously together. Hermione felt his hand steal up into her hair. He brought his lips to her forehead, and they whirled around and around to the sweet music that called to their hearts. His hands felt good to her touch. She found herself lost in Severus and the music.

They were shaken out of their trance with the chorus of Abba's "S.O.S." "Oh, I love this song!" Hermione shouted as she began to dance wildly. It was amazing. The darkness and crowding of people gave them a boldness that they never would have dared. Hermione felt like Severus' hands were touching her everywhere as he slid his hands up and down her back, grasping her hips, and, at times, skimming her bum.

So when you're near me

Darling can't you hear me

S.O.S.

The love you gave me

Nothing else can save me

S.O.S.

Severus stopped dancing, and Hermione slowed down and looked at him concerned. He grabbed her and dragged her out of the club. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Let's get you changed back, and I will show you," he said. She quickly changed as he stood guard in the alley, and when she was finished, he put his arm around her shoulders and held onto her arm. She slid her arm around his back, and they walked slowly together. Soon, he stopped in front of a record store.

"Come on!" he said as he opened the door. Curious as to what he was up to, she silently followed as he walked down the aisles. He was looking for something specific. Hermione silently followed him, and he stopped to rifle through the many-papered sleeves of the records. He found the record he was searching for and looked at her shyly.

He took her hand and led her into a listening booth. He placed the record on the turntable and held up the earphones for them both to listen. The song was familiar and new at the same time. Hermione sat close to Severus, their heads and their thighs touching as they listened to the song. Hermione felt Severus was trying to say these words to her, but didn't know how. Soon, their fingers were intertwined, his breath was warm against her cheek, and it seemed this Muggle magic was as powerful as any she had ever experienced in the wizarding world.

Take my hand

Take my whole life too

For I can't help falling in love with you...

As the song ended, and the crackling of the record hummed around them, Severus set down the earphones, took Hermione's face into his hands, and slowly brought their lips together.

As their mouths came closer, Hermione wanted to tell him they should stop, that she wasn't meant to be in this reality. She wanted to say he wasn't this boy, but her angry and mean Potions master who loathed her. However, the reasons why were slipping away, and the life she had lived before just wasn't important anymore. The kiss wasn't passionate, nor did he hold her desperately to him. However, it was powerful in its tenderness. His hands had fallen from her face, and they remained connected only by the pull of their need and the innocence of the moment. When they broke apart, their eyes met, and Hermione knew that the world had changed forever.

He took the record off the turntable, placed it back where he had found it and led her out of the store.

"Hermione," he said as they walked on, "I have never done that before. I have gone to listen to records before, but I've never..." His voice faltered.

Hermione took his hand and smiled at him. He didn't need to explain, though she was so glad he did. She knew now that what had occurred between them was unique and special. It was something of their very own. Severus interlaced their fingers, and they walked back quietly to Spinner's End.

Oh, what a night! (December of '63) by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUgYsOGSZK8>

S.O.S. by ABBA.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f19GKcZU1vg>

I Can't Help Falling in Love With You by Elvis Presley.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 74

Tragedy descends upon the Snape Household.

A/N: Thank you to all who reviewed! I LOVE reviews! Also, hugs and chocolate to my awesome betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin.

When Severus and Hermione turned down the road leading to Spinner's End, Severus stopped and held Hermione back protectively.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Don't you feel it?" he whispered.

"What?" she asked, confused.

He looked at her with a pained expression. "Magic," he whispered. "Dark magic."

They walked cautiously down the road and were greeted by two wizards before reaching the house. Hermione watched Severus cautiously reach for his wand.

"Mr. Snape, Miss Granger," said the first wizard. "My name is Auror Dawlish. You remember Auror Shacklebolt, correct?"

They both nodded dumbly. Severus recovered first. "What happened?" he said with a hint of anger in his voice.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, the friendly Auror who had helped them after Tobias Snape had attacked his wife and son, broke the news to them.

"There is no good way to say this, Mr. Snape. Your father was released from the Muggle prison where he was incarcerated and returned home this afternoon," he said.

Severus interjected. "Wait! I was told he was going to be incarcerated for five years! How the hell did he get out?" he yelled.

Auror Shacklebolt remained calm and focused, unfazed by the young wizard's outburst. "The Muggles informed us that it was 'time off for good behavior,'" he explained.

To this, Severus gave a snort.

Shacklebolt continued. "We had informed your mother in May about your father's pending release in accordance to the agreement of the warden of the prison. We had encouraged your mother to vacate the premises by his release date. Your mother chose not to leave."

"Of course she didn't leave!" Severus spat, his temper beginning to rage. "Our home has been in the family since before my mother's birth! It's the only home she has ever known...of course she wouldn't leave! Why didn't you force him to stay away?" he shouted.

Kingsley's face remained stoic. "We cannot do that, Mr. Snape. Your father was a Muggle. According to Muggle law, he had every right to return to his own domicile, unless your mother had appealed to the Muggle government for him to stay away," he replied.

"Why are you referring to them in the past tense?" Severus asked sharply.

Hermione felt his hand tighten in hers. She placed her other hand on his arm to calm him. She had a horrible feeling that something very wrong had happened in Severus' house.

"Mr. Snape," began Auror Dawlish, "we regret to inform you that at 18:47 this evening, the Killing Curse was cast inside your home. Your father is dead."

Hermione heard a strangled cry rip from her throat. She looked at Severus, and he was so pale, his eyes so black, he looked numb from shock.

Auror Dawlish sighed as he looked at Kingsley. He continued to speak to Severus. "Son, we found your mother's body next to your father. It appears she performed a Slicing Hex on herself. We examined her wand, and that was the final spell she cast. The spell before it had been the Killing Curse.

"My parents are dead." It was a statement rather than a question. The Aurors nodded solemnly. They led Severus and Hermione down the street and into the house. Aurors were everywhere examining the house and taking notes. Severus and Hermione sat together on the couch, and the questions began.

Hermione thought as Severus spoke with the Aurors. *This is why she made us leave. She knew he was coming, and she had already planned to kill him and herself. That's why she was so blunt with me this morning about if I loved her son! Oh, God! Why did she have to do it?* She covered her face with her hands as she tried to process it all.

She felt an arm steal around her, and she glanced up at Severus. "Hermione, Auror Shacklebolt asked you a question," he said softly.

She swallowed and licked her lips. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked weakly.

Kingsley Shacklebolt gave her a reassuring smile. "I wanted to clarify the reason for your presence here. It is my understanding that Dumbledore allowed you to stay with Mrs. Snape and her son for the summer?"

"Yes," she said weakly.

"You are an orphan, according to the paperwork Dumbledore gave us?" he asked.

"I am," she replied.

"Dumbledore is waiting for us to take you both to Hogwarts. He will be making arrangements for where you will be staying for the rest of the summer," he said reassuringly.

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Severus and Hermione jerked their heads up towards the voice. It was Avery.

Avery stood in the front door, looking around the sitting room as if it were contaminated. "Severus and Hermione will be staying with my family at Avery Manor," he said importantly. "My father has worked out the arrangements with Dumbledore." He handed a letter to Kingsley.

The Auror read it and looked at Hermione. "The Headmaster is giving his consent if you wish to stay with the Averys," he said with concern in his eyes.

Hermione looked up at Severus, and he placed an arm around her. "I will take care of her, sir," he replied.

Hermione looked at Avery. There was triumph in his face. His eyes glittered, and a smile played around the corners of his mouth. She did not want to go with Avery; he terrified her. If she were brought to his house, there would be no guarantee she would leave it safely.

"Did the Headmaster give us permission to stay at Hogwarts?" she asked desperately.

Kingsley looked relieved. "Yes, Miss Granger, he did. Is that what you wish to do?"

"Yes," she answered resolutely.

"Hermione!" Severus exclaimed as he turned to look at her. His face was pained, and he was clearly upset.

"Severus, let's please discuss this in private," she whispered.

"If you will excuse us," Severus apologized to Avery and the Aurors.

Severus led Hermione past Avery, and they stepped out into the hot summer night air. Severus grabbed her by her arms and said, "Why don't you want to stay with me?" he asked, sounding like a five-year-old little boy.

"Severus," she said as she dislodged herself from his grasp. "I want to stay with you, but I'm afraid to be at Avery's house. I'd be frightened the whole time!"

He looked down at her and slid his hands around her waist. "You can stay with me. I'll never let you out of my sight," he whispered.

Hermione felt her cheeks growing hot. "Yes, then we'd be having sex inside a week!"

He nuzzled her cheek with his nose. "Would it be so horrible, Hermione?" he asked deeply.

"No," she answered softly. "It's just we're not ready for that step, and we would be making love for all the wrong reasons. If we decide to take that step, I want it to be beautiful, like the way you kissed me earlier. That was wonderful," she said shyly.

He looked at her with dark intensity. She looked into his eyes and felt how wonderful it would be to lose herself in them. It would be so easy just to fall into him and let him take over her will, her soul, her mind, and her body. She felt such desire for him to be close to her, holding her, touching her, she felt on fire. She remembered how good his erection felt against her thigh and considered how much better it would feel inside her warm body. But she couldn't...not now...not like this.

He looked so sad and downcast, but he nodded his head and agreed with her that it would be for the best for them to be apart.

"Why can't you just come back to Hogwarts with me?" she asked desperately.

Severus looked at her guiltily. "Hermione, my time of mourning is over. Lily is out of the picture, and now my parents are gone. It's time to now take the final step and begin my training."

"Your training?" she asked incredulously.

He smirked. "I know, it sounds like I'm joining Her Majesty's Army. However, in our world it's not so far off the mark."

"What's going to happen to you, Severus?" she asked quietly. Avery was starting to come around, stalking like a predator.

"I don't know, Hermione," he whispered softly. "But I do know this: you have been mentioned. Your unknown pedigree and blood status coupled with your magical abilities have intrigued many important people. Your showdown with the Slytherins has raised your value, as well as your ability to continue to deal with them diplomatically. I will need to ascertain what that interest will be. Besides, I have debts to repay."

"What debts?" Hermione asked fearfully.

Severus sighed. "Lily's safety came with a price. There is always a price when it comes to Slytherins, Hermione. Nothing is free," he said coolly. "Never forget that. Avery is watching. I will see you in six weeks."

He walked away, and Hermione returned to the house to pack and prepare to leave for Hogwarts. *Six weeks I will be away from him*, she thought. She sighed and hastily packed her trunk. She put on her traveling cloak, and Kingsley shrank the trunk down to the size of a handbag.

"Mr. Shackbolt," she began as she looked around the sitting room, "what is going to happen to the house?"

"The house is Master Snape's. After he turns of age, he will be able to come and live here as he pleases. Right now, the Auror Department will be cleaning up and putting things to rights after the investigation is over."

He smiled and motioned her to walk down the stairs first. They walked outside, and he said, "Hold on to my hand. We are going to Apparate to Hogwarts now."

Hermione took a moment to look back to the house. It had been such a wonderful day. She couldn't believe that just a couple of hours ago, she and Severus had been sitting in a record booth listening to an old love song and sharing their first kiss. So many wonderful memories were being left behind in the old house on Spinner's End. But this night, they had stolen precious hours far removed from anything that was remotely connected to the world they were entering.

Hermione walked up the final steps to the Headmaster's office door. She took a steadying breath and knocked. The door opened of its own accord, revealing Dumbledore sitting behind his desk. His face looked worried. Though, when he saw Hermione, his face lit up, and he smiled.

"Miss Granger!" he said happily as he stood up. "I am so pleased to see you. Please, sit down."

Hermione sat on one of the plush chairs near his desk, and with a wave of his hand, a silver tea service appeared.

"Shall I pour?" he asked over his half-moon glasses.

"Please," she answered politely.

Dumbledore spoke first. "Miss Granger, I was so very distraught over the deaths of Severus' parents. I had gone to see Mrs. Snape personally after she had been informed of her husband's release. I had tried to persuade her to leave Spinner's End and reside in Hogsmeade or to take a Wizarding flat near the Ministry. She, of course, refused most ardently! I had hoped that seeing you and Severus during the summer might make her see reason." He sighed tiredly.

"Miss Granger, I seem to be making more mistakes concerning you and Severus as time goes by," he declared.

"I don't know how you possibly could have known what was in Mrs. Snape's mind!" Hermione said in his defense. "After all, Severus and I were there for six weeks and never once suspected anything so dastardly."

She accepted a cup of tea from the Headmaster and continued, "I admit that I felt something was wrong with Mrs. Snape. I just assumed she was concerned about my staying the entire summer this year. I was afraid I would wear out my welcome. I was wrong," she whispered ruefully.

Dumbledore patted her free hand. "There, there, Miss Granger. All shall be resolved in due course. What is most important is that Severus be watched over and protected," he said mysteriously.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked, confused.

The old wizard smiled, and his blue eyes twinkled. "I apologize again, Miss Granger. I have a most unfortunate habit of being vague at the worst times! Severus has been for many years now targeted by the followers of Lord Voldemort. His first year, a student, a seventh-year Slytherin prefect named Lucius Malfoy, took young Severus under his wing. Severus always had a leaning towards dark magic, as most Slytherins do. He had no true friends his first two years before your arrival, save Miss Evans. Those in his own house distrusted him and were jealous of his magical abilities. Although I was pleased to hear of his long-time friendship with Miss Evans, I was sorely disappointed when I saw the fruit it bore. Miss Evans is a very powerful witch. However, her maturity level cannot seem to grasp such a complex personality as Severus Snape."

Hermione sipped her tea and said nothing. She wholeheartedly agreed with the Dumbledore's assessment. She hated knowing Lucius Malfoy had been such a key player in Severus' seduction to the dark. She knew from personal experience from her second year that the man was a vicious opportunist.

He continued. "I know you realize that this year shall bring a new set of problems, including a shift in relationship with you, Severus, and Miss Evans."

Hermione nodded. "So, you know about their falling out?" she asked.

"Professor McGonagall was kind enough to inform me about the incident that took place by the lake in June. Unfortunately, no staff member saw it, so no punishment can be given," he replied.

Hermione pursed her lips. "Pardon me, Headmaster, but I think James, Sirius, and Peter should be punished for what they did! I saw the whole interlude. It was a set-up. A set-up orchestrated by Avery and Sirius Black to humiliate Severus to such an extent that he would lash out at Lily. Severus had been warned that his time of protecting Lily was over, that he needed to let her own house take care of her. Don't you see what is happening underneath your nose?" she said passionately.

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes," he replied sadly. "I do. And it is most unfortunate. I do not presume to dismiss what is taking place outside of these walls. Lord Voldemort, or Tom Riddle, as I know him, is recruiting amongst the Slytherins of this school. His followers are called Death Eaters. I am aware that the animosity between Gryffindor and Slytherin House has grown exponentially as the past few years have gone by. I fear a war will happen upon us: a war that shall end in tragedy and death. I fear what this New Year shall bring."

"I'm not safe, am I?" Hermione whispered as her eyes drifted to watch the crackling fire.

"On the contrary, Miss Granger!" Dumbledore said brightly. Hermione turned to face him, her eyes wide with shock.

Dumbledore's cerulean eyes shone as he spoke. "You have been given a high honor by being asked to stay at Avery Manor. I am pleased you did not take the offer; nonetheless, the offer itself was a gesture of good faith. Mr. Avery is the true Head of Slytherin House. Professor Slughorn is merely a figurehead, and I know it very well. Mr. Avery's father is an old classmate of Voldemort's and is considered to be his right hand man. He is one of his fiercest supporters, along with Rudolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange, Rebastan's older brother and sister-in-law. Slytherin House has recognized you as Head of Gryffindor House. No Slytherin shall raise a hand against you unless an order is issued from Mr. Avery, which consequentially, would mean Voldemort himself."

Hermione's eyes popped open in horror and disbelief. Dumbledore merely nodded his head.

"Oh, yes, Miss Granger. This year shall be a true testing of your strengths and abilities. I would not be surprised if you were not invited to have a visit with Voldemort himself," he said calmly.

"How can you allow this to go on inside Hogwarts?" Hermione raged. "How can you let it take root? Can't you make it illegal? Expel those who are in league with Voldemort?"

Dumbledore spread his hands in resignation. "And then where would we be, Miss Granger? At least this way, I am able to monitor what is happening around us. If I were to drive them out, I would be forcing a war to happen prematurely, before those who must fight it are ready," he revealed.

Hermione looked down at her tea. "I shouldn't be in the middle of this. I should not be interfering. I could be endangering my own reality!" she said hysterically.

Dumbledore remained calm. "Or, perhaps, Miss Granger, this is what you were destined to do. Perhaps you are the one who will stop Voldemort."

She stood up and her tea fell to the floor. "No!" she yelled. "You don't understand. It's not my destiny...it's not me. There is another..." She clamped her hand over her mouth in shock and fear. She had said too much.

"So, in the future, another will come to vanquish him?" he whispered to himself. "Astonishing!"

"Don't you see?" she hissed angrily. "I can't meddle with what must come to pass. There are certain events that must happen, or we risk ever having anyone to stop him!"

"Hermione, the bell cannot be unrung," he said firmly. "What is done is done. You shall assume your new status and assist Severus with his duties. It is expected of you. You cannot avoid Voldemort now; he is aware of you and your power. Besides," he added. "You cannot be walking around anymore without protecting your mind. Voldemort himself will train Severus in the art of Occlumency. You shall start your training with me."

"Headmaster, I know about Occlumency. I can't have you seeing what is inside my head," she insisted as she began to pace the floor.

"Then I suggest you start working very hard during these next six weeks to thwart my attempts to break into your mind. Under the command of Voldemort, Avery and Severus will be attempting the same thing once school resumes," he warned. "I'm sure you wouldn't want Voldemort knowing what information you have hidden in your head. But fear not, Miss Granger. You shall be given the use of my personal Pensieve before each Occlumency lesson. You can remove the damaging memories and not be afraid of them being breached by either side."

Hermione sat down and watched numbly as Dumbledore summoned from one of his many bookcases several books on Occlumency. That thought alone made her quake with fear: Voldemort could find out about his coming demise. If he knew that, James and Lily would be slaughtered outright before Harry could even have a chance at life! She had no choice. She would do what was expected of her, and she most definitely would use the Pensieve. She took the books and left for Gryffindor tower. It was going to be a harrowing six weeks. The beauty of the day she had just shared with Severus seemed so far away and remote from where she found herself. Would she and Severus ever find their way back to each other, now just as they had found one another?

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 74

Hermione starts her sixth-year with many complications.

A/N: I want to thank luvsev for the hard work she's done, and I also want to thank each of you who have read and left reviews! Keep them coming :)

The fall term started tense and full of unspoken fear. Dumbledore had been correct in his assessment that further lines would have to be drawn between the Slytherins and Gryffindors as their world barreled swiftly towards war.

Hermione had been eagerly awaiting Severus' return. When he finally arrived at the Start-of-Term Feast, he was very different. He looked so unlike the Severus she knew that she almost didn't recognize him. He was dressed in brand-new robes. Severus had never owned anything new. However, he was groomed and dressed appropriately. Hermione noticed a couple of Slytherin girls looking at him like they could have eaten him with a spoon. It rankled Hermione, but she kept her herself collected, remembering to practice the disciplines of Occlumency.

Avery and Severus greeted her formally before the Feast began. It was a diplomatic maneuver by Slytherin House to demonstrate to their brothers whom they were to show deference. The message was clear: Hermione Granger was not to be touched. She was under the protection of Avery, which meant she had the approval of the Dark Lord himself. This seemingly meaningless exchange as interpreted by the Gryffindors was not lost upon Sirius Black. He knew all about the Slytherins and their ceremonies. He was incensed and appalled that Avery and Snape would have the gall to flaunt themselves at Gryffindor's table.

That evening, Hermione found herself in an imbroglio that threatened to tear Gryffindor House in two. Sirius Black went straight up to Hermione as she entered the common room and attacked her verbally.

"You traitor!" he snarled as he pointed his wand at her chest, striding up towards her.

James, Lily, Peter and Lupin tried to call him off. He refused to relent. "I can't believe you would even think of consorting with that rabble after how Snivellus treated Lily last term! How can you call yourself a Gryffindor?"

Hermione's temper flared white hot in righteous indignation. "You dare call me a traitor?" she snapped. "I wasn't the one who asked to be chosen. It so happens that I managed to stand up against Avery, Mulciber, Rabastan and Rosier in order to get them to leave Mary MacDonald alone!"

Mary stood up and interjected. "That's why they haven't bothered me? I thought perhaps they were just biding their time!"

"No," Hermione said calmly. "I told them Mary was under MY protection since none of you saw fit to help her. I bested three of Avery's cronies in one fell swoop. Avery then offered to sit down with me and negotiate the terms. Shortly after, Avery informed me that he was impressed with me. He called me Miss Granger, and later I was informed that I had been recognized as the Head of Gryffindor House.

"You?" spat Sirius. "You came here in your third year! What claim do you have to speak for all of us?" he challenged.

"I have no such claim," she replied. "This is not about who is the better person amongst us. It has to do with the person *they* wish to negotiate with in the future."

"This is preposterous! Gryffindors will never abide by Slytherin's archaic class structure! You don't speak for us!" snarled Sirius.

Suddenly, to everyone's shock, Lupin spoke up. "Hermione is right, Sirius. She has proven that she is powerful enough to duel against three boys at once. All upperclassmen as well from what I was told. Not only that, Hermione has an innate ability for diplomacy and levelheadedness. She is far too logical to allow her emotions to cloud her better judgment. If this is going to come down to war, as we believe it shall, it will be crucial to have someone who can deal with the other side. I think we should let Hermione do what she has been doing and leave her in peace. Besides, she has more people other than Mary under her protection," he added.

He sat down and stared at Hermione for quite a while as Sirius continued to demand answers. "Who is under your protection? What is the cost for all of this? Slytherins don't do anything for free. What are you, Snape's whore?"

Lupin and a couple other Gryffindors started to rage against Sirius. Lupin was furious. He jumped up, and for the first time Hermione could remember, challenged him.

"Will you stop being so damn bloody-minded and listen to reason?" he roared. "If she were whoring herself to Snape, there would be no respect! She would only be Snape's 'Mudblood whore'! At this he turned and glanced at each of the Muggle-borns in the room and said, "I apologize for using that offensive word. I only said it to express the reality of the situation."

Hermione was affronted that neither Lily nor James came to her side against Sirius' accusations of her being Snape's whore. She excused herself from the common room. But before she left, she hissed in Sirius' ear.

"You've got nerve to accuse me, Sirius! I know all about the deal with the devil you made last term. Don't you forget it!"

She stormed out of the room and returned to her dorm. *Damn them!* she thought. *Damn the lot of them!*

Over the next few weeks, Hermione spent a great deal of time with Remus Lupin. He seemed to possess the only rational mind in the whole of Gryffindor House. He also had been chosen to study Occlumency with Dumbledore. Soon, they were pit against the other, searching for vulnerabilities in each other's mind. Hermione also confided in Remus about her difficulties she had been experiencing with Lily and the strain in her relationship with Severus.

Remus was an apt listener. He was intelligent and very fair-minded. He also was not quick to judge. That trait came to be something Hermione cherished in him, especially when she finally admitted the depth of her feelings for Severus.

He had sighed and looked rather sad when she admitted her love for Severus. It was more than knowing his affection for Hermione would never be returned. He was concerned about her welfare.

"Hermione," he began. "There is a reason why things between he and Lily had to end," he said.

"I know, Remus," she replied. "However, I know Severus and understand what motivates him more than Lily ever was able!"

"I suppose that is an important element," he mused.

"Knowing the reasons why Severus chooses certain avenues helps to understand the man he is becoming," she offered.

Remus looked at her pointedly, halting her steps while they had been walking around the Black Lake.

"Hermione, the man that Severus is becoming...is that the man you want?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered honestly. Lupin shook his head in sheer disappointment.

"Don't!" she snapped. "You only know one side of Severus Snape. I've lived with him. I have experienced tragedy, loss, hell...I've even held him as he cried. You do not know enough about him to pass judgment, Remus," she warned.

"I don't want to judge, Hermione," he said calmly. "I want to understand, I do. It just seems that I won't be able to, and it makes me sad."

Hermione looked at him earnestly. "Why, Remus?" she whispered.

He looked at her with pain etched on his face. "Because it means there will always be a part of you I shall never understand, a part that will forever be lost to me," he whispered.

Hermione patted his back. It was sad, but it couldn't be helped. After all this time, her heart had found someone to love. She just couldn't believe it ended up being Professor Snape! However, the Professor Snape she remembered from her first and second years didn't seem so clear anymore. He was fading from her mind and quickly being replaced by Severus, the boy who was becoming a man, who had kissed her as he played that old record to tell her he was falling in love with her.

Remus left her then, and she walked into the main gates, walking along the corridors, aimlessly daydreaming about the night Severus kissed her.

A pair of hands grabbed her and threw her into an empty classroom. It was dark. Hermione saw a black figure in front of the door.

"Severus?" she whispered.

"What were you doing with Lupin?" he demanded.

"You know Dumbledore has been teaching us Occlumency. We work together. Besides, he's the only Gryffindor that will even speak to me with any civility these days," she said snidely.

"What about Lily?" he sneered.

"She largely ignores me. You've seen it in class. She is beginning to hate me, I think," she whispered sadly as she lowered her head.

Severus came closer and held her face in his hands. "I can't stop thinking about the night I was in your bed. I wish we had given in, Hermione. But then, I can't forget the kiss we shared. It was perfect. It was the most perfect experience I've ever known. I love you, Hermione. I love you with an emotion I have never felt before in my life...ever...and I shall never stop."

Hermione felt his hands cover hers. He leaned into her and whispered in her ear, "Let me kiss you, Hermione. Let me feel your perfection."

Hermione felt her breath hitch and said, "The lights, Severus. I don't want to kiss you in the darkness."

He lit the room, and they looked into each other's face. "It's been too long, Hermione," he whispered.

She lifted her head and leaned into him. He caressed her face as he brought his warm lips to touch hers lightly. It felt so smooth and easy. Then they shifted their lips and began to give into the deeper urges within them. They continued to kiss passionately and hungrily. Finally, they broke apart.

"I will always love you," he whispered his lips brushing her own.

"Promise?" she choked out.

"I promise," he said fervently.

The magic swirled around them again as it had once before when promises had been made, and they were still awed by the intensity of its power. They stood in reverent silence as the swirling colors of gold, silver, purple, red, blue and green shimmered around them. As Hermione looked into Severus' black eyes, she knew something powerful had taken place between them.

"What's to become of us, Severus?" she asked.

"I don't know," he whispered as he looked at the dissolving magic around them. "We'll have to wait and see what the Dark Lord wants."

She nodded. *It's already starting. The Dark Lord is beginning to dictate our lives. Well, only for five more years come Halloween. Five more years, and I can have him without fear, without reservation and without having to answer to anyone. He promised to love me.*

"Severus," she whispered as he began to open to the door to leave. "I will love you. I promise that I will never do you harm. I may hurt you, being just a simple witch in love, but I shall never hurt you out of malice or of ill intent. I will always love you."

Severus strode to her and pulled her to him tightly and held her close. Hermione felt the emotions between them so keenly; she couldn't hold back the tears coursing down her cheeks. Severus held her face and kissed them away before taking her lips again with his own. They held on as long as they dared, then released the other without a sound or a goodbye. There was no need for the words. Not for them.

Hermione had been correct in her assessment of Lily's agitation with her. As the weeks passed, she grew more impatient with Hermione's presence. The evenings usually ended with her strolling in right at curfew and spending her late evenings with the Gryffindors in the common room. She still kept her distance from the Marauders somewhat. She seemed unsure as to how she should go about her newfound independence from Hermione and Severus.

Mary MacDonald was the only other Gryffindor besides Lupin that confided with Hermione about what was truly happening in Gryffindor House.

"Look," she said one evening in late September. "I don't feel exactly comforted by knowing you have this 'alliance' with Slytherin, but I am not a person who forgets a kindness. I also realize that it is only by your good graces that I have remained unmolested since my last encounter with Mulciber and Rosier."

Hermione regarded the young woman with deep respect and appreciated her honesty.

"Mary," she said, "you have absolutely nothing to fear. I respect your honesty and insight. You owe me nothing. I have been the one chosen and have the power and ability to save those whom I can. When I think about Laura Danbary, I shudder to think!"

Mary nodded gravely. They both knew what had happened to the young Muggle-born Ravenclaw. She had been viciously raped and her mind Obliviated. She had no recollection of the event itself, but she had been nearly killed with the viciousness dealt her. She was gone from Hogwarts now. No one was sure if she would ever return.

"Mary," Hermione asked. "How is Lily, really? I am concerned for her. I have no claim on her and neither does Severus. Is she being treated well and protected by James and Sirius?"

Mary laughed weakly. "James and Sirius act like the biggest prats, just to cover the fact that they are in essence her bodyguards. Either Lily has no real inclination of what is happening here, or she just wants to turn a blind eye to it all." Mary drew in an uneasy breath. "Hermione, I really am sorry that she has treated you with such disdain. Her mind is so closed. I don't think she's gotten over what Severus did to her."

Hermione wanted nothing more than to set the record straight. However, she couldn't risk it. Lily was slowly growing closer to James and Sirius. James had even said to her face that he knew he had bested Severus. The only relief was that he didn't rub it in Severus' face. That would have been too much to bear.

"Mary," she said. "I want you to do me a favor. I need to know how things are going with Lily. If there could be a way for you to either act as a liaison between James Potter, or you could just continue to give me your assessments of situations as they arise, I would be grateful. I know what I am asking could be potentially dangerous, especially if Sirius were to discover what you were up to..."

"...You really don't trust Sirius Black," she interjected.

Hermione was unapologetic. "Mary, there are things I know that I can not reveal to you. All I can say is that I do not trust Sirius Black, and he has given me more than one reason to not do so. He is a hothead and potentially dangerous. I warned Lily that she would rue the day she ever met the boy, but she just laughed it off as she always does. Well, one day, she may regret how she ignored my warning."

"Do you trust James Potter?" she asked.

Hermione pondered her question. "I do. I do not particularly *like* James, and to be sure, he has his faults, but nonetheless, I believe him to be upright and honest. Even in his errors, he makes no excuses for his blatant hatred for Severus, and I respect that. I wish all my enemies were so open...not that I consider James an enemy!" she said quickly at the sight of Mary's aghast face. "No, I trust James to be honest and noble. It's almost comforting in the midst of all this duplicity! I detest these intrigues, deceptions and half-truths that are so commonplace when negotiating with Slytherin House."

Mary gave her hand a squeeze as they stood against the railing overlooking the Gryffindor common room as the inhabitants played, joked and enjoyed themselves without the burdens of knowing it all came with a price.

She remembered Severus had told her once that nothing ever was free when it came to dealing with Slytherins. She looked over at Sirius Black, flirting with a couple of girls. He was so carefree, so smug in his disdain for her. He should know being from a long line of Slytherins that Hermione was the one person he should be thanking for his easy life. Hermione's heart hardened even more as she watched him laugh and flirt. He should be on his knees in gratitude for her patience and long suffering where she was concerned. She knew that if she only gave the word, he would be dead. If it had not been for the concessions she had made at the beginning of the school year, the war would have most assuredly broken out. Instead, she was ridiculed and disrespected by her very own house. Avery reveled in her rejection by her own house. He saw it as proof that Gryffindors were nothing special or courageous. If anything, they were just as territorial and narrow-minded as Slytherins were.

"Oh, they spout their equality amongst all wizards and witches, yet they reject their own savior!" Avery had said one day to her as he laughed.

Hermione was the only non-Slytherin allowed inside the common room. When she arrived each Thursday evening, she would negotiate terms with Avery. As Dumbledore had predicted, there was a great deal of Legilimency taking place through the course of her visit. Hermione, being the methodical, logical, industrious witch she was, had taken to Occlumency like a duck to water. She had a natural talent for the craft, and Lupin was always proud to report that he, never on his best day, could breach her walls.

Dumbledore taught the subtly of creating false memories and directing the person down the corridors of the mind where you wished for them to go. The greatest lesson she learned in her training was not to focus against keeping a person out of an area that is rife with information; the focus was to not show anything that was hiding at all and merely 'give over' the tidbits that could keep the person happy, but to enable them to truly ascertain any real truths or secrets. It was paradoxical; the safest defense was not in protectively locking away one's secrets, but keeping them hidden in plain sight. There, they would be most likely overlooked.

This particular Thursday evening's discussion was about the on-going conflict between the Marauders and Severus Snape.

Avery sat across from Hermione with Severus at his side. He never was a person to mince words; however, tonight he was even less inclined.

He looked at Hermione long and hard before he spoke. "I seem to recall, Miss Granger, upon our initial meeting that if anyone were to set their sights on the Mudblood MacDonald, especially more than one person at a time, that the punishment would be meted out in double portions. I have to say that the actions of those in your own house have been less than stellar. Although, we have been reluctant to interfere with Severus' *personality conflicts*, we are no longer going to turn a blind eye."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "That statement has a lot of buckshot behind it," she replied smoothly.

Avery smiled viciously. "I am only willing to give you the same consideration you have given us." He steepled his fingers in front of him as his elbows rested on the arms of his chair.

Hermione remained steady. "So, when I return to Gryffindor tower, the message I will carry is to watch out, the Slytherins are in for 'an eye for eye?'"

Avery chuckled. "No, think of it more as the Golden Rule: a 'do unto others.' If Severus is set upon again two to one, I shall presume that is the same action they want reciprocated," he said simply.

Unfazed, Hermione retorted, "Don't expect for either Potter or Black to stand down from what they will interpret as an unmitigated threat. This message will only increase the likelihood of retaliation."

"Oh, I hope so," Avery said in an eager whisper. "Only, make sure they realize that they may not be the recipients of our vengeance," he explained. "I'm sure that shall keep their wands in check."

"I'm curious," Hermione asked as she settled back into her chair. "Why is it that you have taken such an interest in Severus' well-being when you have shown nothing for it before? Why now, when he is old enough to manage his own affairs?"

Avery waved away her question. "That is not your concern, Miss Granger. I do not expect you to understand. This is the Slytherin way. We do not believe in protecting the weak, only those who are the most vital. You Gryffindors have that defect of protecting the weakest among you."

Hermione was disgusted. "So, I should interpret this change of attitude towards Severus as proof of his rising power amongst your ranks?"

"Miss Granger," Avery said elegantly. "I do believe Gryffindor is entirely wasted upon you. If it were not for the fact you are only a poor orphan, you might have found

greatness in Slytherin House."

"Nevertheless," Hermione replied in repulsion as she stood. "I shall take my chances with Gryffindor House."

She left them after the parties had shaken hands, and the two wizards had bowed to her. The many faces she saw as she weaved her way towards the common room door helped to ground her in the reality that she was no more welcome or respected than the lowliest Muggle-born Hufflepuff. As charming and effervescent as Avery was towards her, Hermione knew her place amongst them. It would be foolish to ever forget for a mere second.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 74

Another meeting with Avery, and another fight with Sirius makes for a well-rounded day of insanity for Hermione. After the Christmas holidays, she secretly meets with Severus and enjoys a romantic birthday interlude with him.

A/N: Again thanks you to all my hard working betas. Also, thanks to all who are keeping with this fic and sending reviews. Keep it up! I love them!

Hermione walked into the Gryffindor common room. She met with the "Marauders" as she normally did after her weekly talks with Avery, including the rest of the upper class Gryffindors. This time Lily was there with James. It was eerily similar, seeing how Severus had joined her and Avery in Slytherin's common room.

"Well?" Sirius asked gruffly.

Hermione sat down and address them all, "In the past, I have made certain conditions on the behaviors of some members of Slytherin, and now the time has come to collect."

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "What have you done?" he said in a threatening tone.

Hermione was on her feet in an instant. "I did what I had to do to protect my own from being set upon. Let's not hide from that reality, shall we? The truth is that I threatened the lot of them that if they ever ganged up upon Mary MacDonald again, I would repay them in spades. Well, now Avery is asking for all of us to live by the same standard. You do know what that means, don't you?"

Sirius looked at her confused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "How can you be so thick?" she sneered.

"It's Snape, isn't it?" asked a concerned voice.

Hermione's head snapped over to the direction of the sound. James stood there calmly and repeated, "It's about Snape, right?"

"Yes," she said angrily. "Avery let me know that this has gone on long enough. Obviously, Severus has gained some clout amongst his housemates, and they are not going to stand aside and let him be ambushed day after day."

"You always felt so sorry for that sniveling git!" Sirius bellowed. "Why don't you just go back to him? You and he are just alike!"

Hermione's eyes flashed furiously and she reminded herself to remain calm.

Lupin stood up and went to Hermione's side.

"You all know that she is just the messenger!" he snapped at them. "Let's not turn this into a character assassination!"

Sirius refused to back down. "I don't care! I'll do whatever I damn well like. If Avery or any of those blighters have a problem with it, then they can come and do their worst!" he said smugly.

"That's exactly what they are hoping for," Hermione said, her voice dripping with venom. Her voice became louder and louder as she spoke. "Avery said retaliation would be forthcoming; however, it would not be against you or Potter. It may be Mary next time, or Lily. Or any Gryffindor! The point is that they do not care to keep or respect the standards we hold dear if we do not adhere to them ourselves! So, you *will* desist with these ambushes immediately or face retribution!" she warned.

"Retribution?" Sirius said as he lazily plopped down into a chair. "From whom?" he said as he spread his hands in a cavalier fashion.

Hermione whipped out her wand and growled, "From me!"

Sirius jumped up with lightening speed, but Hermione was ready for him. "You?" he spat in derision. "What could you possibly do to me?"

Hermione didn't think. She didn't want to care anymore. She lashed out and hissed, "*Sectumsemptra!*"

She nicked him on the shoulder. She didn't want to do anything really life threatening, but he had to be shown that he was not in charge here. A few girls screamed, and cloths were brought to stop the bleeding.

The room was silent as Hermione walked closer to Sirius and ordered him to sit down. She began to sing the incantation and healed him, good as new. All the while, Sirius stared long and hard at her.

"That was Dark magic!" someone hollered accusingly.

Hermione faced the crowd who was looking at her in fear and awe. "They can break you and heal you only to break you again. This is the enemy you face, didn't make the fucking rules, but this is what it is! Accept it."

Hermione was tired. She went up to her dorm room, not caring how any of them felt about Avery's warning. In her estimation, it had been actually damn nice for him to give

fair warning. She'd felt for years James and Sirius were just a big bunch of arseholes that needed to be taken down a peg or two!

She was slipping into bed when Lily came into the room.

"Well, they are talking with Mary," she said curtly. "I hope you are satisfied!"

Hermione snapped back her covers and stood to face her old friend. "What?" she said sadly. "What have I done that has been so horrible that you have seen fit to ignore me these past three months? We were best friends, Lily. I haven't changed. You have."

Lily was brimming with rage. "I can't believe you, Hermione Granger! I just can't. You know what these people are, you know what they do, and yet you continue to meet with them and play your little political games with them! I don't know if I can even trust you!" she yelled.

Hermione went and put her hands on Lily's shoulders. "Lily, things are not always cut and dry. I've tried to explain that to you time and again! You know that I care deeply for you. I want you to be as safe as you can while we are in this school because when we leave, there will be nothing to hide behind. It will all be unleashed, as it already is now in some areas! People are disappearing; Muggles are murdered outright! It's good you are with James. Stay with him, and let him train you to protect yourself. You will need it."

Her green eyes were full of tears. "I know you see him and talk with him. You don't see me anymore, Hermione, and neither does he. It's like neither of you ever cared about me at all," she whispered. "I lost my best friend, and now I'm losing you and I don't deserve it!" she cried out.

Hermione embraced her, knowing she was talking about Severus. "You've not lost me, Lily. You haven't, really, you haven't!" she whispered in her ear. "Listen, I am still your friend...but no more."

Lily pulled from her. "Hermione," she breathed, "I-I thought we had something special."

"I'm not gay," replied Hermione calmly.

"Neither am I," said Lily softly.

Hermione didn't believe her for one minute. Lily held her tightly, and they hung on to each other for a while. Lily finally released Hermione, and they silently went to bed separately.

The rest of the term went on without incident. James and Sirius were making the most out of taking turns hexing Snape. James was quite moody. Ever since the night Hermione and Lily made up their friendship, she had been acting cooler towards him and he couldn't understand it. Hermione knew perfectly well what was occurring, and it was only a matter of time before things came to a head.

Hermione and Lily had come to a critical point in their relationship. It was more of a truce than an understanding. Lily began to spend more time with Mary MacDonald and some of the other girls in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Hermione was officially out of the perimeter as well as James and Sirius. She was kindly towards Lupin; however, the rest she blatantly ignored.

James took his frustrations out on everyone. He grew an even bigger head than the one he possessed fifth year! He spared no one the wrath of his wand. He and Snape were constantly fighting. It was getting rather old, and Hermione finally confronted him just before Christmas hols.

"Look, James, it's not Severus' fault Lily's turned cold on you. She seems to have turned cold to most boys these days. I think she needs to figure out what she wants. You could really take this time to think about how you want Lily to see you and what kind of wizard you want to be. If you continue to show yourself as a levelheaded and likable bloke, she may come around during your seventh year. But, for the love of Merlin, stop acting like a ruddy jack-ass all the time!" she snarled at him.

"I thought it was all settled, you know?" he said as they walked in the snow outside. "I really thought after Snape called Lily that name, she'd be excited to take me on. It was going okay, but now she's pushing me away again!" He kicked at the snow in frustration. *God, he looks like Harry when he does that!* she thought wistfully.

"I'll change, Hermione. I'll do it. I may never stop hexing Snape. He likes to give as much as he gets! But, I'll stop jinxing people in the halls," he promised.

"That's a lad!" Hermione said as she patted him on the back.

The Christmas hols were to be as gloomy as every one before. At least she always had a Christmas package from Severus' mum, but not this year. Snape was at Spinner's End, cleaning out some of the rubbish of his mum and dad's. He was the master now, a mere two weeks before he became of age at seventeen. If he had only been born a couple of weeks earlier, he and Hermione could have stayed at Spinner's End together. Hermione shuddered with pleasure at how wonderful it could have been.

Hermione was falling hard for the dark wizard. He was no longer a boy, but an intelligent and graceful youth coming into his body, lithe, taunt, and magnificent. Her thoughts turned more intimate as time passed. She began to think about how it would feel to have him naked on top of her. Many a morning in her shower, she would touch herself fantasizing about him panting and sweating over her, pushing himself inside her. She wanted it more than her next meal or her next breath. She wondered how he would see her upon his return after the holidays. Would he see the desire in her eyes?

When Severus returned, he was very different. Gone were the last remnants of the boy that she had once known, the boy that she could still reach with a touch of a hand. He was hardened and self-controlled. Hermione knew he had spent a great deal of time with the Dark Lord over the holidays; she wasn't prepared to see how much he had morphed into the Professor Snape she once had known. She wanted to kick herself for thinking she could change him, that she could love him out of his destiny.

She didn't get to speak to him until his birthday. It was a very special day: the ninth of January 1977. He was now of Legal Wizarding Age. They met by the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She gave him a special gift she had worked out with Professor McGonagall doing extra work to earn money. It was a beautiful black silk cloak. She knew it would look magnificent on him. She had pocket money that Dumbledore gave her every month for incidentals. She had squirreled her money over the past semester and finally over the Christmas hols, had it ready for him.

Severus was touched and deeply moved that she had spent so much of her own hard earned money on something so beautiful for his own vanity.

"Hermione, it is far too extravagant. It's not right. You wear second hand robes and have used textbooks...it is not correct...I should be spoiling you!" He bowed his head in shame. "I never even recognized your birthday," he said sadly.

"Don't worry," she said knowingly. "It was so close to the beginning of term. It would have been far too risky!"

He tried it on, and Hermione felt her breath catch. It was Professor Snape. A young Professor Snape, but it was him. Although the Professor Snape she had known never had looked so passionately at her. He reached for her and kissed her desperately. She eagerly let him take over and gave in to his ardor.

"Hermione, I love you. There will be times you will doubt my love, but I will not ever stop. I made a vow. One day, I shall cover you with diamonds and brocade. You shall put all those pure-blood ladies to shame with your loveliness. Even this moment, the way you look at me...my God, Hermione, you are the loveliest witch I have ever seen."

He continued to hold her and kissed her wantonly. He whispered into her ear, "I want to make love to you, my love. My sweet Hermione, you are the only perfect thing in my life, and I don't deserve you. Promise me, Hermione. Promise you will save your love, save yourself for me. One day, I shall take you into my arms, and I will never release you until you are ready to pass out from the pleasure I will give you. I swear...I shall never touch another woman. Until you and I can be together, I will save myself for you."

"Oh, Severus," Hermione whispered. She could say no more. She was overcome with her feelings for him.

Hermione smiled brightly. She knew that he would love her until the day she died. And she knew he would be hurting and pained that they could not yet fully express their love in the way they wanted to do so desperately. It just could not be right now. However, these stolen moments would have to sustain them until their time came.

As the day turned into evening, they held on more desperately to the other. "I love you, Hermione," he whispered. "I want you to know you hold everything in you that is good in me. I entrust all my goodness and all the things I hold precious for you to keep and protect. I can't wait until I can make you mine in every sense of the word. Hermione, I couldn't stop loving you even if I tried."

"Are you mine, Hermione? Are you still mine?" he whispered.

"I am yours, Severus," she answered. "I will never let another man into my heart or my body. I would rather die than have another man touch me. It's for you. All I have is yours."

He grasped her face and pulled her to his own. "Hermione, I want you so badly. I want nothing more in this world to make love to you and lose myself in you. Can you understand how intoxicating you are? I don't want to live without you," he said lowly and passionately.

"I must go, Severus. They will be waiting to celebrate your coming of age," she reminded him.

"Hermione," he said as he pressed her against him. He whispered so quietly, and as he spoke, Hermione felt the words he said were too intimate, far too personal between them to vocalized in the air. When he released her, Severus was emotional, and his voice shook as he spoke. "A woman may offer herself to me to secure a place for herself. I will refuse of course, unless the Dark Lord insists upon it. I want you to know that if that happens, I shall think of you, and the night you let me into your bed at Spinner's End and let me kiss you on the cheek. I won't have intercourse...I won't even touch her...only allow oral service. Forgive me, for the crassness of my words. I know this must be a traitorous act, and I hate myself already. I feel I shall be violating our bond. Please know I shall not enjoy any minute of it. If I find release tonight, it shall only be because I will have thought of your lips and hands on me. My body may betray me, but my mind will be pure. I hope you can forgive me one day...for I shall never be able," he said sadly.

Hermione felt her heart was breaking at his confession. "This is not easy for us, Severus. I know because of the oath you gave me; you will love me forever and always. I trust you. I just hope you can accept that until this is over, I cannot be with you intimately, knowing what the Dark Lord might make you do. I-I am sorry. I just can't feel comfortable knowing...just hours from being in another woman's...I just can't," she choked out as the tears began to swell in her eyes.

He took her into his arms and kissed her tears. "No, Hermione. You are right. What we have is too precious to be mixed in with all of this. I shall refrain from trying to progress our relationship to that level. But I wanted to be honest. I want you knowing what I have to do, and I want you to know how I will be used. Can you bear hearing that I might be fucking other women?"

"Oh, Severus!" Hermione said in disgust. "That is just...how can you even say that word to me?"

He kept his hold on her. "Because you and I *will make love*. What I will do with these soulless women who only want to make a name for themselves will be animalistic with no tenderness or feeling. I might as well be urinating on them. I know that that is shocking, but I've seen it. They watch each other copulate, and it is grotesque! I do not want what I have planned for us to be anything like that," he said in revulsion.

"Severus," Hermione asked as she toyed with his shirt. "Does this mean that when we finally, you know, that you will only want things to be gentle and tender?"

He smiled at her. "You're afraid I will only want you certain ways and other acts will be ruined?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. She couldn't speak, she felt shy and embarrassed.

Severus took her face and lifted it to his. "You fantasize about us?" he whispered to her.

She nodded her head, and he chuckled. "That's a relief," he said happily. He became more aggressive with her and started to roughly kiss her neck and twist her nipples that had begun to harden against her shirt. She moaned in excitement, and Severus whispered to her, "Don't worry. I fantasize about you, your lips around my cock, taking you from behind, making you scream as I taste the sweetness from between your legs. No Hermione, I want you to fulfill all my needs."

He continued to hold her. "What I had felt for Lily was just lust compared to what you and I will one day experience. Please, don't give up on me, my love. I shall never give up on you," he said softly with his intense black eyes boring into hers.

"I shall save it all for you, Severus. No man shall know me but you. I swear!" she said passionately.

The familiar magic swirled around them, bonding their vows to the other, only the colors were not so varied, it was all silver and gold. It was ancient magic, Severus whispered. And he explained that they were magically betrothed. Only death would release them from the other.

He kissed her passionately and nibbled on her neck and ear. "I want to bare your breasts and ravage them. Your lips are so full and tender. Every time I look at them, I can't help myself. I can't stop thinking about how soft the skin between your thighs must be. I want to kiss you there," he said huskily.

Hermione felt his erection pressed against her in desperation. "Tell me, Hermione, tell me what you think of when you touch yourself." His eyes were mad with desire.

"I-I think of you pushing yourself inside me to make me mould you. I think of you panting and groaning as you thrust inside me," she blurted out wantonly.

He grabbed her and pushed them against a nearby tree. He ground his erection into her pelvis through his clothes until he was moaning and panting with desire. Finally, he shuddered, and Hermione knew he had found release.

"Forgive me," he panted.

"Nothing to forgive, Severus. I wanted it as well."

"I want to pleasure you," he whispered.

"Just watch," she whispered.

He stared wide-eyed as she dipped her hand into her waistband and knickers with one hand and slipped her other hand up her shirt to find a hardened nipple. Severus stood frozen in shock as she pinched and rolled the peak through her small fingers.

"Stand closer, Severus!" she breathed.

He hovered over her as she forcefully frigged herself into a frenzy of desire. Severus looked at her in amazement. She climaxed and shivered. *"Oh, Severus, Severus, SEVERUS!"* she screamed as she flew over the edge.

She adjusted her robes, and Severus grabbed the hand that had dipped itself into her knickers.

"Dip your fingers into you, Hermione," he ordered.

She obeyed, and he grabbed her wrist, eyeing the come glistening on her hand. He sucked it off.

"Your sweetness," he said with a sigh. "Nothing more luscious," he said deeply.

As they walked away, for a moment, Hermione wished he had dipped his own fingers to take as much of her excitement from her as he wanted.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 74

More complications arise when Hermione learns Voldemort will be calling on her for a visit, and she and Lupin are introduced into the founding members of the Order of the Phoenix.

A/N: Thank you all for the lovely reviews so far. Please keep them coming. I want to know your thoughts! :)

Lily and Hermione's truce had settled into a relationship of attrition. Though on the surface everything was well, the redhead was not a forgiving woman, and she could not see past what she perceived as Hermione's betrayal of their friendship by keeping company with Severus.

Life in the dorm room was tense and uncomfortable. However, Lily had stepped up to take her work as a prefect more seriously this year than she had last year. Hermione knew she was angling for the Head Girl position. If she got it, Lily would have her own room, leaving Hermione and Mary alone in the seventh-year girls' dormitory.

Along with Lily's campaign to win the Head Girl title, she placed more effort than ever into her schoolwork. She had never been lazy by any stretch of the imagination. However, she was determined to make a name for herself. She was a natural at Potions, and she and Severus were the top two in their class. Since Lily was not speaking with Severus either, Potions class was tense and highly competitive. Lily received the accolades she craved so much from her adoring Gryffindors while Severus received praise from the Slytherins. He and Lily were a part of what was called, "The Slug Club," a group of handpicked talented students by Professor Horace Slughorn who had a greedy way of students who had exceptional promise to ingratiate himself with, just in case they grew up to become someone great.

Hermione had been invited to join the "Slug Club" since she was vying with Severus and Lily for the top student of the sixth-year class. However, she kept declining offers to attend the parties. Things were tense enough having to be in class with Lily; Hermione didn't want to add more discomfort into her life.

Potions class was quickly becoming a hotbed of one-upmanship. Lily and Severus pitted themselves against the other in a fierce battle of wills and wits, at times making Professor Slughorn roar with laughter at what he referred to as "Lily's cheeky personality." Hermione tried to not be jealous, but it seemed that Severus was still haunted by the ghost of his first love. She wondered at times if he really wanted her or if he was using her to try and win Lily back.

When she wasn't studying, Hermione spent most of her free time with Remus Lupin working on their Occlumency. Hermione was rapidly growing in her abilities, and Remus was just not a challenging partner anymore. Dumbledore took over her formal lessons, but Hermione still met with Lupin to talk and visit.

One day while they were walking on the green, he asked her, "What are your plans after graduation?"

Hermione was dumbfounded. She had never thought about a career in this timeline. If she were to go out into the wizarding world, she could really interfere with her future.

"I don't know. Teaching seems interesting. I love Arithmancy. I suppose I would have to speak with Professor Vector about my options."

"What are your plans, Remus?" she asked in return.

"Oh, well, it's open-ended at the moment. Dumbledore has some assignments for him I could do, so research and fieldwork would be my answer...at least for a few years. Then, perhaps teach if I could. I would love to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts," he said with a smile.

Ah, Remus, your wish shall come true/she thought happily. Then she wondered how Professor Lupin was faring in her own timeline. Had anyone discovered he was a werewolf? She was bolted out of her thoughts by another question.

"Hermione, I recall a conversation we had about a relationship. You said 'not now.' Well, we are in the second half of our sixth year, and I was wondering if 'now' had arrived," he asked shyly.

Hermione swallowed hard and said, "Remus, I think you are a handsome and intelligent boy who will one day become a great man, I'm sure of it. However, I have discovered my feelings lie with someone else. I am in love, and I know I always will be. I'm sorry, Remus. I don't want to give you false hopes."

Remus gave a half a smile and said, "I appreciate your candor. I hope I shall always have your friendship."

Hermione hugged him. "Don't you *ever* think I will stop being your friend. I care for you deeply, just not romantically. You are dear to me, and I consider you to be a very good friend...someone I KNOW I can trust."

Remus smiled, and they continued their walk. Now that the question of a future relationship had been resolved, the two could resume their regular weekly meetings and talk about the goings on in the wizarding world and discuss Hermione's latest meeting in Slytherin House.

Lily Evans had always been a gem to the professors at Hogwarts. This year, she had taken great pains to exalt herself above the rest. She never said a word, but it seemed clear to Hermione that Lily was becoming increasingly ambitious. As a prefect, she was exacting and minded the rules. Now, she was using her influence to her advantage by spending more of her free time with Professor Slughorn and attending each party of the Slug Club. Hermione still refused to attend, but Severus was beginning to go more and more, and it bothered Hermione a great deal. Her insecurity over losing Severus to Lily frightened her in more ways than one. She always had to be aware of her timeline, but lately she had stopped considering it, especially where Severus was concerned.

It was fast becoming a problem. How could she reconcile two desires that were the complete opposite of the other? Hermione wanted to stay with Severus; she had vowed to be with him. However, she desperately wanted to return back to her life with Harry and Ron. Sometimes, she missed them so much she ached inside; at other times, she wondered if they ever thought about her anymore or how much they must have changed. She still saw them as budding third-years. She wondered whatever had happened to Sirius Black. Had he been caught and returned to Azkaban? How was Professor Lupin? She wondered if Severus was fit to be tied that Lupin had taken the coveted job he had wanted for so long. Was she there as an older thirty-something woman married to Severus? She only allowed herself a small amount of time theorizing. It threatened to drive her mad if she continued to do so for extended periods of time.

Hermione's meetings with Avery were coming to a fast close. He was leaving at the end of the year, and nothing official had been said about his successor. Avery informed Hermione that a plan to bring her before the Dark Lord was being created. Severus reported it most likely would occur during the coming summer. He encouraged her Occlumency training, although he hated it was with Lupin.

One day they argued over the situation. Severus wanted badly for her to excel at Occlumency, but he told her he felt left out of the process and wanted to practice with her.

"Hermione, why can't you let me perform Legilimency on you?" he argued.

Hermione hated lying to him. She loathed that she had been keeping this secret for so bloody long! She exhaled as she placed her hands on her hips. "Look, Severus, I just don't feel right about it. We're too close. There must exist an emotional detachment in order to perfect this skill, and I don't want to bring you into that frame of mind! I don't want to have to detach from you, I want to feel with you. It's too precious," she concluded shyly.

"What of Lupin? He is in love with you!"

Hermione placed a reassuring arm on Severus'. "I know. Believe me, we have discussed it, and I have made it quite clear that there could be nothing else between us than friendship. He knows my heart belongs to you."

Severus looked at her in wonder. "You told him that you are...*mine*?" he whispered.

Hermione winced. "Are you angry?" she asked.

"NO!" he shouted as he broke out into a broad smile. He grabbed Hermione and swung her around. He set her back down and cupped her face. "I love you," he said happily.

"I love you, too, Severus," Hermione replied.

Valentine's Day rolled around again, and Hermione found herself thinking about the old days. She and Lily, apart from fifth year when Lily and Severus had gone off alone together after the dance, had never been apart for the holiday. It saddened her to think how their relationship was lost. Hermione liked to hold on to the good times. It was the times like Valentine's Day that brought back the not so pleasant memories.

Hermione was unnecessarily concerned. Lily had been steadily gaining popularity throughout the various houses and had garnered for herself a devoted pack of followers. There was no doubt now that Lily Evans was the most popular girl in school. She had the best grades, and although she tied with Hermione and Severus most of the time, it was her personality that shone through to outshine any other competitor. Lily Evans was becoming her own person, and that person was a bold leader.

A week before Valentine's Day, Hermione found her dorm room filled at curfew with all sorts of Gryffindor girls...Molly McKinnon, Emmeline Vance, Alice Longbottom...they all loved Lily, and in turn, Lily loved the adoration. Lily planned to all the girls that were now a part of "Lily's Circle" that go together as a group and not tie themselves down to one boy. Hermione noted that she had been conspicuously left out of the invitation.

Mary MacDonald, who was in the sacred "circle," stopped Hermione on their way to Potions to chat about Lily.

"Hermione, I know that you and Lily have been best friends since you came here third year, and I am sorry she's being such a bitch to you," she confided.

Hermione shook her head sadly as they walked on slowly to the dungeons. "Honestly, Mary, I think I am a bit, well, relieved," she said bluntly. "I have noticed a change in Lily, and I think it can only be for the best. She was so confused with keeping loyal to Severus, and she was so hurt about my newfound status with Slytherin, I think she has been desperate to discover herself. Lily is a born leader. You watch! She will surprise everyone one day, I think."

The Valentine's Ball was as romantic as ever. Hermione wore a darling Muggle dress that was made of dark burgundy taffeta with crinolines to set off the short skirt showing off her silk stockings. She stayed in the background, drinking moderately, as those of age were able, and watching the politics of dating and mating around her.

James Potter was as annoying as ever, trying too hard and being completely obtuse to Lily's efforts to humiliate him publicly. As Hermione continued to watch their careful dance of stalk and escape, she couldn't help but notice how hilarious Lily found it all. She looked at James as if he were a puppy she could control and make him do her bidding. It was rather twisted, but they both seemed to get something out of it, or else they would cease to play. Hermione was reminded of the "carrot and stick" approach. Lily Evans was a shark at the game. Hermione wondered if the girl had any feeling for the black-haired Quidditch player at all.

Hermione had been making small talk with a few Ravenclaws when Severus made his entrance. Hermione felt her pulse quicken and her stomach lurch at the sight of him. Things were getting to be so complicated between them; she didn't think they would be able to restrain their desires for long. As she looked at him in his elegant dress robes, she noticed that he wore a face of calm disinterest. Hermione's mind flew backward in time to a Hogwarts of her own reality when she was a second-year. A cool and collected Professor Snape stood facing Professor Gilderoy Lockhart during the first day of the dueling club. He had the same look of indifference on his face now. Hermione knew that he had been irritated beyond belief at his forced participation in such a farcical situation. Hermione smiled a tiny smile. She knew Severus was trying to perfect his nonchalant demeanor. *He's probably bored to sobs!* she thought humorously.

As she continued her conversation, Avery charmingly interrupted her. He oozed gracefulness and reminded Hermione of Draco Malfoy's father. She allowed herself to be led onto the dance floor where she could engage in private, delicate conversation without any fears of being overheard or thought of strangely if they had stood off to the side chatting alone.

"Hermione," Avery said admiringly, "you are the loveliest creature in the room."

Hermione laughed as she looked around her for someone who might be watching. "Please don't waste your flattery with me, Avery, trying to get on my good side. When it comes to you, I do not possess one."

She glared at him as he laughed darkly. "I know, Miss Granger. It's all *business* with you. I just want you to know that Severus will be invited formally to stay the summer with Lucius Malfoy. It seems the Dark Lord has made some final decisions concerning him, and he shall be staying there."

Hermione remained cool. "Fascinating, Avery. And what, pray tell, could this information have to do with me in the slightest?" she asked sarcastically.

Avery tightened his grip on her. "Just this, my little Mudblood. The Dark Lord has had his eye on you and the Mudblood Evans. You see, it does him no good to have the public think of him as just another Muggle-hater. So, when a truly brilliant mind comes along that maybe *less* than pure-blooded, he is more inclined to wink his eye at the

situation. He had truly wanted Evans. However, she has defied him."

What?

Hermione's mind spun. *What has been going on around here? Has Lily seen Voldemort?*

"Hermione!" Avery growled.

Hermione came back to where she was. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she wondered if he could tell. Instead, he calmed down and continued. "The Dark Lord has been following your successes academically and politically with your growing relationship with Dumbledore. The question of your background, being obscure, remains of great interest to him. He knows of the attraction and bond of friendship you and Severus hold. He is not wholly pleased, but at this time, as long as you both remain discreet and quiet about your attraction, he shall allow it to continue. This predicated on the fact that you shall allow yourself to be presented to him during this summer where your future will be discussed further."

Hermione was shocked. "I have always stayed with either Severus or Lily during the summer. Lily will not have me again, I'm sure, and Severus, being gone...where shall I go?" she asked, mostly to herself.

Avery smiled cruelly. "Oh, I'm sure your precious Dumbledore will make a home for you," he answered as the dance ended.

Hermione walked shakily from the Great Hall to the vestibule near the entranceway, trying to remember how to breathe properly. Soon, a figure was behind her. She sensed a presence and jumped, turning around to see who it was.

"Remus!" she cried out in relief out as she flung her arms around him. "I am so glad to see you!"

Remus was concerned. He held her face up to the light and saw how shaken she was. "Hermione, I am worried about you. What did Avery tell you that was so upsetting?"

Hermione told him the entire discussion and then said, "Remus, where am I to go? I haven't more than £10 to my name!"

"We shall speak with Dumbledore," he said calmly as he placed his arm around her. "Now, I think you should find Severus before it becomes too late. If I am not mistaken, he probably already has his eyes on you as we speak!" He gave a dramatic shudder to make Hermione laugh.

It worked. "Remus, thank you. Severus thanks you as well. You know, he actually encourages our Occlumency studies," she confided.

Remus gave a snort. "I find that very difficult to believe!" he said with a sad smile.

"Believe it," she assured him.

They went walking outside. "Remus," Hermione began, "when Avery spoke to me about my relationship with Severus, he mentioned that Lily had defied Lord Voldemort. Has she been to see him?"

Lupin sighed. "According to Sirius...he's the one who keeps tabs for us through Regulus...Lord Voldemort wanted Lily to join him. Lily is a powerful witch and, until you came along, the only witch he could see that could potentially sway his people against him. I believe he wanted to contain Lily more than anything."

"That's what he wants to do to me, Remus!" she exclaimed as she turned to face him. "Isn't it? All this talk about being the honored Gryffindor, all the conversing, making concessions and truces between the houses, it's all about feeling me out, how much damage I could potentially cause for Voldemort?"

Lupin sighed. "Yes, I believe that underneath everything, he wants to contain you, limit you, so he will not have to face you in war. He is a powerful wizard, Hermione. Sirius has extensive knowledge about the workings of his mind. He is fiercely and incredibly egotistical. He has fashioned himself as a 'lord,' for Merlin's sake! Yet, he is not so delusional as to ignore the potency of a witch's power. He knows Lily is a very powerful witch. From what I was told, the whole business was conducted shoddily. She rejected his attempts to lure her outright. Now, he has been made aware of you. He is doing a slower job of doing it, but yes, I think he means to collect you and control your magic for his own purposes."

Hermione's mind began to race. She nibbled on her lower lip as she paced slowly. "If I keep maintaining a snail's pace towards Voldemort, he will be fine with it, I mean, slow moving is still progress. I will be able to keep my relationship with Severus," she mused out loud.

Lupin shook his head. "Hermione, I do not understand this! What are you hoping for?" His brow was furrowed, and he began to gesture with his hands. "Yes, I understand that meeting Voldemort, having that face to face with him, potentially getting into his good graces as a means of mining some bit of information Dumbledore could use against him is intelligent. I have always supported the scheme. But Hermione, this relationship with Severus cannot continue! How could it? He will have to truly become one of them if he is serious about protecting you, Lily, as well as other Muggle-borns. When that happens, you won't be welcome. How could you be? Voldemort won't accept you being with Severus...at least after he doesn't need you anymore!"

Hermione looked down at the ground. Lupin grabbed her shoulders. "Hermione!" he snapped. "Do not do what I think you're planning. It will mean your death!"

Hermione shrugged him off. "Don't be dramatic, Remus," she said impatiently. "I know things that you don't, and I know...I just know what I am doing," she replied quietly.

"You are a Seer, aren't you?" he whispered.

"No," she whispered. "I just know a few things that I can't tell you or anyone. Just know that I will never betray the cause to stop Voldemort. I will do everything I can to get the wizarding world rid of him and his kind. I swear to you, I won't be taken in, nor will I be foolish enough to show my hand before it is prudent. That is where I fear Lily went astray," she said as she gazed off in the distance.

She thought of the day she arrived. The day had been so full of chaos. Harry telling her and Ron on the Hogwarts Express about Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban, meeting Professor Lupin, dementors...it all was so much! Then she ended up here, not knowing why Sirius had killed all those people, or if he had to do with Harry's parents' deaths. One thing was becoming clear: Sirius Black was not all he said he was. There was a bit of Slytherin in him. He was playing a dangerous game if he was truly a part of Voldemort's group of followers. Then again, Lily was playing a risky game herself by openly defying Voldemort. She had been foolish to denounce him so quickly when he had offered her some sort of amnesty. Now, James would be drawn into it as well. Damn her! Was this what it had come down to? Harry was going to be an orphan because Lily couldn't get over being called a Mudblood?

Remus interrupted her thoughts. "What is it, Hermione?" he asked.

She shook her head and smiled as she rubbed her upper arms. "So cold, tonight," she replied sadly. "I just think that this will be the last school year before all hell breaks loose, Remus. 1977 is not going to be a great year, I'm afraid."

Lupin shrugged and placed an arm around Hermione, leading her back into the castle. "I doubt the rest of the decade will be much fun, Hermione. I doubt we'll see 1980 unscathed," he added ruefully.

We all will Remus, she thought painfully. It's 1981 that will be the fateful year. That is if I live to see it.

Hermione spent the rest of the school year studying and practicing Occlumency as much as she could with Dumbledore and Remus. When May arrived, Dumbledore had

them both come to his office his office for a special meeting.

When they arrived, Hermione saw Professor McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, from the Auror Department, and another wizard Hermione did not recognize.

Dumbledore was as always, most gracious. "Welcome, Miss Granger, Mr. Lupin, and thank you for coming on such short notice. Please, sit down."

Remus and Hermione looked at each other and sat facing the group. It felt to Hermione as if they were about to be interrogated. Then, Professor McGonagall spoke.

"In here, in this meeting and during these times, you shall call us by our given names. You may call me Minerva and the headmaster, Albus...that is if you feel comfortable," she said with a slight smile that clearly showed her nervousness.

Dumbledore patted her shoulder. "There, there, Minerva. Don't worry over your cubs. They are about to become full-grown soon," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I want to introduce you both to Kingsley Shacklebolt, a former Ravenclaw, and one of the Auror Department's finest," continued Dumbledore. "I believe, Hermione, you and Kingsley already know each other due to your relationship with Mr. Snape...Mr. Severus Snape," he added quickly.

"Yes, sir," she replied. She felt her throat tighten and her stomach churn when he had said 'Mr. Snape.' Mr. Snape to her would always mean Tobias Snape, the drunken, violent pedophile that had tried to rape her when she was just fourteen.

The headmaster continued. "This is Alastor Moody, another one of the finest Aurors in the Ministry. Alastor has been chasing and capturing dark wizards for decades now. We are very honored to have him with us."

Ah! thought Hermione. *He is the famous dark wizard catcher!*

"Albus!" The wizard scowled. He looked at Hermione and Remus with wary eyes. They were small, dark, beady eyes that seemed to distrust everything he saw and looked as if he could x-ray right through a person. There was only one wizard she had ever known who could make her feel that way, and he was her age in this timeline.

"I don't like this one bit, Albus," he declared stoutly. "These children have no business in this!"

"I beg to differ, Alastor," replied Dumbledore. "We are going to war. All the signs are pointing towards our students, like these, who will be fighting it. Remember, I am already aware of Death Eaters amongst my students. We must be prepared."

Alastor Moody grunted a reply and crossed his arms defiantly. He still didn't agree. But he was willing to concede the point to Dumbledore.

"Remus, Hermione, I want to officially bring you into the fold of what we are calling The Order of the Phoenix," Dumbledore announced. "We are the founders and are going to begin recruiting members as opportunities arise. You both have been working diligently on your Occlumency and Legilimency training. I want to formally induct you both if you wish."

Hermione stood. "I am truly, sorry, Headmaster. The work I am doing will not allow me to be a part of this organization," she said regretfully.

Alastor gave a low growl. Hermione's eyes darted towards him. "If you don't mind, sir," she said as her temper began to rise, "I have been faithful to the cause of ridding our world of Voldemort since I was a child! A true child! No matter what you think, I am seventeen and of legal age to do as I please. I have been used unscrupulously by the Slytherins in this school, and am anticipating a face-to-face meeting with Voldemort at any time during this summer. I am also a Muggle-born, so if you still don't trust me, why don't you just spell it out plainly!" she spat angrily.

"Fine," Moody answered shrewdly. "It is your connection with Severus Snape. The young man is on the verge of becoming a Death Eater. Dark magic oozes out of his pores. He is a very devious and deceitful young man whom I am sure will become a very important key player in Riddle's war. You aren't the first Muggle-born he has tried to entice into the Dark arts. You would be wise to remember that, Miss Granger."

Hermione wanted to slap him. "I know Severus Snape and his motives better than anyone else in this room! For anyone to claim he is willingly a part of Voldemort's camp is deluded; although, I have to say, Mr. Moody, for a dark wizard catcher and specialist, your being so easily fooled is a clear sign that Severus is spot on," she replied detachedly.

She turned back to Dumbledore, ignoring Moody, and said, "Sir, you know the reason I cannot become a part of this. My involvement may have consequences that I am not prepared to face or pay. I must focus on the task set before me," she insisted.

McGonagall interrupted. "Hermione, you don't have to be an active member that attends every meeting and knows each member. You can be a covert member. It will give you security if something goes wrong. It just isn't safe for us to be out there working as free agents when the enemy is so well-organized."

Hermione thought about what she said. "Well, if you promise that I will only have to answer to Dumbledore, I suppose I can do it," she said.

"No," said Moody sharply. "There needs to be at least two more Order members to verify your operations," he insisted.

"Fine," Hermione retorted flatly, "I chose Minerva as well. If you are so keen on keeping tabs on me, then you can be the third party. That is all!" she finished.

In the end, Hermione and Remus took their oaths as fledgling members of the Order of the Phoenix. As the words of the Oath came from her mouth and she saw the magic swirl around her and the other members, binding them together. Hermione thought of the oaths she had made unknowingly to Severus until the words had been uttered. She wondered now, with her on one side and Severus working for the other, if they would survive to complete the promises *they* had sworn to each other, which, in Hermione's mind, were the most important.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 74

Hermione and Remus begin their training for the Order of the Phoenix the summer after their sixth year.

A/N: Thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for all their hard work! You are both angels! This chapter has Hermione training to combat Death Eaters. There is a bit of squick, torture, abuse, and non-con for training purposes. I just wanted to warn you. Please read and review. This chapter is pivotal to the plot later on in this fic, so please don't overlook it!

Summer finally arrived, and Hermione knew that she was saying goodbye to many things. She knew that Lily would become Head Girl, and they would more than likely not speak to each other ever again. It was the middle of 1977, and Hermione knew that Lily and James had much to accomplish before their deaths. Hermione had accepted that her ability to help influence the coming together of the witch and wizard was no longer a possibility. All she could do now was hope that they would find a way to each other so Harry could be born.

Four years and they would be gone from this earth. It seemed strange when Hermione saw how bright and vivacious Lily and vital and strong James was, that they would never know the wonderful son they would create and how much he would change the Wizarding world.

Hermione and Severus stood in a hidden alcove and looked hard into each other's eyes. Hermione wanted to say so much. She felt so scared about being away from him for so long.

"I'm going to miss you, my darling," she whispered as his lips found hers.

"I love you, Hermione. I will always love you," he whispered in return as his lips parted from hers.

Their hands were grasped tightly together. Neither wanted to release the other. Tears were gathering in Hermione's eyes, and Severus kissed away each tear that fell.

"This could be the last time we have together for a long time," he said sadly.

"It won't be for long, Severus," she reassured him. "I will hold onto you, even if I cannot show a soul...even if I have to deny it to the world...I will keep you and hold you," she whispered as they embraced.

Severus looked down, unable to meet her eyes as he spoke. "Hermione, you are all the wonders and beauty I could ever hope to know. I'm glad you will hold on to me. I'm afraid of losing everything decent about myself," he said honestly.

"You won't!" she said boldly as she forced his eyes to look into hers. "I won't let you lose who you truly are. I'll keep it safe, and if you ever need reminding, I will be there to do so."

Severus smiled at her. It still astonished Hermione at times how emotional he allowed himself to be with her. There was no way he would ever allow anyone to see or hear the loving words they spoke to each other. She could scarcely believe this was the younger version of the teacher who had terrorized her for two years. But then, it was becoming harder and harder to remember him. She could only recall snippets, the worst days, like when she had stolen from his stores to make Polyjuice Potion or the first day of class when he had yelled at her. She remembered how he could glide around a room without a sound and how his eyes could bore holes right into her soul. Everything else was melting away, and she did not care anymore. Severus Snape was no longer the dark, angry, vicious teacher. He was a sensitive, complex, and loving young man who would be completely hers one day.

As they kissed for the final time, Hermione thought perhaps it would not be so bad if she never returned to her own time. What if she just stayed here forever? She couldn't just leave him. She pushed the thoughts out of her head and focused on the Severus in the here and now. It had not escaped her notice how adult he was becoming. He quickly was becoming a man. He was seventeen after all. He was tall and angular, with long, pale fingers that reminded her of the Potions master. He was still young, though, and his eyes still had a light in them that the Potions master's did not.

She kissed him urgently, more passionately than she ever had before. He responded wholeheartedly and desperately clung to her hair as he dipped his tongue in her mouth. At last they broke apart, knowing they could not go further. He turned and walked away, never saying goodbye. They never said goodbye. It was as if it would be wishing ill upon them if they said the word. Hermione knew he was fearful, more so than she, for she knew he would be all right. He would live, but he didn't know it.

Summer that year was spent in the country, training with Kingsley and Moody. Hermione could not determine where they were, just somewhere far away from Hogwarts. A man named Fenwick and his son, Benji, owned the farm where they billeted. A portly man of middle-aged years, Fenwick had a lot of land with lush greenery as far as the eye could see. It was a perfect place, isolated from prying eyes. Fenwick and his son were wizards as well, and from what Lupin had told her, probably members of the Order.

Right after their arrival, Kingsley had explained that he was going to work mostly with Remus, but Hermione was going to work extensively with Alastor. Hermione just could not get the hang of calling the ill-humored man Alastor, so she just called him Moody...for that was what he was, the moodiest man she had ever met, and she had thought Severus had mood swings!

Hermione and Remus were instructed in combat and advanced Occlumency training. Moody spent a great deal of time working with Hermione since she would at any moment be invited (at this Moody had snorted) to see Lord Voldemort.

He talked to her while sitting in a chair on its hind legs. He sliced an apple into small pieces before he eating it.

"Invited? Don't think so. More like 'summoned,'" he warned her. "The man trusts no one, has no friends, and is the consummate Slytherin. He uses whom he needs and disposes of those he doesn't. Your job is to always make sure you are useful. As long as he needs you, you will never have to fear for your life."

"You seem to know an awful lot about Slytherin thinking, Moody," she observed as she took a piece of apple he offered her.

"Course I would! I was a Slytherin, myself, so I know of what I speak. You would do well to remember this one piece of advice. If you forget everything I teach you, I don't care. If you can manage to remember this, you will succeed: CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared.

Hermione flinched. Moody laughed wickedly, then his face grew dark as he said quietly, "I'm not funnin' you, girl. I mean what I said. 'Constant Vigilance' is the key to survival. A little paranoia never hurt anyone. Besides, you have a true reason to be on your guard: you are a Muggle-born. That fact alone should make you want to never let down your guard around the enemy: perceived or otherwise. I'll teach you to trust your gut instinct. Tomorrow, you and I will work on what the Ministry is calling 'Unforgivables.' You are going to learn how to combat them, resist however you're able, and learn to protect yourself against them before they are even cast."

Hermione sat and listened in awe as Moody went on about the three different Unforgivable Curses and the various repelling jinxes that a witch or wizard could cast on themselves to prepare for such an attack.

"Now, I don't ever want to hear any monkey shins about you being under the 'Imperius Curse' and unable to resist and all that rubbish. I will have trained you so hard; it won't even stand up in front of the Wizengamot. And if you betray the Order, I shall testify against you, witch, and happily see you to Azkaban myself!" he threatened.

Hermione swallowed. "What if I don't have what it takes to resist the Imperius Curse?" she asked weakly.

Moody leaned forward and set his hard, beady eyes on her and said, "You'll have what it takes, even if I have to break you down and build you back up again myself!" he snarled.

He sat back and laughed raucously. Hermione closed her eyes. *This is going to be one frightening summer!* she thought.

Fenwick happily supplied the four Order members with food and drink during their stay. It was a hot summer. Last summer had been positively boiling, but under the

conditions of living in the midst of the elements and the constant training, Hermione felt drained and tired most of the time.

On top of it, she felt like one big bruise. She had been tortured and succumbed to the Imperius curse so many times she had lost count. Moody made it extremely humiliating. Hermione knew she was not performing up to the level he was expecting, thus his reasoning for his degrading tactics.

"Come on, girl! You are NOT trying!" Moody snarled.

Hermione was on her back for the hundredth time that day. She covered her face with her hands as she felt the tears well up. Five weeks and she hadn't cried...until now. Even when he had forced her to eat dog food...like a dog would, she hadn't cried. It had made Remus livid, and he almost hexed Moody, but Kingsley had stopped him. Seeing Remus like that, angry, scared and impotent to do anything to save her had forced her to reach deep inside herself and do something.

However, what she did was fail. She still would not comply, but neither could she completely throw it off either. She had remained immobile, unable to help or defend herself. At first, Moody had been excited that she had finally shown some spark...some fire behind her brains. It had been short-lived though, after another week went by doing the same thing: falling to the ground.

So for the hundredth time that day, Hermione was on her back, while Moody jeered at her.

"So there she is, Hermione Granger, the cream of her generation, one of the brightest witches of her time, on the floor again!" Moody growled as he strode around her with his claw foot thumping along as he circled her like a beast of prey.

"Oh, what fun Voldemort will have with you, my sweet! He loves a bit of blood sport and humiliation. No doubt he'll have you on your back just the way you like it and have all his Death Eaters fuck you until you're dead!" he spat.

Hermione began to shake and cower in fear. She couldn't take this. She couldn't do this.

Moody leaned against a post and wiped his chin, eyeing her appreciatively. "Hermione, you've a choice. You CAN do this, not because it is within you, but because you MUST! You MUST do this, or you will be dead!" he hollered.

Hermione stopped crying and eased up into a sitting position. Moody seemed to be battling himself, muttering and cursing. Finally he grabbed a chair and sat on it backwards, facing her.

He fixed his dark, beady eyes on her, his balding, black, greasy hair hanging lifelessly around his face. The scars were gruesome, even more when he smiled, which was something he rarely did, as if he knew how grotesque it made him look. He studied her carefully and then spoke to her in a low, gruff tone.

"Hermione, I am getting the notion that you are not appreciating the gravity of our situation. For seven years now, Voldemort has been gallivanting around Britain, terrorizing Muggles, witches and wizards alike, just because he don't like 'em.

"He was always like that, killin', maimin', and causin' trouble just to see if he could. He hates Muggles, and the only thing he hates more than a Muggle is a Mudblood, like you. He sees you as an aberration of the foulest kind. A being that ought not to be. A desecration of everything he holds dear.

"Now, not only are you a disgusting freak of magical nature, you are a powerful witch. That is even more dangerous because what Voldemort wants more than anything is to rule the Magical World. He wants to have all the power, all the glory and honor that's possible to possess. If he can't get it through acceptable means; he'll do it by force. He even has his own people call him 'Your Lordship,' like he was a ruddy aristocrat!

"We don't have royalty in the Wizarding world. Everyone has an equal chance to make his or her own fame and fortune. We have rules and standards, but he doesn't care. He never has. Perhaps being an orphan, he always felt the rules never applied to him.

"Now here you are, Hermione. You're a powerful Mudblood witch. You're also an orphan, just like himself. You have stood out amongst his next generation of followers, those just now old enough to join his service, and you have fought them, made them create an alliance with you for the sake of peace. Why? Because HE wasn't ready for war and needed to keep people like you contained. You have dared to defy everything he stands for and wants. You are standing in his path, and for Voldemort, if you cannot be placated to stand aside and allow him to use your powers to his advantage, he will make an example of you.

"Now, I've seen him do it. You notice I don't have a leg anymore. I've been face to face with Voldemort, and he is a powerful Dark wizard...very powerful. There is nothing wrong with power; it's that he has no scruples to guide him. You would be a needful thing at most, Hermione, and if you choose to resist and reject his need, then you will have to be eliminated.

"I've tried. I have tried to adhere to the orders Dumbledore gave, but he said in the end if I was unable to train you with the orthodox measures, I must use unorthodox measures. I don't want to make you do some of the more truly shameful or agonizing things Voldemort would do without a second thought, but I don't know what else to do."

"Wait," said Hermione. "What kinds of things are you talking about? Rape? Buggery?"

"Yes, among other things that are even more heinous. He might force you to kill a person or torture them for his own enjoyment. He may even force you to copulate with an animal..."

Hermione vomited on the floor. Moody hissed and Scorgified the mess. "Get up!" he growled impatiently.

"You must be made of tougher stuff than this, *Miss Granger*," he said mockingly. "Are you a virgin? Is this why you look so horrified? Have you ever seen a man's penis? You had best get familiar with the idea if you continue to fail as you have!"

Hermione watched as he walked out of the barn. She held herself together, thinking of the oaths she had made to Severus. How she had saved so much for when they could be together. She cried. She cried because somewhere Severus may be out there raping and killing for Voldemort. How much was going to change in him? How would they reach the end without losing each other in the process? After everything they had gone through together, and after all this time, would he still become the cold and sadistic man she had known as a child?

Moody was right. She had to do this. Not because it was good for the Order or even because she could be raped. It was because she had oaths to keep and a future to save from being erased forever. She had a life that was waiting for her, and she had to make sure Voldemort never knew about Harry. He could never know; otherwise, he would just find a way to destroy him, James, and Lily in another way. Then all would be lost.

Moody returned with Kingsley and Remus. Moody attacked her again, and she heard the voice in her head.

Take off your clothes.

"Nooooo!" she screamed as she fell onto the ground again,

Take off your clothes, NOW!

The force of his order was more intense than she had ever felt it. She was beginning to twitch onto the floor when she heard Kingsley say *Legilimens!*"

Oh, fuck! Hermione thought as she battled the two onslaughts. Her mind was more precious than her body. She began to strip as she focused on keeping Kingsley out of her mind.

Give oral sex to Remus Lupin

The voice was passive and half-hearted. She was on the ground on all fours, struggling to keep her mind intact. As long as the Imperiused orders were half-hearted, she could resist, but she couldn't fight...not with someone trying to break into her mind.

Suddenly, Kingsley withdrew slightly from pressing against her shields and a surge of power bubbled within her.

Give oral sex to Remus Lupin

Hermione was gaining control, but couldn't show it yet. She acted as if she were complying with the order when suddenly she grabbed Lupin's wand from his belt and shouted,

"Expelliarmus!"

Moody's wand went sailing out of his hand before she shouted, *"Stupefy!"*

Moody fell crashing into the manger of water behind him. He was roaring with laughter as Lupin and Kingsley went to fish him out. Hermione ran to quickly redress herself. When the men approached her, she was just finishing buttoning her pants.

Moody said, "Interesting approach, Granger," he said appraisingly. "You chose your mind over your modesty. Why?"

"Easy," she said simply. "My mind can not be up for forfeit. There is too much at stake. I don't keep my secrets hidden in my bra!" she said as she chuckled.

"Well, at least not anymore," Moody said with a twisted smile.

Hermione felt her face grow hot.

"You have made progress, Hermione," said Kingsley. Let's have dinner, and then we'll get at it again. We've only six more weeks to get you into shape. May Voldemort resist the urge to see you until the end of the summer!"

Hermione hoped so too.

Training did not stop just because Hermione had experienced a breakthrough. It was now more important than ever that she learn how to duel and defend herself. She was taught how to Apparate during a fight with ease and speed. Lupin and Kingsley set upon her, one after the other, to see how well her endurance could hold out.

The final two weeks were upon them. Moody and Kingsley spoke to their trainees about the worst to come.

Moody paced with his claw foot thumping on the floor as he moved and spoke in his usual harsh tones.

"The worst has now come upon you. You have been captured. You are about to be 'interrogated,' but that is a misnomer," he growled. "A Death Eater interrogation will mean tortures, beatings, slashes, brandings, amputations, etc. For women, rape is to be expected. Perhaps for men as well, but it is not as common. How do we know this? Because witches and wizards have already been disappearing around the country. We at the Auror Department are finding bodies that have been mutilated, marked, desecrated...it's barbaric," he finished.

Kingsley continued, "We have been fortunate to have spoken with a few who have escaped before their execution. The stories of torture have been horrific. The women who have spoken with us lived long enough to tell us their stories before committing suicide. The men are now in the wind, drunkards, thieves, unable to cope. Some have survived. Like Alastor."

Remus looked at Moody in awe.

"You have seen him?" he asked.

"Aye," he replied. "I was fortunate to have been interrogated by the most idiotic Death Eater to ever join Voldemort's ranks! I escaped, but I had to leave my leg behind and take these scars with me," he replied.

"So this is what will happen to you," he explained. "You won't know if it is day or night because you will be held in a dungeon, probably in some rich Death Eater's manor. While he and his wife go to Ministry functions, you will be languishing in hell!"

"Now, you will be asked many questions. You don't answer anything. You give them your name only if you think it will work to your advantage. Most likely they already know who you are and what you do for the Order, which is the reason you are there in the first place. Although, there are times when people just 'happen' upon trouble and are spirited away.

"You need to focus on TIME. Look for any signs that could tell you the hour of the day and how many days have passed. From the moment you are discovered to be missing, we will look for you for three days. If you are not recovered, you will be marked as dead. No attempts will be made to find you. Although, we may stumble upon you in a raid. It is important to never give up hope.

"We advise you to try to ESCAPE. Do not allow them to beat and use you day after day; you will become dependent upon them, and your mind will be broken. Voldemort will rip your mind into shreds to extract any and all information he will find relevant. Then you will die. It would be better for the Order if you were to just die in the attempt to escape than to sabotage any operations we have that are of your knowledge. But be smart! Don't just go without a fight. If you have decided to die, make sure you take as many with you as possible. Most of the time, the bodies are sent to us as warnings, so there is a very good chance you will be able to be buried properly. In that case, you shall be given full honors by the Order, and any dependents shall be given shelter and safety from Death Eaters."

Hermione and Remus were quiet. They didn't know what to say after such a sobering speech. Kingsley sat with them and said, "You have done your training. There is really nothing more we can teach you. You have learned combat, defensive magic, Dark arts, even how to repel Unforgivables. What Moody and I would like to do is to bring you both up to speed on the Order and give you your assignments. You are both going into your final year at Hogwarts, but make no mistake; there are Death Eaters at Hogwarts. So there must be Order members as well."

Moody took over. "This fall, the Head Girl will be Lily Evans, and the Head Boy, James Potter. They are to be approached by you, Remus, to join the Order. They are not to know of any other members beside yourself. If they decline, they must be sent to Dumbledore where they will be Obliviated on the spot. If Lily and James agree, then Dumbledore shall take over the responsibility of bringing Sirius and Peter into the fold. There are others as well who will be asked to join who are still too young; however, the Order will be recruiting fast. Things are moving at a fierce pace. We Aurors are having a time dealing with all the chaos that Voldemort and his Death Eaters are raining down on us, and these disappearances are just causing mass hysteria.

"Now, Hermione, your job is to carry on as you have. You and Severus Snape shall be meeting weekly to discuss Slytherin and Gryffindor relations. Any compromises towards keeping the peace in the school will be appreciated by Dumbledore. The last thing he wants is a war breaking out at Hogwarts! You will gather information as you are able and report to Dumbledore and Minerva."

He stopped and looked Hermione hard in the eyes. "I know you and Severus Snape have been friends for an awfully long time. Well, it is time for that relationship to end. Your interactions can only be business. He is a Death Eater now. He cannot be trusted. Any hint of fraternizing with the enemy will cost you your life. The Order is firm about this," he warned her.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 74

Hermione begins her seventh year, and is confronted with a seemingly emotionless Snape, and Lily confessing a secret a long time coming.

A/N: Awesome reviews! I love them! Thanks to WriterMerrin and luvsev for their continued hard work! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Hermione and Remus stood at the Hogsmeade platform looking up at the castle. It seemed a lifetime had passed since they had last seen it. They were both hardened and lithe. Because Remus was a werewolf, Hermione had watched his transformations and learned how to handle herself against a werewolf attack. Hermione was tanned and strong. She had lost much of her generous womanly curves from a lifetime of reading books than playing outdoors. Now she was toned and fit. Her eyes were different as well, from what Remus had told her. He had said she had a wary look about her. She had replied that she needed to be wary, for this year was going to change everything...

She had no idea how correct she had been in her estimation. As she settled on a horseless carriage, she watched a group of Slytherins pass by. She saw Severus amidst the group. He was as she, lithe and toned. His face was emotionless as their eyes met. He halted the group, and they fell in line with him.

So it is true! Severus is now the Head of Slytherin, she thought.

He gave a small bow. "Miss Granger, I hope you had a profitable summer," he said deeply. "I look forward to our meetings. Please send an owl regarding which times you will be available for our first meeting." He then turned on his heel and strode off in a billow of robes. Hermione looked after him. He had turned into Professor Snape after all. Her heart plummeted. Was everything gone and forgotten? Had he loosed her from his heart?

Remus, perhaps sensing her disquiet, leaned over and whispered, "You knew this was to be for you. There is no point in continuing in a false hope that you can overcome this. The chasm is far too deep and wide, Hermione."

Hermione turned to him. "I have to hope. I cannot stop hoping," she replied as she turned back to look after Severus.

Remus turned her face to his. "You are hoping for what cannot be. Fraternization with the enemy, Hermione, remember? Like it or not, Severus is now officially camped with them. He is theirs."

"Do you think he has been trained to use the curses Moody used on us, Remus?" she whispered softly.

"That, you will have to ask him. But, Hermione, I think you need to reflect on your future. Weep if you must, for him and for all that you shared," he said wisely.

"Weep for what could never be," she said sadly.

Remus clasped her hand. "Yes, Hermione, for what had been, and what never shall be and also what never could be."

Hermione sat through the Sorting and the Welcome Feast while bittersweet memories flooded her mind. She thought of her own sorting and all the nervousness she had felt during that time. She thought of Harry and Ron and what kind of men they had become without her. She could not dwell too long on it, thinking that they were at this table with her as well, just in another time. She glided her hand across the old wood of the table, wishing with all her might that somewhere, Harry and Ron would be doing the same and somehow, together they could feel each other through time.

She looked at the Marauders. James had changed over the summer. He was serious looking, and true to what she had been told, he wore the insignia of Head Boy. Sirius and Remus sat with him, along with Peter, all of them happily chatting and laughing. They were so carefree and at peace.

Hermione looked at Severus. She had watched as each new first-year Slytherin made their way to the table and into the hands of Severus Snape. He shook each new member's hand and spoke with him or her. He was making his presence known, and his place could not be misinterpreted. He had now taken up the vaulted place as Head of Slytherin. He looked smug and proud.

Hermione's eyes glanced and found the brilliant emerald eyes of Lily Evans staring at her. She was beautiful. She had become a woman, like herself. Neither of them were children anymore. Lily carried a hard glint in her eyes that disturbed Hermione. She kept it carefully hidden in the midst of the others. Hermione knew Lily had caught her staring at Severus. There would be words later between them, she was sure.

Hermione sighed as she ate her dinner. She was again the outcast, but somehow, she didn't seem to care so much. All she wanted now was to get back to Harry and Ron. Damn all of this! Fuck the Order and all of its demands. If she had lost Severus, it was meaningless.

After the Feast, Hermione was left in her small dorm room with only Mary McDonald as her companion. She was just finishing up with her unpacking when the door opened and Lily stepped in. She whispered to Mary and came towards Hermione.

"Hello, Lily," Hermione said as cordially as possible.

"It's strange not being in here with you and Mary," she replied with a small smile.

Hermione smiled as she sat on her bed. "Yes, congratulations on making Head Girl. You and James Potter, who would have guessed?" she said with a tiny laugh.

Lily laughed in return. "I know! It is rather strange," she said with her voice trembling. "I want for us to make peace. Would you please come to my room? We can be alone to talk."

Hermione agreed and followed the Head Girl to her new digs. It was a nice, quaint room. Small, yet cozy, Hermione sat in one of the chintz sofa chairs Lily offered.

"I have some herbal nighttime tea, if you would like?" she asked sweetly.

"No, Lily, I'm fine," said Hermione, feeling rather strange being alone with her.

Lily turned to her and said, "I couldn't help but watch you as you were looking at Severus. There was something there, I'm not a fool."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, trying to decipher the meaning behind her statement.

"Lily, Severus has changed. It was apparent the moment I saw him after arriving. He approached me and asked for arrangements for our meetings. He has been made Head of Slytherin," she offered.

"I figured as much," she said calmly as she set down her cup and came towards Hermione. "It must be painful to know it is all over now. I know you and he had become close."

Hermione kept looking at her warily. "What are you trying to say, Lily?" she asked directly.

Lily knelt on the floor and slid her hands up Hermione's thighs. "It's been so long, Hermione. You have to know how I have always felt about you," she whispered.

"Lily!" Hermione breathed.

Lily crushed her lips against Hermione's. Hermione was aghast. This was wrong. Lily was supposed to be falling in love with James!

Hermione broke their kiss and said slowly, "I think I am confused. What exactly are you telling me?"

"Please, let's not keep skirting the issue, Hermione. I want you back. If you want, Mary can have this room, and you and I can take the seventh-year room. We can be together always like this: just you and me, Hermione...without pretense. I thought we would grow up, marry nice wizards and be best friends. I never thought I would grow to love you this way! No one has ever made me feel the way you do," she pleaded as she caressed Hermione's face. "We can be together forever!" She pressed her lips onto Hermione's while her hand cupped her breast.

Hermione scrambled up from the chair. "Lily, it has been a while," she started to say.

Lily interrupted her. "I know, Hermione, but we can get it back. I admit I was angry about being replaced..."

"...Lily, there was no 'replacing'!" Hermione insisted.

Lily's eyes flashed furiously as she stood up. "I can't believe you, Hermione! How can you choose him over me? I've been your friend. He couldn't stand you. He hates us...*Mudbloods*, remember? James and Sirius were right about him all along."

Hermione tried to make her see reason. "Please, Lily, I'm not choosing. Look, James and Sirius never liked me anyway. It's not as if anyone ever cared..."

"I CARED!" Lily screamed as she pushed Hermione to the floor. "You just wanted me out of the way, didn't you?"

"Lily, NO! I never wanted to come between you two!" she protested.

Lily let out a frustrated screech. "How blind can you be?" she shouted. "It was never about Severus. It has been about you! I want you. I have always wanted you. I just used him to make you jealous...I...please, Hermione!" she begged.

This was unbelievable. How had everything been so turned around? Hermione was stunned. "I am sorry, Lily, I care about you; I just don't want you that way," she explained.

"So, what you're saying is you like boys now? Are you shagging Severus, Hermione?" she demanded.

"No!" Hermione said in disbelief. "Lily, please! You have to stop this," she said adamantly.

"I love you, Hermione," she whispered as tears fell from her eyes.

Hermione swallowed and gasped for air. "Lily, you and Severus were so...so intimate once. I thought for sure you and he were going to have sex that summer before fifth year."

Lily wiped her lovely, green eyes and said thickly, "I-I didn't really know, and I thought I should at least know what it would be like with a boy. But all I could see was your face every time he touched me. I thought you loved me, too. After all, you wouldn't accept Remus' advances, and there were no others around. I tried to make you jealous by being with Severus...I admit that wholeheartedly." She looked at Hermione desperately, pleadingly.

"Lily, you will thank me one day. There will be a nice bloke...just look at James Potter! He's changed. He seems so mature now," Hermione said in desperation.

Lily stepped back from her, as if she couldn't stand being near her. "Leave. Get out, Hermione Granger!" she hollered. "I never want to lay my eyes on you ever again."

Hermione looked at the cold eyes staring at her. There was nothing more to say. She turned and, with one last glance, said goodbye to Lily forever.

The first week was hell. Hermione felt it was for the best to not tell anyone about what Lily had confessed to her. Remus was patient. He sat with her on the hill that overlooked Hagrid's hut. He looked at her a lot and sighed often.

"I know you are hurting, Hermione," he said softly as he placed his hand on hers.

Hermione pulled away from him.

"I...I'm sorry, Hermione," he choked out sadly. "Really I am."

"It's just that I told you, Remus, that I don't see you that way!" she blurted out angrily.

She calmed down and rubbed her forehead. "I'm sorry, Remus, that was cruel."

Remus shook his head. "No. It's the truth. I just got it in my thick head that since things have changed with Severus, and the fact we went through so much during the summer, perhaps I would have a chance to hope?" he asked quietly.

"Remus," Hermione began to say and then started to sob inconsolably. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Hermione?" he asked, concerned.

"I love him, Remus. I love him, I miss him and I am so afraid I will never have him!" she sobbed.

"I don't mean to be cold-hearted, Hermione, but you know it is hopeless for you and Severus." He took her by the hands and looked into her face earnestly. "It wasn't fair, it was cruel in more ways than I can count, watching you strip off your clothes, seeing your naked body. I wanted you, Hermione. I wanted you like I have never wanted any witch. I would wait a lifetime if you would only tell me that I had the slightest chance. I would give anything, all I have, to be with you, Hermione," he said passionately.

"I...I need to think, Remus," she whispered.

His eyes sparkled, and Hermione could tell he was aroused. She blushed and averted her eyes from the tenting of his robes.

He noticed and tried to cover it with his books. "I apologize, Hermione," he said calmly. "All I can say in my defense is that is how intense my affection is for you. I desire you in many ways. Sexually is one of them."

"I appreciate your honesty," Hermione replied. Then she dashed off. She needed to think. She needed to go to the owlery and let Severus know when she could meet with him. She was nearing the entrance up to the owlery when Severus came out of nowhere.

"Hermione," he said smoothly.

His voice was perfection. Long gone was the youth; he was a man. Strong, toned, lightly muscled...he must have trained as she had this summer. She kept her walls of Occlumency up. She still didn't know if he was the Severus she knew and loved.

He took her hand and led her into the shadows underneath the stairs. "Hermione," he breathed as he kissed her. The familiar feel of his lips on hers made her moan with want. She had missed this.

"Hermione," he groaned as he broke their kiss. "I missed you; I thought of you constantly. I love you."

"Do you?" she whispered against his lips. "Are you still my Severus, the Severus who kissed me in that record booth, who made those oaths to me?"

"Yes, Hermione," he said as his black eyes pierced hers. "I am still yours. Are you still mine?"

She held his lips back. "As long as you keep yourself from fully joining that madman," she said firmly. "I know you must do what you must to protect me and Lily..."

"...No, Hermione," he whispered. "It's bigger than that. I have experienced how insane the Dark Lord is. He is vicious and evil...truly evil. There are things he is doing that I cannot imagine anyone stopping him!"

Hermione took his face into hers. "You can't talk that way, Severus," she whispered. "You have to remain strong."

"Hermione, he's coming here...to Hogwarts...sometime this term. It's vital that Gryffindor house accept the offer I will be making when we meet," he said grimly.

Hermione peered into his face. "It's really that bad, isn't it?" she asked softly.

Severus lowered his head. "People are dying. I have seen entire families of Muggles slaughtered for sport! He is sadistic and insane. He has these powers he learned in the Orient back when he disappeared twenty years ago. He knows how to hurt people, make them do things they don't want to do. I know, he taught me, Hermione. H-He marked me," he choked out.

"What do you mean he marked you?" she demanded.

He lifted the sleeve of his robe and unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a dark tattoo. It was of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth.

"Oh God, Severus, what have you done?" she breathed as she went to touch it.

"Don't!" he hissed. "It's how he controls us. He presses his finger or wand into any Death Eater's Mark, and we have to Apparate immediately to his side. If we don't, it burns and torments us." He swallowed thickly. "Hermione, I didn't know I was there to take the Mark. It just was sprung upon us...Regulus and me. It was either take the Mark or defy him, which meant immediate death. I know I should have died than to take it." He lowered his dark head.

Hermione kissed his head and held him to her. "No, Severus. I'm not sorry. It had to be done. There are no easy choices anymore. Nothing is cut and dry," she said shakily.

Severus' black eyes looked into hers. They were hollow and deadened. "He has these creatures, Hermione. I can't get them out of my mind. They are dead, but re-animated. Dead, but alive! They feel no pain, they can be cut and not bleed; they are an army of the dead. He keeps them in a cave..."

"No, Severus! I don't want to hear anymore," she said weakly as she cradled her head.

"Now can you see why I am afraid that there is no hope? He is too powerful, he's so awesome in his magic...he wields it like no one I have ever..."

"...Not even Dumbledore?" she asked desperately as she lifted her head.

Severus looked away, his brows knitted in thought. He began to breathe shallowly. "Well, I have never seen it, I only heard of the mighty battle against Grindelwald. People have said that Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard alive." He looked at her again, and his expression relaxed.

"That's right, Severus. As long as we have Dumbledore, we're safe!" she said happily.

Severus grabbed her and kissed her lips, brushing his tongue across them. She gave him entrance, and they held onto one another desperately.

"I will have to do what I must to stop him, but Hermione, I will stop him, and you and I will be together forever," he panted between kisses. "Hermione, please, will you let me make love to you?" he asked as he pressed his erection against her stomach and his forehead on hers.

"I can't," she said simply. "Not now, not like this. There will be a time, I promise," she swore.

"Make an oath to me, Hermione," he pleaded. "Vow to me that I will have you, that one day you will come to me and give yourself to me. Swear that I will know you, all of you," he said as his eyes swept over her.

"I do swear," she vowed.

The magic swirled around them for the third time, and the kisses they shared were as sweet and hungry as ever.

"I want to see you, Hermione. Show me again how you pleasure yourself," he said hoarsely.

Hermione opened her robes and moved where his voluminous robes hid her from all outside view. His eyes burned in their intensity as she revealed her breasts and

pushed her hand into her knickers. She began to rub furiously, whispering Severus' name as she grasped one taunt nipple and felt her climax building. She looked down and gasped at the sight of Severus' long, thick cock as he stroked to the sight of her masturbating.

After he panted through his own release, he whispered near her lips, "One day, I will bury myself inside you and will never let you go until you scream my name. I can not wait to hear you calling my name as you writhe underneath me, Hermione," he growled.

Hermione's eyes fluttered, and she cried out his name one last time before she was spent.

"I love you," he said passionately.

"I love you," she gasped.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 74

Hermione has her first meeting with Severus as the head of Slytherin. A surprise conversation with James, a take charge Lupin, and a vicious Sirius makes up yet another day of well rounded insanity, and that's before she has to meet with Dumbledore.

A/N: I know I am testing the patience of you all who are asking me, "When are Severus and Hermione going to be able to be together?" I ask for you to continue to believe when I say that their time will arrive and to remember that the darkest is always just before the dawn. Again, to luvsev, my beta and cheerleader and also WriterMerrin, She-Who-Will-Not-Allow-A-Misplaced-Comma-To-Slip-By-Her, my deepest thanks.

The first meeting of the Heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor took place once again in the Slytherin common room after dinner. Regulus Black was seated along with Severus and Hermione, silently watching, observing the pair.

It was business as usual, at first. The past agreements and protections of certain parties were honored. Then, the discussion turned to more difficult and murkier areas.

"Miss Granger," said Severus, "there must be an accord made between the houses concerning certain areas of the grounds. Places, times, etc. I have drawn up what I deem to be an acceptable agreement. I understand that you must answer to your house. Therefore, your people will have a period of calm until the parchment is signed...after an agreement is reached, of course." He smirked as he waited for her response.

Hermione raised an eyebrow as she took the parchment and read it. The Marauders, namely James and Sirius, were going to have kittens! She would have to speak first with Remus before anything got out-of-control.

Hermione laid the paper down in front of her. "Severus, what is all this? Are you telling me that Slytherin has dared to regulate the whereabouts of Gryffindor Muggle-borns? Have the other two houses approved this agreement of their own Muggle-borns?" she asked angrily.

Hermione watched Severus' jaw clench. "You are not reading properly, Hermione! This has nothing to do with the other houses. Ravenclaws are far too cerebral to be a problem, and Hufflepuffs are too damn intimidated to go anywhere at night without nearly their entire house moving about in unison!" He tapped the parchment with his finger. "This is all about Slytherin and Gryffindor. Our houses cannot be trusted to be alone together without mayhem erupting. I have my duties to see to, and I don't need some meddling do-gooder telling tales to Dumbledore. Therefore, if harmony is to exist, if you want Slytherin to respect the past accords, then I suggest you be extra persuasive when dealing with your housemates. Potter and Black in particular. But I am not an unreasonable man. I am willing to negotiate on certain aspects of this agreement if it will help for there to be less animosity."

Hermione shot a look at Regulus, who did not flinch at the mention of his older brother.

"Very well," Hermione replied. "I shall see what I can do. Although, you will recall from previous meetings I had with Avery last year, I cannot guarantee anything. If your scheme is outright rejected, what then shall I say, or better yet, what shall I expect from Slytherin in return?"

Regulus leaned in and said swiftly, "Then Gryffindor can expect hostilities to begin post haste. We will target Mudbloods and make the others watch. Tell them to remember the Mudblood Danbury. That should make them see reason. The idea is to keep away from us. This accord," he said in a nasty tone, "is only a gift to placate your more hot-tempered and volatile housemates. And you can tell my brother that I had him especially in mind," he finished with a smile.

Severus rolled his eyes, and Hermione flashed a smile. She relished the flush of red that colored the younger Black's face. She leaned in and addressed him.

"You had better watch your mouth, you little pisher! You have a lot to learn about diplomacy if you are going to take over for Severus next year."

"Why do you allow this Mudblood to address you so casually, Severus?" he demanded.

"Because I do, and you do not have the authority to question my reasoning," he said softly as his eyes bored into Black's.

"Pity, isn't it?" Severus said coolly to Hermione as if Regulus weren't even present. "There is such disrespect for one's betters. I apologize for the manners of my colleague. He has still so much to learn."

"Quite," replied Hermione sharply. "Although, I must say, I believe it has to run in the family. I am forever having to remind Sirius Black of the same concept." She aimed a glare straight at Regulus.

Regulus' face nearly turned purple, but he sat firmly in his chair. Nearby, another Slytherin was sniggering in his chair.

Severus smiled malevolently. "Regulus deserved that comment for his rash behavior. Remember, Regulus, if you can't remember your place, there will always be someone standing by to remind you or take it from you. Who better to assist you in your retention than Miss Granger?"

Hermione smirked as Severus gave Regulus a look that clearly said, "Take it like a man!"

"Now that we've finished with this evening's hysterics, may I escort you to the door?"

"Thank you," she replied.

Severus led her to the door to walk her out. "Regulus is a problem," she whispered quietly as they reached the door.

"I apologize for his uncouth behavior," he replied silkily.

She made her way out the door saying, "It has nothing to do with me. He's a liability!" she hissed.

She was on her own now. It was like this every week. Being ambushed in the dungeons by some Slytherin was par for the course. Although, she realized, as she got older, the hexes and curses from the Slytherins came faster and more fearsome. She was glad this night for all the training she had endured with Moody. She would be able to handle the pathetic attempts of some Death Eater wannabe. She made her way unscathed to the main floor where James Potter was waiting for her.

"James," she said in surprise. "I was expecting Remus."

"Ah, well, I am Head Boy now, Hermione. I shall be escorting you from now on," he explained.

"Not happy?" he asked.

"No," she replied peevishly. "I enjoyed meeting with Remus. It gave us the time to talk over things before I have to deal with your lot!"

James chuckled. "My lot?" he asked. "Last time I checked, you were a Gryffindor," he pointed out.

"Barely," she muttered. "And yes, your lot! Your friends, namely Sirius Black. That boy is a menace! And his brother is just as kind," she added sarcastically.

"Look," James said apologetically. "I know Sirius can be a prat at times. Hell, I've been a prat most of the time, but things are changing, Hermione, and some things are just not that funny anymore," he said seriously.

Hermione stopped and looked at him. If he didn't have those hazel eyes, Hermione would have sworn she had Harry Potter right in front of her. Her eyes watered, and she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"James, I think growing up will do wonders for you," she replied.

"I hope so, Hermione, I'm getting rather weary of waiting for Lily to notice me!" he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"You do rather fancy her, don't you?" she asked lightheartedly.

"Since the first day I saw her, but she was always with Snape hovering over her..."

"Don't," she interrupted.

"What?"

"Don't do that, James. Don't disparage Snape. They were friends. Best friends for years, before you ever came into the picture. And he loved her too. Don't make light of a relationship just because you can't understand it. She wanted him there, *hovering*, as you say. She cared about him," she said firmly.

"It's all done now, though," he said softly.

"Yes, it's all done now," she said angrily, thinking about Sirius and his selling out of his friends, and of what he would do in the future, killing all those Muggles.

They reached Gryffindor tower, and as usual, the group was assembled and ready to hear what had been discussed.

Remus took over for Hermione. She was glad to have him take over. She hated having to deal with Sirius and his mouth.

"Let's everybody calm down," Remus said loudly. Peter cuffed a few third years around the head and shooed them to bed.

Remus continued. "Now that we are hopefully alone, let's get down to business. James, Lily, I will need to speak with you both privately after we are through. Hermione?" he gestured towards her.

"Right. Well, I met with this year's Head of Slytherin." Boos and hisses erupted from the group.

"Honestly!" she snapped. "Do you think this is a game? A game where you can just take what you like and thumb your nose at the rest?" She glowered at everyone as she spoke.

"Every week, I take my life into my own hands for all of you! I don't need to make any arrangements with Slytherin..."

"...That's because you've been shagging Snivellus since you came here from wherever you came from," drawled Sirius.

Hermione smirked and said, "If that's true, then I'm glad I'm not the only one whoring with Slytherins!" she said accusingly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he bellowed as he sprang out of his chair.

Hermione closed the gap. "You know *exactly* what I'm talking about!" she hissed at him.

"Break it up!" Remus yelled. "We've more important things to do than to bicker amongst ourselves. Hermione's right. She's a dab hand with a wand. She doesn't need anyone's protection, but there are those who do. Now, why don't we hear what Hermione has to tell us?"

Hermione backed off from Sirius and took out the parchment Severus had given her.

"Things are changing at Hogwarts. As you all are now aware, Voldemort is on the move. Attacks, disappearances, and killings on Muggles and wizard kind alike continue."

Marlene McKinnon, a sixth-year, spoke up. "I heard Voldemort has enlisted the giants to assist him in killing Muggles!"

Frank Longbottom, another sixth-year, said excitedly, "I heard there are Death Eaters now amongst us, here at Hogwarts!"

Murmurs of concern and fear arose from the crowd. Hermione raised her hands and said, "All right, now! Settle down! I have an important announcement from Slytherin house."

"What of these rumors?" demanded Sirius.

Hermione weighed her words very carefully. "I want you all to listen," she said softly. "It is true that Voldemort is out there, and he is terrorizing Muggles and wizards, alike. He has many resources at his disposal and has not been wasting his time. There are things I cannot say now, until I speak with Dumbledore. But I will say this: do not cross Slytherin. If you are a half-blood or a Muggle-born, do not engage them. Stay away from them, or find a pure-blood in Gryffindor or in one of the other houses you

know to be sympathetic to Muggle-borns. Now, to the matter at hand:

"I have a written agreement that I am to sign. Naturally, it carries all sorts of enchantments that will attach itself to the signer. I have been given a grace period to speak with you all and have been allowed to negotiate. This year's Head of Slytherin is most anxious to avoid any problems. The fact that he is willing to concede to some things and bargain with our house says a lot!"

"Who is it?" demanded Sirius.

Hermione looked at him with defiance written on her face. "Severus Snape," she said clearly.

The room erupted into shouts and swearing. Lupin jumped up and started to bellow. "Let's settle down! Sirius, stop fueling the flames! You know as well as I that Severus Snape is not one to act rashly. He is a calm and deliberate wizard."

"Exactly!" Sirius spat viciously. "He's a bloody opportunist. He'll have every Muggle-born at his mercy. I wouldn't be surprised if he started deeming areas of the castle off-limits to Gryffindor!"

Hermione's patience was at an end. "Sirius Black, would you for once just shut that trap of yours and listen? Do you not understand what is happening? There is a war out there, and it is seeping into Hogwarts! For your information, for all of you," she said as she swept her arm around, "that is precisely what Snape is asking. He has written a schedule for us to adhere to. Certain areas of the grounds after dark will be off limits on alternating days. Why is he doing this? He's doing this because he doesn't want anymore Laura Danburys!"

The wizards and a few witches fell into silence. Some witches, like Lily, began to whisper, confused. They had been blissfully shielded from the truth. Those who knew had not forgotten about Laura Danbury, the poor, sweet witch, weak in her magic, Muggle-born, who had been set upon, viciously beaten and raped, then had her mind Obliviated. She left to return to the Muggle world, and no one had heard from her since, and although everyone knew who was responsible, nothing had been done about it.

Hermione cleared her voice. "Now, we must come to an agreement and soon, for reasons I cannot divulge unless Dumbledore gives me the permission to do so. I have also been given an oath that all hostilities will be suspended until this time next week. The grace period will allow for us all to move about freely and reflect on our best interests. Please do not abuse the goodwill of Severus Snape. You know as well as I that he will have his hands full reining in those most vicious of his house. Do not antagonize them!" Hermione looked pointedly at Sirius and James as she said this.

Lily spoke up. "What about the rumors of Death Eaters at Hogwarts? Is it true?" she demanded.

Hermione licked her lips. "I will neither confirm nor deny that Death Eaters are at Hogwarts. As I said before, I must speak with Dumbledore before I can say anything more on these matters. Good night," she said curtly.

The meeting broke up, and Remus spoke with James and Lily privately. Frank Longbottom and his girlfriend, Alice Lambert, came up to Hermione.

"We want you to know that Alice and I are behind you one hundred percent Hermione," Frank said firmly.

"That's right," agreed Alice as she took Hermione's hand in her own. "I know that you risk a lot being Muggle-born. I think you are awfully brave. We will stand behind whatever you decide is the best. You know more about what is really going on than we do."

"We will make sure to keep those we can under control!" Frank said heartily. "Although, I can't pull enough weight to influence those older and more fervent in their ideas," he said wryly as he looked over at an agitated Sirius Black talking with Peter Pettigrew. "We both will pull our weight. You can count on us," he finished.

Hermione smiled. She was proud of how decent and brave Neville's parents were. She wondered if she would ever be able to tell him just how good and decent they had been before they were taken from him. She didn't know much about Neville's past, just that his parents were dead as a result of fighting against Voldemort, and he was raised by his Dad's mother: a menacing woman he called "Gran." She shook her head of those thoughts. She would go crazy if she thought of it now. She smiled at them and said as steadily as she could manage, "I thank you and appreciate your support."

"Headmaster, Black is going to be trouble," Hermione announced.

The Order of the Phoenix was meeting in Dumbledore's office. Hermione had finished giving her report of her meeting with Severus and Regulus earlier that evening. Dumbledore had agreed it was only for the best that Gryffindor agree to the accord handed down by Slytherin.

"Except, Hermione, make one change, just to let them know you won't always be so agreeable. It's just good diplomacy," he said, smiling.

"Which Black?" rumbled Moody from his chair in the back corner.

Hermione turned to face him and gave a snort. "To be quite honest, they both are going to be burrs in both Gryffindor's and Slytherin's backsides," she said ruefully. "Although, I must say, I rather enjoyed Regulus' dressing down by Snape. He had the audacity to call me a Mudblood and got Snape's temper flaring. Snape was so mad; he let me do the dressing down. When Black had the nerve to try and talk back, he was slapped down like an errant pup!" she said with a laugh.

Dumbledore smiled. "Both Sirius and Regulus have that Black streak of audacity in them that causes them to speak first and think later...no offense, Phineas," he said to the late Headmaster Black, who was growing apoplectic in his painting.

"Headmaster," said Hermione.

"Please, Hermione, call me Albus," he said.

Hermione smiled. "Sorry, Albus. Habit. I received first hand information on the activities of Voldemort. He has created an army of dead creatures and has begun to mark his followers," she said quietly.

Dumbledore sighed. Kingsley, Minerva, Remus, and Moody each looked at her shock and then at Dumbledore in fear.

"Is this true, Albus?" asked Minerva.

"An army of the dead?" repeated Moody.

"Albus, this cannot be!" protested Kingsley.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I am sorry, but it can and is a reality. The complete truth is far worse, I'm afraid."

He looked at Hermione and said, "How trustworthy is he? Don't say his name. I know who you must be getting this information from. I just need to know, is he reliable?"

"He was terrified, Albus. He was so terrified that he was at the point of giving up hope. He said Voldemort is truly evil and fears that he cannot be stopped. I think he can be trusted, for now. I want to say that he will always be trustworthy, but things can change," she said sadly.

"That is very wise, Hermione. Tell me, has Voldemort begun marking my students?" he asked suddenly.

Hermione's mouth opened. So did the others.

"Marking?" whispered Minerva.

"Yes." Hermione heard her voice confirm it, and she felt she had somehow betrayed Severus by doing it.

"It's the Mark of Death that Voldemort has taken to lighting up the houses where he has killed," Dumbledore answered.

"The *Morsmordre*?" asked Kingsley.

"Yes." Dumbledore looked at Hermione, and his eye twitched. "Have you seen it?"

Hermione swallowed. "Yes. It looks like a black tattoo with a skull and a snake coming out of its mouth. I went to touch it, and he went berserk. He said to never touch it. It is how Voldemort calls them. He places his finger or a wand on the Mark, and it sends a burning signal for all of them to Apparate immediately to where he is. Apparently, they don't even know where they are headed. There is no need for the knowledge of destination!" she whispered in a shocked voice. "Furthermore, Voldemort also has trained them and has given them the key to control and subdue their enemies."

"Why did he take this Mark?" growled Moody.

"He said he and another boy were taken to Voldemort, and they were marked. It wasn't anything he was expecting. It was either take the Mark or risk defying Voldemort and face death," she explained.

"He should have died!" shouted Moody as he shook with anger.

Hermione rounded on him. "And what exactly would that have accomplished?" she spat. "We can get more inside information this way! If it hadn't been for the courage of this one wizard, we wouldn't know for sure if Death Eaters were on the grounds. Well, they are, and now we know for sure!"

Minerva sat down shakily. "Albus, I insist that we begin recruiting immediately. If this is true, we must prepare the students, especially the seventh-years. Only Hermione and Remus have been trained so far!" she said urgently.

Albus turned to Remus. "What did James and Lily say?"

"They were in full cooperation. Lily will also be watching out for the Muggle-borns in Gryffindor."

"What about James?" asked Dumbledore.

"He will handle Sirius and Peter. That will be priority number one," he answered.

Dumbledore sighed as he sat down behind his desk. "We have already been recruiting among those witches and wizards who are alumni and those sympathetic to our cause; however, we have already experienced setbacks. There has been infiltration, and some members were killed this summer," he reported.

"Anyone we know?" asked Remus.

"No, but it is making recruiting that much more difficult!" he said in frustration. "I fear most of our number will have to be among the young; others are just too terrified for their families. And there is this issue that Hermione brought up that is continuing to complicate matters."

"What?" asked Remus fearfully.

"Don't you worry, m'boy," answered Moody confidently. "You and Miss Granger have already been trained to defeat it if it is cast."

"The Imperius?" Hermione and Remus blurted out at the same time.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Who knows if the person is lying when they say they have been Imperiused?"

"Veritiserum," said Hermione.

"What?" asked Kingsley.

Minerva and Moody looked at her strangely. Albus rescued her.

"Veritiserum is still in its infancy, Hermione. It is not ready for testing, and we are unsure of its full effects. The Ministry is still debating its use."

"What was she talking about?" asked Remus.

Albus smiled. "As usual, our Miss Granger is on top of the latest breakthroughs in the Ministry. A potion, named Veritiserum, has recently been created. It compels the person who takes the potion to speak only the truth. I think Muggles have an equivalent known as Truth Serum?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hermione nervously.

Albus continued. "The curses Hermione eluded to earlier, there are three that Tom is using. Two have already been used by Slytherins inside these very walls. The first, the Imperius, compels a person to act against their will. The other is the Cruciatus Curse, which causes unbearable and agonizing pain to those upon whom it is cast."

Hermione spoke up. "Albus, he told me that is how he controls them all. He has subjected them to these curses and also has instructed them how to cast them."

Minerva shook her head. "This is appalling! Albus, I implore you, we must bring Filius and Pomona in here and begin recruiting immediately!" she insisted.

"Minerva!" snapped Moody. "You must be cautious, especially with the young. Only those who can be trusted...as much as any young person can...should be approached. As foolhardy as Sirius Black is, he would no more turn over to Voldemort than I would!"

Kingsley looked at Albus. "Should we begin now?"

Albus looked so very sad and tired. "I fear we have no choice," he replied.

After the others had left, Hermione stayed to speak with the Headmaster. "Albus, he says that Voldemort is planning to come to Hogwarts," she whispered.

"Yes, Hermione," he replied. "I am aware of the fact. But, I must say I am most pleased with your relationship with Severus. I was afraid we would lose him. It seems the friendship you and he forged as children has strengthened over time."

"I am frightened for him, Albus," she confided. "I love him. What am I going to do when I finally am able to go home?" she asked.

"Let's deal with one thing at a time, Hermione. For now, let's focus on getting through this final year with no major catastrophes," he said with a smile.

Hermione left his office feeling lighter for having gotten the heavy load of knowledge off her chest, but scared for all of them. She knew everyone else's futures, but what about her own? Would *she* even live to see 1981?

Curfew was soon, but she needed to get out of the castle. She walked as she thought over everything that had been said in the meeting. She found herself roaming by the hillside overlooking Hagrid's hut. She stood there with the fall breeze blowing her robes around her. She looked up into the sky and watched the clouds slowly creep along, the water from the river that deposited into the Black Lake rambling along its course. She wanted nothing more than peace, for there to be no Voldemort, no war, no death, but it was useless to want what could not be, what could never be.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 74

Hermione is finally summoned to meet Lord Voldemort face to face.

A/N: We are at a critical stage in Hermione's and Severus' lives. The next three chapters will be full of drama, intrigue, sadness and a little surprise that will send everything Hermione has been building for herself into pieces. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Again, my gratitude to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their hard work and thoroughness. This fic would be nothing without them.

As the fall term ambled on, the agreement between the houses of Gryffindor and Slytherin had been signed and, for the most part, adhered to by both parties. Sirius and James still stoutly refused to give up their vendetta against Severus. At least they had the sense now to make it private. Halloween week arrived with no word from Severus about Voldemort's demand for Hermione's presence. Soon, she stopped asking, although Severus had warned her to not forget.

The day before Halloween, Severus came over to the Gryffindor table and was greeted with half a dozen wands. The Slytherins accompanying Severus had theirs out in a flash.

"Put your wands away!" Hermione snapped at her fellow Gryffindors.

Severus glowered at his men. Hermione nearly smirked. He looked just like the Professor Snape she had known so long ago. She kept her face straight and waited for him to speak.

"His Lordship requires your presence tonight, Miss Granger. I shall have Eloise LeStrange collect you around eight o'clock. Slytherin will be patrolling the castle for the Head Girl and Boy."

"What am I to tell them?" she asked.

"Evans and Potter will remain in their common room this evening if they are wise. I trust you to pass this information to them," he said, looking over at Lily in disdain. "Do wear something appropriate. A fresh school uniform will be considered neutral. DO NOT dress in Muggle clothes. Have I made myself clear?" he said without looking at her.

"Yes," she replied.

He swept away in a billow of robes, and Hermione went down the table to speak with James. Sirius was there and, as usual, trying to nose in on the conversation.

"James, in the hall, please?" she asked.

As soon as he met with her, she told him what Severus had said. "Damn, Hermione!" he hissed. "I don't like this at all. He's dangerous, and I'm not talking about Snivellus, either..."

"...Calm down, James!" she said impatiently. Then she smiled at him. Gosh, how he reminded her of Harry.

"I'll be fine. Moody has trained me for this very occasion!" she said reassuringly.

James looked about him nervously and whispered, "Hermione, you need to know something. Snape did this before...to Lily. He took her there to show her off, to prove some point of what a big shot he could be. Well, Lily about lost it, and she thinks she came within a hair of being killed, so just be careful, okay?"

Hermione was shocked. "Lily told you this?" she asked.

"Yes," he said rather sheepishly. "Lily and I talk a lot, you know, Head Girl, Head Boy stuff. There is a lot we have in common now. I also guess my ability to not be a complete *toerag* has made an impression."

Hermione smiled. This was the best news she could have heard just before going into the bowels of hell to meet the devil.

"Your perseverance has paid off, James. Try not to cock it up," she said flippantly.

She went to leave, but turned to ask a question. "How old were they when Severus took Lily to meet him?"

"Fifteen," he answered.

"I'm not fifteen, James," she reminded him as she went to walk away.

James grabbed her arm. "I know that, Hermione. That was the only reason Voldemort let her go in the first place. If she had been your age, he would have killed her. He said she defied him."

"I *will* be careful," Hermione promised and walked away to ready herself to meet Lord Voldemort.

Eloise LeStrange came at eight on the dot. She had a pug face, which intrigued Hermione. Perhaps she would be Pansy's mother in the future? This knowledge kept her mind busy thinking of other things than what she was about to do until she reached the main entrance.

Severus came to her side and escorted her out towards the boundary line. "This will be our only chance to talk, so do it quickly. What of Regulus, Hermione?"

Hermione didn't miss a beat. "Remember that terrible day back in our fifth year when you lost Lily forever?"

He shot her a knowing look that told her he didn't want to be reminded that he had once been a fool for the redheaded Gryffindor.

Hermione continued. "Well, Avery and I were there. He had me by the arm, Disillusioned, for the 'show,' he called it. It had been staged. Sirius wanted Lily out of your clutches so bad that he made a deal with Avery to stage a fight where you would come out the loser, of course, playing you and James like violins. Then, Lily came into the fray..."

"...FUCK!" Severus swore. He stopped walking and stood frozen in place.

Hermione pushed his arm. "Don't stop walking! I know you are angry, but I'm telling you all of this for a reason. No one wanted you to succeed with Lily. They all conspired: Avery, Regulus, Sirius and God only knows who else to force your hand. They all knew you were under orders to humiliate Lily publicly," Hermione whispered.

"I wanted to do it on my terms!" he growled as he began to stride furiously towards the Apparition mark.

"I know," Hermione said painfully as she half jogged to keep up with him. "It was terrible to just stand there and do nothing to stop it. I'm sorry."

They said nothing until they reached the mark. Severus grabbed her hand, and they Apparated into Spinner's End.

Hermione nearly collapsed from the tug of Apparition. It had been quite a jaunt to go to England from the Highlands in one go. She sank into one of the old chairs in the sitting room as Severus flashed his wand. He then let out a blood-curdling howl from deep within him. Hermione jumped and headed for the front door as the wizard raged all around her. Books, furniture, and bric-a-brac...nothing stood a chance between Severus and his rage.

Hermione shrank against the door, holding onto the handle for dear life. She thought he would hex her into oblivion just for telling him about that treacherous day, but instead, after the violence had subsided, he swiftly repaired the damage and went to Hermione's side.

He knelt down and took her in his arms. She flung herself onto him and sobbed. He pried her off of him a little so he could look into her tear-stained face.

"I recall that I once called you a Mudblood in a pique of anger," he whispered against her lips.

Hermione nodded and let him kiss her boldly. He released her lips and caressed her face with one hand. "You forgave me, even before I ever apologized," he said sadly.

"Yes," Hermione breathed as she brought her hands to the nape of his neck, bringing his face to hers. She kissed him and lost herself in the moment. His lips were on her mouth, cheeks, eyelids, neck and shoulders.

"Severus," she moaned.

"I want you, Hermione," he ground out painfully. "It hurts to not have you. I can't bear much more." He kissed her lustfully, and Hermione felt her mind slip away.

"Make love to me, Severus," she whispered.

He looked at her, and she began to undo her shirt. Suddenly, he screamed and clamped his hand over his arm painfully.

"Shite! Hermione, we must Apparate now!" he said through clenched teeth. He grabbed a hold of her waist, and they Disapparated into a luxurious manor. Hermione looked around her in wonder as Severus loosed her from his grip. They were standing in a rich, ornate foyer with scarlet draperies, heavy crystal chandeliers and gilded mirrors. There was a golden door in front of them. Severus was sweating and gritting his teeth. He closed his eyes and breathed through his mouth and nose.

"Center yourself," he ordered. "Discipline your mind."

Hermione obeyed immediately. This was the voice she had been trained for two years to obey without question. This was Professor Snape, the wizard of her tender youth, of her long lost past. She quickly buttoned her half-opened shirt, raised her walls of Occlumency and walked in with Severus to meet Lord Voldemort.

"Your Lordship," Snape said in a calm, deep voice. He bowed respectfully before a man who had his back to them. Snape grabbed Hermione by the upper arm and squeezed painfully. She gave a low curtsy as the wizard slowly turned.

Hermione involuntarily gasped, but she was able to silence the sound. She had dared to look upon Lord Voldemort in the face. She averted her gaze to the hem of his sleeve, but the memory of his distorted face was lodged in her brain.

He was ugly. Not ugly as a man could unfortunately be. Certainly, many people thought of Severus as ugly, but Voldemort was hideously grotesque, like a wax mummy in a horror movie. His black hair was combed smoothly back to his collar, and his eyes were bloodshot, as if they were turning red. His face might have been handsome once when he was younger, perhaps; although, now he looked as if he had been dead and preserved for quite some time, only now coming back to life. He was tall and thin with lavish, sumptuous robes. He acted in every part a Lord, waiting for Severus to kneel before him and kiss his robe. He did not react or comment on the gesture.

"Severus," he said in a high, chilling voice. "You have brought your foundling to meet me. Rise, and kiss my hand. Mudblood, you may kiss the hem of my coat."

Hermione watched as Severus obeyed him without question, and when he had finished genuflecting, Hermione sank to her knees and kissed the barest end of Voldemort's robe.

Voldemort was pleased.

He reached down and, with one long, waxy finger, raised Hermione's face to meet his own. She could feel the pressure of his intrusion into her mind. She thought of all the safe things she could find to offer him. Soon, he grew bored and withdrew. The boredom was evident on his face. She was a thing to him to disassemble and scrutinize. That was all.

He graciously offered them a seat across from him. Voldemort was flanked by a young Lucius Malfoy on his left and an equally lovely, dark-haired woman on his right, who glared at Hermione through heavy-lidded eyes.

"She is most agreeable, Severus," he said coldly. "Most pleasant and charming. Quite unlike the fire-brand you brought to me when you were a child."

"My Lordship, Hermione Granger has been most anxious to meet you," replied Severus.

"Really?" he said with a light cackle. "Why would a Mudblood be desirous to meet me?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, and Voldemort raised his hand to silence him. He trained his eyes on Hermione at all times. "Let her answer, Severus. I want to know all about this witch who has caused such a stir amongst my allies."

"Sir," Hermione began slowly, "I was very intrigued by the meetings I had with Mr. Avery during the last two years. Our discussions were insightful, educational, and I was highly impressed by the order in which Slytherin house at Hogwarts conducted themselves."

Voldemort gave her a calculating smile that made Hermione nervous. Should she continue or be silent? Was he going to say anything in reply?

"I must say that I was most intrigued when I heard about the stunning entrance that preceded your becoming Head of Gryffindor," he said smoothly.

Voldemort snapped his fingers, and a silver tea service appeared in front of them. The dark-haired witch poured, and Severus took what was offered him while Hermione was given nothing. Not that she would have accepted anything from this place to imbibe anyway. Nonetheless, the point was made. Subtle.

"Thank you, Your Lordship," she replied smoothly.

"Tell me, what possessed you to traipse down to the dungeons after curfew, alone, to duel with three Slytherins? Two of whom were older than yourself?" Voldemort asked as he sipped his tea.

Hermione must have looked shocked, for he said rather quickly, "I was Head Boy when I was at Hogwarts. I like to be knowledgeable on the goings-on in my old house."

Hermione sat straight in her chair as she spoke. "I merely had experienced enough nonsense, sir. My room-mate, a Muggle-born herself, had been grossly attacked in a manner I found repugnant."

"*Repugnant?*" he repeated as he sipped his tea.

"Yes," Hermione insisted. "A strange curse was used to compel the witch to engage in sexual acts. When she showed signs of resistance, she was beaten."

Voldemort put down his teacup forcefully. "I agree," he said with disgust. "I wish I could just stop that type of violence. Why some pure-bloods insist on soiling themselves with Mudbloods is beyond me. I assume it is all a part of being an adolescent, I suppose."

"Although, I can understand the ability, or the *gift* in seeing value in things others might see as rubbish and test them. Take Severus, for example. He's a half-blood, not really accepted into my sacred circle by his comrades, but since I see the value where others have failed, I have a most willing servant."

He leaned in towards Hermione and said in a whisper, "I know you are not valued, Hermione Granger. Your history is like my own: an orphan brought into a strange world, you were brave and thus sorted into a house where your bravery could shine. But then, you were cast adrift, shunned by others because of your lackluster appearance and your over-winning talents. It is the same sad reality in the wizarding world as it is in the Muggle one: women are not allowed to be intelligent or forceful. They are pressured into 'dumbing down'...but you, Hermione Granger, have thrown off that rule, and I applaud you."

Hermione was feeling rather confused. Why was he praising her...her, of all people?

He narrowed his blood-shot eyes and studied her. "Your magic is powerful. In fact, I would consider it an honor if you were to join me in my quest."

"I am afraid I do not understand, sir," Hermione said, feeling confused. "I am Muggle-born. A Mudblood. Where would I fit into your 'Brave New World'?"

"You believe I want all that is not pure-blooded to be killed and terrorized, correct? I'm sure Dumbledore has all you Muggle-borns frightened to death with all sorts of nightmares of my plots and schemes. No, Hermione Granger, it is not so. Actually, it is rather mundane, but I cannot be responsible for the independent actions of others. I only want to live in a world where the possibilities of magical power are limitless. Knowledge of any and every branch of magic should never be regulated. Knowledge is the beginning of power. You understand this, don't you?"

Hermione blinked. She was speechless at how seductive his words were.

Voldemort continued. "I want to have the best of magical families to be examples to all other magical beings. I personally don't mind about pedigree, if they have strong powers to make them extraordinary. You, Hermione Granger, are a powerful witch. You took Avery in your hand and squeezed until he gave you what you wanted. You set one of my Death Eaters on fire just because he was in your way. I think you are a force to be reckoned with, Hermione Granger. I can give you everything you desire...even an alliance with Severus. Your children will be mighty and strong. They will intermarry with the pure-bloods, and a new generation of powerful witches and wizards will come from your issue. You think on that, *Hermione Granger*. You may leave, now," he said dismissively.

After the obligatory bowing and scraping had ended, Severus and Hermione found themselves back at Spinner's End. Hermione was exhausted as she collapsed onto the couch, feeling stupid, although not knowing why.

"Hermione," Severus called to her. "Drink this."

She sat up. "What is it?"

"It is a Wit-Clarifying Potion. He has a way of making the mind muddled, even more so when you have to work so hard at keeping the secrets of your mind out of his reach," he explained.

Hermione drank and felt immediately refreshed. "Severus, how did I do?" she asked as she returned the phial to him.

His mouth formed a thin line. "I don't know. I think *well*, if my past experiences can be worth anything. He didn't immediately offer you what he offered Lily. He rather handled you with kid gloves, not as a way of condescension, but rather out of a sense of grudging respect. I think he knows there is more substance to you," he replied softly.

"What happened when you took Lily to him?" she asked him. She was terrified to ask, but she needed to know. It would explain so much, why Lily had been so distant from her back at the last part of the summer before their fifth year, her anger and the first flush of discontentment with her relationship with Severus.

"Well," he said as he rubbed his forehead. "It was a really stupid thing to do, looking back at it all. I wanted to show Lily how powerful I could be one day. I hadn't fully understood all of what he was about. I just wanted to impress her and show him what a powerful witch she was. It was a fiasco. She was rude and did not try to hide her contempt of him. He played with her mind, batting it around like a kitten with a ball of yarn. She was crying after he was finished with her. I was so scared. He threatened me to never do anything like that again."

"But what was strange was that he admitted she was very powerful...extremely powerful. He told me he wanted to see her again when she was older. I'm sure he is curious as to how I am able to persuade powerful Muggle-borns to meet him. I think he liked you because he didn't rush into trying to force your hand. With Lily, it was as if he were frustrated by her revulsion and just wanted to tell her the way things were going to be and watch her react poorly. It was terrifying to watch him manipulate her and then, in the end, threaten her. When he told her he wanted her to join him, she reacted so badly, I thought he was going to kill us both. Instead, he told her she had defied him, and he would not forget her."

"That sounds ominous," whispered Hermione.

"Yes, I am afraid I unwittingly have placed Lily on a list of sorts. I'm sure when Lily leaves Hogwarts, he will be keen on finding her and making her pay," he said in a hollow voice.

He sat next to Hermione and said, "I actually feel very responsible for what happened. I have to make sure I know what is going to happen to her. I know she hates me now, but I have a responsibility to her...you can understand that, can't you?" His eyes searched for hers, questioning, wondering.

Hermione smiled. "Of course I can, Severus. She was your first love."

Severus caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately. They both knew they needed to stop. It couldn't be risked, especially now, with Voldemort wanting Hermione as he did.

"Severus, you must be wary of Regulus," Hermione warned him. "He has betrayed you before to his brother. I have a feeling there might be more to the Black brothers than what meets the eye."

He looked at her seriously. "What else do you know?" he demanded.

"About?"

"Regulus and Sirius. There is always something there when you speak of them. Sirius mostly. What is it?"

Hermione took a deep breath. She looked up at him and said, "Honestly, Severus, I don't know. All I do know is that Sirius Black is no good. He's not what he seems. I just have a feeling about him."

Severus gave a snort. "I have never liked the bastard, and I never shall, so you have no problem with me."

"I know," Hermione replied softly. "It's James and Lily that I am most fearful for. James loves him so; it would be tragic if he did something to place them in danger."

Severus stood up. "Why are you placing Lily in with Potter?" he asked harshly.

Hermione swallowed and decided to test the waters. "I think they may be growing closer," she said simply. "Does that bother you?"

"No!" he answered quickly. "No, I-I just never thought..." He stopped short and looked away.

"I think we need to go back now," Hermione said after allowing him a couple of minutes of reflection.

They went back to Hogwarts and parted silently. Hermione went directly to the headmaster's office. Dumbledore wanted a full report of what had transpired with Lord Voldemort.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 74

Dumbledore lends Hermione some insights into her meeting with Lord Voldemort, and Hogwarts awaits the arrival of Voldemort's meeting with the headmaster.

A/N: Well, another drama-filled chapter leading us closer to the end of everyone's days at Hogwarts. I hope you enjoy this chapter, and the next chapter after this will be the (one of many) big reveal. Again, thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin, who are so diligent, and for all the lovely reviews!

"Interesting," Dumbledore replied after Hermione told him everything that had occurred in Lord Voldemort's presence. He sat quietly in his chair behind his desk, rather casually, deep in thought. It seemed an eternity while Hermione waited for him to say anything about what she had confided in him.

The old wizard stood up and began to pace around his office. Finally, he spoke. "Has he mentioned a second meeting?" he asked shrewdly as he paced around the room.

"No," Hermione answered truthfully as she turned her body to keep him in her sights. "He said nothing to me about it. Although, he may say something to Severus later."

"Sir, there were two people sitting on either side of him. I know the wizard was Lucius Malfoy. However, the witch I didn't know. She was dark-haired with heavy-lidded eyes."

"The woman seated with Voldemort was Bellatrix Lestrange," he answered grimly.

"Lestrange?" she repeated. "There was an Eloise Lestrange that came to get me when it was time to leave."

"Yes," Dumbledore explained as he nodded. "Miss Lestrange is from another branch of the Lestrange family. Rabastan and Rodolphus are her cousins." He took a deep breath and continued, "Yes, Rabastan's brother, Rodolphus, is her husband. Bellatrix Black was her maiden name. She is the cousin of Sirius and Regulus."

"Oh," said Hermione, her interest now piqued. "I thought perhaps *they* were married. Why else would they be flanking Voldemort?"

"Tom and Bellatrix's relationship is a complex one. Although she is another man's wife, she is the closest Tom has ever come to having a wife of his own. She is his right-hand, and for the moment, it seems, Lucius is the chosen favorite. That may change. No, Lucius has recently married Bellatrix's sister, Narcissa. She was in her final year during your third year."

My word! Draco is related to that woman, she thought.

"It seems there is a lot of intermarrying amongst the pure-bloods," she observed.

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied. "Have you then found it strange how Voldemort wants to knit you into his pure-blood world?"

Hermione smiled. "I found him working desperately to explain a theory that had more holes in it than Swiss cheese. He tried to appeal and charm his way into what interests me the most. He must be rather good at it," she mused.

"Charming those who are potential obstacles has been one of Tom's lesser known talents, I'm afraid," Dumbledore confided as he reclined in his chair. "I recall how he charmed his way through seven years here at Hogwarts; although, he was never able to charm me. That was something, I fear, that always annoyed him."

Hermione watched the headmaster's face as his eyes drifted far off somewhere. "Any advice for me if he asks me to return?" she asked.

Dumbledore came to the present and sat upright in his chair. "You cannot return, Hermione," he said without a flicker of emotion. "His allowing you to leave the way you did was in a sense of good faith. If you return, he will feel no sense of obligation to allow you to leave alive. He will torture you, siphon your magical abilities and then dispose of you."

Hermione felt numb with shock.

Dumbledore leaned forward onto his desk and spoke candidly with her. "Hermione," he said softly, "I didn't tell you the details of the deaths the Order has suffered by Voldemort because I didn't wish to terrify you before your meeting. It was necessary for you to meet him for Severus' sake. He had been most foolish taking Miss Evans to meet him that day, very foolish. He needed to redeem himself in Voldemort's eyes.

"We have found wizards and witches, their bodies mutilated and nearly impossible to recognize. A few spells of Dark Magic were found on them, and we were able to ascertain that he had been experimenting with the minds and bodies of those he felt were powerful enough to be a threat to him. He knows you are powerful. He has admitted as much. If you return, he will kill you."

"What will happen to Severus?" she asked.

Dumbledore remained calm. "He will be continue on the path he has chosen and do what he must to stop Voldemort from continuing. I must ask that you adhere to the accord you signed with Slytherin. Do not engage Severus any more than you must. It will endanger him if you were seen to be close here and then when the time came for him to deliver you, he was unable."

Hermione stood and turned away from Dumbledore. "You asked me to make a life for myself. I have the person now that I wish to make my life with, and now you are saying I have to give him up?"

She turned back to him, astonished. "Why? Why must I? Can't we spirit Severus away, take him and hide him from Voldemort?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Hermione, we must think of the Greater Good. Severus' work could mean everything to Voldemort's downfall. The information he passes to you could mean speeding up the war and ending it years ahead of than if we had done nothing. You have given up so much, Hermione. I know this must all be so confusing and seem impossible to handle. Just hang on. It will not last forever," he implored.

Hermione left Dumbledore's office feeling low and downcast. How could she hang on if she had to watch over her shoulder every time she met with Severus? Would the cool and detached demeanor he assumed when they met in public take over the private looks of love to which she had grown accustomed?

It was Christmastime and the weather was gloomy and cold. Hermione met with Severus again outside underneath the Owlery stairs. It was getting exceedingly dangerous for them to meet alone, so they decided to only meet once a month. That way, information could be more concentrated and useful to the Order.

Their breath hung heavy in front of them as they huddled to stay warm.

"He has met with the giants in hiding. He is recruiting them to make some sort of push. He wants to take the war to the next level. It all rests on his meeting with Dumbledore. How the meeting ends will let us know how to proceed. Dumbledore needs to know this. Also, we don't know who all the Death Eaters are. We wear masks, and it creates a lot of confusion. Orders are given that only some have knowledge of and vice-versa. It keeps things in his control, I guess," he said.

"Severus, are you okay?" Hermione whispered quietly.

Severus was staring out into the snow. Even in the shadow, being so close to him, she could see the vein flickering in his temple that always signaled emotional strain. "There is more. It's a bit fuzzy, he's not been clear, but he's been working on what he calls his 'immortality.' He's working on something that will secure his existence forever. I have no idea how he is doing this, but the demonstrations of his powers are awesome, Hermione. You need to warn Dumbledore."

Hermione was silent. "He's taking steps towards immortality? Can that happen?"

Severus shrugged. "I know about Nicolas Flamel, but this is different. He's working on experiments, experiments that I am aiding him with. Dark magic, it is so fascinating, Hermione. It makes you feel so alive and powerful. I've only read about such things, but I've always wondered...now I can broaden my mind. It's exhilarating!" he said excitedly.

"Severus," she called to him.

He stopped and looked at her with a fire in his eyes she had only seen when he looked at her with desire. Now, he desired something new.

"Severus, look at me!" she said in a hard voice not like herself.

He snapped out of his dream-like state and looked at her. "Severus, you are teetering, love. He's wooing you the way he wants to woo me. We have so many similar desires. Knowledge, learning, expanding the mind's abilities, power, respect...Severus the cost is too much!" she said desperately. "And you know nothing is for free...especially from that vampire."

She clung to him now in desperation to hold him, keep him safe from Voldemort's seductive powers.

Severus looked away, his face so forlorn. "It's so hard, Hermione. He makes it all sound so right. The Dark Arts is so subtle, I feel so pulled towards it...my whole life I have. I think it was those books I found that were my mum's. She said in school she had been fascinated by the Dark Arts. I was *pulled* in, and I just took to it so well!" he explained. "It was as if I was made to do the Dark Arts."

Hermione placed a hand on his chest. "I understand, Severus. How can you refuse something in which you excel?" she replied.

"Right!" he answered brightly. "I have been able to make my own potions and spells for years now. You remember my book, my old Potions book from fourth year?"

Hermione laughed. "How could I not? That poor book was so inked up, and you just infuriated me with your ability to always find a better way to brew!"

"You should have seen my sixth-year book! I consolidated everything from fourth year and on into that book. All my spells, curses, hexes." His smile vanished as he changed the subject.

"Voldemort leaves me be to do my brewing. I don't have to join in when they go out Muggle-hunting. I hate it!" he said in disgust as he shook his head.

"You can live in your lab, working on difficult potions for Voldemort..."

"...Don't say his name!" he hissed.

Hermione was stunned. "Why ever not?" she asked, affronted.

"It makes my Mark sear. It frightens me that he could find me or hear me," he whispered fearfully. "Just call him the Dark Lord."

"All right," Hermione acquiesced. "The *Dark Lord* praises you, tells you how invaluable you are, gives you all the adoration you secretly resented Potter for all this time. It is very seductive. Like a lover, even."

"No, Hermione," he said firmly. "It could never be *that* dear to me. One day, we will be lovers, and it will be wonderful. You have vowed your body to me and as mine is to you. Look, we can do this!"

He changed the subject abruptly. "He takes great pains to demonstrate his magical powers that he has learned over the years when he traveled. He claims to be the most powerful wizard alive, quite disturbing, that."

Hermione snorted. "Quite full of himself, isn't he?" she said with disgust. "The hubris of this wizard is incredible, but no bother. Dumbledore is far greater, I am sure of it!"

"That's all I can tell you, Hermione. Listen. I have to go away for the holidays, and then sometime soon after, he'll be coming. Warn your people to stay in their tower." He pressed a tin into her hand. "Here is some Floo powder. Floo the elves in the kitchens; I have already warned them. They will bring you food, whatever you require. I'll send word the morning of his arrival. Make sure that no matter their blood status, if they don't want him to know about them and their families, stay in their tower! Do you understand?" he asked with worry etched in his face.

"Yes, Severus. We shall all be careful."

He kissed her and said, "I won't be able to meet with you for a while. Valentine's Day, I will see you at the dance. I won't be able to steal away with you, but I will be thinking of you, wishing we could spin around on that dance floor for everyone to see! I love you, Hermione Granger. One day Hermione Snape. Does it sound good to you?" he whispered against her lips.

"Mrs. Severus Snape. I think I'm looking more forward to that," she teased as she rubbed her hands slowly up and down his chest.

"Why?" he asked with a quirk of an eyebrow.

"Oh, it makes me think of all the things I am waiting for: being with you, belonging to you, being under you...things like that," she replied shyly.

Severus looked at her intensely and closed his eyes as he traced her face with his fingertips. "I want to learn your whole body the way I have learned this face," he said with yearning in his tone.

"You will, Severus."

January of 1978 was a hard month. Severus and Lily both turned eighteen. The snow was making everyone stir crazy, and then the worst was the weekend Voldemort arrived. Hermione received the owl and went straight to James and Lily, who had strangely become an item over the holidays. After dinner, the Head Boy and Girl escorted all of Gryffindor House and the Muggle-borns of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to their common rooms. The mood was tense, but Hermione shared Severus' gift with them all. The house-elves worked overtime bringing in all sorts of tasty foods and creamy pies to help take the edge off.

"Damn decent of the slimy git, I'll say that," admitted Sirius as he tucked in with James, Peter, Lily, and Remus.

All in all, the first evening was a blast. The second day was slow. Everyone was having a bit of a lie-in. Later, Hermione organized study groups to help everyone get all of their homework out of the way, so when Severus gave the heads up, they could enjoy themselves without guilt.

At first most of them grumbled when Hermione mentioned "study groups," but she said that it would be a competition to see who could outshine whom. Those students good at Transfiguration had their own team to work with and teach. Potions, Charms, Ancient Runes, Divination, Potions, Arithmancy...everyone tried their dead level best. The day was full of first- through seventh-years, people who never had spoken a word to each other before, helping each other with their various tasks.

There were quite the shockers too! Little Marlene McKinnon, a sixth-year who was as quiet as a church mouse, completely annihilated James Potter and Sirius Black in a duel. It had been most spectacular! For such a small witch, she was wicked fast and deadly accurate. She hadn't even broken a sweat. Sirius Black swore he had fallen in love.

First-years were showing upperclassmen enchantments and spells that were in the NEWT level. It had been amazing to watch such young children perform such difficult spells. At the end of the day, Marlene McKinnon won a bag of Honeydukes chocolate for an honorable mention prize for her dueling lesson. First place went to Lily Evans for the incredible Transfiguration of the common room to look like the Throne Room she had seen in Dublin Castle when on Holiday in Ireland. Through her demonstration, she was also able to assist other students with the more difficult concepts of Transfiguration.

Second prize went to Maddie Markum, a first-year who had dazzled all of Gryffindor House with her Charms work. She was also able to explain the complexities of jabbing versus swishing whilst performing a spell. Many people benefited, even a couple of seventh-years.

Third place went to Alice Lambert with her study group on cauldron safety. She helped to show many first and second years where they were going wrong before cauldrons began to explode. She had such a tender and nurturing manner that she was able to handle the strain and pressure. By the end of the day, everyone's homework had been completed and also proofed by seventh-years for accuracy. Then it was back to the celebration of good food by the house-elves and games of wizard's chess, Gobstones, and Exploding Snap for everyone.

Sunday came with another lie-in and a late breakfast. Soon the rumors and questions started to abound.

"Surely, Voldemort has been and gone by now!"

"I wonder if he did anything to Dumbledore."

"Did Dumbledore hex him?"

"When is Snivellus getting his pale arse here to let us out?" demanded Sirius Black over everyone else.

James sat lounging with Lily in his lap. "Don't be a prat, Sirius," he said lazily. "Just enjoy!" he turned, and he and Lily began one of their infamous snogging sessions. Hermione thought it was revolting. Why Lily was all over him, she couldn't understand. Not after the declaration she had made to her at the start of term. However, she could tolerate it because she knew their snogging was going to lead to Harry being born. Although, deep down, she knew, even if she didn't want to admit it to herself, that Lily was using James. She had made it plain that she was gay. It hurt knowing that Harry, who took such stock in his parents' love, was really a by-product of two people just wanting to fit in with the expectations. Sure, James loved Lily, but she didn't love him.

She was caught staring, and Remus whispered to her, "Makes you wish you had someone, doesn't it?" he whispered.

Hermione wasn't in the mood for another one of Remus' "we should be together" sales pitches. So, she changed the subject.

"Remus, how did they get together anyway?" she asked as she jerked her head towards James and Lily, AKA, Hogwarts Golden Couple.

Remus' face grew sad. "You didn't hear?" he asked.

"What?"

"Lily's parents died over the summer. So did James'."

Hermione was dumbstruck. "How?" she demanded.

"Lily's parents were in the house when a pipe broke. Gas leaked in, and they died in their sleep from the carbon poisoning. James' Mum and Dad were old when James was born. His dad was eighty and his mum was sixty! His dad had a heart attack and it was all so sudden. James' mum hadn't been well for a while. She had problem with her kidneys. Anyway, when James' dad died, the shock was too much for his mum. She just gave up and died a month later.

"Being Head Boy and Girl made them communicate, and sharing their loss was good for them, brought them together. He wised up, she stopped thinking he was a bastard, and then one thing led to another," Remus explained.

"Do you think Lily's parents' deaths' were accidental?" she asked fearfully.

"It was the work of Death Eaters. The *Morsmordre* was over the house," he replied.

"How odd they would be so...humane," she replied hatefully.

"Are you upset that she and James are getting closer?" he asked.

"No, but I am concerned about how Severus will take the news," she whispered.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 74

It's time to leave Hogwarts behind. But where will everyone be going?

A/N: This is the promised chapter you've been waiting for. Things are not going to turn out as planned by the Order. Hearts will be broken, futures will be uncertain. Thanks as always to luvsev and WriterMerrin for working so hard with me! Also, thanks to all of you who read and review!

Severus came to Gryffindor tower to tell them that it was safe to go freely about the castle again. He spoke with Hermione and Remus for a while and told them about the Dark Lord's visit with Dumbledore.

"It didn't go as he had hoped," he replied. He stared at Remus, studying him harshly. "I do not approve of discussing matters in front of the werewolf!"

"Severus!" Hermione chided him. "Let's not forget our manners, shall we?" she said coldly.

Severus looked at her angrily, and then his expression turned impassive. "By all means. Please remember the relationship of our houses. I am only required to speak with you, not him as well," he said softly.

Hermione turned to Remus. "Just go, it's all right."

Remus left after giving a glare to Severus.

"Severus," she started, "that was unbelievably rude!"

"Please, not now with sympathy for the wolf," he said waspishly. "We have bigger things with which to concern ourselves."

"Such as?"

"It failed. The Dark Lord is angry and vengeful. The war will now take on a more deliberate and concentrated effort."

"I need to go see Dumbledore," she said.

"No need. I am sure Dumbledore shall be here shortly," he replied. He glanced over Hermione's shoulder, and his face grew dark. Hermione turned around and saw James and Lily snuggling and kissing. She turned to look at Severus' face. It was murderous. He swept away without a word, and Hermione closed her eyes. She didn't even want to think about what thoughts might be running through Severus' mind.

The spring arrived, and more meetings of the Order of the Phoenix were being held in Dumbledore's office. People were flitting in and out; names were mentioned briefly.

"Barty Crouch is the Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. The curses that Voldemort is using, the Ministry now calls them 'Unforgivables'. Just as you, Hermione and Remus, were trained in receiving and casting Unforgivables, the Aurors have now been allowed by the Ministry to use them whenever necessary," Dumbledore reported.

"I still think it's a bloody mistake!" growled Moody. "There'll be no way to sink down to that level and then rise above it after the war is over!"

"Duly noted, Alastor," said Dumbledore. "However, we are in no position to debate Crouch when he seems to be the only one strong enough to hold the Ministry together. We do have those inside the Ministry who are with us, fellow Order members who are fighting out there, risking the lives of their families."

"Has it gotten so bad now, Dumbledore?" asked Remus. "The *Prophet* only tells us so much!"

"The Ministry is one step away from collapsing," Dumbledore replied. "Would you and Hermione be willing to join the fight? I realize you have NEWTs coming; however, there are certain things we need where only you and Hermione can help."

A look of realization came over Remus' face. "I shall begin taking the necessary steps," he replied darkly.

"I won't lie to you," warned Dumbledore as he stood up from his chair behind his desk and made his way towards them. "We have experienced a lot of tragedy. There is someone in the Ministry who is sabotaging our efforts, and we don't know whom. We lost some very good people."

Hermione breathed deeply. "What can I do?" she asked simply.

"For now, I need you to lean on your contact with Slytherin. See if there are any others who are unhappy or willing to defect. We need to break into their ranks, infiltrate and do something to stop Voldemort. Can he still be trusted?" Dumbledore asked warily.

Hermione thought cautiously before speaking. "He is holding his own, for now; although, he is aware of the pull the Dark arts are playing on him. Voldemort is working hard to seduce him. He is losing heart, growing fearful about the future. I hope there will be someone who will join him so he won't be so alone. He's terrified all the time. He sent me a warning: Voldemort was not pleased by the way your meeting with him ended. He will be throwing his full weight onto you to prove he is the stronger wizard. He is working hard to ensure his 'immortality,' as he calls it. He has been enlisted in creating Dark potions that he doesn't fully understand. Voldemort will not explain the reasons behind it, but the fact remains that these demonstrations of might and power keep the Death Eaters in line. He has them terrified and convinced he is unstoppable."

Dumbledore steeped his fingers and said, "I want Hermione, Remus, Sirius, James, Peter, Lily, and Mary MacDonald to meet me here, tonight. I have a proposition I would like to discuss with all of you."

They all crammed into the office. It was uncomfortable, with Lily and Hermione not speaking to each another, but fortunately, Dumbledore did not make them wait long.

He came in and smiled happily at them. "I hope we can all dispense with the formalities. Let it just be said that we are all sad that 1978 will prove to be another year of war, and that I am regretful to thrust adulthood upon you all so quickly, however, for the sake of our world, it must be so.

"I believe all of you are ready to sit for your NEWTs. I would like for all of you to come next week in shifts to take your examinations. Afterwards, you will be leaving the school to go immediately into Auror training and officially become members of the Order. I will be giving you information as needed for your own safety. No one is to know of this adjustment to your education. You will just disappear, which, unfortunately, will not be so odd, considering the losses the Order has already suffered."

After much discussion, questions, and fears expounded upon, the scheme was accepted. It was April, and very soon, they would all be gone. After the others had left, Hermione stayed behind to speak with Dumbledore.

"Remus will be joining the werewolves that have taken up with Voldemort. He will be unable to contact us for quite a while. As for you, as long as Severus remains, I need you to as well. You will go to class as always, even though you will no longer technically be a student. It will be imperative that we get as much information as possible. Have you found any dissatisfaction in the ranks?" he asked.

"Severus, during our last visit, mentioned Regulus has not been himself. There seems to be a melancholy hanging over him. He will have to work more on him, but he seems to be the only weak link," Hermione reported.

"Very well," he replied. "It is all coming to a fast and furious conflict. More deaths, more lives splintered. I wonder how many of the students here today will be alive by the end?" He turned and faced Hermione with an urgent look on his face.

"I implore you, Hermione. If there was any time for me to know anything about the future, this would be the time to tell me!" he urged.

"I can't, Albus. I can't risk jeopardizing the future. As far as I can tell, though, everything is going according to the history I know. I will say this, the next three years will be brutally difficult, and hope will seem lost, but it will not be. James and Lily are important to the cause and must not lose heart. I shall do all I can to ensure their safety."

They all sat secretly for their NEWTs, and when it was all over, the newly instated members of the Order of the Phoenix began to pack to leave for training. Hermione was sure they were leaving for Fenwick's with Moody and Kingsley, but didn't want to ask. Mary and James came to say their farewells. She hugged them both and said, "Please be careful!"

James smiled broadly and whispered to Hermione, "I proposed to Lily, last night. She said yes! As soon as we can, we're going to get married."

Hermione's face shone. "I am so very happy for you both!" She squeezed his hand and watched as he went to meet Lily across the common room to escort her out. For one moment, Lily's eyes met Hermione's, and then, they were gone. Hermione felt a lump in her throat after their departure. She knew that she would never see them again.

Later that day, Hermione met with Severus out by the lake. The meeting was under the umbrella of Severus trying to pump information from Hermione about the missing Gryffindors, so there was no issue of being seen talking. It had been a while since they could meet privately. They looked at the other hungrily, but did not dare touch, knowing someone was watching their every movement.

"I noticed the diminished ranks of Gryffindor house today, Hermione," he replied while looking out at the lake.

Hermione saw no reason to lie. She leaned over and picked up some smooth rocks and began skipping them across the surface of the water.

"Yes, they are gone. Dumbledore had them all sit for their NEWTs early, and they are in the wind."

"You know I have to ask..." he said

"...Tell your Lord that they are in a place marked by a Fidelius Charm. They will not be found until they resurface."

"What of you?" he asked with a glance her way.

"Me?" Hermione repeated. "My place is here, protecting the others, the younger ones, Muggle-borns, fulfilling my role as Head of Gryffindor," she replied unimportantly.

She stole a glance and saw the telltale flicker of the vein in his temple. It was his tick that gave him away when he was furious. "Is there something wrong?" she asked. "You seem to be out of sorts."

"I saw them, Hermione," he said tersely.

"Lily and James," she whispered as she nodded slowly.

"They were shagging! Shagging!" he spat as he clasped his hands behind his back. He looked murderously angry and jealous.

"What do you want me to say, Severus?" Hermione whispered sadly.

"She snuck out of here like a fucking coward...she couldn't even face me...ME! Her oldest friend! She still could not find it in her heart to finally forgive me." He began to walk away from Hermione, his robes billowing behind him.

Hermione didn't know what to do. She didn't want to follow him. She wanted to smack him. After all this time, he still loved Lily best? What would he think if she just decided to throw it all away and tell him the whole truth, that Lily's passions were not for either him or James? Lily loved her! She stood there and kept skipping stones, trying to keep her temper under control. Finally, after he had made his circuit, did he come back to talk with her.

"I wasn't good enough to shag. I had to promise the sun, moon, and stars before I could have a bit of trim, and what angers me is that I'm having to do the same with you!" he hissed.

That was it. She struck him, hard, across the face. "I cannot believe you!" she screamed. "Is that what I am to you? 'A bit of trim'? Sod off!"

She ran inside the castle, back towards Gryffindor tower. Two Slytherins intercepted her: Regulus Black and a sixth-year named Travers. They each had her by an arm. She was going nowhere.

Regulus leaned over her and grabbed her hair, pulling her towards him. "I saw what you did. There are no heroes here to help you now," he whispered in her ear.

She jerked her head away as much as she could. "I never had any use for heroes, Regulus Black. I am able to stand on my own steam, thank you very much," she said as she glared at him.

"You will not get away with striking Slytherins, Mudblood," he warned darkly.

They ushered her into an empty classroom, and Regulus warded the door and placed a Silencing charm on the room.

"You want to fight like a Muggle, then you shall get beaten like one. And if you tell anyone who did this to you, we will find the first Mudblood Gryffindor we can and personally make *her* suffer," he said dangerously. He lowered his head to hers as she was forced to her knees. "I think you know what I am getting at?" he asked.

He backed up and nodded to Travers. He began to beat Hermione viciously as Regulus looked on. She hunched into a defensive position, but Travers just began to kick and stomp her around the legs and back. Finally, Regulus stopped the beating and said to Hermione as she lay there bleeding, "Don't worry, we shall alert the infirmary to your whereabouts. It's the least we can do."

Hermione lay there bleeding and broken as they walked out. Regulus had been merciful, far more merciful than she had expected. She waited patiently as the discovery was made, and she was transported to the infirmary. She stayed there for one week, having sustained numerous broken bones and lacerations, including a horrible head wound that was a little dicey. Hermione mentally kicked herself the entire time for being so foolhardy. She never should have struck Severus. She could have called him every filthy name in the world...could have even threatened to hex his bollocks off. It all would have been acceptable. But she had hit the Head of Slytherin and in public. She was fortunate she wasn't dead.

Frank and Alice came with Marlene McKinnon to visit and cheer her up. Marlene brought some lovely spring flowers and tried to get Hermione to tell them who had attacked her.

"Please," Hermione said desperately. "Do not engage Slytherin. I had it coming. I did something that was out of bounds. I'm lucky to be alive, not to mention unscarred. They could have done much worse damage, but they were merciful. This is war, and while I know this must all seem insane, it is how things are. If I tell anyone who did this, they promised me they would find a Gryffindor Muggle-born and make her suffer."

She looked at the three of them hard. "Do you understand the message? Not he, but *she*. You know what that means, right?"

They nodded slowly. "I can't wait until I can join and fight those bastards!" Frank said fiercely. Alice slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. He looked at her and began to calm down.

"Let's go, Frank," Alice whispered.

After they left, Marlene sat on the edge of the bed and said, "Is there anything I can get you, Hermione?"

"Please," Hermione said as she grabbed her hand.

"Please make sure no one does anything rash or foolish. I think I've done enough of that to last until the end of term," she whispered.

Marlene smiled. "Why did you hit Snape, Hermione? I thought you and he had some sort of amicable truce between you?"

"He said something about James and all of them, and I just lost my temper. It's just I have had it building up in me for so long, and I snapped," she lied.

Marlene stood. "You are a damn liar, but I won't press matters. It's your business, not mine. I'll keep things tight while you're healing," she said a bit roughly, and then she walked away.

Severus didn't come to see her in the infirmary, although Dumbledore did. She had just woken from a nap when she saw him sitting in a chair by the window near her bed. The area was curtained off, and she began to look anxiously around her.

"Don't concern yourself, Hermione. No one can hear us," he promised.

He stood and brought the chair closer to her and sat down again. "I must say, I am rather disappointed, Hermione. You allowed your personal feelings to take over your better judgment. You are better than that." He looked at her strangely.

"I do know that one can only take so much. It must be hard with Remus gone. You have no one to confide in. Your relationship with Severus must be at a breaking point for you to lash out at him in such a public manner."

Hermione's eyes were brimming with tears. "He hurt me with his words. It felt like he punched me in my stomach, and I felt so humiliated, I needed him to hurt as much as I hurt!" she explained.

"And instead, now you feel so much worse," Dumbledore mused. "It isn't easy, seeing the person you've lived to hate in an intimate embrace of the girl you had once loved and hoped to marry," he said calmly.

Hermione cried. She cried all the tears she had wanted to cry for all the years she had been stuck in this life, the life she had never meant to live, for the boy she loved, whom she had never meant to love, and for all the loss and pain that came with it.

Once her cries started to subside, Dumbledore squeezed her hand. "It's hard to let go in the best of circumstances, but when a person is so prideful, it can be nearly impossible..."

Finally, graduation came and all the ceremony and pomp that came with it. Hermione had made her decision. She was going to have to leave the wizarding world. She could not stay and risk the chance of destroying the future she hoped to return to. She had not spoken to Severus in nearly two months. There was nothing to say. He still loved Lily, despite everything they had shared and promised, he still loved her and wanted her. It was something Hermione could not forget.

She walked slowly back from outside to meet Dumbledore in his office. The weather was looking poorly. A chilly breeze was setting in, and the air smelled of rain. She was going to gather her things, all the things that would trace anyone back to her, and make her case. Like it or not, she was leaving and would not return until after the thirty-first of October 1981.

She made her way back to the castle alone until she sensed a person closing in on her. She spun around, brandishing her wand at the person. It was Severus. She tucked it away and turned her back on him.

"Hermione, we must speak to each other!" he said urgently.

"Why?" she said weakly. "There is no reason anymore. There is no more hiding the fact that you and I are through. Shortly we will leave, you will go back to your Lord, and I will go where I must. It's over."

His face grew dark. "That's it, then?" he spat, grabbing her arm and marching her over to where they could be unobserved. "All the vows and promises you made to me are over and done?" His black eyes burned into her as he raked them over her form. "You swore to me I would have you. You swore you would never leave me. You swore you would be mine!" he said angrily.

Suddenly the thunder rolled, and the rain came down on them. "What does it matter?" Hermione yelled as the rain began to seep into her clothes. "You love Lily! You were so angry Potter got her and not you! You don't want me."

She broke down crying, and he grabbed her and held her to him. The rain was plastering his black hair around his face. "I love you, Hermione. Yes, I felt a hurt pride from long ago, and I was a bastard to you for saying what I said. I'm sorry. I love YOU! I want to be with you, Hermione. I always will. Come with me, and be my wife. Come be by my side, and together we will live the rest of our lives happy and content!"

"Are you fucking insane?" she screamed over the rain. "We are in the middle of a war! You think I can just come with you, move in with the Dark Lord, and we'll live happily ever after?"

"We'll do it together; you and I will stop this, we can do it!" he insisted.

"What about you, Severus? Why can't you just come inside and let Dumbledore hide you? You don't have to go back to him. If I go with you, I'll be just another Mudblood whore. Do you understand that?" she yelled as she grasped desperately onto him.

"If you don't come with me, Hermione, we can't be together!" he snapped. "I HAVE to go back. I've come so far now, and I have to keep you safe. The only way is to finish what I have started."

"No!" said Hermione. "Please don't go. You don't know what he could do...he could really hurt you...change you. I love you. Please don't leave me!" she begged.

"I'm not leaving you!" he hollered as he pulled her to him and kissed her. They kissed hungrily and desperately as she pleaded with him.

"Don't go. You don't need to keep doing this!" She wanted to tell him, just three more years, and it would be over, and then they could be in the open, loving one another, safe, not worrying about Voldemort for another decade. At least they could have that. If he left now, what would become of him? Had she changed things too much? Would he even live?

She began to cry. She was terrified for the future...their future. She clung to his robes. She poured out her heart, everything inside her. "Please, Severus," she sobbed. "Don't go!" She sank to her knees, clutching his robes, desperately weeping.

"Don't leave me! Please!" she screamed as her voice grew hoarse.

He dropped onto his knees, grabbed her face, and said, "You'll understand it one day. I must do this for you and Lily, for all of them. I have to do this! Besides, he will kill me if I don't come back. The only way is for me to fully give myself over to him, don't you understand? I have to get the power and the strength. Then I can defeat him. I'll show them all!" His eyes were blazing with greed and passion.

He stood and left Hermione on her knees in the mud from the heavy rain. "Please," she tried to yell as her voice became raspy and soft. "Don't go..."

Hermione shivered in the infirmary as Madam Pomfrey admonished her.

"I will never understand it! Outside, yelling in the rain, soaked to the skin! You are begging for pneumonia!" she chided.

Hermione took her Pepper-up Potion and waited for the steam to stop coming out of her ears before going up to see the Headmaster.

He had been surprised by her announcement and tried desperately to make her change her mind.

"Hermione, your formality concerns me," he said anxiously.

"Expect me around the fall of 1981, Headmaster," she said sadly.

"Hermione," Dumbledore asked delicately. "You've been crying. What's the matter?"

She refused to look at him. "Nothing that can be helped now, sir. The die has been cast. No one would listen. He wouldn't listen!" She burst into tears.

Dumbledore embraced the crying witch. "Please, can't you tell me anything?" he begged.

"I wish I could!" she said brokenly as she wiped the tears from her face. "I wish I could unburden myself and have this entire bloody business over and done with...but I can't. If I do, I risk changing everything in my world, and I can't do it. Besides, all of this was decided years ago. It wasn't even me...it was the choices they all made before I came here! Then, after I arrived, the same stupid, asinine choices kept being repeated, and now everything will be the way it is supposed to be...no matter how much I loathe it! It would be better for me to be apart from our world and not upset anything more than I must."

"And Severus?" he asked. "Can he still be trusted?"

"I don't know, I don't know anything anymore..."

A/N: Now before you all start sending Howlers... just remember the very first chapter. For three years, Hermione was hiding in the Muggle world. Then she sees Severus for the first time during those three years, and they fight. For those who have been asking for lemons...we are now approaching the grove!

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 74

In the early hours of the first of November, 1981, Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts after a three-year absence.
How will Severus react to her return?

A/N: Here are the promised lemons that some have ask for! I hope you enjoy Severus and Hermione's reunion. Again, thanks to my awesome betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin :)

October 1981

Hermione sat in her flat and watched the children walking up and down the street. It was funny; Deidre had said how the American tradition of "trick-or-treating" had carried over into the British culture.

"Personally, I tend to favor Guy Fawkes Night. At least you get a bonfire, fireworks, some lager, and there's always someone to snog!" she mused whilst painting her nails.

Hermione smiled faintly, wondering what was happening. She had already planned her leaving. As far as Deidre and her father knew, she was moving to the States to look up a long-lost aunt of her mother's. They had been excited for her that she was finally going to have a family. She built up a very happy scenario in their minds about her future. She had thought of Obliviating them, but too much time had passed. Besides, if things ever got too bad, she would need a place to run away and hide. Hermione didn't think many people would take too kindly to her showing up after all this time. As far as they all knew, she could be dead. Only Dumbledore had known she was alive. But after last month's stunt with Lucius Malfoy and Severus, anyone could know now.

She even wondered if Lily and James had married. She had absolutely no clue what reality she would be walking into tomorrow. She had tried to sleep, but around 4:00 a.m. she couldn't stay away; she knew it was over, she felt it in her blood. She jumped off of her bed and wedged the loose floorboard open under her dresser and pulled out her wand. She shrunk her bags into her cloak that she had kept over the years, hidden out of sight. She took a deep breath and looked in the mirror. She wondered what Severus would say when he saw her. She wondered if he would even be at Hogwarts.

She closed her eyes and focused on Hogwarts with all her might. She spun, and in a blink of an eye, she was there. She could hear distant sounds of singing and chattering from Hogsmeade. *Everyone must be celebrating*, she thought. She began to walk towards the castle nervously. When she finally reached the large oak doors, there was Dumbledore with his arms outstretched. She ran and embraced him, and when she opened her eyes, there was Severus, waiting, midway into the light. Anyone else might not have recognized him, but she would know him anywhere.

She slowly made her way towards him, and he towards her. They embraced and cried. Severus pulled her face towards him and he kissed her.

"Please, tell me you are back?" he whispered. "Tell me I've not lost you?"

"No," she cried as she held onto him tightly. "I didn't know if you would be here. I was so afraid! Even when I saw you last month, I still didn't know what to think. You hurt me so much! I was afraid all the time..." she stopped talking and broke down, sobbing on his shoulder.

"It's over, for now," he whispered. "They all think he's gone forever, but Dumbledore and I know the truth. I don't know how much time, but at least there will be some peace."

"There is so much I need to tell you," Hermione began.

"No," he said softly as he placed a finger on her lips. "There will be a time for that. Now, I want to take you to my home."

"Spinner's End?" she asked surprised.

"No, here," he replied. "I am Potions master here now. I started in September. I didn't have the time to tell you. I was working as a spy for Dumbledore and an opening came up here at Hogwarts. I will remain here teaching...well, I can tell you all about it later, but for now, I want to take you to my rooms...that is if you still want me." He lowered his head as if he were anticipating the worst.

Hermione turned towards Dumbledore, and he smiled while gesturing her to go on with Severus.

Hermione's hand found Severus', and he held it tightly in his own as he wordlessly led her down to the dungeons. "You must be wondering about all the celebrating, or are you?" he asked strangely. "I found it odd that Albus was expecting you, although I do get a strange feeling at times the old bugger is omniscient," he said wryly.

Hermione laughed. "Severus, like you said, there will be a time for all that. Now is not that time," she said seductively.

They reached his rooms, and he led her silently into the bedroom. He pulled Hermione close to him and whispered, "What is the time for now?"

"It's time for us, Severus. For you and me to finally be together. Everything else can wait," she whispered.

"Just one thing, Hermione," he said with his head hung low. "I hurt you so much, and I made you feel abandoned when I never came to the infirmary after saying those terrible things. But I have loved you all this time."

He looked up and held her eyes with his own. "I was such a fool. You were right. She never loved me. No one has ever loved me like you have." He kissed her desperately then as his hands cupped her face.

Hermione kissed him in return as their hands shook from anticipation. After all this time, from the moment Severus had sneaked into her room in Spinner's End, kissing her on the cheek, and the next night, taking her into that record booth, playing that love song of years ago, to all the passion-filled interludes watching the other pleasure themselves they shared in private, hiding from everyone, it had now come down to this night.

Silently, they shed their clothes, looking and admiring everything their eyes drank in. They slowly reached for each other and sighed at the connection of their bare skin. Severus reached down and swiftly picked her up and laid her down on his bed.

Hermione felt the tears slide down her face. All these years, finally they were able to express what they never could. He wiped away her tears and kissed the trail they made down her face. He moved his hands all over her, admiring her full breasts and firm legs. He kissed his way down to her cleavage and toyed with her nipples as he worked his way downward. Hermione was nervous. A part of her had never dared to dream she would be able to be with Severus this way. He parted her labia, and she felt his breath tickle her just before he lowered his mouth on her.

"Oh, yes!" she breathed. "Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes!" she continued to groan in anticipation.

He paused and kissed the tender skin of her inner thighs, slowly. He groaned appreciatively. He skimmed his fingers across in a pattern over the satiny skin and said before lowering his head to please her again, "I always knew you would be so soft there."

She felt his lips and tongue on her, teasing, exploring, tasting. He discovered many delights there. He pushed his tongue inside her and then his finger, feeling her flimsy barrier she had saved for him. Then there was that little pearl of nerves that made her giggle and blush. He had noticed this before whilst watching her touch herself during one of the few interludes during school. He wrapped his lips around it, teasing her with his tongue.

She came and squealed as she grasped the bars of his headboard above her. She felt him work his way back up slowly as she lazily recovered from the most explosive orgasm she had ever experienced. He kissed and nipped his way back up her body, taking his time to suckle and cup her breasts appreciatively. Hermione felt a hot hardness dragging along her thigh as he rose over her.

She reached down and tenderly grasped the soft, velvet hardness in her hand. Severus was shaking and panting as she teased him with her fingers. She ran her other hand down his back to his arse. As she squeezed him, she realized how taut it was.

"Hermione, I can't tell you how long I will last. I've never done this before," he said against her throat, his breath ragged.

"It's okay, I've never done it either," she groaned as he began to thrust into her hand. She led him to where she ached for him to be and snuggled him with her sex.

His mouth was open, and he choked for a second or two as his body jerked involuntarily. "You are so warm. I never thought it would feel ~~so~~ warm!" he murmured in her ear.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he drove inside her.

A ragged sound forced its way from Hermione's throat. Severus was breathing hard as he lay still on top of her.

"Did you...?" she asked timidly after a minute.

He balanced himself upright onto his elbows and knees. His cock was thickly embedded inside her. "No," he groaned. "I wanted to give you a minute. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said nervously. "What do I do?" she whispered.

"At this point, I'm just praying you like it," he replied honestly with a hint of fear in his voice.

He began to move, and Hermione hitched her legs behind his thighs, pushing upwards to brush her clit against his pelvis. She discovered a delicious sensation when she kept herself lifted up.

"Severus, put your hand on my arse, lift me!" she breathed. He did and soon she was moaning.

"This can't be real, this is so good!" she groaned.

"Yes!" he panted as he began to pump inside her feverishly. She looked over as he was propped up on one hand next to her head while the other cupped her arse. He was straining to push himself in as deeply as he could. He was glistening with sweat, and his hair had swung to one side, so she could see how flushed his face was with lust and desire.

"You feel incredible!" he exclaimed as he continued to pound inside her.

Hermione felt the friction inside her driving her higher and higher to a feeling that threatened to take her over. She felt a burst that set her body afire.

"Severus!" she screamed as she arched her back, giving everything over to him. "More! Yes!"

"Oh, my...*Hermione!*" he roared as he exploded inside her.

It was six o'clock, and Hermione felt as though she was as dry as a desert. She was positive Severus had expended every drop of moisture in her body. The wizard was a beast, and she loved it. She looked over at the sleeping panther that was Severus Snape and wondered if she had been wise in keeping him "without" for so long. The wizard had needs...a lot of needs...that kept her in a suspended state of bliss as her friend and lover acquainted himself with her more private parts. She smiled as she remembered how many times in two hours they had satisfied those needs.

She must have slept again because the next thing she knew, it was eight o'clock and she was experiencing a wonderful, hard throbbing massaging itself against her clit. She smiled as she heard a familiar panting in her ear. She opened her eyes and gently found an earlobe to flick with her tongue.

"Oh, fuck!" exclaimed the sexiest voice on earth, and soon they were wrestling for dominance. In a flash, she was faced with burning black eyes. His body was tense and primed. He stared at her without a word.

She bit her lower lip and gasped as he clutched her waist tightly with one arm. She lowered her eyes and began to rub her pussy against the length of his cock.

He watched her as she worked herself into a frenzy. He slammed into her, making her shudder underneath him, and he pushed his hand under her head, kissing and sucking at her neck as he stroked deftly inside her. She began to make sweet, small cries that she knew now drove him crazy with lust.

"Yes, good girl, cry for me," he whispered in her ear.

"Please fuck me, Severus, please!" she cried out softly.

He did and, as far as she knew, didn't stop until it was eleven o'clock in the morning.

They sat in bed, naked, eating ravenously. He kept staring at her whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She did the same to him. Soon they were blushing and laughing at the silliness of the moment. They started to talk about old times, memories of lazy summer days, and happier times at Spinner's End, stolen moments where he would share his latest developments in his Potions book.

"You prat! I was so mortified," she said, trying to sound upset as they talked about the night he performed the Levicorpus spell he created on her.

"I can't believe you didn't hex me," he said while shaking his head. "I got such a hard-on watching you wriggle around trying to cover your knickers," he confided.

"You did?" she breathed as she felt her face grow warm.

He reached over and stroked her face. "I can't believe you are here. Hermione, we're going to be so happy! You and I can stay here...if you want, I can apprentice you, or

you can apprentice with Minerva, you were always so good at Transfiguration. Albus said everything is going to be fine. I may have to spend a week or two in Azkaban, but knowing you're here and will be waiting for me when I get back will make it all bearable!" he exclaimed in a rush.

His face changed, and his smile faded. "D-do you still I-love me?" he stammered. "After everything I put you through?"

"Yes, Severus," she breathed. "I love you, I will always love you, darling," she said as she kissed his lips softly.

"I guess we need to meet with Albus," she said slowly.

Severus banished the food off the blanket and lowered Hermione onto the bed. "Not until the morning, sweet," he whispered. "Today, you and I get to do anything we want." He began to nibble on her neck.

"I take it all you would like to do today is me," she guessed sarcastically.

"Mmm hmm" was his reply as he began to slide his hands from her waist up to cup her breasts in his hands.

He flipped her over onto her stomach and yanked her back into him by her waist.

"Oh, my!" she said shocked as he began to massage her bum appreciatively.

He reached around and rolled her nipples with his fingers. Soon she was wiggling her backside against his hardening prick. With a growl, he plunged inside her, and she screamed with delight.

"This was what I wanted to do that night I saw you in your knickers!" he groaned as he continued to pump into her from behind.

Hermione thought of that day, of how she was pulling on her skirt to cover her privates as he stared while apologizing profusely.

"You dirty boy!" she mock-chided him. Actually, it turned her on strangely. She was feeling decadent as he began to build the orgasm inside her.

"Tell me," she said deeply and wantonly, "did you go back to your bed and masturbate to seeing my snatch through my little knickers?"

He growled and leaned over her, still fucking her, whispering, "Yes."

His confession made her come, calling his name desperately as he ground into her fiercely until he was jerking in spasms, grunting obscenities into her ear.

That was so dirty! she thought naughtily. She sighed audibly in satisfaction, and Severus murmured in agreement.

"I love you, Hermione Snape," he whispered as he fell asleep.

Hermione's head perked up, and she turned to face him. He was softly snoring with a happy look on his face. Hermione snuggled into him and smelled his scent. *Home. I'm home*, she thought as she fell asleep.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 74

Hermione meets with the founding members of the Order of the Phoenix to explain and learn about the last the three years.

A/N: Thanks again to all of you who keep sending all the wonderful reviews. I truly appreciate them. Thanks also to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their continuous hard work.

Hermione woke up and at first was disoriented. Then she saw Professor Snape walking towards her and jumped in panic.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

He looked at her, confused. "Hermione, you are with me in my rooms at Hogwarts."

Hermione breathed deeply. "You scared me. I wasn't prepared to see you in such severe-looking robes."

He grinned. "I know. I am rather young to be a teacher, so I need to be extra-severe," he said as he leaned in for a kiss.

"We have a meeting with Albus in about an hour. Will you be ready in time?"

"Of course!" Hermione replied. "All I need is a shower. I don't have any robes. All I have is my traveling cloak. The rest are all Muggle clothes."

"Just shrink one of mine and wear it over your Muggle clothes," he said as he walked to the other side of the bedroom.

Severus opened the door to the lavatory. "All you need: towels, shampoo, soap, an extra toothbrush are all in here. I have a class to teach. Afterwards, I will collect you, and we'll Floo into Albus' office."

Hermione wrapped the bed sheet around her as she padded to the bathroom. She stopped in front of Severus as his eyes followed her figure.

"What year are you teaching, Professor Snape?" she asked saucily.

"First-years. Wretched lot," he said with a sigh.

"Well, I can help you grade papers tonight if you want my help?" she offered.

"You don't need to do that," he said softly as he played with her long hair.

"I have to earn my keep," she retorted playfully.

"Cheek! I would never let one of my students talk to me that way!" he said indignantly.

"Well, I'm not one of your students, Professor," she whispered as she flung her arms around him, letting the sheet fall to the floor.

He kissed her soundly and said, "As much as I would love a repeat of yesterday's festivities, I must now go to work. Please don't send me in there with a raging hard-on," he pleaded.

"Sorry, sir," she said flatly as she retrieved her sheet. He smiled evilly and then turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

Hermione sighed as she began to unpack. She was feeling rather unsettled. Yesterday had been perfect. She had felt so right in his arms. Now, she had to go and face the reality that she had not been a part of this man's life for the past three years. He had experienced war, death, pain, and sorrow. She had not been a part of any of it. They had parted on bad terms, but yesterday had shown her he didn't care. He was glad she was back in his life. Would everyone else? Who was still alive?

She thought about all the people she had known through the years since the Time-Turner brought her to this life. She had done what Dumbledore asked of her. She had made a life for herself, but she had drawn the line as to how involved she would become in others' lives. She hoped she would still be welcome and not a pariah. After all, she had just up and disappeared right when the war was escalating for the Order.

She was waiting in Severus' office when she heard him yelling on the other side of the door. Some poor first-year was getting it good from Professor Snape. *So, after everything, he still became Professor Snape!* It worried her.

He came back in and looked murderous. She shrank from him, and his face relaxed. "Am I that terrifying to look at?" he asked deeply.

"Yes," she said honestly.

He smirked. "Good! Then the little bastards will think twice before fucking around in class," he answered distractedly as he looked around his office, rubbing his hands together.

"Ah, there it is," he murmured as he picked up a book. He slipped back into his classroom.

Hermione shook her head. "Severus, before we go to see Albus, I want you to know it's going to take some time for you and I to get into some sort of groove. I don't know who Professor Snape is, and from what I just heard, he is pretty scary," she called out to him.

Severus returned to the office and looked at her ruefully. He stole an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "There are, unfortunately, faces I have to show in public as a part of my image," he explained. "However, you and I connect on a deeper level. I am still the boy you grew up with and who fell in love with you. We made oaths to each other, and those oaths are stronger than being apart for three years. I missed you, Hermione, and I loved you every day we were apart. I will never stop loving you. Time can't change it because what we have is real."

"I love you," Hermione said as she hugged him.

"I love you, Hermione," he answered. "Albus is waiting."

"Hermione!" Albus said happily. "This is a happy day, my child. A happy day!"

Hermione looked around her. Minerva, Kingsley, and a man who looked like he could be Moody were in attendance. She was welcomed heartily by all, except for Moody. He had a magical eye that seemed to have replaced one of his dark, beady ones. He looked as if he had been in the thick of war and had nearly died in the process. He resented her, Hermione figured. She wouldn't begrudge him his hate for her if that were the case.

Dumbledore began. "I suppose, Hermione, you would like to know what has transpired these last three years?"

Moody interrupted him. "I cannot stay silent. This witch deserves to be in Azkaban! She ran out when the Order needed every able body it had. How many died because she was a coward?"

Severus jumped up at her defense. Moody drew his wand. "Don't even think of challenging me, boy," he growled. "If it weren't for Albus, I would have you in chains and in Azkaban so fast..."

"...That will be enough, Alastor!" warned Dumbledore harshly. "Severus, sit down. As I have told you all, Miss Granger is not to be harassed or criticized for her leaving the wizarding world. She had to do it for the Greater Good. There are circumstances, Alastor, that no one save Hermione and myself are aware. I look at it this way: her withdrawal from our world saved more lives in the long-run than if she had stayed."

"I still think Hermione must be a Seer," contended Kingsley. "How else would she know when it would be safe to return?"

"Unless she was in league with You-Know-Who. Just look at them, cozy and in love. A Death Eater and what? What are you, girl?" growled Moody.

Hermione turned to Dumbledore. He raised his hand. "Now is not the time to talk of these things. All will be revealed in due course. For now, you will keep a civil tongue in your head, Alastor, or leave," he said plainly.

No one moved or spoke. "Very well. I think now would be the time to let Hermione know what has transpired these last three years.

Minerva spoke first. "After you left, the Order went into full swing. The summer was spent recruiting, training, and bringing new members up to speed on what You-Know-Who was doing. The Ministry was all but in shambles. Barty Crouch Sr. held it all together. A very brave man, albeit a harsh man. He gave the Aurors full approval to kill rather than bring in Death Eaters alive."

"Which was a stupid and asinine order!" growled Moody. "How would we ever get any information if we just killed Death Eaters on the spot?"

"It may have been hard, but the times were desperate!" Minerva shot back. She turned back to Hermione. "You-Know-Who unleashed a torrent of creatures to break us. Giants were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings. Train crashes and the like...it was all the work of the Giants. The Ministry was in a frenzy trying to Modify the memories of all the Muggles who had seen them. He also had an army of Inferi, an army of the dead, to slaughter whole families. We lost so many people. The cream of the next generation!" she sniffed and drew out a handkerchief.

Kingsley continued. "The losses were grave, but there were many successes that kept us going. 1979 was the worst year. We had just truly formed the Order right after of the Graduation of '79. The Longbottoms joined us and to this day are our most fiercest..."

"...The Longbottoms?" asked Hermione. *I thought they were supposed to be dead!*

"Yes, Frank and Alice married the day after they left Hogwarts, went right into training. They were with us and were our two strongest members. They both at three

separate occasions battled You-Know-Who and walked away *alive*. He hated them, and through Frank, Alice, James and Lily, we managed to thwart many of his plans.

"But we had losses right from the start. Edgar Bones' family...they were all nearly killed. That was a horrible loss. Then there were those we never found: Mary MacDonald. She had been marked for death, same as you, Hermione. That's why I don't share Alastor's viewpoint. You-Know-Who was furious that you could not be found. I know now that Severus took many beatings for not collecting you and bringing you to him. The idea was spread that you were the reason for some of the successes the Order had. You were some sort of double agent, some sort of wizarding 'Mata Hari.'"

Hermione snorted. "I did what I could. Death Eaters were so obvious it was pathetic! I managed to save Muggle women from being victims. I even had a run in with Severus and Lucius one night a month ago."

Everyone's eyes pierced into hers. "What?" she asked defensively.

"What exactly were you doing, Hermione?" asked Minerva anxiously. "Severus?"

Hermione felt she was put on the spot and grew defensive. "I was very depressed! I couldn't do anything...and I had good reasons to stay away. But I couldn't just sit by and do nothing! So, I began to go to the local bars and discos where I knew Death Eaters frequented. I started to upset their plans to kidnap victims. I hid my face a lot with glamors. Last month, Severus told Lucius who I was. He laughed. I don't think he took me seriously, but I rescued two girls that night!" she said angrily.

She looked at Moody and said, "You have no right to judge me! I did what I had to for a far better purpose down the road. Even so, I still managed to do something for the war effort, so don't you sit there and say I was a coward! I am no coward," she yelled.

She was riled and right pissed off at Moody. Hell, she knew to expect it, but not from them. From some random person who didn't know her or what she had done over the years, she could handle, but the very people she had trained under and had known her personally? They all calmed down, and Kingsley continued. "We lost Caradoc Dearborn; his body was never recovered."

"Wouldn't be surprised if he became one of his Inferi!" Moody interjected morbidly.

Everyone cringed at that statement.

"We lost Benjy Fenwick too," Kingsley added.

"No!" breathed Hermione. "Fenwick's boy? He was so nice to us!" she said painfully *Benjy and Mary! Who else?* she thought sadly.

Kingsley continued. "We lost Dorcas Meadowes. I don't think you met her. She was killed by You-Know-Who personally. She was a very powerful witch. Then, we lost Marlene McKinnon, right after she joined. They killed her whole family. Sirius was heart-broken. He had been in love with her."

"She was a very powerful duelist," Hermione said sadly. "I watched her practice with James Potter and Sirius Black. She didn't even break a sweat and had them on their knees. She was fast and deadly accurate."

"Well, she and her family were killed. We have a number of Death Eaters in custody that may give up names in exchange for leniency," said Dumbledore.

"You know my thoughts on that, Albus," muttered Moody.

"I do, Alastor, but this is neither the time nor the place. Go on, Kingsley," he said calmly.

"Gideon and Fabian Prewett. That was a blow. It took five Death Eaters to take them down," Kingsley said with a look of respect on his face.

"Aye, including Dolohov. That wizard is one piece of work! They fought bravely to the end. T'was devastating for Molly and Arthur. They were Molly Weasley's brothers," Moody explained.

"Hermione never met the Weasleys," said Minerva. "Good people, backbone of the Order."

Severus suddenly spoke up. "Losses were on both sides. You remember Wilkes?"

Hermione nodded.

"Dead. You can thank Moody for that. He refused to come alive, so it had to go to the bitter end," Severus said.

"That's how I got my new lovely eye," he said with a gruesome smile. Wilkes decided to take a chunk of my face with him before he bit it!"

"There were a great number of lower level Death Eaters you never knew that died. However, one died who decided to openly leave the Dark Lord," Severus said softly.

"Who?" Hermione asked wide-eyed.

"Regulus Black," he replied.

"No!" she breathed. "I never would have thought it," she said as she shook her head.

"Because he was the one who ordered Travers to beat you?" he asked.

"Well, no, actually I thought that was rather merciful of him," she said. Hermione explained the assault by Black and Travers after she had struck Severus in public.

Moody snorted. "Damn right he was merciful. Lucky you weren't made an example of!"

Severus continued. "Well, Regulus made a fatal error of going off on his own when the Dark Lord tried to get him to release one of his family house-elves for an important task concerning his 'immortality.' Regulus had been aiding the Dark Lord and was privy to some of the more secret aspects of the Dark Lord's work. Regulus said he had figured out a way to make a strike against the Dark Lord's quest for immortality. Ruddy fool! He should have kept going and doing it undercover! I would have gladly aided him, but he had so much guilt concerning Sirius, he went alone. Got himself killed."

Hermione shook her head. "What about Sirius? Peter? James and Lily?"

Dumbledore sighed. "We wanted to save this for the last. Hermione, there are many Death Eaters in custody in Azkaban. We still have many at large. Evan Rosier, Igor Karkaroff, the LeStrange brothers and Bellatrix LeStrange, and Dolohov. But we have just today apprehended Travers and Mulciber. Lucius Malfoy also has turned himself in, claiming he had been Imperiused by Tom. We have no idea how long this will go on before it's all sorted out and all those who are criminals apprehended.

"Halloween night, Voldemort somehow broke through the Fidelius Charm on the Potters' house. James and Lily had a little boy, Harry. Tom killed James and then killed Lily. He went to kill Harry, and the curse rebounded. Little Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord."

"Amazing, truly amazing!" blurted Minerva. "All of England...all of Great Britain is celebrating as I am sure the entire wizarding world is! Everyone is saying after all the Death Eaters are rounded up and put away, then Barty Crouch Sr. will become the new Minister of Magic! Barty has been a bulwark, even though a bit fanatical at times. He'll be a strong leader to strengthen and gather everyone together again."

They all grew sad. Hermione whispered, "How did this happen, Albus? Who was the Secret-Keeper?"

"Sirius Black," replied Dumbledore.

"My God!" she cried out. "How could that be? They were closer than brothers; they were like two halves of a whole person!"

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head in disbelief. *All this time and no one could have been arsed to tell Harry?*

Severus rolled his eyes. "Please, Hermione, do not wax sentimental about Black and Potter. I have a weak constitution," he said snidely.

"I don't believe it!" Hermione said firmly. I refuse to believe Sirius Black would sell out James and Lily! Sure, I think him capable of anything, but not James!"

"He was the Secret-Keeper, Hermione. Peter is heaven only knows...probably too terrified to come out. Lupin is still lying low for now. The Order must still keep its ranks. Tom may be gone, but there are fervent supporters out there just waiting to do damage. Right now, Hogwarts is the safest place to be," Dumbledore finished.

Suddenly the fireplace burned green, and a man's head stuck out of the fireplace.

"Dumbledore!" someone shouted.

Hermione and Severus jumped out of the way as the man began raving. "It's a catastrophe! We need Moody and Kingsley here right now! We've got twelve dead Muggles, and Peter Pettigrew is gone. Blasted to bits!"

"Who did this, Cornelius?" asked Dumbledore gravely.

"Sirius Black. We've got him now! However, it took so many Aurors to subdue him, the Ministry's in a panic. He's stark raving mad! This is complete pandemonium!"

Kingsley and Moody readied themselves, and the man, Cornelius, stepped out of the way.

I wonder if it could be Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic? thought Hermione.

Hermione was shaken out of her thoughts with Severus and Minerva arguing over Sirius.

"I knew it! That damn piece of filth was never to be trusted...NEVER!" Severus raged.

"We don't know the whole story, Severus. It could be a misunderstanding!" snapped Minerva in response.

"Hermione?" asked Dumbledore quietly. "I think you and I need to have a private word."

Severus and Minerva stepped out of the office as Hermione sank into her chair. Albus came and sat next to her.

"Now what has happened has come to pass, do you have anything to share with me?" he asked gravely.

Hermione felt strange opening up this side of her mind. These were things she had never spoke of aloud and rarely thought of, to be honest. Yet, Albus was right. It had come to pass, and there was no use hiding it anymore.

Hermione heard her voice talking, but it was hollow and flat. "The days before my arrival were full of dread and anxiety for our world. There was a wizard that came to my knowledge. He was known as a dangerous person who had killed 12 Muggles and a wizard. I didn't know who the wizard was who had been killed."

"Peter Pettigrew," Dumbledore murmured, shaking his head.

Hermione continued. "Black escaped, and rumor was that he was going to try to murder Harry Potter."

Dumbledore looked at her with a horrific glare. "Black truly was a murderer?" he said shocked.

"That's what Harry told me..." She stopped speaking, placing a hand over her mouth.

"You are friends with Harry Potter?" he asked quietly.

"He's my best friend," she whispered. "We are in the same year."

"And I suppose Severus was your Professor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Merlin!" he exclaimed. "The world has turned upside down."

"Look," said Hermione. "You told me to make a life here, and I did. You placed me with Lily and Severus, and I made the best of things. I never intended to fall in love with Severus, but I did."

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk. "As far as you know, has everything come to fruition, or has there been a snag in time?" he asked cautiously.

"It isn't over yet, Albus," Hermione warned darkly. "There are still Death Eaters out there and more tragedy is still to come. I'm sorry, but it cannot be helped. I don't know enough of the details, but it isn't over for some of the Death Eaters still out there."

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead. "Do you feel as helpless as I do at times, Hermione?" he asked hollowly.

"Yes," she breathed. "It was hell for all this time to look into the faces of those I knew would die, yet I find it ironic that I still can be shocked. I never knew about Marlene, Mary, and Benji dying. I can't believe Marlene is gone! She was so powerful. But, Mary, I am not surprised. How they hated that they couldn't touch her. I only wish I could have taken her with me," she said sadly.

"And Severus?" asked Dumbledore. "What can you tell me?"

"He saved Harry's life," she answered. "When Voldemort resurfaced...and no...I refuse to tell you about it. I can't risk it. All I know is that Severus Snape is not the sort of man people like, but you trust him."

"Thank you, Hermione," he answered. "At least there is one doubt that I don't have to worry over anymore."

Hermione rose from her seat. She didn't know anymore what to do to help the Order or to relieve Dumbledore's mind. She didn't know where to go from here. Should she tell Severus the truth about who she really was? Would it matter if she never returned? *Of course it matters!* she thought. *In ten years, a little girl named Hermione Granger is going to walk through Hogwarts doors, and then what?*

She decided as she slowly opened the door that she didn't know where she was going or what she was doing, but one thing was clear. It wasn't over. The Longbottoms

were still out there, and something was going to happen to them; she just didn't know what. Besides, Severus was facing Azkaban. She couldn't tell him. Not now. Not yet.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 74

Hermione remains with Severus at Hogwarts, living a simpler life with a very content Severus. Also, Remus comes out of hiding and tells Hermione some things she had needed to hear about Lily.

A/N: Thank you all for your support and kind words! They meant more than you could realize. Again, thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin!

The fall term ended with no more incidents to mar the holidays. Sirius Black was sent to Azkaban so fast it made Hermione concerned about the wizarding justice system. She argued with Severus over it during their first Christmas.

She was putting some cheery decorations up on the mantle place as she expressed her opinion. "Severus, I just do not understand how Fudge could get Barty Crouch to forgo a trial and send him straight to Azkaban. I, for one would like to know how it came to be that Sirius betrayed the truest friend he ever had!" she said hotly as Severus sat at his personal desk grading final exams.

Severus laid down his quill. "Hermione, I for one am just glad he is off the streets. There were too many witnesses, far too much scandal. Then there was the way he reacted when they took him in. The man had gone round the twist. Completely insane! I've told Albus my belief that Black was no Death Eater. However, I could not be conclusive. You know the Dark Lord never allowed us to know who all his Death Eaters were," Severus replied as he picked up his quill and returned to marking essays.

"I do not wish to ruin our first Christmas together with these maudlin thoughts," he murmured as he remained hunched over his desk scribbling furiously. He lifted his eyes up to meet hers and whispered, "I have something for you."

Hermione smiled, and her frustration dissipated. She walked over from the fireplace while Severus drew out a box from his desk and patted his lap for her to sit. Hermione giggled and tentatively obliged. He grabbed her and pulled her close to him. He gave her the box, and she grinned as she opened it slowly. She could tell by the shape what it was. It was a simple gold ring with a rope design embedded with emeralds. It was simple and elegant, and there was no way she could accept.

She tried to leave his lap, but he held her firmly to him. "Hermione," he said, the hurt evident in his voice. "We made oaths...vows to each other. You told me you would always be with me. I want you to marry me. We have lived nearly a lifetime together. I love you," he said simply.

She held the ring in her hand as she tried hard not to cry. "Severus, there is no way on earth the Ministry would allow us to marry. Your trial is coming up, the future is so uncertain!" she whispered urgently.

He held her hands tightly in his own as he looked into her eyes. "That is why I want us to have things settled between us. I know this is the wrong time, the worst timing, in fact, but I cannot go on with my life on hold. I need to know you will be mine for always. I need you, Hermione. I've loved you for so long. I loved you as a friend, and then I loved you as a boy loves a girl. Now I am a man wanting to love you as a woman, to be with me, stand by me, please!" he begged as he pressed his forehead against hers.

"Yes, Severus," she replied slowly. "I will stand by you, no matter what. I will love you, always. I will marry you as soon as we are able."

He closed his eyes briefly and took the ring, sliding it over her finger. "Let me take you to bed, Hermione. We have so much to make up for," he whispered. "I have another surprise for you, too."

He led her into the bedroom. Hermione noticed a phonograph was sitting on a table by the corner. Severus grinned widely as he took out a record, and Hermione smiled in return. She knew what it was.

She walked over to him as music filled the air. He drew her into his arms while the music played. She listened to the words as if she had never heard them before. He held her close to him, and she held onto him tightly. The words meant something so very different today than they had all those years ago when they sat in that little record booth, sharing their first kiss.

Some things are meant to be...

It was true; she could not help falling in love with him. She would love him no matter what came to pass. Her life was his, and his was hers. Would her staying, though, be "a sin?" Were they rushing into something blindly? Was Hermione thinking clearly about not meddling with time or was this just the natural course of their feelings? After all, they had been through hell and found each other on the other side. She would have to trust that love, trust that they were meant to be...no matter what.

For I can't help falling in love with you...

The record ended, and they slowly let go of each other.

"I never would have thought you an Elvis fan," she commented lightly as he turned off the phonograph.

He laughed. "Well, Elvis was big when I was born. The Beatles even hailed him as a great musician. His music was popular with the young, married couples that had grown-up and courted listening to his music. There was a nice lady I used to go visit down the street when my parents would fight too loudly. I would run down to her house, and she played this song and others of his. She was a big fan. I always associated his music with love, safety, and warmth."

He was toying with the phonograph as he spoke. Severus had always been a tactile person. He needed to keep his hands busy whenever he discussed something difficult. Hermione slowly stood up from the bed where she had been sitting and snuggled into him.

"I think it's lovely. Do you have any more records?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Do you like Elvis?"

Hermione laughed. Elvis was more her father's music. It was so strange to hear Severus talking about him. Yet, she had grown up listening to her fair share of "The King's" music.

"Yeah!" she said. "After all, he is an icon," she replied. "That's the real test, isn't it? The man's been dead for four years, and he's still revered!"

Hermione laughed. "You know, you'd rather be suited for Johnny Cash, you know? The 'Man in Black'?"

"Don't know him," Severus replied.

"Don't ever tell a soul!" he said in a threatening voice while he looked at her jovially. "If the Slytherins ever knew I listened to Muggle music, it could blow my whole cover!"

Hermione started to slowly take off her clothes. "What is your cover?" she asked innocently.

Severus stretched out on their bed and said smugly with his hands behind his head, "I am the bastard of the dungeons. I favor my house over all the others. I generally hold all non-Slytherins in contempt and rule my classes with an iron fist and a sharp tongue. I've made many girls cry, and I am generally hated. But it's not me, Hermione. You know the real me.

"I think you are the only one who knows the real me," he said sadly.

Hermione slipped naked under the covers and snuggled to him. "Come here, you. Isn't it wonderful that in this room, you do not have to pretend? I love you and care about you deeply. I always have, even before I loved you," she admitted.

Severus stood to take off his clothes as she watched him, and pulled back the covers. He climbed in and nestled on top of her. "I had known it was you all those times I had those terrible dreams. You would hold my hand and speak soothingly to me. Hermione, no one has ever thought me special enough to have such caring." He kissed her tenderly on her face, her cheeks, eyes, nose and lips.

Hermione sighed in relaxation and spread her legs as she lay underneath him. "Come into me, Severus. I don't think I shall ever tire of you being inside me," she whispered.

He slowly made love to her. "I can't believe you are going to be my wife!" he said happily as he started to pick up the pace.

Hermione groaned as she kissed him passionately on the lips. "I already am, Severus."

He looked deeply into her eyes. The black pools of desire were there as he began to thrust earnestly into her. She had always wondered what would happen if she dove in and lost herself?

She gave in and let his gaze take over. She felt his eyes burning into her. "You're mine, Hermione," he said urgently. "All of you belongs to me, just as all I am is yours. You have the power to destroy me or raise me up. I don't care about my pride. You are everything!" he panted as he moved jerkily inside her.

She began to cry out softly as he started to bring her to orgasm. "I'll never tire of that! Tell me, love. Tell me you love me!" he pleaded.

She exploded as she screamed, "I yes oh, Severus! Don't stop, don't stop...I love you. Take me...I'm all yours. Oh, God!"

He looked happy and peaceful as he emptied into her. Later, he leaned over and smoothed her hair from her flushed face. "Do you think you would like to have children one day?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, one day, I would," she replied.

He lowered his face towards her, kissing her lightly as he continued to stroke her hair away from her face and said, "We can tell our children all about how we met, were friends, fell in love, and it will be a proper love story," he said longingly as he nuzzled her nose with his own.

Hermione looked at him. She could tell by the look on his face that he wanted so badly to erase the ugliness which he had been born into. He wanted to make a life with her.

Hermione smiled and closed her eyes. He was so happy...so content. She couldn't bear taking that away from him. It made her ill to think of ruining this moment. She knew Severus. He had to have thought obsessively about proposing before asking her. He had made everything so special for them. She didn't want to keep the truth of herself from him, but she just wanted some more time. She didn't want to think about tomorrow. It would be painful enough when he found out the truth.

Hermione kept her presence in the wizarding world low-key. She helped Severus with his Potions classes, grading papers, helping him brew potions for Madam Pomfrey. Severus was so happy; she didn't think she had ever seen him as happy as he had been during the past six months.

A lot of work at the Ministry also kept the Order humming along. Dumbledore was gone nearly every day as trial after trial came and went. Many were sent to Azkaban, yet the worst of the lot; the LeStrange brothers and Bellatrix Black LeStrange were still on the loose. No one knew where they were hiding, and until they were found, no one in the Order dared to come out of hiding.

Remus came one day to Hogwarts to see Hermione. She was shocked to see him. She could see the beginnings of the Professor Lupin she had met all those years ago. Severus wasn't happy to see him, and he sat in a corner and sulked during the whole visit.

"Hermione, we all missed you!" he said happily. "We had no way of knowing where you were or if you'd come back..."

"...I'm sorry, Remus. It needed to be this way," she said as she poured them tea. "I'm back, though, and will help the Order in whatever way I can," she promised.

"I have some questions, though," she asked tentatively. "Did Lily ever say anything about me?"

Remus sat back in his chair and blew out a breath as he glanced warily at Severus.

He looked at his cup of tea hard and furrowed his brow. "Everyone had something to say about you, Hermione. None of it was very good. Sirius, Lily and Peter had been the angriest. Lily had been so furious we couldn't even mention your name in her presence for the longest time. She had declared you were dead to her, and she was convinced that you had joined You-Know-Who to be with Severus."

Severus snorted from his corner of the room.

"Very mature, Severus," Hermione shot at him. "*Honestly!*"

"Well, what do you expect?" he spat. "Lily was never the forgiving type nor was she ever the understanding type either!"

Hermione pursed her lips. "Lily and I were close, Remus. We were quite close at one time. I can understand her reaction to my departure," she said quietly. "Tell me, though, Remus, was she happy with James?"

Remus looked at her questioningly. After a while of searching her face, he said, "Yes, Hermione. They married soon after leaving Hogwarts. They had never expected to conceive during a war, but these things sometimes cannot be helped."

He laughed and said, "What was really funny was the day before Lily found out she was pregnant, Alice and Frank had found out they were expecting. They were wrecks:

Frank and James. You know, I think it had been the pregnancies that started to pull James and Sirius apart." His face grew sad after that.

He leaned and placed his arms on his knees. "You see, Sirius never got over losing Marlene. They had to wait so long before they could be together with her being a year behind, but when she came to Fenwick's where the Order was hiding in those days, there was a week where no one bothered them. They went off, and sometimes Sirius would resurface for food and wine and take it off with him. We all knew they were shagging like bunnies, but no one cared. We never knew how long we had left to really enjoy life.

"Then, after training, we all started going out there and fighting the Death Eaters. James and Lily had already faced You-Know-Who twice before and narrowly escaped. Marlene was spectacular. She went out there with Sirius, and the two of them were unstoppable! Then, word came that Marlene's mother was dying. It had been a trap, of course. They were all killed: Marlene, her parents, brother, and sister. It was terrible."

"What happened to Sirius?" she whispered.

Remus shrugged. "James, Peter, and I went and got him drunk...I mean, he was blotto for a fortnight. Then Moody took him in hand and said he was done mourning, and the best thing he could do was to avenge Marlene and kick ass. So, he did. He took lots of risks, too. James by then was so concerned about Lily, she was four months along and starting to show. So was Alice...there was a lot of fear, but Sirius would drag James to come out with him, and together they did a lot of damage. It was the two of them out there, just like old times, but James' wasn't into it anymore."

"It's hard to think that Sirius was really in league with You-Know-Who," Hermione said soberly.

Remus put down his teacup. "I don't care who says that. I won't believe it. I can't believe it. Something must have happened to make it look like Sirius betrayed James and Lily. I mean, Peter? Who'd want to kill Peter? He was just a sweet, scared kid half the time."

"But, James, did he ever talk about me?" she asked quietly.

Severus perked up from his corner and strode over to her. "Why would Potter want to talk about you?" he snarled.

"Easy, Severus," said Remus.

Hermione looked at Severus defiantly. "He showed me kindness at times, times where he would be the last person I would have ever thought would be nice to me. You know how I got to the Astronomy Tower the night Lily broke off your friendship? Well, it had been James who lent me his Invisibility Cloak."

Severus and Remus both gasped. "Really?" asked Remus with a grin. Severus growled low in his throat.

"Yes," she said stoutly. "James was a good person. Sure, he could be a prat at times, but he loved Lily, and he cared about your feelings, Severus Snape, when Lily couldn't have been arsed!"

Remus smiled. "James never thought the worst of you like the others. Neither did Mary MacDonald. They kept faith with you, Hermione, when there was no reason to. I did as well. I only wish they all could be here to see how wrong they had been."

He sat back in his chair again and said, "After Lily had Harry, she really changed. She was still silly and funny, but she let go of a lot. She actually started to talk about you, Severus, and the old days when the three of you were friends."

Hermione was becoming emotional. She didn't want to talk about Lily anymore.

When Remus left, she walked him out towards the Apparition line. He looked at Hermione oddly and said slowly, "Hermione, I probably shouldn't say this, but I think I should because Lily is gone now, and there is no other way for you to know how she felt at in the end." He stopped walking and turned to face her.

"She told me about the two of you. She told me everything. She felt a lot of guilt over the fact that the two of you never reconciled. I don't think she ever got there with Severus, but I think she'd want you to know that you were right. After Harry was born, she and James became closer than I had ever seen them before. She really fell in love with him. I just thought you should know that she didn't die hating you for rejecting her."

Hermione felt the tears prick her eyes. "Thank you, Remus. Thank you for understanding something so complicated. I loved Lily, I just didn't love her the way she had wanted me to," she said stiffly.

"It's okay, Hermione. And don't worry, I will never tell Severus, not that he wants to ever talk with me, anyway!" he said with a smile.

Hermione laughed as she embraced her friend good-bye.

"Hermione, wake up!" Severus hissed.

"What?" she answered groggily.

"They've been caught...the Lestranges!" he whispered as he dressed.

"All three of them?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, and that's not all; Moody's got Barty Crouch's son in custody with them!"

Hermione jumped out of bed and hurriedly threw on jeans and a jumper. Things had certainly been going crazy these days. First Karkaroff had been found hiding in Eastern Europe, then Evan Rosier had been found and cornered by Moody...that had been bad. Rosier had taken a chunk off of Moody's nose before he had died. Hermione was slipping her feet into her trainers when the fireplace roared into green flames. Dumbledore's face came through.

"I apologize for the intrusion. Severus, you need to go to St. Mungo's immediately! Hermione, I want to see you in my office now."

Hermione looked at Severus. She then began to wrap her hair into a ponytail. "He sounds really angry," she said anxiously.

Severus didn't say a word, but went immediately out to Apparate to St. Mungo's. Hermione went to see Albus and wasn't even done closing the door before he started railing at her.

"How could you keep this from me?" he raged.

Hermione wasn't even fully awake yet. "What are you talking about?" she shouted back at him.

"The Longbottoms!" he shouted. "When Moody apprehended the Lestranges, they were already inside the Longbottoms' house. Frank and Alice had been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse. They might have been tortured into insanity! Why didn't you warn me?"

Hermione closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I told you, Albus, that I didn't know all the answers. I didn't know about the Longbottoms! I knew that Neville

would be raised by his Grandmother, but I never knew the details behind it."

Dumbledore sank into his chair. His face was ashen. "So there is no hope for them?" he whispered. "Severus will not be able to save them?"

"I don't know!" Hermione shouted. "How many bloody times do I have to say I don't know? This is just so frustrating! I just want to scream!" she yelled.

"I am sorry, Hermione," Albus said sadly. "Obviously, this was a part of fate. Destiny has dictated this outcome. But, please, Hermione, is it over?"

"I hope so, Albus," she whispered. "I hope so."

Later that morning, the Order convened in Dumbledore's office awaiting news from Severus. He returned miserable and in shock. "I am sad to report that the Longbottoms' condition is permanent. There is nothing that can be done."

Moody, Minerva, Kingsley, and Albus sat in stunned silence. Finally Minerva spoke through her tears. "What will happen to Neville, Albus?" she asked shakily.

Albus sighed. "Neville has been taken in by Frank's mother, Augusta, and his Uncle Algie. He will be raised by them."

"Oh, Albus!" said Minerva distastefully. "Augusta Longbottom is a horrid woman. She will turn that little boy into a frightened child scared of his own shadow."

"It is what it must be, Minerva," Albus said resignedly. "We now must turn our attentions to other matters. The discovery of Bart Crouch's son as a Death Eater, partly responsible for the insanity of the Longbottoms, will destroy Crouch's career. There has been much talk over him replacing Millicent as Minister. The Ministry is bothering me yet again to take over as Minister of Magic."

"Will you take the position, Albus?" asked Moody gruffly.

"No. Nothing short of a major calamity will make me give up my position as Headmaster of Hogwarts...especially now. Whoever becomes Minister now will need the full support of powerful people behind him. As Chief Warlock, I must be prepared to be heavily involved politically and help find a suitable Minister if the public rallies for it."

"There is talk about Cornelius Fudge," said Kingsley.

"Well, he did, after all, handle that whole debacle after Sirius Black killed all those Muggles and Peter Pettigrew! What do you think, Albus?" Minerva asked.

Albus pondered the question and said, "Well, Cornelius is a politician, first and foremost. He will work very hard to make sure the wheels of normalcy run smoothly. I seem to recall an American I once knew years ago; he spoke of a time in his country called, 'The Era of Good Feelings.' I think that will be the sentiment the wizarding community would want from their Minister. If there are no serious objections to his ascension, then I will not stand in his way. Nevertheless, I still have my concerns. Besides, I have much faith in Millicent Bagnold."

"What are those concerns, headmaster?" Severus asked.

"Well," he said as he examined his fingernails. "Cornelius has always been a bit power hungry, and it concerns me that he will gloss over certain difficulties if they prove to be too hard to handle. And there will always be a situation that will be too difficult to handle in regards to diplomacy. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty to sort out the good from the bad. Fudge doesn't seem the type to be keen on doing that," he said wryly.

Hermione kept silent. She knew for a fact that Cornelius Fudge would become the next Minister of Magic, but did not want to say anything.

Hermione was starting to grow restless. As the trials dragged on, the *Daily Prophet* was full of all the latest news on each of the trials. Hermione and Severus waited to see if he would be able to escape the clutches of Azkaban. They were thoroughly enjoying one another as if every minute counted. The closer they came to the end of the school year, Hermione found Severus was becoming increasingly amorous. There probably wasn't a private alcove inside the castle where he had not ravished her. He spoke more and more about marriage, but Hermione insisted they still had to wait out the political fallout, not to mention the fact Azkaban was still hanging over his head.

So, while they waited, news came out that Millicent Bagnold would keep her position as Minister of Magic, and things began to settle down. Fudge was still considered to be in line for Minister one day, but for now, he was content on working his way towards the post. Severus and Hermione waited as Albus conferred with the Wizengamot over whether Severus would have to stand trial.

It had been during the last month of term that Severus had been ordered to appear before the Wizengamot. Albus had insisted Hermione remain behind, which had frightened her, but when he returned that evening, she had held him at tightly as possible, sobbing uncontrollably. It was now over. There was nothing now to stop them from marrying. As wonderful as it seemed, it also pulled at Hermione's conscience. She would have to tell him the truth. Severus shocked Hermione with a surprise trip to the French Riviera for a vacation that summer. She was ecstatic. She had tried to find out how the research was going with the development of the Time-Turner before their departure, but with no answers. She wanted to know when she could have the choice to stay or return. It did not escape her notice that in less than a decade, little Hermione Granger would be coming to Hogwarts. Time was closing in on itself. Yes, a vacation would do her a world of good.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 74

Hermione finally tells Severus the truth.

Severus and Hermione went to Marseilles and spent a month in the French Riviera. It was very romantic, making love all night, swimming and dozing in the summer sun during the day kind of vacation. Severus was everything to Hermione, she realized, and she didn't want to imagine a world without him.

One evening, during dinner, Severus leaned over and took her left hand where her engagement ring rested. He looked at it lovingly and said, "Hermione, let's get married. I know that the Dark Lord is still out there and will return, but I refuse to put our lives on hold. I want to lie next to you knowing you are my wife, and we belong together. I want to do it however you wish. If it's a simple wedding, so be it. If you want a big wedding, we can do that too. But let's do this!"

Hermione had been dreading this moment. She felt torn in half. She couldn't marry him without telling him the truth. If she did that, she would lose him forever. But the

clock was ticking. She couldn't just wait until little Hermione Granger showed up at Hogwarts and then...surprise!

No, she had decided. She would have to return to her own time. How, she didn't know...nothing had been developed on the Time-Turner. But, sooner or later, she would have to go back.

She looked into his eyes, the eyes that had made their way into her soul, and said, "I can't, Severus. There is something I need to tell you, but can we please just enjoy the rest of our time together? I promise I love you, and I will always want to be with you."

"But you don't want to be my wife?" he accused her angrily as he threw his napkin on the table.

"NO!" she said firmly as she grabbed his arm. "I want nothing more than to be your wife. I'd marry you this second if there weren't a good reason for me wanting to wait until we get back. I respect you enough to give you the choice. After I tell you what I need to, you may not want me," she said quietly.

"Rubbish!" he snapped.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"I love you, Severus. Please let's enjoy tonight, and then tomorrow we will go talk with Albus, and then after you hear what I have to say, if you still want to marry me, I will marry you immediately. Please, can you just wait until tomorrow and love me tonight?"

He looked troubled, and Hermione grew fearful. Finally, the music started playing, and he stood to offer his hand. They went out onto the dance floor and danced to a heart-rending song that was new to both of them.

And I have never been afraid of losing out

And I have never wanted love to be a chain

I only know that when I'm with you

You're my sunshine, you're my rain

The sweetest thing I've ever known is loving you

But all the heartaches and temptations

Only made me love you more

The sweetest thing

I've ever known

Is lovin' you

As they danced, the sadness of the lyrics pulled at Hermione's heart. She didn't want to cry. She wanted to enjoy again what she had waited so long for. Nevertheless, the tears did come because she knew even if he accepted her secret, she would still have to leave him and return to her timeline.

She slid her hands up the back of his shirt and held him close. She felt his hands embrace her tightly and his kiss on her neck. She wanted him; she didn't care about tomorrow. She just wanted him now, and she wanted it to last as long as she could.

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Take me back to our room, Severus. Make love to me," she asked simply.

They left as the song ended. Hermione didn't know the song, nor did she ever care to learn it. But one thing that reverberated in her mind was that Severus was the sweetest thing in her life. Loving him, fighting for him, standing by his side, and missing him while they had been apart never diminished how much she loved him. There would be no other. Ever.

Severus slowly took off her clothes and kissed the path that exposed her skin to him. Hermione's heart was breaking. She wanted to reassure him that this wasn't the last time...that there still was a time for them...a place for them. Somehow, they would work it out. Their love was far too precious to ever relinquish it to time.

He was tender and delicate as he laid her down on their bed. They kissed for what seemed like forever until giving in to what they wanted so desperately. As he moved inside her, she felt tears fall onto her face. He was crying as he made love to her. It was just too much. He was trying so hard to keep his composure in the face of what he feared would be loss. Yet, he couldn't stop the tears from falling, splashing salty droplets onto her lips and cheeks. Hermione held him close to her and let him find solace in her body. He clutched her to him in response, and soon he was climaxing. His voice cracked, and he let out a gut-wrenching sob. Hermione couldn't take the sight anymore of seeing her Severus in pain.

After he was still, she sat up in bed and took her wand from her bedside.

"Accio, Time-Turner!" she said loudly.

Severus' head snapped up in shock. "What?" he said in disbelief. The pieces of the old Time-Turner that Hermione had kept with her all these years flew into her hand. She began to tell him the story.

"I was a third-year student in 1993. Because of my outstanding marks, I was given a Time-Turner. I was thirteen, almost fourteen. The night of the Welcoming Feast, I was sitting up in the Gryffindor common room and was foolishly fiddling with it while studying. I was tired and stupid. The next thing I knew, I was on the floor, and I didn't have anything with me...not even my wand...just my Time-Turner. I knew something was wrong, so I made my way to see Professor McGonagall. I was disoriented by the differences in the hallway. Everything looked so different. I still thought I was in 1993. I didn't think about the revolving staircases, and I tripped. I instinctively grasped out to save myself from falling, but as you can see, the Time-Turner broke into pieces." She placed the broken pieces into his hand as she continued. Severus looked at the pieces with great concern, and he looked back into her face to listen.

"I was caught by Filch and was taken to see Dumbledore. I told him what happened. I was so sure he could fix it...I mean, Dumbledore can fix anything!" she said as she laughed nervously.

"He shook his head at me and said there was nothing he could do, that I was stuck in 1973. He said I needed to make a life for myself here. So, I did. You knew I never fit in with my house. Lily took me in, and you were a part of the package. I didn't want to interfere. Then Dumbledore thought it would be good for you to have me stay with you. He was concerned for you. I had no choice. Even after what your father did, Dumbledore still wouldn't let me back to Hogwarts.

"Severus, I never knew when the time would come that I could go home. Then as the years passed, it didn't seem so important anymore. I fell in love with you, and my life was here with you. I love you, Severus, with all that I am. I want to be your wife. I want to have your babies and grow old with you. P-Please believe me!" she choked as the tears fell freely from her eyes.

He had been silent the whole time, holding the broken pieces of the old Time-Turner in his hands. He placed the pieces on the bed between them.

"I have questions for you, Hermione," he said seriously.

Hermione nodded as he continued. "In 1993, which by the way is only eleven years from now...you were a third-year. Meaning that you came to Hogwarts in 1991, correct?"

Hermione's heart plummeted at the sound of the harsh voice of the Professor Snape she had known a lifetime ago. "Yes," she answered quietly.

"That means that in nine years, a little Hermione Granger is going to show up in my Potions class, and if I am not mistaken, that will be the same year as Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom, correct?"

"Yes," she replied, her head hanging low, unable to face him.

"You are friends with them?" he asked harshly.

"With Harry, yes. Neville, I mostly help him with schoolwork. He's a nice, respectful boy, same as Harry!" she insisted heartily as she lifted her face to look into his.

Snape gave a snort as he crossed his arms. "What *exactly* did Dumbledore tell you when he said he had no way of getting you back to your timeline?"

"He said that I had to wait until the invention of a more sophisticated Time-Turner. He told me I had no other choice but to make a life for myself in this timeline. He gave me a history and got me a new wand and uniform. I went out from there to make my way," she answered simply.

Severus shook his head. "That old fool!" he hissed. "You were a child! You could have disrupted everyone's true destiny!"

He got up from the bed and put on his dressing gown hurriedly. "Tell me, Miss Granger. Was I your Potions professor for your first two years at Hogwarts?"

Hermione had been dreading this question most of all. "Yes," she whispered.

He closed his eyes and sat down in a chair. "My God, what have I done?" he asked painfully.

Hermione got up and put on her robe, making her way to him. She knelt before him and said, "Severus, you remember this: I didn't go seeking you out. I remained passive and never tried to come between you and Lily. I never butted in, never tried to upset any balance. I can tell you this, that in my original timeline, James and Lily married and had Harry. All I knew was that Harry's parents were killed by You-Know-Who on Halloween night in 1981. That's all I knew about his family. Just before I left, I learned about Sirius Black, that he was a murderer, but I didn't know whom he had killed, except a rumor was going around that he wanted to kill Harry. I'm telling you the truth. I didn't know half the stuff I found out when I came here.

"Please, Severus. By the time we became more than friends, we had grown up together. I started to forget the teacher I had known and started seeing the boy in front of me. Nothing has changed! I love you!" she choked out as the tears began to flow.

He looked at her and reached down to take her into his arms. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" he asked against her neck.

Hermione swallowed. "I couldn't. I was so afraid that I would change too much of the fates of the people around me. That was why I left. I knew Harry Potter was going to defeat You-Know-Who, but that James and Lily had to die. I couldn't stop it. It was what had to happen. Otherwise, I didn't know how he could be stopped. Please love me, Severus! Please don't push me away. I've been in pain for so long!"

He held her in his arms and looked into her soft, brown eyes. "No, Hermione, I won't reject you. But tell me, what am I like in ten years?"

"Well," she said as she shifted her legs. "You are cold and cruel to everyone, except towards the Slytherins. You hate me and call me a 'know-it-all' and basically frighten everyone that crosses your path. You dress in scary, billowing robes, are rude, sarcastic, and eager to find any excuse to take away house points. You are the most feared teacher at Hogwarts."

"And I take it you hated me, which would explain your less-than-happy attitude when we first met?"

"I thought you were just a mean, unfair, git that got off on terrorizing students, particularly poor Neville Longbottom. But now, I'm older, and in retrospect, I can see that you were just a very lonely man."

"I never married Lily, never had a woman or wife?" he asked.

"No, you were a bachelor and didn't seem interested in getting a girlfriend. I mean, at least to an eleven-year-old girl. If you did, no one knew about it."

"Or perhaps, I had a hard time knowing the woman I loved was now a little girl again, and I had to keep my distance," he replied.

Hermione threw her arms around him. "Please tell me you don't hate me! I couldn't bear it if I lost you now!" she begged earnestly.

Severus pulled her from him and kissed her lips. "We said vows, Hermione. Our oaths are binding. I love you. I am confused and angry about what we might have to do to rectify this mess, but you and I are forever. Time doesn't matter...especially ten measly years! You are mine, and I am yours," he said passionately.

Hermione felt the weight of the world lift from off her shoulders. "Please take me, Severus. Make me yours...now that you know me...I want you to be inside me. I need you," she whispered.

Severus carried her to the bed, and they made love. Somehow, it really didn't matter. They had grown up together, had lived through terrible days, and falling in love had not been a part of a scheme or plan. It was honest, real, and eternal.

After, as they lay together in each other's arms, Severus whispered, "I will help you, Hermione. I'll get you back home."

She sat up and cried out desperately, "No! I want to stay with you."

Severus reached up with his hand and played with her curly hair. "You must live in your timeline. When you become the age of consent, if you want, we can be together. It won't be long. We can wait until you are sixteen. It's just a couple of years."

Hermione snorted, "Like I can be made to be fourteen again!" she scoffed.

"But I just found you, we just started to live our life! Oh, God, Severus," she cried bitterly as he held her.

"I will always have dreams to remember and memories to keep me warm. I will wait for you, Hermione. That is, if you still want an old man," he said with a chuckle.

"Please don't joke, Severus!" she pleaded. "I love you."

"And I love you, Hermione. You sacrificed a great deal for me, and now I must do the same for you. It's better this way. Tomorrow, we'll return to Hogwarts and speak with Albus on how the research is going, okay?" he asked.

Hermione said a muffled "yes" against his chest. Then she cried bitterly. A thought crossed her mind that she never recalled ever crying so hard in all the years she had been here. Now that she was going to find a way back, she didn't want to go.

The song Hermione and Severus danced to was *The Sweetest Thing* by Juice Newton (1982).

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 74

Severus and Hermione join Dumbledore at the Department of Mysteries where an answer to Hermione's need to return to her timeline may be found.

A/N: My thanks again to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their dedicated work. I would like to dedicate this chapter to my friend **beaweasley2**, who pushed me to dive into my imagination and create this original character you will read about shortly. Thanks, sweetie, for all your help :)

Severus, Hermione, and Albus sat quietly in the headmaster's office. Hermione and Severus had just finished telling Dumbledore about Hermione's confession. It was finally out in the open. Now, the problem was what to do.

Albus leaned forward and rested his hands on his desk. "I have not been sitting idle these past years only thinking about Tom. I have been in touch with the Unspeakables at the Ministry. There were only two wizards who would even give me any information at all that could help us. It is contained in the Department of Mysteries, and to do what I think should be done to return Hermione to her timeline will take a great deal of forethought and hard work to make it come to pass.

"Bode and Croaker, the two wizards who would speak with me, told me they are indeed discovering that the Time-Turners are adjusting themselves without wizarding interference. They do not know how much longer it will be, but in the meantime, Hermione must remain here and continue making a life for herself. You could help the professors, even take on an apprenticeship if that suits you. All I ask is that you not interfere or interact with the students. We still must keep the timeline from getting out-of-hand."

"What are you proposing, Albus?" Severus asked as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Dumbledore looked at Hermione. "We have an Aging Potion that Severus could create in his sleep. However, we do not have a Potion of *Youth*. From what I have been told, something akin to an *elixir* or *substance* of youthful properties exists in the Department of Mysteries that it is possible to examine."

Hermione had until this point remained silent and had kept an open mind, but this was too much. "Wait! Wait one damned minute!" Hermione bellowed as she jumped up from her chair. "You mean to take me and make me nearly fourteen again?"

Dumbledore spread his hands in resignation. "It seems to be the only way. The night you left will be the target date to send you back, *oforward* as the case would be," he said as his blue eyes twinkled. "As soon as your other self disappears, you will be there in the common room to take her place."

"So we create a paradox?" she asked angrily.

"Do you want to return never having anyone know the life you have led? Do you want to see Severus, knowing he will never recall all that you have shared over the years? I think that would be terribly cruel, but that is what could happen if you return to the time before the mishap. This way, you will have a support system of people who will understand you and a fiancé who will be waiting for you to come of age. I know it will be difficult having to go through your adolescence all over again, but I think it is the best way."

Hermione snorted as she looked over at Severus. "Do you think you can handle me at thirteen again?" she asked with a faint smile.

Severus smirked. "Three weeks from fourteen, Hermione. I shall be keeping track of the calendar," he said lowly.

He turned to Dumbledore and said in all seriousness, "Albus, the day Hermione turns sixteen, I don't want any interference. I will not wait once she reaches the age of consent."

Severus looked at Hermione. "What do you think?"

Hermione felt very warm, as if she were blushing violently from the roots of her curly head to the bottom of her pink-colored toes. "I don't know. We don't even know when the Time-Turner will be ready! And Severus," she leaned in and whispered to him, "my mind will be your age, my mid-thirties, but my body will be that of a girl. I may, not at sixteen, be prepared to *engage* a grown man. We shouldn't make any rash decisions."

Later, in bed, Severus looked into his lover's eyes as he laid over her, urging her legs apart. "I think I will like the idea of you being a virgin again," he teased.

She smacked his chest. "You're just excited because you'll finally get to have me when you couldn't, when I was sixteen and seventeen! Good gracious! This is just eerie," she said with a shiver.

Severus kissed her hungrily. "Let's not dwell on it. I just want to enjoy you now."

He toyed with her, nipping and stroking her nipples with his tongue until she whimpered with delight.

He growled deep in his throat and lifted himself up to capture her full lips. His fingers found their way to her wetness, and he whispered against her lips, "I remember you telling me when we were young and unable to make love how you fantasized about how you wanted it to be. Do you remember what you told me?"

Hermione was far too gone to answer. All she could do was moan as he continued to stroke his fingers inside her.

"I think of your pushing yourself inside me to make me mold you. I think of you panting and groaning as you rock inside me," Severus repeated against her mouth.

"That's what you told me, my love. I will make you mold yourself around me as I push into your sweet wetness. I will slowly rock inside you until I fulfill my own promise. Do you remember what I promised, Hermione?"

He had slowly pushed his way into her tight warmth and now was rocking into her with deliberate thrusts.

"I-I can't...*ungh*...*Severus!*" she groaned.

"I'll remind you," he continued to whisper as he took her moans into his mouth. "'One day, I shall take you into my arms, and I will never release you until you are ready to pass out from the pleasure I want to give you. I swear...I shall never touch another woman. Until you and I can be together, I will save myself for you.'

And I have, my sweet girl, you've been the only. My one and only." He pressed his lips against hers as he continued to make love to her. She gripped his back urgently as she succumbed to him. Severus continued to thrust into her, making them both release together.

"I'm not done yet," he panted against her neck.

He slid his hand down and pressed his fingers against her nubbin, triggering another orgasm. Hermione clutched and writhed as she cried out her love's name again and again. She was exhausted, yet he didn't stop. Again and again he played her like a Stradivarius. Finally, all she could do was cry feebly as another orgasm washed over her.

"That's right, sweet girl, I love hearing your cries," he said softly.

Severus released her as he hovered over her; Hermione's eyes were so heavy, and she was so exhausted, she didn't know if she could even move to touch him.

"My sweet girl," he whispered as he reached underneath her curly hair to hold the back of her head. Hermione felt his long black hair brush against her cheeks. He kissed her near her mouth just like that night years ago when he had stolen into her room in the night to beg for a kiss. She felt her body slip into slumber, only to be revived by the touch of him. He took her again, and she watched him take his pleasure from her body. He was beautiful as his face relaxed into peaceful joy. She felt the telltale movements that he was nearing his limit, and she reached up with both hands to touch his face, turned upward, eyes closed in bliss. She stroked his cheeks and turned his face down, his eyes blazing fire as he came. He collapsed onto her, whispering his love for her.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"I love you, Severus," she replied.

Then they slept.

In the morning, Dumbledore took Severus and Hermione to the Ministry of Magic. They made their way directly into the Department of Mysteries. Bodrick Bode, a tall, congenial man, who had expressed his interest in meeting Hermione, met them at the entrance.

"My word!" he exclaimed. "So this is our time traveler. So exciting to meet you, Miss Granger," he replied as he shook her hand.

Hermione smiled at him as he pumped her hand vigorously. "We are so fascinated to see how we can help this young woman," he said to Dumbledore.

"Well then," Mr. Bode continued after he had bowed to Severus in recognition. "I thought since we've already let the kneazle out of bag, so to say, we might as well show you some of the more interesting things we have here, although I can only give you limited information not pertaining to the Time Room.

Hermione was excited. Here were the deepest reaches of magic within these walls. Being an Unspeakable had to be intriguing work. On a daily basis, these witches and wizards experimented and handled forces that were nearly impossible to harness and control. To a Muggle-born like Hermione, they were modern day explorers, like Ferdinand Magellan, Vasco de Gama, or Amerigo Vespucci.

The Department of Mysteries was an eerie place. A simple, bare corridor led to a black door that, when opened, led into a circular room surrounded by identical black doors. In the center of the room was a candelabrum with cobalt blue colored candles. The room had a calming effect on Hermione immediately. *Probably due to the cobalt,* Hermione thought.

She looked down at the polished floor. It was nearly transparent; it shone so perfectly. Hermione felt like Alice, deciding whether or not it had been a good idea to go down the rabbit-hole. That was how strange the circular room looked.

Hermione examined the twelve doors curiously. "Sir," she asked Mr. Bode. "The doors have no handles. How do you access the rooms?" she asked curiously.

Mr. Bode smiled. "We Unspeakables have our ways," he answered cryptically. "We have here the most interesting magical powers at our disposal that are nearly impossible for the wizarding mind to contemplate! That is why we are called 'Unspeakables.' We simply do not have the language to fully describe the mysteries we are surrounded by in order to do them justice. We do not hope to dare fathom their depths. We simply go as far as they lead us, and we guard their secrets closely. It is, in fact, your situation that has deemed you worthy to even be allowed this far into our realm. The most extraordinary things have been occurring in the Time Room, and the wizard in charge, the Time-keeper, is most anxious to meet you!" he said excitedly.

"Oh, I wish we could see all the rooms!" said Hermione as she gazed around.

"Ah, my dear," the wizard said apologetically. "That is quite impossible, not to mention highly dangerous. I have only received permission to allow you limited access into the Time Room. Now, let's not keep the Time-keeper waiting!" he said with a smile.

He waved his hand, and the unmarked doors began to spin around and finally stopped. Another wave and the black door in front of them opened for them. Mr. Bode gestured them to walk inside.

Hermione's eyes went wide with surprise and sheer delight. It was...*dazzling!* The calming, cobalt blue light from the circular room was forgotten as the shimmering light around them overcame Hermione's senses. It looked as if a million prisms had been let loose and were flying around, sparkling away.

The room was full of thousands of clocks, all shapes and sizes on various counter tops and shelves. Small, simple, wooden clocks were placed alongside golden, ornate timepieces. Anniversary clocks with their spinning and whirling balls that sparkled as the light caught their movement mesmerized her. The clocks were all in unison, ticking away in perfect precision. The length of the hall seemed endless, but finally they reached a gigantic curio that held the most intricate timepieces, so delicate that it seemed the slightest breath would send them crashing down. The curio was even more ornate than the most impressive clocks that stood in the room. It was of heavy-set gold. The glass doors were gleaming, as if it was not real glass, but water shimmering on the surface, just as the floor in the circular room had been. Flanking the sides of the curio were the most beautiful grandfather clocks Hermione had ever seen. She peered closer to the face of one of the clocks. The roman numerals seemed to be fashioned from some sort of gemstone.

"That would ruby," said a kind, elderly voice beside her.

Hermione jumped back and collided with Severus. He set her upright and softly stroked her arm as if to soothe her.

The old man smiled and stroked his beard which was long, although not as long as Professor Dumbledore's. His hair was wild; it reminded her of what Harry might look like in his dotage with his hair all askew. The man wore a three-piece suit made of dark crimson velvet. It was ornate, just as many of the clocks in this room, and he wore thick-rimmed spectacles that reminded Hermione of Percy Weasley. He had, though, warm brown eyes and pink cheeks. Hermione rather liked him. He seemed warm and welcoming.

"My name is Horatius Daglish," he said with a clear voice. "I am the Time-keeper." He waved his hand around gracefully. "All these clocks, timepieces, what-have-you, are all my responsibility. Time is a mystery. I have been Time-keeper for two-hundred-years! In all that time, I have seen great things happen in this room," he said as he looked around appreciatively. His eyes rested back upon Hermione. "Although I must say, I have never seen what has been occurring recently in this very room in all the years I have spent here. It is most exciting, and I would be a damned liar if I said I wasn't interested in meeting the young witch responsible for such a happening!" he said as he hooked his thumbs in his small vest pockets where a delicate gold chain was dangling from between the two.

Dumbledore spoke up first. "Horatius, I am so happy to see you again, old friend!" he said as he shook the wizard's hand.

"Albus!" he said as he wagged his finger at him. "I should have known you would have your hand in this. You have always wanted to know the secrets in the Department of Mysteries. Well, consider yourself welcome!" he said with open arms.

"Now, to the business at hand." He conjured a book from nowhere and thumbed through it on the table in front of him. "Ah-ha!" he said as he adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. "A young witch had a mishap with one of our Time-Turners. Extraordinary!" He took off his glasses and said, "My dear, we here in the Time Room have no control over the magic here. All we do is observe the magical changes and adjustments. It seems that in your time of 1993," he said as he glanced back at his book, "you were given permission to use a Time-Turner that was powerful enough for you to travel long distances in time. Twenty years!" he said as he gazed off into space. "Extraordinary!"

Albus spoke up and broke Mr. Daglish from his wool-gathering. "You said, Horatius, that the clocks and timepieces have the ability to morph by themselves into what is needed. Miss Granger has waited many years...nine to be exact. Is there any hope that she might be able to return to her own time?"

Horatius sighed as he took off his glasses. "Albus, Time-Turners are for going *backward* in time, not *forward*. Although that has been the constant, there has been a strange abnormality in one of our Turners that has been most remarkable. It also is one of our most delicate pieces. We do not wish to examine it while it is still morphing. I would say in a few months, I will let you know; however, I do have hope that this *may be* the piece you need to help Miss Granger."

Albus looked cautiously at Severus and Hermione and said, "We have another concern, Horatius. Miss Granger not only needs to return back to her own time in 1993, but we need to find a way to de-age her."

Horatius was silent for a couple of minutes as he stroked his beard. Finally he spoke with grave concern in his tone. "A highly talented and dedicated Potions master would have to undertake this type of sensitive challenge," he said mysteriously. "I have theorized and dreamt of such a creation. However, I am not a Potions master, but one of us in this room is."

His brown eyes shifted over to Severus, and his smile widened. "If I were to give you a unique ingredient that has never been used in any potion, but has been used by itself to de-age anyone who comes in contact with it, do you think you could create such a potion to bring Miss Granger her youth back to her?"

Severus crossed his arms and looked seriously at the older wizard. He spoke slowly. "I would need to examine the research notes taken on how the substance has worked before. I would need a sample to take back to my lab and would need to know exactly how it must be handled."

"That would be no problem!" Horatius exclaimed happily. He took a key from his breast pocket and unlocked the curio cabinet. The glass rippled as he slowly opened the doors. He took out a crystal bell jar that shone light from it as a diamond would.

Horatius smiled. "It is what is contained in this jar that makes the light shine so brilliantly," he whispered to them.

It was the most spectacular thing Hermione had ever seen! Horatius conjured a pouch and a silver spoon. He turned to Severus and said, "Now this will last you until you return to Hogwarts. Take the ingredient from the pouch, and place it into a velvet lined bag of your own and use only silver in contact with it."

He spooned out a generous amount of what looked like silver glitter and poured it into the scarlet pouch. He handed it to Severus and then opened another door that came from nothing inside the curio. He handed Severus a leather bound journal that Hermione supposed had the research on the strange, glittery substance. Severus placed the book and the velvet pouch in one of his many pockets in his traveling cloak, and Horatio ushered them from the room.

As they went to rejoin Bode in the circular room, he called out to them, "Good fortune to you, Miss Granger! Remember that love knows no time." With that, the door closed and the rooms began to move around until Hermione could not remember which had been the Time Room.

Back in Dumbledore's office, the three sat exhausted in mind and spirit. Severus had already transferred the glittering substance into one of his own green velvet pouches. They were now trying to process what had occurred and where to go from there.

Severus was staring off into the fire, silent and looking sad and forlorn. "I will begin tonight on analyzing the ingredient," he said in a far-off hollow voice.

"How long do you think before Horatius will know when the Time-Turner will be ready to analyze?" asked Hermione. She saw out of the corner of her eye Severus turn his face towards her sharply.

"So eager to leave, my dear?" he said icily.

Hermione looked at him painfully. "Don't ever accuse me of wanting to run off on you, Severus," she said angrily.

"Children," said Albus calmly as he folded his hands on top of his desk. "We must focus on what can be done and place our efforts towards it. Severus will work on a De-aging Potion. Hermione, you shall assist him. I will continue to correspond with Horatius and will keep the both of you informed."

Severus jumped up from his chair, his rage finally getting the better of him. "I can't believe that after everything that has happened these past nine years, I must endure placing my life on hold indefinitely! I can't marry the woman I love; she doesn't even exist...although I have seen in the Hogwarts register for a Hermione Jane Granger, born 19 September, 1979: Muggle-born. She will be coming here for the fall term of 1991! I can't wrap my mind around this. It's like you aren't even real!" he roared as he strode out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione looked at Dumbledore with her eyes full of bitter tears. She wanted to tell Albus she just couldn't imagine staying while time closed in on them all. It was August of 1982 now. How long would they be kept waiting? 1983? 1984? 1985? Her mind reeled at the thought she could be stuck here in limbo, waiting for a piece of magic melding onto metal to determine when she could claim her life as her own.

"I'll go to him," she whispered softly as she slowly eased out of her chair. She walked the halls towards their rooms in the dungeons, recalling how happy they had been when she had returned from hiding in the Muggle world. Voldemort seemed to be the worst thing that stood in the way of their happiness. Now it seemed so cruel and ironic that it was being together that hurt the most. Every time he touched her, she was sure he was thinking of a little toddler, somewhere in England, just shy of her third birthday.

She walked into their bedroom and found him lying on their bed. Their small bed that only fit them as long as they stayed intertwined in sleep. Never before has it ever been a problem. The passion that had burned for so long ignited that first night, even though they had been apart for three years.

Horatius was right. Love knows no time. She went and sat next to him, forcing him to budge over as he kept an arm across his face.

"Severus," she heard herself saying, "Do you want me to return to the Muggle world? Would it make things easier?"

He moved his arm from his face, and she saw the pain and hurt in his eyes. She fairly shuddered at what she found in their depths. A hollow, empty, fathomless gaze met her.

"Don't close down, Severus. Please. I am here. I have always been here. The dark days when your mum was gone and when Lily left you, I was there for you to cling to, to remember that somewhere someone loved and cared about you. Don't stop loving me; don't stop now. We will get through this. One day it will end, and when it does, we will be together for all the world to know and see that I am yours, and you are mine!" she pleaded.

"I don't know how I will be able to handle seeing you as a little girl in my classroom in nine years. You won't know, you realize," he said.

"I know," she admitted painfully. "But the day will come that I will know you. The day after the Welcoming Feast, 2 September 1993, when you see me at breakfast, it will be *me*. But until then, let us love each other and forget about what is years away. The longer the time passes that the Time-Turner remains unable to help us, the less time we will have apart."

She slipped off her clothes and slid into bed. "Come and hold me, Severus. Love me."

A/N: Horatius means "keeper of time"

Daglish is an old name of watchmakers in Britain.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 74

One more Christmas at Spinner's End before Hermione's return to 1993.

A/N: Thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Severus and Hermione will have some time alone before they have to be separated.

19 September 1982 came around, and Severus claimed he didn't know if he should be celebrating Hermione's twenty-third birthday or her third.

"Don't be an arse!" she bit at him. The staff at Hogwarts had been let in on the situation of Hermione's real identity and where she had come from, and she decided to undergo a change for the new school year. She was going to be Jessica Irving, a past student, now assistant to Professor Snape and Headmaster Dumbledore.

"You will have to alter your appearance, Hermione," Dumbledore warned her.

"So, after all the hard work, I am to be put away?" she asked angrily as she stood in the middle of the headmaster's office.

"Well, I am sure Minerva would be more than pleased to hand off some of her Deputy Headmistress duties to you. You also can assist Professor Snape. You can even work towards an apprenticeship. Your skills need not deteriorate because we are waiting for you to return to your own time."

Hermione fiddled with the little whirling objects on his shelves. "No word from Horatius?" she asked hopefully.

"No," he replied. "I am sure it won't be long now."

Hermione sighed as she paced the room. "I don't want to leave, Albus...but I don't like languishing in a life that can't be fully mine! I want to be married, have babies. I want to do this right with Severus. I love him."

"I know, Hermione," he replied. "We'll just have to do the best we can."

The years passed, and 1984 came upon them. Severus and Hermione were still under the false relationship in public of professor and assistant. Jessica Irving kept herself low-key since Bill Weasley and Charlie Weasley were students at the time. It was so odd to see them as little boys. She had never met them before and had only seen them through pictures Ron had shown them after their trip to Egypt the day before she had arrived. She was glad they didn't know her. It made things so much easier that way.

She worked hard as Dumbledore's assistant and as Severus' partner in the lab. He had worked so hard at the De-Aging Potion that the preliminary tests on the nifflers and rats showed he was making great progress. Soon, he told her, he would have it perfected, and then when the Time-Turner was ready, she could leave.

In November of 1984, Horatius sent an urgent owl to Dumbledore in the middle of the night. The Time-Turner had been glowing and morphing at an incredible rate. The last few hours had been amazing to watch. Now, it had cooled down and was ready to be analyzed for its properties. For this, he wanted Dumbledore present when he checked it.

Severus and Hermione had been awakened as soon as Albus had received the owl and read it. At first, the couple stared at the headmaster in disbelief. Then after he left to go to the Ministry of Magic to meet Horatius there, Severus sat down on their bed and cried.

Hermione knelt in front of him and held his head, trying to comfort him as best she could.

"Nine years. Nine years before I can know you again, before I can have you with me." He looked up at her. "How will I live without you? How will I be able to be your teacher and not want to be with you, to kiss you, to make love to you?"

"Severus, you won't," she said flatly. "All you will see is a little girl, and you won't find that appealing. But one day, when I grow up and become a woman, I will return to you and come back to our bed where I belong."

Severus toyed with her engagement ring on her finger. "You will have to either leave it behind or hide it," he said sadly.

He grabbed her arms and said, "Come back to Spinner's End with me, just one more time. Make love to me, and stay with me there before you have to leave," he whispered.

"You've always wanted to shag me in that bed!" she said as she laughed.

He groaned as he spread her legs, forcing her to straddle him. She felt his hardness against her inner thigh. Their coupling was hard and fast. They slept soundly and in the morning received the news that Hermione had waited to hear for more than a decade.

Horatius told Dumbledore the Time-Tuner was finished. It had modified itself to take Hermione into the future. It was an amazing piece of magic, and of course, he could not find the words to explain why magic had found a way.

Hermione would never forget the day that everything was set for her return. It was 30 November 1984. She and Severus had a quiet dinner together and spent most of the night making love and talking about their plans. Severus leaned over Hermione as she lay supine on their bed. He stroked her body as slowly as he could, as if he were trying to imprint her body onto his memory forever.

"I want us to have a Christmas together at Spinner's End. Dumbledore said he would lend me a couple of house-elves to clean and prepare the house to be habitable. We'll get a tree and presents. We can go out dancing and celebrate New Year's. Then afterward, we will return and prepare the potion and..." He stopped talking.

"I would love to spend Christmas with you, Severus." Hermione whispered.

Severus stroked back her hair and kissed her softly on her lips. "I want to make it very special. I want it to sustain me for the next six years before I see your sweet face again," he whispered.

"Me too," she replied.

Spinner's End from the outside looked gloomy and dilapidated, as always, yet the inside practically shone from the deep cleaning the house-elves had done. Severus watched her as she went around looking at the rooms. Hermione, sensing he was trailing her a few steps behind, smiled, knowing he wanted to see her reactions to the old, familiar rooms.

She went to open the door to her old bedroom, the room she had stayed in for three summers, and looked at the bed where Severus had first declared his feelings for her. She went and touched the crisp white sheets on the bed and closed her eyes, remembering how the sheets felt against her skin when Severus had climbed in with her, pleading for a kiss.

She felt Severus wrap his arms around her waist and burrow his head in her neck. She felt her nipples harden as a shiver of anticipation rose up inside her. She turned to face him, and they kissed. Soon they were in that bed, just big enough to make love in, and Hermione felt herself melting in desire as she watched the man she loved worship every inch of her body.

"I had asked you for a kiss, Hermione, and you refused me then," he murmured in her ear.

She cupped his face in her hands and said, "Now you can do that and much more," she replied softly as she pulled him in for a kiss.

Soon, he was slowly edging inside her; she was so wet she could scarcely feel herself around him. As he moved, she grew frustrated.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm so open, I've never been so randy before; there isn't any friction for me!" she complained.

"Believe me, it'll be fine," he whispered as he found her nub and spread her wetness around it. Soon, she was tensing and gasping; her orgasm was coming fast. As she came, he pushed himself inside her and furiously slammed into her over and over again. As soon as she recovered from her first orgasm, Severus was bringing her towards her second. She was clenching and unclenching around him as she began to chant his name.

"Yes!" he shouted as he came inside her.

Still, he continued to please her until he was soft inside her body. Hermione ran her hand down the back of his head, feeling his hair under her hands. He lay on top of her, and they snoozed for a while before getting up to enjoy some cocoa and discover what other surprises lay in store for them by the house-elves.

The kitchen larder was bursting with the most delectable food. Meat pies, puddings, various cakes and cheeses filled up all the spaces, which had always been bare. Then there was a Christmas goose and turkey. Hermione's mouth salivated over the sauces that filled up the room. They would want for nothing. The elves had done well.

However, by far the most impressive item was the Christmas tree that the elves had brought over and decorated. There were fairy lights and tiny, white candles waiting to be lit on Christmas Eve. The sitting room had been dusted, and the book-lined walls gleamed in their polished leather. The old, rickety furniture had been charmed and expanded to accommodate a cozy environment. Severus had been most impressed with the fireplace which he claimed hadn't been cleaned since 1945.

Hermione laughed as she watched her Scrooge frown and scowl his way through all the finery and luxury.

"This is not my house!" he declared. "It's been magicked to death, and it is far too sentimental. No one experiences the holidays like this," he sneered.

Hermione smiled brightly as she set herself upon one of the comfy chintz sofa chairs. She tucked her feet underneath her and said, "I love it! It reminds me of my favorite book when I was a little girl."

Severus shot her a pained look.

Hermione reached out her arms and silently beckoned him to her. They easily fit into the oversized chair, and she cozied up to him.

"I seem to recall that you wanted this to be a Christmas to remember always, something that you could hold onto and recall while we are apart," she reminded him softly.

His scowl fell from his face, and he turned to her and said, "I could never give you this. These are things only the Malfoys could do. It seems like torture to enjoy something that could never be a reality."

Hermione laid her head on his shoulder. "This Christmas is about us, my darling. It doesn't matter what we have or don't. I don't care. You are all I am thinking of and wanting. Let's enjoy the beautiful gift of these things and let me tell you about my book."

Severus gave a snort. "Books. You always had your nose stuck in book," he said teasingly.

Hermione batted her eyes. "Why, Severus! I never knew you noticed."

He looked at her with smoldering eyes as he captured a curl between his fingers. "I noticed. I may not have seen you as I do now, but I always noticed you, Hermione," he whispered.

"When did you really see me for the first time?" she whispered.

"The night you came and comforted me after Lily left me. You held me as I cried, and you never chided me or made me feel stupid for being weak."

"You weren't weak!" she fairly shouted. "You were in extreme emotional distress!"

Severus smiled and kissed her lips tenderly. "I loved how you held me, making me feel so safe and cared for. I thought, 'She really is a wonderful person.' And I love you now, for getting angry for how I was treated."

He pulled her into his lap and said, "Then you came here and worked on my mother's vegetable garden. You were hot and laid in the sun. I remember standing over you, watching you rest there. I looked at the freckles on your nose and could see where the sweat on your chest made your shirt stick to your breasts. I knew I wanted you, not just for a time, but for always. Still I had to get Lily completely out of my system. You came and followed me there to where I was sitting watching her house. You silently sat with me, like a fellow comrade. You never said a word, and that gesture spoke volumes. You fell asleep, and I watched you. I wanted to make love to you then," he said shyly.

Hermione finished for him. "Instead, you stole away into my room, begging for a kiss."

"I wanted more than kisses, Hermione, but I didn't want to rush anything. You were so good and kind. I wanted to cherish what was unfolding in front of us."

Hermione felt her breath growing shallow. "If we don't stop, we'll be shagging in front of the fireplace. Then you'll really feel like a cliché," she said saucily.

He gathered her into his arms and laid her down on the rug in front of the fire. "I don't think I would mind, just this once," he said huskily as he began to kiss her throat, hovering over her.

Christmas Eve came far too quickly. The days had been full of happiness, snowball fights, dragging out the old wooden washtub and washing up in the melted snow, cleaned and heated. There had been nothing more intimate to Hermione than washing Severus hair and then having him wash hers.

"Do you think you will ever put in indoor plumbing?" she asked.

"No," he said as he poured water over her soapy hair. "At least not unless you want to live here with me. But, why would you?" he said dryly.

She leaned back her head, looking at him upside down. "Kiss me," she ordered.

He kissed her and ran his hands down her throat to grasp her soapy breasts peeking out of the water. Hermione squealed. He laughed heartily then.

Later, after they had a lovely Christmas Eve dinner, Severus lounged on the couch, watching Hermione in her fluffy white robe and wet curls light the candles on the tree.

"Are you sure you don't want to participate?" she asked him. "You're staring at me. Am I doing it wrong?"

She looked over at him as he chuckled. "No, he said as he adjusted his pose to lie more comfortably on the couch. "I love watching you like this. I can imagine a decade or two from now, you and our little ones doing this every Christmas."

She smiled and lit the next candle.

"You want this life? Me, marriage, babies?" she asked. "I thought you didn't believe a life like this could be possible for you?"

"Of course!" he said in irritation. "If it weren't for the fact that you happen to not belong in this timeline, we'd have been married and most likely you would be pregnant with my child," he snapped.

Hermione flickered her eyes towards him as she lit another candle. "How many babies do you want with me?" she asked.

"Ten," he said in a serious tone.

Hermione gasped. "I will not give birth to ten children, thank you very much!"

Severus laughed raucously. Hermione smiled in spite of herself. "So seriously," she said as she lit the last candle. "How many babies?"

"Come here," he asked softly.

She slowly made her way towards him, and he bit his lower lip as he reached to slide his hand up the back of her calf and reached to her thigh. Hermione closed her eyes and moaned in approval. He pulled her to him and made her sit on his lap.

"I want," he said languorously, "just to make a life with you. I want to have as many children as pleases us, and I want to make you never regret you chose me to be your husband."

Hermione put her arms around his neck and kissed him gently. "Always want me, Severus. Never stop wanting me to be the one at your side," she whispered as she kissed him slowly.

They savored and held on to each other, watching the lights flicker on the lovely tree. After Hermione had drifted to sleep on his chest, Severus picked up his wand and, with a flick, blew out all the candles. Hermione in her sleep snuggled close and nuzzled Severus as her hair decorated his chest.

The morning came and woke them; the light shining off of the snow forced them awake. Hermione squealed as she jumped off Severus, diving into the presents under the tree. Severus looked at her and shook his head.

"I need coffee," he said.

Hermione waited patiently until he returned. He sat on the couch and nursed his coffee watching his fiancée tear into her present from him.

"*Hogwarts, a History*?" she said, laughing, as she looked at him.

"You love that book. I want you to have that and know it was from me each time you recite to Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Neville Longbottom from it," he said as he rolled his eyes.

"Actually, it's Harry and Ron," she said offhandedly. Then she clamped her hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that!" she said, upset with herself.

"If I had a knut for every time I heard Hagrid say those very words," he muttered as he swallowed the dregs of his coffee.

Hermione laughed. "That's right, Hagrid does say that a lot," she said.

"So, who is 'Ron'?" he asked as he set his cup down on the table.

"Well," she said as she played with the book's binding. "His name is Ronald Weasley, the youngest son of Arthur and Molly Weasley."

"Ah," he said in recognition. "Yes, he's about two years old or so. I recall Minerva mentioning another couple of Weasleys in that damn book of hers."

Hermione wanted desperately to change the conversation. She took out her present, sat down on the couch next to him and gave it over.

"What did you get me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Open it!" she urged him.

He carefully opened it, and when he saw what it was, his eyes watered at the sight. "It's beautiful," he whispered.

He took it out of its box and read the inscription. "Love does not know time."

"Put it on, Severus...or do you want me to?" she asked.

"You do it," he said strangely, as if there was a lump in his throat.

Hermione took the wide golden band and slipped it over the finger of his left hand. She kissed it after she had put it into place and looked up into his eyes. "Never forget me, and never doubt my love," she said as she leaned in to kiss him.

"I don't know what to say," he whispered. "It's perfect. How is it that you are so perfect?" he asked as he searched her face.

Hermione blushed. "I'm not perfect, Severus. It's just that I'm perfect for you, just like you are perfect for me," she whispered softly as she toyed with her robe.

"Okay, Severus. I went to the record store and got some stacks of wax for us to dance to before we go out into public again!" she said cheerily one day as she blew in from the outside.

Hermione and Severus had decided to go bring 1985 in with a bang, so to prepare, she went and told Severus to pull out the record player and they were going to practice dancing.

They had a grand time, dancing and laughing to the all the popular Muggle songs. Then Hermione pulled out an Elton John record.

"He's a wizard!" exclaimed Severus.

"What?" said Hermione. "If he's a wizard, then why haven't I heard about it?"

Severus pulled out his best sneer. "It's not my fault that your education is lacking,"

Hermione smacked him. "You are terrible; you really had me going for a second. Now where have you heard Elton John before?"

"Please, Hermione, I am a half-blood. I remember listening to 'Your Song', 'Tiny Dancer,' and 'Rocket Man' when I was a boy, before you came along in the early seventies. So what is this one?" he asked as he picked up the jacket.

"All the clerk said was that it was a huge hit this year. I think he thought I was a bit barmy for not knowing what it was!" she said as she began to laugh.

She put it on the turntable and the music began to play.

Don't wish it away

Don't look at it like it's forever

Between you and me

I could honestly say

That things can only get better

And while I'm away

Dust out the demons inside

And it won't be long

Before you and me run

To the place in our hearts

Where we hide

And I guess that's why

They call it the blues

Time on my hands

Could be time spent with you

Laughing like children

Living like lovers

Rolling like thunder under the covers

And I guess that's why

They call it the blues.

Hermione and Severus stood there just listening and not moving a muscle as the lyrics drove straight into their hearts. When it was over, Severus reached out for her and held her to him as she cried.

They were determined to have a good time for New Year's. After all, the following day, the second, they were returning to Hogwarts. Hermione would take the potion, and Horatius would guide her in working the modified Time-Turner. For Hermione, it would be only a blink of an eye, and she would be right back where she had originated. For Severus, though, it would be a grueling and lonely five and a half years before he would see her again. Then another two years before they could be together.

They Apparated to London and danced through the fast and happy songs and cried and held on to each other though the sad ones. One song touched Hermione deeply, more than the others that night. It was a haunting song that made her want to suspend time and stay in that moment forever.

Its so hard to get old without a cause

I don't want to perish like a fading horse

Youth is like diamonds in the sun

And diamonds are forever

Forever young, I want to be forever young

Do you really want to live forever, forever and ever

It really hit her then at that moment, dancing in Severus' strong arms, just how much she was losing. He would suffer her absence, but she would lose his youth. When she saw him again she would be thirteen, and he would be thirty-three. It wasn't so terrible; he wouldn't be old, yet he would have lived years without her. Would he forget? Would time make the passion and desire fade? She remembered what Horatius said, "Love knows no time," and held on tighter to him. She would hold him to her as tightly as she could until she could no longer...

When the clock struck twelve, they kissed. Hermione put all of her love into her kiss, hoping Severus would know just how much she loved him and would never want anyone else, ever...no matter what the future brought their way.

A/N: Song #1 - *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues*. Music by Elton John and Davey Johnstone. Lyrics by Bernie Taupin.

Song #2 - *Forever Young* by Alphaville

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 74

Hermione prepares to return to 1993.

A/N: Well, here we are, the last chapter before Hermione is back in her original time line. Soon she will be back in school with Ron and Harry. But first, she has to see if the De-Aging potion Severus made will work or not. Thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin for their hard work.

The fateful day finally came, and Severus and Hermione found themselves unable to speak, let alone pack and ready themselves to Apparate back to Hogwarts. Hermione declared she couldn't eat a bite, so Severus grumbled that they should just get on with things.

As Severus placed his arm around her waist, she said to him, "I wish we could make love just one more time."

He smiled weakly. "You said that early this morning. It will never be enough, Hermione. Let's not prolong the pain," he said quietly.

They Apparated to the boundary line and began to walk towards the castle. The snow was beautiful, hanging richly from each limb of the Whomping Willow. She slipped her hand into Severus', and they ambled on slowly, savoring the moment.

It was all over too soon. Before Hermione knew it, she was in Dumbledore's office. Severus went directly to the dungeons to retrieve the potion he had placed in stasis during their holiday.

Hermione turned to Dumbledore. The anxiety was eating away at her. "So," she said, "are we doing this here?"

Dumbledore smiled as he placed a warm hand on her shoulder. "You, Severus, and I are going to the Department of Mysteries. Horatius is waiting for us there. He is most anxious to witness the transformation and see how Severus was able to concoct the potion!" he said with an excited gleam in his eyes.

He sobered and continued with a sigh, "Horatius is also most concerned how the Time-Turner will work. He wants to make sure he does his best to ensure your safe travel back to 1993."

Hermione numbly nodded. She felt so strange, like she should feel something...panic, or fear...but she just felt numb and strangely detached from the situation. *Perhaps my brain just cannot handle the process and is protecting my mind from falling apart*, she mused to herself.

They waited in silence until Severus returned with his potions kit. They were ready.

"Before we go, Hermione, you need to leave everything from this time behind. It will be returned to you by Severus in due course."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Severus placed his arms around her from behind and whispered, "It's better this way...don't worry."

It hurt. She went from being comfortably numb to being so hurt she could scarcely breathe. Giving her engagement ring back to Severus felt as if she had broken both their hearts. She placed it in his outstretched palm and burst into tears. Severus drew her into his arms as she whispered, "I feel I'm abandoning you, and I will never get you back. I love you. I don't want to go!"

"It's okay," he murmured. He reached inside his robes and drew out a chain with the golden wedding band Hermione had given him for Christmas. He opened the clasp and placed her engagement ring with his own and refastened the clasp. Hermione smiled through her tears as he placed them back inside his robes, patting the place where they rested.

She embraced him and held him tight. "Okay, I am ready," she said.

Albus had made an adjustment with the Floo Network through Bodrick Bode to Floo directly into the Ministry of Magic. Soon, they were there, amongst the hustle and bustle of the Ministry, silently making their way down to the Department of Mysteries where Albus reassured them that Mr. Bode and Horatius would be waiting to assist them.

Before Hermione knew it, she was back in that circular, cobalt blue-colored room. She looked at Severus and noticed how the blue shining in his black hair made it look alive, instead of lank and lifeless. No, Severus Snape had never grown to become conventionally handsome, but he had grown into his face, and his demeanor and posture had given him a regal air. He commanded respect although he had never asked for it. He was intelligent, calm, poised, and keenly aware of the motives of the people around him.

Hermione realized she had, over time, fallen deeply in love with a man who had terrorized her in her previous life. She knew he was a terror to his students, she'd seen and heard it first-hand in this timeline. It didn't matter. He loved her, and he was hers. At least that was what she hoped when she reached the other side of whatever was waiting for her there.

Horatius was nearly jumping for joy at their arrival. He was wearing his dark crimson suit with his delicate timepiece chain in the waistcoat pocket. His white hair was as disheveled as ever, and his huge, brown eyes were shining brightly behind his severe horn-rimmed glasses. He welcomed them all and shook their hands enthusiastically.

"So, today is the day! I can't tell you all how exciting this is for me to witness. Never in all my years have I seen such a powerful display of magic."

He gestured for them to come closer to the enormous golden curio where, indeed, something awesome was changing inside. The glass cabinet doors that looked like water were shimmering and trembling, causing ripples on the delicate surface. The Time-Turners were all turning various colors of the rainbow, melting and molding before their eyes. Hermione was awestruck. She had never seen such beauty.

Horatius smiled as he watched Hermione's expression. She became aware of his gaze, and she shifted her eyes to him.

"What is happening, sir?" she whispered.

The Timekeeper's hands spread as he raised them above his head. "They are all morphing! They have finally answered the call of their purpose!" He turned swiftly to the nearby table and, with his wand, opened a drawer and levitated a delicate golden Time-Turner from the drawer to the hard marble top. He slipped a velvet cushion underneath to protect the piece and then carefully lowered his wand and stood back.

"Miss Granger," he said as he placed his wand in his pocket and took her hands into his own. "Do you know the mystery of the Time-Turner, the real reason for their being?"

"No," she said, confused.

Horatius' eyes beamed. "The writing on every Time-Turner that has come into existence has the same wording. It says,

"I mark the hours every one,

Nor have I outrun the Sun.

My use and value to you,

Are gauged by what you have to do."

He looked intently into Hermione's eyes for a hint of recognition. She thought hard about the words and finally said slowly, "The use and value of this particular Time-Turner is dependent on what I must accomplish? Is that right?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes!" he exclaimed as he clapped his hands together. "All of this, my dear Miss Granger," he said as his hands swept around the vast curio, "is because of you. You have called into the mystery of magical time, and it has returned its answer. You will return, for you must. It is imperative that you return. Now, does that make you feel more assured and at peace?" he asked with a pleasant smile on his face.

Hermione looked at Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling while he smiled happily, and Severus, as his face relaxed into acceptance. They now understood, and it had made all the difference. She flung her arms around Horatius, and he laughed in delight.

"Oh, my goodness! It has been fifty years since I have been given such a gift! Dear girl, you will turn my head," he chided as he blushed.

"Now, as to the changes in the glass bell jar, it has been nothing less than phenomenal!" Horatius continued. He opened the curio and removed the bell jar. They all peeked into it, and the glittering substance Severus had used to make the De-Aging Potion was now spinning and swirling around the edges in a never-ending spiral. At the bottom was an egg that began to hatch. It was a sweet little hummingbird, all the colors of the rainbow. As it rose, it matured into a full-grown bird, descending and dying before it reached the top. The bird and its hatched shell disappeared and another intact egg reappeared. The cycle was never-ending.

"How extraordinary!" whispered Dumbledore.

"It's lovely," murmured Hermione, entranced by the cycle of life in the bell jar that never ceased to emit light and glittering magic.

Horatius closed the lid and put it away carefully inside the curio. "I really felt you should see that, how so much has changed! I can't wait to see what the next years will bring me, but alas, I must remain focused on the present!" he said with a finger pointing up to make his point.

Dumbledore spoke. "I have here a replica of the uniform Miss Granger was wearing the day she came to us plus some unmentionables and shoes fit for a girl." He placed the bundle in her hands, and Severus slowly removed a phial from under his cloak. "This is the potion I have worked on and perfected. You should de-age precisely back to age thirteen years, 11 months and fourteen days."

Horatius spoke gravely to her. "My dear, when we take you back, you must remain hidden until you are absolutely certain that your other self is gone. You must not see yourself, so mind the space around you. Just in case, we will turn this one-hour less from the time you said you had disappeared. Do you understand what I have told you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered firmly.

Horatius gestured towards a door. "Go through the door and take the potion. Put on your new clothes and come out to us, so we can see how it all worked...but don't lock the door, just in case!" he said, smiling.

Hermione nodded and turned to Severus, taking the phial from his hands, letting her fingers linger on his.

"One last kiss?" she whispered as she felt the tears stinging in the back of her eyes.

Severus placed his hands on her upper arms and drew her in for a lingering kiss. Hermione's mind flashed through all the happy memories, the lazy, summer days spent holding hands. The comforting night in the Astronomy Tower as she held his head in her lap, the first kiss in the record booth, and the passionate kisses under the owls' steps, to finally the first time they made love after being apart so long. They separated, and she walked slowly from him into the other room and quietly shut the door.

She went into a bathroom and took off all her clothes. She looked at the body she had grown into: the rounded hips, long legs with her thick thighs, her breasts that were full and firm. Her hair had grown so much from when she had been a girl. Her hair fell long and thick down to her waist in heavy curls. It had been the only way to tame the bushiness that had plagued her adolescence. Now she was going back to it all. She took one last look and turned her back to the mirror and unstopped the phial. She slammed it down in one gulp and felt her stomach roll. She felt as though she had taken Polyjuice Potion again, just without the horrible taste. The effect however was the same. She fell to the floor in the fetal position and curled into herself. She focused on breathing as every bone in her body ached. She felt she was being crushed. Finally, she fell asleep, and when she woke, she was giddy and light-headed.

There was banging on the door. It was Severus. "Hermione! Can I come in? Are you alright?" he asked, sounding rather desperate.

Hermione jumped up, spun around and saw the girl she had been. She touched her hair in all its uncontrolled bushiness and her clear, youthful skin of a girl growing into a young woman. She looked at her minuscule breasts and narrow hips. She looked at her face and opened her mouth.

"Oh, Judas Priest!" she shrieked angrily.

"Hermione? Hermione!" bellowed Severus.

"I'm all right. Let me finished getting dressed," she called out.

"What happened?" he asked, sounding worried.

"Oh, nothing...I just remembered with the De-Aging came my horrid buck-teeth!"

Hermione scowled as she heard raucous laughing from the other side of the door.

She finished putting on her uniform and pinned a part of her hair back in a clip. She opened the door and looked up at Professor Snape. He was taller, much taller. Everything was taller. She didn't like it.

"I feel strange," she said. "My voice...there's something wrong!" she said fearfully.

Horatius smiled. "You are thirteen, Hermione. Your voice is higher because you are younger. You will find yourself used to it in time," he reassured her.

He placed the Time-Turner around her neck, and as per their agreement, she gave him the remnants of the broken one she had arrived with. He gave her some friendly advice on Time-Turner care as she would have to use it as she had planned for her third year.

"Now, keep in mind, you will have your teachers and perhaps some other adults who will remember you. Just in case you feel sad and alone, know you aren't," he said as he patted her shoulder.

"Of course, Miss Granger!" said Dumbledore. "And also you will be reunited with Messrs. Potter and Weasley."

"Oh, and Crookshanks!" she exclaimed. "My familiar...I had just gotten him the day before!"

She turned and looked at Severus. He looked down at her with expressionless eyes. He kept his distance.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Do not call me that," he said painfully. "It's Professor Snape."

"You don't want me anymore?" she whispered.

He looked down at her with a well-trained sneer. "You are thirteen. I must keep things contained. You know my feelings. Remember them, and know it will never change, but do not expect me to ever express them to you until you are of age," he replied in the icy tone she remembered from a lifetime ago...a lifetime to which she was returning.

Horatius helped her with the number of turns and stepped back as she blinked and faded from sight.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 74

Hermione encounters Severus after her return to 1993, and tries to fit back into adolescence.

A/N: Thank you to all the wonderful reviews and also to my excellent betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin.

Just so you know, this will not be a complete recap of JKR's books. The next two chapters of Hermione's third year will have a lot of Rowling's own work, but from Hermione's POV. Much thanks to JKR for the creation of this wonderful world!

Hermione landed on her backside in the Gryffindor common room. She was alone in the dark, with only the light from the fireplace to guide her. There, on the table, were her books, wand, and book bag. Her hands shook as she gathered up her things and crept her way towards the third-year girls' dorm. She saw Parvati and Lavender asleep in their beds as she took off her clothes and the Time-Turner, tucking them into her footlocker.

She slipped on her nightgown and went to bed. She didn't know how she was going to sleep or how things would be in the morning, but she was back, and everything so far had gone according to plan. She was excited to see Harry and Ron after all these years. However, the only person she truly wanted to see more than anyone else was Severus. She wondered how he was sleeping, if he was sleeping at all. She wondered if he would remember that she was back...the Hermione who knew their love and the oaths they had made to each other. A part of her was frightened that he had forgotten her, or he was going to be cruel towards her. As her thoughts wound round and round, she finally fell asleep.

The next morning, Hermione found Ron and Harry waiting for her in the common room. She smiled and gave them huge hugs.

"Hermione, geroff!" Ron exclaimed as he tried to breathe.

She released him only to grab Harry instead. When he pulled back from her, he said, "Hermione, where's your tan?"

Hermione's insides puckered. "I don't know. Don't I look the same?" she asked.

The boys shrugged it off, and they went to the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione was nervous. She was going to see Severus, and even though for him it had been nearly a decade, she hoped he would remember that she was the Hermione he had known and loved.

She glanced up at the High Table when Ron pointed out that Snape was looking extra furious today at the new DADA professor. Hermione watched as Severus glared at Remus with suspicion. Finally, when the boys were tucking into their food, she chanced a look at Severus. He looked at her but did not register any emotion on his face. Hermione was downcast. She hoped he was just putting on an act for everyone.

Malfoy was in excellent form as he mimicked Harry's fainting spell brought on by the Dementors.

"Just ignore them, Harry," Hermione whispered.

Hermione could not believe she was back in the thick of adolescence. Hadn't it been terrible the first time? She found herself pushing her food around her plate, feeling listless, when the term schedules came in.

"Ooh," she said excitedly. "We're starting new subjects today."

Hermione was excited about Divination. It hadn't been a part of the curriculum back in the '70's. She was looking forward to it. She recalled it had been during her days as Jessica Irving that she had first noticed the professor. She liked to stay up in her tower, something about "clouding her inner eye," or something. Also, she was taking Muggle Studies. That was a class she hadn't taken back then. So, at least there would be new things that she would look forward to.

Ron interrupted her thoughts. "Uh, Hermione, I think your schedule is messed up. You've got three classes that are going on at the same time."

"Don't worry, Ron," she answered without paying him real attention. "I have it all worked out with Professor McGonagall."

"Don't you think your schedule is a bit too full? I mean you already take on enough as it is!"

She looked up and glared at him. "Ronald, I don't see how my schedule is any concern of yours. As I said before, McGonagall has already cleared my class schedule, so just drop it," she snapped at him.

She got up and said, "Divination's first. Let's get going," she said bossily to them. She watched Ron as he crammed a whole piece of toast and jam into his mouth, and she shook her head disgustedly. She had forgotten how bad Ron's table manners were.

They made their way, huffing and puffing, up towards the North tower, getting a bit lost in the process. They finally found the silvery ladder that led up to Professor Trelawney's classroom and proceeded to sit through the woolliest class she had ever been in, not to mention she was starting to think the whole subject of Divination was a bit dodgy as well.

Hermione continued to sit, unimpressed, as Trelawney droned on about the images the dregs of the tealeaves had left in their cups. When she "proclaimed to foresee" that Harry had an enemy, Hermione snorted.

"Well, of course Harry has an enemy," she snarled. "You-Know-Who?" she said in exasperation.

The class gasped, and Hermione rolled her eyes. *This is such bullshit!* she thought. Harry and Ron were looking at her as if she were a total stranger. Hermione fixed her stare back on the old fraud as she kept turning Harry's cup around and around in her hand muttering various images of doom and gloom she was seeing until finally, she screamed and swayed on her feet and went to collapse most dramatically into an armchair near Harry and Ron's table. Harry and Ron went to look into the cup with interest, trying to see what would have made her react like that. Some of the others were gathering around as well, trying to see what Trelawney had seen.

She was shaking and protesting for them not to make her tell what she had seen in Harry's cup until finally, while whispering, said, "You have the Grim!" she said in a terrified whisper.

Everyone was asking what the Grim was. Hermione groaned into her hand, which was covering her face. Everyone was clamoring for more information, and Trelawney was more than willing to give them all the details.

Hermione got up and walked behind Trelawney's chair and said sharply, "I don't think it looks like the Grim," she announced calmly.

Trelawney looked at Hermione with disdain, and there lingered a flicker of anger in her eyes.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future," she said in a wounded voice.

Hermione's eyebrow raised itself sharply in rage. She wished she could give the old girl what for. Inner Eye, indeed! If she were so keen, she'd know that Hermione had a very interesting past and an even more fascinating perception of the future. She was glad when Trelawney declared class was over, and she could get out of that nightmare of a class.

Everyone was depressed and downcast in Transfiguration during that next period. Hermione informed McGonagall that they had just come from their first Divination class, and McGonagall had sniffed and asked which one of them was scheduled to die this year.

Hermione laughed as McGonagall sarcastically dealt with the prognostications of Sybil Trelawney. She started to feel a bit better. Transfiguration had always been one of her two favorite classes, the other being Charms. She soon started to feel more like herself.

The bell rang, and everyone started heading towards lunch. Hermione hung back to speak with Minerva. The older witch closed the door and placed a silencing charm on

it.

"Well, Hermione, how are things going for you?" she inquired. "Just so you know, this is your official debriefing. Albus, you know, is very busy with Fudge and all these nasty Dementors."

"Minerva, thank you for not talking to me like a third-year," Hermione said gratefully.

Minerva laughed and conjured a chair. "Sit down, and have a spot of tea. I'm going to give you a bit of scotch too; you'll need it," she warned.

Her teacup was halfway to her lips when she stopped in dread and said, "What?"

Minerva sighed and spoke reluctantly. "It's Severus. He's not taking this well at all. Not at all," she said as she shook her head. "Then there is this business with hiring Remus. Severus was furious when Albus hired him. I thought Severus was going to kill someone when Albus told him his decision was final. Then, Remus really got off on the wrong foot when he tried to talk to Severus about you just before the Welcoming Feast."

Hermione nearly dropped her teacup. "I don't know why Severus should take on so. He never really got on with Remus, especially after the stunt Sirius pulled on him, but he knew we were training and studying Occlumency together, and he wasn't too fussed about it," she replied.

Minerva shrugged. "Well, it's because of all this drama with Sirius escaping from Azkaban," she replied. "Severus has it in his mind that Remus will foolishly aid Sirius into the castle."

"That is preposterous!" Hermione exclaimed. "Remus would never do such a thing," she declared.

Minerva breathed in deep and sipped her tea. "When it comes to Severus and his prejudices, it is impossible to make him see reason. All he can say is that Remus never believed Sirius betrayed James and Lily and also never believed it was he that killed Peter and those Muggles."

Hermione felt Minerva's eyes studying her carefully. "Have you spoken with Severus yet?"

Hermione set down her tea. "How could I?" she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "I just got back in the middle of the night and have been running my arse ragged all morning. I hope tonight I can somehow see him."

"Hermione," Minerva said as she placed her hand on the younger witch's hand. "Severus went through a very difficult time when you left. He took up the drink, which Albus helped him through. He became withdrawn and angry. He missed you desperately, and many nights I sat with him as he slept. He cried, although he'd never admitted it to anyone," she said with wide eyes. "He would cry bitterly, he was so lonely and confused. Then, you arrived as a first-year, and at first, he was excited because you were back, and he could see you, but it wasn't *you*, and he found himself irritated and even more befuddled. He doubted that you both would find each other again."

Hermione felt her chest constrict, and tears burned in her eyes. "I have to talk to him, Minerva. He needs to know I love him still," she whispered.

"Just be careful, Hermione. He is not the young man you once knew. He is thirty-three and a man now. *Agrown* man, not the young, open, young man you grew up with. He's complicated."

"Minerva," Hermione said calmly, "Severus and I were separated for three years during the war. When we came together, it was as if no time had passed between us. Our love is real, and as soon as I talk to him, he'll realize the worst is over, and in just a couple more years, we can be together again."

Minerva looked at her strangely. "I hope you are right, for both your sakes," she replied.

Hermione searched for Severus at lunch, and they briefly made eye contact. He looked so cold and sour, so unlike the laughing man she had known. But she remembered again the public persona he was forced to wear. She wished she could assure him. Well, time would come when she had Potions class later in the week...if she couldn't get him alone in the meantime.

She began to eat as Ron went on about the Grim.

"Nonsense," she muttered as she ate.

"No!" Ron insisted. My Uncle Bilius saw one, and then he died twenty-four hours later," he said soberly.

"Coincidence," she replied. "You can't be *scared* to death. That's what you are claiming. It's not an omen; it's the cause of death."

She ate hurriedly and then went into her bag to find her Arithmancy book. "Divination seems to be a very woolly subject. Guesswork, that's all it is," she declared.

"You're just mad because Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura," Ron shouted. "You just don't like not being the best at everything!"

Hermione glared at him. She slammed her Arithmancy book down so hard, bits of meat, peas, and carrots flew everywhere.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!"

Hermione had had it. She snatched up her books and her bag and left. As she walked, she kept thinking *Why am I so bloody emotional? Damn hormones!* She was conflicted. She had to pretend she was nearly fourteen, when in truth she was nearly twenty-four...or was it thirty-four? She hated that she couldn't just go down to her real bedroom with Severus and have a good talk with him. She smiled as she thought how stupid he probably thought Trelawney was. She could imagine him laughing with his head thrown back and the crinkles in his eyes.

She sat in an alcove on the floor and thought about the Severus she had seen at breakfast and then at lunch. Was he still the same person who would laugh with her and make love to her like he used to once the time arrived? *He probably thinks I am repulsive. I'm just a child, and he doesn't want a child. Will he even wait for me to be a woman again? I wonder if he'd ever strayed?*

She shook her head of those thoughts and tried to get herself mentally prepared for her next class: Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid.

She refused to speak with Ron, not so much about being angry; she was extremely nervous Hagrid would let it slip that he'd known her. Hagrid knew about her being back as a Hogwarts student, and he knew to keep it quiet from the other students. He gave her a smile that went straight to her heart. She truly loved Hagrid. He was the first person who had really cared for her during those lonely days back in 1973.

The class was a fiasco. Hagrid had brought a Hippogriff to class, and after a breathtaking view of Harry in flight with "Buckbeak," things took a turn. Draco Malfoy decided he wasn't about to be outdone by Harry Potter, strutted up to Buckbeak and got a slash in his arm from one of Buckbeak's talons. Things looked very bad for Hagrid, even though he had warned the class how to approach the creature properly.

After Hagrid went to take Draco to the infirmary, they all made their way back to the castle. Hermione was really worried for Hagrid. She decided to seek out Severus and speak with him. She slipped away from Harry and Ron and went down the long circular dungeon stairwell that she knew by heart. She could hear the blood rushing in her

ears and her pulse racing. She couldn't wait to see him, to *feel* him. She shook her head. *Get a grip, Hermione! You are thirteen. He's your teacher.*

"What do you think you are doing, Miss Granger?" a cold voice rang out from nowhere. She turned around and finally saw Severus step out into the light. She had forgotten how tall he was, or rather how short she was now that she was thirteen again.

"I needed to see you, Severus," she said as she reached out for him.

In a flash, he had her by her upper arm and drug her into his classroom. He slammed the door behind him and glared at her in fury.

"What do you think you are doing? First, you come down here, and then you speak to me in that manner! Have you lost your mind?" he hissed.

Hermione was lost for words. Then she registered the pain his fingers were causing in her arm as he gripped her.

"Let me go!" she threatened as she brandished her wand at him.

His fury broke, and he ripped her wand from her hand, forcefully, throwing it onto the floor.

"You have a lot of nerve coming down here like it was only yesterday we were together, when in reality it has been long and torturous years," he whispered angrily.

He towered over her, continuing to look at her with rage. "This isn't like the old days, Hermione. I am no teenage Head of Slytherin. There is no more self-appointed Head of Slytherin. Only me!" he roared. "And I do not make deals, accords, nor do I make alliances. You are Hermione Granger, thirteen, student of Gryffindor house. I am Severus Snape, thirty-three, Head of Slytherin house. I refuse to allow you to disturb *that* reality."

Hermione looked at him warily as she stood up slowly. "I have no problem with facing reality, Severus. But it seems you do. I am Hermione Granger, your fiancée, and am twenty-three years old. Perhaps I am thirty-three or thirty-four with all this time hopping. I don't know. But, don't underestimate me, Severus. *I know you.* This mask, this persona is a lie! I know who you really are, even if you've forgotten!" she shouted.

He slowly released her arm and reached his hands up to his neck, where he took out a golden chain with their rings on it from underneath his robes. "I haven't forgotten," he whispered as he turned his back to her. "I just *can't* think of you being that. You are the girl from my youth, my old friend. I know inside you are the woman I love, but my mind cannot handle it. Please, Hermione, I asked you before to not do this to me. I will come to you when you are sixteen, not one day before."

He turned to look into her eyes and said, "I'm older, Hermione. I've aged and am not as open as I once was," he whispered.

"Just keep yourself open a little so I can get back in," she softly replied.

"You're in there; you will always be in there. There was never another woman, never a substitute. I missed you *I miss you.*" He whispered so softly, Hermione could barely hear it.

"Love does not know time, Severus," she said clearly. "I love you, and I will love you, forever. I shan't bother you again. Consider the matter closed. Just promise me you will come for me on my sixteenth birthday. Even if we don't make love, just let me be near you, hold you, kiss you."

He nodded as he kept his back to her. She picked up her bag and her wand, and with a wave of his hand, the door opened. She knew he was crying. She knew this was much more than a case of missing her. He was truly torn and lonely for her. She prayed the next two years would pass quickly.

Her fourteenth birthday came around, and she received a note in the morning owl post. It read, "Love does not know time." Hermione held it close to her heart that night and cried. She missed him so desperately at times, and his behavior in class grew exceeding terrible. Harry and Ron commented again and again that Snape seemed more "vindictive" than ever.

First, it had been their first Potions class of the year. Severus had called her "a show-off" and had taken five points from Gryffindor for helping Neville in class. Then he had raked Hermione over the coals. Finally, when they had their first Defense class in the teacher's lounge, Severus had been relaxing in there when they had all walked in with Professor Lupin. He had made a dramatic exit by informing Remus that he needed to "watch out for Longbottom unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

"Mighty Merlin, that man needs to get laid!" snapped Lavender as she, Parvati, and Hermione got ready for bed.

Parvati snorted. "I wonder if any of the Slytherin girls don't already do it! I know Pansy would do anything to get ahead," she said haughtily.

"So, that's the reason she got caught by Fred and George giving Malfoy head?" Lavender said in mock confusion.

"What?" shouted Parvati.

"Fred and George caught them while she was going down on Draco! They swore to secrecy, but made Draco cough up twenty Galleons for their silence," Lavender said as she giggled hysterically.

"Did he pay?" Hermione said nonchalantly from her own bed as she flipped through her Ancient Runes textbook.

Lavender and Parvati just started at her. "When have you ever been interested in idle gossip?" Lavender challenged her.

"Whenever it seems interesting enough," Hermione said languidly. "So, do you both think girls try to get ahead through sexual favors?"

Lavender looked very interested in such a sordid topic. "Well, I can't imagine any of the teachers being remotely attractive enough for that. Perhaps when McGonagall was younger or even Dumbledore. Now, Snape is a different kettle of fish." She tapped a finger on her cheek.

"I would think since he is young, and is a Head of a house, that probably he's had his fair share of offers...especially Slytherin girls. They'd do it with anybody if it meant getting what they want...I'm sure."

"Well, I guess he must not be getting offers since he is being such a nasty piece of work these days," Hermione mused.

Lavender began to comb out her hair. "Well, I would think Professor Lupin would be an interesting conquest. He does look careworn, and his clothes are terribly shabby, but I wonder what he looks like without the robes!" she said saucily.

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. *Nothing much has changed since the old days with Lily. Except Lavender isn't about to work her way into my knickers,* she thought.

Hermione couldn't help but think about Lily. They'd had a special relationship that had been exciting and forbidden. Lily had given her her first orgasm. She had given her her first kiss. She had been the one to first touch her breasts, and it had been reciprocal. It was nothing like how she had felt the night she and Severus had made love. When Lily's lips touched her nipples, it had been pleasant. When Severus' lips did the same, she felt she was going to positively melt.

Lily had been pretty, and Hermione hadn't been. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw the gangly girl she had been. She was also going to have to get her teeth fixed as well. That had made an impression. Well, at least she wouldn't have to worry over going through that disgusting experience when Severus' father tried to rape her. He was long since dead and gone. She wondered about Spinner's End. Had Severus ever returned there? Had he kept it up, or had he refused to return after that last Christmas before she had left? It was so strange. It had been just weeks ago, but for Severus, it had been memory from long ago.

Hermione thought about how Severus showed her the chain that held the engagement ring he had given her and the wedding ring she had given him. He had said he missed her...that he *misses* her. She felt the tears fall from her face and reached for the note she had received from him on her birthday. "Love does not know time." She read it over and over, memorizing his handwriting. She was fourteen, and she would only have to wait two more years. Just two more years, and she could be with him forever and never have to be alone again.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 74

Harry's curiosity about Hogsmeade gets the better of him, and he gets more out of his secret outing than he planned.

A/N: Thank you all for your awesome reviews! So you know, again, that the previous chapter, this chapter, and the next five chapters or so will have snippets from JKR's work directly. But don't worry. This is not HP part deux. Things will start to change bit by bit, as you can see now by Hermione's relationship with Crookshanks. Also, so you know, I am working hard to make sure no underage hanky-panky is going on! A clasp of a hand, kiss on the forehead, a hug, these are the kinds of things that will consist of Severus and Hermione's physical relationship. So my thanks to JKR for her fabulous fic that I borrowed from: *Prisoner of Azkaban*. Also, my eternal devotion to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin (who seriously needs to have an all-expense paid vacation to the island of her choice for putting up with all these crazy chapters)!

Hermione was furious. Harry was determined to find a way to sneak his way into Hogsmeade. Whenever she tried to talk to him about it, either he or Ron would blow up at her. Things were getting increasingly worse between her and Ron because of Crookshanks and Scabbers. Ron yelled at her constantly about her cat and that she should keep a better leash on him. Hermione defended herself as best as she could, but the truth was that Crookshanks knew there was something off with her and was continuously going off and doing his own thing. Hermione tried to talk with her familiar and explain, but it wasn't working. Besides, Hermione got a funny feeling that there was something Crooks needed to do. He took his stalking rather seriously, so she had decided to let him be. Unfortunately, Scabbers had also become restless and was constantly on the loose. Ron was furious and blamed Hermione for it all. She didn't know what was going on with his thrice-damned rat, nor did she care! So, their relationship continued to be strained and upsetting.

Halloween arrived, and a truce was made between them to go and see Hogsmeade. Hermione was especially excited to go because she had not been allowed to go to Hogsmeade with Severus and Lily. She had no one to sign for her slip, and Dumbledore had thought it would be best she not go far away from the castle.

They came back with wonderful treats, and Hermione had to admit she went a bit mad over the Chocoballs.

"They are filled with strawberry mousse and clotted cream, Harry...they were so delicious!"

"She brought back a whole bunch of sugar quills. You know how she likes to bite the tips of her quills, now she can get a sugar rush at the same time!" said Ron as he laughed.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him. She actually had enjoyed herself. She was feeling the happiness of being an adolescent without all the heartache being an adult caused. She had enjoyed the butterbeer Ron had bought her and gorged herself on Chocoballs. It was a nice substitute for what was becoming a real problem: sexual frustration. The Chocoballs seemed to deaden the ache, but if she didn't get relief soon, she was going to march up to the Head Table and give Severus a damn good rogering right in front of everyone.

She was having the hardest time keeping her emotions under wraps. She never remembered feeling this way the last time she was fourteen, but then she had been a traumatized girl who had almost been raped by a grown man and was having sexual interludes with her best girlfriend. Perhaps that was why she never felt so amorous before: everything was already being taken care of, or she had suppressed the need because of the trauma. She did recall near meltdowns when she and Severus were trying to keep their hands off each other, but she handled it all well with masturbation. Why was this time so different?

She would have to think about it later. They all were heading back to the tower after the Halloween Feast, and there was a terrible backup.

"What's going on?" bellowed Ron.

Then Hermione heard Percy the Prat ranting on about being Head Boy and for everyone to get out of his way. Finally, Dumbledore was there, and Hermione managed to squeeze through to look at what all the fuss was about.

"Oh, my..." she breathed as she grabbed Harry's arm. There was the Fat Lady's Portrait at the entrance of Gryffindor tower, but the portrait had been slashed, and the Fat Lady was gone.

Peeves swirled around overhead and started taunting Dumbledore. After a couple of exchanges, Peeves said, "Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

Hermione grabbed onto Harry for dear life.

"Hermione!" he whined. "You're choking me."

Hermione felt the world was falling apart. She held onto Harry and whispered, "Please, Harry, be careful. You just don't know what he's capable of!"

Harry pulled her off of him and said, "Hermione, I know, we've talked about this! Sirius Black was Voldemort's right-hand man and lost everything. Now, he wants to kill me in hopes of getting Voldemort back. I'll be okay, Hermione, I will," he said earnestly.

"But Harry," she said in a choked voice as her eyes darted around her, "he got into the castle! How could he? There is no Apparating or Disapparating in Hogwarts. This is extremely dangerous. He got to our common room door!"

Harry hugged her. Hermione was shaking and starting to cry. "Hermione," he said as he cupped her tear-blotched face. "I will be alright. Dumbledore is here. He won't let Black hurt me, okay?"

Hermione nodded and hugged him again. "I know, Harry, just let me hug you a bit more, okay?" she asked.

"Okay," he said, a little exasperation in his tone. "Geez, Hermione, you're like Ron's mum or something!" he joked.

Hermione laughed as she let him go. "You're like the brother I never had, Harry. I like taking care of you," she whispered.

Harry gave her a side hug. "I love you, Hermione," he said.

She burst into tears. "I love you too, Harry," she replied as she sobbed.

All of Hogwarts had to go sleep in the Great Hall for the night. Dumbledore and McGonagall had conjured up hundreds of sleeping bags for everyone. In the rush by everyone to get safely into the Great Hall, Hermione was suddenly yanked back into an alcove behind a tapestry.

"How touching, Hermione. Feeling a bit emotional about Potter, are we?" asked a furious-looking Severus Snape.

Hermione was in extreme hormonal overdrive. She found herself leaning into him. *He's so tall. It's been so long.*

"Hermione!" His voice cracked like a whip. "Don't do that again," he warned as he kept her at a safe distance from him.

"I can't help it, Severus!" she begged. "I'm going crazy or something. I need you badly," she whispered as she ran her hands up his chest towards his face.

He grabbed her hands and said, "Hermione, I need you to listen. Please. Now, focus!" he ordered.

She looked at him as he pleaded his case. "I know it has to be Lupin sneaking that filth in here. He never believed the evidence when it was staring him in the face, and I doubt he'd turn Black away if confronted by him. Lupin was never strong enough to stand up to him," he said hurriedly.

"Tell Potter to stay as far away from Lupin as possible! Can you do that for me?" he asked.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Now, go," he ordered.

She gave a muted scream of frustration as she bolted out of the alcove. Now she was in a right mess. She was randy and mad as hell!

Soon after, Severus stepped in to substitute for Remus. He was a right bastard and even called Hermione an "insufferable know-it-all" in front of everyone. After class, she stayed behind to give him a piece of her mind.

"How dare you!" she seethed after the door had closed behind the last student. "It's bad enough you have half the girls in Gryffindor saying you're so vile you need to get laid; now you deliberately tried to out Remus! How could you?"

Severus turned on her. "I have a job to do, *Miss Granger*. You seem to be the one all cozy with Potter, making sure he's happy and content. So, have you found him to be a suitable replacement?" he accused her.

"What do you want from me?" she screamed. "I'm ready to lose my damn mind. Between Harry's recklessness and Sirius Black's determination, I don't know what to do anymore. And you're no help. You won't let me get within an arm's length of you unless it's to inform me of your crazy werewolf fears!"

His eyes flew open wide, and he pointed a finger at Hermione. "That's just what Lily would have said! She never took me seriously, and neither do you. I think this De-Aging Potion has muddled your mind," he spat.

Hermione's face fell slack. She observed how far apart they were physically. She remained by her desk while he remained up where the professor's desk stood. It seemed impossible to close the chasm between them. "I can't believe this is happening between us," she whispered as she let her bag drop to the ground. "I thought everything would be fine. We'd just wait until I was sixteen, and we'd fall right back to where we were. All the dreams we had of having babies and living in Spinner's End, being happy..." her throat caught, "...it's over, isn't it?" she whispered.

"No!" he cried out in pain. He strode to her and took her into his arms and held her. "I love you, I love you, I love you," he whispered. "Never say that again, never think it again. I can't stand this. It is torture. I hate living like this." He felt her arms and cupped her face. "It's you, but you are a girl. I see you, and I want you, and then all I can think of is..." His face grew dark and ugly as he released her.

"Tell me," Hermione urged him.

"I think sometimes perhaps I could kiss you, just hold you near me, but then I keep seeing my father...I feel like a pedophile. It's just easier for you to hate me, to stay away until it's appropriate."

Hermione felt horrible for him. *Of course, he would be feeling like complete shite! He looks into the mirror each day and sees his father staring back at him, just like the day I had met his father!* Hermione recalled that day. She had been taken aback, thinking there had stood Professor Snape, just in really smelly clothes. *Now, I'm around the age I had been then, even a few months younger, and all he can think is... 'I'm becoming my father!'*

"Severus," she said as she touched his face. "I don't want you to think for one moment you are a pedophile. It's me, the woman inside, that you really want. Also, you grew up with me. You were starting to show an interest in me when we were young. I promise you, I love you, and I will take your warnings seriously. Just remember, I can't make Harry abide the rules, but I'll do my best. I also swear to you, I haven't replaced you. I'm a virgin."

Severus looked at her strangely.

"Yes," she said as she rolled her eyes. "I checked. I figured if my teeth could grow back, why not my hymen?" she said wryly.

She heard him chuckle. "I'm sorry," he said as he began to laugh. "It's just too funny," he said as he threw his head back and laughed.

Hermione laughed as well. This was just what she missed. If she could connect with him like this and keep it alive, they could make it.

They sobered then, and she placed her hands into his. "Harry and I are friends, like brother and sister. Actually, I feel quite maternal towards him, but he'd never understand if he knew the story, and I refuse to tell him about my past. *Our past*," she whispered.

"Let's just get through this year and focus on keeping Harry safe from Black," Severus offered.

"Agreed," replied Hermione.

She took her leave of him and went to see Madam Pomfrey. She really needed to get her hormones figured out.

She went into the infirmary, and Madam Pomfrey caught her. "Hermione, my dear," she said as she hugged her. "How are you? I've been telling Albus that you need to have a complete physical examination!" she chided.

"Well," Hermione said as she lowered her head nervously. "That's why I'm here. I need to talk to you about my hormones, I think."

After Hermione explained to the mediwitch what was happening, the woman chuckled. "Oh, my dear. You are actually in your thirties, and on top of it, you are a teenager physiologically. However, our bodies have memory cells. I'm afraid you are probably the most hormonal female ever known in creation." She left her to retrieve some potions.

She came back smiling and looking optimistic. "Here is a special potion for women who are experiencing fluctuations hormonally in their mid-thirties. This should get you back on track. Now, I usually don't tell tales, but since you are Severus' fiancée, he's been having a horrible time of it. Before you arrived, those six years had been hell on earth. He had been a raging alcoholic. Albus had to take him in hand, and we thought he would lose his very mind. Now that you're back, it's even more confusing! My dear girl, there is just nothing to be done but let nature run its course. When you turn sixteen, I expect you to come and see me for your Contraception Potion," she said with a warning look.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hermione replied with a blush.

"Now, let's get your teeth fixed, shall we? I recall you were looking different after I performed that teeth-shortening spell on you."

"Oh, yes, please!" Hermione begged.

When she left, Hermione had her hormone potion and the teeth she was used to having. Things were starting to look up.

Hermione was crying next to Harry's bed. The Dementors had entered onto the Quidditch pitch, disrupted the Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff game, and attacked Harry. It had been terrifying, and Albus was enraged. After the crowd had left, Madam Pomfrey had let Hermione stay and talk to Harry.

"Hermione," he whispered as thick tears started to stream down his face while she held his hand tightly. "I heard my mum screaming. She was begging and crying to make Voldemort stop. Then she screamed something so dreadful and then it was silent. I think that was the sound she made when she died."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered as she cried, hanging her head into her handkerchief. She felt awful. She had known Lily, loved her, lived with her in Gryffindor, sat at her family's table, and had even been her lover. Now her son was in pain. Hermione took a tissue and wiped Harry's face.

"It's going to be okay, Harry. Trust me," she whispered. "I'm sorry, so sorry," she said as she cried again.

She and Severus decided it would be best for her to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas. It would be better to watch over Harry that way. There was one final Hogsmeade trip before everyone left, and Ron and Hermione promised Harry another bunch of sweets to bring back to give him.

She and Ron had been in Honeydukes trying to figure out what to get Harry when, all of a sudden, he was there behind them. Hermione nearly lost it when she saw him and demanded to know how he had gotten there. Harry told them about the Marauder's Map, and Hermione had to start counting to ten to stop herself from completely going insane and starting to scream.

Instead, she just kept her curses in her head. *Damn you, James and Sirius! Ohhh, Remus, just you wait until I get my hands on you. Oh, my gosh! If Harry has the map, how did he get his hands on it? Is this another trap of Sirius?*

"Harry," she began in her bossiest voice. "You have to turn that map in to McGonagall! You promise me here and now you ~~will~~ never sneak into Hogsmeade again!"

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Ron. "What gets me is that Fred and George didn't hand it over to their own brother."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron. Sometimes he was just so thick! "Ronald, there are more important things to consider than this map," she snapped at him.

"Harry?" he asked.

"Are you going to turn me in?" he challenged her defiantly.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Of course not," she snapped.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, good. If I hand this in, I'll have to explain to McGonagall where I got it from, and I can't do that to Fred and George," replied Harry.

"Harry," Hermione said slowly. "You have no idea how Black got into Hogwarts. As far as you know, the very tunnels you are using may be the ones he's using to get inside! Do you want to meet up with him in a dark tunnel unawares?" she said hotly.

"Um, Hermione," Ron said as he coughed. "Have you even read the latest notice?"

"What?" she turned to him, confused.

Ron pointed at a notice posted on Honeydukes front door. Hermione read it carefully. *Dementors will be patrolling the streets after sundown... complete shopping before then.*

Hermione was still exasperated. "Look, Harry, you are not to be in Hogsmeade at all! And this is not sundown. Black could be here right now as far as you know," she reasoned.

"Come on, Hermione!" said Ron tiredly. "Harry deserves a break. Let's just enjoy the day," he begged.

Harry, though, was determined to get a straight answer from Hermione. "Are you going to turn me in, Hermione?" he demanded.

"No...of course not...but, Harry..."

"Come on, Harry," interrupted Ron. "Let's go to Zonko's. They've got cool stuff there. Then we'll all go for a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks and call it a day, okay?"

"Fine," Hermione acquiesced.

They made their rounds together and finally came to the Three Broomsticks. They made sure to keep Harry hidden as they nursed their butterbeers, trying to get warm. Soon, though, the door opened, and Hermione's eyes bulged from their sockets. "It's Flitwick, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Fudge!" she hissed. She muttered a spell and moved a Christmas tree over slightly to block the view, although they could still hear the conversation.

"Harry, so help me," Hermione warned him. "Keep your head under the table, and deal with it."

They sat quietly as they overheard Rosmerta talking to Fudge and the professors about the Dementor problem. Soon, the conversation turned to Sirius Black. Hermione closed her eyes and hoped they wouldn't say anything that would upset Harry.

Rosmerta was clicking her tongue. "Of all the people to go over to the dark side, I never would have thought Sirius Black," she said sadly.

"That's not the worst of it," whispered Fudge. "They were best friends all right, he and James Potter, but not only did he stand up as Potter's best man, he also was named Harry's godfather upon his birth! Can you just imagine the torture that boy would feel knowing the man his parents named to look after him in case of their deaths was the one who betrayed them and had them murdered?"

Hermione was torn. Not only were she and Ron struggling with an enraged Harry to keep low, she was also furious that she had been kept from that information and that Harry had been kept from it as well!

She listened more after she swiftly kicked Harry somewhere hard.

"...James and Lily knew he had been after them. Dumbledore had his own spies of course, who insisted that they go into hiding. Dumbledore was wary of using Black, he even offered to be the Potters' Secret Keeper himself, but they refused. Then again, You-Know-Who had his own spies, and he was tipped off."

Rosmerta gasped. "Dumbledore suspected Black?"

Fudge sighed. "All I know was that he was sure that someone close to the Potters had been telling You-Know-Who about the Potters' movements for a nearly a year. Barely a week had passed after the Fidelius Charm had been cast that they were finally murdered."

Hermione and Ron sat frozen in silence and fear as they continued to listen to the professors talk about Sirius Black and Harry's parents. Hermione felt a huge void had been filled. She had known Sirius was no good the day she had met him. She recalled vividly when she told Lily that she would rue the day she ever met Sirius Black. She was furious. Why had Harry never been told? She could have done something, anything to point the way for Dumbledore. But whom was she kidding? That had been the destiny for James and Lily all along. They had to die so that Harry could defeat Voldemort. Still, she was seething. They all would answer to her about this omission.

After they had all left, Hermione, Ron, and Harry sat in silence for a great while before finally heading back to the castle. Hermione knew Harry had to be bursting with questions and would demand answers. She only hoped they would be wise enough to be honest with him about the truth.

She left Harry and Ron alone and went to see McGonagall. She knocked loudly on the door, and she answered with a concerned look on her face. "Hermione?" she asked. "What is wrong?"

"Oh, a great many things, Minerva. I want to see you, Remus, and Severus in Albus' office right now," she said sharply.

"What has happened?" the older witch asked darkly.

"Not here," she replied quietly. Then she went off to wait by Dumbledore's gargoyle. Momentarily, Minerva met her, and they went up. Albus welcomed them courteously, and Minerva flooded Severus and Remus, asking for their presence in the headmaster's office.

When they were all assembled, Hermione began. "Firstly, I want to say that despite your warnings and watchful eyes, Harry has managed to slip into Hogsmeade where he surprised me and Ron at Honeydukes. We had a mild argument of which I will repeat to Remus and Severus at another time.

"Imagine my surprise when we were sitting in the Three Broomsticks and overheard a conversation about James, Lily, and Sirius. It was revealed that not only had Sirius Black been named Harry's godfather, but he had also been their Secret Keeper."

They all looked at her with varied degrees of remorse and embarrassment. "How could you keep that from me? I was here! I was here all this time...I could have done something! All I had to go on was that Sirius Black was a murderer...period! I had no idea he was the Secret Keeper! And I certainly didn't know that he had been named Harry's godfather."

"Look," she said as she went to the door. "I have a lot of things to smooth over with Harry. He's distraught and confused. And I'm beginning to think there might be more to this story than meets the eye. Why would a man who was You-Know-Who's right-hand man want Harry Potter killed? Wouldn't he want to subdue him and keep him to deliver to wherever You-Know-Who is hiding out now?"

"Or perhaps we have been wrong this whole time, and Sirius Black is innocent like Remus has always contended."

Minerva tried to speak. "Hermione, I know this was not an ideal way to pass information to you..."

Hermione laughed. "Ideal? Let me make something clear. I will inform you of what Harry's doing, and I will be clear about everything I know. From now on I expect the same consideration. I may look fourteen, but I am not in my mind. Do not treat me like a child again!"

She stormed out and went back to face Harry.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 74

Ron and Hermione are at odds over their familiars, and a break-in by Sirius Black has Hermione more terrified than Harry.

A/N: Again, my thanks to JKR for her wonderful book, *Prisoner of Azkaban*. This chapter takes some scenes from her book that have been woven into my own words. Thanks as always to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin for all their tireless work.

Dinner was a nerve-racking experience. Harry was on edge and was understandably upset. Hermione let him and Ron be, knowing Harry would need to process the information alone or maybe with his best friend. She knew he hated for her to see him cry.

She made her way early Christmas Eve morning to see Severus. He answered in his nightshirt and was still half-asleep. He slowly put on his robe and ran his hands through his hair. Hermione thought he had never looked more shaggy. She smiled at his attempts to make himself presentable.

He made coffee and finally spoke once he had his first sip. "I have decided to stop all of this foolishness between us. Being in what used to be our home is not too upsetting. It's what I wait for again. However, we have work to do. I assume you have come to spill your wrath concerning Black and Potter, and before you speak, I do hope that you have a more horrendous wake-up call for the werewolf."

"I'm really angry with Remus. I've thought about sending him a Howler that only he can hear. I have yet to devise my sadistic plot," she said with a mad smile on her face.

Severus smirked. "Good. Please make sure I hear all about it." He took another sip and set the cup down. "Fine, what is this news?"

"I found out how Harry is sneaking into Hogsmeade. He has a map. It's called the Marauders Map. Ring any bells?"

Snape's eyes glittered. "How?"

"Seems that Fred and George nicked it from Filch's office during their first year. They decided to hand off the tradition of trouble-making to a new generation."

"Those little shits!" he swore.

"Who?" asked Hermione with a snicker. "Fred and George or James and Sirius? And let's not forget Lupin in all this. I'm going to ring his neck," she said darkly.

"Not before I do," Severus said evilly. He straightened up and said, "Fine, I will make it priority one to make sure he has no reason to use that map. I expect you to thwart him at every turn. Black wrote a part of that map, and it means he knows how to get in. Lupin, the damn fool. Sentimental bleeding heart!" he snarled.

"I have to get back now. Harry will need someone to talk to about his parents," she said as she made her way to the door.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," purred Severus as he made his way to her. She felt the boiling in her blood, but the damnable man only gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Cunt-tease," she snapped as she left him.

Hermione got back to the common room in plenty of time to meet Ron and Harry. Harry looked awful. It was nearly lunchtime, and he looked as if he hadn't slept in days. It was a perfect winter day. The fire was cheery as the snow was falling gently outside the window. Hermione watched as Crookshanks lay out like an orange shag carpet in front of the fire.

Hermione didn't want to, but she knew Harry. She knew how he plotted.

"Harry," she said nervously as she fiddled with one of her books. "I know you must really be upset and confused about yesterday, but promise you won't do anything rash," she asked quietly.

"Like what?" Harry snapped.

"Like not going after Black?" Ron said equally as nasty.

They began to argue; Harry was incredibly angry. He said that the most terrible thing about the Dementors was how they made him feel. He told them about the horrible nightmares, his mum screaming, his dad trying to save them.

"Please, Harry," Hermione begged as the tears ran down her face. "There is nothing you can do. Leave it to the Dementors. They'll take care of him once and for all!"

"You heard what Fudge said!" Harry yelled. "Azkaban doesn't affect him like other people. He's beyond that."

Ron turned white. "So, now what? You're going to kill him?"

"Stop it!" Hermione snapped in a panicked voice. "Of course Harry won't be so foolhardy. Harry, please be sensible," she whispered as she walked towards him. "Black did a horrible thing, but don't play into his hands and go after him. Don't become him. Your parents sacrificed so much for you. Please, just let it go, and let the Ministry deal with Black."

Harry was silent for a while as Hermione kept her hands on the front of his robe. Finally, he said in a far-off voice, "I'll never really know what my mum and dad would have wanted. Because of Black, they're dead."

Ron tried to change the subject to seeing Hagrid. Hermione reminded them Harry wasn't to leave the castle unchaperoned. Harry got a mad glint in his eye. "No, I want to see him. I want to know why he never told me about my *godfather*! I want to know exactly when he had planned telling me about my mum and dad!"

Ron and Hermione pleaded with him not to go, but he was determined. Their trip was unsuccessful, as they found a depressed Hagrid who had found out that Buckbeak was to be tried for attacking Draco Malfoy. They promised to help him gather evidence for the case and went soberly back to the castle.

Hermione was relieved. She had been a wreck the whole time, wondering just when Harry would start hollering about Sirius. She had been terrified that if cornered, he would tell them about her past. She was grateful for a calm day, and in the morning there were presents.

"What's that?" Ron exclaimed eagerly.

Harry unwrapped his parcel, and out came a brand new Firebolt.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "Who sent it to you?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "No card or nothing."

Hermione felt a fluttering of nervousness and fear deep inside her stomach. "Harry, you can't ride it. You don't know who sent it. It could be dangerous!"

Ron and Harry scoffed at her. While Hermione mulled over the situation, Crookshanks sprang from nowhere right onto Ron's chest. Scabbers had been resting on Ron's shoulder and made a mad dash for it. The chase was on, and Ron was roaring at the top of his voice. The squabbling continued until Hermione locked Crookshanks in her dormitory. Even then, the tension was thick between the three friends. Between the Firebolt and the dueling familiars, Hermione wondered if the three of them would ever be able to salvage their friendships. Ron was already furious at her, and she knew Harry would be murderously angry, for she had decided she needed to inform Minerva about the Firebolt.

Christmas Dinner was quiet and subdued until Professor Trelawney came down from the mount and decided to eat with the peasants. Minerva gave just enough jabs to keep things interesting, and when it was over, Hermione stayed behind to speak with her. She tried to get some look or response from Severus, but he was deep in his evil bastard persona. So she carried on and told Minerva about the Firebolt.

Just as Hermione knew, Harry and Ron were seething at what they considered treachery. She tried to explain her reasoning that it might have been sent by Sirius Black, but they wouldn't hear a word of it. Hermione spent the rest of her holidays alone and miserable. No friends, no Severus. She even started to wonder if he even missed her.

She thought a lot about that last Christmas, how he had made love to her, told her he wanted ten babies, and that he just wanted to be with her forever. She remembered making love in that old, rickety bed that had been hers a lifetime ago and felt the yearnings and longings for him. She wanted him inside her again; she wanted to feel his kisses and his lips against her breasts. She sighed as she stared out of the library window. She couldn't remember a time when she had ever felt so alone while surrounded by so many people who claimed to love her.

She knew going to Severus would just result in another bout of unresolved sexual tension on her part, so she decided to go see Hagrid. After all, Hagrid knew her, knew her secrets, and knew she was Severus' fiancée. The moment he opened the door to her, she burst into tears.

"Hermione!" he chided sweetly. "Wha's got yer inter a state like this?" he asked.

"Oh, Hagrid. I'm so lonely. Ron and Harry hate me because I told Minerva about the Firebolt. Normally, I wouldn't care. They're just kids who want to have fun; it's just they're all I've really got. Severus can't bear to be around me. It's just too weird." She sniffed and blew her nose. "I am so alone and sad. I miss Severus; I miss the ways things were! And I hate Harry and Ron not talking to me. They think all I want to do is ruin their fun. They just don't know what we know about Sirius," she said angrily.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. They're jus' boys an' all. They don' kno' wha' they're doin' half the time! Don' upset yerself. I'll be havin' a chat wi' 'em meself," he said firmly.

"Oh, please, Hagrid. Don't make them angrier than they are already," she said nervously.

"Don' worry 'bout it!" he said sharply. "They got no business treatin' yer this way. Friends don' treat friends like tha!"

He started to blush a bit and said, "I don' kno' much 'bout love an' all, but I kno' Snape loves yer very much. Jus' hang in there, Hermione. You'll be together again before yer kno' it."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Hermione said as she dried her eyes. She gave the half-giant a hug and asked him more about Buckbeak. They cried together a bit, and then she helped him with some chores. She felt better after some physical labor. She went to bed showered, clean and exhausted. She slept very well.

The next term started, and still Harry and Ron were not speaking to her. Harry still had not received his Firebolt back from McGonagall, so she expected her banishment to last as long as the broom stayed out of Harry's reach.

She threw herself into her work, which was becoming more cumbersome by the day. Every night she was working behind a stack of books, pouring her heart into her research and essays. As long as she studied, she didn't have to think about all the pain in her heart, her longing for Severus and the feeling of betrayal by her friends. Besides, she had to admit that she had forgotten a few things along the way. Although she wasn't garnering any grades, she still wanted to put her best foot forward and do her best. Hermione was not a woman to do anything by half-measures.

Nighttime was terrible. She was experiencing erotic dreams again about Severus and the first time they made love at Spinner's End. Then she dreamt about the time he took her from behind and confessed he had masturbated to the sight of her upside down in her pink knickers when he had cast the Levicorpus spell he'd created. She woke up in the night often and had to go to the lavatory and relieve herself. It was mortifying. She had a vivid memory of what it felt like to be fucked good and hard by her fiancé. But she couldn't get what she needed. She knew she could release some of the tension by getting her fingers inside and working her g-spot, but she was a virgin and didn't want to ruin it. She knew it might be silly to others, but she remembered their first time. They'd both been virgins and were practically fumbling and shaking with need for release. Sure they had found it, but the penetration she had felt had been painful. Severus was older, wiser, patient, and knew his way around her. She wanted him to take her as a virgin and see how good it could be. If she did what her body ached for, her hymen would be torn and the dream over. So she continued to suffer every night and wonder if Severus suffered as well.

February arrived, and with it came the news everyone in Gryffindor had been waiting for: the Firebolt was back! Hermione sat, as usual, behind her stacks of parchments and books, as everyone crowded Harry and Ron, wanting a peak. Hermione knew what was coming next...the make nice speech...and was unimpressed.

"See!" Harry said proudly as he showed her the Firebolt. "I told you nothing was wrong with it!"

"Contrary to what you might think, Harry, I am happy there was nothing wrong with the broom. It's nice to know it was safe after all," she said curtly as she continued writing her essay for Transfiguration.

"Can I sit down?" he asked nervously.

"Sure," she said as she moved a pile of parchment off of the spare chair.

"How are you doing all this stuff?" he asked as he looked through some of her charts and parchments.

"Well...hard work and all," she said offhandedly.

"You look tired, Hermione. Why don't you drop a couple of subjects?" he asked.

"I couldn't! I love Arithmancy; it's so interesting..."

Hermione was interrupted by a dreadful, strangled yell. She and Harry jumped up and saw Ron running towards them with a bed sheet.

"LOOK!" he bellowed as he shook the sheet in Hermione's face.

"Ron!" said Harry.

"SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!"

Hermione looked at Harry as if she thought Ron had done round the twist. Harry looked intently into the sheet.

"Is that blood?" he asked, disgusted.

"YES! BLOOD! HE'S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?"

"N...no," Hermione replied as her voice trembled.

Ron threw on top of Hermione's Runes homework a patch of spiky shapes that had several long, ginger cat hairs attached.

Things had definitely taken a turn for the worse. Hermione doubted she and Ron would ever be reconciled. Ron had been angry for so long that she didn't take more responsibility for her cat, and now Scabbers was dead. Hermione didn't have the heart to confess that Crookshanks never really took to her after her return. He must have sensed something was off, and that was why he was continuously prowling. She didn't know what to do to make Ron feel better. It seemed to her he took a lot of pleasure

in making her feel like crap.

Ron's brothers and sister tried to cheer him up by telling him that Scabbers wasn't really dead, but he just insisted playing the martyr. Harry felt that Scabbers was gone and tried to point that out to Hermione. When he did that, she blew her stack.

She slammed her book closed and stood up screaming blindly. "Fine! Just take his side. Everything is my fault! The Firebolt, trying to save your hide in Hogsmeade and now Scabbers, I just can't seem to do anything right by any of you!"

Hermione had had enough. She didn't care anymore. She went down to the dungeons and banged on the door. Severus was tense and nervous, but let her in.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"I can't take it anymore!" she cried. "I want you to give me an Ageing Potion. I can't do this anymore. I don't fit anywhere, and I miss you. I dream about you holding me and loving me, telling me everything is going to be alright, then I wake up and everything is complete shite!"

She sat down hard at one of the Potions classroom chairs and rubbed her forehead.

Severus sighed and sat opposite of her. "What's going on, Hermione? Why aren't you talking with Minerva or your girlfriends?"

She stared at him like he was a complete idiot. "I am not fourteen, you prat! I want to talk with my fiancée, the man until a few months ago was in the world I was living in and sharing my life with. I could tell you anything. Now, I come to you and you just can't be arsed?"

"I don't do well with crying women," he said flatly.

"Since when?" she snapped.

He drew in a sharp breath as he stood up. "Hermione, after you left, I had to become accustomed to being alone. I distanced myself from women, just in case I became tempted, and even then as Head of Slytherin, there was always a young girl who would develop feelings for me, and I would have to listen to the crying after I would reject her. It became something that made me nervous and uncomfortable. Now, I can't seem to recall how I ever managed to keep your love and not drive you from me," he admitted.

Hermione smiled and said, "You were never that great with talking about feelings. You were more of the 'let me show you in my actions' rather than with words. That's how you explained the reason you wanted to kiss me the first time. You didn't use words. You used a song."

"I'm sorry you are feeling so much pain. I wish I could remove it, but I can't. Please go to Minerva. I just can't," he whispered.

Hermione left and wandered a bit, then decided to go watch the Quidditch game. Gryffindor won, and she hurriedly made her way back to get as much work done before the partying started. She was neck deep in her homework for Muggle Studies when Harry came over and said, "Did you come to the game, Hermione?"

"Yes, I did," she replied distantly, not looking up from her writing. "I'm glad we won, too. I think you did well, but I have to read all this by Monday."

Harry slipped an arm around her shoulder. "Come on, Hermione. Have a bit of food."

"I really can't, Harry. I still have over four hundred pages to read. Besides," she said as she nodded her head towards Ron, "he doesn't want me to join in."

Then Ron spoke up over the crowd and said, "If Scabbers hadn't been EATEN, then he could've had some Fudge Flies. He really liked them."

Hermione burst into tears, hurriedly gathered her work and went to her room. Harry feebly tried to stop her, but it was no use. She hated this life. She desperately missed Severus, and he didn't give a shit that she was suffering...just like Ron. All he could care about was his fucking rat!

She didn't know what to do anymore. She was just so angry all the time.

She still hadn't confronted Remus about the Map. Truthfully, she had started becoming afraid of him. He wasn't the boy and young man she'd known. She was smaller and felt vulnerable around him. At times in class, she wondered if he would hurt her if she confronted him. It was eerie being in class with him, and the way he looked at her was very scary. She remembered how much he had cared for her back when she had last been this age, but it seemed more than that. She felt he was feeling her out; she had her Occlumency walls raised whenever she came into contact with him. She was starting to really think he was helping Sirius into the castle. The thought petrified her. If Sirius knew about her, and Remus was sure to tell him, he might try and kill her as well. She was cracking up under the pressure. Something had to give.

And it did in the middle of the night.

Hermione heard a blood-curdling scream that seemed to come from Harry and Ron's Dormitory. Everyone was racing into the common room, and Professor McGonagall was there, furious and demanding answers.

"I tell you, I swear, it was him...Sirius Black!"

Hermione's throat felt constricted.

"It was just a nightmare," Percy kept on insisting.

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE! I WOKE UP AND HE WAS STANDING OVER ME WITH A KNIFE!" he screamed. "Just look at my curtains! Ripped to bits, they are!" he continued to yell as the others tried to calm him down.

Professor McGonagall tried to calm everyone down. "Now, really, Weasley, how could Sirius Black have ever gotten into here without the password?" she reasoned.

Ron was undeterred. "Ask Sir Cadogan's picture. Go on, ask him!" he dared her.

Sure enough, Hermione heard that Neville's lost parchment of the week's passwords had been taken and used by a man Sir Cadogan had let into Gryffindor Tower.

No one slept for the rest of the night. The entire house was in a state of panic. The only bright ray of sunshine was the upcoming Quidditch final. It was the only topic that would draw Ron out of his anger over the break into Gryffindor tower. One afternoon, Ron was over the bulletin board in the common room while Harry relaxed and Hermione studied.

"Harry! Hogsmeade weekend...next week! What d'ya say?" asked Ron.

Harry slowly rose from his plush chair and ambled over to Ron. "Yeah," he said. "Perhaps everyone will relax and forget about Sirius Black for a while."

Hermione had enough. Not only was she terrified of being murdered herself by Sirius; she was terrified for Harry and for Severus.

"Harry," she said as she approached him. "If you go to Hogsmeade again, I will tell McGonagall about that map!" she swore.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry, 'cause I can't," said Ron in a bored voice.

Hermione couldn't have cared less. She'd dealt with worse pricks than Ronald Weasley.

"How can you call yourself his friend when you know there is someone out there trying to kill him?" Hermione seethed.

"Oh, so now you want Harry to hate me? Thanks a lot, Hermione!" Ron said sarcastically.

"Just like you're wanting him to hate me?" she retorted.

Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Crookshanks decided to jump into her arms at that moment. Ron's face turned into disgust, and she just gave up, took her cat, and went to her room.

Later, she went to see Snape as required and told him about Harry's decision to go to Hogsmeade.

"He's going ahead regardless of what I say. Threatening him with telling Minerva isn't working, so there you have it," she stated dully.

"Hermione, are you all right?" he asked in a worried tone. "You haven't even said 'hello.'"

She looked up at him and narrowed her eyes. "You can't have it both ways, Severus. You can't express interest in my feelings only when it is convenient for you," she said angrily.

"For your information, I haven't been well. My hormones have been fluctuating like crazy. This damn De-Aging Potion has my body working overtime with teenage hormones, and according to Poppy, my body, which has memory cells, has decided I'm thirty-four. I'm hitting my sexual peak. So I'm extremely sexually frustrated and can't get relief because...let's face it...you and I know a helping hand only does so much! Then there is the fact that I am re-living the same hell I had endured when I had been a teenager once before: I have no friends. My house has rejected me. I am alone with no support from my peers. I don't seem to fit in either world. So, to answer your fucking question, Severus, no, I am not fucking all right!" she screamed.

She went to leave, and Severus pushed his hands against the door. "Hermione, what do you want? You want me to make love to you, in your fourteen-year-old body?"

"I just want to stop feeling so damn lonely!" she said as she angrily wiped the falling tears from her eyes.

"Come here," he said. He took her hand, and she followed him into his rooms. She looked around and burst into tears. "It looks the same!" Hermione walked around touching everything, finally sinking to the middle of the floor, curling into a ball, and sobbing.

Severus watched her cry until she was quiet. He picked her up and laid her in his bed with her resting between his legs. She burrowed into his chest, he snapped his fingers, and the blanket covered them. He turned off the lights, and they slept holding one another.

In the morning, Hermione felt warmth from behind her. She looked around and saw Severus staring at her.

"You fixed your teeth," he said with a smile.

"Yes." She blushed. "I had to feel like myself," she answered.

"Thanks for letting me spend the night. I really needed that, Severus," she said sadly.

"I am so sorry life is so bad for you right now."

"It's not just being rejected, it's Remus and Sirius. I'm afraid Remus might actually be helping him, and he'll tell Sirius that I'm here and he'll kill Harry, me, and you! I'm just so scared all the time."

"I will protect you, Hermione," he said as he stroked her hair.

They were so close. "Please kiss me, Severus," she breathed. "It's been so long.

He placed a finger on her lips. "September 19th, 1995. I will come for you, bring you back here, and you will never leave me."

The magic that had captured them so long ago on those two separate occasions swirled around them again.

"I will be ready to be yours in on September 19th, 1995, and I shall never leave your side," she vowed, and the magic flowed again.

"What does it mean?" she whispered as they looked again at the familiar magic that encircled them.

"I think that you and I may have to be married on that day, Hermione. You have sworn yourself to never leave my side. How do you feel about being a sixteen-year-old bride?"

"Please!" she sneered. "I'm thirty-four. Believe me, I'll be ready!"

She went back to her room and made out a calendar. It was March 5th of 1994. September 19th, 1995. She had to wait only one year, six months, and two weeks. She would have to learn to deal with it. Perhaps the summer would bring some excitement. Perhaps a trip somewhere to get her mind off missing Severus too much with her parents would be just the thing.

Later that day, after Severus had filled her in with Harry's latest antics with his Invisibility Cloak, she received a note from Hagrid. She waited and approached Harry and Ron with it. Ron had a cutting remark as usual, and she told them plainly that Buckbeak was going to be executed.

A/N: WriterMerrin thought it a good idea that an explanation of Hermione being a child on the outside and a woman on the inside would be nice for you all. So here is the conversation that went between us.

WriterMerrin: *Was it Poppy or herself who had that theory (of memory cells)? It sounds like just wishful thinking to me. So why didn't these 'memory cells' counteract the aging potion to begin with? Hermione is actually right here. Snape is being such an idiot by saying he doesn't know what he can do. What he can do is give her the potion to counteract the one she took before and release her from this insanity. She has already asked him for it, and he never gave her the courtesy of a response.*

Livvy: *It was Poppy's assessment. But you can't "counter-act" memory cells because that is what they do, they remember, regardless of what happens to your body. I don't know how it works. I only know we have them, and they can't be altered. So taking a De-aging Potion would not make these memory cells forget the years her body had spent as an adult. Snape can't give her an aging potion. She's supposed to be fourteen, and look fourteen. She'll have to just let the potions Poppy gave her work in her*

system to alleviate the hormonal fluctuations.

One added thought: when Hermione asked Severus for a potion, it was the Ageing Potion that she wanted. She wanted her old body back, the one she was used to, meaning the Hermione she was before she de-aged and returned to 1993. She feels frustrated and wants to stop the pretense that she is a teenager when she's already done this before.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 74

It all comes down to the Shrieking Shack. What will happen now?

A/N: It's a long one, but I hope you will be pleased with it. As always, my thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin. You two are the best! For clarification: the words of JKR are combined with my own for the next few chapters. Some are direct quotes, others partial, and places where scenes that have been taken, I have used my own dialogue instead of JKR's. Many thanks to Rowling for her creative mind. I don't own it. I just like to tinker with it :)

Hermione, Harry, and Ron began talking again, the three of them, just like old times. Ron offered to help Hermione to appeal the execution. She flung her arms around him and sobbed about how sorry she was about Scabbers. Ron took it off the cuff, saying that Scabbers was old and he might try to get an owl from his parents.

In the meantime, they all tried to keep Hagrid's spirits up. As he walked them back to the castle after class one day, he began to cry. Malfoy was nearby with his cronies, making fun at Hagrid's expense. Hermione strode right up to the berk and cracked him good and proper across the face. She had had enough of his shite!

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul...you evil..."

Ron tried to get her to back off of Malfoy. She had Draco at wandpoint right at the neck. She wasn't afraid of him. She had been trained by the best: Alastor Moody. She could wipe the floor with him and his sniveling friends if she chose.

"Get off, Ron!" she yelled as she advanced menacingly towards Draco.

Malfoy and his lot scurried out of there quickly. Ron was impressed. The three of them had Charms class and were running late. Hermione went to the common room to gather her things. She was so tired from all the exertion and the hard work, she passed out right on top of her Arithmancy homework. It wasn't until much later she was being jostled awake by a concerned Ron and Harry.

"Where have you been?" asked Ron. "We thought Malfoy had got to you!"

Hermione wasn't fully awake. "After Regulus and Travers, no way," she mumbled.

"What?" asked Harry.

They shook her until she was coherent and explained she had missed Charms. She started to panic, and Harry asked, "Who are Regulus and Travers?"

Hermione panicked. Had she talked in her sleep? "I-I don't know, strange dream," she said trying to pass it off as nothing.

They raced to make it to Divination on time. Today they were working on crystal balls. Hermione was getting restless. Each class was becoming just a little more insane than the last. Trelawney went around looking into everyone's ball when she turned rather dramatic.

"My dear..." she breathed to Harry. "It's plainer than before... my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer... the Gr..."

"Oh, for *goodness' sake!*" said Hermione loudly. "Not that ridiculous Grim *again!*"

Professor Trelawney stood up and looked at Hermione with the utmost contempt. "I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, ~~my~~ dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane."

"Fine!" yelled Hermione as she jumped up, crammed her books in her bag, throwing it over her shoulder, and said, "I give up! I'm leaving!"

She strode to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder. She had already been in a tetchy mood after hearing the things Severus had said to Harry when he had caught him coming back from Hogsmeade. She'd had a fantastic row with him over it...the worst fight they'd ever had.

She strode right into the Potions classroom without permission, and that set him on edge. Although, Hermione couldn't have cared less, the classroom was empty. She was hopping mad, and he was going to pay for it.

"How dare you speak to Harry like that!" she hissed at him.

"What are you babbling about?" he said dismissively.

"Don't you dare ignore me! I am mad as hell, and it's all your fault."

"My fault?" he said mockingly. "Pray continue."

She wasn't going to take the bait. "I had given you that information on the Marauder's Map only to protect Harry, not to give you an opening to verbally abuse him. You just had to get your digs in about James, didn't you? How childish! The man's been dead and buried these twelve years and still you can't seem to let it go. So what if he had humiliated you in school? So what if at times he'd been a right, proper git! You can't say James Potter didn't have the corner on being the school's biggest git, Severus! You did some pretty nasty things yourself," she hollered at him

Severus was standing over her with his arms crossed. "Have you quite finished?" he whispered angrily.

"I have!" she replied just as angry.

"Harry Potter seems to have taken up his father's mantle of recklessness, thus placing himself and you in a precarious situation. I won't stand for his lackadaisical attitude towards security on this campus. I will deal with him any way I see fit, and I would appreciate it if you kept out of it."

Hermione began to fume. "You are the most stubborn, bull-headed, bloody-minded wizard I have ever met!" she snarled. "I can appreciate your concern over the current situation, but that is what I expect from you. Take Harry to task all you want for his 'recklessness'. But do not ever...EVER...besmirch his father again to him. It is low and beneath you, Severus."

She then stormed out without waiting for a reply.

Now, she hadn't spoken to Severus in days. After her infamous departure from Divination, she buried herself in her work once more; however, she felt worse every day, feeling weepy and exhausted. She went back to Poppy, and the mediwitch told her she needed a rest.

"You really are taking far too much upon yourself," she said in all honesty.

Hermione sighed, "I know, Poppy. I've bitten off more than I can chew; however, I have to see it through to the end. Next year, I won't put so much on myself. I did drop Divination. I can't stand Trelawney. She thinks I have a dried up soul."

Hermione and Poppy laughed.

Just before Easter holidays, Professor Lupin called Hermione to stay behind after class.

Reluctantly, she made her way to his desk, fingering her wand inside her pocket.

Remus smiled at her and said, "Hermione, I know we haven't spoken a lot this year. I have to apologize for my reluctance. It's been rather difficult seeing the young girl I had once known standing in front of me. It brings back too many embarrassing memories."

Hermione smiled a little and said, "I have noticed your looking at me during class. It's been disconcerting."

Remus sighed wearily. "I am sorry, Hermione. You never really get over your first love."

Hermione lowered her head and wished with all her might she were anywhere else.

"I do have a true purpose keeping you back, not just to talk about the old days," he replied. "I wanted you to know that I now have the Marauder's Map. I have received it from Severus, who found it on Harry."

"That's good," she said nervously.

Remus looked at her intently. "Hermione, you were my best friend for so long. I swear, I would never do anything to betray you."

Hermione looked up at him and was warmed by his dark brown eyes. "Thank you, Remus," she whispered.

Easter holidays came and went. The studying continued to help her get through the endless, lonely days. Then finally, it was nearly June, and the Quidditch final was just around the corner. Hermione was elated to look forward to something other than her endless workload. Gryffindor won, and everyone took a break to celebrate. Even the scare of Sirius Black breaking into Gryffindor Tower could not destroy the happy mood.

Unfortunately, it was short-lived. June meant exams, and everyone was under pressure. Then the worst news came. Buckbeak's appeal had been set for the sixth, which happened to coincide with the final day of exams.

"For an appeal, this seems a bit dodgy!" snapped Hermione. "Looks as though they've already decided Buckbeak's guilty, bringing an executioner to the appeal."

They wanted to be there for Hagrid, but Harry's Invisibility Cloak was still hidden in the one-eyed witch's statue. They went on and finished their exams. The final day, Harry came running into the common room, bursting with news about Trelawney. He stopped when he saw the looks on Hermione and Ron's faces.

"It's over, mate," Ron said. Hagrid sent us this." He handed the note to Harry, who read in a rush and crumbled it up in his hands.

"We've got to do something!" Harry insisted.

"It's sunset, Harry...we can't," he said. We'd never get past everyone."

Harry sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "If only I had my cloak," he whispered sadly.

"Where is it again, Harry?" Hermione asked abruptly.

Ron and Harry looked at her like she had just sprouted another head. "If Snape sees me there, I'll get expelled for sure," he said seriously.

"True," Hermione replied. "But if I were to get it... How do you open the witch's hump again?"

Harry told her, and before he could finish, she was gone. Hermione was determined. Although she didn't like breaking rules, when it came to saving a life or helping someone in desperate need, she'd do it. She'd done it before, even for Severus. She looked around as she tapped her wand on the witch's hump and muttered the incantation. She pulled out the cloak and thought of the night James was waiting for her as she tried to sneak out to be with Severus after Lily had ended their friendship. She remembered how much he had reminded her of Harry. She felt the familiar pang of loss and regret and then pushed it into the back of her mind. She'd have time later to think about the past. Now she had a responsibility to help those who needed to be helped in the here and now.

She returned with the cloak and Ron looked at her in shock. "I just don't what's gotten into you, Hermione. First, you hit Malfoy, walk out on Trelawney's class and now this!"

After dinner they went to Hagrid's. He told them nothing could be done, and they should get back to the castle. Hermione started making tea once Hagrid started crying.

She picked up the milk bottle and screamed.

"Ron! It's Scabbers!" she squealed.

"What?" he said in disbelief.

She brought the milk jug over to the table and dumped him out of it. Ron was beside himself with joy. "Scabbers! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed. Scabbers was frantic, trying to wriggle out of Ron's grasp. "It's okay, Scabbers," he said, trying to calm him.

"Yer best get outta here," said Hagrid seriously. "They're comin'..."

They scrambled around, and Hagrid led them out the back way. Once they were a good distance away, they each all started talking at once.

Then they heard the thud of the axe. "Oh, my God!" Hermione breathed. "They did it."

The three of them were silent until Ron began struggling with Scabbers. The rat was trying every which way to get loose.

"OUCH!" Ron bellowed. "He bit me!"

Ron squinted in the coming darkness. A pair of yellow eyes gleamed at him. Hermione turned to look where he was staring.

"Oh, no!" she moaned.

"Crookshanks, NO!" she yelled.

Scabbers was gone, and Crookshanks sprang after him. They ran after the rat and the cat. Ron got Scabbers into his pocket and caught Crookshanks by the scruff of the neck.

"Come on!" Hermione pleaded as she tried to get the Invisibility Cloak over them. "We've got to get back."

Just then they all heard the pounding of paws on the ground. It was a great, black dog. They screamed as it bounded towards them and then sank its huge teeth into Ron's arm, dragging him away towards the Whomping Willow.

Harry grabbed only a handful of fur before the dog yanked Ron effortlessly down a hole at the base of the tree. Suddenly, Harry and Hermione were knocked off their feet with brute force.

"It's the tree!" Hermione yelled.

Harry whipped out his wand and shouted, "*Lumos*!"

The wandlight showed the trunk of the thick tree. Hermione and Harry were on the ground by the hole where all they could see was Ron's foot that was caught on a root. They heard a terrible crack and knew his leg had been broken. He disappeared from view. Harry tried to scramble upright, but Hermione pushed him down.

"Don't get up!" she rasped. "You'll only get thrashed again! Where is that knot?" she shouted. She was frantically searching for it when, all of a sudden, Crookshanks came waltzing up to her and pushed the knot that stopped the Willow from killing them all. Her eyes locked with those of her familiar, the familiar whose trust she had never been able to gain. He trusted her now.

Hermione grabbed Harry, and they dove into the hole. They followed Crookshanks, who was like a sentinel, and were amazed with the sights around them as they continued deeper into the interior.

Finally, they reached what looked like a wall that had been smashed open in a house. Tatty furniture, dusty chandeliers and a rickety staircase were in front of them.

"It's the Shrieking Shack," Hermione said. *So this had been the place Sirius Black had lured Severus to in an attempt to have him killed by Remus?* she thought. They heard muffled sounds from up the stairs, and they crept up towards the noise, walking carefully on each dusty stair, watching out for the ones that were broken in between.

When they reached the room, Hermione flung it open as Crookshanks sauntered in and curled up on the dusty bed on the opposite side of the room. Ron was on the other side, white and looking terrified as he held a struggling Scabbers in his shaking hands.

"Ron?" Hermione said. "What is it?"

"It's a trap!" he shouted. "It's not a dog. He's an Animagus!"

Harry and Hermione turned around, and for the first time since 1978, Hermione was face to face with Sirius Black. He was beyond filthy. It was incredible that the once handsome, strong, muscular youth was now this emaciated creature before her. His eyes were hollow and sunken in. If it hadn't been for the fact she had practically grown-up with him, she'd have never recognized him.

He didn't seem to register whom she was, and for that, Hermione was grateful. Now she had to figure out how they were going to get out of this alive. She wasn't quick enough. Sirius had already disarmed Ron and cried out, "*Expelliarmus*!" Harry's and Hermione's wands flew out of their hands and into Sirius' outstretched palm.

"I knew you'd come to help your friend, Harry. Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful... it'll make things... easier," Sirius said in a raspy voice.

Hermione tried to keep her face out of Sirius' line of sight. He was fixated on Harry, but Hermione knew Harry's temper. He would have taken the mentioning of his father as a dig, and she knew he would not stand for it.

"No, Harry!" Hermione's voice rang out.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" Ron shouted at the crazed man.

"There'll be only one murder here tonight," he said harshly. "Now rest your leg."

Harry refused to let it be. "Why just one murder? You killed my parents, your other friend, Peter, and all those Muggles! What, gone soft in Azkaban?" he yelled.

Before Hermione could intervene, the two wizards were grappling on the floor, Harry was choking Black, and they were struggling like mad for dominance. Finally, Hermione kicked Sirius, and he grunted in pain. He let Harry go for a second, and Harry dove for his wand. Crookshanks attacked Harry, and he cursed at the cat. Soon, he had Black against the wall with a wand at his throat.

"Are you going to kill me, Harry?" Sirius whispered.

Harry looked surprised. "You killed my parents," he replied.

"I don't deny it, but if you only knew the whole story," he expd anxiously.

"The whole story was that you sold them to Voldemort, you bastard!" Harry cursed.

Sirius' eyes bulged from his head. "No, never! Please, you must listen. You'll regret it forever if you don't!"

Harry and Black stood locked in a battle of the minds. Just when Hermione couldn't take the pressure anymore, she heard footsteps.

"We're up here!" she screamed. "It's Sirius Black!"

Black's eyes left Harry's and were now boring into Hermione's. She didn't move a muscle. He had just opened his mouth to say something when Remus burst in, crying, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione sank to the floor. She was so scared, but now Remus was here. He had sworn he wouldn't betray her. Lupin collected all the wands and turned to Sirius. "Where is he?"

Hermione was confused. The two wizards were whispering. "If it's true...after all this time, I don't understand!" said Lupin.

"It was all switched!" said Sirius. "I thought no one would suspect. Then it all went wrong...he just made this explosion!"

"Oh, Sirius," Lupin whispered. Then he hugged him, embracing him like a long-lost brother.

"What the hell is going on here?" Hermione screeched at Remus. "I trusted you! Now, you've been helping him all this time?"

Sirius turned and stared at Hermione intently. She knew there was no going back now. "Is she?" Sirius breathed as he gazed at her intently.

"Not now, Sirius," interrupted Lupin. He then blocked their view of Sirius' face, and they whispered in muted tones. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully, Remus would be able to keep Sirius under control...for once.

Harry turned to Hermione, "What is he talking about?"

"Not now!" Lupin roared at Harry.

Finally, Lupin turned to them and breathed heavily, as if he were out of breath. "I know what this looks like to you, but there has been a terrible miscarriage of justice..." he began.

"The point is that I have been keeping your secret, and you betrayed me...betrayed us all!" Hermione interrupted.

He took a step closer towards Hermione. "Now, Hermione, I did not betray anyone!" insisted Remus. "At no time did I ever assist Sirius in his search."

Hermione shook her head violently. "I trusted you! You have no idea what I went through to make sure Harry was safe! Why?" she screamed.

"I'm not here to kill Harry!" Sirius snarled. "I'm here to get Pettigrew."

"Peter?" Hermione whispered. "Peter's dead. You killed him!"

"No I didn't!" he bellowed. "He made that explosion when he transformed into his Animagus form: a rat!"

Ron went pale as everyone looked at Scabbers.

"All this time," Hermione whispered hollowly.

"You're all fucking insane!" shouted Ron. "Scabbers is just a family rat."

"Wait!" said Hermione as she held up her hand. "How did you know how to find us?" She looked directly at Lupin for the answer.

"I was perusing the map Severus had confiscated from Harry. I saw his name on it. That map cannot lie," he replied.

"Dear God!" Hermione moaned as she looked at Ron holding Scabbers.

"Wait just a damn minute!" hollered Harry. "What has Professor Lupin done? What's this secret?"

"He's a werewolf, Harry," explained Hermione. "That's why he's been missing classes."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "So that's why Snape made us learn all about werewolves?"

"Snape?" Sirius said as his eyes darted from Lupin to Hermione. "What about Snape?" His eyes pierced through Hermione as the answer sunk in.

Lupin sighed. "Severus Snape is a professor here, Sirius, as am I."

"That foul, slimy git? That Death Eater?" Sirius raged.

"Let's not get off course," said Lupin. "Let's just explain to Harry what is happening."

Sirius began to speak. "Twelve years ago, I was your father's best friend. We had been friends since our first days at Hogwarts. He was like a brother to me. We made friends with Remus and another boy that sort of hung around us, named Peter. The four of us were always hanging out. Remus here had to transform every month, so we decided to become Animagi. I was a black dog, named Padfoot. Your dad, James, was a stag named Prongs, Remus here didn't have to learn to change, we just called him Mooney, and then there was Peter. He was a rat, and we named him Wormtail."

"The Marauder's Map?" asked Harry. "My dad and you all created it?"

"Right," said Remus. "We charmed it so it cannot lie. So you can imagine my shock when I was looking through it and stumbled across a name of a person I thought had died twelve years ago...Peter Pettigrew!"

Sirius continued. "Your mum and dad were hounded and constantly being hunted by Voldemort. They finally were talked into going into hiding. One week, Harry. One fucking week before their deaths, I came up with a brilliant plan that no one could ever figure out: make Peter Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper to James and Lily's house."

"And we knew there was a mole amongst us, we just never suspected Peter, of all people!" said Lupin. "We had always suspected someone else. Right, Sirius?"

Hermione opened her mouth in shock. Sirius had thought *she* had been the mole!

Sirius glowered at him. "I was incensed. I went to track the rat bastard down, and I did. Unfortunately, he had gained a little skill from his Dark Lord. He caused a scene, created an explosion right after slicing off a finger, and transforming into his Animagus form. No one would believe me; none of us were registered Animagi. And it's illegal to become an Animagus and not register your form with the Ministry," he finished.

Sirius turned back to Lupin and said impatiently, "So, Remus, are we done now with the goddamn history lesson? Let's kill him! Now!"

Ron's eyes grew wide, and he said, "You just stay away from Scabbers. He's been in our family for ages!"

"Twelve years, right? Very curious. Now give me the fucking rat, and I'll show you what he really is!" Sirius snarled as he tried to rip Scabbers from Ron's hand. "I'd like to commit the murder I was imprisoned for!"

"You're both nutters!" hollered Ron. "A werewolf and a murderer! What a pair. How Dumbledore ever hired you is beyond me!"

Remus lowered his head. "I struggled all year. With Severus on my back about being in league with you..."

"Typical Snivellus!" sneered Sirius. "That piece of slime was forever following, stalking, and bothering us, trying to figure out what we were up to every month. So, I decided to give him a taste to sate his imagination."

Hermione was getting a bit fed up with Sirius at this point, and Lupin could sense it.

"And nearly got him killed, you bloody idiot!" shouted Lupin.

"So, that's why Snape doesn't like you," Harry asked Remus. "He thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin. They all stared in disbelief as Severus Snape slipped off the Invisibility Cloak and pointed his wand directly at Lupin.

Hermione screamed. *This can't be happening! He's going to kill them both, and he'll be sent to Azkaban! Of all the times to be an idiot!*

Hermione stood frozen in disbelief as the three men she had known, grown up with...one she had loathed, one who had wanted her, and the other who was the love of her life...relived the grudge of all grudges!

"I've told the Headmaster that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof! You never could believe in Black's guilt. Never could think the worst of him, even when he tried to get you to kill me!" Severus raged.

Hermione desperately wanted to help, but she couldn't risk exposing everything in front of Ron and Harry. Sure, Sirius wasn't guilty, but damn it if he was an innocent! She never would forget that spectacle Avery had forced her to watch, as Severus, Lily, and James had been played like puppets in a sick and twisted play.

"Severus, you are making a mistake!" warned Lupin as he held his hand up in a defense stance. "Sirius isn't here to kill Harry."

"Two more for Azkaban tonight!" Severus spat. His eyes were looking crazed. Hermione wondered if he even had it within him to see reason when it came to Sirius.

"You fool," said Lupin softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back into Azkaban?"

BANG! Snake-like cords burst through Severus' wand and bound Lupin's mouth, wrists, and ankles. Black let out a roar of rage and attacked Severus.

"Stop it!" Hermione screamed. "Please!"

Severus had his wand pointed right between Sirius' eyes. "Give me a reason. Give me a reason, and I swear I'll do it."

Hermione walked cautiously towards Severus. "P-Please, P-Professor Snape," Hermione whispered softly. "Please can we just listen and not do anything rash?"

Severus didn't even look her. "Miss Granger, I would keep quiet if I were you. Vengeance is sweet," Severus whispered almost lovingly as he continued to glare at Sirius.

"Wrong again, Snape!" Black sneered. "As soon as we take that rat to the castle, I'll be a free man again."

"Whoever said anything about the castle?" said Severus with a malevolent smile. "I'll just gather a couple of Dementors and watch them give you a gentle kiss into that good night. Perhaps, they can spare another kiss for the wolf, too."

Hermione knew she needed to get Severus to stop this insanity. He was slipping and was about to make a tragic mistake that would destroy all the work they had endured over the years.

Hermione placed a hand on Severus' arm gently. "Professor Lupin could have killed Harry many times this year, Professor Snape, but he didn't. He didn't," she rationalized.

"Do not ask me to fathom the depths of a werewolf's mind," he said coolly.

"YOU'RE JUST PATHETIC! JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU IN SCHOOL, YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN!" Harry yelled suddenly.

Hermione jumped back and grabbed Harry's hand before he rushed Severus. *Don't, Harry, for the love of God, don't do this!* she prayed silently.

"Don't you speak to me like that, you whelp! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! Instead, I have to endure the spawn of James Potter speaking to me as if he knew anything that is going on in this room!" Severus raged.

"Neither do you!" Hermione snapped at him. She walked up to him, looking up into his face, and whispered softly so Ron and Harry couldn't hear her. "If you've ever loved me, you'll stop this. Just stop this now, go back to the castle, and let the Ministry handle this."

Severus stood back, and after a minute of struggling with himself, let Lupin loose. The tension was still thick, but at least some order had come into the situation. They all continued to talk about Peter, the missing toe, the paper Sirius saw in Azkaban that showed Ron and his family in Egypt. There had been Scabbers on the cover, and that was how Sirius had found out that had been where Pettigrew had been all these years.

"So the rat attached himself to an old pure-blood wizarding family to keep a look-out on his master's whereabouts!" Sirius concluded.

"So now what?" demanded Harry. "You want to commit murder...become what they all said about you all this time?"

"Harry, that piece of filth is the reason you don't have your parents anymore!" raged Sirius.

Lupin turned to Severus and reasoned with him. "Please, Severus, join us. Force him to show himself," begged Lupin. "Let's get the bastard responsible for making our lives hell for the last thirteen years."

Grudgingly, Severus brandished his wand and steadied his hand. Sirius grabbed at Scabbers from Ron, and the rat went insane, running all around the room. Finally, one of the spells either from Lupin, Sirius, or Severus hit him, and there he was: Peter Pettigrew.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 74

The fate of Sirius Black and Pettigrew come to a resolution, and Severus and Hermione say goodbye for the summer.

A/N: Well, we are at the end of Hermione's second time around of her third year. Whew! I hope you enjoy this chapter. Again, I have woven my own writing with JKR's words. My deepest gratitude for her fabulous world and her willingness to share it with so many! As always, my everlasting devotion to luvsev and WriterMerrin who have stuck with me this far! :)

"Hello, Peter," said Lupin congenially.

"S...Sirius... R...Remus... my dear friends!" Peter stuttered in a squeaky voice as he started to edge towards the door. Severus barred the way, and Pettigrew snarled as he slinked away from him.

"How interesting, Pettigrew, to see you alive and well, at least alive, if not well," Severus said wryly.

"What are you doing here, Snivellus?" he snarled.

"You aren't the one asking the questions here, Wormtail!" shouted Sirius.

"Remus." Pettigrew cringed while he slinked towards Lupin. "Help me! Sirius tried to kill me before, and he's been trying to kill me all year!"

"Some would think you deserve killing," said Severus dryly.

Sirius' face grew more skull-like as he advanced on Pettigrew. "No one is going to die until we get a few facts sorted out," he whispered sinisterly.

"I knew it. I knew it!" Pettigrew shrieked. "I always knew he'd find me. He's been given dark powers by You-Know-Who. He's powerful, and now he wants to destroy me!"

"What, Voldemort, teach me tricks?" Sirius said innocently.

Pettigrew cowered.

"What is it, Peter? Does the sound of your lord and master's name strike fear in your mind? I don't blame you. I'm sure his lot isn't terribly pleased that you've scampered off. Isn't that right, Snape?" Sirius sneered as he looked at Severus.

Severus remained silent. His eyes bored into Peter's watery eyes before he spoke. "You failed, Peter," Severus said softly. "You had been the mole giving information to the Dark Lord for a year before the Potters' deaths. You are a pathetic weaking! If it hadn't been for the fact that the Dark Lord never allowed us to see all the faces of our fellow brothers, *I would have known you.*"

Peter looked upon Severus with rage. "What of you, Severus? You're just a Death Eater too...always sucking up to the Dark Lord. What are you doing here now?"

"So you admit it!" roared Sirius.

Pettigrew began to pull at the tufts of hair on his head. "You can't understand! The Dark Lord, he is so powerful. If you had the choice, Sirius, what would you have done?" he challenged him.

"I would have died!" he shrieked. "I never would have betrayed my friends!"

"Well," asked Lupin. "Shall we?"

"NO!" Harry shouted. "Take him to the Dementors. Don't become what they all think of you. Just don't!"

Sirius was growing antsy. "Harry..."

"...I've made my choice. Azkaban and the Dementors can have him," he replied.

They all began to take the long trek back towards the castle. Sirius and Harry helped Ron while Remus, Hermione, Peter, and Severus followed. Hermione watched the tension in Severus' face. His wand was fixed onto Peter's back, and he had never looked so invincible or deadly.

Hermione realized she really didn't know this man. She never knew what the war had done to him, what her absence had done to destroy him. He was cold, cruel, vindictive, and angry. At least he had been able to keep it together before anything disastrous happened.

They reached the surface and took a pause. Hermione watched Harry while he and Sirius talked alone. Then Hermione heard a whimpering noise beside her.

"AHHH!" she screamed as she crawled backwards from the scene in front of her.

"Professor...Remus...he didn't take his potion!" she yelled frantically.

"Run!" Sirius yelled. "RUN!"

No one could move; it was too horrific and gruesome. Before their eyes, Lupin was transforming into a werewolf. Severus blocked Hermione, Peter, Harry, and Ron from view. Black transformed into a dog and attacked the growing and snarling werewolf. It was awful to hear the snapping and howling that came from their fight. They all were transfixed, unable to turn away. Finally, Hermione saw movement at her side.

"A wand! He's got a wand!" Hermione screamed. She looked at Severus who did nothing. She struggled against Severus' iron grip on her, and he refused to release her. Hermione realized that Severus was deliberately enabling Wormtail's get-away, delaying time for them to act. Pettigrew transformed back to Scabbers and scurried away. Hermione watched Harry scramble towards Sirius, telling him that Pettigrew had gotten away.

"What'll we do?" asked Ron.

Snape said, "Weasley, you and Miss Granger will come with me to the Infirmary. I'm sure Potter will be able to take care of his godfather."

Hermione was reluctant to leave Harry, but she did. She would confront Severus later about why he had allowed Pettigrew to escape.

Hermione paced as Cornelius Fudge, Severus, and Dumbledore discussed the events of the evening. Harry was unconscious, and Black had been found at his side, near death. Ron had been patched up by Madam Pomfrey, and all Hermione could do was listen to Fudge, the blowhard, talk about how fortunate they all were to have had escaped such a dangerous creature as Lupin and his happiness that Sirius Black was back in custody.

Hermione was disgusted. After Fudge and Dumbledore left, she took Severus aside and laid into him. "How could you just stand there and lie like that? You know, you saw with your own eyes that Sirius is innocent!"

Severus pointed a finger towards the unconscious Black. "That man is no innocent. You and I know that from personal experience," he reminded her.

Hermione relented. "All right, yes, but still, he is innocent of murder, and I swear, Severus, I'll do what I must to stop this Dementor Kiss from happening!" she hissed as she stalked off.

When Harry came around, Madam Pomfrey gave him some chocolate. Hermione explained that Sirius was locked in the high tower and at any moment was to be given the Dementor's Kiss. Harry jumped up out of bed. "No!" he yelled. "We have to stop them!"

Hermione smiled, loving how predictable he was. "Don't worry, Harry. See this?" she asked as she took out a golden chain with a circular spinner surrounding a small hourglass. "This is a Time-Turner, Harry. This is how I've been getting to my classes all year. You and I are going to go back in time to save Buckbeak and Sirius. Do you trust me?"

Harry grinned. "Yes! That's brilliant! Let's go," he said urgently.

Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat in the Gryffindor common room a couple of days after the whole Sirius Black debacle. Harry and Hermione had been successful. They had saved Buckbeak and Sirius, and together they were in the wind. Before Sirius had taken off, he'd hugged Hermione and whispered in her ear, "I know you, Hermione. I am grateful you could look past our history and help me."

"You're welcome, Sirius," she had replied. Two days later, she still didn't know how she felt about Sirius Black. One thing was for sure; he hadn't been the one who had betrayed James and Lily. She was grateful for that.

The trio was getting ready to leave for the summer, and Hermione was torn. She wanted to leave, but then she didn't at the same time. She had returned the Time-Turner to Minerva, saying, "I don't want to ever see a Time-Turner as long as I live, I do believe."

Minerva had laughed. "Are you going to see Severus before you go?" she had asked her softly.

"Of course. I already miss him. But only one more year before I'm sixteen."

She left and made her way to the dungeon. "Severus?" she called out. Before she could blink, he was there beside her, startling her.

After she regained her composure, she whispered, "I am leaving, but I couldn't leave without saying goodbye."

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. "We need to talk, Severus. You deliberately kept us back from acting so Peter could escape. Because of that, he got away, and God knows where he is! Why? Are you still a Death Eater?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered without shame or apology.

Hermione felt her legs give. Everything her world had been built upon was falling apart. Severus grabbed her from hitting the ground.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"Hermione!" he said sharply. "I am a Death Eater, and I am also a spy for Dumbledore. Being Dumbledore's man means that I must be a Death Eater. He will return, Hermione. Remember, a long time ago, he gave hints about reaching immortality. Regulus told me about it. I never fully understood, but I know that when the Dark Lord returns, I will have to rejoin my brothers and be a Death Eater once again, in order to defeat him."

"A spy," she whispered sadly. "A double agent?"

"Unfortunately," he sighed.

"Hermione," he whispered as he brought her closer to him. "I need to kiss you, to feel your lips on mine, just once before we part again. I know it's wrong; I just need to kiss you." He brought her to him, and she crumbled in his arms. He was far more aggressive than he had been as a youth. It frightened and excited her at the same time.

She eagerly returned his kiss, and he abruptly pushed her from him. "I'm sorry, Hermione. You are still too young. I can't be excited by it. Please don't be angry with me. It just feels wrong," he said huskily as he lowered his forehead to hers. "I miss my curvaceous Hermione."

Hermione tried to smile, but she felt heartbroken just the same. "I'll get there, Severus," she mumbled as the tears fell. She didn't hate him for saying the truth of what he felt, but still it felt like rejection. "I-I love you," she whispered through the tears.

"Oh, my girl," he whispered as he held her. "Please don't cry, Hermione. I love you, and I will miss you. I can't wait until we can be properly and legally together without fear or awkwardness."

"I love you," he breathed.

"I love you too, Severus," she replied.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 74

Hermione starts her fourth year at Hogwarts and is happy to see Alastor Moody will be on staff as the new DADA teacher. However, Moody doesn't seem to recall Hermione from the old days. Suspicions arise.

A/N: Another year at Hogwarts, and there will be much more drama than before. Thanks to JKR and her amazing imagination that I plucked from her books to make this chapter what it is. Also, my thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin: you guys rock!

Hermione spent a lonesome summer with her parents, trying to will the days away. Now that Wormtail had been discovered as the betrayer of the Order, Harry had shared Trelawney's prediction he had heard that fateful night. Hermione's anxiety and sense of foreboding grew exponentially as Harry had conveyed to her each word of the prophecy. She was looking forward to going to the Burrow at the beginning of August to go to the Quidditch World Cup.

When the day arrived, she was eager to get going. The World Cup had been exciting...until the Death Eaters emerged and frightened the life out of her. She had spent the whole time hiding from the scrambling crowds, explaining to Harry about the *Morsmordre*, the sign of Voldemort. Hermione felt it. He was gaining power.

By the time Harry realized his wand was missing, Ministry officials surrounded them all and accused Harry of casting the Dark Mark.

"This is insanity!" Hermione snapped. "Why would Harry Potter of all people cast the Dark Mark?"

Barty Crouch, the man who had sent his own son to Azkaban all those years ago for torturing the Longbottoms, stood stone-faced and undeterred. "You have been caught at the scene of the crime!" he said.

"I didn't do it!" Harry shouted. "I was just telling my friends my wand had been stolen!"

Amos Diggory came up to them with a house-elf in tow. "I think I've found our culprit," he said. "This your wand, Harry?"

"Yes," he said.

Amos Diggory took the wand and cast *Priori Incantatum* on it to reveal the last spell cast. Sure enough, there was a tiny *Morsmordre* shining from it.

Ludo Bagman, the wizard in charge of the World Cup spoke up. "This is madness. A house-elf has to have a wand to do that!"

Amos said, "She was found with Mr. Potter's wand on her person," he declared.

Barty Crouch looked pale and faint. "That is my house-elf," he said shakily. The wizards began to interrogate the poor thing while she cried out her innocence the entire time. Barty Crouch was incensed. He said, "This means clothes!"

Everyone knew what that meant. Hermione had always thought Crouch was a cold and unfeeling man, but this was reprehensible.

"What is going to happen to her now?" she asked Mr. Weasley.

"Don't worry, Hermione. Winky, that's her name; we'll take her to Dumbledore. She can live with the house-elves there. I know she didn't do this," he whispered.

Hermione was relieved. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. If Winky would now be at Hogwarts, she might be able to find the underlying cause of all this insanity.

After the World Cup, and the subsequent arrival at Hogwarts, Hermione went with Harry and Ron to the Welcoming Feast. She took a few chances to glance up at the High Table to watch Severus seated in his normal, black, dour robes. Heaviness came over her as she saw his visage. He looked pinched about the eyes and mouth, as if he had spent months concentrating with much difficulty. He was tired, and she knew him too well to not see the signs. Severus was under a great deal of external pressure. Where it was coming from, she couldn't suss out. She was quite concerned about him. She wished with all her might that she could just stop the entire pretense and go to him, but it was impossible. Therefore, she would have to wait. Moreover, she didn't know when she'd get a chance to talk with him alone. She sighed and accepted it would have to be this way...for now.

The new Defense teacher was Alastor Moody. Hermione was happy to see him again. He looked as ragged as ever, but still wary and seeming full of spit and vinegar. She couldn't wait to say hello to him. She listened as the others whispered about him. He had acquired a nickname, "Mad-Eye Moody," due to the magical blue eye he wore that replaced the black beady one he had lost. It was a bit humorous to listen to the others talk about him through stories and legend. She had gotten to know the real Moody quite well that summer on Fenwick's farm.

Dumbledore announced that this year a Tri-Wizard Tournament would be held. Students from Durmstrang Institute and Beauxbatons Academy were going to arrive in October and participate in the competition, so there was plenty of time to hope and dream about what the tournament might be like.

Dumbledore spoke about the history of the tournament, and when Hermione heard the words "death toll," her head snapped to attention. That frightened her, but everyone around her was listening with rapt attention. The possibility of death seemed to make the opportunity to participate even more interesting.

Fred, George, Ron, and Harry were talking fast and furious about the competition and how to get past the Age Line.

"I still can't believe the Ministry won't let you put your name in the Goblet unless you're seventeen!" grumbled Ron.

Fred grinned as he looked at his twin, George. "I reckon a few drops of Ageing Potion might do the trick," he said mischievously.

"People have died!" Hermione said, still feeling extremely upset at the news that people could actually get killed during these games.

"That was years ago, Hermione," Fred said as he brushed her off, unconcerned. "So, if it works for us," he said, pointing his finger between George and himself, "fancy entering?" he asked Ron and Harry.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry quietly. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? Dunno if we've learned enough, though."

Harry remained quiet as Neville entered the conversation. He was nervous and scared, as usual, but he really had reason for it this time. He was terrified his Gran would try to force the Ministry to accept him to save the family honor.

Hermione thought they were acting like big babies. They were determined to go through with trying to bypass Dumbledore's Age Line. It was sheer foolishness, but she wasn't going to say a word. Experience was always the best teacher, she had found.

The next day, Hermione caught up with Harry and Ron. They were talking about their first day back when Malfoy came out of thin air.

"Hey, Weasel," he said derisively. "Just got a look into today's *Prophet*. Imagine what is going to happen to him when the Minister hears about this!"

He began to read loudly from an article in the paper, and a huge crowd was gathering. Hermione sighed inwardly as she watched the scene unfold. It was always like this with the three of them. It was just like James, Severus, and Sirius all over again. Well, perhaps not that bad...at least they didn't continuously hex each other on sight...but there was a fair amount of animosity all around.

She heard Malfoy say as he paused in his recitation, "Imagine them not even getting your Dad's name right," he said in mock indignation. "I guess that makes him a non-entity."

Ron was shaking with fury. Hermione knew if there hadn't been a crowd around them, he would have flattened Draco's face in a heartbeat.

Finally, after Draco had finished reading and had made a few remarks about Mrs. Weasley's weight, Harry grabbed Ron by the arm and forced him to walk away.

"Get stuffed, Malfoy!" Harry called out to him.

Hermione rolled her eyes. *So much for a clean getaway.* Harry and Draco began to yell, and then it was over. Harry had turned his back to join her and Ron when she heard a roar from behind.

BANG!

Hermione saw a flash whiz by the side of Harry's face. They were all getting their wands out when another loud bang sounded, and they turned to see Professor Moody.

"OH, NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!"

They watched as Moody limped across the grass, and there not five feet from them was a white ferret.

He started questioning Harry about what had happened, and then Moody began to bounce the ferret higher and higher, ten feet off the ground. Professor McGonagall ran towards them, shrieking at Moody, "Is that a student?"

"Yep," he replied simply.

She whipped out her wand and brought Draco back to his human form. Everyone was laughing as Draco looked confused and dizzy while McGonagall took Moody to task for transfiguring a student into an animal for punishment.

Hermione looked at Moody. There was something not quite right. She knew she hadn't seen Moody in years, and that he had undergone severe trauma while tracking down rogue Death Eaters. However, this wasn't like Moody. The Moody she knew wouldn't have done that without making his presence known. Then he would have changed him back, not "played" with him as students looked on, laughing. No, Moody would have Transfigured him back to his human form and given him a stern lecture about proper Wizarding conduct in a duel. No, Draco never knew what hit him. Sure, Moody would have hexed him. He would have growled right in his face, and after scaring the living shite out of him, then he would have hexed the boy. However, this was childish. Perhaps he was growing senile. Something was amiss.

Harry and Ron were excited and laughed all the way back inside the castle. Hermione made her excuses, saying she had work to do, then snuck down to the dungeons.

She tiptoed around and found the Potions classroom empty. Once she thought she was alone, a wand dug into her back. She had her wand out already and turned as fast as lightening to find herself face to face with Severus. They both lowered their wands. Silently, Severus locked the door and silenced the room.

"I'm back!" she said with a smile, in hopes of bettering his mood. He looked furious.

"I noticed," he said gruffly.

Hermione let out a sigh and took another approach. "Severus, as much as I would fancy a social visit, I need to talk to you about Moody."

He looked intensely into her face and said, "What about him?"

"There's something not right," she said uneasily. "I can't put my finger on it but, perhaps, he's getting old and senile."

"I assure you, Hermione, he is not," he said coolly.

"What's wrong?" she asked as he took his seat behind his desk.

He sighed impatiently. "The problem, Hermione, is now that Moody is in this school, he's bound and determined to find me out. I never know when he'll pop up and demand something of me. Today, as I was informed by Albus, I'm to have my office and storeroom checked for anything illegal or suspicious."

"Nevertheless," she said importantly. "I will be speaking with Albus. There's something not right about him. He just isn't the Alastor Moody I remember."

"Unfortunately, he is exactly like the Moody I remember," he said angrily.

He looked at Hermione, and she grew suspicious, "What?" she snapped.

His taut face broke into a smile. "You have changed this summer, Hermione. I can see the woman in the girl that was there last year."

"Tempted?" she asked flippantly.

"A little," he replied as he sat back into his chair. "Fifteen in three weeks. Only one more year."

"Can't wait," she whispered and then bit her bottom lip.

"I love you, Hermione," he said gently.

"I love you," she replied as she let herself out of the classroom.

Hermione was apprehensive about going to her first class with Moody. It was right in line with what he would do...he talked about the Unforgivable Curses. This, of course, was familiar territory for Hermione. She had never forgotten the summer on Fenwick's farm where she and Moody ate, slept, and trained. Unforgivables had been among the required curriculum. She had learned how to effectively throw off the Imperius Curse and disarm her opponent successfully.

He showed the class the first two, beginning with the Imperius Curse, and explained how much trouble it had given the Ministry back in the days in the aftermath of the First War. Then he demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse that Hermione had felt herself while in training. It was a horrific feeling that could render a person insane or cause

them to suffer aftereffects for years. Hermione watched as Moody continued to torture the spider that he had been using as his victim. The jerks and twitches it made, for Moody had silenced the insect, were so disturbing, it was unbearable to watch. Hermione cringed inside. Then she saw the look on Neville's face.

"Stop it!" she shrieked.

Moody looked up at her, and they all looked at Neville, whose wide, horrified eyes were like empty tunnels of despair, and his white, clenched hands were balled up into fists atop his desk.

Hermione wanted to scream at Moody. He knew...he knew exactly what had happened to Frank and Alice, Neville's parents. Everyone who had been alive in those days knew about the Longbottoms: the core of the Order, loved by everyone. Frank, the loyal, fierce Auror, and his sweet wife, Alice, who had fought against the Death Eaters in the war only to step down as a soldier due to her pregnancy. She had just been a simple housewife, caring for her one-year-old son when the Lestrangle brothers, Bellatrix Lestrangle, and Barty Crouch Jr. broke into their house right after torturing Frank into insanity and tortured Alice right in front of little Neville. Both had been in St. Mungo's ever since...insane, the both of them. Neville never talked about them, as far as Hermione knew. No one knew about Neville's sad past.

She couldn't understand how thoughtless he could be.

Finally, the last curse was cast on the poor spider. The Avada Kedavra was the killing curse, and Hermione cringed in horror as the class watched the spider die. She looked at Harry and knew what he was thinking. That was how James and Lily died. Hermione could see Lily's face, so carefree and full of life. She couldn't imagine what she had looked like in death, her face stilled, her green eyes lifeless. Hermione fairly shuddered.

He lectured to them about being diligent at all times for potential enemies. As he lectured, the words he told her all those summers ago sounded in her ears, "If you forget everything I teach you, I don't care. If you can manage to remember this, you will succeed: CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

These were Moody's words of wisdom, and although they were the words he would say, she was still positive there was something not right about him.

As they left class, Hermione walked to Neville and placed her arm on his shoulder. "Neville, are you all right?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes," he said with a false enthusiasm. "Interesting lesson, wasn't it? Interesting dinner... lesson. What's for eating?" he babbled.

Ron and Harry both looked at Neville with the same concern as Hermione. Then they heard the clunking footsteps of Moody behind them.

"It's all right, sonny," he said to Neville. "Why don't you come up to my office? Come on... we'll have a cup of tea."

Neville looked like he didn't want go anywhere with Moody. The old wizard looked over at Harry and said, "I know it seems harsh, but you've got to know. No point in pretending. Now, come on, Longbottom. I've some books that might interest you."

"What was that about?" said Ron as they all watched Neville go upstairs with Moody to his office.

"I don't know," Hermione whispered. However, inside she was deeply troubled. There was simply something odd. Perhaps she needed to have a chat with Moody.

Later that evening, Harry came to Hermione and Ron in the common room and whispered that he got a letter from Sirius.

"What does he say?" Hermione said.

Harry read the letter to them, and Hermione hissed, "He's come back ~~up~~here? Is he mad? He'll be caught for sure!"

Harry looked downcast. "I never should have told him about my scar. Now he'll feel responsible to help me," he said ruefully.

"Harry, no," she began to say.

Harry cut her off. "I'm just going to go to bed."

The first day Hermione got to speak with Moody, she went into his office alone and closed the door.

"Hi, Moody. It's good to see you again," she said airily.

Moody looked at her strangely. "Oh, Miss Granger. Sorry I didn't remember you. So much going on," he said in a strange tone.

There was definitely something amiss. "I was thinking about the summer at Fenwick's farm while we were in class. You know, the first time Remus saw me here, I thought he was going to have a seizure. I am sure Dumbledore explained everything to you?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "Terrible shame," he said gruffly. "If you will excuse me, Miss Granger."

He all but tossed her out of his office. Hermione was immediately aware that she was correct in her assumption that, indeed, something very wrong was happening here. She went straight to Dumbledore's office.

When he let her inside, she'd told him about the short and confusing conversation she just had with Moody. "It was as if he had forgotten, or never knew me! The wizard lived with me for a summer...he was my teacher, we ate together, slept in the same ruddy barn. Now, it's like he's lost a part of his memory. He isn't himself."

"Do you think he could have been Obliviated?" she whispered.

Dumbledore got up and paced back and forth in front of his fireplace. Finally, he said, "Thank you, Hermione, for telling me this. I assure you that I will be keeping this information close at hand. Now, you must promise not to breathe a word of this to either Ron or Harry, and most certainly, not to Severus."

Hermione's brows furrowed. "I don't like to keep information from Severus," she told him.

"I know that when it comes to what is best for him, you have done it in the past," he said with a knowing look.

Hermione's pulse was beating like crazy. "What are you talking about?" she breathed.

"About your relationship with Lily Evans," he replied.

She looked at him in horror. "How did you know?" she whispered.

"Hermione, I know the signs; I know them well. Do not be alarmed. I shall never under any circumstances ever tell Severus. Please place this information with that in your mind as well, Hermione. It is for his benefit. As for you, I want you to stay as far away from Professor Moody as possible. Understand?"

"Yes, Albus," she replied. "Am I in danger?"

"No, he answered. "Just keep your mind off of Alastor Moody. Think about the Tournament, about all the excitement this year will bring, and having new people to meet from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons," he said with a smile.

"Okay," she agreed and left him. She hated the feeling that he had just treated her like a child...as if she was truly a fifteen-year-old. However, she decided to shrug it off and went about the rest of her day.

Hermione's fifteenth birthday came around, and with it came another card, just like the one she had received last year from Severus. It simply read: "Love does not know time." That night, she got out her copy of *Hogwarts, A History* that Severus had given to her that last Christmas at Spinner's End. She looked at his handwriting and tucked the note in with the last one and placed the book under her pillow. She wanted to believe that they only had one year and then the wait would be over. They would never be without the other again. Somehow, after the talk with Albus, the dream of the perfect reunion was beginning to tarnish. She had more than once wondered if they would ever know peace together...

The day the guests from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons arrived, everyone was in a state. Excitement was everywhere. They had class with Moody that day, and everyone was shocked to learn they were going to experience the effects of the Imperius Curse.

"Isn't that illegal, Professor?" Hermione challenged him. She couldn't believe it he was going to do this! What did fourth-years have any business knowing such advanced magic? Her eyebrows furrowed as she crossed her arms, mutinously.

Moody didn't skip a beat. "Dumbledore wants you to know what it feels like so you can effectively learn to repel it," he replied sharply. "Of course, if you don't care to learn and would rather be caught unawares, you can leave. Off you go," he said, pointing a gnarled finger at the door.

Inside, Hermione was shocked. He had to either not be the real Moody or had his memory tampered with. There was no look of recognition that he was aware that Hermione knew anything more about the Imperius Curse than any other Hogwarts student.

"No, she said confidently. "I will stay."

It was ridiculous. One after one, students were unable in the slightest to resist the pull of the curse. Hermione stood impatiently, waiting her turn. She wanted to see the look on Moody's face when she flung his attempts to control her just like flicking a bug off one's shoulder. However, when Harry's turn came...he demonstrated in one hour what it had taken Hermione a whole summer to accomplish. He fought off the curse completely.

Hermione stood, waiting for Moody to put her under the Curse. She stood with determination and repelled it. She smiled at Moody, hoping for some sign...a conspiratorial wink...something to ease her mind, but nothing came. He was genuinely impressed with her work...that was until Draco Malfoy opened his mouth.

"Typical, Granger!" he sneered as he and his cronies snickered. "She would never allow anyone to best her in any subject, even Harry Potter!"

Hermione was highly impressed with Harry's work. She hoped Dumbledore would hear of it. This was phenomenal news. But, Hermione supposed it would have to wait. The excitement of the coming schools was growing, and everyone focused on getting through their last classes in order to get dressed up to make a good impression.

Hermione was nearly ready to fall on the floor laughing as she watched and heard the other girls speculate about the Durmstrang wizards. They just HAD to be exotic with dark hair, Slavic features, and strong to live in the harsh cold climate they did. Therefore, when Durmstrang arrived with all the pomp and ceremony as possible, all the girls were acting like brainless twits.

What irritated Hermione, though, were the older and lovely ladies from Beauxbatons. As she watched the procession of the boys and girls of Beauxbatons Academy walk sedately into the Great Hall, she noticed some of the girls were simply ... *gorgeous*. They were older and full-bodied. They had to be seventh-years. That meant they were of legal age! The boys were making complete asses of themselves, and Hermione warily watched Severus up at the Head Table. She met his eyes, and he looked at her questioningly. She would talk to him later. What if one of those older girls caught his eye? What if he was getting tired of waiting for her body to catch up with her mind? She told herself to shut up. She was being stupid. But still it nagged at the back of her mind.

She found herself snapping at those around her during the Welcoming dinner. Hermione took a great dislike towards one of the Beauxbatons girls that the boys were claiming had to be a veela. In Hermione's opinion, she was a loud and arrogant French bitch, and when she laughed derisively during Dumbledore's welcome speech, she said aloud, "No one is making you stay!" That got her a few glares from the boys around her, and she decided to keep her hostility to herself.

If that hadn't been bad enough, Ron was going insane over the presence of Viktor Krum.

"Yes, Ronald, I am aware he was the one who caught the snitch during the World Cup."

"Yes, Ronald, I recall the Wronski Feint."

"Yes, Ronald, I know he is probably the youngest Quidditch player ever to play at the World Cup."

She was about to lose her bloody mind. Who gave two shites about Viktor Krum? She was glad when it was all over and they could go to bed. As soon as she could, she slipped out and went towards the dungeons. She didn't get far. Severus was already waiting for her outside Gryffindor Tower.

He ushered her into an alcove behind a tapestry, and she wrapped her arms around him, inhaling his scent.

He pulled away. "What are you doing?" he asked, confused.

"I need to hold you, smell you, feel you. There is no substitute for it. I have tried. Trust me," she said

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off the floor. She couldn't resist and began to kiss him urgently. He responded, and they were finally kissing as they used to kiss, with all the hunger and the need that was in them. She tried to place his hand on her breast, but he stopped and pulled away.

"Stop, Hermione. This is wrong," he said firmly as he disentangled himself from her.

"What's wrong about it, Severus? I'm thirty-five!" she insisted.

"That may be all well and good, but you have a body of a fifteen-year-old, and it is wrong. Eleven months, and we won't stop. I promise," he whispered.

"Well, at least this is encouraging," she whispered in return.

"What?"

She played with a button on his frock coat. "At least I know that I still can entice you. Last year's goodbye left me sad, but I can see now that you are starting to warm up to me again," she explained.

He took her hands into his own, away from his frock coat. "Hermione," he said seriously. "I think about you all the time. I dream of the young woman I knew and made love to all those years ago. You are turning into her more and more every day. Soon, Hermione. Soon," he murmured as he kissed her one last time. "I just came to reassure you of my love."

She left him then and felt as if he had sensed her insecurity, and his passion was exactly what she had needed to reaffirm that he still wanted only her.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 of 74

Hermione decides to help out Harry with his first task for the Tournament, and Snape is not happy with the late hours she's keeping. Later, Hermione comes to a decision.

A/N: As always, my gratitude for Ms. Rowling's work that I have taken to weave into this chapter. Also, my deepest thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for all their hard work!

The next days after the arrival of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, students were full of hoping, dreaming, and plotting about being the Triwizard champion for Hogwarts. Hermione just sat and shook her head as Fred and George tried to get their plan just right. It was a lot of fun when they finally placed their plan into action, only to end up with gray beards. Dumbledore laughed at their attempt, and Hermione just looked at them with an "I told you so" smirk on her face.

The night finally arrived, and the Goblet was ready to decide the champions. One by one, the papers with names on them spat out of the goblet and into the eager hands of Albus Dumbledore. First, Viktor Krum from Durmstrang, then Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons, finally for Hogwarts was Cedric Diggory, a very handsome and likeable boy from Hufflepuff house. Each one went into a secluded room off the side of the Great Hall to await further instructions.

Dumbledore began to speak on the need to support all of the champions, but Hermione was looking at the Goblet, which was looking rather strange. Suddenly a spark shot out and another paper floated down into Albus' hand.

Hermione was just as shocked as everyone else as Dumbledore shouted Harry's name. Harry remained frozen in his seat. Finally, Hermione nudged him and hissed, "Go on!"

Harry disappeared into the secret room, and the faculty of each school of each champion and the Ministry officials along with Dumbledore followed them into the antechamber.

"How did he do it?" asked George in disbelief.

Hermione shook her head. "Something is wrong. Very wrong." She turned to Ron, only to find him looking surly and angry.

"Ron?" she whispered.

"You'd think he'd have given his best mate a chance!" he grumbled. "But, no! He always has to get the glory for himself," he snarled.

Ron got up and went to sit at the other end of the table.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders at Fred and George. She didn't want to be around when this hit the fan. She knew there would be some serious partying tonight as well as some severe yelling. She decided to steer clear of it all. Soon enough, she'd hear all about how Harry had become the fourth champion.

Hermione waited patiently outside the common room door until Harry made his appearance.

"I've got a stack of toast here if you're interested," she offered. "I thought we could skip all the morning breakfast drama and have a chat."

Harry smiled. "Sounds perfect," he said tiredly.

They made their way outside. "Not much sleep?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "Ron is being a prat about this whole situation. I swear, Hermione, it wasn't me! I didn't do this. Someone's trying to set me up."

"I believe you, Harry," she whispered.

"You do?" he asked as if he couldn't believe what she'd said. "Thanks," he finally replied when he got his head sorted out.

They made their circuit around the lake, munching on toast for a while until Hermione said, "The problem is that we have to find out who did put your name in. Do you have any ideas?" she asked him.

Harry told her of Karkaroff's argument with Moody, and how Moody had said only a powerful wizard could have done such a thing.

"Moody is right, Harry," she agreed. "I don't think any student could have done it."

Harry changed the subject. "Did you see Ron at breakfast?" he asked.

"Yes, I did," she replied quietly.

"Does he still think I entered myself?" he hollered.

Hermione took a breath and tried to explain. "No, not really, Harry. He may say it, but he really doesn't believe it. It goes much farther than this stupid competition."

"Well, what the ruddy hell is it?" he exclaimed.

"Harry, can't you see? He's jealous!"

"Jealous?" he shouted. "Jealous of what? He just wants to make a prat of himself in front of everybody," he grumbled.

"Look, it's like this. Ron is the last son in a long line of boys. He's always getting the hand-me-downs, never the best. Then there is you, Harry Potter, who gets all the attention while he is your best friend. No one seems to see him because they're staring at you."

"Great!" Harry spat. "Tell him he's welcome to it! People always gawping at my forehead everywhere I go..."

Hermione interrupted him. "I am not telling him a thing, Harry. You are going to work this out between the two of you. It's the only way."

She took another steadying breath. "Now, I need to change the subject. I want you to keep an open mind about it. I want you to write to Sirius and tell him what happened."

Harry glanced all around them. "Come off it," he scoffed. "He's back in the country just because my *scatwinged*. He'll probably come bursting through the castle doors if I told him about this!"

Hermione was undeterred, although she did silently agree with Harry's assessment of Sirius' penchant for the dramatic. "Harry, Sirius would want you to tell him about this. Besides, it's not like he's not going to find out anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione sighed. "Harry, this is big news! It's going to be all over the *Prophet* and goodness knows what other publications will be writing about it. Think of the Wireless Network, plus there's all the gossip. Everybody will be talking about it."

"Okay, okay," he acquiesced. "I'll do it."

They made their way up to the owlery, and Hermione looked at the area under the steps with longing. The memories flooded back of all the talks and intimate moments she and Severus had shared there. She cleared her head as they reached the top, and she took out parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink.

"Now write!" she ordered.

Hermione began to notice badges that other students were wearing, mostly the Slytherins. When she got close to one, she saw it read *Potter Stinks* and would change itself to *"Support Cedric Diggory!"* She knew Harry was suffering. He and Ron weren't speaking, and everywhere Harry turned, there was a stupid badge and a smart-ass comment dogging him wherever he went. As for her, she just tried to tell him to ignore it.

Then, soon after Harry's mandatory interview with Rita Skeeter, writer for the *Daily Prophet*, an article emerged that threatened to send Hermione exploding all over the breakfast table. There it was, bold as brass:

"Harry has found love with one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school."

It was sheer hell. Hermione knew Severus was going to blow when he read it. He was already insecure about their age difference; now this was going to send him over the edge. Then, to make matters infinitely worse, Krum had started to hang out at the library. That didn't bother her so much. A person had a right to use the library. He was a quiet person. The problem was exactly *how* he hung around. He stared at her, and it was starting to become creepy. That coupled with the fact that wherever he went there was always a pack of giggling, idiotic girls following his every move. She couldn't concentrate with all of that racket. Then it dawned on her that, perhaps, Viktor Krum might be interested in her.

It was a disaster. The rumor was that Hermione and Krum were trying to keep their obvious attraction a secret. She tried to talk to Severus about it, but he shut down completely and refused to discuss the issue. She was getting the cold shoulder from her best friend just like Harry was from his. So they sought solace with each other. They were quite the ironic pair, actually.

A week later, Harry told Hermione he had spoken with Sirius through the Floo in Gryffindor tower the night before. He gave a full report to Hermione on their talk. They sat in a secluded area of the common room while Harry filled her in on the situation. "Sirius wanted to warn me about Death Eaters at Hogwarts," he said worriedly. "He is afraid that someone inside Hogwarts is trying to kill me."

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time, now would it?" she said off-handedly.

Harry smirked. "Yeah, every year someone wants me dead. But to show their hand so early...I mean...the Tournament hasn't even begun! Sirius said there are Death Eaters in the school and to keep my head down. As if I could!" he snarled. "I've got a ruddy dragon ready to have my arse for lunch!"

Hermione tried to look shocked, but she knew exactly whom Sirius was referring to: Igor Karkaroff. The wizard had taken half a year for Moody to catch and was now side-by-side with him.

It wasn't working out so well. Karkaroff was a coward that had sold out his friends and master just to save his sorry hide. He never even joined with Dumbledore. He just didn't want to be in Azkaban.

Harry's voice dragged her from her thoughts. "Sirius said many Death Eaters that are still imprisoned don't like him. That's why he stays mostly at Durmstrang, teaching Dark Arts to all his students. So, Sirius told me to watch out for Krum."

Hermione remained calm. "So, does Sirius believe Karkaroff put your name in the goblet?" she asked him.

"I dunno. Nothing seems to be clear. He just asked me to be careful and train well."

Hermione found it oddly refreshing to be in agreement with Sirius Black. "I'll help you, Harry. We'll figure out how to defeat this dragon," she replied.

Hermione was mighty grateful that Harry had Hagrid and Sirius on his side to inform him of the things he needed to know. Sure, she could snoop around and get info on the tasks, but to inform him on how dangerous Karkaroff was? Not a chance. He would become far too suspicious about how much a student was interested in his business, let alone if he discovered how much she really knew about the wizard.

Hermione and Harry got up early on Sunday morning and got a bit of breakfast before Harry dragged her out and into an empty classroom to figure out a battle plan. Hermione was getting frustrated. Harry couldn't keep his mind focused on the task. She finally told him that first, they needed to defeat the dragon, and then they could worry and plot all they wanted after the task concerning Karkaroff and Death Eaters.

That got him reasonably focused. Hermione brainstormed on a number of different possibilities, each one more far-fetched than the previous on how he could defeat the dragon.

"I just don't know, Harry," she said as she sat down in exhaustion. "The problem is that these are difficult spells, and you've not even done your O.W.L.s yet."

"I don't believe it!" she moaned. Harry snapped his head up as Hermione began to pack up her things. "Come on, Harry, let's go to the common room. Wherever Krum is, his gaggle of giggling girls won't be far behind!" Sure enough, there they were, and Hermione rolled her eyes. Why wouldn't he just leave her alone?

A few days later, Harry ran up to Hermione, who was working in the greenhouse. He was all excited. "Hermione, I need you to teach me how to do a Summoning Charm."

"That's a fantastic idea, Harry!" she praised him. "Let's go." As they walked to the common room, Hermione wondered where Harry had gotten the idea to think of a Summoning Charm. She decided to keep her thoughts to herself and her eyes wide-open.

It was a disaster. Hermione kept on saying, "Concentrate, Harry, concentrate!"

What d'you think I'm trying to do?" he yelled at her. "I'm sorry, I just keep getting a vision of a great big dragon popping in my head for some reason..."

They kept on, only stopping for classes and meals. By two in the morning, Harry had finally gotten it down pat. Hermione was pleased but exhausted.

"You'll be brilliant, Harry," she assured him as they went back to the common room. "Let's have a kip. You'll need it for later."

In the morning after breakfast, a very angry and surly Snape ambushed Hermione and quick marched her underneath the main staircase.

"Spending lots of time late at night, I see," he said silkily. "What were you up to at two a.m. if you don't mind me asking?"

Hermione crossed her arms. "I have nothing to say, Severus. You refused to talk with me about that Skeeter woman's article. Now, it seems you've allowed your paranoia to sink to lower depths. If you can't know deep in your soul that I love you and would never cheat on you, then we are truly making an error by continuing to wait," she said simply.

"You would rather be released from me?" he thundered. His fists were balled in rage.

"That's not what I said, damn it!" she yelled as she felt herself back up against a wall.

He leaned into her, placing his fists on either side of her head. "I will not be made a fool of, Hermione," he warned as he swept away from her.

The first task was later that day, and Hermione was glad. It got her mind off of her troubles with Severus. They were getting so close now to the end of the waiting; things couldn't fall apart because of a stupid, ignorant woman's article! She refused to give him up. She was that determined.

Harry did very well during the first task. He summoned his Firebolt and sped off with the dragon close behind. He was the fastest to get the egg, and after it was all over, there was Ron, ready to talk with Harry for the first time. Hermione was relieved. How stupid could two people be? She wished she could get Severus to talk with her and make things right again. She started crying and hugged them both just before running off to sob in private.

She sat alone in her dorm room as the party commenced downstairs. She was relieved that Harry was with Ron and that all was well again; it was just so infuriating that Severus would not speak to her. In the past, he had always come around to see reason. The fact that he wouldn't even *talk* about that damn article and at least yell about how mad it made him feel was very telling. He was distancing himself from her.

Hermione tossed and turned in her bed, trying to sleep. She finally lay flat on her back. She wanted to scream, actually. She wanted to scream, and she wanted to give Severus a good shaking! She wished she could understand why this stupid article? Why now, after so many other terrible things that could have torn them apart, was this little ridiculous bit of fluff causing him to distance from her?

The next day, Ron, Harry, and Hermione went to the owlery to send a note to Sirius about Harry's success in the first task. On the way, they filled Ron in on all that had been going on with Karkaroff.

Ron snorted. "Bet he feels like an idiot! Look at you, Harry; you did the best out of all of them. And there is no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dangerous. How could they be?" he said as he struggled with Pig to tie the letter on.

Hermione frowned and folded her arms. "The end is a long way from now. If the first task was any indication from what we should expect from the subsequent tasks, well, I shudder to think!" she said darkly.

"Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" Ron quipped. "You and Trelawney should get together sometime."

Hermione ignored that comment, and Ron went on. "Well, we'd best get into the common room. I'm sure Fred and George have gotten all the stuff ready for your celebration party.

When they had returned, the common room was all decorated and ready for the party. Lee Jordon was with Fred and George as they carried in massive amounts of food with them.

"Cool!" said Ron. "How did you nick all this stuff?"

"Didn't have to nick it, little bro," said George.

"Yeah, the house-elves practically fall over themselves to help you. Right friendly lot, the little buggers," added Fred.

Hermione's interest was piqued. "How did you get in there?"

"Easy," Fred replied. "All you have to do is tickle the pear on the portrait of the painting of the bowl of fruit. It giggles and..." He stopped short. "Why?"

"Nothing," she replied. Hermione wanted desperately to talk to Winky. She knew she was working here at Hogwarts now. She had her suspicions all along about Barty Crouch and how he had overreacted towards her.

December came, and Hermione still had not been able to get through to Severus. He was as cold and reserved as ever. Hermione spent a lot of time crying now in her dorm room, afraid and saddened and afraid that she had lost him forever. She took out her two notes that he had written to her that said, "Love does not know time" and

held them to her heart as she cried. She wanted to believe he still loved her...that he still cared. After all, wasn't the fact that he was still so angry a sign that he still felt for her? She wanted to believe. She wanted to keep hoping, but he was making it so difficult. She was ready to do something very drastic. She had to get it though Severus that he couldn't keep treating her this way. A witch has her pride, after all. So she began to think of her options. Immediately, one came to mind: Viktor Krum.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 of 74

The Yule Ball, and the fallout. Plus, Hermione has a run in with Rita Skeeter.

A/N: My gratitude to Ms. Rowling's wonderful imagination. Her work has made this chapter possible. Also, to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin, who continue to work so faithfully, my deepest thanks.

Towards the end of the fourth-year Slytherin and Gryffindor Care of Magical Creatures class, Rita Skeeter showed up. Hermione wanted nothing more than to claw her eyes out; however, the witch seemed interested in Hagrid. She was very interested in everything about Hagrid, including the Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Hermione hung back as Rita's eyes found Harry, and watched as Rita looked over the singed and scratched-up faces of the students as she continued to ask her questions. Hermione was growing rather suspicious of Ms. Rita Skeeter. That woman was never up to anything but bad news.

After class, Hermione decided it was as good a time as ever to try to talk to Winky. She didn't get far into the kitchens before a dozen elves ambushed her. "Oooh, miss, you needs food, miss?" squeaked a very tiny elf.

She smiled at all of them. "Hello, a cup of tea would be most welcome, that is if it's no trouble?" she asked sweetly.

They all scrambled around, and a few of them gently pushed her towards a chair where she sat in front of a cup of Earl Grey with milk, sugar, and a plate of delicious-looking biscuits. Hermione smiled as she sipped her tea and took a biscuit. "Thank you all so much. You are so kind. I was wondering if Winky was around. May I please speak with her?"

Hermione was led towards a closet door. Winky sat surrounded by numerous bottles of butterbeer, looking terribly dejected. "Oh, Winky," Hermione said as she knelt down to face her.

Winky burst into tears. "Winky is a disgraced elf," she whispered through her whimpers. "Winky is ashamed!"

"Why are you ashamed?" Hermione asked gently. "It's Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed. He treated you so poorly."

"No!" Winky shouted. "Mr. Crouch is a good wizard. Winky was bad. My poor Mr. Crouch. What is he doing without his Winky? He is needing me...oh, the shame!" She burst into new tears.

"You know, I see Mr. Crouch from time to time," Hermione said slyly.

Winky's countenance brightened. "Master is coming here? Is he well?"

"Yes," Hermione said as she worried her lip. "He's often with Mr. Bagman as well."

"Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard!" Winky said fiercely. "My master tells Winky things...but I's keeping my master's secrets."

Hermione felt she wouldn't get much more out of her. "Well, I will be going now, Winky. Please take care of yourself," she said nicely.

Harry and Ron sat thinking long and hard about what Hermione said. "Well, Winky seems to love him, doesn't she?" said Ron.

"Doesn't think much of Bagman though, does she?" said Hermione.

"I wonder what Crouch has been telling her?" Harry wondered.

"He's probably not a very good Ministry official. He did seem to be a bit off during the World Cup...sort of distracted," Hermione said.

The next day they were in Transfiguration, waiting for class to end, when McGonagall informed them of the upcoming Yule Ball.

"Now, the Yule Ball is a part of the Triwizard Tournament and is open to fourth-years and up, although you may ask an underclassman if you wish.

"Dress robes shall be worn, and the ball will begin at eight o'clock Christmas Day. This is a time for all of us to socialize with our foreign guests. We shall not be relaxing any school rules. We expect you all to act in a manner befitting a Hogwarts student. I know I shall be most displeased if I find anyone of my house acting in any way that would embarrass the school!"

Every girl at Hogwarts was all aflutter about the Ball. Hermione wished there was no Ball. She and Severus were still not talking, and she had started to give up all hope. One night, she decided to give it one last chance.

She snuck down to the dungeons around four in the morning. She knocked on the door to the classroom, and she heard the ward going off in his office. She waited a few minutes, and a very angry Severus in a grey nightshirt opened the door.

"Go away," he snarled.

Hermione pushed her way through and closed the door behind her. "You have a lot of explaining to do, Severus!" she yelled. "I've had quite enough of this mess, and I want you to talk to me, damn it!"

He turned and walked towards his sitting room. Hermione followed him. "I am not through, Severus!" she roared.

"I am," he said coldly.

She looked at him in shock while the tears filled her eyes. "You can't mean it," she gasped. "You can't! You love me. I love you."

Severus remained stoic as he looked down at her. "I am growing tired of waiting for a child to grow up. You seem to have your pick of suitors. I hear Viktor Krum has had his eye on you since he arrived. I'm sure any day now he'll be asking you to the Yule Ball. Why don't you go with him? Or at least with someone your own age," he said coldly.

Hermione barked a laugh. "My own age? I'm thirty-five, Severus. That would make you the closest to my age. Why are you doing this? We are so close now. Just a few more months and we can be together the way things used to be!"

He let out an impatient growl. "Things will NEVER be the way they used to be!" he shouted as he banged his fist on top of his desk "Do I love you? Yes. I will always love you, Hermione. But I cannot have you in my life. Go and make a life for yourself in this timeline..."

Hermione strode over towards him and got as close to his face as she could. "...You know, Dumbledore told me the exact same thing when I first came to 1973! I made a life. I made a life with you. You and I are engaged! Where is it?" she demanded as she held out her hand.

"Where is what?" he snapped as he headed into his living quarters.

"Where are the rings?" she asked angrily.

He opened a drawer in his private desk and threw the rings at her. She caught the chain and saw her engagement ring and the wedding ring she had given to him during their last Christmas together.

"You've stopped wearing them?" she whispered.

"Just forget me, Hermione," he said sadly. "Go with Krum to the Ball, be young, enjoy your youth."

Hermione threw the rings back into his face. "You fucking arsehole! I had a youth. It was with you, and it was ~~ours~~ *ours*. It may not have been perfect, but we did the best we could, and we held on. We made Vows, Severus. Don't you forget it!" She turned and stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

She went back to her room and readied herself for the day. And as Severus had predicted, by the end of it, Viktor Krum had approached her and asked her to be his date for the Ball.

Hermione said, "Yes."

Hermione was thoroughly miserable. She really felt it was all over for her and Severus. Horatius had been so wrong. Love does know time, and their time had run its course. She threw herself into nagging Harry about preparing for the next task and how to figure out the clue in the egg.

But he always said, "C'mon, Hermione! It's Christmastime!"

She knew she had been shirty lately, and she felt badly about it, but when she overheard Ron, Harry, Fred, and George talking about getting dates, she was repulsed by Ron's callous remarks.

"Oh, I see," she said. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?"

"Er...yeah, that sounds about right," Ron replied.

"I'm going to bed!" she snapped.

She went to her room and was ambushed by Lavender and Parvati. They had sworn to secrecy not to spill the news about Viktor. She had said she wanted it to be a surprise. She had also told them she wanted them to make her drop-dead gorgeous. At this age, the last time, she still hadn't been able to tame her hair. It hadn't been until her seventh year that she'd achieved the length she needed to weigh down the bushiness and tame the curls into something attractive.

So tonight was to be a practice night for her outfit, hair and make-up. She wanted to be happy and act excited, and she thought she did a fair job of it, but inwardly, her heart was breaking. She didn't want Viktor; she wanted Severus.

She dreamt of him that night. Dreamt of them making love in the bed at Spinner's End where he had first declared his feelings for her. She remembered how good his hands and lips felt on her skin, how intensely he looked at her as he moved inside her. When she woke, the thought of never feeling him take her into his arms made her feel so broken up, she cried desperately.

The Yule Ball was to be the most exciting time of her year; however, Hermione felt desperate and extremely sad. She had a shimmering blue dress that showed off her increasing, womanly curves. Lavender and Parvati worked a dream on her hair, pulling it up into a graceful twist with wisps of ringlets to brush her cheeks and neck. Her make-up was perfection, and the shoes were lovely. They were of blue satin that matched the dress attractively. Hermione fastened the clasp on the pearl necklace that her mother had given to her for her fifteenth birthday with the matching pearl and diamond earrings that hung delicately from her small ears. She decided to make her entrance alone. She peered over the banister and saw Harry and Ron with Parvati and Padma. She swallowed and looked for Severus. He wasn't anywhere to be seen. She did, though, see Viktor in his Durmstrang uniform. He looked intimidating and, she had to admit, a bit dashing.

She walked down the main staircase, and the gasps of the people around her made her smile brightly. Viktor met her at the bottom of the stairs and kissed her hand. He swept her away to the entrance of the Great Hall, where all the champions would lead the procession into what was now the Ballroom. At McGonagall's signal, they all walked in. Viktor led her to the Head Table where all the champions and their dates were to eat. She knew that down at the other end, Severus was watching her talk with Viktor. It was difficult. The boy had a terrible time pronouncing her name. She tried repeatedly to say, "Her-MY-O-knee" while he kept saying "Her-my-ninny." She finally gave it up and decided to ask him questions about Durmstrang instead. That way she wouldn't have to talk, just nod and pretend she actually gave a damn.

After the meal, the champions were to begin the dancing portion of the evening. Hermione's hand trembled as it lay atop of Viktor's strong arm. She allowed Viktor to lead her to their prearranged spot on the dance floor, which just happened to be right in front of Severus. She refused to meet his eyes. She had been humiliated enough. Viktor was an incredible dancer, light on his feet and very comfortable in leading her around the floor.

"Her-my-ninny," he said, "you look vonderful, tonight."

"Thank you, Viktor," she replied.

They danced for a while, and then she danced with Harry. He wasn't having a great time either.

"Harry, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, it's just I waited too long, and now the girl I wanted to ask got taken by another champion," he mumbled.

"Cho?" she asked. "Oh, Harry, I am so sorry."

He shrugged. "Can't do anything now, can I?"

"Harry," she offered. "If it's any consolation, I too know what it feels like not be with the person you want."

He gave her a smile, and they walked off the dance floor. He said he was going to go for a walk with Ron. She went and sat down to have punch with Viktor.

Later, Hermione was growing tired. She was heading to bed when she was stopped Harry and Ron.

"Hermione, you won't believe it!" said Ron breathlessly.

"What?" she said, confused.

Harry spoke up. "We just saw Karkaroff and Snape talking in the garden. Snape was saying he didn't see what all the fuss was about, and then Karkaroff yelled at him, saying that 'You can't pretend it's not happening! It's been getting clearer and clearer for months.' Then he said he was concerned."

Ron interrupted. "Then Snape said he should just take off, and he'd make his excuses for him."

They stopped, still catching their breaths. "Is that all?" Hermione asked.

"Isn't it enough?" asked Harry incredulously. "Don't you see, Hermione? This means that Karkaroff and Snape are friendly or at least were at one time."

"Well, as interesting as that was, I'm sure we'll figure it all out sooner or later. Now, if you don't mind, I'm quite exhausted and want to go to bed," she replied tiredly.

The boys went back into the ballroom where the dancing was still going on. Hermione hiked up the front of her dress and began to ascend the stairs. As soon as she was out of view from the entrance way, a cold hand wrapped itself around her arm and pulled her into an alcove.

Hermione tore her arm out of Severus' grasp. "I am growing weary from your manhandling of my person, Severus. Now, what is this all about?"

She stood with her arms crossed, glaring at him in fury. He captured her into his embrace and kissed her hungrily.

"I'm a damn fool," he whispered between kisses. When he finally let her go, he looked at her. "I love you, Hermione. You know I love you."

"Yes, I am aware of that," she replied angrily as she pushed him away and straightened her dress.

"You are so beautiful, Hermione," he breathed as his hand hovered over one breast, wanting to touch it, but knowing he couldn't. "You look just like you did when we were seventeen," he replied. "Can you forgive me, Hermione? I am so afraid."

Hermione knew that look on his face. He really meant it. He had already been kicking his own arse all evening.

"Seventeen, Severus? You do realize you are nearly thirty-six?"

Severus leaned into her and whispered, "Hermione, there will always be that seventeen-year-old boy in me wanting to *bənside you*," he purred.

"I know, Severus," she whispered as she ran her hand up and down his arm. "Everything will work itself out."

He raised the material covering his left arm and showed her the Dark Mark. It was becoming darker. "Hermione, I don't want you harmed. I thought foolishly I could keep you safe by driving you away."

"Like last time?" she said angrily as she grabbed his wrist and glared at the Dark Mark. "How could you keep this from me! You have been so cruel, Severus, and not only deliberately cruel, you failed to trust our love all because of your petty jealousy! Our love doesn't know time, and it certainly will not bow to the Dark Lord. But damn it to hell, it certainly does have its limits! We made Vows, Severus. You are mine, and I am yours...forever! Don't you keep me in the dark about all this and try to pour your fears and anxieties into making me feel bad for just trying to keep up all of this subterfuge!"

"Yes," he replied softly as he took her again into his arms and kissed her brutally. "I hate this feeling that I'm fifteen again, having to beg for affection. It was hard enough the first time. I hate this feeling that I might lose you to Krum!" She pressed herself against him, and he moaned.

"I want you, Hermione. You look so beautiful. I hated every minute you were in that idiot's arms. Promise me, you won't let him touch you?"

"I promise, Severus," she whispered. "Please don't worry. You don't have anything to be concerned about. You are the only one for me. You always have been."

His eyes roved over her body lustfully, and Hermione could tell he was suppressing the urge to take her. He stopped himself and sighed. "Okay, just a few months more, and then it'll be over. You will be living with me again, Hermione! You're mine, all mine!" he said desperately as he cupped her face. He produced her engagement ring from inside his robes and placed it on her finger.

"You know I can't wear this now," she replied.

"Soon, but for now just around your lovely neck," he said as he traced the bare skin around her neckline. He pulled his necktie loose, "I have mine on as well. We won't give up. I can't promise I won't get jealous ever again, but I do love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she whispered.

He let her go, and she walked back to Gryffindor tower and placed the ring into her vanity until she could put it on without anyone noticing. A tap of her wand placed her signature on it. Nothing could open it but her wand.

Parvati and Lavender came in, laughing and giggling. They had a great time, or at least Parvati did once she had ditched Harry and went off with one of the Durmstrang lads.

They asked Hermione about her night, and Hermione smiled and said, "It was perfect."

The first day of the second term was a disaster. The *Daily Prophet* came out with an article that was devastating for Hagrid.

"Damn that woman!" Hermione seethed as she read the article. "Who does she think she is, doing something like this? I knew...I just knew it! Hagrid never should have let that woman near him. Interview, my arse!"

"What gets me is how did she find out?" Ron whispered.

"Maybe she heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime at the Ball," Hermione said quietly.

"Hermione, we were there hiding behind one of the statues. We didn't want them to catch us out there right after getting yelled at by Snape. They weren't talking very loud either. We would have seen her!" Ron said excitedly.

They were all confused then. This was definitely a mess. Hagrid had himself holed up in his hut, refusing to teach classes or receive visitors...all because of that blasted article.

It contained all the mistakes Dumbledore had been making hiring his staff. First, Moody, but then she zeroed in on Hagrid, outing him as a half-breed giant whose mother had abandoned him as a baby and was living somewhere in one of the giant communities in Europe. She painted Hagrid as a bloodthirsty, reckless sub-human, who was highly dangerous for the students of Hogwarts. She also called for Hagrid to get the sack. They tried to figure out how she would have gotten her hands on such information, but kept coming up short.

That Saturday, they went to Hogsmeade and went into the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer. They saw Ludo Bagman with a group of surly goblins.

"Does that man ever go to his office?" Hermione murmured.

"Come on," Harry said. "We're supposed to be looking for Hagrid."

Mr. Bagman glanced over to their table and made a beeline for Harry. He took Harry to the side and left Hermione and Ron behind.

Hermione watched the interchange with fascination. Abruptly, he left, and Harry came back to the table.

"You won't guess what he said to me!" he told them in a hushed tone.

"What?" Hermione and Ron asked.

"He offered help for the second task!" he said incredulously.

"That's dishonest!" Hermione sputtered. "He's a judge!"

"I'm sure Dumbledore wouldn't be too happy if he knew Bagman was up to this," Harry added.

"I wonder if he's giving the same consideration to Cedric?" Hermione wondered.

"Who cares?" said Ron.

"What was that business with the goblins, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Apparently, they are on the look-out for Crouch. He's not been coming to work, sending messages to work and having Percy fill in for him."

"What, you mean Weatherby?" Ron said.

Harry laughed. "Funny though, why would they be after Crouch of all people?" he mused.

"Uh-oh," said Ron quietly. "Look what the kneazle dragged in."

They turned and saw Rita Skeeter making her way through the crowd. Hermione wanted to scratch her eyes out after what she had done to Hagrid.

"Harry!" she squealed as soon as she spotted him. "How lovely! Why don't you come and join..."

"I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot broomstick," said Harry furiously. "What did you have to do that to Hagrid for?"

"Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry," she said simply.

"Who cares if he is a half-giant?" Harry shouted. "There is nothing wrong with him!"

The pub grew quiet, and Hermione was begging inwardly for Harry to settle down. Rita just smiled and pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill and said, "How about giving me an interview about the Hagrid you know, Harry?" she offered.

Hermione stood up and held her bottle of butterbeer like a grenade. "You are a wretched woman," she said through gritted teeth. "You couldn't care less about the truth. Anything for a story, anything for a Galleon, just as long as you get what you want. You're just a prostitute behind your flashy photographer and handy pen! Even Ludo Bagman..."

"Sit down, you silly girl!" she snarled. "I know things about Ludo Bagman that would curl your hair...not that it needs it," she added, looking at her bushy hair.

"Come on, Ron, Harry," she said while keeping her glare on Rita. "The quality of the clientele has significantly lowered all of a sudden."

With that, they left. Ron was shaking his head. "Hermione, you'll be next. She's a vindictive piece of baggage, that one," he warned.

"Let her try!" she sneered. "Silly little girl, am I? She'll soon learn not to shoot off her mouth so quickly if I have anything to do with it!"

"You don't want to start upsetting her, Hermione. She's pretty rotten when she wants to be," Ron warned her.

"She can't scare me into silence. I'm not afraid of her," she said fiercely as Harry and Ron worked hard to keep up with her strides.

They made their way to Hagrid's, now that they knew he wasn't drowning his sorrows in Hogsmeade. Hermione banged on the door. She wasn't going away without a face-to-face with her old friend.

"Hagrid, open the damn door, or I'll blast it down!" she shouted.

She was shocked when Dumbledore opened the door. The three visitors stood in solidarity and demanded to see Hagrid.

After a lot of tears, talking and trying to cheer the half-giant up, he felt a lot better about things. He agreed to come back to class and not let the article and the re-buff he suffered from Madame Maxime get him down.

The next day, Harry confessed to Hermione he still hadn't figured out the egg clue.

"Harry!" she chided, "You lied to me! You told me you had already worked it out."

They were in Charms class, working on Summoning Charms. Since Hermione had already taught him about these charms, they could both talk effortlessly as they worked.

"Just get off the egg, Hermione!" Harry snapped. "I need to tell you about Snape and Moody."

Harry went into great detail about last night's activities. How when he had been hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, he had gotten stuck in the sinkhole, only to be nearly caught by Filch and then Snape, who was furious that someone had been in his storeroom.

"Who was in the storeroom?" Hermione asked as she flicked her wrist and sent a pillow flying neatly across the room.

"The Map said Barty Crouch!" he whispered.

"How can that be?" Hermione exclaimed. "He's been so sick, he couldn't even come to the Yule Ball."

"Well, the point is that Moody showed up, and he and Snape had a bit of a row. I could tell Snape is scared of him. Snape then mentioned something about Moody having searched his office and quarters earlier last term for evidence of dark artifacts at one time. He reminded Moody that nothing had been found."

"Moody surely has it in for Snape, doesn't he?" said Ron.

"I find it highly suspicious that Moody showed up when he did," said Hermione.

"Well, if he's trailing Snape all the time, then it makes sense," said Harry.

"There are too many variables!" Hermione insisted. "Why was Crouch in Snape's storeroom? How was it that Moody showed up right at the same time? It's all very fishy to me."

Hermione's brain clicked together. What if Moody wasn't Moody at all? She needed to find out which ingredients had been taken from Severus' stores. Talking to Severus would have to wait. Harry had figured out the riddle of the egg, but had no idea as to come up with a plan for the task.

They rummaged through the library, looking diligently for anything that could help Harry stay underwater for an hour. Finally, Fred and George showed up and said, "Ron, you and Hermione are to go straight to McGonagall's office."

"Why?" asked Ron.

"I dunno," said George. "But she was looking quite grim. Best get going," he said as they left.

Hermione and Ron wished Harry luck, just in case they didn't see him before the morning.

Ron and Hermione walked to McGonagall's office, and when they went inside, Dumbledore was waiting there with her.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 of 74

The second task is over, and Hermione grows increasingly furious with Rita Skeeter's article and the problems it causes. Also, a visit with an old acquaintance brings Hermione a bit closer to the mystery of Mad-Eye Moody.

A/N: My deepest thanks to JKR for letting me use her words and her world so I could write this fic. Also, my gratitude to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their tireless work.

When Hermione woke up, she was in the middle of the Black Lake, holding onto Viktor Krum's shoulders. His strong arms were wrapped tightly around her middle. Eager to get out of his embrace, she eagerly got up onto the floating stand everyone was gathered on, and she jumped up to be immediately enfolded by one of Madam Pomfrey's blankets.

Viktor, clad in another blanket, said, "Hermy-own-ninny, I would luff for you to come and visit me in Bulgaria this summer. I think you would like to see my homeland." He leaned in closer to her. "I haff never thought for a girl this vay before," he whispered shyly in her hair as his lips nearly brushed her ear.

"I'll have to talk to you about that later, Viktor," she said uncomfortably as she maneuvered away from him. Right now, all she cared about was Harry and Ron.

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed as she watched him appear suddenly with Ron and Gabrielle, Fleur Delacour's sister, in tow. Fleur had been most hysterical that her sister would die, and Hermione had waited with everyone else as the minutes ticked by. As soon as Harry got onto the barge, Hermione hugged him fiercely.

"That was brilliant! We were so scared for you!" she exclaimed.

Viktor was hovering over her and commenting she had a beetle in her hair. She brushed his hand away in annoyance and continued to chat and cheer along with the others about Harry's success.

"Harry Potter wins 45 points, due to his example of moral fiber in the face of danger!" announced Ludo Bagman. "Also, the third and final task will take place on June 24th."

Hermione and Ron hugged and congratulated him together.

"Whew," Harry said. "At least I can take a breather. June, that's loads away from today."

"It really isn't Harry," said Hermione. "However, you do deserve a nice break."

Over the next month, Hermione was growing increasingly tetchy and shirty. It seemed that she was yet again a part of the latest gossip concerning Viktor Krum picking her as his "hostage." What was even worse was that Viktor was following her around, constantly wanting to study with her. She found him annoying, but sweet. He didn't mean any real harm, and it wasn't his fault the girls were gushing over him. He certainly didn't lead them on. So, Hermione decided to put up with his presence. She just hoped that Severus wouldn't think she was reconsidering anything.

A week later, a note came from Sirius telling them to meet him outside of Hogsmeade on their next weekend outing. It was all the three could think about. Harry said he feared he had overly concerned Sirius and now he was risking his life because of him. Hermione tried to get Harry to see the bright side of things...at least they could ask Sirius questions about Barty Crouch.

One day as they made their way towards Potions, Hermione caught Pansy Parkinson giggling at her with a bunch of other fourth-year Slytherin girls. Once she sat down at the desk, Pansy came over and handed her a magazine. Severus was writing notes for the day's lesson on the board, so she hastily flipped through it. There, in the center was a picture of Harry, and underneath was an article entitled, "Harry Potter's Secret Heartache."

Hermione groaned. Severus was going to have kittens when he saw this. She scanned it quickly while Ron leaned over to hiss in her ear, "I told you! I told you not to annoy that Skeeter woman, and now she's made you out to be some...some sort of *scarlet woman*!"

Hermione turned slowly to look at him. "Good Lord, Ron," she whispered as she began to giggle. "Wherever did you hear that one?"

Ron blushed. "It's what my mum calls them," he mumbled.

Hermione sniffed. "Well, if that's the best Rita Skeeter can do, the hag is losing her touch," she said as she flung the copy of *Witch Weekly* onto an empty chair. "What a pile of rubbish."

She glanced over at the Slytherins, who were waiting for an emotional display of some sort. She gave a sarcastic smile and a small wave. There was no way she was going to allow a group of teenagers to get her goat!

Later as she was working her scarab beetles into powder with her pestle, she said aloud, "You know, I wonder how she could have known?"

"Please tell me you haven't been messing about with Love Potions!" moaned Ron.

"Don't be absurd!" she snapped. "It's just that when Viktor pulled me out of the lake, we were talking alone and he was whispering, so no one heard us. He asked then about coming to visit him in Bulgaria and then said that he really liked me. How did she find out?"

"What did you tell him?" asked Ron.

"Well, honestly, I was far more concerned with you and Harry at the moment," she replied.

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is, Miss Granger," said an icy voice from behind them, and all three of them jumped, "I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione was growing angry. She knew Severus and he was getting jealous again. The rumor mill had obviously reached his ears, and he was getting afraid.

"What is this?" he said as he picked up the magazine Hermione had discarded in the empty chair next to her. "Ah... reading magazines under the table as well?" Snape added. "A further ten points from Gryffindor... oh, but of course..." Severus' black eyes glittered as he found the article Rita Skeeter wrote about the triangular relationship between Harry, Hermione, and Viktor. "Miss Granger must keep up with all the heartbreaks she has caused this year," he said snidely.

The Slytherins sniggered as Severus began to read the article aloud. Hermione was incensed. She had never been this furious with Severus in all her life *How can he do this to me? This is a mockery of everything we are!* she thought.

She toyed with the necklace that held her engagement ring and tried to remember why she loved this person when he was doing his damndest to be so unlovable.

Each sentence he read in that derisive tone cut at her heart. She wasn't going to cry; though she was going to kick his ass!

After he had finished, he moved them apart and had Harry up near him where he could hiss all he wanted about how much he loathed him. Hermione focused on her work, biding her time, and then he was going to pay.

Then suddenly, Igor Karkaroff came in the room like a storm, demanding to talk to Snape. He tried to brush him off, but Karkaroff would not be deterred. Finally, class ended, and everyone left. Hermione left as well, but waited outside. She was glad Potions was the last class of the day. Nothing was going to stop her from giving him a piece of her mind.

She noticed she hadn't seen Harry, and at that moment, she heard yelling, then a couple of minutes later, Harry bolted out the door. "Come on!" he hissed. "I've got something big to tell you!"

"No, you go ahead, Harry. I have to speak with Snape." Harry gave her a look that said, "Don't piss him off more," but she brushed it away and said, "Go, Harry. I will see you at dinner."

She waited, and about forty-five minutes later, Igor Karkaroff stormed out of the classroom. He glared at Hermione and went up the dungeon stairs. She slipped into the office where Severus had his back to the door. He was leaning his fists atop his desk, his posture defeated.

Hermione flicked her wrist and shut and silenced the door. Severus whirled around, brandishing his wand.

"Get out!" he yelled.

Hermione dropped her bag and strode over to him. "Hey, who do you think you're talking to, you prick!" she snarled.

He looked at her with amusement.

"I'm so glad I give you so much entertainment, Severus. I never realized that was my true calling. Now, do you mind wiping that damn smirk off your face and telling me what the hell possessed you to act like a complete fuckwit in front of everyone today?" she bellowed.

"You have been playing me for a fool, Hermione. I see it with my own eyes!" he snarled. "You are constantly with that dunderhead, Krum. He follows you around like a puppy on a leash. There is only one reason a grown man would stoop to such idiocy!"

Hermione laughed in his face. "You're punishing me because he happens to fancy me? I don't get it. I just don't get it. We went through this years ago over Remus, and you were more understanding then! I could understand a seventeen-year-old boy acting like an arse in front of everyone, but not a grown man!" she shouted.

He remained silent. Hermione folded her arms. "I'm waiting, Severus. I am not leaving until you start telling me the truth...the entire truth. That means no half-truths or lies of omission."

She picked up the magazine that he had read from off of his desk. She crumpled it in her raised hand as she shook it at him. "I can't believe you, of all people, would fall for this tripe!" she yelled as she threw it in the waste bin.

"You have no idea the amount of stress I am under, Hermione. Igor is constantly on my back, and so is Moody. The Mark is growing blacker every day. Soon, Hermione, he'll be back. When that happens, you and I shall be right where we were on Graduation Day. I have to keep my Vow to Dumbledore, and I *know* you won't follow," he said

sadly.

Hermione went over and forced his face to look at hers. "It's different this time," she said as she searched his eyes with hers. "I'm not a child anymore. I may look it, but it's me, Severus, it's *me*! It will always be *me*!" She took his hand, placed it over her heart, and said, "Inside here, inside this husk is the woman you love. The outer shell is different, but it's me!"

She searched his eyes for recognition. All she could see was fear. She grasped his arms and said, "Remember when you took me to the record store and we sat in the booth listening to Elvis Presley? Remember that song?" she whispered.

"Yes," he mumbled as he lowered his head.

She began to breathe the words in his ear, "'Wise men say, only fools rush in, but I can't help falling in love with you.'

"Remember, love does not know time," she whispered and then she kissed him softly on his lips. He grabbed her and held her close before rushing them into to his private quarters, the home they had shared together. He lowered her onto the bed they had once shared and began to kiss her madly while hovering over her.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered as he kissed her face and throat. "Tell me, does he kiss you the way I do?"

She pushed him upright, and she sat up. "Severus, I made a vow that there would be no other man for me. Viktor likes me, it's true, but I do not return his affections. Nor has he ever tried to kiss me other than a peck on the back of my hand during the Yule Ball."

She got up off the bed and shook her head. "Why is it so hard for you to trust me? To believe in me? Why do you always expect the worst after all I've done to prove the opposite?"

Severus punched a fist into the mattress as he kept his head down. "I told you I could not promise I would never be jealous again, Hermione. It's hard being older; I see my youth starting to go away. I'm thirty-six, and you have the body of a teenager. How can I compete with all the young wizards?"

Hermione straddled him on the bed and placed her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. She took out her necklace with her engagement ring on it and said, "There is no competition. For there to be one would mean the competitors were on equal footing. It cannot be, my love. You and I have a rich history that goes back decades. We are bound, you and I, remember?"

Severus leaned forward and embraced her. "I miss you," he choked out. His body was shaking, and she knew he was crying. She held him and whispered, "Let me stay the night in our bed. Let me care for you, Severus."

He nodded, and she gathered her things. "I shall return after dinner," she promised.

"Hermione," he called out to stop her. She turned to face him, and he looked at her with pain-filled eyes.

"I am so very sorry I have continued to hurt you."

Later, as the gossips talked about Hermione and Krum being secret lovers, Hermione was curled up with her real lover, although the only intimacy they shared was of holding the other's hand and baring their souls.

"What are you doing today?" Severus asked her in the morning while she fussed with her hair.

"To Hogsmeade, and to meet up with an old acquaintance," she replied absent-mindedly.

"Who?" he asked suspiciously.

"Sirius," she replied.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Sirius is Harry's godfather, and he is very concerned with this tournament. He wants to talk to Harry about Karkaroff and also enlighten him a little of how things were when the Dark Lord was in power the first time," she explained.

Severus made a growling noise in the back of his throat.

"If it's any consolation, love, you and Sirius are of one mind. He thinks the Dark Lord is returning, and that it's only a matter of time. He's been warning Harry all year to keep focused on his tasks and his nose out of trouble."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way out of the bustling streets of Hogsmeade to the outskirts where Sirius told them he would be waiting. At the end of a lane, near a stile, was a black, shaggy dog, carrying newspapers in his mouth and looking oddly familiar.

"Hullo, Sirius," said Harry.

The black dog gave them all a good sniff and then wagged his tail once, turned around, and trotted away from them towards a hardscrabble hill at the foot of the mountains. They followed Sirius as he bounded and climbed up the descent of the mount. It was a hard climb, but once they reached a small entrance of a cave, they followed Sirius inside and plopped down on the hard dirt floor, panting and out of breath.

They turned at the sound of a strange noise and saw the orange eyes of Buckbeak, the hippogriff. They all bowed respectfully, and he bowed in return. After that they collapsed onto the ground and Sirius, who had in the meanwhile changed back into his human form, joined them. He looked horrible! His hair was even more matted and filthy than when they had previously seen him. He was also terribly thin. He sniffed in the air and rasped, "Chicken!"

Harry tossed him his rucksack, and Sirius tore into the chicken and bread like the starving man he was.

"Thanks," he said as he chewed. "Been livin' mostly off of rats. Can't steal too much food in the village. Can't risk getting caught."

"What are you doing here, Sirius?" Harry asked.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," he replied as he ate. "Don't worry about it. I'm pretending to be a loveable stray."

He glanced at all of them, and his face turned serious. "Look, I want to be on the spot. Let's just say things are... fishier. I've been stealing papers every day one gets thrown out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one getting worried."

He nodded towards a stack of old newspapers as he continued to inhale his food. Ron began to unfold them and look at the headlines.

"But what if they catch you?" Harry said, sounding panicked.

"Don't worry! The only ones around here that know I am an Animagus are you three, Dumbledore, and Snape."

Harry and Ron snorted. "Snape would love to get a chance at you!" Harry seethed.

"Don't think so," Sirius said as he gnawed on a chicken bone.

"What makes you say that?" Harry challenged him.

"Snape doesn't want trouble with Dumbledore. Besides, Dumbledore made him take an oath." He stole a glance at Hermione while the boys exhaled and calmed down. Hermione and Sirius spoke volumes in that glance. They both knew there had not been any such oath. It was Severus' devotion to Hermione that kept him safe. Hermione would never forget how badly she had judged Sirius for so many years based on incomplete knowledge and prejudice. This was her way of atonement, and Severus would respect that.

Ron passed Harry the *Daily Prophets*. "Mysterious Illness of Barty Crouch, Ministry Witch Still Missing...Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved."

"Hasn't been seen in public since November..." Harry read.

"But they make it sound like he's dying!" Ron said.

"That is wrong!" Harry said definitively. "He cannot be so ill if he managed to get up here..."

"My brother is Crouch's assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork," he explained.

"Well, he did look ill," Harry said, "the night my name came out of the Goblet."

"Well, he's probably feeling the crunch now that he doesn't have Winky to help him," Hermione added.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah, at the World Cup," Harry said. Then he told him the whole story of getting his wand stolen, Winky being caught with it, and the Dark Mark.

"Harry, where was the last time you knew you had your wand with you?" Sirius asked.

"At the bleacher seats at the game."

"Had you seen this Winky around you at the time?" he asked pointedly.

Harry looked puzzled. "Yeah, she was in the top box next to us. There was an empty seat for Mr. Crouch, but he never came."

Sirius was pacing now as he ate his chicken leg. "So, after you left your seats, did you check for your wand?" he asked.

"Uh, no," Harry said guiltily. "So, you think my wand was stolen up there in the top box during the game?"

"It's possible," Sirius said simply.

"No!" said Hermione. "Winky did not steal that wand. I talked with her. She's in a right state. She's lost without Mr. Crouch. She still thinks he is her master. She wouldn't do anything to upset him. There has to be another way Harry's wand got stolen and used."

"Well, was anyone else was sitting around you?" he asked.

"Loads of people," answered Harry. "Bulgarian ministers, Cornelius Fudge, the Malfoys..."

"The Malfoys!" Ron said with an ugly sneer. "I just bet it was Lucius Malfoy."

"Anyone else?" Sirius asked.

"No," the boys answered.

"You forgot Ludo Bagman," said Hermione as she was stroking Buckbeak's wings.

"Can't say I know much about him other than he was a fantastic Quidditch player once. What's he like now?" Sirius asked.

"He's taken a fancy to Harry!" Hermione said laughing.

Sirius looked confused. "What's this?"

"Oh, he's just taken an interest in my doing well on the tasks is all," Harry replied.

"Wonder why?" Sirius mused. "When the Dark Mark was conjured and the elf discovered, what did Crouch do?"

"He went to look around the bushes for signs of other people, but there wasn't anything," said Harry.

"He didn't want it pinned on his elf, well, that's understandable," he replied. "But then he sacked her?"

"Yes," answered Hermione. "Poor thing. Just because she wouldn't stay in her tent and risk being trampled to death by all the running people."

"This is interesting, this is," Sirius replied. "You add up these incidences, and it *doesn't* add up. I know Barty Crouch. There is no way being sick or under 'a bit of strain' would keep him from taking part in the Tournament. He's worked far too hard to not be a part of it now."

Hermione was getting nervous. They were getting into dangerous territory now. She kept quiet and let Sirius tell his story.

"You know Crouch?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes. I know Crouch. He was the one who threw me in Azkaban without a trial."

Hermione winced inwardly. She knew all too well those terrible days of Sirius' arrest and then the torture of the Longbottoms.

"No!" said Ron and Harry together.

"Yes, it made my head swim how fast I found myself imprisoned," he said as he stole another glance at Hermione. She swallowed and looked back into his hollowed eyes as he continued. "Crouch was the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic. His star was rising high those days."

He was a great wizard, powerful in his magic and power-hungry as well. He was never a Voldemort supporter. Never that...he was very outspoken against Voldemort and even those who were sympathetic to him. But that wasn't too far-fetched. Many people were outspoken in those days. You had to be in a way, but you're too young. You can't understand how it was," he said shaking his head.

"Tell us, then," whispered Hermione.

She didn't know why she was doing this. Torture? A means of penance? A desire to hear his story because he had been denied so long? Hermione couldn't understand it. She just wanted to hear him talk about it.

"All right," he said looking into her eyes. "Imagine Voldemort's in power right now. You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people to do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You're scared for yourself, your family, for everyone you love. Every week, news comes in about another raid, another death, another disappearance, more torturing... the Ministry of Magic is in complete disarray, they don't know what to do, they're dashing about trying to keep it all hushed up from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying as well. Terror everywhere, fear everywhere... panic... confusion... that's how it used to be."

Hermione's eyes were filled with tears. Her heart was racing. She remembered some of those days; some she had mercifully escaped by running off and disappearing into Muggle London. She wondered if Sirius knew about what little she tried to do, how she had managed to be a snag in the Death Eater's fun of Muggle-baiting, torture, and rape?

Her tears spilled over, and she was glad Harry and Ron could just chalk it up to her being a girl. She wanted to scream, "I did what I had to do! If I hadn't have left, yes, James would be here, but Harry would not, and Harry is the answer to defeating Voldemort. *He's the one!*"

Sirius glanced over and noticed her tears. Hermione caught his eye watching her and wiped them away. "Well, times like that bring out the best and worst in people," Sirius continued softly. "I even heard about a witch who completely fell off the Ministry's radar and went on a vigilante spree, tracking down Death Eaters and saving Muggle women and girls from being raped and tortured. After You-Know-Who was gone, she came back. 'Never would of thought it of her,' said the people who had known her.

"Others, like Crouch, well, he saw the potential for power. Now, his methods may have been good to implement...I don't know. All I do know is that he allowed Aurors to use the same torture methods the Death Eaters were using in order to bring them to justice. Now to me, that's not justice. Old Mad-Eye Moody, your Defense teacher. He was the best Auror...ever!" he said as he slapped his hand on his knee.

"He never liked to stoop to that level. Now he trained his people to recognize it and fight off Unforgivables, but he never used it to take down a Death Eater, and he has my respect for it."

"What if Moody saw a wizard try to hex another wizard while their back was turned?" Hermione asked tentatively.

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "He'd hex that wizard so bad he'd feel it for quite a while," he said darkly. "Moody takes things seriously and has a high standard."

"He wasn't one of the renegades that took fun or sport in hexing another person, right?" Hermione asked again.

Sirius looked confused. "Of course. Moody is all business. He takes dirty pool seriously. That doesn't mean he won't stoop to vicious teaching methods. He wants all of his students to know what kind of evil is out there."

Sirius changed the subject back to Crouch. "There were a lot of people after Voldemort's fall clamoring for a change. It looked as if he might get the top job...until his son was caught with the Lestrage brothers and the wife of one of them, Bellatrix Black Lestrage."

"Your relative?" said Harry incredulously.

"Bella is my cousin. She's Draco's aunt, Narcissa's sister. A real nutter, too. She was deranged before Azkaban; she's probably beyond all rational thought by now. Anyway, Crouch's son, Barty Jr. was with them on their torture spree. Got life in Azkaban. Sent there by his dear old dad," he said with a sinister grin.

"His own son?" Ron whispered.

"Yep," Sirius said lightly as he threw his chicken bone towards Buckbeak. "Perhaps he should have stayed home more nights instead of furthering his political career."

"Was his son really a Death Eater?" asked Harry.

"I don't know," Sirius answered truthfully. "I was there when he came in, screaming, crying for his mum...terrible. After a few days, he got quiet. They all got quiet after a while." Sirius sat for a bit with a haunted look in his eyes.

He shook himself out of it and said, "He was dead within a year. His Mum and Dad came to give him a bedside visit; his mum had been real sick from what I heard. He was dead within days after that. Saw him buried with my own eyes by the Dementors.

"So in the end, Crouch lost it all: wife, son, career. One moment a hero, one moment dishonored. The public couldn't respect a man who would send his own son to Azkaban. Perhaps if he had shown any emotion over it... I don't know. So in the end, Cornelius Fudge, who was 'on the job' the day Wormtail pulled his great disappearing act, started his own journey on the rise to fame, and he got the top job."

"Moody said Crouch was obsessed with catching Dark wizards," said Harry after a long pause.

"True," Sirius agreed. "Although, it could have been all mania, chasing after a dream. If he could catch just one more, then he could get back on top again."

"And he snuck into Snape's office, remember?" said Ron triumphantly.

"That's makes absolutely no sense," said Sirius, looking confused. "If Crouch wanted to get at Snape, then why isn't he pulling himself together and watching him during the Tournament? It's the perfect opportunity to poke around without looking like he's snooping. Why risk a middle of the night jaunt to Hogwarts?"

"So you do think Snape is up to something?" Ron asked eagerly.

Hermione groaned as she rolled her eyes. Ron huffed at her. Sirius looked at her pensively.

"Look, I don't care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape..." Hermione snapped.

"Oh, give it a rest, Hermione!" Ron said impatiently. "I know Dumbledore is brilliant and all that, but don't tell me that a clever Dark wizard couldn't fool him."

"Why did Snape save Harry's life our first year, then? Why didn't he just let him die?" she challenged Ron.

"I dunno...maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out..." he stammered.

"What d'you think, Sirius?" asked Harry loudly.

Sirius looked at Ron and Hermione. "I think they've both got a point. Ever since I found out Snape was teaching here, I wondered to myself 'why?' Why would Dumbledore hire him? He was neck deep into the Dark arts, famous for it. He knew more curses and hexes than most seventh-years when I met him as a firstie. He was a piece of

work. He turned out to be in a part of a gang that all became Death Eaters."

Hermione set her face firmly, looking at Sirius as if he had betrayed her. *Why can't he ever say anything nice about Severus?*

Sirius continued his count of the old Slytherin crowd, the ones that Sirius knew Hermione had dealt with, making deals for the safety of all Gryffindor Muggle-borns.

"Snape's clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble," he finished quietly.

"Snape knows Karkaroff and wants it all hushed up," said Ron.

"Yeah, you should have seen Snape's face when he barged into Potions yesterday!" Harry said quickly. "Snape's been avoiding him, but Karkaroff wouldn't be brushed off. Then he showed him something on his arm."

Sirius glanced at Hermione again without Harry and Ron getting wise. "He did, did he?" he asked. "Well, that could be very important. And if it's what I think, he's got a right to be afraid."

He looked at Hermione again and said, "There is also the fact that Dumbledore does trust Snape. And he does...fiercely. I don't know why...it was made clear that it was none of my business...but that Snape, for all his *nastiness*, is really Dumbledore's man."

"If that's true, then why are Moody and Crouch so keen on getting into his office?" Ron challenged him.

"Well," Sirius said as he shrugged, "Moody has always been one to go after his gut instinct. He's not about to take anyone's word for anything. He's always been a bit paranoid. That and the fact he never was able to nail Snape and kick his arse into Azkaban. That infuriated him. As for Crouch, well, we've already covered that. Imagine how huge it would be for him to discover a Death Eater hiding in Hogwarts under Dumbledore's radar all this time. Power-hungry!" he finished.

"Hey," Sirius said as he turned to Ron. "Your brother is Crouch's assistant; any chance you could get information on Crouch's whereabouts?"

"I reckon I can try," said Ron. "Although, I'd best be cautious. Percy acts like he's in love with him!"

"While you're at it, try and find out about any leads on Bertha Jorkins. Her mysterious disappearance sounds awfully familiar and upsetting," Sirius said ominously.

"Bagman told me they hadn't any," replied Harry.

Sirius shook his head. "Well, I read that article, and it was rubbish! The Bertha Jorkins I knew was not how Bagman made her out to be. Sure, she was on the dim side, but she knew how to gossip and had a memory like no one else! It used to get her into trouble in school, and I bet she's been quite a liability to the Ministry as well."

"It's half past three, boys," Hermione announced.

They all got up and said their goodbyes. When Hermione went to hug Sirius, he pressed a note into her hand. She shoved it in her pocket, and he gave her a wink.

She pressed on ahead with Ron so Harry could get some alone time with his godfather. After they all left Sirius at the stile, they walked on for a while in silence.

"Imagine living off rats!" said Ron, sounding disgusted.

"That's how much he loves you, Harry," Hermione whispered as she put her arm in his.

Harry smiled at her. She could see the pain in his eyes. He hated seeing Sirius like that. It hurt her as well.

"Perhaps now that we know where he is, we can at times leave some more food for him," she suggested.

"Yeah, that might help him out a bit. Thanks, Hermione," he said with a small smile.

"Makes me wonder," said Ron pensively.

"What?" asked Hermione.

"If Percy would do what Crouch did, put his own family into prison," he said.

"No," Harry said flatly.

"Dunno, Harry," Ron said, his brow furrowed. "Percy is awfully ambitious."

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 of 74

Hermione starts to bring Sirius food and drink alone, and they fight about the day Severus called Lily a Mudblood.

A/N: My thanks to JKR for her wonderful words. Soon, we will be departing the familiar and split off into a different existence. Watch for Chapter 45 and for the relationship between Sirius and Hermione. Again, my deepest thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their hard work!

"How is the mutt?" Severus asked upon Hermione's return.

"Hellacious," she replied. "He sends his regards," she answered back in the same smug tone Severus had just used. "He still has faith in Dumbledore, in spite of your *nastiness*."

Snape snorted as he took the drink she poured him. "How many months now?" he asked.

"Five and a half," she replied suspiciously. "Why?"

"Oh, just wondering," he said airily.

"Why, you want to do something about it?" she asked aggressively as she walked over to him, swallowing her drink in one gulp. She straddled him, and Severus began to back-peddle.

"Hermione, don't do anything rash," he said with a frown.

She captured his lips in a kiss. He tasted like firewhisky, but so did she, and it was really getting to her. She slid her hands up her jumper, pulling her bra aside, and squeezed her bare breasts. She began to rock herself against his erection as she continued to touch herself underneath her shirt.

"This is wrong," he groaned. "What are you doing with your hands up your jumper?"

"Come on, Severus," she cooed. "Just let me...*ah...angh...oh god!*"

"Hermione?" he asked as he cupped her face. Her face was still warm from her orgasm, and she had a content grin on her face. She practically purred as she snuggled into him.

"I do believe I have been used," he said, pretending to be offended.

"Why don't you let me help you with your problem?" she whispered in his ear.

"Hermione, I can take care of it myself," he said sharply.

"Can I watch?" she asked with her huge doe-eyes looking up at him with that look she knew worked wonders on him.

"I don't think so," he answered in a strained voice.

She nuzzled his ear and flicked it with her tongue. "You let me watch once," she said seductively.

"No, Hermione," he said, now sounding extremely strained. "Besides, that was before you came to this timeline."

"Let me listen," she whispered seductively. "I'll press my ear to the bathroom door, and you can talk dirty to me," she offered.

"And what will you be doing?" he asked deeply as she nipped his chin with her pink lips.

"I don't know, I guess you'll have to imagine..."

"Fuck!" he swore as he threw her off him. She laughed as he slammed the door behind him. She made her way towards the door and listened with relish to the moans and grunts of the man she loved. *Not much longer. We'll have to just work our way into it, so when the big night arrives, we won't be so tense*she plotted naughtily.

Later, as Hermione got ready for bed, she remembered the note that Sirius had passed to her discreetly as they had said goodbye. She took it out of her jeans pocket and opened it.

Dear Hermione,

I'm writing to apologize in advance for anything that I may say in front of Harry and Ron that may upset you. I want you to know that I will always have my differences with Snape, but I know that you were in a very precarious situation that you could never tell us all about back then. Dumbledore has visited and told me about your real history.

I hope you and I can truly place the past behind us. I hope you can forgive me for being so cruel to you. I still do not understand why you chose to be with Snape, but I will never tell Harry or anyone else about you. I also want you to know that I do appreciate Snape's sense of fair play, not turning me in. I know he won't accept my thanks, but I wanted you to know my gratitude.

Thank you,

Sirius

Hermione smiled as she threw the note into the fire. She was grateful that Sirius had grown a little. She was glad he was trying to mend the fences between them. She still didn't know if she should tell Severus about the note, but she sure felt better about Sirius now and was sad that he had lost Marlene while she still had Severus.

The next day, Ron, Harry, and Hermione went up to the owlery to mail Percy as they had promised Sirius they would. Afterwards, they went to the kitchens to see if they could talk to Winky.

"I also have to give Dobby his socks," Harry informed them. "After all, it was his idea to give me the gillyweed."

They were ambushed by eager house-elves when they entered. Harry was talking with Dobby, and Ron was asking for food while Hermione was looking around for Winky.

"Dobby," she asked. "Where is Winky?"

Dobby's ears fell. "Winky is not well, miss. Winky's been through six bottles a day now. She's there by the fire," he answered while pointing his finger in Winky's direction. "Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Professor Dumbledore is her master now."

"Hey, Winky," Harry said as he bent down to talk with her, "you don't know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he's stopped coming up to judge the Tournament."

Winky focused onto Harry. "Master has...*hic*...stopped coming?" she said sluggishly.

"Yeah," Harry said softly. "The *Daily Prophet* says he's ill. He hasn't been back since the first task."

"Master...*hic*...ill?" she said as she got to her feet, swaying. Her bottom lip began to tremble.

"But we don't know if it's really true," Harry said shrewdly.

"Master needs his...*hic*...Winky!" she said as she burst into sobs. "Master cannot manage by himself!"

"Other people can manage their housework by themselves, you know," Hermione said softly.

"No!" she said indignantly. "Master needs...*hic*...more help than...*hic*...housework! Master is...trusting...Winky with his most...*hic*...important secret!"

"What?" asked Harry.

Winky shook her head very hard, spilling butterbeer down herself. "Winky keeps...*hic*...master's secrets! You is nosing, you is!"

"Winky must not talk that way to Harry Potter!" said Dobby angrily.

"He is nosing...*hic*...into master's private and secret...*hic*...Winky is a good house-elf...*hic*...Winky keeps her silence!"

Winky suddenly passed out from the all the butterbeer she'd consumed. Harry turned to the others and said, "That's that then. I don't think we'll be getting more out of her."

They got the ham and other assorted pies and flagons of pumpkin juice and went back to the owlery to send them to Sirius.

The next morning, Hermione was eager to get her morning paper. She had taken a subscription of the *Daily Prophet* so she could see for herself what others were saying about Crouch. She was starting to get some sort of an idea, but the possibility seemed so far-fetched, she knew she needed to think on it more.

Instead of a paper, she received letters. She opened the first one, and it said that she was a wicked girl and that Harry deserved more than her. It also called her a Mudblood and told her to go back where she came from.

"Oh, how ridiculous!" she spat as she passed the note to Harry to read. The next one was just as nasty, but the third burned her hand upon opening.

"Ouch!" she said as the yellowish-green liquid poured onto her hand. Boils began to erupt, and it smelt heavily of petrol.

"Undiluted bubotuber pus!" said Ron as he picked up the envelope gingerly and sniffed it.

"Ow!" she said as tears formed in her eyes. She tried to clean off the pus, but the boils were erupting so fast, she was now in serious pain. She went directly to the infirmary to get sorted out.

She was back in time for the last of her Care of Magical Creatures class and explained to Hagrid about her lateness. Her hands were covered in bandages, and she felt simply awful.

Hagrid commiserated. He had been receiving his own set of hate mail since Rita Skeeter's article. They made their way slowly towards the Great Hall for lunch, and Ron began to grumble about not having money after he found out the gold he had given Harry at the World Cup had been leprechaun gold.

"Well, at least your hands aren't full of pus," she said in an attempt to make him feel better. As she struggled with her knife and fork, she said irritably, "I hate that woman! I am going to get Rita Skeeter back for this if it is the last thing I do!"

The hate mail carried on, and Hermione began to just chuck it in the fire. "It'll die down," she said. "But what I want to know is how on earth did she get all that private information? I already asked Professor Moody if he had detected if she were under an invisibility cloak, but he said 'no.'"

"Maybe she had you bugged," suggested Harry.

"Bugged?" Ron said. "What... you mean like fleas or something?"

Harry started to explain to Ron about Muggle spy detection and Hermione interrupted. "Will you two ever read *Hogwarts, A History*? Muggle devices will not work in this sort of magical field. So whatever she's doing, it's magical."

She stopped, and a flash of genius came over her. *A bug! That's it, a bug! I wonder if she is an illegal Animagus like Sirius? If that is it, I have her now!*

"I'll see you later," she said as she took off to speak with Professor McGonagall.

Minerva was shocked when Hermione told her of her suspicions.

"No," she gasped. Then after she thought about it, said, "Well, that would be right up her alley. Well, I can help you with that end. I will contact the Ministry to see if she is registered. They always let me look at their books, no questions asked."

"And you are sure you will know if she's registered or not?" Hermione asked.

"Definitely. And don't worry; I'm the soul of discretion," Minerva whispered.

Hermione sat back with her tea, a coy smile playing around the corners of her mouth. Oh, yes. Rita Skeeter was going to get hers.

While Harry was clandestinely sending food to Sirius by owl, Hermione was getting out of the castle with a little help from Dumbledore to pass along information and to bring fresh water and pumpkin juice.

One day, around Easter, after the high hike up the hill, Sirius was waiting as usual. He grabbed Hermione by the hand and helped her inside. She bowed to Buckbeak, he bowed to her, per their usual ritual, and she sat down on the dirt floor.

"So, no word from Ron's brother at the Ministry?" he asked as always.

"Nope," she answered as she caught her breath.

"Damn, Sirius, I wish these people would get onto clearing you so you won't have to live like this anymore," she said as she squinted around her.

Sirius barked a laugh. "Me too, although where could I go that would feel like home? This is just like Azkaban! Albeit without the Dementors, and having fresh air, fresh food, and a woman that visits me every week," he said with a wink.

Hermione laughed at his ability to see the bright side of things.

"You do know that Severus would be having kittens if he knew I was meeting you like this, right?" she asked.

"But, of course!" he said with a playful grin. "That's where I get my entertainment."

"Ah-ha," said Hermione, pointing her finger at him. "Well, let's get to business, shall we?"

"Fine. How is the Skeeter-baiting coming along?" he inquired.

"Oh, I've got her now," Hermione said wickedly. "That bitch is an Unregistered Animagus. I have figured out what she is too."

"What?" he asked with a smile.

"She's some sort of beetle. I narrowed it down to that because after the second task, Harry was late getting out of the water, and I was concerned and hugging him, and at the same time, Viktor was trying his hardest to get my attention from him. He said, and I quote, 'You haff a vater-beetle in your hair, Hermy-own-ninny.'"

Sirius snorted as he laughed. "I love that! You got that Durmstrang accent spot on."

Hermione giggled. "Well, I'm biding my time and keeping my eyes open. That old cow isn't going to ruin any more lives with her half-truths and innuendos. I'll make sure of that."

"What's your plan?" he asked as he started to drink from one of the flagons of pumpkin juice.

"You'll find out when it's all said and done," she replied with narrowed eyes. "I'll just cross that bitch when I get to her."

"You always liked to play it close to the vest, Hermione," he said appreciatively. "Well, so what's the word on Crouch?" he asked lightheartedly, changing the subject.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I've a theory, Sirius, but I don't know what to do about it. I can't talk to Severus about it. It would send his paranoia to new heights. You know how he is," she said.

"Only one other person I know who is more paranoid is Moody," he replied.

"Well," Hermione said softly. "I've been thinking about what Harry said about that night. He said the Map read Barty Crouch. He's too sick to come and judge the tasks, but he comes in the middle of the night? Then, Moody shows up out of the blue."

"Now, Severus has been furious because someone is breaking into his stores. He jumped on Harry about it and accused him of doing it so fast that he can't even imagine the possibility that it might be someone else. If Harry were stealing from Snape, I would know, because I am the potion maker in our group!"

Hermione breathed deeply as she scooted closer to Sirius. "What if, and I know I can't explain, but what if Barty Crouch is stealing from Severus' stores to make Polyjuice Potion in order to pass himself off as Moody?"

"What?" Sirius said in disbelief. "You think Barty Crouch is disguising himself as Alastor Moody. Why?"

"I don't know, Sirius," she answered honestly. "However, I do know this: Moody and I spent the summer after my sixth year in training. He taught me how to duel, combat, and to throw off the Imperius Curse. I lived with the man on Fenwick's farm that summer with Remus and Kingsley. I *know* him! And no one can convince me that that man at Hogwarts is Moody. He doesn't know me, and he doesn't know that he is to know me."

Sirius' eyes were opened wide. "Did you tell Albus?" he said hurriedly.

"Of course!" Hermione replied. "He told me to stay away from Moody. Which makes me wonder why did he never tell Moody about me? I mean he told you and Remus. He also told me he was going to keep the situation under wraps, but he'll have an eye on him. I haven't come forward with anything new. It's just crazy. Why would Barty Crouch want to pretend to be Alastor Moody?"

"Unless he's completely gone round the twist and is desperate to get his hands on either Karkaroff or Snape," he said as he scratched his beard. "I think you need to tell Dumbledore this, Hermione."

Hermione looked away and thought hard about it. Sirius broke her out of her thoughts.

"On the subject of my living arrangements, Albus and I have been discussing a plan to get me out of this cave and into a somewhat normal domicile."

"Oh, really?" she asked. "What?"

"My parents' house in London. It's vacant, has been since my mother died ten years ago. As far as Albus has been able to find out, only our old house-elf, Kreacher, lives there now. It's an old pure-blood house, full of Dark magic and Dark items that would need working on. I think Bill Weasley will be coming back from Egypt to help Albus with it if we decide to move. You know what that means, right?" he asked darkly.

"The Order?" she whispered.

"Yes. Some of us are already at a standing call, awaiting orders. Snape has been telling Dumbledore his Dark Mark is getting darker. Have you...uh...seen it?" he asked nervously.

"Are you trying to find out if I'm sleeping with Severus?" she asked calmly.

Sirius grimaced. "God, Hermione, I'm not a well man! I can't handle that information. If it hadn't been for James taking off his underwear in fifth year, I wouldn't have known Snape had a penis!"

Hermione grew angry at the memory of that day. "I bet it made you jealous," she said viciously.

"What's with the hostility?" he asked, confused.

"You know exactly what I'm referring to, Sirius Black! I was there that day, right at Avery's side. I was to be a front-row guest at what he called 'a magnificent performance' orchestrated by you, he, and Regulus in order to humiliate Lily, test Severus' loyalties, and use James as the tool to make it all happen!" she shouted.

Sirius bowed his head. "I'm not proud of what I did, I'm not. I just wanted Lily out of Severus' life. He was no good for her. You knew it then as I did!" he said hotly.

"You used your best friend, hurt Lily, and nearly destroyed Severus. For your information, everything Severus has done, he's done for my protection and Lily's. You remember Laura Danbury...what those animals did to her?"

Sirius nodded silently.

"How would you like to have the choice placed on you...what if Death Eaters had come to you and said, 'Here, Sirius, this is your chance to finally have it all over and done with, here are your choices: either we take Marlene and pass her around a few times to all the pure-bloods of Slytherin, or you can prove your loyalty by making sure she never wants to have anything to do with you ever again?' That's what he did. He had to make her hate him. You thought if *Snivellus* was just pushed enough, his true colors would stand out. Well, they did, but you were so damn color-blind, you couldn't see it!" she hollered.

She grabbed her bag and went to leave. Sirius placed his hand on her shoulder, "Please, Hermione, wait!"

She turned and faced him angrily. "I am sorry, Hermione. I paid for it too. I loved Marlene, and if it had been me, I would have done the same for her. I could see a change in Snape. You just don't know what he was like the first two years at school. He was a nasty piece of work. I think you came along and saved him. I just didn't figure it out until it was too late."

He sighed and continued. "I wonder at night sometimes what my life would have been like if Marlene hadn't died. She was so much like you, Hermione, full of fire, beauty, and such bravery. She would have kept me grounded...just like you do for Snape." He looked into her face as if he were searching for something. "I just hope he appreciates what he has."

Hermione was feeling the tears fall down her face. "I can't talk anymore today. I've got to help Harry prepare for the third task soon, and I've loads of work to do. I-I'll see you next week."

She left and didn't look back. She still hated what Sirius had done all those years ago, but he had apologized and had seen the error and damage. It was true that he had paid. He had paid dearly for his cruelty towards her and Severus and his damnable pride. He'd lost Marlene, his true love, and he lost his youth to Azkaban as an innocent man. Hermione decided she would forgive him. She would just need time to think it through.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 of 74

Barty Crouch resurfaces, and Hermione finally puts the pieces together about Moody's impostor.

A/N: Well, y'all, we are getting to the final stretch. One more chapter, and we will again return to Hermione's POV and see how her world will change. Thanks for the reviews, I really appreciate each one! Also, thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin, who continue to work so hard with this fic. Finally, thanks to JKR, who allows us to fiddle with her work and have a bit of fun with her awesome characters.

Easter arrived, and Ron received a very shirty letter from Percy that closed the door to any hope of gaining information about Crouch. Hermione kept on the lookout for Rita Skeeter and had informed Dumbledore of her hunch about Moody and Crouch. He didn't outright brush off the idea, but he was very close-lipped about it. His advice remained the same: Stay away from Moody as much as possible, and he would remain on top of it.

In May, Harry dashed into the common room, saying he was to go to the Quidditch pitch for the final instructions for the third task. Ron and Hermione were excited.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione told him when he left to meet Ludo Bagman and the other champions.

Late that night, Harry came in, looking disheveled, with a very irate Hagrid at his side. Hermione sat as Hagrid told her in no uncertain terms that she was to keep her distance from Viktor Krum. He left in a huff.

"I've never seen Hagrid that angry before," whispered Ron. "Hermione, what d'you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" she said shrilly. "Harry," she asked as she looked at him. "You're a mess! What happened?"

Harry told them the whole sordid tale. Crouch had resurfaced and was acting completely barmy; he'd gone to fetch Dumbledore for help and left Krum behind to watch out for Crouch. Severus had detained him, and by the time he got back, Crouch was gone, Krum had been attacked, and then Moody showed up out of nowhere.

Hermione sat rubbing her forehead. "All right, it comes down to this. Either Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody attacked them both when Viktor wasn't looking."

"It had to have been Crouch," said Ron at once. "That's why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He'd done a runner."

"I don't think so," said Harry, shaking his head. "Crouch seemed so weak...I don't reckon he was up to Disapparating or anything."

Hermione was getting mad. "You CAN'T Disapparate or Apparate on Hogwarts grounds; haven't I told you enough times?" she shouted.

They went through every insane theory until daybreak, and then they went to the owlery to notify Sirius about Crouch.

"Okay, Harry," Hermione asked once more. "Tell me again, what did Mr. Crouch actually say?"

"I've told you, he wasn't making any sense," Harry said, sounding frustrated. "He wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He definitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault... He mentioned his son."

"What did he say about You-Know-Who?" asked Ron.

"Just that he was getting stronger," Harry whispered.

They all looked at each other nervously. Then Ron said, "Yeah, but he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was probably just raving..."

"He was the sanest when he was talking about Voldemort," Harry said, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. "It was then he was desperate to see Dumbledore."

Harry turned to look out the window. "If Snape hadn't held me up," he said angrily.

"It was probably for the best, Harry. Something could have happened to you. We still don't know who put your name in the Goblet! You could have been killed," Hermione said fiercely.

Harry turned to her. "What's with you and Snape, anyway?" he asked suspiciously. "You seem awful keen to take up for him lately."

"Harry, I am trying to be a voice of reason. Snape saved your life once. Why would..."

"I don't fucking care, Hermione. Maybe he saved my life so that he could have me preserved for something truly horrific later! That still doesn't answer my question why you are so keen on Snape. What, are you crushing on the git?"

Hermione turned and left without another word. There was nothing to say to Harry. After all, he wasn't crazy; he was spot on. He would faint dead away if he knew the whole truth of the matter. She decided to work this out on her own. First, she had to see Severus and ask why he had stopped Harry. Then she needed to talk to Dumbledore.

She went into the dungeons, and since it was so very early, wasn't fussed about being caught. She tapped on the door, and she could faintly hear the wards sounding off. The door opened a sliver with an ebony wand coming into view. Seeing it was Hermione, he huffed and dragged her into the room, securing it behind him.

"Not a sound!" he snapped as he grabbed her hand and let her into his private rooms.

After the doors had been warded sufficiently for a man who was turning into a delusional, paranoid mess before her eyes, he then barked, "Speak!"

Hermione blinked a few times and asked, "Severus, when was the last time you slept?"

"Hermione," he said sharply. "I do not have time for this. Say your piece, then get the hell out of here!"

"Why did you detain Harry yesterday?" she asked.

"Because the blighter was acting out of pure reflex. He was babbling about Crouch being back, and I didn't want him going immediately back out there where an unstable man might be lying in wait," he said coolly.

"You wanted to buy a little time?" she asked.

"Obviously," he sneered.

"How does the information strike you that Moody showed up minutes after Harry arrived?" she offered.

"The information that I never gave him?" he said with a grimace on his face.

"What?" she said.

"You heard me," he said as he poured himself and her a drink. "Moody claims he was on the grounds where Krum was attacked because I had informed him Crouch was out there, utterly insane. I did no such thing." He tossed his drink back, emptying his glass all at once. Hermione followed.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "That means it's true! Moody is actually...*oh my god!*" she breathed as she dropped the tumbler onto the floor. She watched as Snape repaired the glass and stared into her frozen face.

"Hermione!" he said as he shook her by the arms.

"I have to see Dumbledore...NOW!" she screeched.

"Oh, no," he said as he grabbed her arm and hauled her back to him. "You're going to tell me what's rattling around in that brain of yours," he insisted.

"All this time, I never thought it. I kept remembering Harry talk about that night he almost got caught by you..."

"Damn, I knew it was Potter!" he seethed.

"Honestly, Severus!" she said impatiently. "Harry hasn't been stealing from you; it's been Crouch!"

"What? Are you insane, woman?" he yelled.

"Listen," she demanded. "Harry has had the Marauder's Map. That map doesn't lie. It said that Barty Crouch was in your storeroom, which was why Harry was out of Gryffindor tower. He got his foot stuck in that trick step on the staircase. Filch comes, you come, then Moody materializes...out of nowhere!"

Severus' eyes glanced around him as he thought. "Last night, Potter came demanding to see Dumbledore...to bring him to Crouch who was acting like a lunatic...insisting the Dark Lord was getting stronger." Severus placed his hand over his left arm instinctively. "It has been getting stronger... Hurts more as well... Can't sleep... Can't think," he rasped.

"I've known Moody wasn't really Alastor Moody nearly all year," she confessed.

Severus eyes snapped open. "What? How?" he demanded.

"Because the summer after our sixth year, Remus and I went to Fenwick's farm to train for the Order with Kingsley and Moody. I lived with him for the summer, trained, fought, ate...this Moody didn't even think twice when he saw me. Remember how Remus acted when he saw me for the first time?"

Severus chuckled a little.

"You are a sick and twisted wizard, you know that, right?" she said in hopes of shaming him.

"It's not my fault the werewolf nearly went into an apoplectic seizure," he said calmly.

"You loved it," she pointed out to him.

"If we could return to the topic at hand?" he asked smoothly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Fine," she conceded. "All this time I thought Barty Crouch missing equals Alastor Moody amongst us. The old Dark wizard catcher, eager for his big, white whale," she said dramatically.

"His *what?*" Severus said, nearly laughing.

"Never mind," she said as she rolled her eyes. "But I forgot that the night of the drawing of names, Barty Crouch was there and so was Alastor Moody. Don't you see? At the same time! In the SAME room," she spelled out.

"Barty Crouch," Severus said. "That map didn't provide anyone with a senior or junior, did it?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled knowingly.

"Always knew Potter was never that bright. Even with all four of them, they still managed to muck it up!" he said triumphantly.

"Enough already with the Marauders, Severus!" she pleaded as she threw her hands up in the air in frustration.

"So, Barty Crouch Jr. is still among the land of the living?" Severus mused. "This is insane. It can't be."

"It's the only logical explanation, Severus," she insisted. "We must tell Dumbledore immediately!"

"Let me tell him, Hermione. I want you to be very cautious. *Very cautious*, understand?" he said intensely.

"Okay, Severus. I'll let you handle this. But don't you get Harry killed!" she choked out as she started to cry.

Severus took her in his arms, lifting her slightly off the floor. "I promise, Hermione," he whispered. Hermione sighed in his embrace. He stood upright and lifted her even more off the floor when she refused to unwrap her arms from his neck.

"Hermione," he said as he tickled her waist.

She giggled. "This is interesting," she said dreamily. "I could stay like this all day long."

"How much longer till your birthday?" he asked.

"Four months," she whispered as she nuzzled his ear.

"Then I shall remember you said that in exactly four months time," he said with a grin as he deposited her upon his bed and threw on his robes.

"Don't you ever get tempted?" she whined. "Why is it that I'm the one that has to try and seduce you?"

"So, you've already forgotten the snog behind the alcove after the Yule Ball, have you?" he asked with a glint in his eye.

"No," she answered lowly.

"Someone has to be the adult here," he said importantly with a raised eyebrow.

"And what is so 'un-adult' about wanting to have sex?" she asked.

"Nothing, I assure you," he said with a snort. "Rather sex with a fifteen-year-and-eight-month-old child is rather 'un-adult.' I believe it's called a 'felony.'"

She pursed her lips and made to storm off when he caught her arms and leaned into her. "Just remember, my darling fiancée, when you're telling me a year from now you 'have a headache' and aren't 'in the mood,' this little conversation. I assure you, our not having sex has nothing to do with feeling it is beneath me."

"What that I were," she murmured as she pecked his beak-nose and escaped him.

Nerve-racking as it was, Hermione had to go along with the farce. She couldn't even tell Harry and Ron about it. It was killing her to go around with all the pressure inside her trying to get out. She just wanted this whole fucking Tournament over and done with so she could go ahead and find where Moody really was. She dearly hoped her old mentor wasn't dead. She didn't know if she could handle that blow after all this time of that nagging feeling she never could exactly place.

The three of them caught up with the professor outside in the corridor of his classroom.

"Professor Moody!" Harry called.

"Hello, Potter," growled Moody. He looked like hell.

"You three in here," he said gruffly. Hermione didn't want to, but she followed Harry.

"Did you find him?" asked Harry eagerly.

"No," he said as he took out his hip flask and took a swig from it.

"Did you use the Map?"

"Of course, took a leaf from your book, Potter. Summoned it from my room. He wasn't anywhere on it."

Hermione kept her walls of Occlumency up as high as she could. She could sense the pressure from him. Harry and Ron, who knew nothing about Occlumency or Legilimency, couldn't possibly notice the feelings of it around them, trying to invade their minds.

"So, he DID Disapparate?" said Ron.

"You can't Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!" Hermione said, exasperated. "There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren't there, Professor?"

Moody's magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. "You're another one who might think about a career as an Auror," he told her. "Mind works the same way, Granger."

Hermione nearly had to bite her tongue off to stop telling him what she thought of him.

"Well, he wasn't invisible," Harry said.

"Yes, but under his own steam?" Hermione inquired.

"Yeah," said Ron. "Someone could have put him on a broom with them or something."

"We can't rule out kidnap," growled Moody. "Could be anywhere. Only thing we do know is that he's not here."

Hermione was then convinced that Crouch was on Hogwarts property. This impostor wanted them to believe that Crouch was long gone so badly, it could only mean he was here. His own father! But ironically, he had put his own son in Azkaban. *What goes around comes around*, she thought grimly. She hoped he wasn't dead, but he had to be. This was getting more hopeless by the second.

"Well," Moody said, dragging Hermione out of her thoughts, "get lots of practice for this last task. Right up your alley, Potter. A maze. Just remember, Constant Vigilance! You two stay with him, help him train, right?"

"Yes," Ron and Hermione both said.

"And you both stick close to Potter. I'm keeping an eye on him, but you can't have too many eyes out!"

The next day, Sirius sent Harry a scathing letter that made it quite plain that Harry was to keep his nose out of trouble and stay focused on his task. Hermione knew he was concerned. She hadn't been able to see him in a while and wouldn't be able to either. She couldn't even tell him why as she didn't want Severus knowing she'd been visiting him. Obviously, Albus knew the precariousness of the situation; he hadn't said a word to Severus either.

Hermione didn't know what to do except to help Harry the best way she knew how by training him: force all the curses and hexes she knew into his brain until he complained of leakage. And any time Harry began to grouse about it all, she would shove him back into reality.

"Harry, Sirius is worried about you! We all are! Moody, Hagrid, Sirius, and I are all saying the same thing. Now stop fussing and do it! Get to work!"

She had never before been called bossy so many times in her life. Honestly, at times she thought she was a mother, a mother to a couple of ready-made children that she had to stop from getting themselves killed. It was driving her batty.

Therefore, they kept on working hard at preparing Harry for his task. It was the middle of June, and still nothing was amiss until one day, Ron came after Hermione just before dinner.

"Where's Harry?" she demanded.

"He took off! He fell asleep...well, we both fell asleep during Divination...and then he was screaming, shaking, and pressing on his scar! He said he was going to the infirmary, but he's not there!"

"Oh, no!" Hermione moaned.

They had to carry on until they realized Harry wasn't at dinner and neither was Dumbledore. Hermione excused herself, went to the High Table, and talked with McGonagall.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore is in conference with Mr. Potter. You finish your dinner, and I will make sure he gets back to the common room safely. I'm sure he will have much to tell you and Mr. Weasley," she said reassuringly.

"Okay, she whispered. "Um," she said even more quietly. "Where is Professor Snape? Is he okay?"

"Professor Snape has found it easier to remain in his solitude for now. There are just too many stressors. It's easier for him to remain in the dungeons. I think it is easier on the nerves to remain where he is most comfortable." She patted her arm, and Hermione felt better. She wished she could just assert her true identity and scream, "I'm thirty-five fucking years old! I want to take care of my own fiancé!"

Instead, she swallowed her anger, confusion, and her fear, ate her dinner, and dutifully went to Gryffindor tower with Ron, awaiting Harry's return. They passed the time by finishing homework and preparing for exams.

When Harry returned, they all stayed up late into the night as he retold everything that had happened. The dream of Voldemort, Wormtail, and the snake, Nagini, talking in a strange old house; the visit to Dumbledore's office; the trip into the Pensieve; and everything Dumbledore had told him about his scar and about Crouch's son, Barty Jr., having been sent to Azkaban for being a Death Eater.

Hermione, of course, knew everything he was saying and everything he wasn't. Hermione peered into his mind and saw that Harry knew the truth about Neville's parents. She was glad he had the strength of character to keep that to himself.

Ron was having a difficult time of it all. Perhaps she would be as well if she had never left this timeline and went into the past. It was refreshing, though, to know that Dumbledore had reinforced in Harry's mind the belief and faith he has in Severus. It really hurt Hermione the way Harry continued to talk to her so disrespectfully about her fiancé.

Harry turned to her. "Hermione, I'm sorry I accused you of fancying Snape...I just couldn't see. Sometimes I can't see past things because of how he talks about my Dad."

"I know, Harry. It has to really be hurtful when he talks to you about your Dad that way. It's a shame he has to be so difficult."

"Hermione, I know I just said I was sorry about what I said, but I still think that you do have some feelings for him."

Hermione smiled. "Harry, you think I'm crushing on Snape?" she asked.

"Dunno, are you?"

Hermione looked at her watch. "Harry! We've got to practice...we have to get the Impediment Curse done tomorrow! Get Ron, and go to bed. I'll see you first thing in the morning," she said as she patted his back.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 of 74

Hermione's POV from the night of the third task, and the revealing of Moody's impostor.

A/N: Here we are! This is the last chapter before things take a detour. Thanks for keeping up with the story, and I hope you will enjoy the new life Hermione and Severus will be planning for themselves. Thanks to WriterMerrin and luvsev, and thanks to all of you who have been following! So you know, this chapter is heavy on canon; although, it is from Hermione's POV. So I have placed in italics what is straight from JK Rowling's words from GoF.

Harry and Hermione continued to work hard, grabbing any spare moment they could to practice. McGonagall got frustrated with walking in on them constantly, so she gave them their own empty classroom to work in. Harry was doing brilliantly. He had a natural talent for Defense. Hermione was a good teacher, and sure, she could duel,

thanks to the hard work of the missing Moody, but she didn't have the talent to make the wand sing and move with all the power and grace that came with being a brilliant duelist. Harry was beautiful, so beautiful she wanted to cry.

It took her back to that day all the Gryffindors had had to stay in the common room because Voldemort was coming. They had all banded together and helped one another in different subjects. She had watched with awe as Marlene...little, timid Marlene...took on James and Sirius, and they'd both had that beauty of motion. Harry was just like James, athletic and powerful in his movements. Marlene had been so fluid and skillful. Hermione would never forget the look on Sirius' face when she had finally bested them both. He had declared he was in love. Of course, everyone laughed, thinking it was a joke, but it hadn't been. Hermione wondered how much he had loved Marlene. She was glad they'd had that week to be alone and declare their love in all the ways they needed to so they could do the work the Order needed from them.

Sirius kept sending Harry notes of encouragement and direction. He tried to keep Harry on point, focused on what was his responsibility: getting through this last task. Hermione agreed wholeheartedly. She told Harry the same thing. After the Tournament was through, the impostor of Moody would be dealt with accordingly.

The day of the last task came, and at breakfast, Hermione opened the *Daily Prophet* to an article about Harry. The Slytherins were all sniggering and laughing. She scanned it quickly and reluctantly handed it to Harry.

The headline read *Harry Potter, Disturbed and Dangerous*. Hermione was beside herself. "How! How am I not catching this?"

"*Gone off me a bit, hasn't she?*" Harry said, brushing it off.

"How did she get all this? Harry, was the window open at the time?" she asked.

"I opened it when he collapsed!" Ron said quickly. "I didn't know what the bloody hell was going on. I figured he needed some fresh air with all that perfume and crap Trelawney's got up there."

"Damn!" Hermione said as she slapped her hand on the table. "I will get that cow. I swear I will."

Ron leaned over and whispered, "You know I think you're brilliant...but sometimes, Hermione, you're dead scary."

Hermione snorted as she laughed. "Oh, Ron!" she exclaimed. "What would I do without you?"

"I have no idea," he replied, looking a bit frightened.

The Weasleys came to give moral support as Harry's surrogate family. Hermione joined them, but her heart and mind were with Severus. Was he still holing up in his dungeons, scared to come out? She decided to give her excuses and make a detour. She snuck into the dungeons and tapped on the door. Again, just a sliver opened, and when Severus saw it was she, he grabbed her, held her to him, and closed the door behind him. He was filthy and reeked of firewhisky. He started grabbing her in very inappropriate places and whispering very naughty things that were quite dangerous in her condition of being perpetually randy.

"Remember how I took you in your old bed at Spinner's End?" he asked, slurring slightly.

"Remember how I told you how hard I got seeing you in your pink knickers? God, Hermione, would you wear knickers like those when we get married? I want to do so many things. I've been learning," he said importantly.

"Really?" she said, trying not to laugh as she tried to distract him. *Cor, Blimey! He needs a bath!*

"I've been forced to watch the revels. Some of them aren't all raping and shite. Some are very willing and erotic. I've watched and seen how to pleasure a woman in many, many ways. I have read and was fortunate to have friends to demonstrate the pictures. I can't wait to try it out. I am sick of wanking. Let's have a bit of fun, 'Mione," he said as he swayed. "Would you help me and bring me off?"

It was tempting, and it was what she had wanted for so long. Her thighs ached and mouth watered, but she couldn't do this. He was blotto. When he sobered, he would be so distraught...it wasn't worth it.

"You want me, Hermione. Touch it, just touch it," he pleaded.

She went and got a sobering-up potion and called out to him from the next room, "I will touch it if you drink this." She gave him a sweet smile and unbuttoned a couple of buttons on her shirt to sweeten the pot. She poured it down his throat, and in a couple of minutes, he looked horrified.

She threw him a towel. "Your bath awaits, Professor," she said sweetly.

Before he disappeared behind the door, he asked. "How long?"

She smiled. "Two and a half months," she said slyly.

"Dear God," he moaned. "Can we do that thing we did once?"

"Sure," she said as she began to unbutton her pants. Soon, they were on opposite sides of the door, not seeing or touching, but satisfying themselves the only way they knew how.

Hermione joined the Weasleys in time for the third task. Although Hermione felt sick, everyone was excited. She just wasn't sure about this going all right. She searched for Severus, and he was there, sitting with his Slytherins and the Durmstrang crew...Karkaroff having done a bunk after the whole debacle with Crouch near the forest.

Suddenly, the four champions appeared, and the four Heads of houses, along with Dumbledore and the Moody impostor, went up to examine the various portions of the maze. McGonagall was giving directions of some sort to the champions. Hagrid went to wish Harry good luck, as did Ludo Bagman.

On Bagman's whistle, Harry and Cedric entered the maze first. After a suitable interval, Viktor entered, and then lastly, Fleur.

It was rather nerve-wracking, hearing intermittent blasts from wands and the roars and screams from animals that were lying in wait to attack them. A scream ripped through the air. After a while, Fleur Delacour's wand shot a warning blast into the air, and she was Levitated out of the maze. Only three were left. Hermione was wringing her hands; she kept glancing at Severus, not knowing what to do, afraid for him. Severus' face remained impassive and emotionless. She knew though that he did care; he was a nervous wreck as well.

There were more blasts and hollers from deep inside. The wind was picking up deep inside the maze. Hermione could see the tops of the hedges, and they were winding crazily, as if a mini tornado was in the midst of it all. Suddenly, Viktor's wand sent sparks into the air and soon his body was Levitated and was being cared for by Professor Snape while Madam Pomfrey tended to Fleur.

For a long while, it was silent. Everyone knew now that Hogwarts would win, but whom? Were Cedric and Harry still all right? The silence was more terrifying than the wind,

screams, and blasts from the wands.

Soon, a huge blast sounded from deep within, and it was repeated again and again. The sound of far-away shouts that had to be from Harry and Cedric came intermittently with horrific blasts, and a mighty wind from inside the maze. Then there was silence. For an eternity, there was silence.

The silence went on for so long many of the teachers were beginning to whisper. Krum was talking animatedly to Severus, who was looking very worried. Dumbledore was with Fleur, and she was hysterically telling her story. Madam Maxime took her in hand to get her to calm down.

Still, no one knew what was happening to Cedric or Harry.

The crowd was restless. It was taking too long, and people were whispering about Viktor and Fleur, who were still shaking their heads and talking heatedly. Hermione darted around and could not see a glimpse of Moody's impostor. She began to stand up and watched as Albus, Minerva, and Severus spoke with each other. It seemed there was nothing that could be done but wait.

So they all sat as the hour grew late. Suddenly, a burst of light shot from nowhere, and there were Harry and Cedric sprawled on the ground. Harry was clutching the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's shirt in desperation. Hermione walked slowly closer to the bottom of the stands. Something was dreadfully wrong. Her hand calmly went for her wand as she moved closer.

Cedric wasn't moving, and Harry was crying. Suddenly, some of the girls started in their direction, and Dumbledore and Severus dashed towards the young wizards. Harry was fighting them off; he didn't seem to want to either release Cedric or the Cup. Minister Fudge went forward and whispered amongst the adults gathered there in hushed tones. Finally, a scream ripped through the air, ending the confusion. "Cedric Diggory is dead! He's dead!" Hermione's head jerked towards the yelling. "Dead! DEAD!"

The whole scene was pandemonium. Hermione strained to see what was happening, but the screams were awful, and Amos Diggory was sprinting across the field to see the body of his dead son. People were starting to rush, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw the impostor make his way to Harry and steal him away towards the direction of the castle. Hermione fought and strained to make her way through, but she couldn't. She wanted to scream at Severus and Dumbledore that the impostor now had Harry in his grasp and in mortal danger. However, she could do nothing in the mighty sea of people.

She found a small hole between the rows and took its path that led under the bleachers. She skirted the edge and found Dumbledore and Severus. They were conferring with McGonagall. Before she could reach them, they were off into the night, going towards the castle.

Hermione sank onto the ground and wept. She felt so afraid. Then she felt the familiar friendly hands of Ron around her.

"Come on, 'Mione," he said softly. "Let's go and get a cup of tea or something."

She nodded as she sobbed against his shoulder. She wished Sirius were here, she wished Severus were the one holding her and comforting her, but Ron, sweet Ron, wasn't so bad in a pinch.

It had seemed like forever until Harry entered the infirmary. Hermione had been waiting there with all of the Weasleys waiting for the news. Molly Weasley broke down crying and moved to gather Harry into her arms as she wept.

"Harry! Oh, Harry!"

Dumbledore stopped her. "Molly," he said as he held up a hand for a moment. "Please listen to me. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him," he added, looking at Ron, Hermione and Bill, "you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione and Bill and hissed, "You hear? He needs quiet!"

Madam Pomfrey asked Dumbledore about the dog. Dumbledore smiled and said, "This dog will be staying with Harry for a while, and I assure you, he is very well trained. Harry...I will wait until you are in bed."

Madam Pomfrey led Harry behind a screen to undress into a nightgown. They all remained silent, waiting for him to re-emerge.

Dumbledore spoke to Harry for a while and then left. Madam Pomfrey gave him some potions, and he drifted off to sleep. Hermione had in her rucksack all of her essentials, and she wasn't going to budge until she knew she was going to get answers from someone. Staying with Harry seemed the only thing to do. So she sat silently as everyone paced, dozed, and then woke again, all the while, Sirius, in his Animagus form, curled up and rested by her feet.

Right outside of the infirmary door, voices were being raised. Mrs. Weasley was getting upset.

"They're going to wake him if they don't shut up!" she whispered.

"What could they be shouting about?" whispered Bill. "Nothing else could have happened, can it?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat and she felt her face grow numb. Where was Severus? Did he get hurt? Did they find Moody? Was he dead? *Oh, please God; let Severus be all right!* she prayed.

"That's Fudge's voice," Mrs. Weasley whispered. "And that's Minerva McGonagall's, isn't it? But what are they arguing about?"

Hermione looked at Ron, and he shrugged.

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva..." Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

"You should have never brought him into the castle!" yelled Minerva. "When Dumbledore finds out..."

The doors of the infirmary burst open with Fudge leading the group with Minerva hot on his heels followed by Severus. Hermione jumped up. She felt relief wash over her. He was all right. She listened as she slowly sat down. Severus caught her eyes and she swallowed. His eyes left hers and focused on the two squabbling people in front of him.

"Where is Dumbledore?" he asked Mrs. Weasley.

"He's not here!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "This is a hospital wing, I would think you'd..."

Dumbledore came in, his robes sweeping the floor. "What has happened?" he demanded sharply. "I asked you to guard over Barty couch, Minerva, I'm surprised at you!"

"Oh, there's no need to stand guard!" Minerva snapped angrily. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Hermione was watching people she had worked with and fought with now fight amongst themselves. She had never seen such a display. And it seemed Barty Crouch had been found, but which one?

Severus spoke in a low tone. "When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events, he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a Dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch..."

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" Minerva interrupted. "I told him you would never allow a Dementor inside the walls of this castle..."

"My dear woman!" roared Fudge. "As Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing possibly dangerous..."

"The moment that...thing...entered the room, it swooped down on Crouch...and..." Minerva's voice failed her.

"Not so much a loss!" Cornelius reasoned. "After all, he is responsible for several deaths!"

"Yes, but now he cannot give testimony," said Dumbledore smoothly. "He cannot give evidence about why he killed in the first place."

"Why he killed them?" sputtered Fudge. "According to Minerva and Severus, he seems to have thought he was doing all of this on You-Know-Who's orders!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving the directions, Cornelius," Dumbledore explained. "Those deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded, and Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Hermione gasped. She was glad Mrs. Weasley did at the same time. She felt sick...so sick. All this time, after all of this waiting, he was back, and she would have to leave again! *No! I won't go. I'll stay and fight this time. I won't let them take Severus from me again!* she thought angrily.

Everyone was giggling at Dumbledore, except for Minerva and Severus, who knew the truth, and Hermione, who tried to feign shock anyway. Hermione's head spun as Dumbledore and Fudge went round and round over Voldemort's regeneration. Dumbledore was trying to make the Minister see reason, but for some reason, he didn't want to.

"You are prepared to take Mr. Potter's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

Suddenly, Sirius began to growl and his hackles were raised, his teeth baring at Fudge. Hermione leaned down and petted him to help him calm down.

"Of course," replied Dumbledore. "I heard Crouch's confession, heard Harry's version, and the stories make sense including the disappearance of Bertha Jorkins."

"You take the word of a lunatic and a boy who...well...is a Parselmouth, has fits, hallucinations?" Fudge said warily.

"Been reading Rita Skeeter, have we," asked Dumbledore jovially. "I assume you are referring to the pains Harry has experienced due to his scar?"

"Listen, Cornelius," Dumbledore said as he took a dramatic step towards the Minister. "Harry is as sane as you or I. I believe that scar hurts him whenever Voldemort is close by or is feeling murderously angry."

Fudge was not moved. "I have never heard of a scar that operated as an alarm bell before..."

Suddenly, Harry was upright in bed, screaming at Fudge, rattling off the names of the Death Eaters he had seen. Hermione was gobsmacked. The names were a roster from days gone by: Lucius Malfoy, Avery, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle.

The Minister brushed it off as nothing. These men had been cleared, he said, and he still maintained that Harry was mentally unstable.

"You fool!" hissed Minerva. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths are not the random acts of a lunatic!"

Aha! So it had been Barty Jr. all this time, Hermione thought.

"I see no evidence to the contrary!" Fudge bellowed.

Hermione could see Dumbledore was at the end of his rope. "Voldemort is back. If you can accept it, then steps must be taken. First, the removal of the Dementors; they are Voldemort's most loyal followers. They will join him the minute they are asked. If you do not act now, we shall be where we were thirteen years ago!"

"The second task is to send an envoy to the giants; otherwise Voldemort will once again have them at his beck and call."

Fudge sputtered about the end of his career and other such rubbish. Hermione was disgusted at his blindness and selfishness.

Dumbledore descended upon him and vocalized everything that was in Hermione's heart at that moment. The man was blinded by the power of the office he held. He loved it so much he was willing to risk the lives of the very people he had sworn to protect. Dumbledore pleaded with him to act now for his own good or later, he would lose everything he loved so dearly.

Hermione was light-headed. It was like Barty Crouch Sr. all those years ago happening over again.

Fudge refused to comply. He argued that Dumbledore was trying to work against him, to which Dumbledore insisted it was not the case. Finally, the man was reduced to sheer denial that Voldemort could be back. Then Severus did something so powerful, so noble, it took her breath away.

He strode to Fudge, past Dumbledore, and pulled up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

"There!" he said harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour ago, when it burned black, but you can see it. Every Death Eater has it burned into his flesh by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another...and his means of summoning us to him. This Mark has been turning blacker all this year. Why do you think Karkaroff left so suddenly? He fled when we felt the Mark burn. We knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears for his life. He had betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be welcomed back into the fold. He feared the Dark Lord's vengeance."

Fudge was taken aback, disgusted by the Mark Severus had shown him, still shaken by the events, and too far into denial to accept anything. He stammered his excuses and told Dumbledore he would be in touch tomorrow about the running of the school.

After he had left the bag of Harry's winnings on his table, he left. Dumbledore turned to face the remaining people.

"Molly, I can count on you and Arthur?" he asked.

"Of course, Dumbledore," she whispered.

Dumbledore spoke quietly with her, and Hermione tuned out, stroking Sirius' fur and trying to process all that was happening. Then she heard him speak to Minerva.

"I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible, and Madam Maxime, if she is willing."

"Madam Pomfrey, would you please go down to Professor Moody's office? A house-elf named Winky is there. Would you be so kind as to get her safely to the kitchens? A house-elf named Dobby will look after her."

Then came the coup de grace. Dumbledore announced it was time for two of the remaining number to recognize each other. Sirius sprang to his human form, and he and Severus glared at each other. Mrs. Weasley went into a hysterical fit. Severus was calm and cool.

"What is he doing here?" Severus snarled.

"Sirius is here at my invitation, Severus. Now I trust you both, and it is time to lay aside the differences and stand united. I will though, in the short term, settle for a lack of open hostility. Now shake hands."

Hermione knew Dumbledore was still talking, but she was dumbstruck at the thought of Severus actually allowing Sirius to touch him. They shook hands, and Hermione forgot how to breathe for a few moments.

He gave Sirius his orders, to go to Lupin's and rustle up the old crowd who were already on stand-by.

After Sirius left, he turned to Severus. "If you are ready, Severus, you know what I must ask you to do... if you are prepared..."

"I am," said Severus.

Hermione wanted to speak to him. He looked so pale. She thought she might cry. He was returning to Voldemort. She knew it. She couldn't stop herself. She dashed out and ran to him.

"Hermione," he said sharply as he drew her into an alcove. "What are you doing?"

"I can't let you go without speaking to you one last time. What if you don't come back?" she cried.

"I will. Wait for me in my rooms. I shall be back by tomorrow." He caressed her face and hair.

"Such a lovely, young woman you are becoming, Hermione," he whispered as he drew her towards him and kissed her. She let his hands wander as she clung to him. He felt so strong. She never remembered him being this strong the last time. She couldn't wait for the summer to fly by and for them to be married and properly together.

"I think we are fools, Severus," she whispered as he nibbled on her neck. She felt a tingle, and her nipples hardened.

"Why?" he asked.

Hermione sighed. "Because we are going into this mess for the second time, and you are still the most important thing that matters. I won't leave this time. I'll stand by your side through it all. Please come back to me," she begged him.

"Soon," he whispered as he placed his forehead onto hers. "Meet me in my rooms. I have the wards set to acknowledge your wand." He grabbed her by the back of the neck and kissed her passionately. Then he was gone.

Hermione pulled herself together and went back into the infirmary. Mrs. Weasley was talking softly to Harry and hugging him. Ron was standing nearby, red-faced and sober. Hermione saw something by the window. She slowly reached inside her rucksack and took out her jar. *With one swift movement, and a terrific slam, Hermione had everyone nearby jump in fear, looking at her curiously. Hermione apologized hastily and smiled at her captured prey.*

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 of 74

Hermione is finally introduced to the Order of the Phoenix, and her true identity is disclosed.

A/N: Sorry for the long wait! I had far too many errors to sort through. Much thanks to luvsev, WriterMerrin, and notsosaintly for all their patience and diligence. This fic would be a garbled mess without them!

Hermione went down to Severus' quarters and waited for him. Just before she'd left, Harry had grabbed her arm and said in a sleepy haze, "Voldemort said one was too cowardly to return... he will pay. But don't worry...he won't die. Karkaroff...he'll be killed." Then he fell asleep.

Hermione went and took off her clothes and put on one of Severus' shirts. She readied his potions. She thought of everything he might need...Calming Draught, Sleep Potion, Blood-Replenishing, Pain-Relief, Wit-Sharpening, Boil remover, Skelegrow, Draught of Peace...she had them all in a row, along with some books she found on healing. She remembered some of the healing spells Severus' mother had taught her years ago. So, she waited and waited. She slept on his bed and woke around eight in the morning to discover he hadn't returned.

Though she was afraid, she summoned Dobby and asked for some breakfast, a comb, and a toothbrush. She had to keep her mind calm and focused. She had just finished breakfast when Severus came stumbling in, shaking and twitching in spasms. She got him on the bed and gave him a Calming Draught and a spoon of the Draught of Peace. Soon, the jerking and spasms ended. He was shivering cold, and his clothes were soaked with perspiration and caked with blood. She levitated him and stripped him down, then laid him prone so she could tend to his back. She worked hard tending him, and by lunchtime she was finished and exhausted; she slept next to him in bed and woke up later in the afternoon.

"How are you?" she asked him.

"I've been better," he replied.

"How was work?" she asked with a smirk. "Rough day at the office?"

"Mmm," he replied. "My boss is a real taskmaster."

She smiled ruefully as she kissed his lips lightly.

They spent the rest of the day together, talking and resting. Severus didn't want to talk about what had happened with Voldemort, but he did inform her that she had indeed been correct in her hunch about Barty Crouch Jr. He told her the whole story about how Barty Jr.'s old and dying mother had switched places with him using Polyjuice Potion, and that was how he got out of prison. He had gained strength and overpowered his father as Moody and transfigured him into a bone, which he'd buried on Hogwarts grounds.

Hermione was very sober. As they curled up for the night, she asked him, "What do we do now?"

"Well, we go to the Memorial service for Mr. Diggory, and then you shall go back with the Weasleys. I don't want you going back to your parents' house. The Dark Lord knows know about you, Hermione, thanks to Lucius Malfoy and others like Avery, who knew you from our school days. Dumbledore isn't happy about it, neither am I, but what can we do? Are you ready to rejoin the Order now and be under their protection?"

"Yes," she said. "I am so ready for us to be married and stop some of this charade. It will be good to know we can be ourselves in front of some people."

He stroked her hair. "Well, we planned to marry on your birthday. Can you wait until September?"

"Two and a half months. I can just wank off until then, I suppose," she said offhandedly.

Severus laughed. "Ouch, don't make me laugh just yet," he pleaded.

Hermione's face sobered, and she whispered softly, "You paid for hiding me from him, didn't you?"

Severus looked at her tenderly and replied, "I did what I had to in order to keep us both safe."

Hermione's eyes began to water. "It's never going to end, is it? We won't ever really be free. Only behind these walls will we be able to be ourselves. Even then, only in these rooms in the dungeons."

Severus pulled her close to himself. "One day, Hermione. One day, we will free. Until then, we just have to keep our love alive." They snuggled under the covers and rested up in order to begin a new chapter in what had already been an epic romance.

In the morning, as she dressed, Severus placed her ring on her finger. "Wear it, Hermione. Wear it, and let the Order know you are my fiancée. Wear mine as well. Just don't start wearing it until you leave Hogwarts with the Weasleys. All right?" he asked.

"Okay," she replied as she slipped it back on her chain.

After the Memorial service for Cedric, all the students prepared to leave for the Hogwarts Express back to London. Hermione was alone; Lavender and Parvati had already left to go see the Durmstrang boys off. Hermione had already spoken to Viktor earlier that morning. She had waited after his early-morning swim and broke the news to him that there could never be anything between them, but that she had appreciated how sweet and kind he had been and that she hoped they could be friends.

He hadn't taken it well, and Hermione was now feeling pretty low. Her life was now becoming so complicated and troubled. She was facing another war where she couldn't know for sure if she or Severus would live to see the end.

Hermione was just closing the lid of her trunk when Mrs. Weasley and Minerva walked into the dorm room. She stood up sharply and said, "Hello, Mrs. Weasley, Professor McGonagall."

"Please, call me Minerva, Hermione. Molly knows," she said as she sat down on one of the beds.

Hermione sat down in her chair, breathless and confused.

Molly looked at her curiously. "I always thought there was something different about you, Hermione," she replied. "Then there was this assistant of Professor Snape's that Bill said looked exactly like you when he was at Hogwarts: Jessica Irving. Oh, my, he was so smitten back in those days! When Minerva told me the story, I thought it was a joke! But you were the girl the Order talked about in the old days. The girl who trained with Moody, the girl Remus had loved but had instead loved a Death Eater. I can't even begin to imagine how strange it must be for you. How old are you? Thirty-five? Thirty-six?" she asked.

"I'm almost thirty-six," Hermione replied. "My sixteenth birthday will be in September."

"At which time, she and Severus shall be married, and she will be a part of the Order. Hermione will be officially inducted once we get settled in at headquarters," Minerva added.

"Hermione," she continued. "Your orders are to be Molly's right hand. There are meals to cook, people to care for, and then when Harry joins us in August, there will be all his questions to handle. You will, on top of your household duties, be assisting Albus with some scheduling for the Order members. We'll talk more about that when we get all settled in. So, are you ready?"

"I am," Hermione replied.

She took one last look around before she went and left Gryffindor tower for the last time. Severus had promised her that she would not live anywhere else but with him after their marriage. Besides, she didn't need to complete her schooling; it had already been finished years ago.

Dumbledore was the Secret-Keeper, so it was his note in his own script that she read before the building appeared before her. She looked at Molly, and the older witch smiled in return whilst taking her arm and bringing her in the house.

"Oh, Merlin!" she exclaimed as she coughed.

"Yes, it's bit rancid. But we'll get this place tidy soon enough. Let's start with the kitchen. I cannot bear having a kitchen that is not put to rights," Molly said importantly.

There were a fair number of horrid bugs and dust so thick Hermione thought she was going to cough to death. She placed a Bubble-Head Charm over herself while she worked. Molly looked at her in shock and a bit of humor as she watched Hermione in her short-shorts and tank top scrubbing the kitchen floor.

"Hermione," she said. "Where on earth did you get that outfit?" she exclaimed.

"Muggles," she said. "It's very cooling, but don't worry. As long as it's just you and I, then I'll wear what I please, but as soon as the boys arrive, I'll be dressed appropriately."

She and Molly worked like house-elves all day long. The kitchen was a putrid mess, and Kreacher was absolutely no help, whatsoever. He snarled and growled at Hermione every chance he could, calling her "Mudblood" and "Filth." Hermione largely ignored him. At the end of the day, they sat in the sparkling new kitchen with some pumpkin juice.

"I feel I've used muscles I've not used in years," claimed Molly.

"I feel wrung out," replied Hermione. "I'll say, it will be good to get more hands in here to clean if this place will be fit for human living. I shudder to think what the bedrooms look like up there."

"Well, don't worry. We'll pack up and get to the Burrow. Ginny should have dinner ready for us, and we can shower and sleep well tonight. Tomorrow, we're all coming back and getting to work!" she said importantly.

"Ah, the whole Weasley clan is coming to set up housekeeping for the Order, eh?" Hermione teased.

"That's right. And they'd best pull their weight or answer to me!" she said sharply.

They Apparated back to the Burrow. Hermione was so tired she threw on an old Hogwarts robe over her indecent work clothes and practically collapsed when Ron came to hug her. He brought her trunk inside, and she and Molly ate heartily, then retired to bed.

The next few days were all the same. Everybody worked hard at cleaning and pitching in. Order Members were going in and out; however, Hermione was still under wraps. Sirius and Buckbeak were still hiding out in the cave on that hardscrabble hill on the mount. There was still so much that had to be done before Headquarters could become habitable.

Molly was a good person to talk to in the evening when all the others were in bed. As far as the rest knew, Hermione was reading late. In reality, Molly was filling Hermione in on the progress of the Order and passing along any and all information she could about Severus.

One night, she told her the biggest news of all.

She poured them a cup of tea and said, "This of course is in the strictest of confidences. It is imperative when Harry comes that he not find out about this. We'll have to reign in Sirius...Merlin knows he thinks Harry should be in the Order. Sometimes, I think he forgets Harry isn't James."

"Did you know James and Lily?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," she said as she smiled. "Not as well as I would have liked. We were in a lower echelon of the Order. Arthur's job at the Ministry made things dangerous. We had babies to watch out for! I had all seven children born by the time You-Know-Who fell. It was so terrifying. But of course, you knew. I heard about you sometimes. Lily and Sirius weren't nice about your leaving. But James said he always liked you. He told me it had been a shame that Severus went over to You-Know-Who. He thought you and Severus would have made a fine couple. I only wish he had lived to see how right he had been."

Hermione took another sip and said, "I can't say I'm glad to be a part of a war; however, I am glad to finally do my part. I can use my expertise and help Severus."

Her eyes glazed over. It was the beginning of July, and in two months, she and Severus would be married. There would be a lot to explain...and a lot to consider...but one thing was for certain: she finally was going to marry the man she had loved nearly her whole life. Or two lifetimes, if one wanted to see it that way. She looked at her engagement ring, and Molly took her hand and admired it.

"When will you tell everyone?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not now. I'll just wear it on my right hand in the daytime. Molly, will Severus and I be able to live here? Like a proper married couple during holidays and vacations once everyone knows?" she asked.

"Oh, I would like that," she answered. "After all, you've waited long enough, and you are not a child! We'll see when the Order meets officially."

"So," Hermione said as she munched on a biscuit. "Tell me the story."

"Well, it all started after you left. Severus was spying for You-Know-Who, and he knew that Dumbledore was meeting Professor Trelawney at the Hog's Head. You should remember her from the days when you came back, right?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "I was Jessica Irving at the time," she said.

Molly laughed. "Bill will faint dead away when he sees you, Hermione!"

"Oh, dear," Hermione said nervously. "Well, don't tell Severus. He has enough insecurities about my De-Aging," she informed the older witch.

Molly got back on track. "Well, that night, Sybil made a prediction to Albus. Aberforth, Albus' brother, found Severus eavesdropping and threw him out on his ear. He only heard a part of the conversation...that is called 'the prophecy.' Basically, it says that one will be born as the seventh month dies, and the Dark Lord shall mark him as an equal, and neither one can live while the other survives.

"Severus only heard the first part and reported back to You-Know-Who. Well, he decided to mark the Potters for death. Lily had just given birth, as had Alice Longbottom. However, You-Know-Who chose the Potters. They went into hiding as soon as Severus defected. For a year, Severus worked with Dumbledore as a spy. No one knew, no one in the Order knew. According to Albus, Severus was terrified that You-Know-Who was going to slaughter them all...James, Lily, and Harry...and he couldn't live with the guilt. It was then he came to Albus with the plan to work at Hogwarts to pretend to be a spy around the start of the fall term of 1981. September, I believe.

"I think Severus always wanted to make amends with Lily, but no one knew Severus could be trusted, and Sirius...Merlin! He went mad. He was frantic that Severus was going to get them all killed. He and Albus had the most terrible rows that first month. It couldn't be hidden that Severus Snape was a teacher at Hogwarts. I suppose that was what led him to get James and Lily to switch from him being the Secret-Keeper to Peter without telling Albus. Sirius was so afraid, but we had all been in those days.

"Well, according to Severus, You-Know-Who is desperate to get his hands on that prophecy. It's hidden in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. We have to make a schedule for there to be someone on point at all hours. That will be your major task, to get all the Order members down for their rotation. One thing in our favor is that only You-know-Who or Harry can get the prophecy. No one else can touch it. Even so, You-Know-Who might try anything to get around it. So, at night, it is imperative that someone stands guard at the Ministry so He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can't get in."

"It sounds simple enough," agreed Hermione. "Why not let Harry retrieve it and get it to Dumbledore?" she asked. "Doesn't Harry have a right to this prophecy?"

"Well, that's where the other problem comes in," Molly whispered. "Remember the vision and the dream Harry had? His scar hurting him?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well, we think that You-Know-Who has some sort of link into Harry's mind. That scar is some sort of conduit or a way to invade his mind and plant information, even retrieve information. If Harry knows that prophecy, then You-Know-Who could access it. Harry must be, in a way, kept in the dark about this. Do you understand?"

Hermione furrowed her brows as she mulled it over in her head. "For the most part. I think I'll have a better idea when we start meetings and I can hear more from Severus on the matter."

Molly nodded. "Hermione, he's not been well," she said softly. "He refuses to eat here with us, and I don't think he is eating regularly. These past three weeks since the term ended, after Cedric Diggory died, he's been summoned to You-Know-Who far too many times. He suffers, from what Poppy tells me, from shocks and convulsions."

"The Cruciatus," Hermione whispered.

Molly gasped. "How did you know?"

Hermione looked at her darkly. "Molly, I trained under Alastor Moody for an entire summer after my sixth year. He taught me how to fight off the Imperius Curse and also had me undergo a few rounds of the Cruciatus to feel what it was like. Moody's heart wasn't into it. He doesn't like doing those things. It was bad enough. Oh, poor Severus!" she whispered. "Doesn't he ask for me?"

Molly grasped her hand. "I think he needs to focus now on his work, and you would be a huge distraction. He knows that when the school year starts, he won't be summoned so often, and then you'll be married and you can care for him, all right?"

"Okay," she whispered.

It was the middle of July when a part of the Order convened. Hermione slipped her ring on her left hand and walked proudly into the kitchen to be introduced and inducted.

Kingsley and Moody were the only ones who had worked with her as Hermione Granger. Bill and Charlie were gobsmacked. She was the young Jessica Irving from their early years at Hogwarts. Now she was standing there, looking even younger than they had remembered.

Albus neatly explained the truth of the matter of Hermione's true life and identity and age. Then announced she and Severus were to be married on her sixteenth birthday at Headquarters. As he spoke, Sirius sat quietly, not taking his eyes off the bride-to-be.

Moody looked at Hermione, and she returned his stare. He had, of course, not seen her since her De-Aging. He had listened to Dumbledore carefully and then come forward to look at her closely.

"Albus, I need to make sure it's her," he said gruffly. Severus made to respond, and Albus placed his hand on the wizard's shoulder. Moody walked right up to her, his claw foot thumping on the floor as he walked. He stood and looked directly into her eyes. "Merlin's Beard, girl," he growled as his eyes raked over her. Hermione remained silent.

"Tell me how you finally threw off the Imperius Curse?" he whispered.

Hermione felt her face grow red. She leaned in and hissed quietly, "I chose between modesty and the protection of my mind. I can't believe you, Moody; I'll have to tell Severus now!"

Moody guffawed and said, "It's her!" and hobbled to the back of the room. Hermione glanced at Remus, and he was trying hard not to look embarrassed and failing miserably at it. Kingsley was fighting back a chuckle. She looked at Severus, and he glared at her angrily. She was going to answer for that later.

She officially took her Oath, even though she had been one of the first members back in the seventies; it just made sense and unruffled a few feathers.

She sat by Severus' side, proudly as his intended for the next two months, and listened as Albus spoke about the latest developments.

"Keeping an eye on Potter will be a must. Miss Granger will be undercover as a student, although she has already passed her N.E.W.Ts in 1978. Her records were pulled some time ago, so no one will be the wiser. In the meantime, for the duration of the summer, due to her undercover status, she cannot join the rotation. She can't even Apparate for another year yet. So, Hermione will be working on our rotation schedules for watching Harry and also for guarding the Department of Mysteries.

"Hagrid and Madame Maxime have gone to speak with the giants. I know this may seem like a lost cause since so many sided with Voldemort during the last war; however, I do not wish to leave any stone unturned. I do not hope for a reply any time soon. We must wait.

"Now, Severus has returned to Voldemort's side as a spy for the Order. He will be reporting to us all regarding the movements of Voldemort and of course any new recruits into the Death Eaters. Severus, do you want to give your report?"

Severus drew in a breath. "Mr. Potter will continue to be marked as an unstable, mad individual who belongs in St. Mungo's. Already, many in the Ministry have turned against not only him but Dumbledore as well," he replied. "Lucius Malfoy has been courting favor with Fudge and other members of the Ministry. Since the *Prophet* has also been pressured by Fudge's camp to discredit Potter's story, the Dark Lord has taken the opportunity to keep a low profile and allow his more socially acceptable followers to keep the public disbelieving his return until he can execute his plan."

Lupin spoke up. "Do you know what he's planning?"

"No, he's keeping it to himself just now. I will of course report anything that comes to light," he replied coolly.

Hermione spoke up. "Has Fudge told Malfoy about the argument you all had with him in the Hogwarts infirmary?" she asked.

"No idea," he replied in an irritated voice. "If he has, no one has said anything about it."

"Perhaps Tom might be interested to know one of his Death Eaters exposed himself to the Minister of Magic?" mused Dumbledore as he leaned back in his chair. "You may have to answer for your choice, Severus."

"No doubt, as I have already answered for a great many choices, Headmaster," he replied blandly.

Hermione was amazed at the emotionless man before her. He was capable of great deception, she knew. He had honed his talent over the years, and she could see just how detached he could be from a potentially sensitive exchange. She decided to think on it later. Dumbledore officially ended the meeting, and her thoughts turned to Harry.

"What should I do to assist Harry?" Hermione asked Albus.

Albus smiled. "You be there as a voice of reason and strength. Don't allow his anger over my distancing myself from him be counterproductive. He may try to turn inward and become depressed or lash out towards those he loves best. Keep loving him and showing him the care and the faith you have always shown. It will be love, Miss Granger, that will defeat Voldemort in the end," he said with his eyes twinkling.

At the end of the meeting, there were a few questions about Hermione and Severus. Albus said, "Voldemort knows about Hermione. Thanks to Lucius Malfoy, Hermione's

identity has been revealed. Hermione will marry Severus and live with him as his wife in secret. She will attend school; however, no grading will be taking place. She will live with Severus in his quarters as any other married couple, albeit under the radar of the students." he said.

"You know you can back out, Hermione," Sirius said gravely as his eyes pierced Severus'. "You don't have to marry him."

Hermione was aghast. Severus wrapped an arm around her waist and said to Sirius, "She wants me. And how it burns you to know that you will never again have that kind of love..."

"Severus," whispered Lupin as he looked at him pleadingly. "Don't."

Hermione watched as Sirius glowered at them. His left eye twitched as he focused on Hermione. She felt he didn't like seeing Severus' arm around her waist. She felt strangely aware of her body as Sirius kept his eyes focused on her.

Dumbledore turned to Hermione and said, "How I wish things could be different, but not now. At least you will have each other to cling to." He looked at her engagement ring. "What shall you do with it?" he asked.

Hermione shook herself out of her confusion over Sirius' outburst. "I will wear it around my neck as I did last year and also will keep Severus' after our wedding night. We can't have anyone seeing a ring on him, can we?" she said regretfully.

"When's the big day?" asked Kingsley.

Dumbledore turned to the Order. "Tuesday, September nineteenth," he replied. "On Miss Granger's sixteenth birthday."

Hermione went to her room that she was working on to be her bedroom to stay for the summer and as a bedroom for her and Severus for their wedding night. It would have to take place here, under the safety of the Fidelius Spell. She went to her bureau and took out a glass jar. She smirked at the tiny beetle inside, who was looking quite put out. With a wave of her wand, Rita Skeeter came out and stood in her bedroom.

"You evil, conniving, little bitch!" she screamed.

Hermione sat, unconcerned about her ravings. She had Rita's wand and had her under so many jinxes and spells, there was no way she could be harmed.

"Now, Rita," Hermione tutted. "I thought you would be happy that I've let you out for a bit of airing."

The witch glared at her. "What do you want?" she snarled.

"I want a Wizard's Oath that you will never speak or write about me, Harry Potter, or anyone that has anything to do with Harry Potter or myself for one year. If you break this Oath, I will be notified immediately, and you will be outed to the Ministry as an Unregistered Animagus and reported for spying on private property at Hogwarts when Dumbledore had ordered you to stay away!" Hermione retorted angrily.

"Fine!" she spat bitterly.

Hermione produced the witch's wand and gave it to her. She wasn't afraid. She had rendered it useless until Rita made her oath. Their wands touched, and the magic swirled around them as Rita repeated the oath.

Hermione quickly took the wand back from the reporter. The witch began to scream and fume. Hermione calmly changed her back into her Animagus form and placed her in her jar.

'Don't fret, Rita. You'll be free very soon. Just not right now." She placed the jar back into the bureau, and then a soft knocking came from her door.

"Come in?" she whispered timidly. It was Severus.

Hermione threw herself into his arms. "Oh, I love you!" she said desperately. "Do you like the room?" she asked as she pulled him in further by the hand. He strode over to the bed and sat on it. He bounced a little, testing the springs as Hermione blushed.

"My, Hermione," he said silkily as he stood up to take her face in his hand. "Blushing Bride? Don't you recall the very naughty things we did at Spinner's End? Not to mention our first night when you came back to me after three long years."

Hermione nuzzled into his hand. "It's just that you are still so much larger than I am. I don't remember you being so intimidating," she replied as she ran her hands up his woolen coat.

"Well, Hermione," he said as he placed his hands gently over hers. "I am also not teenager anymore. I was a young man then, and we were the same age: equal in our mutual virginity and subsequent explorations of sex. I'm a decade older, and although I have been celibate these years, I have seen quite a bit and have learned a great deal about the art of lovemaking. I did explore and was fortunate to have seen some couples perform true lovemaking on a scale we hadn't achieved. I know my body better, but it unfortunately is losing some of its buoyancy of youth.

"You, on the other hand, are a mature woman trapped in a young woman's body; you haven't been able to experience or exercise your sexuality as I have. You are young, Hermione. Even then, the Hermione I remember returning to me was more mature and womanly."

Hermione stepped away. "My body is still undesirable, isn't it?" she whispered sadly.

"No, I didn't say that," he said softly. "Let's just not make any promises about the wedding night. There's no rush to intercourse. There are many ways we can pleasure one another, remember?"

"Of course," she said as he skimmed his thumb across her lower lip. "Do you want to fool around?"

"As tempting as the offer is, I cannot. I still have a promise to keep," he said. "I would like to discuss what happened during the meeting. Why were you and Lupin blushing, and why were Kingsley and Moody smiling?"

Hermione sighed. She knew this was coming. "Look, Severus, I had a lot of problems with the Imperius Curse. Moody had finally had enough and reminded me of the humiliating things I might be forced to do if I didn't apply myself more and really fight it. He ordered me to give Remus oral sex."

She winced, waiting for the fallout. Severus turned his back to her, and she covered her mouth.

"What happened?" he said angrily.

Hermione spoke low and softly about that night. When she told him about being naked, he turned around, his eyes pitch black with murder in them. Hermione then told him about how she used Remus' wand to disarm Moody and sent him flying into a water trough.

Severus' mouth twitched at that point, and Hermione let out a nervous giggle, although she stifled herself and forced her face to be serious looking.

"I ought to kill them," he said softly. "Especially Moody. He's no fool. Lupin's so bloody transparent, his mind is practically shouting the lust he has for you in his eyes!" His voice raged at the end, and he grabbed her shoulders. "You know he wants you, right?" he asked. "I can see it. He sees you as the girl he wanted all those years ago when he thought he had a chance..."

"...But now that is over, and I am marrying you," Hermione interrupted in a firm voice. "I love you."

Severus palmed her face and leaned in to kiss her.

She wrapped her arms under his arms and around his shoulders as he continued to passionately kiss her.

He broke it off abruptly and said, "I need to go before this goes further." He quickly removed himself from Hermione's embrace and left the room.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself. It was July fifteenth, just another two months until the big day. She felt on fire all the time. She knew she would be ready. She yearned for Severus' touch. The days had better fly by, or she was going to die from want!

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 of 74

Hermione tries to settle in with her duties for the Order while pretending to become just another OWL student.

A/N: This is it! One last chapter before the wedding. I hope you like it. Thanks for being so patient.

The day finally came for the whole Weasley clan to officially move into Headquarters. They weren't supposed to move in for another week, but there had been an incident at Harry's house in Little Whinging. An impromptu meeting was held at headquarters, and Hermione was furious at the news.

The entire Order was there, except for Moody, who was on guard duty at the Ministry, and Mrs. Figg, who was watching Harry.

Hermione jumped up from the table and screamed at Mundungus Fletcher. "How could you?" she shrieked. "I work hard to accommodate everyone's needs and schedules so that the Ministry, the Death Eaters, and Harry can be watched appropriately, and you go off because you found a deal on some rusted-out cauldrons?"

She threw down her quill. Everyone was staring at her. It was still odd to see a near sixteen-year-old girl give the wrath of Merlin like any other thirty-year-old woman. Well, she was...she just didn't look it.

"Dumbledore," she continued. "With all due respect, if my services are not needed, then I will gladly relinquish this post. Otherwise, if I am to continue scheduling for these duties, I must insist that there be some sort of accountability for those who fail to take their work seriously."

"Here, here!" said Molly. She was just as furious as Hermione.

Lupin spoke up, "Hermione, don't you think you are being a bit harsh?" he asked.

Molly and Minerva jumped on him faster than a Niffler on a Galleon.

"Remus Lupin! Harry could have died!" screeched Molly.

"Yes, Mr. Potter now has to go before the Wizengamot. Because of the vileness perpetrated by some foul person, Potter has to answer for much more than just his sanity! If Mundungus had been there, Harry wouldn't be facing a tribunal!" Minerva shouted.

Dumbledore raised his hand. "I understand all of your concerns. I shall make sure this is taken care of. In the meantime, in three days hence, I must require the Advance Guard to go to Surrey, retrieve Harry, and bring him back here to Headquarters. I know it's early, but he can be another pair of helping hands, right, Molly?" he asked with a smile.

Molly nodded sharply in reply as Albus continued. "Now, Hermione, I will need you to consult your date book and make sure the Advance Guard is free for that night. The next morning someone will have to pull a double shift; I apologize, it cannot be avoided. Now, Arthur and Molly have some news they would like to share."

Arthur Weasley and his wife stood up and, with brave faces, announced that their son Percy had disowned the family and decided to take the Ministry's side in the matter of Voldemort's return.

"It has been a painful time; however, Molly and I feel you all should know, especially those of us who are at the Ministry and at times pass sensitive information to one another. It pains me to say, but my son cannot be trusted. He, until he comes to his senses, is lost to us."

Molly burst into a torrent of tears and excused herself from the room. Hermione followed her and comforted the mother as best as she could.

"You stay right here, Molly. I'll make you a nice cup of strong tea and put a little firewhisky in it. It's not easy for you, Lord knows, Molly. You are an exceptional woman," she said as she patted her arm.

Severus was watching her as she came back and fixed Molly's tea. She went back out and sat with her as she drank up and dabbed her eyes. "Oh, it's so hard. You raise them to do the right things, to look at the world with a fair mind, and you never think that your baby would become so cold-hearted!" she cried.

Hermione patted her and said, "We can only hope he will come to his senses soon and stay safe at the Ministry until then. At least you know you have one child not in danger."

"True," she said as she dabbed her eyes. "Hermione, you have a mother's heart, you know? You understand what so many others don't. I can't even talk to Arthur about Percy without him shouting. When he shouts, it makes me cry. Arthur isn't the shouting type! It frightens me so."

"Well, you can talk to me, Molly. I'll listen. In the meanwhile, we have so much to keep us busy. Then there's Harry to look out for. My, you know how that horrid aunt of his starves him! We're going to be cooking day and night just to get him fattened up enough to look good at that hearing and ready for school!"

Molly's mothering radar was piqued. She instantly forgot her woes and began to think of all the things they still needed to accomplish that summer before the wedding.

"I do want you and Severus to have a nice wedding!" she said. "Even if it has to be a short wedding and honeymoon. Have you decided what to do since the wedding is on a Tuesday?"

"Well, we are going to spend the night here and return to Hogwarts in the early morning. Then we'll take the weekend and stay at Hogwarts in Severus' quarters. Minerva and Filius have gladly offered to take over for Severus in case of any emergency. Severus is going to become conveniently ill, and I will be going home to spend the weekend with my mum and dad for my birthday. My, all the subterfuge!" she said as she laughed.

They went back inside to rejoin the meeting, and the two witches sat by their wizards.

"Molly, Hermione," said Sirius. "We were just talking about the continuing downfall of the Ministry," he said light-heartedly.

Albus smiled. "I've been officially kicked out of the Wizengamot as Chief Warlock and Chairman of the International Confederation."

Molly gasped. "How can they do that?"

"Very easily, Molly," Arthur replied. "Dumbledore is losing nearly everything by standing by Harry. They've even stripped away all his honors, even the Order of Merlin."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore in alarm as he smiled and waved it off, saying, "Just as long as they don't take me off the Chocolate Frog Cards, I shall still have hope left."

Harry's arrival was not a happy reunion. He was surly, angry, and very upset when he found out that Hermione was an Order Member and could not tell him anything. He was angry about the Dementor attack and Dumbledore's distancing himself from him as well.

After the hearing, Harry should have been happy, but all he was, was angry, furious, and hurt that Dumbledore wouldn't speak with him. It was so hard to try and get Harry to understand and just accept things for what they were. He yelled constantly and was moody as hell. He spent time with Sirius and Buckbeak, leaving Ron alone with the twins and Ginny while Hermione worked on her scheduling. She couldn't believe it when Molly told her that it was the last week in August and that they had shopping in Diagon Alley to do.

Hermione really didn't need anything. Although she would keep up the pretense of working hard in the dungeons, the only real classes she was taking were Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. She stayed and readied her trunk and prepared to release Rita Skeeter. She placed the jar in her rucksack and walked into Muggle London a good long ways and released Rita in a secluded spot, leaving her wand next to her. It still had an anti-jinx spell on it, so Hermione wasn't fussed. She walked out of Hyde Park feeling free.

The thirtieth of August was a terrible day. Minerva came in a rush, and Hermione was the first Order member to see her. Harry rolled his eyes and stomped away while Ron silently joined him.

Minerva took Hermione by the arm and led her quietly to the side. "Hermione, Molly needs to call up everyone she can for an emergency meeting: all the Advance Guard and senior members. We'll meet tonight at seven. Oh, and I believe it is Miss Tonks' night for guard duty. You'll have to switch her off with someone else, perhaps Podmore," she suggested. Then she left as swiftly as she came.

That night, the senior members and the Advance Guard met. Albus informed them that he had received Educational Decree number twenty-two that states the Minster has the right to hire instructors at Hogwarts if the Headmaster is unable.

"Surely, it can't be that bad finding a Defense teacher?" Sirius said incredulously.

Dumbledore sighed. "It has been nearly impossible. We all know that Tom placed a curse on that position. After so many years, everyone knows it is cursed," he said sadly. "I've even considered just giving it over to Severus, but Tom's envy would be monstrous. We can't lose him."

Hermione wrapped an arm around his. He stiffened and shifted his eyes towards her as she looked at him with worry. She felt his hand on her leg, under the table, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

Arthur spoke up next. "I know this will come as a shock to some of you, especially you, Remus, but Delores Umbridge will be the Defense teacher this year."

Lupin fairly growled. "They can't be serious!" he snarled.

"That old cow?" Tonks blurted out. "She's evil, that one. She's prejudiced against anyone who isn't purely human. I daresay she wouldn't even count me as fully human!"

Hermione watched as the temperamental Metamorphmagus' hair turned a blazing red. She felt badly for Remus. The witch was horrible. After Lupin had quit teaching at Hogwarts, his status as a werewolf had spread. The Wizengamot had passed Umbridge's anti-Werewolf legislation, and Remus had been unable to find steady work ever since. It was also another bone of contention between Severus and the two ex-Marauders. Sirius blatantly called out Severus as the reason that law passed and for Remus' misfortune. Although Remus was not as vocal as Sirius was, he did harbor ill will towards the Dark wizard. Hermione braced herself for yet another chapter in the ongoing saga.

"Just can't believe they'd hire someone so vile!" said Molly.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "But how is she qualified to teach Defense?"

Moody snorted.

Arthur spoke up, "Anyone, the law says, that the Minister of Magic determines is fit. That is what makes her qualified."

"That, and the fact she is Fudge's Senior Undersecretary, not to mention she literally thinks the wizard can do no wrong," said Minerva sarcastically.

"What it comes down to," interrupted Albus, "is that we all will have Fudge's eyes and ears inside Hogwarts. She will be doing much more than teaching, if that. She will be keeping tabs on everyone. Severus, I expect for you to be most helpful and engaging, but I'm sure you knew that already," he said with a smile.

"Yes, Headmaster."

"If Snivellus hadn't let his hurt feelings get in the way of all this, perhaps Remus could have had the job!" Sirius shouted angrily.

Hermione closed her eyes. *Here we go again!*

Albus raised his hand to silence the group who had begun arguing amongst themselves. "Please, all of you! We cannot undo what has been done. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage. Allowing Fudge to have Umbridge at Hogwarts may temper the hostility, push back the campaign I'm sure that has started to have me sacked."

Hermione's eyes darted to meet Dumbledore's.

"Miss Granger, we will need your help most of all. You have to keep Harry's temper under control. She will try to goad him into acting rashly, then use his anger against

him later. You must try and help him to see reason."

"I shall do my best, sir," she replied.

The first of September came, and Hermione was nervous about the new school year. She had been named Prefect and had special privileges that came with it, which would make her comings and goings easier. She did not have to take Potions nor half of her courses so she could assist with the Order. She explained to Harry and Ron she was in an accelerated program that gave her more one-on-one time with professors, and since she said she wanted to become a Potions mistress, she now lived in the dungeons.

The morning they set out for Hogwarts was grim. Arthur, Molly, Sirius, and Hermione were exhausted from sitting in the kitchen after being awakened at four in the morning.

Hermione was awakened with Molly shaking her.

"Hermione, wake up! Arthur's here!"

She put on her robe and went downstairs. "What's going on?" she said through a yawn.

Molly placed a cup of black coffee in front of her. "Podmore was arrested tonight for trespass."

"What?" said Hermione as she choked on her coffee.

Sirius threw her a tea towel. "Voldemort's desperate. He wants that prophecy so badly he can taste it. Well, he's shown his hand now," he said.

"Not so fast, Sirius," replied Arthur. "What is Podmore going to say? I was placed under the Imperius Curse by a person I can't prove is a Death Eater under the strict orders of someone the Ministry doesn't want to admit is alive?"

"What's he going to do?" asked Hermione.

"He's keeping a stiff-upper lip. He'll be sent to Azkaban. For how long, I don't know, but all I can hope is that he remains silent. If he gives out any information about the Order, we could be in for serious trouble."

"Podmore's strong," said Sirius. "He'll do his time and come back to us. He's tough."

They all sat around the table sincerely hoping he was right.

Harry and Ron didn't like the idea of Hermione living in the dungeons. It didn't seem necessary. They sat on the Hogwarts Express as Hermione argued that this was all a part of her schooling and would help her education.

"Besides, the Order needs me," she replied quietly.

"Well, you are good with Potions, spells, and all that," said Ron generously.

"Thank you, Ronald," she replied.

Harry looked angry, although he always looked angry these days. It was strange for Hermione. For her, it was like seeing James in a bad mood all the time.

"Harry, she said as she put her arm in his. "Harry, I need your support. I can't do all this without you. You have to understand how much the Order needs me. Who would suspect a student, especially me, helping Snape?"

"I can see your point, Hermione," he said finally. "It's just I feel so alone, more alone than ever. Now, you aren't even going to be with us, anymore."

Hermione looked at Harry; his green eyes were so sad. She could read them as well as she had been able to read Lily's. She placed her hand on his opposite cheek and made him face her.

"I'm always with you, Harry," she said. "I want you to know that everything I do for the Order ultimately leads back to you. I want you safe."

"I can take care of myself!" he yelled. "Look at what I did this summer...fucking Dementors were after me and Dudley, and I fought them back and took care of it. Why can't anyone see that I am capable of taking care of myself?" he fairly shouted at her.

"Because this is bigger than a few Dementors, Harry," she said urgently. "There are many dark and evil things out there that you haven't even heard of that can kill you and everyone you love."

Harry interrupted her. "Then why do you know about it, Hermione? How's it that you know all this stuff and I don't?" he demanded.

Hermione licked her lips. "It's not that I know everything and therefore I can deal with it all. These things are so terrible and horrific that it is taking the entire Order to defeat them all. So, it isn't that I alone or a whole group of people are saying, 'Harry Potter can't care for himself, he's too fragile'...no! It's that there is so much danger where you are concerned, so concentrated...if it were me or Ron or Ginny, we would be treated the same," she reasoned.

"Well, you're not, are you?" he snapped at her. "You have no idea what I feel like. Seeing Cedric die, almost getting killed twice in one night, facing Voldemort...I went through all of this, and now, no one is telling me anything!"

Ron and Ginny looked at her desperately. She was tired. There was so much she wished she could say to make him understand, but she couldn't.

"Harry," she said quietly, "you need to trust us. Please, trust us. In time, you will know what you want and need to know. Just please, trust us...trust me."

Harry turned and looked out the window. They all stayed quiet for the rest of the trip.

It was pure hellish torture that first night. Hermione tossed and turned, knowing Severus was so close and the wedding was less than three weeks away. At night, she began to explore herself more intimately. Her hymen was thick and firm, not flimsy as it had been at twenty-two when she had lost her virginity the first time. She stopped taking the hormones; she wanted to be as ready as possible to be taken by Severus. She was feeling concerned a little; after all, he wasn't a young boy her age. He was a man, larger and older-looking than she was, but at the same time, it was what really fascinated her about him. She knew the young Severus Snape; now she was going to have to learn about the older Severus Snape. It added an air of mystery and a bit of lust when she could feel how solid and firm he felt when she allowed her hands to wander over his woolen cloak. She could hardly wait to have what she imagined he looked like now under his robes on top of her...

The next three weeks were awful during the day as well. It seemed that no matter what she and Ron did or said, Harry was determined to butt heads with Umbridge and snap at anyone in sight who upset him. He was in detention more than he wasn't, and the added pressure of missing Quidditch practice and the angry threats from Angelina, the team captain, or the furious lectures from McGonagall, due to his nasty temper, didn't seem to faze him or jar him from out of his mode of self-destruction.

One morning, Hermione opened up her copy of the *Daily Prophet* and saw a headline that caught her eye.

Ron leaned over and read with her.

"Podmore? Isn't he one of the..."

"Shush, Ron!" Hermione hissed.

Ginny and Harry leaned over. "What does it say?" Harry asked.

Hermione took a breath. "Sturgis Podmore... has appeared before the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic... Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense ... sentenced to six months in Azkaban."

"Six months, for trying to get through a door?" whispered Harry. "That's not right."

"It could be a frame-up!" Ron said excitedly. "The Ministry suspects he's one of Dumbledore's lot so...I dunno...they lured him into the Ministry. He wasn't trying to get through a door at all. Maybe they just made something up to get him."

"But why him, Ron?" asked Harry. "I mean, if they were going to frame someone, why not get your dad, or Kingsley, or Tonks!" He looked at Hermione.

"Anything you care to add?" he asked pointedly.

"No," she replied coolly. "And I don't appreciate your tone, Harry Potter."

"I don't appreciate being *lied* to," he quipped.

"Harry, no one's lying to you!" she hissed.

"Then tell me you knew nothing about this! It said it happened on the thirtieth of August. Anything you'd care to share?" he asked.

Hermione got up and gathered her things. "I've better things to do with my time than argue with you about the same old nonsense," she said angrily.

She left them all there, knowing they knew she hadn't told them what she did know. How could she? She was an Order member, and they weren't.

She spent the weekend before her wedding bunking with Ginny and spending time in the common room. She found it a nice change, and Harry especially seemed to appreciate having her in Gryffindor tower. His attitude lifted from resentment to happiness quickly. It was obvious that Harry wanted Hermione to stay for good. It saddened her to think how short-lived his contentment would be.

It was late Sunday night, and Hermione was helping them all with their Astronomy homework when an owl came peeking at the window.

"Isn't that Hermes?" asked Hermione.

"Blimey. It's from Percy!" Ron replied.

He read the letter out loud. The more he read, the more downcast Harry looked. Hermione felt horrible; however, she wasn't all that shocked. Percy had chosen his side early on and had been clear about it. Nonetheless, it hit Harry hard and made Ron angry. So angry he crumpled it up and threw it in the fire.

"Well, I guess we're in for a treat in the morning," Hermione mumbled.

"What?" asked Ron.

"Percy," Hermione answered. "He said to be on the look out for 'yours truly'; there's an announcement of some sort being made"*

Later, that evening around midnight, just as they were packing it up, Sirius' head popped into the fire. He lingered to have a very interesting discourse with Harry about Delores Umbridge and her position there as teacher and to ask Harry if he wanted to meet up with him for a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry declined the offer and was uncomfortable about it. Hermione remained silent, but fumed that Sirius had the nerve to suggest that Harry was less like James than he thought. Hermione decided she would have a chat with Sirius about Harry *and* James.

A/N: The italics with the * at the end are words that belong to JK Rowling. The others are my own. The reference to Dumbledore and the chocolate frogs is a modification of Rowling's words in OotP.

<i>Ad Vitam Aeternam </i>

Chapter 45 of 74

Severus and Hermione finally marry after twenty years of waiting.

A/N: Finally, we have arrived! My thanks to WriterMerrin, who still worked on this chapter while under the weather. Also, my thanks to luvsev, who has given me her advice and cheer-leading :)I hope this chapter will have been worth the wait!

Ad Vitam Aeternam

For All Time

The day before the wedding was full of excitement. Hermione spent the day at Grimmauld Place joking around and getting drunk with Tonks, Emmeline, Molly, and Minerva. She was still in the area of being somewhat sober that afternoon to chat with Sirius. She dragged him down into the kitchen, away from the rowdies to be alone with him before Lupin came to save him from being the only wizard in a house full of drunken witches.

They sat uncomfortably in the kitchen, and Hermione finally said, "I was there the night you Floored Harry, and I heard what you said about James. I thought you were being completely unfair and rude about Harry's decision to think about your well-being over his own feelings of isolation. I'm sad to say that Harry made the adult choice...not you."

Sirius stood and walked over to where she sat, leaning over her. "Hermione," he replied as he flashed his cocky smile at her, "it's none of your business, love. This is between me and Harry."

Hermione felt very uncomfortable with him hovering over her. She stood shakily as she adjusted her eyes and faced him. "It is not just between you and Harry!" she retorted. "Everything that has to do with Harry is the Order's business. In fact, my job is to keep Harry's morale from going down the toilet! The same rule applies to you as well. If you were out there, we'd have to keep tabs on you, too. Don't you know that you're a wanted man?" she asked desperately, needing him to realize the danger he was courting by his behavior.

He smirked as he leaned in closer, raking his eyes over her breasts before meeting her eyes. "Am I? Then why is it I haven't been shagged good and proper in over a decade?" he murmured softly.

Hermione straightened her spine and glared at him. "Cute. So mature, Sirius. Just like throwing up Harry's dad to his face when he's already feeling down and out. We don't need the reunion of James and Sirius!"

"You know what, Hermione," he shouted over her as he walked over to the doorway and leaned on it. "I'm glad you're marrying Snivellus because you two are made for each other. I knew it twenty years ago, and I know it now. You can't stand the thought of Harry and me being happy. Snivellus is just as jealous of me now as he was then, and you're jealous of Harry now just as you were jealous of Lily, then!"

Hermione looked at him as if he were insane. She screamed with laughter. "I was never jealous of Lily, Sirius!" she said incredulously as she walked unevenly to the doorway. "Severus was my friend, and we were friends long before we ever became lovers. In fact, we didn't even have sex until after V-V-V...that fucker was gone!"

Hermione crossed her arms and continued to yell at Sirius as she swayed. "I can't believe you would throw James into Harry's face like that! Harry isn't James and never can be, and he shouldn't have to be subjected to that kind of pressure! It's hurtful and inappropriate for a godfather to speak that way towards his godson!" she hissed.

Sirius grabbed her by her upper arms, and after a couple of seconds, pushed her away from him, forcefully. "I don't have to listen to this. I can't believe you would waste yourself on someone like him when you could have so much better! I treated Marlene like a goddess! He could never...oh, hell! Have a nice life, Hermione. I hope you and old Snively have a great repressed life together!" he said nastily as he ran up the stairs and slammed the door behind him.

"Bugger!" Hermione swore out loud.

There was nothing she could do now. So she went back up to the party and got completely sloshed.

Hermione woke on Tuesday with a feeling of anticipation and happiness thrumming through her. Today was finally the day! She stood in a dress of white silk that Minerva had made just for her. Ginny had taken her measurements for a simple, white cotton dress to make for her, and the measurements had been intercepted by Molly, given to Minerva, and with the cotton dress came a lovely, satin wedding dress that brought tears to Hermione's eyes. She wore the pearls she had worn for the Yule Ball and Molly's wedding veil that was long and luxurious. She never dreamt she would ever have such finery for her wedding.

Hermione had worked hard to grow her hair long since her De-Aging, and her hair was just starting to capture the longish, heavy curls that hung down her back. She let Tonks place a touch of make-up on her, and Arthur came with a bunch of wild flowers from the Burrow for her to use as a bouquet.

Arthur gave her away, and Severus stood with Albus as she solemnly entered the drawing room. All the members of the Order were present, and Albus' voice fell richly in the small parlor as Severus and Hermione finally fulfilled the vows they had made so long ago. The thrill of magic wrapped itself around each person; the shimmering glow was mysterious as well as enchanting. A large, stone Pensieve appeared in the middle of the room. The bride and groom stood in the center, next to the Pensieve, as the witnesses surrounded them. Albus nodded for Hermione to speak first. She offered her right hand, palm open, and Severus placed his left hand into her own. She placed her wand to her temple, and Albus murmured an incantation as the silvery, gossamer strand floated on top of the water. Hermione's memory came into view for all the witnesses to see.

Hermione began to speak. "I made a promise when I was a girl and you were a boy, huddled on a field of grass, that I would never stop being your friend."

"Severus, is there really a difference between pure-bloods and Muggle-borns?" she asked.

"No," he mouthed.

Hermione smiled. "That's all I need to know. I won't give up on you. No matter if everyone hates me for it, I promise I will never abandon you."

"I recall being in a lonely classroom, unable to show our faces in public together for fear of the political changes in our world, and I asked you to make a promise to me."

"Promise me that you will always remember that I will never wish you evil, only good. Promise me that you will always remember that I am your friend and I care for you."

"I will always love you," he whispered with his lips brushing hers.

"Promise?" she choked.

"I promise," he said fervently.

"Severus," she whispered as he began to open to the door to leave. "I will love you. I promise that I will never do you harm. I may hurt you, being just a simple witch in love, but I shall never hurt you out of malice or of ill intent. I will always love you."

"Then when we had to part for that long summer, I asked you to promise to believe and trust that I would never harm you on purpose. You did. Then you asked me to vow that I would keep myself for you, and I have."

"Please, don't give up on me, my love. I shall never give up on you," he said softly with his intense black eyes boring into hers.

"I shall save it all for you, Severus. No man shall know me but you. I swear!"

"Make an oath to me, Hermione," he pleaded. "Vow to me I will have you, that one day you will come to me and give yourself to me. Swear that I will know you, all of you,"

he said as his eyes swept over her.

"I do swear," she vowed.

"Then when you came of age, we stole two precious moments alone, and again, vows were made." Hermione nodded to Albus, who cast a Concealment Charm around the memory so only she and Severus would see and hear the private scene.

"Hermione, I love you. There will be times you will doubt my love, but I will not ever stop. I made a vow. One day, I shall cover you with diamonds and brocade. You shall put all those pure-blood ladies to shame with your loveliness. Even this moment, the way you look at me...my God, Hermione, you are the loveliest witch I have ever seen."

He held her and kissed her wantonly. He whispered into her ear. "I want to make love to you, my love. My perfect Hermione, you are the only perfect thing in my life, and I don't deserve you. Promise me, Hermione. Promise you will save your love, save yourself for me. One day, I shall take you into my arms, and I will never release you until you are ready to pass out from the pleasure I want to give you. I swear...I shall never touch another woman. Until you and I can be together, I will save myself for you."

"In the dark days when uncertainty crept in and shook our faith in our love, we reassured ourselves of our oaths and clung to each other in our hearts."

"Hermione," he groaned as he broke their kiss. "I missed you, I thought of you constantly, I love you."

"Do you?" she whispered against his lips. "Are you still my Severus, the Severus who kissed me in that record booth, who made those oaths to me?"

"Yes, Hermione," he said as his black eyes pierced hers. "I am still yours. Are you still mine?"

He stole an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "There are, unfortunately, faces I have to show in public as a part of my image. However, you and I connect on a deeper level. I am still the boy you grew up with and who fell in love with you. We made oaths to each other, and those oaths are stronger than being apart for three years. I missed you, Hermione, and I loved you every day we were apart. I will never stop loving you. Time can't change it because what we have is real."

"I love you," Hermione said as she hugged him.

"I love you, Hermione," he answered.

Hermione signaled to Albus to remove the charm on the Pensieve. Again, the witnesses could see the memories as they appeared. "The day I had to tell you the truth of my life. I thought surely, this would break us. But, you surprised me yet again by reminding me of our vows."

Hermione threw her arms around him. "Please tell me you don't hate me! I couldn't bear it if I lost you now!" she begged earnestly.

Severus pulled her from him and kissed her lips. "We said vows, Hermione. Our oaths are binding. I love you. I am confused and angry about what we might have to do to rectify this mess, but you and I are forever. Time doesn't matter. You are mine, and I am yours," he said passionately.

"When I returned to my original time, we promised that we would be together on this day. The magic enveloped us, and we knew another vow had been made for this special day."

He placed a finger on her lips. "September 19th, 1995. I will come for you and bring you back here, and you will never leave me."

"I will be ready to be yours on September 19th, 1995, and I shall never leave your side," she vowed, and the magic flowed around them.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"I think that you and I will have to be married on that day, Hermione. You have sworn yourself to never leave my side. How do you feel being a sixteen-year-old bride?"

"I shall save it all for you, Severus. No man shall know me but you. I swear!"

The familiar magic swirled around them, binding their vows to the other. It was ancient magic; Severus whispered that they were magically betrothed. Only death would release them from the other.

"Love does not know time, Severus," she said clearly. "I love you, and I will love you, forever. I shan't bother you again. Consider the matter closed. Just promise me you will come for me on my sixteenth birthday. Even if we don't make love, just let me be near you, hold you, kiss you."

She tried to leave his lap, but he held her firmly to him. "Hermione, we made oaths...vows to each other. You told me you would always be with me. I want you to marry me. We have lived nearly a lifetime together. I love you," he said simply.

"We had our rings, the tangibility of the love and vows we had given to each other. We had to hide them for so long, but no longer. In front of all these people, I give my love, my honor, and everlasting loyalty," Hermione said as she finished. She waved her wand in a gathering motion and placed each memory back inside her head. She slipped the golden ring on Severus' left ring finger, and he then took her left hand into his right one.

Severus spoke lowly and said, "I had a long time to consider the woman in front of me now. She was someone on the periphery of my vision. Then there were moments that happened in my life, tender touches and kind presences...silent solidarity. I knew she was on my side, and that is the most precious gift a man can have." Severus cast three memories, one after the other, into the air above the Pensieve, and everyone watched each memory as it appeared and another took its place.

Hermione had taken the initiative to go into his room and kneel by the bed, stroking his hair and forehead while whispering encouraging thoughts. She told him he was going to be all right, that she was here, and no one was going to harm him.

She watched Severus as thick tears started to roll down his face. He turned from Hermione, curled up into a ball, and sobbed.

Hermione pulled the curtain closed around them and went to Severus' side. She sat next to the bed, stroking his hair and forehead, and telling him it was all going to be all right.

"She never knew that I was aware of her caring nature towards me, but I was always aware."

He looked at her with smoldering eyes as he captured a curl between his fingers. "I noticed. I may not have seen you like I do now, but I always noticed you, Hermione," he whispered.

"When did you really see me for the first time?" she whispered in return.

"The night you came and comforted me after Lily left me. You held me as I cried, and you never chided me or made me feel stupid for being weak."

"I wanted so badly for us to be together, to be married. There can be no way that we can at this time be acknowledged by the Ministry, but we are here, together, with all of

these witnesses to show the depth of my commitment and love."

She held the ring in her hand. "Severus, there is no way on earth the Ministry would allow us to marry. Your trial is coming up, the future is so uncertain!" she whispered urgently.

He held her hands in his own tightly as he looked into her eyes. "That is why I want us to have things settled between us. I know this is the wrong time, the worst timing, in fact, But sweet, I cannot go on with my life on hold. I need to know you will be mine for always. I need you, Hermione. I've loved you for so long. I loved you as a friend, and then I loved you as a boy loves a girl. Now I am a man wanting to love you as a woman, to be with me, stand by me, please!" he begged as he pressed his forehead against hers.

"Yes, Severus," she replied slowly. "I will stand by you, no matter what. I will love you, always. I will marry you as soon as we are able."

"There were terrible days where I thought I would have to destroy all the good in me in order to survive. We had grown up together and had lived through terrible days. Falling in love had not been a part of a scheme or plan. It was genuine. I entrusted to you, Hermione, all that I held dear in me. It was only your pureness that could have ever touched my darkness and make me whole again."

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered. "I want you to know you hold in you all that is good in me. I entrust all my goodness and all the things I hold precious. I can't wait until I can make you mine in every sense of the word. Hermione, I couldn't stop loving you if I tried."

"What exists that connects us is honest, real, and eternal. Time could not destroy it, being apart for years at a time did not fade our desires and our faith. So here we are now, twenty-two years since we first met, here to announce to all we will hide no more from those we can trust. I give to this remarkable woman my love, my protection, and my respect."

He slipped Hermione's ring onto her left ring finger, and then Albus spoke, "This is the culmination of over twenty years of promises and vows. We are witnesses to their faith, hope, and love. My children, may your lives together be blessed. You are now one: husband and wife."

As Severus and Hermione kissed, the memory of sitting in the glass record booth where they had kissed flew into Hermione's mind. Such was this kiss. It was not a passionate kiss, nor one of need or hunger, but a kiss of completion, that all what had been promised and yearned for had now been fulfilled.

The celebration was short-lived, for the war would not wait, and neither would work or the school. Severus still had classes to teach, and Hermione had her own duties for the Order to maintain, not to mention prefect duties and going to the two classes she wanted to stay fresh in: Charms and Defense. Now she had added a third: Transfiguration.

After the wine had been drunk and the cake eaten, Severus and Hermione wished their guests a goodnight. The clamoring could be heard from their upstairs bedroom, but it made Hermione feel better to know there were other noises in the house.

She took her husband's hand and led him into her bedroom. She'd had it beautifully redone, and she busily began to light the candles that lined the edges of the room. The light illuminated her figure inside the white satin. Severus walked slowly behind her and pressed her to him. Hermione leaned back and offered her lips to him. They kissed as they stood bathed in the soft light of the room.

"Are you sure, Hermione?" he whispered as his fingers drifted and caressed her face, urging her to turn around to face him.

"Let's just feel our way," she replied nervously.

Clothes came off silently as their trembling fingers struggled with buttons, crisp shirt linens, and tiny hooks within the smooth luster of Hermione's dress. The heavy dropping of black dress robes and the rustling of falling satin were all that could be heard over the increasingly uneven breathing between them. Hermione looked at Severus as he stood naked before her. He had more to him, a substance that had not there before. A manliness that had erased the desperately thin youth he had been. He had more hair, more lines, and more muscles that filled out his pale skin.

His hands were rougher from a decade of working with potions. They felt strange on the more sensitive parts of her skin, now that she had the time to think about it. She watched as he looked at her supple body...the body that still wasn't finished becoming what it would be in the next two years. However, she still had a woman's body. This summer's hard work had taken away the last ounce of baby fat and had replaced it with a woman's curve. His roughened hands followed those curves slowly, and he began to kiss and caress her as he leaned in to taste her lips once more. He took her hand silently and led her to the side of the bed where she lay down. Severus joined her, sitting at her side.

"I want to feel," he whispered as he moved down to face her bent kneecaps, clenched together at first, but she let him spread her legs while he pushed one finger inside her. Her walls hugged it tightly, and he sighed. Hermione nodded for him to press on. He pushed his finger deeper and crooked it to touch her more intimately. Soon, her breathing was shallow, and she was shifting her hips to find satisfaction faster. He placed a gentle hand on her abdomen and rose over her.

Severus lowered his head and tenderly kissed her cheek. "Shh, be still, Hermione. Let me bring it to you," he whispered. "You are so very delicate."

Hermione looked at him desperately. She was burning and becoming lost in the dizzying haze of yearning.

"Please," she breathed while his face and lips hovered just above her own.

He kissed her tenderly and pressed his finger harder inside her as he continued to tease the soft, spongy spot that would give her what she needed.

She rewarded him with the sound of her soft, mewling cries. It never ceased to arouse him. She was too precious, too delicate in his hands. He relished the light, gasping words she uttered as she melted around him. Their lips brushed against each other, and he breathed, "My sweet girl, I love you," as he crushed her lips against his own, taking the lead, opening her mouth slowly. He made gentle love to her mouth, and her body loosened. He cupped her breasts tenderly, kissing each mound lovingly as Hermione let out a squeak at the touch of his hands on her ultra sensitive skin. His thumbs ran over each nipple, grazing them until they rose to meet his touch. He lowered his head to flick each one with the tip of his tongue, and Hermione gasped, pulling him closer to her. She spread herself further and sighed as her eyes grew heavy.

"Now?" he whispered.

She nodded and held him close to her, running her fingers up and down his back.

He went slowly, pressing the soft head of his sex into her dewy opening. He went in as far as he could until he reached her hymen.

"I don't want to hurt you," he choked out.

"It's all right," she said although her body was trembling under his.

"Hermione, you are shivering!" he whispered in concern. "No, I'm not doing this."

He withdrew and held her close in his arms. Hermione released tears she didn't know were there.

"I'm sorry!" she whispered through her tears.

"Never be sorry," he whispered against her cheek as he cradled her in his arms. "We'll do this on our own time, when it's right for us."

Hermione reached down with her fingertips to touch him and reacquaint herself with him. She remembered how it used to be: the sounds he made and the movement of his hips as he reached climax. He was still the same, her Severus, just in a slightly different body.

They slept, and sometime in the middle of the night, they found each other again.

Their lips met, and the old flame of passion from years ago returned. She cradled his head in her small hands and matched his ardor.

"I love you, Hermione," he gasped. "I can't believe I have you again."

His hands massaged her breasts, making them react to his touch. He placed his mouth over one puckered nipple and sucked while lashing the nipple with his tongue.

"Please, take me," she panted.

He looked at her with lust and desire. "You look like the girl whose bed I climbed into, seeking a kiss," he breathed as he found her entrance.

Hermione smiled. "You confessed later you wanted more than kisses from me."

"So, now I get my wish?" he murmured. "I finally get the girl of my youth?"

A flash of Lily crossed her mind. Wasn't Lily the girl of his youth? Wasn't she the one he'd wanted?

"No," he whispered as he shifted deeper inside her, resting against her maidenhead. "You. Just you, Hermione."

Hermione felt the tears well up, and she held him tighter to her. "Now, Severus," she said without reservation.

He slowly pressed in, and she felt the tearing and the pressure of his manhood inside her. She wept, although if it was from pain or the joy of knowing Severus held her still so highly in his heart, she couldn't tell. He rocked gently, easing his way back and forth, and she urged him on...to take all of her.

He was gasping out his pleasure; one hand gripped the back of one of her thighs, raising it as he thrust deeper inside her. She cried out, and then her body began to remember the feeling of him inside her. She let it wash over her and held onto him, remembering...

Chapter 46

Chapter 46 of 74

Life resumes after the wedding.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin. I hope you enjoy now having Severus and Hermione together at last!

Severus and Hermione Snape returned to Hogwarts early the next morning. Hermione had all her belongings now in Severus' quarters. She breathed deeply and thought, *I'm home. I'm finally home.*

Severus and Hermione took hurried showers and dressed for the day. Another time, she would go back to retrieve her wedding dress and straighten up their room at Grimmauld Place. After they were dressed and looking their part of professor and student, Severus and Hermione sadly removed their wedding rings and placed them in a box charmed with their unique signature. Only her wand or Severus' could open the box.

They left the dungeons separately for breakfast, and Hermione went to sit with Ron and Harry. She went to say "Hi" to Harry when Ron looked at her pointedly and gave her a wide-eyed glare. Harry looked angry and in a mood blacker than she had ever seen on him.

"What's going on?" she asked to Ron and Ginny who were pushing their food on their plates.

"What else?" said Ginny. "Umbridge."

"What has she done now?" Hermione asked as she glanced at Harry.

"Show Hermione your hand, Harry!" said Ron pointedly. Harry forcefully pushed his hand under Hermione's face. She grasped it and saw the markings, redness, and puffiness.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "What has she been doing?"

"Well, since I am such an unstable person who can't help lying about Voldemort, she is making me do lines. 'I must not tell lies.'"

Ginny leaned over to whisper to Hermione. "She's got this black pen, and it cuts into the person's flesh when it's used to write with. The blood of the writer is used as ink. It's foul, Dark magic," she whispered.

"Harry, she can't do this," Hermione whispered as Harry snatched his hand away from her.

"Well, obviously, she can, because no one is going to stop her, are they?" he snapped.

"You have to tell Dumbledore," she said flatly.

Harry laughed. "Like he cares! He doesn't have the time for the likes of me, now. I'm just a nutter, remember?"

He was looking at her oddly; there was a glint in his eye that just wasn't. *Harry*.

"Harry, you're worrying me," she said quietly.

"Look, I hear how they all talk about me!" he said hotly. "Everyone thinks I'm crazy, and I'm not...I'm not! What do you know, anyway? You're not even with us anymore. You're just like Dumbledore and the rest...trying to keep me out of your Order Meetings." Harry picked up his book bag and strode out of the hall.

"I was afraid of that," Ron said, looking uncomfortable.

"Of what?" Hermione asked. "What's going on?"

Ginny spoke up, "Harry isn't happy about this whole change with you being in the dungeons with Snape and the Slytherins. He feels just so...so lost. Nobody will talk to him, and Umbridge has a personal vendetta against him."

Hermione sighed. "I'm really sorry he's taking all of this so badly. It's just that it's my life, my future. We still have three classes together. It's not like I never see you all."

"That's not all, Hermione. Look what happened when you were gone the past two days." Ginny handed her Monday's *Daily Prophet*.

Hermione took it and scanned the headlines. "I don't believe it! Umbridge is now a High Inquisitor? What is that rubbish?" she snapped.

She read on and muttered aloud from time to time. Finally she tossed the paper down and said, "Well, has anything happened yet?"

"Besides Harry wanting to do his nut because we now know how we got stuck with toad-face?" deadpanned Ginny. "Only Trelawney got 'inspected,'" she continued. "Ron and Harry say she's going to get chucked out."

"Oh, dear," Hermione said as she gazed at the paper again. She wondered why no one had seen fit to tell her of this latest development. All she could think was that it was a time for her and Severus, not to talk about things anyone couldn't do anything about anyway.

"We can talk about this more. I wish Harry could just understand," she said as she shook her head.

Ron started to eat again, "Well, maybe eff you spend muh thime in fa 'ommon 'oom,"

Ginny and Hermione looked at him with disgust. "I don't know which is worse," Hermione said, "your table manners or the fact that I am actually beginning to understand what you're saying."

Ginny snickered. "So, we'll hang out tonight in the common room?" she asked.

"Sure," Hermione replied, feeling uneasy about how she was going to explain this to her new husband.

The rest of the day was vile. Umbridge was so unpleasant and so set against teaching anything about real Defense; Hermione was going to have a mouthful to say at the next Order meeting.

She had a couple of hours while Harry was in detention and Ron and Ginny were busy with Quidditch. She went downstairs and slipped into her quarters she shared with Severus through her old room's entrance. As soon as she reached the bedroom, a very amorous Snape ambushed her.

He had half her clothes off before he released her lips. "I have to tell you, Severus, that I need to go hang out in the common room tonight for a while."

He paused just as he was about to capture a pink nipple. "Now?" he said impatiently.

"No, not for a couple of hours," she said breathlessly as he sucked greedily. She didn't think he even heard her past the word "No."

He was like a starving man, desperate and unleashed. He entered her with a sigh of relief. He rested inside her, breathing hard.

"Hermione," he groaned. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of how good this feels."

Hermione ran her fingers through his hair and brought his lips to hers. Kissing took over as he rested hotly inside her. Finally, he shifted and moaned.

"Please, Hermione, I need to let go," he whispered.

Hermione knew what he meant. He needed her fast and hard. She braced herself and nodded her head. When nothing happened, she opened one eye and saw Severus looking at her strangely.

"What?" she asked.

He laughed. "You look like you're steadying yourself for an earthquake," he said as he chuckled.

"That's not too far off when you let go, darling," she said honestly.

He blushed. "Is it that unbearable?" he asked, embarrassed.

"No," she said. "My body's just getting used to you again," she whispered as she played with the sparse hairs on his chest.

He kissed her again. "Just let me know if it's too much, okay?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded, and he kissed her furiously as he stroked himself inside her. She held on tight as he gasped and panted onto her neck.

Afterwards, as they lay together, Hermione groaned. "I don't want to get up and go back out!" she whined.

Severus laughed. "They're your friends."

She slapped him on his chest and got up to shower.

When she got into the common room, Ron and Harry were sitting, working on homework. Harry was sullen as usual, and Ron looked at her a bit helplessly. She took a breath and went to Harry and said, "Ron and Ginny told me about Umbridge. I wanted to talk with you about it."

"You do, do you?" he asked angrily. "Fine." He tossed down his quill. "I would like to discuss a few things myself. Firstly, where have you been the last two days?"

"I can't tell you," she said apologetically.

"Can't or won't?" he asked pointedly as he crossed his arms.

"Both," she answered calmly.

Harry gave a huff and went about his homework, ignoring her.

"Harry, please," she whispered as she touched his arm.

"You know, Snape was gone too," he snapped as he glared at her.

"What are you trying to say, Harry?" she asked directly.

"Nothing," he muttered.

She tried to talk to him again, but he glowered at her, and her voice faltered. She decided to leave before things got worse.

When she got back to her quarters, Severus was at his desk, grading. "I didn't expect you back so soon," he asked, concerned.

"Well," she replied sadly as she sat in a nearby chair. "I think I may be losing my best friend."

Severus stopped working and placed down his quill. "What happened?" he asked.

Hermione got up and took off her robe. "Just that my absence these past couple of days has not gone unnoticed," she said ruefully.

"By the way," she said. "Did you know about this 'High Inquisitor' business?"

"Yes, I was informed of it Sunday night," he answered. "Why?"

Hermione rolled her eyes in irritation. "Well, I wish someone had told me!" she said angrily. "Harry is so upset. He's not himself at all, and I don't know what to do anymore."

"I think you really need to spend more time with him, Hermione," he said. "It's bad enough you're not being in classes and living in Gryffindor tower, but the boys are strained."

"He's going to have to start Occlumency, you realize," she reminded him.

"I shudder to think," he replied as he sorted his paperwork. "You know who Dumbledore is going to ask to teach him, don't you?"

"Well, I don't know what to do anymore," she said as she started to change for bed.

"Like I said, you need to spend more time with him. Hang out more at the common room. You need to connect with him, Hermione. It's vital. We need to know what dreams or visions he may be having. You can't just count on Mr. Weasley to tell you," he sneered.

"All right," she said as she went to go brush her teeth. "No need to get nasty."

When she came back out Severus was in bed. "I can afford to be more giving with my time," he told her. "Now that I know you'll be with me at night."

She slipped under the covers. "When did you become so smug?" she asked.

"I have always been smug," he replied. "That'll be another thing you'll have to get used to."

Hermione chuckled as she snuggled down to fall asleep. Severus turned off the lights and said, "Can you believe that we are finally married?"

She smiled in the dark and reached for his hand. "Yes, I can."

Hermione made a decision that the next day in Defense class, she was going to find out just how much this witch did not want them knowing about how to truly defend themselves.

She began with the customary greeting of "Wands away" and proceeded to tell them to read chapter four. Hermione sat straight in her chair and raised her hand. After a minute or so, she realized that Umbridge had not only noticed her raised hand, but was deliberately ignoring it. Harry and Ron were off in space daydreaming until the snickers around them got their eyes moving around.

Hermione could see Harry staring at her from across the aisle, and a small smile twitched on the side of her face. She wanted him to know she was on his side. She saw a glimmer of approval in his green eyes for the first time in months. She gave him a conspiratorial wink and set her face in her best "know-it-all" glare.

Finally, the titters and smothered chuckles became too much for Umbridge. She was forced to acknowledge Hermione's determination. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Mrs. Snape, you old cow! she thought angrily.

"Yes, Professor Umbridge, but I have already read chapter four," she said primly.

Umbridge blinked and flashed her nasty smile at her. "Then you may proceed to chapter five," she replied just as perfunctory.

"I have read that as well," Hermione informed her, realizing her voice was really starting to sound like it had her first year. "In fact, I've read the entire book!"

More guffaws came from the other students. Next to Harry, she saw Ron lean forward to stare at her with an open mouth. She almost felt like bursting out laughing. If only for Ron's look of utter shock, this was worth every second.

"Well, then, Miss Granger," Umbridge said as she walked slowly towards her, "Would you care to inform the class what Slinkhard has to say about counter jinxes in chapter fifteen?"

Hermione didn't miss a beat. "He says that they are improperly named," she replied. "However, I disagree."

Harry was beaming. Hermione felt triumphant and a bit ridiculous, having to resort to acting like the sixteen-year-old she resembled. Honestly, all she wanted to do was to have a nice, quiet debate with the bitch and find out a way to get her into the jar out of which she had just two months previously evicted Rita Skeeter...not that it would have been any more adult...but it would make her feel as if she were accomplishing something.

"You disagree?" said Umbridge, like she had been hard of hearing.

*"Yes, I do," Hermione said as she crossed her arms across her chest. "Slinkhard doesn't like jinxes, does he? However, I believe they can be used quite effectively when used defensively."** She hoped the emphasis on the word "defensively" got her point across.

It did. *"Oh, you do, don't you?" Umbridge said, starting now to become very angry. "Well, I am afraid it is Slinkhard's opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger."*

Hermione began to speak, and Umbridge snapped, "That is enough. I am taking five points away from Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

*Among the mutterings of outrage, Harry blurted out, "What for?"**

Hermione pointed at him while Umbridge's back was turned. "You stay out of this," she warned him.

Umbridge started to pontificate about her reasons on taking points from Gryffindor house, one of them being that the teachers they'd had before her had been too lenient and permissive. Hermione was waiting for an opening to see how deeply she could take this and get her to outright admit her purpose to stop them from learning how to defend themselves when she brought up Professor Quirrell.

*"Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher," said Harry loudly, "there was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head."**

Hermione shut her eyes tightly as she sat there with her arms folded. The entire room was silent*Great job on keeping your trap shut, Harry!*

*"I think another week's worth of detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said smoothly.**

"Well done, Harry," Hermione said sarcastically as they left class and walked towards the Great Hall.

"What would you have me do?" he hissed at her.

She stopped dead in her tracks and whispered, "Listen. That's what I expect. You need to learn to keep that mouth of yours shut and your ears open! If I tell you to stay out of it, I expect you to listen and do it! Now you have detention," she said in a calmer voice. "You know what that means. You are going to have to answer to Angelina and McGonagall."

She walked past him, and Ron followed her closely. "I can't believe you did that, Hermione. That was brilliant!" he blurted out.

"Yeah, for whatever it was worth, I guess," she said, irritated with the both of them.

They all sat down to dinner, and Harry started in on Hermione. "You think I like getting my hand sliced open every night?" he asked hotly.

Hermione wasn't about to take the bait. "Harry," she said as she focused on her food in front of her, "I honestly have no idea. You snap at everyone, and whether they care about you or not, you treat us all the same. I'm tired of being talked to as if I were rubbish under your shoes. So, if you don't mind, I'd rather just eat my dinner in peace."

She could feel the stares of six eyes on her. Harry, Ron, and Ginny were just looking at her in shock.

"Hermione?" asked Ginny. "Are you okay?"

She finally looked up and glanced at all of them. "Don't look at me as if I'm the one acting like a Manticore every blessed day!" she snapped. "You take that to Harry."

Hermione sat silently eating as first Angelina and then McGonagall came up to yell at Harry for getting another detention. She remained quiet through it all, eating her food and relishing the fact that he was getting exactly what he deserved.

After McGonagall left, Harry turned and looked at Hermione's profile as she ate. "I miss you, Hermione," he said quietly.

She looked at him, and he opened his mouth only to find Ron and Ginny watching him. They turned their heads and started to talk between them, and Harry turned back to Hermione and continued. "I hate that you are gone from the tower. I hate that you are not around anymore. You can't understand how much I've relied on you being there. Now it's like you're gone, and Snape gets to have you."

Hermione smiled and said, "Harry, do you honestly think he just wants to dominate my time? As if he has nothing else better to do than to 'chat' me up?"

Harry grinned. "You've always been the logical one, the one to make all the nonsense make sense. These headaches and my scar hurting...I don't have you to talk to about it."

"Yes, Harry," she insisted, "you do. I miss you, too. I want to talk...I just want to talk with the Harry I know... at least some of the time."

Harry smiled. "You'll come to the common room, then?" he asked.

She ruffled his hair. "Yes, I'll be there, you great, big prat!" she said as she laughed.

"I've been thinking," Hermione said suddenly as they all were sitting around the common room studying.

"Quick, alert the *Prophet*," said Ron to Ginny.

Hermione turned to Harry. "I want you to teach us Defense," she said directly to him.

He stared at her as if she was mad.

Hermione smiled. She had been thinking of that day, so many years ago, when Voldemort came and Severus had insisted all the Gryffindors stay in their common room during his visit. They all had taken the opportunity to help others in the area they were skilled. Lily had helped with Charms and Potions; Hermione instructed on Transfiguration. She remembered how stunned everyone was when small, sweet Marlene McKinnon blasted Sirius and James off their feet...literally...with her superb dueling skills. Marlene had been an ideal teacher: unassuming, humble, and passionate about the topic. She had given everyone some very simple and direct moves in defensive magic. Hermione felt a pang of sadness at the thought of how Sirius had looked at the small brunette. He had declared he was in love, and everyone had laughed accordingly. It was just like Sirius to say something like that. However, he really had been swept off his feet. Hermione had many times since seeing Sirius at Grimmauld Place, looking a little more like the handsome wizard she had once known, thought of what life would have been like if Marlene had lived. If Marlene had been alive during those terrible, dark days when James and Lily went into hiding, and later, when Voldemort killed them, would Harry have been raised by them instead?

She had to stop herself from going there. She would get nowhere dwelling in the past, thinking of what might have been. She looked at Harry with all his frustration and inability to have any control over what was happening in his life, and it was the perfect solution.

"You know this could be the answer to so much!" she said passionately. "Harry, I know you're frustrated and anxious most of the time. This would not only give you an outlet for all your tension, it would give us the means to learn *proper* Defense."

"Is this some Order thing that you're trying to pass off as your own idea?" he asked suspiciously. "Is this something you've been ~~ordered~~ to do?"

She caught that inflection in the word "ordered," but let it pass. "No, Harry. Furthermore, I really don't think the Order would approve, so we'd have to keep it all hush-hush. What do you say?" she asked.

*"I don't know," he said as he twirled his quill in his hand. "Look, you think this stuff is easy, but it's not. I know what people think. They think that Cedric must have been stupid or not paying attention and that's why he got killed. The stuff I've done has been mostly luck."**

"Excuses, excuses," shot back Ron.

*"Hey," he said harshly. "You don't get it! You don't know what it's like. Neither of you know what it's like to face him. You think it's all about memorizing stuff and that's it. Well, it's not. It's fucking torture knowing your friends could die...or have died...and you could be a second away from getting snuffed yourself. You think I'm so clever and I'm not. I've never been clever. I've just had luck."**

"Harry, take some pride in your worth," said Hermione softly. "I can see luck once. But how many times have you defied him, Harry?" She thought about how his parents had defied him three times; Harry had already beaten that.

"Think on it, all right?" she asked.

He nodded in agreement. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and hugged him. She said good-bye to the others and went back home. She felt great! This was going to do the trick to get Harry to open up to her and to get him out of his funk.

When she got back to their rooms, Severus was waiting for her. "Looking rather smug, I see," he said as he got up from his chair and walked towards her.

"Yes," she said as she removed her robes. "I have made peace with Harry, and we are cooking up a little diversion to keep him busy and help the students at the same time."

"I heard about your little rebellion in class today, my little wife," he whispered. "What are you up to?"

He closed the gap between them, and she felt the magic between them. She smiled at him and said, "I'll tell you when I'm ready. I have thinking and plotting to do."

Severus shook his head. He took a curl between his fingers and twirled it around slowly. She laid her hands on his wool-clad chest and slid her hands up and around his neck. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him next to his mouth.

"It's been a while," he said. As he leaned down to kiss her neck, his fingers brushed her hair to the side.

"Just a couple of days," she replied teasingly.

"Are you tired of me already, Hermione?" he whispered in her ear.

"No," she said with a small laugh.

He pushed his fingers through her hair and wrapped his other arm around her waist. He brought her mouth to his as he said, "Good, because I will never tire of you."

He held her close to him, and they kissed for a long time as they made their way to the bed.

Hermione let his larger body collapse on her as they fell onto the mattress. Severus was quickly stripping her down, and she felt his large hands on her skin. She worked on the buttons on his frock coat and felt her underwear sliding down her.

"Already?" she breathed as she felt his heavy erection grinding against her inner thigh.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered as he helped her take off the rest of his clothes. "I've missed you."

His eyes were burning into her. He always looked at her when they made love. Even when she closed her eyes, she could still feel the heat of his eyes on her.

He took himself in hand, and she felt the pressure of his entrance into her. He pushed farther in than he had before, and she felt her herself stretching to accommodate him. He thrust once deftly inside her and groaned his pleasure.

Hermione reached up to push his hair away from his face. He stilled his movements and gathered her into his arms. He took one of her hands in his own and laid it over her head. He bent down and sucked on her left nipple lightly.

Hermione felt herself growing moist and needy. "Please, Severus," she whispered. "Don't torture me."

He wrapped her into his arms and began to rhythmically thrust slow, but deeply. "My sweet girl," he breathed as he kissed her. He enveloped her lips with his own, and Hermione began to feel the building tension. She broke their kiss as sweet, small cries came from deep inside her.

"Yes, Hermione," Severus whispered. "Cry for me, how I love your cries."

Hermione screamed as he plunged into her. "Oh, God, Severus...you're so hard...feels so good," she moaned.

He looked at her hungrily. "There will always be that sixteen-year-old boy in me, remembering you in your little pink knickers," he panted lustfully.

Hermione gained control of her voice and let her inhibitions out the window. "What stopped you from taking advantage of me then? When you let me down, why didn't you just take me, rip off those silly knickers, and fuck me?" she breathed.

He stopped moving and looked at her sincerely. "I feared rejection. I still do. And I never wanted to 'fuck' you, Hermione. Perhaps when we've had the chance to be together more than a couple years at a time, we can play a little, you know."

"A little slap and tickle?" she suggested as she ground her pelvis around his thick shaft that was still embedded in her.

"Yesss, I would like that very much," he said as he slowly pushed into her again, rotating his hips and pelvis, making sure no part of her was untouched.

"You don't have to fear that anymore," she whispered. "You can dominate me and show me your perverted side. I have one too," she confessed teasingly.

He grabbed her hair and buried her lips under his own. He stroked lightly inside her. "I worship you, Hermione. You have been everything to me. I could never survive without you."

She was panting again with the feelings he was drawing from her. "It is never up for debate, Severus," she whispered. "I am your wife. That means for better or worse, I am yours...forever."

He let loose on her, taking her with him to the edge. It was different than any other type of lovemaking he had ever shown her. She was kissed and touched all over her skin as he took over her completely.

As he continued to push into her, he said, "I want only you to sate me. I have things I want to do to you and you to do to me. I lust for you, I love you...you are everything."

"No more convincing, Severus," she groaned. "Just fuck me. I trust you. Give it all to me. I want it, and I only want it from you, my darling boy."

He looked at her. "Is that how you see me?" he asked breathlessly as he halted his movements.

She looked at him so openly and let her heart bare itself for him to see. "You are and will always be the man who welcomed me back into this world, that night we were trembling as we made love the first time, the man who took me to Spinner's End for that special Christmas, the one who took me to that record booth and played that song for me and kissed me so tenderly, but most of all, you are the boy that I used to comfort by holding your hand when you had bad dreams and needed someone to hold you when you cried. That is how I will always see you. You will never age in my eyes. That's why it doesn't matter. I know who we truly are. I love you. I loved you then, and I love you even more now. You can be yourself with me. I will never judge you or make you feel ashamed of losing control or being vulnerable."

He smiled at her as he stroked her hair, "You never did, did you?"

"No," she replied. "I knew it was too precious, too much of a leap for you to let me in that far. It's sacred to me. I'm your girl, and you are my boy."

He kissed her hard and held her close as he slowly continued to make love to her. Their mingled cries of satisfaction and completion were music to Hermione's ears. She thought she would never get enough of being with him like this. She ran her fingers through his hair, she had never cared it was greasy; she loved him. She gasped out her orgasm into his ear.

"Yes, Severus, like that! Harder! Oooh... yesss!"

"Hermione, I love you. *I love you!*" he shouted as he spilled himself deep inside her.

They held onto each other and stilled their breaths, relishing in the moment.

"I don't think I have ever been this close to another person in my whole life," he whispered to her. "I can't even explain why it is you love me so much."

"I know you," Hermione answered simply. "I was your friend and then became your lover. It was a long process that gave me the time to think and figure out what I wanted. All I want is you. That's why it will never matter what we look like. We'll get old and ugly, but I will always choose you because I know the real you underneath the black clothes and dark glares."

Severus smiled. "I am so fortunate to have you, Hermione. I am so happy that I have a place to hide and be safe and vulnerable without the fear closing in on me."

Hermione held him tightly. "I'm looking forward to finding out what kind of deviant and perverted things you want me to do with you," she whispered in his ear.

He groaned. "As long as you have no objections to being taken unawares," he replied softly.

"Oooh! You mean to grab me and pull me into dark alcoves and do unspeakable things to me?" she asked excitedly.

He smirked. "Oh, yes. I have many fantasies from my seventh year that I need to fulfill," he said darkly.

"You fantasized about me?" she asked shyly.

"Of course! It didn't stop with the pink knickers incident. In fact, it was that incident that spawned a great deal more," he murmured against her neck.

"Tell me one," she asked. She could feel her lower belly growing warm, and she was pulsating between her legs.

His eyes were smoldering. "There are a lot of simple ones from a teenage boy's mind, blow jobs and the like. Not that there is nothing wrong with a good blow job, mind!" he said seriously. "But, I remember one that was really good. Stripping you naked and taking you on the floor right where we could get caught."

"You want to dominate me!" she said in surprise.

"Just a little," he said shyly. "I also would like for you to grab me, rip my trousers open and give me the blow job of my life."

Hermione smirked. "You could always take me to the Astronomy Tower and recreate that infamous incident that started it all," she suggested.

Severus had a feral look in his eyes. "That sounds inspired, Mrs. Snape."

"I love it when you call me that," she whispered.

He cupped her face and showered her face delicately with tiny kisses. "I love that I can finally say it," he whispered. "You are mine. All mine," he said with a glimmer in his eyes.

"I am," she agreed. "And you are mine. Always."

"Promise you will never give up on me, Hermione," he asked as he held her tightly in his arms.

"I already have, Severus" she reminded him.

"Tell me again. I need to hear it on a regular basis. Tell me you will never leave me," he insisted.

She broke their embrace and leaned over him. "Severus, I will never abandon you. Only death can take me from you, and then, in death, we will be reunited. I will never give up on you. Even if the world turns its back on you, I will be your champion. My love will never end," she swore.

The magic came again and took them by surprise. They watched the shimmer of colors surround them brightly and disappear. Severus kissed her hungrily and begged her to take him. Hermione mounted him and slowly made love to him. She kissed his tears away, and after they had satisfied each other, she held him in her small arms and comforted him. It amazed her how such a formidable wizard as Severus Snape needed the reassurance of love from her. She felt humbled and awed at the same time. She had meant her words. She would never forsake him. Even if she had to turn her face from everyone she loved, he would never again experience the rejection that had once been so commonplace in his life. She would never betray that love. No matter what came their way.

A/N: The words in italics that start and end with an asterisk belong to JK Rowling. The other words in italics are my own.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 of 74

Dumbledore's Army has its introductory meeting while Hermione struggles to keep Harry focused as Voldemort tries to plant ideas in his head about the Department of Mysteries.

A/N: Another chapter about Hermione's struggle to keep her marriage, helping Harry, and keeping on top of her job for the Order running smoothly. Thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for sticking with this! Can there be a category for Best Beta?

It was settled. Hermione, Ron, and Harry held a secret meeting in the Hog's Head, and many came, much to their surprise. Word of mouth had gotten around fast. At first, everything was tense, but Luna spoke up and asked some great questions that got everything rolling. Hermione felt great after it was over. By the time the first Defense meeting was held, a name had been chosen: Dumbledore's Army.

Harry's mood was improving rapidly. He was finally going to do something of consequence, and the best part was that Hermione was behind him one hundred percent with the Ministry or the Order not knowing.

Delores Umbridge passed the next High Inquisitor order. All organizations, teams and societies etc. were banned until approval was given. Of course, the Slytherin Quidditch Team was given immediate approval, due to the massive cooperation shown by Severus giving her Veritaserum, not that anyone knew it, nor that it was fake Veritaserum, but it did rankle Harry and Ron to no end.

"This is no coincidence," growled Harry. "She knows."

"How could she?" Ron whispered.

"I would know, Ronald," Hermione reminded him. "That sign-up sheet had a curse on it. Believe me, we'd all know if someone ratted."

They were walking in the hallway when McGonagall approached them.

"Potter," she said in greeting.

"Professor," Harry answered, confused.

"I trust you to remember that all communication inside and outside Hogwarts are monitored frequently."

Harry nodded as she slipped him a piece of parchment. Ron and Hermione looked at McGonagall and then at Harry as she walked away.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"It says, 'Today, same time, same place,'" answered Harry. "Snuffles' handwriting."

They carried on, and suddenly Draco Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies rounded the corner. Hermione sighed. Wasn't it enough she had to put up with these blighters' parents...now she had to deal with their spawn?

Draco was very overconfident today. "Well, if it isn't the Mudblood, Potty and the Weasel! Thought you'd like to know we're to have Quidditch practice today. Such a shame the Gryffindor Team can't get approval."

"Don't take the bait," Hermione whispered to them. By this time, Neville had come around as well, and Draco continued with his spiteful remarks. They tried to get by, but the Slytherins wouldn't let them.

*"If it's a question of Ministry influence, well, I know you really don't have a prayer. Arthur Weasley is one step away from getting the sack. Since he's a nutter anyway, he should be in St. Mungo's. I hear they have a magnificent ward for people whose brains have been addled by magic," he said maliciously.**

Before Hermione could even begin to stop Harry and Ron from attacking Draco, Neville launched himself onto him and started beating him senseless. Harry and Ron struggled to get him off Draco, and Hermione brandished her wand at the Slytherins.

"Don't even move," she said threateningly.

"Not... funny... don't... Mungo's... show... him..."

Hermione was livid. She thought of poor Frank and Alice in that horrid place, insane beyond healing. Then she thought of Neville, sweet, kind Neville who had managed not to go insane himself by being raised by his harridan of a grandmother and a nutter of an uncle like Algie.

Draco eyed Hermione warily. "Think you've got the guts, Granger, against all of us?" he sneered.

"Let me think. Seven of you against one of me... That seems about right. I'll take on the lot of you. Believe me, I've done it before," she goaded him malevolently.

"What's going on here?" asked a soft, silky voice behind them. Draco beamed and then shot a "now you're going to get it" glare at Hermione.

**"Fighting in the halls, are we?" he asked.* "Miss Granger, in my office if you please. *Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, ten points off each for fighting in the hallway.*"*

Hermione swept away with Severus. They reached their living quarters privately, and once safely inside, she complained. "I really hate that, Severus."

"Then don't do things to make me react that way," he replied smoothly.

"Don't give me that shite!" she bit out at him. "Draco Malfoy causes nearly every altercation. For your information, he intentionally poked fun at Neville's parents. You do remember them, don't you? Frank and Alice? They were tortured into insanity by one of your lot."

"Hermione," he warned. "What would you have me do? Let it get back to the Dark Lord that I actually care? You're lucky I didn't take points from you for holding seven of my Slytherins at wand point. It's a good thing you live down here, or they'd all be owling their parents this minute!"

"May I leave?" she asked impatiently.

"Fine, Hermione. But remember one thing. If I don't catch you, I can't punish you. So when you do get your revenge, please make sure you do it where I can not see it."

Hermione left him then. It was those things that made her really not like him sometimes. Why did he have to play the role of the prick so well?

Dinner that night was hilarious. Harry and Ron were in a great mood.

"You should have seen Umbridge!" laughed Harry as he spoke. "I didn't know who I wanted to win, Snape or Umbridge."

Ron was just as gleeful. "It was wicked...Snape was so angry, he started to get that twitch near his mouth..."

"...And that vein throbbing on his greasy forehead," Harry added. "Of course, the git just had to get in his digs... I mean, heaven forbid he look like a prat. He has to take his anger out on the next person...*git*," he swore under his breath.

Hermione remained silent and uncomfortable at Harry's outburst about Snape.

"Well, Trelawney did her nut today," said Ron as he ate heartily. "I swear, she's getting crazier by the week. Today she was on about the 'establishment' out get her. You're really missing top shelf stuff, Hermione."

"Right," she answered sarcastically.

"Well, you know she's a right old fraud!" said Harry derisively.

**Just then, Angelina came up and said, "No Quidditch practice."*

"But I haven't done anything!" Harry said defensively. I've kept my temper and everything!"

*"I know, Harry," Angelina said calmly. "She just said she needed a bit of time to consider."**

"Consider what?" Ron spat angrily. "The Slytherins sure got permission in a quick hurry!"

Harry kept a rein on his tongue, and Hermione was impressed. After Angelina went away, she said, "Look on the bright side, Harry. Snuffles will be calling tonight."

Harry's eyes brightened at the thought.

Much later that night, after Harry had finished his extra work from Potions and Ron had caught up with his work, they all kicked back and rested on the couches next to the fire, waiting for Sirius to show up. Finally a face popped up and said, "Hi!"

The three of them rushed over to the fireplace and greeted him enthusiastically.

"How's things?" he asked.

"Not that good," said Harry. "The Ministry forced through another decree, and now Gryffindor doesn't have a Quidditch team!"

"Also no Defense Against the Dark Arts as well?" quipped Sirius.

"How did you know?" asked Harry.

"Hermione, ** you really want to be a bit more careful about where you hold your meetings. The Hog's Head, I ask you..."*

"Which would you rather?" Hermione said defensively. "The Three Broomsticks? That place is teaming with people..."

*"...Which means you'd have been harder to overhear," Sirius interrupted. ** "You've got a lot to learn still, Hermione, about being underhanded. You can't keep relying on your past experience of playing the diplomat all the time."

"What's that?" asked Harry, confused.

"Nothing...look you three. I know your talents. I expect Ron to be including his brothers a bit to help with your sneakiness," he offered.

** "Who overheard us?" asked Harry. **

"Dung. He was the witch under the veil," he said as he barked a laugh.

"That pillock!" Hermione hissed.

Sirius laughed at her outrage. "Oh, come now, Hermione. You're starting to sound like Molly!"

"Watch it...that's Ron's mum you're talking about," she reminded him.

Ron looked embarrassed that he didn't speak up to defend his mum.

"Okay, look. You're all being followed, and I should say it's just as well if you're going to start an illegal Defense club on your very first weekend out," Sirius tutted.

"All right," said Hermione. "So spill it. Who knows about it?"

"Well, at the next meeting, everyone will, won't they. **And I have a message for Ron. Your mum, and I quote, said, that 'under no circumstances is Ronald to be involved in some illegal secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group. She says you'll be expelled for sure and that you've plenty of time to learn how to defend yourselves later...'**

"...Yeah, all right," snapped Hermione. "Message received. What else?"

** "So are you saying we shouldn't do this group?" asked Harry.**

"Hell, no!" he said. "I think it's great! Just what James and I would have done."

Ruddy prat! thought Hermione.

"Last year you said for me to stay out of it!" exclaimed Harry.

*"Yeah, and last year, someone was trying to snuff you inside Hogwarts. This time we know there is someone outside of Hogwarts that'd like to kill us all, so I say you have to do what you have to do to survive!" he said fervently. **

"And if we get expelled?" asked Hermione.

"It was your bloody idea!" yelled Ron.

"I know... I just thought about what Sirius was saying," she answered coolly.

"What would you rather? Being expelled and able to defend yourselves or sitting safely in school without a clue?" he asked her pointedly.

Hermione wanted to ring his neck. Did he take her for an idiot? Half the time she was in school twenty years ago was spent in keeping his sorry arse from being hexed into oblivion.

"Where are you all meeting?" Sirius asked.

They all discussed it. The Shrieking Shack was out, so was the common room. Someone could rat on them. Besides it would seem rather suspicious with half of the group in either Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw.

** They were still talking when a hand came through the fire. Sirius was gone in a flash, and the hand continued to grope. The hand was oddly familiar. It was a fleshy hand with a ring on each fat finger. **

"Umbridge!" Hermione hissed. They stood there frozen in silence until the hand disappeared.

"I'm starting to have my doubts about this," said Hermione nervously.

"Why?" asked Harry as they all sat back down.

"After talking to Snuffles, I just don't know," she replied.

"Oh, you're just scared that you're going to get it when you have your next meeting," said Ron off-handedly.

** "No," she retorted. "Harry, do you honestly trust Sirius' judgment?" she asked.*

"Why shouldn't I?" He's always given us great advice!" said Harry.

"Oh, yes, he would love to be able to be a part of some Defense group. Look...don't you think Sirius is getting a bit reckless? He is spending all his time cooped up in that house. I think it's getting to him," answered Hermione.

"Sirius is right," said Ron, looking at her strangely. "You are starting to sound like my mum."

Later that night, Hermione stormed into her bedroom and faced Severus, who was in the process of getting undressed for bed.

"Unbelievable!" she yelled.

Severus looked at her and deadpanned, "I know, and it's all yours for the taking, so come on over and get naked."

She narrowed her eyes and said, "Have you any news from Mundungus Fletcher?" she asked.

Severus continued to undress. "That old thief?" he sneered. "I don't like vermin. I get enough of that when I'm forced to socialize with Wormtail."

"What do you know about this ban on all organizations and Quidditch teams?" she asked delicately.

"Oh, that," he said with a knowing grin. "So, the kneazle is out of the bag, is it? What did Molly do, send Mr. Weasley another Howler?"

"No, I spoke with Sirius tonight with Harry and Ron."

"You did what?" he roared. "I can't believe you, Hermione. Do you have any idea what is going on around here?"

"Obviously not. Since all I do is meaningless inane things that get me nowhere!" she shouted back at him. "I thought I was to remain in the loop; now I hear that the Order knows about what Harry and I are up to?"

Severus was getting on his pajama bottoms as he spoke. "It figures. You can't keep him still and out of the way, can you?"

"I guess I can't since Voldemort won't keep out of his way!"

"Do not say that name!" he hissed as he grabbed his arm in pain.

"Oh, suck it up!" she snapped as she started to undress for bed. "This is just fantastic...here I am working my tail off just to keep Harry from going round the twist, and now I'm catching hellfire for it. Well, what would you have me do? His attitude has improved greatly since I came up with this scheme. He's trusting me more and is becoming less hostile. The only caveat is that Sirius is all the rage for it. If that wizard thinks any idea is that wonderful, it must be something truly heinous, and life must be lurking somewhere to bite us in the arse."

Severus laughed as he got into bed. "You will face the tribunal, my lovely. Next Order meeting...you can let us all in on said 'heinous plot,'" he said sarcastically.

Hermione purposefully put on a cotton nightgown that covered her from head to toe, just so Severus would get the point that he would not be getting anything from her tonight...except perhaps the sharp edge of her tongue.

"You know, I think you're starting to understand how I think," Severus mused. "Any idea that strikes Black as a good idea must be fundamentally wrong."

Hermione glared at the wall.

The next day they were in Charms class when Harry's scar began to hurt. He tried to brush it off as nothing, but Hermione and Ron refused to let up.

** "Fine!" he barked. "He's happy, really happy. I know because the last time he was mad. It's like I can feel what he feels."*

Ron turned white. "You could take over for Trelawney," he whispered.

"I'm not having prophecies," he muttered.

"Harry, you've got to tell someone," Hermione insisted.*

"Who? Sirius? He already knows. Dumbledore? He could care less..."

"Don't be a prat!" she yelled at him. "Of course Dumbledore cares."

The following day at lunch, Harry said, "Look, I had another dream. I was in that place with all these doors that were rotating in a circle."

"What is this?" Hermione asked.

Ron answered. "I told you, Hermione. Harry's having weird dreams."

"Yes, Ron, but you failed to provide any*detail*." She looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. "Describe these dreams."

"Well, there is this door, and it's like all the other doors. I keep on reaching for the door, but I can't get through," he answered.

Department of Mysteries, she thought. The prophecy!

"If I could only open the door..." he said in a strange tone.

Hermione was worried. This was what the Order feared the most. They would have to meet soon, and Severus would need to start teaching Harry Occlumency.

"Well, anyway," Harry said, changing the subject. "I've great news. I've a place for our meetings."

"Where?" asked Hermione.

"The Room of Requirement," he answered. "Dobby told me about it."

"Oh, yes!" Hermione said. "It changes to become whatever you need it to be...I should have thought of that!"

"All right," she said. "I'll get the word spread and tell them we're meeting tonight!"

A/N: Again, the italics with an asterisk belongs to JK Rowling. All the others are mine. Rowling's words were taken from TOTP.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 of 74

Hagrid's back, Harry's banned from Quidditch, and Hermione defends the newly formed Dumbledore's Army to the Order. Thank goodness that Severus knows how to help her to relax.

A/N: Thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin. I have been enjoying all the reviews. Please drop me a line if you haven't yet :)

The first Defense meeting went well, in Hermione's estimation. The Room of Requirement was the perfect place. In fact, it served everyone's purpose. They even thought up a name for themselves: "Dumbledore's Army."

Hermione got a hold of enough Galleons and performed Protean Charms on them to signal future meetings. It wouldn't be prudent, she had said to keep the same time and day. They could be found out that way. So, they each had a Galleon that would warm in their pockets whenever Hermione needed to notify the time of the next meeting.

As October dragged on, Umbridge finally decided that Gryffindor could participate in the Quidditch season. Harry and Ron were increasingly preoccupied with practice, so Hermione easily found time to attend the next Order meeting at Grimmauld Place. She left with Severus and Apparated there from outside of Hogsmeade. Inside, she received a hearty welcome from everyone there.

She was happy to see Dumbledore. He had been in and out of the school since the school year had started. As happy as the atmosphere was, though, it grew tense as the information poured in.

"Podmore's all right," reported Diggle. "He's trying to keep his spirit's up. It's hard, though."

Sirius looked grim. But, of course he would. He had spent twelve years in Azkaban. Hermione was sure there wasn't a day that went by that he didn't think about it.

"We believe it was Malfoy who put the Imperius on him," Diggle continued. "We'll have to be extra diligent in our watches. They're gettin' desperate."

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Severus cleared his throat and said, "It's true that the Dark Lord is growing restless. He is counting on getting the prophecy soon. I discovered he is planning on a mass breakout of Azkaban. I have no idea of how many or who he will choose to free, but one thing I can say for sure is that you can count on the Lestranges."

"Bellatrix?" growled Moody.

"Yes," Severus responded.

"Well, if that mad woman gets out, there'll be chaos for sure!" Moody grumbled.

"That will make things harder, but we must keep as Moody implores us...Constant Vigilance! Arthur interjected. "That means no taking for granted when you are greeted by another Order member that all is well. That person could be under the Imperius Curse. Furthermore, you all need to have your contacts in order. No cross-chatting!"

Everyone agreed. Dumbledore had ordered them all previously to have a contact person in case of trouble. It couldn't be husband and wife. It had to be someone not living with you. Hermione's was Minerva's since she was still in school.

Severus continued with his report. "Rookwood is being most helpful these days. His experience as an Unspeakable has given the Dark Lord more information on the Department of Mysteries than we could have dreamed. There was a plot underway to get another Ministry worker to infiltrate the Department; however, that went awoul."

Dumbledore spoke up again. "Severus has just informed me that one of our own has been attacked. Death Eaters have infiltrated the Department of Mysteries. The Prophecy Room was breached, and Broderick Bode is in St. Mungo's. Fortunately, the curse placed on him was not so terrible that he cannot recover; nevertheless, his speech is still garbled. Nothing he says makes sense."

Hermione gasped and looked at Severus. They knew Bode. He was the calm, sallow-faced man that had helped them gain access to the Time Room.

"What of the other workers in the various specialized rooms, Albus?" Hermione asked fearfully. "How are they?"

"All accounted for," he replied with a twinkle in his eye. "Don't worry. It will take more than this to catch Horatius off his guard."

Hermione smiled. She felt better knowing the sweet, gentle man who had helped her come back home was still all right.

"When you say 'breached,' Albus, do you mean to say that they have located the prophecy?" asked Lupin.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "I believe that he was placed under the Imperius Curse and was forced to retrieve it. Of course, only the ones the prophecy speaks of can touch it. Otherwise, the consequences can be severe. Our old friend Rookwood must have neglected to inform Tom of that fact."

"Poor Broderick," said Arthur. "He's such a nice chap."

"Hermione," Dumbledore asked. "I hear we have a lot to learn about what is going on with you and Harry."

"Yes," she replied, noticing Molly's glare on her. "Harry has been having dreams about the Department of Mysteries. He feels a compulsion to open a door in a room, which he described in exact detail, that resembles the lobby to the Department of Mysteries. Also, he is experiencing pain in his scar. He says he now can tell when You-Know-Who is happy or when he is sad."

Dumbledore sighed. "So the connection is growing?"

"I am afraid it is, sir."

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "Well, we must continue to keep our sights sharp, and I want you, Miss Granger, to notify me immediately if this connection takes an ominous turn." He looked at Severus, and Hermione knew what he meant. Soon, Harry would have to learn Occlumency. She shuddered to think how Harry would take having to spend one-on-one time with Severus.

Molly spoke up. "Dumbledore, I think we all need to discuss this new Defense group that has popped up at Hogwarts," she urged.

Hermione felt Molly's glare and turned to watch Molly also glare at Sirius, who looked as if he were the cat who had caught the canary. He had the audacity to smile at her glare, and Hermione wanted to slap his smile right off. *Damn him and Mundungus!*

"Hermione?" asked Dumbledore.

"We are meeting in an undisclosed area of the castle. We do not meet at a regular time, or on a set day. Switching it up at first was a necessity, due to everyone's schedules, but it also functions as another way to keep us safe."

"I want to know who gave you such a foolish idea to start with!" demanded Molly.

"Molly," said Hermione as calmly as she could, "I am trying very hard to keep my temper. You would do well to recall that I am thirty-six years old! I just didn't fall off the Knight Bus, you realize! So, I would appreciate it if you would speak to me as your colleague and not one of your children."

"Then stop acting like one," said Remus quietly.

"Come now, Remus," urged Sirius.

"No, Sirius, this is very important," he insisted angrily. "Hermione, what you are doing is very dangerous."

"Do you all think I'm that thick?" she yelled as she stood up. "May I remind you that at the beginning of September I had on my hands a snarling, moody, sarcastic little boy to deal with...?"

"...And Lord knows she already has one of her own already in Snivellus!" mocked Sirius as he laughed heartily.

"If you don't mind," Severus said waspishly, "I would like to stay out of this idiotic conversation."

"As I was saying," Hermione interjected before Sirius could talk back. "Since the inception of this group, Harry has been easier to handle, he's more optimistic, and overall, he feels more able to handle the pressures surrounding him. Quidditch season is starting, and he's beginning to open up to the people around him that he trusts. The real Harry Potter is coming back to us, and in the meantime, the students are getting the training they need. Surely you can respect this, Remus, Sirius. After all, you were a part of the day we all helped one another, the day the Dark Lord came to Hogwarts."

"I think you should continue," Dumbledore announced. "It will be good for Harry to feel he is doing his part. I just need your assurance you and Mr. Weasley will keep a sharp eye on him, for I cannot."

"I will," promised Hermione.

Gryffindor's first game was grueling. The Slytherins taunted the Gryffindor team viciously with a horrid song aimed to upset Ron. He was already feeling inadequate; this act of cruelty did not help matters. Each time Slytherin scored, they all would sing a chorus of a song they had named "Weasley is Our King."

Harry caught the snitch, and Gryffindor won, although it still would not erase from people's mind Ron's poor performance. It was a mercy, catching it so early. Nevertheless,

Ron felt terrible. He had played abysmally, and what was worse was that he knew it.

Hermione had foolishly hoped for a clean getaway and then a quiet evening soothing Ron's bruised ego, but that hope was dashed the moment Draco stepped in the picture. He was a real piece of work, going on about Mrs. Weasley, calling her fat and ugly. Fred and George were there as well.

"Leave it," said Angelina, trying to pull Fred from the scene. Harry grabbed George as Malfoy ran his mouth, not realizing for a second how fortunate he was to still be alive.

Then Malfoy did it. He managed to get two for one when he insulted Lily Potter and Molly Weasley in one breath.

**"Or perhaps you can remember what your mother's house stank like, Potter, and Weasley's pigsty reminds you of it..." **

Harry and George leapt on Malfoy, not caring that all the teachers were watching. Hermione shook her head sadly as Angelina and Ginny were screaming for them to stop. Madam Hooch came storming over and blasted them apart.

**"What do you think you're doing?" she screamed. I've never seen behavior like it...back up to the castle both of you and straight to your Head of House's office! GO! Now!" **

Draco was whimpering like a puppy on the ground, bloody and moaning. George had a swollen lip. Hermione couldn't believe what had transpired. There was definitely far too much testosterone floating in the air. She knew Harry and the twins were in for it. She glanced around and saw Umbridge with a look of sheer delight on her face. Hermione walked with Angelina and Ginny back to the common room to await the coming news of punishment.

When the boys returned, they were white and scared looking. *"Harry gulped. "George and I got a life-time ban on Quidditch," he said shakily.*

"WHAT?" they all said at once.

George turned to Fred. "Sorry, but Umbridge banned you as well. She figures you were about to jump in and you are my twin so..."

Hermione stood with Harry and Ron, trying to comfort them. "I'm sorry, Harry," Ron whispered.

"What for?" Harry asked with his brows furrowed.

"For thinking I can play Quidditch. I'm hopeless," he said sadly.

Hermione smiled as she watched her boys. "I have news that may cheer you up," she said brightly.

"What?" Harry grunted.

*"Hagrid's back." **

Hagrid's return was a bright turn for them. For Hermione, Hagrid had been a rock, an unmovable force of safety and comfort. Hagrid had been there for her when she had been a scared girl back in 1973 and kept faith with her until this day. He also kept her secrets. Fortunately, Dumbledore had him placed under a Wizard's Oath to never talk about Hermione's past to anyone but her. He was just too loose-lipped. Hermione had missed him dearly and couldn't wait to talk to him about her marriage to Severus.

They sat and listened to Hagrid weave his tale of life with the giants. Hermione was most anxious to hear since no news had been shared by Dumbledore to the Order...at least as she was aware. He told a fascinating tale of how the giants communicated and how he and his girlfriend, Madam Maxime, tried to win them over from Voldemort. Unfortunately, it had been for naught. Death Eaters had already secured their position. However, it looked as if Hagrid had given his all. He looked like the devil. He was bloody and bruised.

He talked about trying to locate his mother, who was a giantess. Unfortunately, she had died; so overall, it had been a very sad and depressing trip. They were trying to console Hagrid when suddenly Ron said, "Oh, no! It's Umbridge!"

They all scurried around to the back entrance, and Hagrid got rid of their cups. They hid well enough, but could hear the exchange. Umbridge was in fine form, insulting and rude; she tried to extract information about where he had traveled. Hagrid was taken aback, but remained steadfast.

Umbridge went on, droning about her newfound status as High Inquisitor and her role in inspecting the instructors. Hermione peeked inside to see Hagrid's reaction. He looked confused. She left him then with those thoughts in mind and the knowledge that she held the power to fire any teacher not up to standards. Hermione was fuming inside. Dear, sweet, Hagrid had been her friend during some very difficult times. There was no way she was going to let that bitch of a witch sack him.

Christmas came around and with it, the upcoming break. Hermione was looking forward to having alone time with Severus. The D.A. was coming along swimmingly, and Harry was knee-deep in his first romance. He came to her for advice, and she was more than willing to oblige him.

"She cornered me after the meeting tonight," Harry reported.

"Good, progress at last," she said encouragingly.

"Well, uh, she, uh..."

"Did you kiss?" Hermione asked him directly.

"Well, yeah," admitted Harry as he looked away, his face looking flushed.

"It's all right," Hermione whispered as she laid a hand on his arm. "How did it go?"

"I don't really know," Harry said, a bit confused. "She was crying."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione replied sympathetically. "Look, Cho cries a lot these days. She's very conflicted about your relationship. She really cared for Cedric, and his death has deeply affected her. She must be very confused," she explained.

Hermione smiled a bit and was happy that she had Severus waiting for her in their bed and no longer had to deal with all the silly worries of youth. She thought of their home where she could be herself and not pretend she was just sixteen. She packed up her stuff and said her good nights.

"Harry," she called to him as she reached the portrait hole. "Don't think too hard about it. Cho has to work it out, not you. If you like her, keep liking her. Be patient and kind. Give her time to sort out her head, and let her know you care that she's hurting. Just let things happen as they come, all right?"

"Okay, Hermione," he said as he hugged her extra tight.

Hermione walked the dark, deserted corridors back towards the dungeons. She was completely knackered. What she wouldn't give for a bit of Floo Powder so she could Floo from one fireplace to the next.

She ambled along slowly before being jerked into a hidden alcove and firmly pressed against a hard body that was warm and solid. Rough hands pulled and plunged inside her clothes, causing her to gasp in surprise and desire.

"Severus?" she breathed.

A hand clamped over her mouth, and she felt a hand manipulate its way between her legs.

"It's time, Hermione," he whispered. "It's time to pay for that outfit you wore the night I took you out dancing!"

"I was sixteen!" she screeched after she loosened from his grip.

"That's interesting. You are sixteen again," he murmured as he turned her around against the wall, hoisting her up to his waist, wrapping her legs around his waist. He raised her arms above her head as his pelvis pinned her flush against his hardened flesh. His lips dragged along the length of her neck. "The thought of you changing clothes right behind me was nearly too much. I wanted to grab your naked body to my own and take you against the wall right there in the alley."

He kept her wrists pinned to the wall with one hand and with the other, stroked her thighs lightly. Hermione felt brazen. It was so very wicked...but so thrilling at the same time. Severus' hand left her thigh to rip open her blouse and push her bra out of his way to expose her breasts before lowering his hand to tease the delicate entrance between her legs.

He kissed her hard and forced his tongue inside her mouth. He dominated every part of her, and all Hermione could think of was to breathe. He was touching her expertly, and she felt the wetness between her legs spreading.

"Wrap your legs tighter around my waist," he ordered her.

Severus pushed into her roughly and sheathed his cock inside her forcefully. He thrust against her deeply, hurting her. She took it with a shudder, and then as soon as she thought she could take no more, he built the tension fast and furiously inside her. Severus murmured all the dirty things he wanted to do to her while she began to gasp and whimper.

"Sweet girl," he breathed as he grasped her breasts in his hands. "Let me feel your pleasure around me."

"I'm trying!" she cried out as she wrapped his hair around her fist as a reign and bucked choppily against the grinding force of his thrusting.

"Hermione... Hermione..." he chanted into her neck while skimming one thumb against a tender red nipple.

She quivered in his arms as she cried out her orgasm. Severus continued to drive into her soft flesh over and over until he found release, straining and trembling against his wife's welcoming body.

They were in bed the next morning, whispering and touching each other as they relaxed in bed.

"Will you take me to Spinner's End for Christmas?" she asked. "It shall be our first Christmas together since 1984." She nipped and kissed his jaw as he cleared his throat.

"I think we might be able to place that on the agenda," he said as he grabbed her hair and pulled her back from him. He mounted her and kissed her neck and shoulder. "Mmmm, you taste delicious," he said deeply.

"I *feel* even better," she whispered wantonly back to him.

He raised an eyebrow in response. Then he pushed her legs apart and plunged into her.

"Ahhh!" she cried out.

"I see what you mean," he groaned as he looked down at her from half-lidded eyes. He leaned back and lifted her by her arse. He began to stroke deeply inside her, rotating his hips as Hermione squealed underneath him.

"You feel even better after you've orgasmed a few times, too." He looked at her flushed face underneath him and smiled. "You feel very slippery and open," he whispered in her ear.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and brought him down lower as she kissed him hungrily. "What are you thinking about now?" she asked him.

"Working in the garden at Spinner's End, your hands in the dirt. I could see down your shirt," he replied wickedly.

She slapped him on the arm. "How could you, you randy bugger?"

"I was a teenager! A desperately randy teenager at that," he said as he laughed. "Not that you weren't top shelf. I was just this depressing, ugly boy who was hoping you would just let me taste the sweat at the top of your cleavage."

He began to make love to her slowly as he whispered in her ear. He knew it drove her wild. "Imagine, knowing you were in the next room. I thought, maybe she's naked and frigging herself thinking about me whilst I'm wanking every night thinking of her."

Hermione felt the tension building. "Oooh, you were masturbating at the thought of me?" she groaned.

"Yesss," he breathed in response. "Nearly all summer long. Then the night I came into your room and climbed in bed with you, I could smell you. I knew you were wet and wanting me. It was hell." He grasped her breasts lustfully and moved faster. Hermione held her lips to his as they climaxed together. Afterwards, they listened to their breathing slow down to normal with their foreheads touching intimately.

"Severus? Hermione?" a voice called.

"I don't fucking believe it!" snarled Severus.

"Who is it?" Hermione whispered as she wriggled out from underneath her husband to put on her bathrobe. Severus sighed in resignation as he put on his pajama bottoms. "Albus, or in your terminology, our friendly neighborhood cockblocker," he sneered.

"He didn't *block* you, Severus. We had our fun," she whispered as they walked towards the bedroom door.

"Post-coital enjoyment is a part of the whole process. Besides, I don't think I was through with you just yet," he replied, irritated.

Severus let Hermione through the door first, and she lingered in the background while Severus went to the fire. "Yes, Albus?" he asked sourly.

"I hope I wasn't interrupting," he said apologetically.

"Albus, I have a young woman in my bed, and it is six in the morning. I am awake. Of course you interrupted!" he snapped.

Hermione huffed in the background, embarrassed. Severus turned his head and gave her a lustful smirk.

"Well," replied Albus. "I guess you will have to live with the disappointment. I'm coming through."

Severus turned around and walked towards Hermione. "Foolish me. Here I thought we would be the only ones 'coming' in here," he muttered sarcastically.

Albus walked through and smiled. "Good morning, Severus, Hermione."

"Good morning," Hermione whispered as she pulled her robe tighter and sidled closer to her husband.

"I have some bad news, I'm afraid," Albus said sadly. "Last night, Harry was brought to me by Minerva and Mr. Weasley. It has started," he said ominously.

"The visions?" whispered Hermione.

"He had a dream," began Dumbledore as he sat down into one of their sofa chairs. Severus went to sit on the couch.

"Dobby?" Hermione called.

Dobby popped in front of her. "Miss! Friend of Harry Potter! You's needing help, Miss?"

"Yes, Dobby, please bring some strong coffee and breakfast for three, please. And Dobby, you must never mention you saw me here to anyone, even Harry. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Miss," Dobby replied as he winked out. Hermione said to them, "Please, let me get on something more appropriate. Don't start without me!" she ordered.

She hurriedly threw off her robe and put on her bra and knickers with a pair of sweatpants and a jumper. She grabbed a pair of socks and a ponytail holder for her hair. She came out and saw breakfast waiting for her.

"Okay," she breathed.

Dumbledore smiled as he handed her a cup of coffee. "Harry had a dream that Arthur Weasley was being attacked by a giant snake. He was hysterical. He insisted Arthur was bleeding to death."

"Nagini," muttered Severus.

Hermione wanted to know what that name meant, but decided she'd ask later.

"Needless to say, Harry was right. We reached Arthur in time, and he's now healing at St. Mungo's. The Weasley family and Harry are at Headquarters."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God Arthur is all right!"

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "However, the story Harry told me was very disconcerting. He said ~~he~~ was the snake. He also met my eyes for a moment, and I could feel the rage and the hate emitting from inside him. He wanted to kill me. It's starting, and I fear the time has come for you to start teaching him Occlumency, Severus."

Severus crossed his arms. "I still don't think it's the best idea, Albus," he said as he shook his head.

"Who else can teach him? Who else is a better Occlumens?" Albus shot back at him.

"Fine," he relented. "I'll start at the beginning of term," he said with a hint of resignation in his tone.

"Hermione," Albus said, "I need you to go to Grimmauld Place and be with Harry. He's confused and afraid. He thinks the Weasleys will think badly of him. He's beginning to shut down and push them away."

"Oh, dear," she said in frustration.

"Wait...Hermione and I are going away!" Severus fairly shouted.

"Please, Severus, Harry needs Hermione," reasoned Albus.

"I don't give a shite. /need Hermione!" he roared.

Hermione reached to stroke his arm. "It's okay, Severus," she said sweetly. "We'll get away another time."

He growled and stormed out of the room. "Let me handle this, Albus. I'll have Severus get me to Headquarters," she whispered.

After Albus left, Hermione took the breakfast tray into the bedroom. Severus was sitting on the bed, leaning back on the pillows against the headboard.

"I told you, Albus is a born cock blocker!" he snarled.

"You are acting like a child that's been denied his favorite pudding," she chided with a smile.

"Well, that's precisely how I feel. No Christmas pudding for me!" He pouted as he crossed his arms.

Hermione took off her clothes and brought over a plate of food. She straddled him and said, "Eat! I have to get ready to go to headquarters, and I want to leave you knowing you've eaten."

She fed him the eggs, and he picked up a sausage and pushed it into her mouth.

"You are a naughty boy, you know that?" she laughed as she ate.

"Take me once more before you go," he asked as he banished the plate of food.

"What?" she responded in shock.

"You heard me. I want you to make love to me before you leave me alone," he demanded as if he had ordered her to make a potion for grading.

"How?" she asked suspiciously.

He relaxed down into the pillows. *"Ride me,"* he commanded as his eyes bored into hers.

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and a flutter of desire spread through her. "I love it when you get all bossy and domineering," she whispered, teasingly.

A/N: The sentences in italics that have asterisks on them are from Rowling's OotP. The rest are mine.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 of 74

Hermione's time at Grimmauld Place for Christmas holiday turns out to be disastrous and life-altering.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin. This is going to be a difficult chapter, and I hope whoever reads will review, ask questions, etc. This is not a gratuitous chapter. What occurs here will have repercussions that will last for a very long time.

Severus left Hermione at Headquarters, refusing to come inside. She didn't dare kiss him, so they parted without an outward goodbye. She watched him Disapparate and felt sad as she entered Grimmauld Place. *So much for our romantic Christmas!* she thought sadly.

It was dark, but still early enough to rouse Harry and have a decent chat with him in time for dinner. She knocked on his door softly, and there was no answer.

"Come on, Harry," she said impatiently. "I know you're in there." The door wrenched open, and Harry stood there, shocked.

"I thought you were going skiing for the holidays," he said.

"Well, it's really not my thing," she said as she moved a pile of clothes aside so she could sit on his bed. "So I made my excuses to my parents, and here I am!"

She watched as Harry glumly padded around the room. "I came on the Knight Bus," she lied. "Look, Dumbledore told what happened first thing this morning, but I couldn't get away until now. Do you want to tell me why you are holed up here depressed and feeling sorry for yourself?" she asked.

"I'm fine!" he said defensively.

"Don't lie," she said as she crossed her legs. "Don't waste my time. Ron and Ginny said you've been cooped up in here and have been hiding from everyone since you left St. Mungo's."

"Oh, really. If they are all so damned concerned, why don't they talk to me?" he snarled as he turned his back on her.

"Oh, Harry, stop feeling all misunderstood," she said as she huffed. "Look, I know what happened when you eavesdropped with the Extendable Ears at the hospital."

"Really?" he answered back snidely. "Then everyone's been talking about me behind my back, is that it?"

Ginny walked in, and Harry growled low in frustration. "Harry," Ginny said, "we wanted to talk with you, but you've been shutting us out."

"I don't want anyone talking to me!" he shouted.

** "Well, that's pretty stupid, considering I'm the only one around here who knows what it's like to be possessed by You-Know-Who!" she shouted back at him.*

Harry and Hermione looked at Ginny in shock. Hermione had forgotten all about that. That had been a lifetime ago...before she had gone back in time, before *everything*, it seemed to her.

Harry seemed to get a bit humble. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I forgot," he muttered.

"Well, lucky you," she answered coolly.

"I'm sorry... So do you think I'm being possessed then?" he asked timidly.

** "Well," she said as she sat down. "Can you remember what you've been doing?" Ginny asked. "Are there large chunks of time that you can't remember? Big, blank periods of time you can't account for?" she asked.*

Harry looked deep in thought for a minute. "No," he answered plainly.

*"Well," Ginny said as she clasped her hands. "You've got your answer then. When it happened to me, I couldn't remember what I'd been doing for hours at a time. I'd find myself somewhere and not remember how I got there." **

Harry looked hopeful, but then said, "The dream, the snake..."

Hermione interrupted. "Harry, you've had that dream before about being in that same strange room with the doors. It just became more detailed. Then last year, your scar was hurting, and you experienced flashbacks of what he had done."

"This was different," he insisted as he paced the floor. "I was inside the snake. ~~I was~~ the snake! What if Voldemort transported me to London?"

"One day," Hermione said as she began to sort and fold the clothes next to her, "you'll read *Hogwarts, A History*, and you will remember that no one can Apparate or Disapparate on Hogwarts grounds. Even then, he couldn't just compel you from so far away, not with all the magical enchantments surrounding the castle!"

"Right," Harry retorted sarcastically. "Although, I remember being Portkeyed off of Hogwarts grounds during the Tournament!"

Ron had finally come into the room, and he said, *"You didn't leave your bed, Harry. I was there. You were thrashing in your sleep for a minute before we could all wake*

you up."

Harry started to pace again. Hermione smiled. Deep down, Harry was a person who could be swayed by logic. Sometimes it was harder and took longer to convince him of something, but in the end he always came around. He finally stopped pacing, and he looked at all of them with his flashy grin that never ceased to remind her of James. He hugged them all, and Hermione's heart swelled. Her brother, that's what Harry was, her brother. He would always be that to her, and she would always look out for him.

Christmas morning came with little cheer. Hermione had a nice bunch of presents, but nothing from Severus. She felt disappointed, but she stopped herself. How could he send it without anyone getting suspicious? She'd see him soon enough. She felt a shiver run down her spine. She knew her boy. He would be randy as hell by the time she came back.

Molly was in a right state. Percy sent back his sweater without so much as a by your leave. Hermione sat with Molly as she cried. She wanted to tell her that her son was behaving like a great big pillock, but she held her tongue. The woman had more on her plate than she could handle, with Arthur lying up in hospital.

Sirius was in a horrid mood as well. He spent the morning looking for Kreacher, his house-elf. Harry became worried for his godfather. *"You know, you said to him, 'OUT' the night we arrived. Maybe he took it for real?" Harry asked.*

"No, no. House-elves can't leave unless they've been given clothes," Sirius said absentmindedly.

"That's not true, Sirius," Harry contradicted him. "When Dobby came to me to warn me about going back to Hogwarts second year, he left the Malfoys, and he didn't have permission. Of course, he did have to punish himself afterwards..."

Hermione's radar went up. She followed Sirius into the stairway upstairs. "You'd best hope that little sneak didn't run off and do something dastardly!" she whispered angrily at him. "Why you insist on antagonizing him is beyond me! Kreacher would love to hand our heads on a silver platter for Voldemort."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Hermione, you think too much. *"Kreacher's probably tucked away somewhere snogging my mother's old bloomers or something. Or maybe, if I'm lucky, he crawled into a vent and died,"* he replied maliciously.

Hermione looked him with disgust. "You are one twisted freak, you know that?" she said as she bypassed him in the stairs.

"Takes one to know one," he quipped.

Hermione looked around to see if they were alone. "Sirius, you need to grow up. Harry looks up to you, and your cavalier attitude is a very poor example!" she spat at him. Then she strode off into the library.

Sirius followed her and blocked her path towards the bookshelves. "Oh, well, we all can't be as well adjusted as the perfect Hermione Granger-Snape, now can we? I meant what I said too," he said as he walked closer to her. "It takes one to know one. Any witch who would willingly spread her legs for *Snivellus* has to be either desperate or a freak."

"You are *disgusting*!" she hissed at him.

"Well at least I'm not the one who gets off on having a greasy slime ball grunting on top of me," he said lazily as he flung himself onto the couch in the library.

Hermione had had enough. She stood over him. "You're just jealous!" she said vindictively as she crossed her arms and looked down at him in the eye. "You're jealous because Severus has a wife, and you don't. He gets to sleep with a young, eager wife every night, and she lets him get his rocks off *whenever* he wants and *however* he wants, and that just rips you up inside!" She stormed off to go up to her room to cool off. *Damn Sirius Black!*

She didn't have time to keep on fuming over Sirius. The Weasleys were going to St. Mungo's to visit Arthur, and she and Harry were invited to come along.

Secretly, Hermione was glad. She hoped she could see Broderick Bode and check on his status. Perhaps the shock of seeing someone after twenty years and have them look the same age might dislodge whatever was blocking his speech from forming correctly. It gave her the shakes when she thought about it. Obviously, someone didn't want him talking. It didn't take a genius to figure that out.

After they had visited for a while, they decided to leave Molly to have some alone time with Arthur. They went in search of the tearoom and had an unfortunate run in with their old Defense teacher from second year, Gilderoy Lockhart. He was still as messed up as ever, not that Hermione could really notice. He seemed as self-absorbed as ever. Then, she heard a familiar name, and she, Ron, Ginny, and Harry turned to see Neville Longbottom with his mean, pushy Grandmother.

Hermione blocked out all conversation as she looked at Frank and Alice Longbottom. She choked back her tears *It wouldn't do to start blubbing here. No one knew that I had known them.* She never forgot that evening after she had rowed with Sirius over Severus being Head of Slytherin. They both came to her and promised they would back her up. They had been good people who didn't deserve the fate they were given.

The meeting broke up and Remus spoke with James and Lily privately. Frank Longbottom and his girlfriend, Alice Lambert came up to Hermione.

"We want you to know that Alice and I are behind you 100%, Hermione," Frank said firmly.

She smiled at them and said as steadily as she could manage, "I thank you, and appreciate your support."

Hermione shook herself out of her remembering as they left. Frank and Alice did not know her or make any attempts to try and guess or figure her out. She felt lost and sad. The only ray of light was that the rest of them felt just as gloomy as she did.

Nearly out of range, she heard Bode's name mentioned. She followed the voice and came face to face with Unspeakable Bode, the nice, sedate wizard who had been so kind to her and Severus whenever they had to meet with Horatius. He had been given a plant for Christmas. She tried to connect with him, but he couldn't make any sense. She was sure he had recognized her.

"Don't worry, Mr. Bode," she whispered to him. "We've not forgotten you. Just hang in there, and we'll find a way to help you."

She had to leave then, and they all made their way back to Headquarters.

The next few days passed without incident, with the one exception that Hermione and Sirius were not speaking. No one really noticed. Hermione kept company all the time with either Harry or Ginny. Whenever Harry was visiting Sirius, she would hang out with Ginny. Now that Christmas was over, everyone was anxious for New Year's to arrive so they could all get back to Hogwarts. Arthur would be out of Mungo's soon, so there were no worries about him not pulling through. Hermione began to hope that perhaps Severus might pop in for a visit, but he didn't come.

New Year's was festive and cheery for everyone. There was a lot of drinking and partying for the Order. To Hermione's disappointment, Severus did not come round for the party. She was sorely hurt. She retreated to her room and went to bed early, not wanting to deal with the ringing in of the New Year and not having her husband to snog. She lay in bed feeling guilty as well. After all, how many New Years' did Severus have to spend alone before she had come back into his life? She tried to buck up and remember that in only a few more days she'd be back in his arms, and he was sure to be ready for some really good shagging after being separated for so long during the holidays.

At some point Hermione must have fallen asleep. She woke to a warm hand gliding up her thigh and then underneath her shirt. She was still half asleep when the hand grasped her breast. The lights were out, and she couldn't see anything, but all she could think of was Severus. *He came to surprise me at last!* She felt a warm mouth on hers, and it tasted of alcohol. *Is he drunk?* she thought. She was waking up now and could still hear the ruckus downstairs.

"Severus?" she murmured sleepily as her shirt was stripped off her.

The man didn't answer. He kissed her again and forced his tongue into her mouth. Hermione wanted to gag. The alcohol on his breath was rank. When she tried to break the kiss, his hands grabbed hers and pinned her arms above her head.

"I know you want this," he growled in her ear.

"Sirius!" she screeched.

He stopped her protests with his mouth on hers. Then he released her lips and forced his thighs between her legs. "I know that if you want that greasy Death Eater, I know you're gonna love this," he said drunkenly as he fumbled with her underwear.

She screamed. "Help! Help me! Sirius, stop. STOP IT!"

He backhanded her across the mouth. "Don't scream," he threatened dangerously as he held the sides of her face in a deathly hand grip. "I'm sure you and Snivellus play Death Eater games all the time," Sirius said against her lips as he barked a laugh. "Tell me, does he call you a Mudblood while he fucks you? Now, be good and just keep still enough for me to get inside you. It has been a long time since I've had a good, long fuck!"

Hermione twisted around and tried to gain leverage to force him off of her. He laughed at her attempts.

"So, this is what you do to get Snape gagging for it? I do love the bucking and struggling. It's pretty hot," he whispered against her lips as his hand clamped down on her breast, squeezing it painfully.

Hermione gasped in pain. She was trapped and couldn't reach her wand. She was growing physically tired of struggling against him. She realized he was really going to do this. She began to cry as he sucked and bit her flesh. "Don't, Sirius," she begged. "I promised Severus I wouldn't ever let another man inside me. Please don't do this to us. Don't!"

He grabbed her hair and yanked her face close to his. "You should have thought twice before mouthing off to me, you cunt!" he snarled as he finally ripped her underwear off her. "How dare you throw Marlene in my face! She was the only good thing in my life, and your *precious* Death Eater husband stole that away from me. Now, let's see how he handles having what he loves taken from him! Just know I'll be thinking of Marlene while I'm 'getting my rocks off'! Let's see if Snape will want you after knowing I was inside you!"

Hermione grunted and screamed as she tried to stop him from penetrating her. "HELP ME! HELP ME! SOMEONE HELP ME! STOP IT! NOOOO!"

She felt the tip of him grind against the juncture of her thigh and labia. He was so drunk, he couldn't find her vagina, and he was trying to force his penis into her by dragging and pushing it along her sex. She finally gathered all her strength and flipped them over onto the floor. She must have rammed her leg against his penis because he was cursing and whimpering on the ground. Hermione scrambled from him and switched on the light. Sirius was holding himself as he moaned on the floor. She ran out the door and crashed into Remus. He looked at her in shock and alarm. She sank into his arms and cried.

"Hermione? Are you drunk?" he asked as he sniffed her. Hermione didn't feel affronted. She was naked and shaking. Her face was bleeding, and she had red marks on her body. Remus had seen Hermione naked before, so he swallowed and took it in stride. He took off his cloak and covered her in it.

"No...but Sirius...he's in there. He tried to rape me!" she cried out hysterically. Remus' face turned to stone. He said, "Go to my room, and lock the door. Don't let anyone in until I return. Okay?" he said forcefully. "Lock the door!"

Hermione raced to Remus' room and locked the door shakily. She was terrified. She kept on checking it to make sure it was locked properly, not that *an Alohomora* could just open it anyway. She curled up in the far corner of the room with Remus' large cloak to cover her. She realized it had almost happened again. The flashback of Severus' filthy father pawing her, trying to force her legs open made her ill. She remembered she felt like he had broken her hips once he had pushed them apart. But then Severus had saved her.

She cried uncontrollably. She wanted badly for Severus to be here, to comfort her, but she was terrified of what he would do when he found out. Sirius couldn't be sent to Azkaban. It would destroy the Order.

If only I hadn't taunted him. I threw it in his face that Severus and I were happy and that Severus was having me any way he wanted while he was stuck rotting in this house without any witch to comfort him. He was lonely and angry. I knew he never got over losing Marlene. It's not his fault...it's my fault. I'll tell Remus that, and when Sirius is sober, he'll feel just wretched over it. It'll be okay; I can get Remus and Molly to heal my bruises, and we just won't tell Severus. He'd kill Sirius if he knew and probably would be so angry with me for taunting him. Her mind raced on and on, minimizing and taking the blame for everything that had happened.

Finally, there was a knock on the door. Hermione was ready to jump out of her skin. "W-Who is it?" she whispered.

"It's Remus, Hermione. Open up."

"No," she said. She was so terrified, she couldn't move. Then she heard Moody.

"Granger," he growled. "Open up this damn door, or I'll break it down."

Moody! she thought. *He'll keep me safe. But he might blame me too...well, still he won't let Sirius near me.*

She opened the door and let Remus and Moody inside. Moody took one of Remus' old robes and shortened it to fit her.

"Go change, and we'll talk," Moody said gruffly.

She obeyed him just she had all those years ago in training. When she came back, Kingsley was in the room as well.

Kingsley smiled his warm, soothing smile and said, "It looks like the four of us are back together again." He offered a chair for Hermione, and Kingsley conjured a chair for himself while Remus and Moody sat on the bed. Kingsley gave her back her wand.

"Thanks," she whispered.

Moody got up and took a look at her face. "Well, there are red marks on your face and neck. We'll have to get Molly to check the rest of you for bruises. So you know, Sirius is locked in your room under magical bonds. He's not going anywhere," he assured her.

Hermione nodded as she kept her head down.

"What happened, Hermione?" asked Kingsley.

Hermione clutched her robe around her tightly. "I was sleeping," she whispered. "I was missing Severus and had been disappointed he didn't come for the party." She started to cry, and Remus handed her a handkerchief. "I was sleeping. It was dark. I felt a man's hand touching me. I was half-awake. I thought it was Severus coming to surprise me. He kept on touching me and taking off my shirt. When he kissed me, I noticed something wasn't right. Then Sirius started talking to me, saying things like I shouldn't have said what I did..."

"What happened earlier?" asked Kingsley.

"We were fighting...Sirius and I never have really gotten along. He had been a bastard in school, and he acts like such a child sometimes. Finally, we argued over Kreacher, and I mentioned he was being a bad role model for Harry, and then it got personal. He said something morbid about Kreacher dying, and I told him he was sick and twisted, and he insulted Severus and our marriage. He said that I was the freak because I liked having a greasy slime ball..." She stopped talking. She was too humiliated to repeat it.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Remus. "We're not going to judge you."

"He said, 'grunting on top of me,'" she whispered. "He said something else, but I-I can't remember."

Kingsley looked at the others and said, "We can get your memory for an Evidence Pensieve," he said quietly.

"It's my fault!" Hermione choked out. "I was so angry he said that about me and my husband that I lashed out. I told him he was jealous of Severus...who had a young witch who he could have any time and any place he wanted, and he was stuck here with no one."

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault! Please don't tell Severus...he'll be so furious!" she begged them.

"Why, Hermione?" asked Kingsley. "Do you think that Severus will be angry with you? Do you think he'll hurt you?"

"I don't know...but I do know that he'll kill Sirius! Sirius can't be arrested. We have to think of the Order!" she said hysterically. "Let's just get me healed, and then I will leave and go back to Severus. I can't stay here," she insisted.

"Well, Snape is coming tomorrow," said Remus. "He's coming to make arrangements to teach Harry Occlumency."

"We can't tell him. Remus, we can't!" Hermione begged.

"Hermione," Moody growled. "The Order must be notified. We'll end this party right now, get everyone sober, and discuss this. Come on. Let's get you to Molly, and she will fix you up."

"Okay," she mumbled.

Remus stopped her and apologized when she flinched at his touch. "Hermione," he said. "You don't think we blame you, do you?" he asked.

She looked at them doubtfully, and Kingsley said, "I don't blame you, Hermione."

She glanced nervously at Moody, and he said, "You were wrong in what you said. You hurt his pride. But that doesn't make what he did your fault, Hermione. You can guilt yourself for the words you said, the temper you lost, but that doesn't give anyone the right to violate a person's body."

She swallowed and nodded her head. She followed them downstairs. The party was over, but people were still drunk and tipsy. Molly administered a sober-up potion to Albus. Remus and Kingsley spoke to him while Moody stood guard over Sirius.

Molly shook her head, and her lips were in a grim line. "I just can't believe it!" she shouted. "Damn that Sirius Black! Just look at you!" she tutted. Hermione looked down and saw hand marks on her breasts and bruises on her arms, wrists, and thighs.

"He didn't violate you...I mean he didn't get you, did he?" she asked, timidly.

"N-no" she whispered. "It was close. If he h-had b-been s-sober," she stuttered as she began to shake.

"Oh, my dear girl!" Molly exclaimed as she applied bruise-healing paste on her. "There. Now stand up, and place your leg up on the table. I need to see your inner thighs. Oh, that bastard! Severus is going to kill him!" she said angrily.

When she was done, Hermione covered herself with Remus' robe. "Molly, Severus can't find out. He can't. He will kill Sirius, and he'll go to Azkaban. Think of the Order!" she implored her.

"All I can think of is Ginny and Tonks! I don't want him around any witch he could get his clutches onto. We'll see what Dumbledore has to say about all this."

Hermione slept in Remus' room with him keeping watch by the doorway. Hermione barely got any sleep, and the quiet around her was unnerving. She knew there was yelling going on in her room, but the Silencing Spell made it impossible to hear.

She spent the next day upstairs with Harry, Ron, and Ginny. Hermione kept covered up. Her bruises should be gone by evening, in time for Severus to come and give his message to Harry and take her home. She was scared that he wouldn't be told and frightened he would be told. She was petrified that he would want to make love. Each time she thought about it, she would burst into tears. She told a confused Ron and Harry she was on her period and that was enough to stop their inquisitive and nosy minds.

Albus called a meeting between everyone involved: Molly, Kingsley, Remus, Hermione, Moody, and Sirius.

Albus was furious, but he kept a rein on his anger. "I spoke with Kingsley and Remus last night and then this morning with Molly and Sirius separately. I viewed the Evidence Pensieve with the memories given to me by both Sirius and Hermione."

He took a deep breath. "It seems there has been bad blood between Sirius and Hermione for quite a long time. However, what you have done is inexcusable, Sirius!" he said angrily. "How you could even entertain violating another Order member is beyond me."

Sirius was looking sad and miserable. "I was drunk...I am stuck in this fucking house, and I get it thrown in my face every chance Snape comes around. Then she had the nerve to stick the knife in and twist it a bit more! I don't know why I did it. I was drunk and angry," he yelled as he threw up his hands.

Hermione was livid. She thought that was the stupidest excuse she had ever heard. Albus seemed to think so as well.

"Sirius, you drink too much. Every time I come here, you reek of stale liquor and suffer blackouts. Your temper is worsening. It's not our fault the Ministry hasn't seen fit to exonerate you. We have all felt for your situation, but our sympathy is at an end. You will not be sent to Azkaban. It would be too disastrous for the Order. You'll remain here, and you will stay away from any witch that comes into this house. Tonight, Severus will be arriving to talk with Harry about his Occlumency lessons. Then Hermione will be leaving with her husband to return to Hogwarts."

Molly spoke up. "What of Severus? Will he be told?" she asked angrily.

Moody took Sirius up the stairs away from the sensitive conversation.

Albus replied quietly, "I think that decision is Hermione's to make."

Everyone looked at her. She felt a pressure from the men to hold her peace, but she couldn't.

"I wish I could keep silent, but I have to tell him. The thought of having... relations scares me, and Severus would be hurt and confused if I refused him with no reason. If he finds out later I kept this from him, he'd be angrier than if I had just told him in the first place. But I can't do it alone! I need your support. I won't be able to stop him if he decides to kill Sirius. Please, I need you all to be there," she whispered.

"Fine," Dumbledore replied. "Hermione has made her choice. We will return here to meet Severus when he arrives. After he meets with Harry, we will all speak with him. Sirius will be here to face Severus. He has violated both Severus and Hermione and caused damage to their marriage, not to mention nearly destroying one of the most intimate acts between a husband and wife. He *will* answer to Severus."

Hermione kept her eyes on the wooden table in front of her as Albus spoke. She wished she could sink into the floor. She also felt sorry for Sirius, but she couldn't understand why. She reckoned she was just exhausted. Later, Molly tucked her in bed with a Calming Draught. Molly promised she would stay by her side until she woke up. Hermione curled up on her side in Remus' old bed and listened to Molly read to her from *Hogwarts, A History* as she fell asleep.

A/N: The sentences in italics with asterisks belong to JK Rowling. The rest belong to me.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 of 74

The aftermath of Sirius' attack on Hermione begins to take its toll.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter. I hope this one will answer some questions and concerns. Thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their continued work and help with this fic :)

After Harry returned from his meeting with Severus, Hermione excused herself, muttering about Order business. She came downstairs and let Molly Weasley lead her down into the basement kitchen. Molly whispered to her that Severus had arrived and was waiting with everyone there. On the way to the basement stairs, Arthur greeted her.

"Mr. Weasley!" Hermione exclaimed. "You're back!"

"Fully healed, no small thanks to Severus, of course," he said happily.

"Arthur, don't over tax yourself," chided Molly. "The children know to keep an eye on you while we are downstairs."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" he asked Hermione.

"Now, Arthur, I told you once before...no stress," Molly snapped bossily. "This is a minor hiccough, that's why only a few of us are meeting. Even Minerva isn't here, so you don't worry about it. If it were really important, I'd tell you."

She and Molly proceeded downstairs. Before they could be seen, Hermione froze. "What if Severus hates me?" she asked with her eyes welling up.

Molly hugged her. "He loves you. It wasn't your fault. Don't make excuses for Sirius, and don't try to stop Severus from getting angry. He has a right to hex Sirius six ways to Sunday and back. If ever I believed in the Cruciatus Curse as punishment...this would be it! I know Severus would do it too! Just let us handle it, and be honest. It'll all work out with him, you'll see," she whispered.

"I should be the one to hex him," Hermione said weakly.

Molly grabbed her shoulders and made her look into her face. "Hermione, you are too vulnerable. In time, you'll want to hex the bastard, and God help him then. For now, someone needs to be outraged and show fury for you. So, until you are ready to face it, let Severus be your husband and stand up for you on your behalf."

Hermione drew a deep breath. "All right."

They went down into the kitchen, and already the atmosphere was tense. Hermione looked around at everyone and shied away from Sirius' stare. Severus got up and gave her a warm embrace.

"You're trembling," he said with concern. He turned to the rest of them. "Why is my wife afraid?" Everyone looked around nervously. Severus whirled back to her and rubbed her arms.

"Ow!" she gasped as she grimaced painfully. Severus looked into her eyes, and she lowered her head from his stare. He turned again on his heel to face the group. "Why is my wife afraid to look me in the eye?" he demanded. "I brought her here healthy and happy. What has happened to her?" He pushed up her robe sleeve and saw the bruises on her forearms, then her upper arms. Hermione cowered from him.

"Don't," he whispered softly so no one could hear them. He kept his back to the table and took her face into his strong hands. "Don't hide from me, Hermione."

He looked at her so imploringly and sad that she burst into tears. "I g-got into a fight with Sirius," she whispered softly. "I said wicked things to him, on purpose, to make

him angry, and he came into my room last night. At first, I thought it was you surprising me, but then he kissed me, and he was drunk. I fought him and..."

"Did he rape you?" he hissed softly.

"Does it matter?" she whispered fearfully through her tears.

"Of course it matters!" he mouthed. "I need to know!"

"No," she mouthed in return.

He held her to him and whispered in her ear, "It doesn't matter for us. I love you, no matter what anyone does to you. I just needed to know how badly you were hurt."

She sobbed into his chest and clung to him desperately. Severus held her to him, letting her cry and find safety in his arms. Once she released her hold on him, he brandished his wand slowly, keeping Hermione tucked behind him with one hand as he turned around to face Sirius.

"Don't!" said Kingsley as he stood quickly.

Sirius was frozen in his seat, pale and looking frightened.

"Don't I have the right?" Severus thundered. "This mongrel violated my wife. Under wizarding law, I am due satisfaction. My wife is too hurt and fearful to face the beast, but I am not. I will take revenge in her stead."

Albus stood. "Severus, we cannot take him to Azkaban, and we cannot allow you to kill him. We are not about to destroy everything we've worked so hard for because of this."

Severus' face was twisted in fury. "THIS?" he roared. "He violated my wife! He had me almost killed, and then years later he tries to defile what's mine! She is MINE!" he growled at Sirius.

He flashed his wand, and a horrific gash split Sirius' chest open. Molly screamed, and Hermione felt dizzy. Everything turned to black...

Hermione woke up in her own bed at Hogwarts. Severus was sitting at her side, watching her with his arms crossed and a deep scowl on his face. She felt along the sheets and frowned.

"I'm naked," she whispered.

"Yes, I wanted to check you fully for bruises. Molly did well. The worst ones are nearly gone," he replied in a staccato voice.

Hermione turned over and faced the wall. "Is he dead?" she asked flatly.

"Unfortunately, not," he said angrily. "However, he has a scar that will never go away. As I am sure the events of that night will never leave you either."

"What happens now?" she whispered as she kept her back to him.

"Black has been placed under house arrest. He has been stripped of his membership in the Order and will have to be monitored every day by one of the male Order members. Regrettably, I have been excused from that duty. You will never visit there overnight again, nor will you be there without Dumbledore or me at your side. No females will be allowed to be alone with him as well. Molly was most adamant. Not even Nymphadora or Minerva is to be alone with him. He has been disgraced."

"I'm sorry," she choked out as she softly cried.

"Don't you dare apologize!" he raged.

Hermione curled up into a ball, still scared to face him. "I thought he was you. I was enjoying it! Then when he kissed me, I knew...I should have known the moment he touched me it wasn't you. I could have stopped it from going too far if I had paid attention!"

"Hermione," Severus said calmly, "you are not at fault. Like a coward, he sneaked into your room while you were sleeping. How many times have I woken you with my touch? You had been sad and lonely. You'd thought I had finally come to see you. It's not your fault any more than it was your fault when my father tried to rape you."

"What will happen with Harry?" she asked. "Will he find out?"

"No," he said.

Hermione could feel the resentment radiating from him. "Precious Potter will be able to keep his idealism concerning his blessed godfather."

She finally turned towards him. "I'm sorry, Severus," she whispered. "It doesn't seem fair, does it?"

His tension left his body, and he smirked. "All I'm worried about is you. I want you to be all right."

"I'll be all right," she said softly. "Knowing that he's being dealt with in a way that still keeps the Order safe makes me feel better. But, Severus...won't the other Order members want answers?"

"Let Albus worry over that," he answered darkly as he sat on the bed next to her. "I've washed my hands of that filthy mutt."

Hermione wrapped her arms around Severus' neck and asked, "Will you hold me? I want to feel safe again."

Severus unwrapped her arms from around his neck and lowered them onto the bed. He enveloped her in his black-clad arms. "Please, get under the covers, Severus. I want to feel all of you against me," she pleaded. He got up and threw back the duvet. He removed his shoes and beckoned her to stand with him. He opened his arms, and she pressed her naked body against him, feeling his voluminous robes enfold and cover her. He looked down at her as they stood together.

"My sweet girl," he whispered.

Hermione turned her head up to him. He held her close and smiled down at her. "You fought like the devil, didn't you?" he murmured with approval.

Hermione felt the tears well up as she nodded.

"I saw your memory. Albus got it for me. At the most terrifying moments, you thought of your promise to me. As if I would consider what he did as you cheating on me," he said softly.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered as the tears fell. "I didn't want it to change...ever. You've been the only one. I don't want any other man to..."

"Shh," he said softly. "I know. You don't have to say it. I know, and I love you. I will love you no matter what. You're my wife."

She began to cry in earnest, and Severus picked her up and nestled with her on the bed, wrapping himself around her tightly until she stopped weeping and fell asleep.

A few days passed, and Hermione found herself strangely afraid to sleep in her own bed with her husband. She loved him, she did, but she needed time to think. She was constantly tense as she tried to sleep. So, she decided to make a temporary change. She moved back to her old room that was adjoining to their quarters, but still left her things to remain where they were.

She also couldn't face the confused looks Severus was giving her. He never asked, yet he did try to come into her room. She had charmed it shut with her own spells, so he let her be. Hermione began to spend more time in Gryffindor tower. She just couldn't face the continuous hurt look on Severus' face. How could she explain when she couldn't understand it herself?

Harry came back to the common room after his first night of Occlumency training with Snape, feeling confused and bewildered.

"It was awful! Just terrible," he complained. "I feel worse than ever."

"What happened?" asked Hermione as she sat helping Ron with his Divination homework.

"Well, he was as much of a git as ever and refused to answer my questions directly," he answered.

"Well, what did you learn?" asked Hermione while she worked on her Transfiguration essay.

Harry plopped down into sofa chair. "Well, Legilimency isn't mind reading. Although, Voldemort and I share thoughts and emotions, I also need to 'close my mind' to him! Rubbish," he muttered.

"Occlumency isn't rubbish, Harry!" Hermione warned him.

"Well," he said flippantly. "I learned that there were all sorts of enchantments on the Hogwarts grounds that will keep him from accessing my mind and compelling me to do his bidding, but I was still able to reach through to him and access HIS mind because the night Mr. Weasley was attacked, Voldemort was possessing the snake."

"Then he starts pointing his wand at me, and without even telling me what to do, he starts probing my mind. All my thoughts and memories came tumbling out for him to see. I asked him repeatedly to tell me what to do, and all he'd say is, 'Keep your mind closed, Potter!'"

"I'm sure it has to be difficult, working with Snape..." Hermione began.

"Difficult?" shouted Harry. "Try unbearable. This isn't going to work. He just kept on insulting me. Even when I finally made a breakthrough into what I've been looking for, he got angry because I found it!"

"What did you see, Harry?" Ron asked breathlessly.

"I saw a plain black door, and I remembered the corridor that I'd been dreaming of. The corridor led into the Wizengamot Court in the Department of Mysteries. There is something behind that door; I know it, and I think it's what everyone is acting so suspicious about," he explained.

"When I asked Snape what was in the Department of Mysteries, I tell you, he was scared. It was like I had asked him the worst question in the world."

Hermione was unnerved as well. "What did he tell you?" she whispered.

"The stupid git was cagey as ever! He said that there were many things in the Department of Mysteries and few of which I would be able to understand. Then, the ruddy prick ended the session right then and there."

Harry began rubbing at his scar.

"You know," Harry continued. "I've been thinking that the weapon the Order mentioned to us is in the Department of Mysteries, and that was why Mr. Weasley was attacked there and Sturgis Podmore got arrested for being there. Voldemort must have ratted him out to the Aurors through someone."

"Why would Podmore be breaking in if he is on our side and trying to stop You-Know-Who from getting the weapon?" asked Ron.

* "What is the Department of Mysteries, Ron?" Harry asked. "Has your dad ever mentioned it?"

Ron thought for a minute. "Well," he said slowly, "he said there are people called 'Unspeakables' that work there. They're called that because what's there is too top secret or unexplainable. Seems like a weird place to hide a weapon, if you ask me," he muttered.

"Actually, it makes perfect sense," Hermione said as she looked over Ron's essay.

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Because it would need to be top secret, and it would need to be in a place where not just anyone can stumble across it," she retorted. "Harry, are you all right?" she asked.

"Just my scar. It hurts," he said as he got up. "G'night."*

Early the next morning, before breakfast, Ron was waiting for Hermione to come to the common room and dragged her to where Harry was sitting.

"Ron," she said angrily, "stop manhandling me!" She pushed him from her, and Ron looked at her, confused.

"Sorry, Hermione," he said nervously. "I just need you to talk with Harry."

She sat across from Harry where he was brooding. She put down her book bag. "What is it, Harry?" she asked impatiently.

* He looked at her strangely. "He's happy. He's happier than he's ever been...or at least since I've been able to feel his emotions. Something has happened, and if that is true, well, then it must be really awful."*

"Oh, dear," Hermione muttered. "Well, I'm sure we'll all find out. Let's get to breakfast." She stood and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Wait!" Ron shouted. "You don't understand. Harry was laughing like a mad hatter and collapsed on the ground! It was the most fucked up thing I've ever seen!"

Hermione looked into Harry's eyes. She wished she could Legilimize him, but now that he knew what the sensation was, he would find her out as a Legilimens. She

peered to see if his eyes were telling anything. She saw fear and worry.

"Come on," she said to them. "I'm sure the *Prophet* will let us know."

They went into the Great Hall, and students were getting their owls. Hermione's owl was waiting for her, and she untied her paper from its leg. She tore a piece of toast to feed it before it flew away. She stretched out the paper and gasped.

"What is it?" Ron hissed.

"Mass Breakout from Azkaban," she whispered. She gave it to the boys to read, and McGonagall passed by them and whispered to her, "Albus' office after breakfast," and moved on.

The boys looked at her, and she shook her head. They each gave her a hurt look and went on reading.

"Look at this!" Harry nearly shouted. "Tragic Demise of Ministry Of Magic Worker."

"Give me that," she snapped as she snatched it from him. As she read, her heart sank. Broderick Bode was dead. A potted plant had strangled him *Sweet Merlin!* she thought. She read on. No one seemed to know how the plant got there. Ron interrupted her thoughts.

"*"Bode... It rings a bell," he whispered. "Yeah!" he said as he snapped his fingers. My dad mentioned him. He was an Unspeakable!"*

"*This is murder," Hermione whispered. "Plain and simple, murder."*

She ate in silence while Harry and Ron continued to make their conjectures about the situation. She watched Albus and Minerva as they whispered in hushed tones. Finally, they rose and walked out of the Great Hall through the teachers' side entrance. Hermione got her bag and said goodbye to Harry and Ron.

She made her way to the Headmaster's office. When she arrived, Albus and Minerva led her up the stairs. Once safely inside, Albus took a jar Floo powder and said, "Hermione, I've opened the connection from here to headquarters. I want you to go first, and we will come directly after you. It is a full meeting. Everyone will be there except...well, I'll tell you when we get there."

She Flooed into Grimmauld Place, and within minutes, Minerva and Dumbledore were there. She was immediately relieved. The silence had been eerie, knowing somewhere Sirius was there, listening.

"Albus," she said nervously, "What is to stop Sirius from listening in on the meeting?"

"Remus has volunteered to watch for him. Don't worry," he said as his eyes twinkled at her.

"Where is Severus?" she asked as they headed down to the basement.

Dumbledore placed a finger over his lips and waited until they were down safely into the basement.

"Oh, Albus, you're here at last!" said a very relieved Molly said as she embraced him.

"Molly, Arthur," Dumbledore said calmly. "Please, everyone sit. I need to let Mrs. Snape know the whereabouts of her husband before the rest arrive."

He turned and looked directly at Hermione. "Right after you left to go meet Messrs. Potter and Weasley this morning, Severus was summoned to Voldemort," he said gravely.

"Will he be okay?" she whispered. It had been so long since he had been summoned. Even when things had been difficult, he had never returned as bad as he had that first time. Nevertheless, there was a nagging feeling that wasn't going away. Something was wrong.

"I am afraid I cannot answer that, Hermione," he replied. "I do know that there will be an immense gathering now that Voldemort's most loyal supporters have returned to his side."

Hermione sat back in her chair and nervously accepted a cup of tea from Molly.

"I wish I could give you more comfort, Hermione," he continued. "You've had more than your share of trials these last few days."

He looked at her with deep concern. Hermione wanted to tell him that she was okay, but it would just be a lie.

"Albus," she whispered. "I need to know; what is going to happen to Sirius? This can't go on forever."

Dumbledore sighed. "Sirius is as much of a threat to our safety as Voldemort. He has grown unstable due to his years of imprisonment and the need to stay for long periods of time in his Animagus form. It has added his reason. For instance, Remus tells me that at times Sirius thinks Harry is James. His sense of reality is distorted. If Voldemort were to find how truly vulnerable Sirius is, I'm afraid he would use him to achieve his own ends. What's worse is that Sirius would never realize he was doing anything wrong."

"You mean the Imperius?" she whispered softly.

"Oh, no, Hermione. Sirius' mind is so weak; all he would need is information that by doing something, it would help Voldemort, and in a heartbeat, he'd do the opposite. It doesn't matter if the person were lying or not. He doesn't think before acting. He never did. It was different when he was younger, but with the losses...Regulus, Marlene, James, Lily, Peter's betrayal, then his unlawful imprisonment...it became too much for his mind to process."

"All he has is Remus," she replied sadly.

"True," he said matter-of-factly. "Although, the hero-worship he receives from Harry aids him, comforts him. That's why Harry must never know what happened. If Sirius were to lose Harry, which I'm sure he would, the potential outcome could be disastrous."

Hermione watched as the Order members came down the stairs one by one. There would be a lot to discuss today, a lot of bad news and pain. Hermione felt so old. She gazed upon Albus, who truly was old. He looked so tired. *This is his third war. He must be so weary,* she thought with a sigh.

Albus called them to order, and Hermione looked at the large group of people assembled.

"This will have to be short and perfunctory. There is a lot to cover, and we haven't much time. So, let me start with that I am as shocked and saddened by the death of Broderick Bode as the rest of you. Bode was a good man as well as a good friend. We will cherish his memory and will not stop until we prove that Voldemort killed him.

"We have reason to believe that Voldemort is gaining more power and is turning to drastic measures to gain the prophecy. Severus Snape was summoned early this morning. As soon as we know what the next steps shall be, we shall meet again.

"I've been informed there will shortly be yet another educational decree sent out. Just another nail in my coffin, as it were. You all need to prepare yourself for the reality that I will be forced out of Hogwarts. Kingsley has informed me that soon I am to be arrested and sent to Azkaban. Unfortunately, I will be unable to comply." A few

snickered at his comment.

He continued. "What concerns me is the running of the Order. Minerva will be taking my place once I leave Hogwarts. There still shall be Severus Snape at Hogwarts for the students and, of course, Hagrid. Only in an extreme situation should Hermione Snape be contacted. We need her to maintain for role as student. Kingsley has already assured me that he and our friends in the Auror Department will continue to support Hogwarts during my eventual absence. We may have been selective in whom we have let into the Order, but we have many supporters. There are many fine witches and wizards who want Voldemort defeated once and for all. Be assured, when I do leave, my time will be put to good use. Many things must be accomplished before Harry faces Voldemort and defeats him.

"Now, about this mass breakout. I do not want to comment on it before Severus' return. Just go about your appointed tasks. Who is on guard duty tonight, Mrs. Snape?"

"Tonks at the Ministry of Magic, Moody at Hogwarts, and Kingsley shall be casing Lucius Malfoy," Hermione replied.

Dumbledore nodded. "I want Miss Tonks and Alastor to switch tonight. I am sorry, but I only want seasoned veterans out at the Ministry during the night from now on. I also want Arthur Weasley taken off the roster as well," he added. "I think we can all agree that he has done his part for the Order in this area." Many people mumbled and nodded their heads in agreement.

Dumbledore cleared his voice. "Now, to our last bit of business. We had an incident that took place here at headquarters during our New Years' party. I am sad to report that Sirius Black has been stripped of his status as an Order member. Remus Lupin is holding him in his room under arrest. He, along with Kingsley and Alastor, will be taking shifts watching him."

"What did he do, Dumbledore?" asked Diggle while other members muttered amongst themselves.

"He sexually assaulted another Order member," he said grimly.

The crowd gasped. Arthur looked pale. He turned to Molly, and when she refused to look at him, he stood, and in a voice unlike anything Hermione had ever heard, said, "I demand to know whom the victim was!"

Albus seemed to understand his outburst. He raised his hand to calm the whispers among the others. "Arthur, I respect your concern. However, I must refuse your demand. It is the witch's right to speak if she wishes. I cannot in good faith compel her," he responded.

Arthur sat and looked at Hermione and Tonks. Then the sweet, kind Mr. Weasley Hermione knew returned. With tears in his eyes, he said, "I consider so many of the women in this room as dear to me as sisters and daughters. We shouldn't keep secrets! When one of us hurts, we all should come together so that person can be comforted."

"Here, here!" said Hestia Jones. "Well said!"

"I agree," said Bill Weasley. "When Podmore was arrested, we didn't turn our backs to him or not mention his name because of what happened to him."

Minerva spoke up sharply. "When You-Know-Who killed the Potters and destroyed the minds of the Longbottoms, did we forget to look after their own? Neville and Harry are like my own sons. I'm sure Arthur and Molly feel the same way."

"Aye," wheezed Dung. Everyone looked at the grimy wizard who was always on the fringes of good society. Many of the Order only believed Albus kept him on because of the sordid company he kept.

"I kno' me reputation ain't respec'able. But I agree. For wha' its worth, when one suffers, we all suffer." He went back to smoking his pipe.

Molly wiped her eyes and lovingly poured Dung a cup of tea.

"Ta, Molly," he muttered.

Hermione was moved by the show of support. She stood, and Dumbledore sat down. "It was me," she whispered.

Tonks and Minerva choked in horror. Hermione swallowed and said, "Sirius and I haven't been the closest of friends. Actually, we have never really gotten along. We argued over a matter, and he insulted my marriage. In my anger, I said some very deliberate, hurtful things. I wanted to hurt him as badly as he had hurt me. This was on Christmas Day. We didn't speak for that week, and on New Year's Eve, he came into my bedroom while I was sleeping and...and came close to raping me. I was able to escape, and Remus, thankfully, was on his way to his room when I ran out. He, Kingsley, and Moody, along with Dumbledore have been dealing with Sirius. Severus knows, and there was an altercation, but we're all going to live through this, and for now, that is all."

She sat down shakily. Bill Weasley, who was sitting next to her, offered her a shot of firewhisky. She took it gratefully and drank it down with trembling hands.

She looked around to face the reception. White, angry faces in shock and horror met her eyes. Except Dung, who shook his head.

"Ain't right," he said as he puffed lazily.

"Wha' ain't right?" bellowed Hagrid. The half-giant looked murderously angry.

Dung looked up at Hagrid from his chair and said, "You all know Sirius is a friend ta me. 'E's been good ta me since we started on here. Was a good bloke back in th' day. But, Dumbledore, 'e's broke. Touched in th' 'ead. Shoulda let ole' Snape kill 'im."

Dung puffed away, and Emmeline Vance said, "What makes you think Snape wanted to kill him?" she asked.

"Have you ever met Severus Snape?" asked Charlie Weasley glibly. "Hermione is his wife. I'm surprised we haven't been informed of Sirius' head being found on a pike in front of the Ministry of Magic with his dangly bits in his mouth!"

"Oh, Charles!" shouted Molly. "That is just disgusting! Severus hexed him with a nasty curse that slashed his chest open. He healed him, but left a nasty scar. He'll be branded for the rest of his life."

"Justice, if you ask me," growled Moody. "After all, Hermione has been scarred as well, just not where you can see it. But scarred, nevertheless."

Albus took over the conversation. "This is how it stands. Sirius is in seclusion until some other arrangement can be made, perhaps in the summer. For now, he will remain here magically bound. He can no longer change into his Animagus form, nor will I allow any...and mean ANY...female alone in this house without a male chaperone. The man guarding Sirius doesn't count. Am I clear?"

Everyone agreed. Then the meeting was adjourned. Arthur, Molly, and their boys, Bill and Charlie, stayed behind and sat with Hermione in the kitchen.

Arthur was downcast and at intervals wiped his eyes.

"Why didn't you come to us, Hermione?" asked Bill.

"I knew you as a young boy, Bill. You too, Charlie. There is only so much reality I can handle. Besides, Ron and Ginny can never know. If Harry were to find out, I just shudder to think what might happen," she whispered

Arthur poured her another shot of firewhisky. "You know, you and Severus will always have us to turn to," he said reassuringly.

She took a sip and nodded. "Thank you, Arthur," she said as she wiped the tears from her cheek. "I feel I just make my own trouble. I really meant to hurt him. I wanted to lash out at him and make him feel as low as he made me feel."

"What did you two say?" asked Arthur.

"We were arguing about Kreacher because we couldn't find him. Harry and I thought he might have left the house. We started arguing upstairs away from everyone, and Sirius said that if he were lucky, Kreacher would have crawled into a vent and died. I went into a tirade about how sick I thought that was and told him he wasn't being a good role model for Harry. I called him a freak, and he said, 'It takes one to know one.' I asked him what he meant, and he said that I was a freak because I am the one who gets off on having 'a greasy slime ball grunting on top of me.' I got angry and said he was just jealous because Severus gets to sleep with a young witch that he can have anytime he wants while he's stuck rotting away in this house. That's about it. We didn't speak for about a week, and then it happened."

She took another drink and felt very uneasy and anxious about their reactions.

"Still doesn't make it right, Hermione," said Arthur.

"It was a low blow, Hermione," said Bill, "but I agree with dad; it doesn't give anyone the right."

Charlie agreed as well.

Hermione swallowed the rest of her drink. "I need to get back to Hogwarts. I want to be back when Severus returns."

"I'll get you back, Hermione," said Molly.

Hermione waited nervously for Severus in their quarters. She had been excused from classes in order to be near Severus when he arrived. It was late afternoon when he returned. He was exhausted and worn out, but other than that, he was no worse for the wear.

She ran him a bath and helped him strip. He nearly fell asleep as she washed his hair.

"Hey, you," she whispered. "Wake up."

He grinned. "I was thinking about you washing my hair at Spinner's End," he said lazily. "If I could have you wash my hair, I'd submit to it everyday."

Hermione smiled. "I love you. I'm so glad you're all right."

After she got him tucked away in bed, she got him dinner and made sure he ate every last bite.

"So, what's the news?" she asked as she watched him eat.

"Big party going on at Malfoy manor. A huge celebration for the returning heroes. It was strange and disturbing seeing them after all this time. It also brought back some memories, but overall, I was glad to be excused."

"How did you manage to get away?"

"I used the same old card: I have to get back to Hogwarts before Dumbledore gets suspicious. Besides, I don't care for their kind of festivities."

He glanced away from Hermione, and she felt sick to her stomach. "I need to go," she said as she stood up. He grabbed her hand, and Hermione screamed. She backed far away, breathing hard.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he muttered.

"I know," she whispered.

"You've all but moved back into your old rooms," he said sadly as he looked at his tray.

"I just can't sleep with you, Severus," she whispered.

"I didn't do this to you!" he yelled as he threw the tray on the floor. "Why am I being punished?"

Hermione swallowed. "I'm not trying to punish you, Severus," she insisted.

"I want my wife to sleep by my side!" he roared as he advanced towards her.

Hermione began to cry and ran out the door to her old bedroom. She lay on the bed, curled up in a ball, and wept.

A/N: The sentences in italics with asterisks belong to J.K. Rowling. The rest belongs to me.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51 of 74

Hermione and Severus try to find a way back to each other.

A/N: Thanks to everyone for reading and reviewing. Also, my thanks to luvsev and WriterMerrin for their hard work!

Later that week, Hermione sat in the Gryffindor common room, listening to Harry talk about his Occlumency sessions.

"It's not getting better," he said, frustrated.

"Perhaps this will all play out like an illness; it has to get worse before it can get better," she reasoned.

"It's Snape that's making it worse. That man is pure evil. Every time I leave his office, my scar hurts, and I'm so sick and tired of walking down that same damn corridor every night!" he raged.

"Hey!" Hermione snapped at him. "You need to get yourself under control, Harry. Apply yourself. This is no joke. Dumbledore doesn't want you dreaming about that corridor, or he wouldn't have placed you in Occlumency lessons in the first place. So buck up, and just do it!"

"Blimey," mumbled Ron. "Don't need to get your knickers in a twist."

"Shut up, Ron!" she yelled. "Don't talk about things you can't possibly fathom."

"You're sounding more like Snape every day," accused Harry angrily.

Hermione slammed down her book. "It's not my fault you insist on spending more time complaining than working on your Occlumency!" she shouted.

"Maybe it isn't his fault!" Ron yelled.

"What are you on about?" asked Hermione, impatiently.

"Maybe it's Snape that's making this difficult. Maybe he isn't trying to help Harry at all, but really he's weakening his defenses, making his mind more vulnerable."

"Dumbledore trusts Snape," she said firmly. "That has to be enough for any of us."

The weeks passed, and before Hermione knew it, it was Valentine's Day. She was sad that she and Severus were not living together. Actually, they were barely speaking. More and more, he was being summoned to the Dark Lord, and Hermione felt herself shutting down. The only thing that seemed to matter anymore was getting Harry better, which didn't exactly endear her to her husband.

It hadn't escaped her notice that it had been nearly two months since they had made love. Not sharing a bed didn't help matters, but Hermione just couldn't do it. She had placed charms up around her doors, and only once, in the beginning, did Severus try to come to her room. When he found she had charmed him out, he stopped trying to reach her. Now, things were so bad she wondered if they would ever get past this.

She heard the stories. Professor Snape was being more of a bastard than usual. He was irrationally spiteful to everyone; she heard, except his Slytherins. Each day, Hermione racked her brain, trying to figure out a way to get the people to believe him. Severus would have to wait. She couldn't deal with intimacy now.

Later that day, an inspiration hit her. She dashed to Gryffindor tower where Ron, Ginny, and Harry were getting ready to go to Hogsmeade.

"Hi," she said nervously.

"Hey, Hermione," said Ginny. "Are you going to Hogsmeade today?"

"Yeah, I am. I wanted to know if Harry could meet me later, around midday, at the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry looked conflicted. "Er, well, the thing is I'm going with Cho, and I think she wants me to spend the day with her."

"Well, bring her along if you want, just please come!" she begged.

"Okay," he said.

"Do you want to walk with us?" asked Ginny.

"Sure. I have to meet up with a couple of people, but I sure could do with some Sugar Quills and Chocoballs."

"Let me treat you, Hermione," said Ron. "I know you don't have a boyfriend, but you deserve to be treated special. It's Valentine's."

Hermione's eyes watered up. "Ronald, that's so sweet of you!"

"Cor, if I knew you were going to cry about it, I wouldn't have said anything!" he huffed.

"No, Ronald. It's nice of you. I accept," she said as she wiped her eyes.

They met up with Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, and Ron ran ahead with them, talking about Quidditch. Ginny put her mittened hand in Hermione's.

"Hey," she said, trying to get Hermione to look at her.

"Hi," she replied softly.

"Look, I know I'm just a kid to you guys, but honestly, Hermione, you don't seem like yourself. You're so sad. Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"I'm in love," Hermione whispered. She couldn't believe she just blurted that out.

"That's great!" Ginny said excitedly. "Who...not my idiot brother!"

"Which one?" Hermione quipped sarcastically.

Ginny laughed. "Well, it better not be Percy," she warned her.

"No, he's not a Weasley," she said sadly.

"Can you tell me?" she asked.

"No," she answered. "I wish I could, but I can't. Look, it's really complicated, and I just can't talk about it. We're fighting and not speaking to each other, and it's really painful. So, please, just let's enjoy the day, okay?"

Ginny nodded, and they walked in silence.

Hermione went to Honeydukes with the crowd and got her Chocoballs and Sugar Quills. She looked around and saw the same huge box of chocolate that Severus used to buy Lily.

"Every year, Severus gives me a huge box of chocolate, and every year I gain a stone afterwards."

"Oh, you exaggerate!" Hermione retorted.

"I think Sev wants me plump. He gets really mushy during the spring and makes eyes at me. All I can think of is that I'm a big, fat cow, and there he is drooling over my cleavage."

She sighed and looked into the distance. "I started developing early. I started wearing a bra at ten! That was when I knew Severus liked me."

Hermione looked wistfully at the box of chocolate and couldn't remember at any time that Severus had ever given her a Valentine's gift. Perhaps it reminded him too much of Lily.

She finally ditched the crowd and tried to drown her sorrows in Butterbeer. She really could do with some Charlie right now. Funny, she hadn't thought about taking cocaine in years; now she just wanted to escape reality. She waited and drank and drank until her first guest appeared: Luna Lovegood.

"Thanks, Luna, for meeting me," she said as she shook the girl's hand.

"You're welcome," Luna replied in an airy voice that seemed not to be concerned. She had long blonde hair and dreamy eyes that seemed to stare off into nowhere. Hermione wondered how she could achieve such a state of acceptance and bliss.

"Daddy says this will be very good for Harry and Dumbledore," she said suddenly.

"I hope so," replied Hermione. "Would you care for a Butterbeer?"

"Yes, please," she answered sweetly.

Hermione stood up and looked for Rosmerta. "Look," she whispered discreetly. "I'm having a really bad day. I'm sixteen, and the Butterbeer just isn't cutting it. What can I have that won't get you in trouble?"

Rosmerta smiled. "Come on, you," she whispered. She motioned for Hermione to follow her into the backroom.

"Here," she said as she passed her a bottle. "Muggle vodka. Doesn't leave a scent on you, but it's as potent as hell." She poured a generous amount and then took her wand and poured the rest of the glass with water. "That'll get you a bit of a buzz, but not get you into trouble."

"Thanks, Rosmerta. What do I owe you?" she asked.

"Nothing, Hermione. Just... well, Severus was in here the other night, drunk as fuck. He was in a bad way, you know. There was a young prostitute trying to sneak past me. She was all over him like a cheap robe. He didn't do anything, but you could tell he was...*considering*. Now, I remember faces, and I remember people. I recall you coming around here a long time ago. I've kept my mouth shut, but I know from hearing the rumors that you are living in the dungeons near Snape. From what I remember, your last couple of years at Hogwarts before you graduated were about sneaking around here, trying not to be seen. I don't know what's going on, and I don't care. But if you want to keep your man, vodka won't get him back," she said as she looked into her eyes directly.

Hermione was gobsmacked. "Okay," she said as she walked out of the backroom.

"Don't forget your Butterbeer," Rosmerta reminded her.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

Hermione made her way back and kept a smile that she hoped was convincing plastered on her face.

Rita Skeeter blew in the door, and Hermione waved her over. The months since her release from her summer of hell in Hermione's jar had not been kind. She looked less sparkly. That arrogant flashy smile was gone, as well as her neatly manicured nails.

** "Well, isn't it Little-Miss-Perfect?" she said nastily.*

"Please, sit down," Hermione said sweetly. "Well, we are waiting for one more person to arrive, so in the meantime, would you care for a drink, Rita?"

"Why yes, I'll have a Firewhisky," she said nicely.

Hermione flagged Rosmerta down and ordered a Firewhisky for Rita. Just then, she saw Harry walk through the room.

"Harry, Harry!" she called. "Over here!" She waved at him until he saw her and then came over. At first, he looked suspicious at the odd gathering of people.

"You're early," she said as Rosmerta came to give Rita her Firewhisky. "Rosmerta, another Butterbeer for Harry, thanks."

"So," she said as she watched Harry remove his cloak. "How did things go with Cho? Is she here with you?"

"Cho?" Rita said in a saccharine sweet voice. She immediately snatched up her purse.

Hermione slammed her hand on top of Rita's purse. "I know what you're thinking, and that topic is off-limits."

Rita glared at her angrily. Harry looked at the exchange and said timidly to Hermione, "What are you up to?"

"We were sitting here about to discuss some business," she said sweetly.

"One word, Rita, and I will call this meeting off!" Hermione said angrily.

"I swear, you had better watch your back, missy! I've ruined far more important..."

"Find someone who cares," Hermione interrupted and then took a gulp of her watered down vodka.

"So," Rita said, dropping her sickening-sweet voice, "what is this story, this exclusive you have for me?"

Hermione smiled and looked smugly at Harry.

"So, you're actually going to stick to it, are you?" Rita asked as she leaned back with her drink. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, and you saw it all?"

Harry glowered at her. Hermione could see his jaw clenching.

"Fine, fine!" Rita capitulated. "I'll do your blasted story. Now what about my money?"

"No money from us, Rita," Hermione said as she stared stonily at her. "We're just giving you the material. You have to earn an honest Galleon for an honest story!"

"This will never happen!" Rita snapped. "I will lose everything if I write this *bilge*!"

"Of course it will, Rita," Hermione said smoothly, "and you are going to make it happen. That is, unless, you want to spend some more time in my jar? Now shut your mouth, and open your ears."

Later at dinner, Hermione turned to Harry and said, "Oh, by the way, how did things go with Cho?"

"It didn't," he mumbled.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I honestly don't know. It just seemed to go from bad to worse. Then she was talking about Cedric, and she cried again."

"Oh, dear," said Hermione.

"Then I told her I was meeting you at the Three Broomsticks, and she went berserk!" he said angrily.

"Was that how you approached it?" she prodded. "You just laid it out there like that?"

"What was I supposed to do?" he asked defensively. "I was honest."

"Harry, you know she is feeling insecure. She would have been more understanding if you had qualified your reasoning!" she insisted.

"Well, by that point she was already angry with me. She took me to Madam Puddifoot's, Hermione! That was her and Cedric's place!"

Hermione shook her head. "Obviously, she's not ready, Harry. I don't think you are either. I think it was too soon for both of you. Just chalk it up to experience, and let it be."

Hermione decided she was much too weary to pretend she was fine around everyone at the common room, so she went to her rooms. She lit the fire and curled up in bed. She heard a knock on her door. She went to remove her charms on the door, but stopped.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Your husband," a deep voice answered from behind the door. Hermione sighed and unlocked the door. He looked more miserable and unhappy than she had ever seen him. He was thin and gaunt, as if he hadn't eaten properly in days.

"It was Valentine's Day today," he said softly as he traced the door frame with one long finger.

"I noticed," she whispered as she stared into the fire.

"Hermione, I miss you. What did I do to have you turn your back on me? You promised me that you would never hurt me or forsake me. Why have you abandoned me?" he asked.

Hermione could hear the anger and frustration in his tone. "I haven't left you, Severus," she said.

"Then why are we separated?" he demanded angrily. "Why are you not in our bed? I reach for you, and you're not there. I miss you so much, it hurts."

"Rosmerta told me today about the prostitute that tried to solicit you," she said softly, still unable to meet his eyes.

Severus closed his eyes and hung his head. "Did she at least remember to tell you I was three sheets to the wind and still refused her?" he asked her weakly.

"Yes, but she also told me that you were close to caving in. She advised that I'd better fix whatever it is between us," she replied.

"I agree," he said evenly.

"There's just one problem, Severus," she replied. "This can't just be 'fixed.' A good shag with you is not going to erase the fear inside me."

Severus leaned into her. "Don't you know me enough by now that I don't want just a shag from you?" he asked as he shook from anger. "I am furious. I'm livid that Black has once again managed to destroy what's good in my life. I hate the fact that I may never be able to touch you again because of what he did, and I am fucking angry, but not with you!"

He stepped back from her and took a deep breath. "I am outraged that you have pushed me away. What he did to you, he did to me too. I feel violated. What hurts you, hurts me," he said with righteous fury. "I want us to work through this together. Don't shut me out. Just return to our bed, Hermione. Don't leave me!"

He walked away from her, returning to their sitting room, and he sank on the couch, weeping quietly. Hermione couldn't bear to see him like this anymore. It was breaking her heart. She came inside and knelt in front of him. "I'm sorry, Severus," she said in a rush. "All I can think of is being in our bed and you trying to talk me into having sex with you."

"I would never do that, Hermione," he said through his tears. "Please stop this. Stop hurting me. I didn't do anything wrong! Stop punishing me."

Hermione hugged him, and he held onto her desperately. "Severus," she whispered painfully, "your grip is crushing me. Please be gentle. I'll sleep in our bed again. Just let me go at my own pace."

He loosened his hold on her and stroked her arms carefully. "Talk to me about it, Hermione. We're best friends, remember?" he asked as he searched her eyes.

Hermione looked at him, and she broke down, sobbing. She had forgotten. He had been her friend years before he became her lover. How could she ever think he would force himself on her?

She held him and said, "I'm so sorry, Severus. I was so wrong."

He picked her up and carried her to their bedroom. On the bed was a fancy gift-wrapped bag of Chocoballs...her favorite.

"And I have champagne," he said as he gestured towards the bottle chilling in a silver ice bucket.

"What is your plan, Severus Snape?" she asked as she crossed her arms.

"My only plan is for romance. Oh, shite! I didn't get flowers!"

Hermione laughed. "It's okay, Severus. You're not that kind of a wizard; although, I am very impressed with the idea of Chocoballs and champagne. It will be heavenly with the strawberry mousse and clotted cream!"

"So what do we do?" she asked nervously.

"I thought a bath. We could take turns or..." he trailed off.

"You have to promise me no funny business if we bathe together. Promise?" she said hesitantly.

"I cannot promise I will not get aroused, but I will not make you feel you have to do anything about it. Is that okay?" he asked.

"Will you do something for me?" she asked shyly.

"Anything," he breathed.

"Let me get into the bath first, and then will you let me watch you strip?" she asked shyly. "I've always wanted to watch you do that for me."

"Just let me know when you're ready," he said. "The bath is already prepared for your enjoyment."

Hermione giggled and went inside. It was gorgeous. The bath had bubbles, and there were candles floating above her and in the corners, just like in the Great Hall. She inhaled the scent of lavender and took off her clothes quickly and got into the tub. She magicked her hair above her head and got comfortable before calling Severus to join her.

"You are lovely, sweet girl," he purred as entered the room.

She had forgotten how sensual his voice was. She was quickly becoming relaxed as the lavender eased her senses and the candles flickered around her. Then, Severus began to strip slowly in front of her. It had been so long since she had seen what he kept hidden underneath all of his black robes and protective wool armor. He began with the frock coat and eased it off his shoulders and arms gracefully. He pulled his linen shirt out of his trousers unhurried and deliberately worked on releasing each button, all the while gazing upon her with that predatory look she had forgotten. She remembered how much it turned her on. His thin, chiseled chest, toned shoulders and arms were making her breasts tingle and her clit ache. He looked extremely tempting. He was taking his time as well with his trousers. She watched as he deftly and expertly opened each button of his trousers to reveal...

He was hard.

Very hard.

She had forgotten how beautiful his body was. He let his trousers drop to the floor. He ever so slowly took off his underwear. He carefully stepped out of them, showing how agile and toned his legs were. Hermione was having a hard time remembering how to breathe correctly. He was unconcerned with the state of his arousal after he had shed every scrap of clothing on him and proceeded to elegantly pour her a glass of champagne. He walked over towards her and handed her the flute glass.

"I have room," she choked out.

After her bath, in which he helped her wash her hair, she was feeling extremely warm and tingly inside.

She stumbled into the bedroom, grasping her towel around her, and began to giggle uncontrollably.

"I think you are a bit drunk, Hermione," Severus observed as he helped her with her nightgown.

She batted the nightgown he had picked out for her away and stated, "No fluffy things!" as she shook her wet head. "I want this!"

She pulled out a mint-colored sheer nightgown, which was indecently see-through. She had purchased it right before Christmas to surprise Severus for his birthday.

"I forgot your birthday, Severus," she said as the tears welled up in her eyes. "I think I owe you," she teased him as she threw off her towel. Severus watched as she pulled the gown on over her head. She jumped onto the bed and tore into her Chocoballs.

"Why am I wet?" she asked as she looked down. Her wet hair had dripped water onto her chest, making her nipples harden and plastering the sheer material to her breasts.

Hermione watched Severus as he ogled her breasts and hardened nipples hungrily. She offered him a Chocoball, and he broke it open, eating only half, but making sure his tongue brushed the tips of her fingers. She felt shivers running all over her body only to rest between her legs. She ached for him, but the fear was still there in the back of her head, stopping her from straddling him and burying his hardened flesh deep within her own. Instead, she popped the other half into her mouth and savored the taste.

"Mmmm...this is so good," she said thickly as Severus offered her a sip of champagne from his crystal flute.

"May I kiss you?" her husband asked in a strangled voice as he placed his drink on the table.

She felt her head nod, although she couldn't for the life of her figure out how her body was moving without her direction. It wasn't the Imperius Curse; she would have felt a happy, numbing sensation. She was nervous and jumpy as a cat. What would she do when his lips touched her? Would he lose control and take her, swift and urgently, or would her body take over her mind and beg him to make love to her?

He leaned over, and she leaned to meet him halfway across their bed. They kissed, and Hermione in her haze recalled that first kiss, that tender and delicate kiss in that record booth from twenty years ago. As she tasted him, she felt the passion come back into her blood. She remembered that Severus was hers, the man she had fought time and space to be reunited with.

He drew away from her and slipped on a robe. He went over to their old Victrola, and he put on an old, familiar record.

She took his proffered hand, and he held her as they danced. The melody had never changed, yet it was as if she were listening to it for the first time.

They wrapped their arms around the other and swayed to the music until the last strains ended. Hermione lifted her head to meet his eyes.

"Lie with me, sweet girl. Let me feel your warmth next to me," he whispered gently.

Hermione nodded, and he swept her into his arms. He laid her on her side of the bed, and he walked over to his. He took off his robe, slowly eased himself naked under the covers and turned to face her. Hermione turned her head and laughed.

"Why are you watching me?" she asked.

"I'm trying to remember you're real, that I'm not dreaming," he whispered.

Hermione felt terrible. "I'm sorry you were hurting so much. I could only think of what happened to me."

"Hermione, you're angry with me. I understand and accept it. When you are ready to face it, I will be here to listen," his voice rumbled near her ear.

Hermione was confused. *Angry? Why would I be angry with Severus? He hadn't even been there* She soon fell asleep.

Late in the night, Hermione sat up in bed and thought of that night Sirius attacked her. Severus hadn't been there! She shook him awake, and he was up in a flash, his wand pointed straight at her.

She flipped off the duvet and stood to face him. "You weren't there! Why didn't you come for me? I thought he was you, I thought you had come for me. You stayed away...why did you stay away from me?" she yelled.

She was shaking with rage. He sighed and rubbed his face. "I knew you'd get to this point. I didn't figure so soon."

"You answer me!" she demanded as she strode over to his side.

"I was afraid of being found out. There were too many people, too much temptation. I didn't want to risk anyone catching us. So, I stayed here, got drunk, brooded, then wanked off and went to bed feeling very sorry for myself. Believe me, Hermione. I would have been there if I had known how badly things had gotten between you and Black. I would have insisted on your return. But I need to ask, why didn't you leave and come home? Potter was doing better, things were tense with Black. Why didn't you take charge and make your own choice?" he asked.

Hermione blanched. "I didn't think I had one," she said, confused.

Severus looked at her firmly. "You always have a choice! Always! Don't be a victim of someone's circumstances. You don't owe Potter your life. You can't solve all his woes. You need to know when to draw that line for us and for yourself!"

Hermione was dumbstruck. "I need to think about this," she said weakly.

"Let's go to sleep," Severus said gently.

Hermione snuggled next to her husband's body. She felt better somehow, liberated and free. She slept well and was happy to be back in her husband's arms again.

A/N: The italicized sentences with asterisks belong to J. K. Rowling. The rest belongs to me.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52 of 74

Things come apart when Harry confronts Hermione about what he saw during his Occlumency lesson with Snape.

A/N: Many thanks for the reviews last chapter. Please keep them coming! I hope this chapter will make up for all the pain our favorite couple has been dealing with. Again, thanks to my betas, luvsev and WriterMerrin for all their hard work! Please Review!

Monday morning arrived with a bang. The interview Harry gave to Rita for the *Quibbler* was fantastic. Hermione felt very proud of herself. She knew that she had helped to make a strike against Umbridge and all her nastiness.

Harry also received a bunch of fan mail that Hermione helped him sort out. Some were good, some were bad, but overall, there were a great deal of people who agreed with Harry and believed his story. She, Harry, Ron, and Ginny were elated.

Hermione began to wonder as she saw the students with their copies of the *Quibbler* how long it would take Umbridge to ban it altogether. She received her answer when Harry told her at lunch he had received a week's detention, fifty points from Gryffindor and could no longer go to Hogsmeade. Hermione smirked. It was only a matter of time now.

Sure enough, Hermione was biting back a laugh as she saw the latest Educational Decree: "Any student found in the possession of the magazine the *Quibbler* will be expelled."

"Hermione," Harry asked her, "how can you be happy?"

"Don't you see, Harry?" she explained as they walked to Transfiguration. "This will only intensify people's curiosity to find out about that article. Umbridge has actually done us a favor for once!"

It was a topsy-turvy day. People were stopping Harry in the halls and telling him they believed him. Hermione was relieved. It had been so long since she had seen Harry light-hearted. The D.A. was still meeting as frequently as possible, and a lot of progress was being made. Hermione was highly impressed with Harry's talents. He was a born teacher. He really knew his stuff and instinctively knew how to handle each individual problem with grace and ease. He was calmer when he taught, and it seemed to be an excellent outlet. Overall, Hermione was very pleased with how life was turning around for all of them.

She and Severus still had things to work out. They hadn't made love yet, but she had insisted he no longer hide in the bathroom like an embarrassed teenager if he needed release. She found watching him wank was very satisfying. They had recently progressed to masturbating together. It was mutually fulfilling. They were taking small steps, but she was optimistic things would be fine, not only for them but for everyone.

However, one day everything changed. Harry and Ron told her about a horrible nightmare Harry'd had the night before. As soon as Hermione could, she went to Dumbledore's office.

"It's serious," she explained. "Now, Harry is convinced he was *inside* Voldemort. I didn't want to think of how he would handle the truth! Harry saw it all: the whole exchange between Voldemort, Avery, and Rookwood. He knows now that Bode was forced to remove 'something' and that he was definitely under the Imperius Curse. He says he is certain the caster was Lucius Malfoy. He is still referring to it as 'the weapon,' so at least he isn't aware of the prophecy. However, he saw himself torturing Avery with the Cruciatus Curse."

"And what has Harry said of his Occlumency training?" Albus asked her.

"He feels guilty that he saw this exchange; however, he is far too curious. He wants to know what is behind that door, but whether it is his own curiosity or Voldemort's...I can't be certain. Nevertheless, he knows that Voldemort will find a way to get the 'weapon,'" she confessed.

Albus, who had been pacing while Hermione had been speaking, now sank into his chair, his cerulean eyes troubled. "This is terrible," he said. "I need to see Severus before Harry's next lesson. Keep insisting, Hermione. It is imperative that he learns to close his mind, for his own good as well as all of ours."

"Yes, Albus," she replied.

Later that same evening, Hermione was in the library to get a few books to read when Harry came bursting in noisily.

"Quiet!" hissed Madam Pince.

"Sod off!" he shouted angrily at her as he approached Hermione. "I need to talk to you...NOW!"

Hermione placed the books down and followed him cautiously outside of the library. Once they were safely alone, Harry whirled on her. He was furious.

"I had a very interesting lesson with Snape tonight. It would have lasted longer, but fortunately for me, Umbridge decided to kick Trelawney out, and Snape was forced to let me go."

"What happened, Harry?" Hermione said calmly. She had figured something like this would happen.

"I tapped into Snape's memories, Hermione. I bet you can guess what I saw," he said aggressively.

Hermione fingered her wand. If he were heading in the direction she feared, he would have to be Obliviated.

"What did you see, Harry?" she continued to ask cautiously.

"I saw a hook-nosed man beating and screaming at a cowering woman as Snape was crouched on the floor, crying. I saw Snape fighting with Sirius and my dad. I saw a teenage Snape talking with a younger Slytherin boy very seriously. Finally, I saw a bushy-haired girl arguing with a young Snape outside on the hill overlooking Hagrid's hut. Is there something you wish to tell me, Hermione?" he said in a dead calm.

She didn't want to do this, but she had no other recourse. She whipped out her wand and calmly said, "Oblivate!"

Harry collapsed on the ground, and Hermione went to get Madam Pince to watch over Harry as she went to get Madam Pomfrey and Severus.

The three of them watched Harry as he slept in a forced Dreamless Sleep.

"I had to do it," Hermione said desperately as she confessed what she had done. "He was so angry; he was in a blinding rage. We just can't trust him knowing that I had lived in the past. Can you imagine the state he is in now? He's so...vulnerable. It would mean a coup for Severus if the Dark Lord knew the truth...but we can't risk him knowing!"

Minerva's lips were set in tight, thin line. "I can't say I'm happy with what has occurred, but it seems the only way to ensure Potter keeps an even keel," she bit out.

Albus came in, looking worried. Hermione told him what happened.

He nodded his head in agreement. "It was the only way. Thank you, Hermione."

"Severus?" he asked as he turned to him. "What transpired during your lesson?"

Severus was taut with anger. "The lesson tonight was a complete disaster, but for one moment, he was quick enough to rebound my spell and get into my head. He saw me speaking with Hermione."

"You have been using the Pensieve, haven't you, Severus?" he asked.

"Of course," Severus replied, affronted. "It is just difficult when there are so many. You know the dangers of removing too many of one's memories at a time."

Dumbledore sighed as he looked upon Harry's unconscious form. "I know, Severus. You must be more diligent now that Tom is becoming stronger. So, what transpired?" the older wizard asked.

"Potter was again in the Department of Mysteries. He was closer to opening the door. He could see the blue light shining from underneath the door. The door flew open, and he saw the circular room with the blue candles. He was too eager to keep going farther in to stop himself. He wants to know how to enter," Severus said darkly.

Hermione gasped. If it hadn't been for the unmarked doors, Harry would have gotten in! She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Can we Oblivate what he saw, Albus?" she asked.

"Don't think I haven't considered it, Hermione," Dumbledore said gravely as he looked at the boy wizard. "The problem is Tom's eagerness. I fear Harry may not be strong enough at this point. Tom has gained more ground in his mind. Mr. Potter will be getting Obliviated every other day at this juncture. Diligence, Hermione, press upon his mind to stop searching...to refuse desiring. It's what Tom wishes for him: the search."

"And on the other hand, I am to keep reporting my wife's continued treachery to the Order by joining me in thwarting any progress Potter might make with Occlumency," Severus added snidely.

Hermione looked at her husband. "The sides of what is true and what is false is growing so thin I don't know if I can tell them apart anymore."

"Welcome to my reality, wife," he whispered.

The days became urgent. Everyone was neck deep in preparing for their upcoming O.W.L.s; the D.A. meetings were full of tension and a sense of vital importance to absorb all they could during each lesson was in the air.

Harry was far too busy to speak about his Occlumency lessons. Each time Hermione asked, he would grunt in short one-word answers.

Harry's hard work teaching everyone how to produce a Patronus Charm had paid off in spades. During the latest lesson, nearly everyone had their Patronus out and shimmering along with ease. It was intriguing to see what each person's Patronus was. Hermione's was an otter. It had always been an otter. She remembered when Severus had come to tell her that his Patronus had changed from a doe to an otter. It had been hilarious to see the look on his face. He had felt an otter was so undignified, but Hermione had laughed and had told him it was *her* Patronus, and she had taken it to mean that he had truly let Lily go.

As they played around with their silvery friends, Dobby popped in and surprised them all.

"Hi, Dobby," said Harry. "What's...what's wrong?" he asked, looking concerned.

The elf looked terrified. Harry said, "It's Umbridge. She found out about us, right?"

Dobby squeaked, and Harry took it for a 'yes.' "WELL, WHAT ARE YOU ALL WAITING FOR?" he shouted. "RUN!"

Everyone ran pell-mell towards the door. They were having a hard time getting out quickly. Hermione saw the Slytherins round the corner. She got away, but not before watching Harry get caught by a Tripping Jinx and falling down flat.

She raced to Gryffindor tower to meet up with the rest. After everyone was accounted for, she told them Harry had been caught.

"Oh, no!" squealed Lavender Brown.

"What are we going to do?" asked Pavarti nervously.

"We wait," said Hermione calmly as she plopped down in a nearby chair.

Harry returned late that night, and everyone was waiting up for the news. He quieted them all down and told them the story. Umbridge knew all about the D.A., tried to have Dumbledore arrested, and he had Stupefied the lot of them. When everyone had come to, Dumbledore was gone. Fudge and Umbridge were furious, and Harry now felt pretty sure the headmaster was gone for good.

Hermione's heart sank. Of course, she had known this day would come; she had just hoped it would have been farther down the road. After Harry spoke, it seemed foolish to remain up and stew.

The very next morning, everyone learned of Educational Decree number twenty-eight. Hermione looked at the notice grimly. It had finally happened. Dolores Umbridge had now taken Albus' place as headmaster of Hogwarts.

Gryffindor house tried to keep their hopes up. The D.A. especially kept reminding each other that it wouldn't be long now. Dumbledore would be back. Then, just as everyone was starting to feel better, the other shoe dropped.

It started with Malfoy, who informed a very irate Hermione that he was now a part of the Inquisitorial Squad and had the authority to dock points. Hermione couldn't wait to talk with Severus to see if he was going to take the little prick in hand.

She stood in front of the wall with the giant hourglasses set in niches. Just that morning, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had been neck and neck. Now the gemstones were flying upward. The only hourglass that remained full was Slytherin.

"Noticed, have you?" asked Fred from behind her.

Hermione turned and said, "Yes, I have. This is ridiculous."

"Malfoy docked us fifty points!" Harry said furiously as he joined them. They started walking into the Great Hall. They were just tucking in when a terrific explosion nearly knocked them onto the floor.

"Bloody hell!" Ron yelled above the din of screams and shouts. "What was that?"

Hermione took out her wand and strode towards the outer hall. Her eyes flew open in shock. Enchanted fireworks were exploding everywhere. She watched Umbridge and Filch dashing about trying to stop them, but each time they cast a spell, the fireworks seemed to multiply. Hermione grinned and snickered to herself. She calmly returned to the Great Hall, got her book bag between her feet, and ate her lunch while watching the fireworks. It was going to be a long day, but at least it would be entertaining.

Umbridge spent her first day as Headmistress running all over the school, chasing down rogue fireworks and extinguishing them. None of the teachers were any help, except Snape, Harry pointed out.

"Snape was madder than a hornet," he reported as he tore into his roast chicken.

Ginny was laughing so hard her shoulders were shaking and her eyes were watering. "H-he wasn't mad. He was scared as a rabbit!" she said as she laughed raucously.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said, smiling. Ginny's laughter was becoming contagious.

"You know how paranoid Snape is on a normal day about students trying to blow up the Potions lab to hell and back. Every time a firework whizzed by the door, his face turned deathly white. I thought he was going to pass out!" she said, still laughing.

Ron shook his head. "I thought he was going to do his nut," he said. "He was roaring and bellowing, trying to get them away and out of the dungeons...Hermione, I think you'd best stay in Gryffindor tower tonight. He's got to be in a right mood."

"Oh, no!" she said importantly. "Not for a king's ransom! I'm not going to risk facing his wrath because I heard he was in a rage. He'll be in a worse mood if I don't show up. Damn your brothers, Ron! Lord knows what heinous things Snape will have in store for me to do tonight!"

Ginny started to laugh again, but silently this time. Just her shoulders were shaking, and she lowered her face to hide.

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" Ron asked his sister.

"I-I'm s-sorry!" she burst out. "I-It's j-just how you s-said that! What's h-he going to m-make you d-do? S-Shag him?" She held her stomach as she tipped sideways to lean against her brother as she laughed uncontrollably. Hermione looked at Harry, who was starting to fight a smile. His face was turning red, and finally his shoulders were shaking too. He turned away from Hermione and starting laughing.

Ron, though, remained composed. "You are really sick, you know that?" he said disgustedly. "I'm trying to eat here. The last thing I need is to think of Snape giving Hermione the high hard one!"

"Oh, *honestly!*" Hermione snapped angrily.

Harry and Ginny screamed with laughter as Dean, Neville, and Seamus looked at them.

"What's the 'high hard one'?" asked Neville.

Fred and George started laughing further down the table. Hermione was shaking her head. She waited for them to calm down, but what Neville said just made her mouth twitch. Finally she hissed at them, "Will you all shut it? The last thing I need are rumors!"

But the laughter had taken a life of its own, and as Fred and George started explaining to Neville about the mechanics of sexual intercourse, Hermione and her living arrangement so close to Professor Snape was forgotten. She went to her quarters to wait for her husband.

Severus strode into the living area and poured himself a glass of firewhiskey. He was grumbling under his breath, and Hermione knew it wasn't good. She was sitting at his desk, working on the rotation schedule for the Order. With Sirius under house arrest, and after the mass breakout from Azkaban, it was becoming more of a challenge to disperse the duties equally.

Finally, he went to the bathroom, and Hermione heard the shower turn on. She was disappointed he hadn't said hello to her, but he was truly in a foul mood. When he came out, he had his robe on and went to lie down on the couch. She got up and padded over quietly to him. She knelt down on the floor next to him and placed her hand on his chest.

"I heard you had a difficult day," she whispered.

"I did," he muttered.

His eyes were still closed, and Hermione asked, "Do you have a headache?"

"No," he snapped. "I'm frustrated, Hermione. Do you know how long it has been?"

Hermione sighed as she turned her head away. Sex. It had been a while. Although they slept in the same bed and engaged in some sexual activity, she still hadn't given him the green light for intercourse. It had been a long time...far too long. A little over four months, to be exact.

"Let me take a shower, and I will meet you in bed," she whispered to him.

"What for?" he asked moodily. "So I can just wank off in front of you? I'm frustrated, Hermione. I can't take it anymore."

She reached over and smacked his leg.

"That hurt!" he yelled.

"So did your comment, you great big pillock!" she bellowed as she jumped up. "Why don't you talk to me about this instead of whining like a little boy?"

He stood up and glared at her. "How dare you speak to me like that," he whispered dangerously.

"How dare you!" she shot back at him. "So, you aren't getting any trim. You think you're the only one who is suffering? I'm not getting any wood, am I?"

He gave a snort and snarled, "Then why don't you ask me about it? Merlin knows I've got enough to spare!"

Hermione was blind with indignation. She put her hands on her hips and got in his face. "Because the last time someone tried to give me wood, he was drunk as fiddler's bitch and nearly tried to grind a new hole in me because he couldn't find the one he wanted! Do you have enough detail? Do you want me to recount all the nasty things he said to me as well?" she screamed at him.

Severus' anger drained from his face. He sat up on the couch limply, defeated, and whispered, "Tell me, Hermione. Tell me so I can understand."

He looked up at her and opened his arms. Hermione regarded his offer and stood, reluctant to make peace with him. Finally, she huffed, sat on his lap, and drew a breath to tell her story when Severus interrupted her.

"Just so you know," he said apologetically. "If I get hard, it's only because your arse is on my cock. It's been a while since it's been near that area, so he may get excited just because of sheer proximity."

"Duly noted," she replied primly. "Thank you."

She told him the whole story; all the details that she couldn't find the strength to tell anyone, she told him. She confessed her fear of Severus doing something Sirius had done, and she would feel trapped all over again. She revealed her revulsion at how Sirius had tried to unsuccessfully penetrate her, and how it had hurt. She told Severus all the humiliating things he had said about their sex life...all the conjecture and crassness that came with them. She told him how humiliated and fearful she still felt deep inside.

Severus was angry. He was so angry he wanted to go and just kill Sirius and have it all be finished. "Dumbledore should have let me put him out of his misery. Dung was right. He's more animal than human." He held on to Hermione and stroked her back. "I'm sorry. Can't I at least try to help you?" he whispered.

Hermione sat there on his lap and looked at him. "Perhaps if you let me take charge and decide how we go about it all," she said hopefully.

"Whatever you want, Hermione," he said in a strained voice. Hermione could feel him getting stiff under her bum. "I'll make it easy for you. I just want you to let me inside you somewhere. At this point, I don't care where. I'm just desperate," he confessed while looking humiliated.

Hermione felt for him. "Don't worry," she whispered. "You'll get your wish. Just let me do it."

"Brilliant," he agreed as he blew out a breath.

She removed her jumper and slid off her trainers. She pushed her bra-clad breasts out towards him and nodded her approval when Severus lifted one finger above the top

of her chest. Having received the go ahead, he glided one finger down her cleavage. He hooked his finger around the front clasp and pulled her to him. He kissed her, and she felt the snap come undone. She gasped as he felt his warm, familiar hands cup and lightly twist the nipples on her breasts as he continued to kiss her mouth gently. Hermione deepened the kiss as she maneuvered her body to straddle him. Severus opened his robe and let her rub the crotch of her jeans against his erection.

"I want to taste you," he whispered in her mouth.

Hermione arched her back and offered a plump breast to him. He eagerly fastened his mouth on it. He grabbed her arse and helped her to grind against his hardness, groaning as he thrust faster against her, suckling both breasts, switching from one to the other. Hermione was growing unbearably aroused and felt if she could just mount him without her jeans or knickers on and control the situation, it wouldn't be so scary. She broke away, and he looked terrified.

"Don't worry," she panted. "I'm not going to leave you wanting."

She stripped off her jeans and knickers as Severus watched. His dilated eyes were hungry for her. She straddled him and said, "I have to control this, okay?" she asked.

"Whatever you want, Hermione," he said desperately. "What do you want me to do?"

She closed her eyes and let her senses take over. "Put your mouth back on my breasts, and keep being gentle; just be gentle with everything, and let me guide you," she whispered.

She was nervous and excited at the same time. She felt like a virgin again. Taking his cock in her hand and nudging the head at her entrance for the first time in months made him moan. Her eyes snapped open at the sound, and she watched her husband as he threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut as she cautiously positioned him at the correct angle. She breathed deeply and eased down slowly. They were both trembling and shaking from the slow torture of their coupling. Severus was whispering as if in prayer, begging her to fuck him.

She moved in a circle, and he choked out a gasp. His hands were clenched into fists on either side of them, and she stroked his arms and chest as she began to pace herself, rocking slowly back and forth on his lap. She felt more daring and kissed him. He captured her lips in a searing kiss. Hermione lost herself in his kiss, and he began to thrust upwards against her.

"Hermione, it's too much. I-I can't stop moving," he groaned.

"Go ahead, Severus," she whispered as she allowed herself to relax and enjoy the moment. "Take me, like you used to," she moaned.

Severus needed no other permission. He tossed her onto her back on the floor and pumped into her frantically. Hermione remembered the delicious feeling of him taking her. He always knew how to move inside her, to touch every intimate place deftly and urgently. This was nothing that would confuse her with what Sirius had done. Severus was no drunken rapist; he was her lover, the man who adored her and had waited a decade for her to return to him.

"Oh, God, Hermione, this is good," he groaned as he lightly kissed her all over her face and neck. "You feel so wonderful, so warm and wet. I couldn't stop thinking about this. I needed you so bad, sweet girl, I love you!"

She watched him as he came inside her, shouting and straining against her, beautifully calling her name. Hermione clung to him as he whispered calming, reassuring words of gratitude and love to her, for giving herself to him.

"You didn't orgasm," he said worriedly after he caught his breath.

"Well, I was more concerned with making sure I was all right with everything," she said.

"I shouldn't have taken over," he said as he shook his head.

"I told you to take me like you wanted to," she reminded him. "I realized I missed it...missed how passionate you are."

"But was I too hard on you? Did I frighten you?" he asked nervously as he kept her cradled in his arms.

"No," she said. "I think I would like some other things later if you feel like doing it," she said as she stood up to go take a shower. She looked behind her and saw the glittering of his black eyes as he watched her walk from him.

A/N: The italicized sentences with asterisks belong to J.K. Rowling. The rest are mine.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53 of 74

An accident with a Time-Turner in 1993 sends Hermione Granger back to 1973, and she is unable to return.

A/N: We're getting to the end of fifth year! I'm really excited to find out how you all like what I do for what would have been Hermione's sixth year. That's right! No more secrets. Everyone will know very soon. Please Review!

At breakfast, Hermione watched Harry with no small fascination. He was hiding something; she could feel it. She finally said, "Harry, how have your dreams been lately? Any interesting ones?"

Harry paused; a look of guilt flew across his face. "Uh, nothing really," he said.

"Don't lie to me, Harry Potter," she hissed at him, and he looked at her strangely.

"You looked just like Snape just then. Sounded like him too," he observed.

"I couldn't care less," she spat. "Don't lie!"

When she perceived that he was about to give her the brush-off, something in her snapped. She dove into his mind and started tearing through it. Harry jumped up and tried to break the contact, but she had him. She burrowed through and saw what he had seen. He had penetrated through to The Hall of Prophecy.

She grabbed him by the front of his robes as the people around them gasped. She quick-marched him into the outer hall and tore into him.

"What the fuck are you doing? Do you want to die, Harry? Is that it?" she screeched as she grabbed the front of his robes, shaking him with all the fury she could summon.

"Why did you...how did you do that?" he sputtered.

"Because she knows Legilimency, Potter," a voice whispered from behind them.

Hermione stopped her assault on Harry and turned to read the rage in Severus' eyes. His face looked calm and cool, but she knew inside he was seething.

"If I can teach Miss Granger how to become a proper Legilimens and Occlumens, surely you can at least learn the rudimentary basics," he sneered.

"S-she didn't even have her wand out!" he said incredulously. "H-how could she do that?"

"Do you think the Dark Lord will need a wand to strip-mine your mind, Potter?" he whispered. "What the Dark Lord can do makes what Miss Granger did seem like the work of a Muggle magician."

"Now, do you understand, Harry?" Hermione asked him. "Tell him what you've seen. Tell him!"

Harry confessed his last dream and described the Hall of Prophecy to him.

Snape glowered at him. "You are pathetic!" he spat. "You go to your common room and stay there until Professor McGonagall collects you. GO!" he roared.

Severus whirled around on Hermione. "As for you, my little Legilimens, follow me." She followed him obediently as they walked up to the dais. Severus whispered to Minerva, and Umbridge spoke up.

"Is there a problem, Snape?" she said curtly.

"No," he said, looking irritated. "I have a disciplinary problem with two Gryffindors. Since one is all but an apprentice of mine, and the other a meddlesome troublemaker, I am simply informing their Head of House."

McGonagall stood imperiously as she glared at Umbridge and swept down the hallway with Severus and Hermione behind her. When they got to McGonagall's office, she demanded an explanation.

"My wife performed Legilimency on Potter right in front of the school," he snapped angrily.

Minerva gasped at Hermione and said, "What on earth could have possessed you to do that? Now he knows you are a Legilimens!"

Minerva sat down behind her desk, and Severus crossed his arms and looked at her questioningly.

Hermione sat as well. "Look, I'm hanging around teenagers all day long, my physiological and emotional health hasn't been the most stable these past months, and what is worse is the fact Harry tells me boldface lies like I'm an idiot. He *deliberately* held back the information that he had penetrated through to the Hall of Prophecy. You-Know-Who is two steps away from getting Harry there and retrieving the prophecy."

"Severus," Minerva asked. "Is it truly this bad?"

He shook his head. "Potter has been continuously difficult to reach. He either lacks the ability or simply refuses to close his mind."

"I think that it may be too late," Hermione whispered. "I can't help him if he keeps hiding from me."

"So, what should we do?" asked Severus jovially. "Oblivate him again?"

"You are taking far too much enjoyment from this, Severus," Minerva warned him.

"No more mind alterations. It's too much," she decided. "After all, Hermione is living near your quarters and is being tutored by you. Everyone knows how thirsty for knowledge Hermione is and how exceptional a student as well. So, we'll let him believe Hermione has taken up the discipline and has been successful."

Minerva looked at Hermione pointedly. "You will have to deal with this outcome, Hermione, and iron this over. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Minerva," she replied, chastened.

Hermione found Harry brooding in the common room alone when she walked inside. "Harry," she called.

He looked over at her and gazed at her strangely. "There is something very wrong, Hermione, very wrong. I may not be able to understand all the 'subtleties' of Occlumency, but I do have a rather keen memory, and there is just something that is not adding up. First, I remember you back in third year mumbling in your sleep about two guys named 'Regulus' and 'Travers.' Now I know, because I've talked to Sirius, that he had a brother named Regulus and that a Death Eater named 'Travers' killed the woman he was in love with: Marlene McKinnon. Then, there was an Occlumency lesson that is fuzzy in my memory, but I keep getting flashes of déjà vu whenever I look at you lately. Then there is this strange relationship between you and Sirius. I know you both don't get along, but for the life of me, I can't figure out why. Now, you're a Legilimens! I want to know the truth, Hermione."

"Harry," she said softly, "you need to focus on closing your mind. I know you have rationalized skiving off on Occlumency because of what happened with Mr. Weasley and that snake. But I'm telling you, Harry, stop it. Don't continue in this."

"Fine," he said distantly, and he sat back down, looking out the window, brooding. Hermione left him, feeling unsettled. She wondered if Remus was letting Sirius get away behind his back and talk with Harry. If so, what were they talking about?

Hermione was working again on the rotation schedule when Severus burst through the door and threw Harry inside. She was in one of her more revealing nightgowns and looked up in shock and horror. She hastily put on her robe while Harry watched her, breathing hard and shaking his head.

"This isn't real. It can't be!" he said.

"Severus, what are you doing?" she yelled at him.

"This nosy little bastard decided to sneak into my personal Pensieve and rummaged through my private memories!"

"What did you see, Harry?" she asked nervously.

"You were there...back with him...under the stairs of the owlery. You had to be seventeen or eighteen. You knew all about him being a Death Eater, and you talked about my mum and dad. Then you were kissing and..." He stopped short, blushing.

"I can't handle this," Harry continued. "She's sixteen! Aren't you? I don't even know you!"

He looked at her so sadly, so lost and confused, Hermione nodded her head and turned around so she wouldn't have to face what was coming next. "You're right, Harry. You can't handle it. Severus, I think you should do it."

Severus flashed his wand and said, "*Obliviate!*" He Stupefied the boy wizard and poured a Sleeping Draught down his throat. He Levitated him out to settle him back in his office.

"How daft are you?" she snapped at him. "How could you leave that Pensieve out there for him to find? Great. That's fan-bloody-tastic! How many times are we going to have to Oblivate the boy?"

"Not again," Severus answered. "I'm ending this nonsense once and for all. We can't risk it. Not now."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione yelled at him.

"I'm through with Occlumency lessons. That little shit can hang for all I care!" he roared back at her.

"You can't do that!" she shouted as she followed him into the office.

"Go back and get some clothes on before he wakes up and I have to Oblivate him again!" he snarled.

Hermione set her lips in a straight line and went back inside to change, slamming the door behind her.

Harry was a bit weary the next few days. Hermione was grateful that O.W.L.'s were right on their heels. He and Ron needed to study and apply themselves to their books.

Hermione also discovered that Harry and Cho had officially called it quits. It had been a terrible row that ended badly. Harry remained in a foul mood, but he was focusing on his work, and that was good enough for Hermione.

She didn't even mention the word Occlumency to Harry, but made a deal with Ron that he would inform her of any strange dreams Harry had. For a while, Ron had nothing to report, so things remained relatively calm. Severus and Hermione began to have sex again, not as often as they had been before the assault, but they were getting there.

Finally there was a break in the calm. Fred and George had decided enough was enough and devised a magnificent blowout exit that would become stuff of Hogwarts legend. It was just like the day of Umbridge's first day as headmistress. The fireworks exploded and were sent whirling down the halls, screeching as they flew. They conjured a massive Stink-sap pit that trapped anyone that stepped into it. It was mayhem on a grand scale, just like they had always wanted. Just before they gave their final bows, they both hollered, "*Accio Brooms,*" and they hurtled across the hall with the chains still attached to them. Hermione could only imagine what Umbridge's office wall looked like.

Umbridge was running through the halls, screaming, "STOP THEM!" However, she and her Inquisitorial Squad were too late. As they left, *Fred turned to Peeves the Poltergeist and said, "Give her hell from us, Peeves!"* *

And so went the infamous Weasley twins, a pair Hermione hadn't seen the like of since the days of James Potter and Sirius Black.

The next few days had order completely broken down. Students were eager to pick up the role of head troublemaker in ways that left the school in total chaos. What was worse was that none of the teachers seemed to care. Hermione decided to stay out of the way and focus on honing her Charms and Transfiguration abilities and help Severus whenever he needed her.

Voldemort was calling Severus more frequently. He always returned tired and morose. Most of the time, he sat drinking from a Firewhisky bottle while Hermione tended his wounds. She had tried once to ask him how he got his wounds, but he had looked at her so viciously that she had muttered, "Never mind," and gone about her business.

Lovemaking was becoming a thing of the past. All their progress had gone pear-shaped. He rarely touched her anymore, and it saddened her. They were just getting to the point where they had been before Sirius' attempted rape, but now Severus clung to the edge of his side of the bed and went out of his way to avoid any physical contact with his wife.

Hermione missed him. She missed his strong arms, his demanding kisses, and frankly, she missed the act itself. She was changing, growing more into the voluptuous woman she remembered and had missed being. She went to bed in tantalizing outfits and watched demurely as her husband followed her through heavy-lidded eyes full of lust as she deliberately began to put on nighties that were no longer fitting properly. It was worth the discomfort of having her breasts nearly spilling out of the tops of her cups if it caught his attention.

One evening, Severus came back from one of his countless summons to find Hermione reading on the couch in yet another sexy nightgown. He stripped off his Death Eater weeds and stalked over to her. At first, he stood and raked his eyes over her. However, to her shock, he fell onto his knees and buried his head in her lap in-between her legs.

"I miss you," he murmured against her stomach as he grasped the sheer material of her nightgown.

"Severus!" Hermione said alarmed. "Are you hurt?" She ran her hands over his back and shoulders, and he shuddered.

"You smell so sweet here; you always smell so sweet and clean," he whispered as he clung to her.

"What's happening to you?" she demanded as she put her book down.

He began to kiss and nip his way down her belly to her quim. "You can't imagine the horrors, the pain...I feel so dirty all the time," he choked out.

Hermione cradled his head in her arms. "I still love you, Severus."

He spread his hands up her back and clenched the material in his fists. He looked up at her, his lanky hair mussed and damp.

"I've done and seen terrible, horrific things, Hermione," he confessed. "I can't get the screams out of my head. He's so much more powerful than before. I can't stop any of it. The things he makes them do...the sport of it all. I come back here, and you are so fresh and sweet, I don't want to risk soiling or hurting you."

"Why would you hurt me?" she asked as he placed his head back down on her lap.

"I see things," he whispered as his eyes looked haunted. "The sight of them arouses me. The women are mindless and fearless. They do the most degrading things, and they look at me. Sometimes they want me, and I have to hide. They laugh at me, call me a heartless, unfeeling prig. It hurts. It hurts so much. I see the women degrading themselves, and I fantasize about you submitting to me as they do, and I-I am ashamed," he mumbled as he kept his head down in her lap.

Hermione took a stabilizing breath. "Tell me, Severus. Tell me what it is that you desire from me?" she asked directly.

He lifted his face. "No, Hermione. I don't want to humiliate you," he insisted firmly.

"Just tell me at least what it is the women do that arouses you?" she asked.

His face flushed and he said, "They let themselves be tied up while the men take turns. Bellatrix, she loves it. She taunts me, calls me queer because I won't fuck her."

"Her verbal abuse arouses you?" she whispered.

"No," he said as he hid in her lap. "It's the submission, the eagerness for more. She will take them all on and never grow tired. She just sits on a table naked and opens her legs. They all rush to her to be the first one. She does it in front of me. I'll be standing somewhere, and she'll expose herself to me. I walk away, and they laugh at me. Lucius especially likes to tease me, asking me if I'm getting enough at school. They are so perverse, and I feel I'm being dragged down into hell with them all over again."

"Severus, what if I were to do what she does? Would it help?" Hermione asked timidly.

"I don't want her, Hermione!" he shouted in frustration into her lap. "I don't want what she does. I want you and the things ~~we~~ do."

The vibrations from his voice against her lap sent tingles up her back. He slid his hand up her naked thigh where she sat on the couch, her legs bracing each side of him. He placed a finger on the crotch of her sheer knickers and stroked a finger up and down.

"You're damp," he replied. "It's fresh; I can smell your arousal," he whispered.

"Well," she explained, embarrassed. "Your head is in my lap. Your warm breath is tickling me through my knickers."

Severus inserted a finger sideways into the crotch of her knickers and felt along the cleft. Hermione was starting to breathe shallowly as Severus pulled her towards him by her waist. He nuzzled his nose against the dampness of her knickers and inhaled her scent. He reached up and dragged her knickers off and hiked her feet up on the edge of the couch. He slid his hand over her mound gently and pushed his fingers inside her and massaged her walls.

Hermione squirmed, and he withdrew his fingers and took out his engorged cock. He got on his knees and pulled Hermione down onto him, impaling her wetness upon his hardened sex. He leaned back little by little as she swayed her hips slowly, teasing him with completion. He fell completely onto his back and surrendered to his wife's control.

"Show me you like it," he whispered as she rocked back and forth, his hands still spanning her waist.

"I've always liked it," she groaned as she began to grind against him.

"Hold me down," he asked shyly.

"Oh!" said Hermione in surprise. "You want me to dominate you?"

She fell forward and pinned his wrists above his head. Her breasts swung in his face, and he eagerly caught a nipple between his lips. He sucked greedily, and Hermione began to cry out her orgasm. As she finished, he began to thrust up against her. His mouth was slack, and his face was completely relaxed.

"Hermione," he whispered. "My Hermione."

She leaned down completely and kissed him tenderly on the lips. "Yes, I am all yours...yours to pleasure you and to be pleased by you."

He grasped her tightly to him as he spent himself inside of her. When he opened his eyes, he said, "Please tell me it's over. Please say you're not afraid anymore," he asked urgently. "I can't bear this distance between us."

She stroked his face. "I trust you, Severus. I know you would never hurt me," she whispered.

"I need you, Hermione. I need to touch you and be with you. I need to feel myself inside you when I'm falling asleep. I miss holding your breasts when we hold each other," he choked out nervously.

Hermione felt a surge of desire for her husband. She missed it as well. It had been so long since they'd had that height of trust and honesty.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Let's go back to the ways things used to be. Maybe now, things will change, the more we talk about it."

He rolled them over and kissed her passionately. "I love your body," he said. "You are becoming quite the woman. Your hips are rounder, and your breasts are fuller. I love it."

"Me too," she admitted as she hugged herself against him. He got up, and she followed him into the bathroom. They showered and washed each other, relearning all the intimate places they had been neglecting.

Once in bed, Severus held her possessively against him, his hands reaching around and cupping her naked breasts as he sighed deeply. Hermione felt safe and warm, surprisingly relaxed and at ease. Perhaps now it *was* over, and they were going to be all right after all.

A/N: All italicized sentences with asterisks belong to J.K. Rowling. The rest are mine.

Chapter 54

The decision is made to go to the Department of Mysteries.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who has reviewed for this fic! It has passed the 1000 mark. :) I am forever in the debt of WriterMerrin for her keen eye and helpful suggestions. Also, thanks to luvsev for her cheerleading. Please keep the reviews coming!

The night that Harry and the rest of the fifth-years took their Astronomy exam, Hermione went out with McGonagall for guard duty. They walked the perimeter carefully and watched out for any suspicious activity. All was calm and serene. Then, off in the distance, there was the telltale sound of multiple cracks of Apparition.

"Did you hear that?" Hermione hissed to Minerva.

"Yes," the older witch replied. "I'll go towards Hagrid's; you go the other way towards the forest. If you get into trouble, send up sparks."

Hermione and Minerva dashed off in opposite directions. Hermione crouched low behind a grove of bushes and waited for any activity coming from around the forest. She felt warm and saw a glow emanating from behind her. She whirled around with her wand brandished and saw a fire in the distance. She carefully ran closer towards Hagrid's hut and saw it surrounded by several Aurors. They were all fighting him and attempting to stun the half-giant, all to no avail. The Aurors were trying to calm him as he cursed and fought his way through them.

Hermione followed McGonagall as the older witch yelled at the lot of them. "Howdare you!" she shrieked. *"Leave him alone! Alone, I say!"*

Minerva strode closer to them, demanding answers. *"On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such..."*

Hermione nearly screamed when four stunners hit Minerva directly on her chest. She flew back and landed hard on her back, looking either unconscious or dead. This was no time to be spotted; Minerva would have to wait. Hermione remained hidden and watched as Hagrid went insane. He howled at the top of his lungs, *"COWARDS! RUDDY COWARDS HAVE SOME O' THAT...AND THAT!"* He began to blast his way through each of the Aurors, * and Hermione took aim and aided his escape from her crouched position in her hiding spot.

Hermione watched Umbridge as she began to scream out orders to arrest the half-giant. After Hagrid had grabbed Fang and successfully made it to the Apparition point, Hermione sank to the ground in fear and exhaustion. She waited for what seemed like an eternity before she could safely come out from hiding. She stayed perfectly still, camouflaged in the darkness until she saw Poppy come running towards Minerva. Then she came out of the shadows to help Poppy get McGonagall to the infirmary.

"Poppy," she whispered. "Will she be all right?"

Poppy set her lips in a grim line as she levitated Minerva's unconscious form onto the conjured stretcher. "I won't know until I can perform a proper diagnostic test," she said as her voice shook. "I cannot, for the life of me, understand what compelled the Aurors to such behavior! Multiple Stunners right to the chest...it might be St. Mungo's for her."

Hermione waited until Poppy had Minerva safely inside Hogwarts' walls before she disappeared again into the darkness to find Severus through his private entrance into the dungeons.

She saw he was working hard, oblivious to his surroundings. She barged in and immediately faced a wand pointing at her chest. "It's just me!" she screeched.

He gasped in relief. "Don't do that!" he hissed. "What the bloody hell is going on now?" he snapped in anger.

"It's Umbridge. She's gone round the twist. She tried to arrest Hagrid, and when Minerva tried to stop them, she got hit by four Stunners to the chest!" she exclaimed through gulping breaths.

"That's just fucking brilliant," he muttered. He looked up at her as he said, "Come with me. I want you to stay with Minerva, and I will talk to Poppy."

They raced to the infirmary. At the door, Severus placed a finger to his lips and motioned her to stay outside the door. He marched towards where Poppy was tending to McGonagall. Trelawney and Sprout were crying into their handkerchiefs.

"Poppy," he whispered. "She isn't...is she?"

Madam Pomfrey was livid. "It's a shock she's not dead. I don't know what has come over people. Four stunners to the chest...nothing warrants that sort of wand abuse. I will make sure Kingsley hears about this. The Aurors have gone completely mad!" she ranted.

"She'll have to be transported to St. Mungo's, Severus. I can't treat her here. I'll keep you informed on her condition."

Severus took one last look at Minerva's unconscious face.

"Oh, Severus," hiccupped Madam Sprout. "What shall we do with Albus and Minerva gone? That woman is pure evil!"

"I know," he whispered as he gazed fiercely on Minerva's form. "Well, we'll do what we can," he said curtly and swept back to where Hermione was waiting.

"We have to call an Order meeting," he whispered determinedly. "I'm going to Albus' office. He has allowed only Minerva and myself entrance. If it is safe, I will come back for you, and we shall Apparate to headquarters. So, wait here for me to fetch you."

It seemed like an eternity, but when he returned, he beckoned for her, and they quietly swept up to the headmaster's winding staircase and swiftly Flooed to headquarters. Hermione and Severus made their way down into the dark kitchen. Molly and Arthur were there, talking in whispered tones.

"What?" Severus said loudly.

Molly fiddled around with the teacups and saucers. "We don't know what to do about Sirius. He's very *agitated*. We don't know if Remus should leave him."

Severus sighed impatiently. "Fine, I'll go upstairs, put the mongrel into a Body-Bind Hex and have done with it," he said tersely.

"Come now, Severus," insisted Arthur. "Let's have Diggle, Bill or Charlie watch him. We must have Remus here; he's a part of the Advance Guard!"

Severus looked at him as if Arthur were an idiot. "Then, why, pray tell, am I being bothered with this nonsense if all has been already decided?"

Molly pursed her lips. "Severus, Hermione is the one with the schedule. We don't know where they all are!" she snapped at him.

By now, people were pouring into the basement. Hermione looked at Dung. He had something bulky under his filthy coat.

Severus turned to the crowd and barked at Bill Weasley, "Get Lupin down here; relieve him of his dog-watching."

"*Honestly*, Severus," muttered Hermione, feeling embarrassed.

He jerked his head toward her and calmed down. Hermione sat next to her husband as they waited for Remus.

"All right," he began with his hands clasped behind his back. "We have a major security issue to discuss. This evening Minerva was attacked by four Aurors, one of them being Dawlish..."

Gasps and sputters issued from the crowd.

"Where's 'Agrid?" mumbled Dung.

"He fled into the mountains, no doubt. Umbridge tried to have him arrested."

Dung shook his head. "Know wha' I 'eard?" he wheezed. "I 'eard that old cow knows what wi' tha' wand of 'er's."

Kingsley came charging down the stairs, very upset. "Sorry, I had quite the evening. There are a group of Aurors that have gone completely..."

"...Barmy!" interrupted Tonks as she came galloping down the stairs. "That old bint put all of them under the Imperius. There's no way Dawlish would have stunned Minerva, especially without a warning!"

"How do you know for sure?" asked Hermione.

"Hagrid's my contact," said Tonks. "He Apparated right into my flat. I forgot to put up my wards. Rather embarrassing that...just coming out of the shower and all."

Severus closed his eyes as if he were having an onset of a migraine. "Try, try, Nymphadora, to have some tact and hold your infernal tongue," he seethed acidly.

Tonks' hair flared pink, and she whispered in Hermione's ear. "I think that one needs a good rodgering, if you know what I mean."

"I'll take it under advisement," she whispered back out of the corner of her mouth and then flashed a smile when Severus caught her talking out of turn.

"Kingsley, if you would be so kind?" Severus sneered. He looked thoroughly disgusted with the lot of them.

Kingsley stood tall and rubbed his hands together. "Now that Albus, Minerva, and Hagrid are unable to help protect Hogwarts, it will be imperative that Hermione stay as close to Harry as possible."

"We have a suspicion, and only a suspicion," he added when Tonks gave a snort from the back of the room, "that Umbridge may have been giving aid to Death Eaters, possibly through the orders of Fudge himself."

"Do you think Fudge has been placed under the Imperius?" asked Hestia Jones.

"I don't think it would even be necessary. The man's ambition knows no end. He accepts whatever Lucius Malfoy tells him."

"Severus, do you think you could manage to find out?" Kingsley asked hopefully.

Severus sipped his tea and remained quiet. Then he spoke. "It's delicate," he said softly. "However, if a situation arose, I could manipulate his pride into bragging about his latest accomplishments for the Dark Lord."

"Fine," Kingsley replied. "The school term is almost over; we'll have some respite with Harry being back at his aunt's house, but be on your guard! You-Know-Who is going to start making a move soon."

When Hermione and Severus went to bed for the night, they were tense and afraid for the morrow. Hermione sat up in bed and straddled her husband.

"What is this?" he sneered.

"Oh, well, if you're going to be ungrateful about it..."

Severus placed a vice grip on her waist as she attempted to dismount him. "What has brought on this surge of lust?"

Hermione tried to look coy as she said, "Oh, I was told that you might be in need of a good 'rodgering,' if I remember it correctly. I replied that I would take it under advisement."

"And?" he prompted her.

"Are you in need of a pleasant diversion?"

"Always," he said deeply, his voice rumbling like thick velvet.

"I suppose I could think of something to please you," she said huskily as she began to push the old, gray nightshirt to his chest. "Ohh! Professor Snape!" she gasped. "Are you... *up*... to something?"

When daylight came, all was well and very subdued. It was the final day of the O.W.L. examinations, and Hermione was relieved to find Ron and Harry completely focused on their exams. They told Hermione what they had seen from the Astronomy Tower, but Hermione told them not to worry, that the Order was quite aware of everything, and that things were in hand.

Ron and Ginny were relieved, but Harry remained concerned. Hermione decided to let it be for now. They had their History of Magic exam coming up, and she didn't want to disrupt their studying with things they couldn't help with anyway.

When the boys went for their test, Hermione and Ginny went to the library to read. The silence was soothing, and soon Hermione fell asleep. Ron and Ginny jolted her awake.

"Hermione!" Ron hissed as he tried to avoid getting yelled at by Madam Pince.

"Wh-what?" she said sleepily.

"You've got to come! Harry is in the infirmary...he was taking his test, and suddenly he started screaming and gripping his scar," he said.

Hermione bolted out of her chair, and the three of them went straight to the infirmary. Harry was yelling his head off.

"I don't need to be here! I'm not sick. I just had a nightmare!" he shouted at the proctor and Madam Pomfrey.

When Hermione arrived, Madam Pomfrey shooed away the proctor. "Yes, yes, I have things under control here. Just go back and tend to your students," she said testily.

Once he was gone, Poppy left them alone. "Harry," Hermione said as she sat next to him on the bed, "what happened?"

"It was so strange. There I was working on my exam, and then I was ~~was~~*oldemort!* He was torturing Sirius in the place I've been seeing all year! I have to save him!" He began to struggle to get out of bed, and Hermione pointed her wand at his chest until he calmed down.

"Harry," Hermione said as she held him back, "I need you to tell me everything so we know exactly what we have to do."

Harry swallowed, licked his lips and whispered. "I was in that room, the room that opens from the blue circular room...the diamond glittering room. I walked past all the clocks and desks; then there was another door, and I opened it. It was that huge room with all the small, dusty balls inside. I was *there*, and I was HIM! I was looking at the numbers. It was row... uh... ninety-seven! That was it on the left. Then I was looking down at a hurt animal, trying to coax it to get something. I was saying, 'I can't do it, but you can.'"

Hermione felt a sense of dread she had not felt in a very long time.

Ron whispered to her, "He was laughing like a nutter, just like the last time."

Harry shot him an angry look. "Well, of course! I was Voldemort!" he snapped.

"Focus, Harry," Hermione said calmly as she rubbed his arms and stared fiercely into his eyes. "What else happened?"

Harry grew impatient. "I told you! Sirius is there...he's torturing him. We have to save him. There's no one to help us. Hermione, you're the only one left of the Order to help us," he pleaded.

"Harry," she reasoned. "It doesn't make sense. There's no way he could be there."

"How do you know?" he demanded.

She exhaled and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I just do, Harry. You have to trust me!" she insisted.

"Look," he said as he bolted out of bed. "I was right about Ron's dad, wasn't I? I don't care if I'm not supposed to know about what's going on in his mind. I'm not going to let Sirius die!"

He dashed out, and Hermione was at his heels. "What makes you think Voldemort wants him dead? Sirius being alive has given him the best cover to prolong his hiding from the public!"

Harry whirled on her. "Voldemort said he would kill him. Sirius said that he would never do what he demanded. He told Sirius he was going to torture and kill him. I can't lose him, Hermione...he's all I've got!"

Fuck! Hermione screamed inside her head as she trailed him. Once Harry got his mind fixated on something, there was no stopping him. Even if she magically bound him, she couldn't keep him that way forever. Eventually, he would be free, and she couldn't risk alienating him.

He dashed upstairs to his dorm room, and Hermione paced, trying to think of how she was going to talk him out of this insane idea.

When he returned, she stopped him, trying to stall for time and said, "Think, Harry. Think! The Ministry is full of people. It doesn't make sense that Voldemort would risk going in there, not to mention holding Sirius there captive!"

"When has anything Voldemort's done ever made sense?" he shot back at her.

You would be surprised, she thought darkly. "But, Harry, you don't know these places. You don't know what you are walking into!" she yelled at him desperately.

"You just don't get it!" he screamed. "I'm not having nightmares, and I'm not dreaming! Why do you think I had all that Occlumency training? It's because it is REAL! Sirius is trapped. I've seen him. If you don't want to help, that's fine, just stay out of my way!"

** Ginny walked into the common room and said, "What's going on?"*

"Never you mind," Harry snapped at her.

"There's no need to take that tone with me," she said coolly. "Luna's outside. We thought we could help."

Harry gave a snort.

"Wait!" said Hermione, grabbing his arm. "They *can* help. We need to establish whether Sirius is really at the Ministry. We can Floo him from Umbridge's office whilst she and Luna make a diversion."

"Hermione," Harry pleaded.

"Harry, I'm begging you," she said urgently, "as a friend. Now I'm going to pull rank on you if you don't stop to consider all the options. If we check and it's true, we'll go. Otherwise, it could just be a trap!"

Harry hesitated for a moment; then he said, "Fine. Let's do it."

The five of them made up a diversionary tactic. Hermione was a bit shocked at Ginny's cunning. She was more like Fred and George than Hermione had realized.

When they broke into Umbridge's office, they softly padded to the fireplace. Harry called for Sirius and got Kreacher instead.

** "Master does not tell poor Kreacher where he is going," the elf said resentfully.*

"But you know!" Harry hissed. "Where is he?"

"Master will not come back. He is at the Department of Mysteries!" he said gleefully. "Kreacher and his Mistress are alone again!"

Harry grasped his scar and said, "It's still prickling. I'm sure Sirius is still alive, but time's running out. How are we going to get there?"

Luna said, "Well, there are six of us. Why don't we take the thestrals?"

"Are you mad?" Ron shouted before being shushed by Hermione. "I can't see those ruddy things. I can't fly on something I can't see!"

"Oh, buck up, Ron!" spat Ginny.

"I don't know about this," Hermione said nervously. "Harry, let me tell the Order."

"No, Hermione!" Harry shouted. "There isn't time. If the Order knew, they'd make me stay here, and I don't think the Order really gives two shites if Sirius dies or not! I'm going, and if you want to stay here, then by all means, stay. But don't you interfere."

Hermione looked at the motley group in front of her. They were going, whatever Hermione did or said. She couldn't let him walk into a possible Death Eater trap. She sighed and capitulated. "Fine. I'll go with you."

"What's the hold up, you lot?" asked Hermione as she got on a thestral with Luna's help.

"I don't think we all should go...I mean it's dangerous," Harry said quietly.

"Luna," Hermione said bossily. "Go attract more thestrals. We'll need six. Harry, you need to realize you can't do this alone. If this is happening, there will be loads of Death Eaters there...I can promise you that! It's not going to be easy to penetrate through to the bowels of the Ministry. The more we have, the more we can achieve."

"You sure seem to know a lot about the Ministry of Magic, Hermione," he replied strangely.

"Harry," she said as Luna brought more thestrals towards them, "it's my job for the Order. Now, let's go!"

A/N: The italicized sentences with asterisks belong to J.K. Rowling. The rest belongs to me.

<i>Tempest Fugit </i>

Chapter 55 of 74

Time is running out for Harry and Hermione to find Sirius alive.

A/N: Well, here we are! Hermione is sticking by Harry to save Sirius at the Department of Mysteries. The title of this chapter is *Tempest Fugit*, which is Latin for "time is of the essence." Certainly, this is true for Hermione and the Order to get to the Ministry before anyone gets killed. Please review! I LOVE to hear feedback! My thanks to WriterMerrin, who keeps working her magic, and to all those who read and review!

The Ministry was empty, looking eerie and dark. The small group went directly to the elevator that would take them down into the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione was nervous. It had been nearly four years since the last time she had been here. She hoped that whatever had occurred, Horatius was gone for the night. She didn't want to see him get hurt.

Whilst in the elevator, Hermione gave some simple instructions. "Harry has taught you all well, so I expect you to use what you've learned. You need to understand that, in this situation, there will be no distinction between adults and children. No quarter will be shown, so give none in return. Try to remain cloistered, allow the darkness to be your friend. If you find yourself in a situation that's too advanced for you and you cannot win, go immediately on the defense. Try to slow them down so others can have a chance." Hermione was tingling all over in anticipation. All the training from Moody all those years ago was coming back. She silently thanked Moody for not hiding the darker side of warfare from her. It had been humiliating, to be sure, but she felt ready to implement what she knew.

"Remember," she hissed as the doors opened, "constant vigilance!"

They moved down the corridor and walked slowly towards the door that Hermione knew would open to the glowing, cobalt-blue, canded room. When Harry nodded, Hermione opened the door and urged the rest to enter. They each stepped inside, wand at the ready, gasping at the tranquility of the deep, blue light that surrounded them. After a moment of silent awe, Ginny asked hysterically, "Which door? None of them are marked!"

"Let's start opening doors," offered Harry. The first one opened to a cavernous pit with stone stairs that ended in a stone dais and an archway with a large, fluttering veil that whispered strange sounds.

"No, Harry," Hermione said as she held him back. "Don't listen to the voices. It's the Death Chamber."

As soon as she closed the door, the room spun, moving all the un-marked doors in a circular motion. "Oh, no!" cried Neville. "How are we going to ever find our way?"

Hermione wrenched open another door. Lamps hung on golden chains and gave the room a great deal of comforting light after seeing the dark hole of the Death Chamber. It was a long, rectangular room that neither Hermione nor Harry recognized. It was quite empty, save for a gigantic pool of water filled with white, oblong objects.

"Brains," Hermione whispered. They looked supernatural in the green water they swam in. Harry looked anxious. "Let's get out of here!" he ordered.

Before Luna could close the door, Hermione stopped her and said, "*Flagrate!*" A large, gleaming red, fiery X appeared on the door. When it finally shut, and the room rotated once again, the mark stayed.

"Ruddy Brilliant!" praised Ron.

Harry tried another door. "It won't open!"

"Then leave it be!" Hermione snatched Harry away from the door. She knew what was in that room. It was the Ever-Locked Room, or the Room of Love. It held the most powerful natural magical force known to Wizarding kind: Amortentia. There was a huge vat of it, and Unspeakables studied the effects of sacrificial love, which was the only way to repel the Killing Curse. In Hermione's estimation, Lily's ability to harness that kind of magic without a wand and miles away from its source had to make her one of the most powerful witches that had ever lived, possibly more powerful than Morgana herself. However, she was not about to get into that conversation with Harry now.

"Harry," she said calmly as she took his face into her hands. "Look for the brilliant, diamond light. You told me the room that led you to the secret place you needed initially came from a brilliant light."

Harry looked as he crouched to see any light illuminating from under the doors. Hermione had them all extinguish their wands so he could see better. Once he found it, Hermione felt elation and sadness at the same time.

Harry opened the door, and the shimmering light nearly overcame them. The room was more brilliant than Hermione had remembered. She looked fondly at all the various clocks and timepieces, ticking along in synchronization, still the same as it had all those years ago. She walked up the aisle and saw that the small bell jar that she had seen long ago had morphed into a tall jar which was more substantial and impressive than when she had last seen it. Ginny squealed with delight as she watched the hummingbird hatch from its bejeweled egg, fly upwards to where it grew old and fell back down into the egg, only to repeat the process over again of birth, life, and death.

Hermione looked longingly at the old Grandfather clock with its rubies to mark the hours. Then she looked fondly at the heavy golden curio that held all the Time-Turners from days past. Some had changed yet again, but as Horatio had said, they changed as they were needed and not before.

Harry walked cautiously to the door next to the Grandfather clock and said, "It's this way."

They padded softly inside and adjusted their eyes to the low lighting. It was a gigantic room, full of various small, glowing balls that held thousands upon thousands of prophecies. All these years, Hermione had never known this room existed.

"Okay, Harry," she whispered. "Where is Sirius?"

He motioned them to follow, and he silently mouthed off the numbers. They started in the fifties and needed to make their way towards the nineties. All was silent, and it worried Hermione. Was Sirius dead? Had Voldemort already received the prophecy and was at this moment lying in wait for Harry? She held her wand deftly. She knew how to duel, and by God, she would take on the lot of them if anyone tried to hurt Harry.

When they reached the row where Sirius should have been, Harry was flabbergasted. Then Neville gasped. "Harry!" he said. "Look! There is a prophecy with your name on it!"

Harry slowly picked it up and looked at it with awe. Hermione was growing increasingly afraid. She could sense danger nearing them. "Let's get out of here, Harry!" she whispered urgently. "I don't like this at all!"

They made to leave when a sinister, drawing voice sounded out to them.

"That's a good lad. Now give me the prophecy."

Black wisps like smoke and sheer material descended around them. Hermione steadied her wand. She was sure to be recognized by at least one of the Death Eaters. It was over. Now they would all know the truth. There would be more no hedging, no more faking. If she were to go down, she'd go down fighting.

As they all came into form, with their disgusting masks and imposing robes, Hermione watched as Lucius Malfoy tried to bargain and worm his way into getting Harry to release the Prophecy into his clutches.

"Don't give it to him, Harry," she snapped boldly.

Malfoy looked her over in surprise. "Why, Miss Granger. It is such a pleasure to see you again. Bella!" he called.

A dark, gaunt, hollow-faced woman slinked out of the shadows and smiled evilly with glee. "It can't be! Why she looks no different than the night Severus took her to meet the Dark Lord," she said as she widened her fixed stare with her sunken eyes upon Hermione.

Harry was shaking his head. "What are you talking about?" he nearly yelled.

Hermione placed a calming hand on his shoulder. "Harry, you need to focus," she whispered into his ear, never once taking her eyes off Lucius.

Hermione felt the not-so subtle prodding of Lucius into her mind. She firmly raised the walls around her mind and, after giving a knowing look that she was well aware of his improper breach upon her mind, took up once again the role of diplomat. "After all, this doesn't need to turn ugly, does it?" she said lightly as she turned her gaze to Malfoy and then to Bellatrix.

"Indeed not, Miss Granger," Lucius drawled. "Avery? Mulciber? Come and greet your old friend, the Head of Gryffindor."

Lucius' tone was deliberately derisive with factious praise. He gazed upon her as a predator. Hermione knew that look well. However, she had not been sitting on her arse or on her back wasting time. She still knew how to negotiate, even with the likes of Lucius Malfoy.

She made a point to step between Harry and Malfoy. There next to Bellatrix stood Avery and Mulciber. Avery smiled viciously.

"Isn't it the Mudblood Granger?" he asked Lucius with grin.

"You used to call me 'Miss Granger,' if I'm not mistaken, Avery," Hermione said in a light, flirtatious voice.

"So I did," he admitted. "However, we are no longer children in need of establishing boundaries and alliances to protect the weaker amongst us...but alas, you probably still require it," he said coolly as he glanced at her comrades flanking her.

He shifted, and Hermione flicked her wand, sending a Stinging Hex that made him shriek. "You filthy cunt!" he swore. "I am going to enjoy killing you."

Malfoy drew an arm out in front of Avery to draw him back. "Let's not get testy, shall we?"

He looked at Hermione with a malevolent smile. "It seems Avery has forgotten his place," he said apologetically. "Let's not allow petty childhood slights to mar what needs to be accomplished this night. After all, there are no heads of houses here. Dumbledore put a stop to it, you know, after Severus left Hogwarts, when the first war truly began. But of course, you fled, didn't you, Hermione?" Lucius reminded her. "You left and let poor James and Lily Potter be slaughtered."

Harry was getting antsy. "What is he talking about?" he hissed at Hermione.

"Hermione didn't know my parents!" he yelled at Lucius.

"Harry, for once just...Shut. Up!" Hermione bellowed as she kept her eyes trained on Malfoy and Bellatrix.

"Lucius," Hermione said smoothly as she efficiently pushed Harry completely behind her. "Look at me. You are dealing with me now. We're all going to remain calm and try

to sort this all out rationally and without anymore blustering or threats."

Lucius smiled lazily and leaned into her. "Compel Potter to give me the prophecy, Miss Granger," he whispered. "Give it to me now, or you can make your final stand here."

From behind her, Hermione heard voices scream, "*Stupefy!*" She vanished in a wisp of white smoke and sailed to the far end of the aisle and began to duel with Mulciber and Avery alone.

"How is it that you haven't aged, Granger?" sneered Avery as he sent her a non-verbal gouging spell that Hermione easily flicked away with her wand using a silent Protego spell.

"Tell us," demanded Mulciber as he attempted to circle Hermione. "How is it that you fuck a Death Eater and still remain in Dumbledore's good graces?"

He sent a Slicing hex her way, and she parried it, screaming, "*Reducto!*" sending Mulciber flying across the aisle, crashing into a gigantic wall of small glass balls that came crashing down on them. She darted away, flashing hexes at Avery as she went.

She stopped and saw Harry cornered by Bellatrix and Malfoy.

"*"I want to know where Sirius is!"*" he demanded.

"*"I want to know where Sirius is!" mimicked"* Bellatrix as she toyed with him.

"The Dark Lord," she said deeply in a haunted voice as she paced around Harry. "The Dark Lord*always* knows."

Hermione stepped closer to Harry and Lucius, straining to hear each word.

"*"I know that Sirius is here,"*" Harry said firmly.

"It's time for you to grasp the veracity of this situation, Potter," sneered Malfoy. "*Now give me the prophecy.*"

"Crucio!" screamed Hermione as Malfoy seized and collapsed onto the floor. Bellatrix turned to look for the caster, and Harry slipped away from her. She snarled as she saw Harry's mad dash and took off, hot on his heels. "Hex them!" Harry screamed to the others. "Hex them all!"

Bellatrix sprinted back halfway towards Hermione and pointed her wand at her. "*Avada...*"

Hermione, who had released Malfoy, deflected the killing curse, and Bellatrix began to laugh hysterically.

"She knows how to play! *Wittle baby orphan with not a fweind in the world,*" she pouted.

The two witches circled each other out in the open as Lucius remained unmoving on the ground. "Couldn't get a decent Gryffindor to respect you, eh?" Bellatrix spat. "You don't fool me! I know you are just Dumbledore's little pet! Just like that slimy, ill-tempered, *know-it-all!*"

"Why, that's what they call me!" Hermione laughed as she snapped with her wand, "*Abduco Anapneo!*"

Bellatrix began to choke, and her wand collapsed to the ground. Her hand clutched at her throat, and her eyes bulged from her sunken eye sockets. Hermione watched her prey sink to her knees as she struggled for breath. They needed to know. They all needed to realize that she wasn't here for fun and games. Bellatrix's lips were starting to turn blue when Hermione captured the witch's wand from the ground before releasing her and running towards the others. She burst through the door of the Time Room and shouted, "*Colloportus!*" sealing the door behind her.

She watched the others as they dashed through the room to return to the circular room. The door from the Hall of Prophecy blasted open, and Hermione slid under one of the many desks. Neville and Harry were trapped there. Neville was bleeding profusely from a hex. The Death Eaters were blasting apart the room, and Hermione's ire raged.

"What the fuck was that all about?" Harry demanded. "How do they know you? When did you ever meet Voldemort?"

Hermione was trying to heal Neville and stop his bleeding. "Harry," she yelled over the crashing of glass and tables, "I can't explain all this now. I need you go find the others and *get the hell out of here!*"

She rolled out from underneath one of the desks, and with her wand, she hoisted up the large desk next to the bell jar and flung it at the Death Eaters, crashing it on top of them.

"Go, go!" she screamed at Harry and Neville as she saw Bellatrix and Malfoy dashing into the Time Room. She stood her ground and fought them with all her might. Lucius was skilled enough to distract her so Bellatrix could recapture her wand. The curses and hexes were destroying everything in the room while shards of glass punctured their skin. Lucius, the coward, ducked out and left the two witches alone. With Bellatrix bearing down on her full force, Hermione couldn't do anything except scream, "*HE'S COMING! RUN FOR IT!*"

"So, tell me, little Mudblood," Bellatrix taunted her. "Who taught you Dark Magic? Was it Snape? Does he know what you truly are? That you're just a filthy, little Mudblood liar? *Expulso!*"

Hermione repelled the hex, screaming, "*Protego horribilis!*"

The door from the Room of Prophecy crashed open, and more Death Eaters marched through the door, sending stunners their way. Bellatrix sidestepped Hermione to pass into the circular room as Hermione dove for cover under a table. As she took aim at the group of Death Eaters, Hermione screamed, "*Confringo!*"

The desks in front of the Death Eater blasted apart and sent Death Eaters flying across the room. One flew into the Bell Jar. Hermione watched in horror as he struggled to release himself. He crashed into the beautiful, heavy, golden curio that kept all the Time-Turners and destroyed it. The heavy frame shook and collapsed down on top of him. Hermione turned and ran into the circular room. It was dark. She placed a Colloportus spell on the door and marked it with another fiery "X". The room sprang to life. The candelabra full of the cobalt blue light illuminated the circular room again, and she gasped at the sight before her.

There was Ginny nearly unconscious on the ground with Ron and Luna by her side. Ron was white as a ghost and had black ooze foaming from his mouth. His eyes were glassy and unfocused.

Hermione knelt down and looked over Ron's and Ginny's wounds. "Where are they?" she panted.

"Harry and Neville went through towards the dark room with that whispering veil. We don't know which door to open; the spell you cast disappeared. Ginny hurt her ankle. Neville had to take Ron's wand. His is broken," Luna explained. "I knew the Death Eaters were coming, so I disillusioned us from their sight. They all climbed into the same room Harry and Neville entered."

"Well, we have to try to help them," Hermione said desperately. "There are more Death Eaters behind that door, and I don't want them to catch us in here! Come on." She

healed Ginny's ankle and began to open each door, steering clear of the one she had marked.

She wrenched open another door and saw it was the Death Chamber. She was about to close the door and try another when she heard the familiar cackling of Bellatrix Lestrange. She took her wand and nodded to Ginny to come with her. "Luna," Hermione whispered, "I want you to keep trying to get Ron and yourself out and back into the Atrium. Get out and then Floo to the Burrow, then to Headquarters, and get all who are in the Order here! Get Kingsley, Tonks, Remus, Ron's parents, Severus...anybody that can help us!" she pleaded.

Luna nodded, and she took Ron's arm across her shoulder. Hermione cast a Concealment Charm around herself and Ginny as they made their way towards the bottom. Lucius had Harry nearly cornered. Bellatrix had Neville around the neck.

"Give me the prophecy, or watch your friend die!" Lucius raged.

"Diplomacy, Lucius," Hermione said as she tried to catch her breath while she revealed herself on the stairs. "I told you before, you don't have a subtle bone in your body. I may have to teach you a lesson."

Ginny emerged from the Charm as well, snapping her wand like a whip, stinging Bellatrix in the arm.

"You bitch!" Bellatrix screamed as she released Neville.

Harry struggled to force the prophecy into his robes as Hermione watched Lucius wrap his nimble fingers around Harry's wrist.

Hermione didn't care about the cost. Lucius could not win. She flung a Banishment Charm at the globe, and it sailed into the air only to smash into pieces and dust past the dais where Lucius and Harry stood.

Lucius whipped his wand to curse her, and she leapt into the air, disappearing like a mist to distract him from Harry. With no prophecy, Lucius' life was now forfeit. He would kill Harry now, regardless of the consequences. Lucius flew upward, and they swirled round and around each other, fighting for dominance.

Lucius gave up his chase on Hermione to see to Bellatrix. Hermione landed in a darkened area to assess the situation. Harry and Ginny were battling Bellatrix as she cackled and laughed at their attempts to thwart her. Lucius screamed at Bellatrix, "NO! Don't hurt him! We need to take him to the Dark Lord alive!"

Lucius then brandished his wand and began to fight. Hermione screeched, "*Duro!*" and Lucius parried her.

He smiled wickedly at her with a gleam in his grey eyes and ground out, "*Imperio!*"

Hermione faltered for a moment, but then threw the curse off her, screaming "*REDUCTO!*" throwing Lucius off the dais.

Harry dodged, grabbing Neville and deflecting stunners from Death Eaters that were making their way inside, streaming down the darkened steps in their masks and death weeds towards the dais.

Hermione stood in stark fear as she watched the scene before her. *Oh dear God*, Hermione thought. *We're outnumbered!*

As she caught her breath and went to get behind some cover from Lucius, she saw Ginny battling Bellatrix. Harry was rushing from where he had stunned Avery to again join Ginny's side. Neville was in a struggle of his own with Mulciber.

Harry ran to the side to move out of the direct path of the Death Eaters. He grabbed Neville to run for cover, and Neville tripped. They went tumbling down the stairs, rolling down over and over.

"HARRY!" Hermione screamed.

The room exploded in blue light as the door that led to the circular room blasted open. Aurors were pouring in, and Hermione could see Kingsley, Tonks, Moody, Lupin, Sirius, and others from the Order racing down and cursing Death Eaters as they ran. Hermione was growing tired and knew Lucius could tell.

He disarmed her of her wand, and Hermione had to resort to hand-to-hand combat. She skittered around as Lucius laughed, toying with her until she became tired enough that he could put her down easily. She slipped away from sight and sprang upon his back, making them both crash onto the rough stone of the dais. Hermione wrenched Lucius' wand away from him, throwing it as far as she could away from them, and he roared with rage at her audacity.

He threw down his cane and cloak, and they began to fight in earnest. She took a blow to her stomach and face, but she fell low to swipe her leg against his ankles, causing him to lose his footing and fall onto his back. Hermione ran to find her wand, but as she reached for it, the Cruciatus Curse cut her down. Her screams reverberated loudly throughout the cavernous pit. Harry ran and tackled Lucius in order to stop Hermione's torture, and the two wizards began to duel furiously.

Hermione slipped down from the dais and hid as she tried to catch her breath. It was unreal. Her vision was blurry...from the hits she sustained either to the head or from the Cruciatus, she didn't know. She vomited as she collapsed onto her knees, and she could just see above her on the dais, Sirius and Harry fighting Lucius and Macnair.

She felt her body slip into darkness, however, the shouts and screams inside her head were pulling at her to stay awake. She clawed her way up the dais just in time to see Tonks fall at Bellatrix's hand. Then from across the room, Hermione watched as the evil witch took aim and cast a lightening bolt of green that burst onto Sirius' chest. Mulciber fell at Harry's hand, and Lupin fell out of nowhere, grabbing Harry to pull him down.

It was moving all too slowly. Hermione felt that each movement her body took was taking ages, and so were Sirius'. She caught his gaunt face as he stood suspended in the air. His eyes did not see hers. He gracefully flew back into the archway, behind that tatty curtain and disappeared. Hermione finally reached the top of the dais to see Harry screaming and struggling against Lupin. Bellatrix was running up the stone stairs back towards the blue light. Harry burst out from Lupin's grasp and charged her.

"Harry!" Hermione yelled feebly. She collapsed right there on the dais and knew no more.

A/N: The italicized sentences with asterisks belong to J.K. Rowling. The rest belong to me.

"*Abduco Anapneo*" - lit. to abduct or steal the breath from another person.

Chapter 56

Severus and Hermione's marriage goes public after the Battle at the Department of Mysteries. Hermione makes a decision about her future without Severus.

A/N: Thanks to WriterMerrin, who has continued to work so hard with me, and thanks to all of you who read and review. :)

Hermione woke up in the infirmary at Hogwarts. She tried to lift herself and focus her eyes, but it was too difficult.

"Hello?" she said hoarsely. She shifted her head towards a black shape coming near her. It was Severus, and he held her hand tightly to him. "They told me everything you did," he whispered. "What the bloody hell were you thinking, going there? You were very nearly killed!"

Hermione turned her head straight, exhausted, and her vision began to sharpen. She eased her head to the other side and saw the faces of the others looking at her fearfully.

"She almost killed that Lestranger woman twice," Ginny said loudly with a look of fear in her eyes. "I saw her cast a curse that made her start choking. She released her just before she choked to death."

"I heard her cast the Cruciatus Curse," whispered Neville as he looked upon Hermione strangely.

"So did Potter," growled Moody defensively. Hermione looked over at him. He was standing at Tonks' bedside.

"Did anyone die?" Hermione croaked. "I had a dream that S-Sirius went into that archway."

"That was no dream," said Lupin sadly from across the room.

Hermione felt her body ease into relaxation. "I have to sleep," she whispered.

"She saved us all," she heard Ron whisper. "Never saw Hermione so... so powerful before. She spoke as if she knew them, and they spoke as if they knew her. It was like Hermione wasn't Hermione."

"She isn't," Hermione heard Severus say from far away. "She's actually my age and Lupin's. We were in school together, and she was Lily Potter's best friend."

Best friend. She had been my best friend, she thought drowsily.

Lily looked back and her eyes shone. "We are best girlfriends, aren't we, Hermione?" she asked.

"Of course," Hermione answered.

"Severus always wants me to reassure him we're best friends, but I think I can have two best friends. What do you think?"

Hermione thought immediately of Harry and Ron. "Certainly, Lily. Of course, you can," she said confidently.

"Oh, good!" she said in relief.

"Will you sleep with me tonight, Hermione?" she asked shyly.

"Okay," Hermione answered.

Hermione spent the next few days recuperating. She was doing well, and Poppy told her she could go back to her quarters the following day. She sat in her bed, eating her lunch, when Harry came in and stood there a distance away.

"Harry," she said quietly.

"Hermione," he whispered. He paused for a moment and then said, "I spoke with Dumbledore, and I know everything now. I also know you saved my arse back there at the Department of Mysteries. So, I wanted to thank you." He turned slowly and started to walk away.

"Harry," she called out. "I'm still me. I'm just older and have lived longer. I'm still your friend."

"Dumbledore told me about the prophecy," he said, trying to change the subject. "I know that there was a mark on me for death since I was just a baby. I can't believe no one told me," he said sadly.

He turned around sharply and faced her, looking angry. "And you," he said with resentment in his tone. "How *could* you not tell me that you had this whole other life? And now you're *married*? I can't believe you love that bastard," he seethed. "You do realize he's the reason Sirius is dead, don't you? He all but killed him with his own wand. Goading him all the time, making him miserable..."

"There is a lot you still don't know about Sirius!" she snapped.

Harry looked at her sharply. "Really? Why don't you enlighten me?"

Hermione wanted to... Harry needed to be schooled in the reality of his selfish godfather. "I can't," she whispered. "Not now. However, I'll tell you this, Harry. Your father and Sirius never liked me. They never did. Your mum, Severus, and I were all best friends. Then Lily and Severus had a falling out, and Severus and I became closer."

"Oh, please!" he spat. "Spare me the details. I don't want to hear about you shagging that *thing*!"

"He's a human being, Harry Potter!" she hollered at him. "You can't understand... you weren't there," she said as she moved her tray onto the table next to her.

Harry came closer. "Well, I do know that Snape went to headquarters and told Sirius to stay put. I can just hear his nasty voice in my head, goading and smirking at him, making him feel worse than ever because he was forced into isolation by the Ministry."

Hermione turned onto her side away from Harry and fought the tears as they ran down her face. She wouldn't let Harry see her pain. She couldn't tell him. Not now, not when he was like this, that his beloved godfather had been a rapist.

"Sirius had to take the high road while all alone, and Snape took every opportunity he could to make him feel useless!" Harry continued to rail.

"I don't want to talk about Sirius anymore, Harry," she said as she wiped her eyes.

"Fine," he said sharply. "I just really wanted to let you know that I heard the prophecy. I know I'm a marked man. I can't live until Voldemort is dead, but the good news is that neither can he while I'm still alive."

Hermione turned and watched him walk out of the infirmary. Hermione burst into tears and then saw Severus glide out from the corner where he had been hiding.

"Well, it's done now, Hermione," his voice soft and tranquil. "Black is dead, and we don't have to worry about him anymore. However, we have a larger problem. The Dark Lord is very angry about your destroying the prophecy. You showed everyone your hand, and it cannot be undone. I've come to tell you that I shall be away for the summer. I have many things to do penance for, you being one of them. Our marriage is now of public record, thanks to Narcissa Malfoy and her recent interview with Rita Skeeter. Once you raised your hand against the Death Eaters, you forfeited all our rights to the secrecy of our marriage. What Kingsley said was true; Lucius, Mulciber, and Avery were placing Ministry workers under the Imperius Curse. It has all come undone, Hermione. The public knows you are the wife of a Death Eater. Whether I am an ex-Death Eater or a faithful one, no one can ever *really* know the truth."

"What are we to do?" she whispered.

"Well, now that Dumbledore and Potter have been exonerated in the public eye, you have a bit of insurance to fall back on. I would advise you to stay at Hogwarts for the summer. Do not go anywhere by yourself. If the Weasleys are welcoming...and I don't see why not; Molly and Arthur have always been supportive of our marriage since they have known of it from the start...you may go to the Burrow."

"I'll see what Dumbledore needs," she replied. "I need to sleep," she said as she felt her eyelids droop. "So... tired."

"It's the effects of the Cruciatus. Lucius is one hateful bastard. But you'll be fine, sweet girl," he whispered as he caressed her cheek.

Hermione slept.

The hiding was now over, and everyone had to face the truth. When Harry, Ron, and Ginny left on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione didn't join them. She watched from the castle doors as they all walked away from her with no goodbyes, not even a smile.

After they all had disappeared, Severus was at her side. Silently they stood, knowing that the long summer lay in front of them. Hermione felt a tugging on her hand. She looked up at her husband, and he said, "Let's go home."

They walked slowly down to their rooms, Hermione clinging to her husband's arm. She knew they would have to part, but she didn't want to think about it now. Right now, she wanted to think about how much she loved him and how they would have this one precious day.

He guided her over to their bedside drawer and lifted the small box that contained their wedding rings. They both tapped the lid with their wands, opening it. She slipped the wide gold band onto his finger, and he glided the gold and emerald ring on hers. They kissed and slowly began to remove their clothes.

They had all the time in the world, and they did not rush. Each part of their lovemaking was slow and prolonged. It felt as if it had been an eternity since Hermione'd had her husband inside her.

"Please, take me," she moaned as she fist his hair to bring him closer to her.

He rose above her and ravished her, roughly stroking his hands all over her body. "You are the woman I remember, Hermione," he whispered. "You are so delectable."

Hermione giggled as she wrapped her legs around his hips. She clung to him as she threw back her head. He grabbed her long hair and swiftly pushed inside her with a sound of relief.

Their hands intertwined above her head, and he ground into her fiercely. Hermione shrieked and groaned as he nipped and suckled on her breasts.

"I love it when you do that," she panted.

He grinned, laughing against her breast, and released her hands, cupped her arse and thrust into her with fierce, slow strokes. She felt herself clench and then melt. She closed her eyes and let him control and play her how he wanted. She felt over and over the ebb and flow of each orgasm until she could hear him start to pant and move erratically within her. She felt the hot liquid burst inside her, and she felt content as her lover collapsed next to her.

They lay in sweet silence as they began to doze. He reached over and placed his left hand on top of hers. They looked at their rings together, fingers intertwined, and Hermione said, "This is what I want, for always, Severus."

"What?" he asked deeply.

"I want, when all this is over, for you and me to live together in Spinner's End or wherever, in a little house with cozy, plush couches and sofa chairs. I want a warm fire in the winter and lemonade and pumpkin juice in the summer with our children running around, playing, and hugging. I want a family that hugs and kisses all the time. I want you and me to wear these rings and never take them off. I want our children to see us kiss and say, 'Ugh, that's so gross! Can't you stop that?'"

He chuckled. Hermione continued, "You know, they won't really mean it. It will make them feel everything is right in their world. I just want you and me, Mr. and Mrs. Snape, to have our place in the world that is safe and warm. I want to be your partner and make potions, be our own bosses, control our own lives."

He smirked as he propped himself on one arm. "You don't want much, really," he whispered. "You think you can handle being a mum and an entrepreneur?" he asked.

"Can you be a father and an entrepreneur?" she shot back at him.

"Touché," he replied. "We'll make it happen, Hermione. You and I."

"What do you want?" she asked as she held him close.

He traced her face with his finger. "I want peace. I want to swear as I trip over little toys that I hope will be all over the floor. I meant what I said, Hermione. I want children, and I want them with you. A big loving family."

She frowned. "Sometimes these things can't be guaranteed, Severus," she whispered. "What if I can't give you children?"

Severus was undeterred. "We'll adopt and teach them all we know so when they go to Hogwarts for school, they'll be the smartest and the brightest in their class," he said happily.

"What if they are all Hufflepuffs and only mediocre students?" she asked.

"As long as they know the meaning of hard work and have a positive attitude towards life, I won't grouse," he replied. "Honestly, Hermione, I just want Christmas. I want every Christmas to be like the one we had; the larder full of meat pies and jellies, goose and turkey, trifle, sweet potatoes, and a big Christmas tree with all the candles and trimmings. I'll even get the tree myself and make the little ornaments if I have to. I want a fire and to snuggle with you on a plush couch and watch our children run amuck and raise hell. I want a proper family with normal problems, no beatings or fear. No starvation and filthy sheets. No clothes that never fit properly. No keeping the pain

hidden. I want my children to cry and not be ashamed."

Hermione looked at him as he spoke. He was so passionate about the life he wanted...with her. She hugged him tightly and said, "We will. I'll carry it all inside me, and we will have the life we want, the life we deserve."

They kissed, and Hermione felt a shiver, a shiver of the promised future. As long as she could lay with Severus every night until they died, she would be happy for the rest of her life.

The Ministry reinstated Dumbledore as headmaster of Hogwarts. Cornelius Fudge was doing a great deal of back peddling to maintain his position as Minister of Magic. When it had been revealed Dolores Umbridge had placed four Aurors under the Imperius Curse to arrest Hagrid, she was sentenced to Azkaban. Although it could not be proven, the Order also believed she had been responsible for the Dementor attack on Harry last summer.

The Order could no longer meet at Grimmauld Place. It was unstable now that Kreacher had betrayed the Order to aid Voldemort. For now, the Order convened at the Burrow and made it Unplottable.

Severus went back to Voldemort again for an indefinite period of time. Of course, he would return in the fall, but it would be a long summer apart, knowing he would be facing the horrible wrath of Voldemort. The only thought that cheered her was that Lucius and so many others in the sacred circle had failed to deliver the prophecy and were now in Azkaban. Hermione thought that it was strange she should feel such sadness at their parting. She felt she ought to be used to it by now; however, she didn't feel better and was miserable when he left Hogwarts.

As for Hermione's summer plans, she had options now that everyone knew she was the wife of Severus Snape. She could stay on at Hogwarts and take up an apprenticeship like Minerva had always wanted, or she could join the Auror Department and work alongside the Advance Order. She decided she would think on it and, in the meanwhile, continue to work for the Order. She lived in the quarters she shared with Severus in the dungeons and assisted Minerva in planning for the new fall term. Albus had been going away on secret missions that couldn't be put off any longer, so it was just as well Hermione remained. Minerva desperately needed her assistance to keep Hogwarts and the Order running.

By July, the state of the war had become nearly unbearable. The Dementors left Azkaban, and the wizarding community was up in arms and full of terror as Death Eaters ravaged London and the wizarding countryside. People were disappearing and being taken away by Voldemort's minions right in broad daylight. The Ministry of Magic had created the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. Arthur Weasley was the Head of the Department. It was in the middle of the month that everything turned upside down. The weather was just as miserable as it could be. The Dementors were on the loose, breeding and affecting everyone's mood. Voldemort decided to take charge and show a display of power that could not be compared.

Diagon Alley changed into something Hermione did not recognize. Small kiosks popped up over night, selling protective amulets to guard against jinxes, curses, hexes, werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi." Each time Hermione heard or even thought of the word "Inferi," a shiver would go up her spine.

However, the most hilarious and ridiculous of all the new security guidelines passed down by the Ministry was the leaflet sent out to each Wizarding family that claimed to help them "Protect your Home and Family against Dark Forces." It was unbelievable just how ill informed, or just downright bloody-minded the Ministry was still behaving towards Voldemort's power. Molly, of all people, railed against it like a seasoned Auror.

"I ask you," she had snapped at Arthur the day it came to the Burrow. "If I was a Death Eater and wanted to get to you or anyone else, what would stop me from placing you or someone you loved under the Imperius Curse and finding out all I needed to and then Polyjuice myself to look like you, and Bob's your uncle, we're all dead. So I ask you, Arthur, where is the sense in this?"

The Order sat cramped in the Burrow, too afraid to return to headquarters in case Death Eaters were there, lying in wait. It had been a hasty retreat after Sirius' death. Ownership of property changed hands rather quickly when there was a death, and there had been a rush to secure all items of personal and official value to the Order. Hermione was not fussed to leave Grimmauld Place behind. It had been the place of her wedding...of course that saddened her...but it had also been the place of her near-rape by Sirius Black. It had been so much worse than what Severus' father had done to her...perhaps then she had been too terrified to fight. She had fought tooth and nail against Sirius, and it had been the most terrifying experience of her life. That room only served to bring memories of making love to Severus mixed with struggling to stop a violent and determined, drunk Sirius Black from penetrating her.

Therefore, there they were, at the Burrow, minus one important face. Only two days ago, they had heard the news that Emmeline Vance had been killed. It had been a terrible blow. She had lived around the corner from the Muggle Prime Minister. It was yet another in a series of tragic and unbelievable events with which the Order could not come to grips.

"I tell you, the Ministry will fall!" growled Moody as Hermione sat in shocked silence.

"I want to know how long it's been since Hermione's had contact with her husband!" demanded Charlie Weasley.

Hermione sat with her head bowed low, her eyes trained onto her hands in her lap. She knew what they were thinking...distrusting and suspicious of her. She was, after all, the wife of a known Death Eater, who now lived in Voldemort's camp. The rumor around the Order was that it had been the work of Snape that got Vance killed.

"You can't blame Hermione for what her husband must do to keep us protected from Voldemort!" said Lupin hotly.

"Still don't like it," whispered Diggle. "How do we know she ain't meetin' him for a bit of pillow talk, sharin' all our secrets? Perhaps that was what got Emmeline killed, and I'm sure that's how Amelia Bones got killed as well!"

"Don't be daft," grumbled Doge from the corner. "Bones was as smart as they come. She bein' the head of the Magical Law Enforcement? Couldn't have tha', now could 'e? From wha' I 'eard, he needed his own people starting in the Ministry. Had to chuck 'er then."

Minerva cleared her throat. "Let's not get carried away on conjecture. The facts are these: Cornelius Fudge was given an ultimatum from You-Know-Who. That ultimatum was for the Ministry to step aside and hand over power to You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. Fudge did not give in, and the results are the outcomes we see here. The massacre at Brockdale Bridge, which the Muggles are believing was just an architectural mishap, the giants on a killing spree and destroying numerous homes in the West Country, where the Obliviators have had to go out and Modify...and in several cases, right out Obliviate...memories of hundreds of Muggles. The deaths of Amelia Bones and Emmeline Vance, as well, were deliberately planned as means to terrorize the Order and force the Ministry to bow to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

She drew a shaky breath and continued. "I wish Albus were here. Unfortunately, he is on a very important mission for the Order that could prove to help us end the war months, perhaps years, in advance, once and for all."

She took off her spectacles and said, "I must say that I am shocked and horrified by this muck raking! Mrs. Snape has done nothing to earn this kind of treatment. Nor has Severus. How quickly we forget how he rallied us together when Albus, Hagrid, and I were unable to lead or give aid! He alerted the Order, and we were able to defeat the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic and out You-Know-Who at the same time! I think you all who have harbored ill will towards the Snapes should apologize. She is facing an indeterminable time away from her husband in order for us to carry on."

Minerva sat, and everyone was silent. Kingsley spoke up next and said, "We need to go to the next order of business. Cornelius Fudge is going to be stepping down as Minister of Magic. Rufus Scrimgeour, my boss at the Auror Department, will be stepping up as the new Minister. He is a very tetchy sort of person, tenacious, cautious; however, he tends to be inflexible at the worst moments. I fear for his ability to withstand Voldemort.

"I will be working undercover for the Muggle Prime Minister. It is imperative that we protect the Muggle populace as much as we are able. Dark times, my friends, darker than before," he said tiredly.

Hermione stood. "I have made my decision. I shall be training this summer with Tonks as a part of Auror Training. I have decided to stop the façade, now that everyone knows I am no longer a real student, having sat for my N.E.W.T.s in 1978."

The room was silent at her revelation, but they all were so very tired. Hermione knew that, once again, her life was taking another turn. Only one thing was for sure: there were no guarantees when she would be able to see Severus again, or if ever...

A/N: Please review! I want to know your thoughts!

Chapter 57

Chapter 57 of 74

Hermione begins Auror Training with Tonks as her mentor.

Tonks was a fully-fledged Auror, now that she had made her bones at the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. Moody was adamant that, although she was young, she had the knowledge and the skills to go off on her own.

There had been a great deal of discussion on whether or not to even allow Hermione the chance to apply for the Auror Department. Gawain Robards, the newly instated Head, did not know Hermione personally, so he had no qualms about telling her to her face what he thought of her.

Hermione sat in his cramped office, the walls full of wanted posters, his desk a right mess. In fact, according to Hermione's tidy nature, the whole office looked like a tip that could do with a thorough dusting. However, she was not about to tell the wizard she hoped would be her boss that thought.

When he came in, he regarded her, the young girl just two months shy of her seventeenth birthday, and said, "I don't know you, and I don't like you. You are married to a known criminal whose activities over the last twenty years have been shift to say the least."

He took a sip of his coffee and continued. "Now I hear all this bull shite about you actually being thirty-six, almost thirty-seven." He snorted as he looked out his magical window.

"If it hadn't been for Moody, Kingsley, Dawlish, and Tonks vouching for you, your arse would have been outta here the moment you stepped your foot in the door," he said curtly.

He folded his hands on his desk. "Lucky for you, I am a reasonable wizard. I love a good mystery and even better, a conundrum. Do you know what that word means, Mrs. Snape?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes sir, I do."

"Well?" he asked as he gestured with his hand.

"I apologize, sir. When I was a student, I was known for being an 'insufferable know-it-all.' You didn't ask for the definition, just if I knew what the word meant," she replied.

Robards grinned. "You are exact. I've read that about you," he said as he flipped open her records from Hogwarts. "You have quite the gap in your education. First and second years: 1991 through 1993. Third through seventh years: 1973 through 1978."

He looked up at her and said, "That must be quite a story. I never would have believed a word of it if Kingsley, Moody, and Remus Lupin had not sworn that you had trained under Moody during the summer of your sixth year."

"Yes, sir, I did," she replied.

"Well, tell me what you learned. I can see from here you have ten N.E.W.T.s, so from a purely academic level, you are more than qualified. So, tell me about your practical experience."

Hermione took a deep breath and went into all her trials with the Slytherins, how Slytherin House had acknowledged her as Head of Gryffindor due to her talents in dueling. She told him that during her second year she made Polyjuice Potion successfully for Harry and Ron, and then she told him about her ability to reason her way through a barrier that would help Harry to protect the Sorcerer's stone from Voldemort back as a first-year. She spoke of her Occlumency training with Dumbledore along with Remus and the summer she spent on Fenwick farm with Kingsley, Moody, and Remus.

"I heard about that," Robards said with a grin. "Moody said you were a tough nut to crack, but when you finally got it through your thick skull, you actually could do some real damage. Now, tell me," he asked as he leaned forward, "the rumor is that you placed the Cruciatus Curse on Lucius Malfoy and hexed Bellatrix Lestrange with a nasty bit of Dark magic. Is it true?"

"Yes," she replied without flinching.

"Do you have any qualms about casting Unforgivables?" he asked as he began to rearrange paperwork on his desk.

"No," Hermione said a bit louder to be heard. "Not if the situation merits it."

"Some of my Aurors think it should be illegal for even an Auror to cast an Unforgivable. It is allowed. Although not the Imperius Curse. If you cannot contain a suspect without resorting to the Imperius, you have no business being an Auror."

"Now, you have experience in the educational and the practical. You have fought in battle already and were able to keep your wits about you. I've heard you are quite the diplomat. Remus said you were one of the best bloody negotiators he has ever seen. You are cool under pressure and can think on your feet. That is essential to being an Auror."

He stared at her again. "What is the definition of a conundrum?" he barked at her.

Hermione remained cool. "A conundrum, sir, is a riddle: a puzzling question or situation."

Robards looked at her and said, "You are married to a Death Eater. I know...I don't care to hear the sob story of his defection to the good guys. The situation I am faced with is that you are a conundrum, Mrs. Snape. How am I to trust that you will not place any of my Aurors in harm's way to protect your husband?"

Hermione looked at him in the eyes and said, "I am not a spy. For the foreseeable future, he and I must live separated for the good of the war. I doubt in the next two years I shall ever speak with him, let alone lay eyes on him. I need this job. I need to do something other than hide away and do paperwork for the Order. I am a good duelist, and I know about warfare and how to negotiate. You will never regret taking me on if you decide that's what you want."

She was breathing hard. He just had to say yes, he had to. Otherwise, she just couldn't face the Order week after week and be called a coward. She would disappear into the Muggle world, find Deidre and pretend she was Hermione Granger's daughter...something until the war was over.

"All right, then," he said quietly. "You will report to Auror Tonks. You will be her personal slave for the next three years. If you're good and fast, perhaps you may finish your training sooner. At any rate, you do as she says. You get one chance with me, Snape. One chance and then if you blow it, I'll chuck you out on your ear, understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Hermione said enthusiastically.

She left the Robards' office and went to Tonks' cubicle. The normally vivacious and happy-go-lucky young woman was a mousy-haired shell of herself.

"Wotcher, Hermione," she mumbled. "Look, it's just too mad here. Let's go to headquarters. Molly always has a good cuppa, and the kids will all be outside playing or working. We'll have a bit o' peace."

Hermione followed her. "You remember how to Apparate, right?" Tonks asked.

"Oh, yes, it's just been a while," Hermione replied.

"Well, remember to focus, and try not to splinch yourself," she warned.

Hermione had to hand it to Tonks. She was a witch who knew her stuff. After a hot "cuppa" from Molly, she perked up a bit and started to talk to her about being an Auror and the training she would be doing under her tutelage.

"Now, so you know, Hermione, I ain't never had me own trainee before, but it doesn't matter, 'cause when the time comes for your final examinations, you won't be tested by me. Dawlish, Savage, or even Robards'll probably test you if he's feeling evil enough. Dead scary, he is," she said with a shudder.

"Now," she said as she tapped her wand on the table. A few parchments appeared before her, and she said, "The Auror Department is under the larger Department of Magical Law Enforcement. So you know, since Bones' murder, there is a new Head. His name is Pius Thicknesse. He's an all right sort, but we have our suspicions since Voldemort has been trying to worm his way into the Ministry. We think he may be under the Imperius Curse. However, nothing is for certain, so we'll have to watch it."

"Our area under Magical Law Enforcement is the Auror Office. An Auror's mission is to pursue and apprehend Dark wizards. That means you are in a constant state of turmoil. There is danger on every side. I must ask you, in all sincerity, Hermione, if you were to apprehend your husband, would you bring him in or let him go?"

Hermione looked shocked. Honestly, she hadn't thought of it. But the answer was clear. She would do what Severus would want: keep his cover intact at all costs.

"I would arrest him and bring him in. It is imperative that his cover remains intact. I won't say it wouldn't hurt me or cause me pain to do it, but I definitely would," she answered truthfully.

"Excellent," Tonks replied. "That was a brilliant answer. Now, you know we take applicants with five N.E.W.T.s or more, and you have a total of ten and all Outstanding. This is excellent. You have all the fundamentals. I see your additional N.E.W.T.s were in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. That may come in handy if we are involved in a difficult case."

"We also do a very thorough background check, and Robards is concerned about your disappearance from our world during the first war: 1978-1981. Can you account for these years?" she asked.

"I was living as a Muggle. I had absolutely no personal contact with any wizards or witches from June of 1978 to September of 1981," she answered.

Tonks peered at her strangely. "You said 'personal contact.' What were you doing?"

Hermione poured herself another cup of tea. "I discovered around 1979 that there were wizards coming into the various clubs where I would go party. I knew all the girls there, being a regular, and I noticed these girls were disappearing. I scoured the news for any missing people or bodies found, and I started finding out the mysteries behind these sudden disappearances. So, I began to track and observe these wizards. I knew they were Death Eaters. I know a Death Eater when I see one. It's as if their forehead is branded, something is lost in their eyes. They are predatory and unconscionable. So, I began to thwart them secretly. Then, I saw Severus. It had been three years: September of 1981. I stopped Lucius Malfoy from abducting a couple of drunken Muggle girls and nearly had a duel on my hands. Fortunately, I have guts and a will for self-preservation and got them away. Of course, the following month after the Potters' deaths, I came back to Hogwarts."

"Well, Hermione," she said, "the next steps will be a series of tests. Some will be oral and some practical to see how you handle stress, your skill in practical defense, your character and aptitude. Your reputation from the battle in the Department of Mysteries precedes you. You already have a splendid reputation, and from what had been reported, you are a prime candidate. Nevertheless, you will do these tests. It will take a month, so say goodbye to the rest of your summer. Oh, and by the way, you're moving in with me since you are my trainee and all."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Let's say I pass all the tests with flying colors. What then?"

"Then you will begin your studies. There is a reason we ask for you to have excellent marks in Herbology and Potions. When on the field, you'll need to know these things. If someone is poisoned, for example, you will need to be able to detect the poison, and if caught early enough, an antidote can be administered. It's the same thing with dangerous and poisonous plants. The rest...Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration is all self-explanatory. So, which do you think will be your toughest subject?" she asked.

"Herbology," Hermione answered. "I know it, I just don't care for it all that much. So, that could work against me. The others I am truly interested in...and Potions! I have learned loads from Severus about Potions. I was in the top of my class in Transfiguration and Charms, although at times Lily and I tied at Charms. She was pretty good," she said remembering old times, happier days.

"Well," said Tonks. "After that hurdle, you will begin a more refined and narrowed approach to your studies. If you excel in Concealment and Disguise, Stealth and Tracking, for example, you may be given the opportunity to join the Hit Squad. Only the best of the best go there. Aurors are the elite of the Magical Law Enforcement. If we

are the elite, then Hit Wizards are the cream of the crop. They require that applicants be over 17 years of age and 'not of a nervous disposition.'

"Once accepted into the program, a Hit-Witch or Hit-Wizard trainee is taught defensive charms, counter-curses, and how to restrain magical law-breakers without attracting Muggle attention. A trainee has a starting salary of 700 Galleons per month, a Ministry of Magic broomstick, and his or her own regular bed at St. Mungo's."

"So," said Hermione. "The month of August will be my testing and then what?"

"You'll be with me, training and staking out. You'll do what I say and when I say. That means if you and I have to spend all night in the blinkin' rain, well, suck it up and make sure you got your big girl knickers on!"

"Okay," said Hermione. "Let's get started!"

"Now wait a bloody minute!" Tonks nearly shouted. "Today is all about me scaring the shit out of you and putting the fear of the Merlin inside you! I know you're no idiot seventeen-year-old! You're older than me for cryin' out loud. AND you've got more experience than half the Aurors already in the department. So, don't steal my thunder. Not that it'll be worth much. You'll fly through these exercises and exams. Robards said when he came on that any trainee who could kick his arse in a wizarding duel gets an automatic pass. You, my girl, will be an Auror within the year. Now, let's get pissed!" she said as she looked around for a bottle.

"Oi, Molly!" she called out. "Where's your Firewhisky? We're celebrating and consoling ourselves at the same time."

Molly came out and went under the kitchen sink. "Shh!" she whispered. "This is my personal stash. So, what is the consoling about?"

Tonks sighed as she poured herself a large amount and started gulping it down like a person dying of thirst. "Hermione and I are going to be celibate at least for a year," she said sadly. "You don't know this, Hermione, but I love Remus Lupin with all my heart, and the ruddy bastard won't do a bloody thing about it."

Hermione was confused. "When did this happen?" she asked the two women.

Tonks shrugged. "It started whilst working in the Advanced Guard. He's so cute and bashful. He's got these eyes that just pull you in, you know?"

Hermione slammed down her drink. "I always thought Severus had the most smoldering eyes. I used to wonder what would happen to me if I lost myself in them," she said fondly.

"What happened?" asked Molly, who was now drinking nearly as much as they were.

"I had an orgasm," she said as she burst out laughing. "He's very, ver-ry passionate."

Tonks nodded her head. "S'true. It's always the quiet ones. I bet Remus could really lay wand," she said dreamily.

"Why haven't you two gone for it?" Hermione asked.

"He thinks he's too old, too poor, too much of a werewolf!" she said angrily. "I told him I couldn't give a shite...but he's so fucking *honorable*! I wish he'd just forget about being honorable and just shag me already. You know, he told me he used to fancy you back in school." She pointed to Hermione with a lopsided grin. "But he said he got over you and then there wasn't anyone. You know, he's a virgin!"

"Holy cow!" Hermione blurted out. "He needs to get laid."

"How did you get Severus to go for you?" she asked.

Hermione smiled. "It's different with us. We grew up together and were friends for years before we made love. We wanted to, but the timing was off. Maybe in time Remus will come around. Has he said he loves you?"

"Yes," she said as tears rolled down her flushed face.

"Well, then don't worry! You'll wear him down. You'll see," she said as she pointed with her finger.

The summer was a blur. Hermione spent every day, Monday through Friday, taking grueling examinations that covered every facet of her being. She learned more about herself than she had ever cared to know. It was depressing at times, informative at others and, in a very warped, masochistic way, quite interesting.

Each night, Tonks would take her to the Burrow for a late dinner and some company. She'd inform her on what was going on outside the Auror Office. Mostly, Tonks had to drag her sorry arse out of the flat, but she insisted on talking to real people, not stuck in a cubicle or a simulator talking either to herself or fake morbid voices pretending to be hidden Death Eaters.

At the end of July, the Order held their final meeting at the Burrow. Harry was coming to stay with the Weasleys and needed to be protected. Remus would be in charge of finding a new headquarters.

The news was even grimmer. Mr. Ollivander had been kidnapped, and his store had been burgled. No one knew where he was or if he were still alive. Minerva's voice shook as she reported the next piece of news.

"Albus has suffered an injury to his right hand. He is being very tight-lipped about it all; however, Severus has helped a great deal with some potions. It was some kind of curse. Severus was able to stop it from spreading further, but his hand is black and quite dead looking. All I could get out of either him or Severus was that Albus was doing some highly sensitive work for the war effort. He said it was worth losing use of a hand to now be one step closer to destroying Voldemort."

Hermione looked up at Minerva. It didn't escape her notice that she was now saying Voldemort's name without fear. Albus must have insisted upon it if she were going to continue as Head of the Order.

"The Ministry of Magic," continued Minerva, "has placed extra protection around Hogwarts. Aurors will be stationed inside and outside, keeping guard duty. They will be staying during the school year at Hogsmeade and working as extra security for the comings and goings in and out of the castle. They will also be assisting Filch in searching students and guests for any illegal or dangerous contraband. The Order will also be assisting the Aurors as needed. We are not to interfere with the Ministry or try to find out who is loyal and who is not. There are too many who are not trustworthy. Absolutely no communication about the Order will be tolerated on Ministry grounds."

After the meeting, Hermione watched Remus and Tonks together. They went outside, and Hermione peeked through the window. They were arguing. Remus was trying to plead with her, and he was holding her upper arms. Then Tonks began to cry. Remus looked so miserable and sad. He held his head in his hand and was silent. Molly snuck up on Hermione and whispered, "How are they?"

At first, Hermione jumped. Then she sighed as she released the curtain. "Not good. They were arguing, she was crying, and Remus looked like he was ready to lose his mind. They both look so miserable," she replied.

"I keep trying to talk sense into that man!" Molly said in irritation. "So what if he's poor? So what if he's sick? No one stays whole and healthy forever. And money? Pah! Everything comes and goes! If you've got love, that's worth holding onto."

Hermione watched as Tonks came back into the house. She was pale and upset. The three witches sat down, and Molly gave them all a spot of tea.

"How did it go?" Molly asked softly.

Tonks shrugged her shoulders. "Same ole bit. I'm too old for you, I'm too sick, you deserve better, I love you... blah, blah, blah."

"I don't think it's right to keep you hanging on like that!" Molly snapped.

"What'd you mean?" Tonks said, her hair starting to perk up a bit.

"What she means, Tonks, is that it's dirty pool telling you he loves you but won't commit. That's sending mixed messages," Hermione said angrily. "I've half a mind to go and give him my two Knuts' worth."

"Same for me!" Molly said hotly. "*Honestly!* I tell you, what's a poor girl to do with a bloke like that? He needs a swift kick in the seat of his trousers, I reckon."

"It's not his fault," said Tonks weakly.

"Now, that's what gets me," said Hermione. "Remus gives you the bum's rush, and you just take it. Not only that, but you take it AND make excuses for him! No wonder it's so easy for him to tear your heart into shreds. You practically have given him a blueprint to show him how it's done!"

Hermione got up. "I'm exhausted. I miss my husband, and to tell you the truth, I'd rather be fighting with him. At least at the end I know I'd get a decent shag," she muttered.

Tonks laughed at that one. "Let's get you home then, love. Another hard day tomorrow for us working-class stiff," she said jovially.

The end of August rolled around, and on the thirty-first, Tonks came to Hermione and congratulated her on her acceptance into the Auror Program.

"I know it's been hell, love, but the boring part is over, and now the real fun begins!"

"What?" asked Hermione warily. She knew Tonks well enough to be very afraid whenever she mentioned something that would be fun.

Tonks put her arm around Hermione's shoulder and said, "You have aced every single aptitude test. Your knowledge and practical application in your tests show you've got the makings of a damn fine Auror. There is just one problem."

"One problem?" she asked shakily.

"You hate flying," she said straight-faced.

"True," she said ruefully. "I never got the hang of it. Probably since the times I have flown have been horrendous experiences. I avoid it whenever possible."

"Well," Tonks said as she shook her head. "It's got to be overcome. You've got to get your arse up in the air. Half the time, our battles will be in the air, not on the ground. Now, unless you want to specialize and join the Hit Wizards with their Sniper program, which by the way, takes nerves of steel, there is no way you can get around this."

"What is the Sniper program?" Hermione asked.

"Just the same as Muggles, instead we use different weapons. You still have to learn Stealth and Tracking, Concealment and Disguise, but what you learn is to situate yourself in a position that cannot be breached and pick off people. But, you don't strike me as the type who can go around willy-nilly Avada-ing people for a living."

Hermione sighed. "Well, when do we start?" she asked, crestfallen.

"All in good time, Hermione. Now that I've got the bad news out of the way, the next piece is some ruddy brilliant news!" she said excitedly. "We're going to Hogwarts!"

Hermione nearly screamed she was so happy, but swallowed it as she reminded herself she was in the middle of the Auror Department. "How did you get it?"

"Hermione, you go where I go, and I go where Harry goes. It's not going to be all that fun, but there will be Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish with us. We'll get you some training in between patrols. That means, rain or shine, snow and bloody hail, we're out there!" she said with a smile.

"Sounds like the postal service," mumbled Hermione.

Tonks hugged her shoulder closer to her and whispered in her ear, "Yeah, but unlike the postal service, you might get a good shag at the end of the day," she said with a wink.

Hermione was elated. She'd be with Severus. Not together, but near. Then there would be times to steal away and be together. She'd be in Hogsmeade. Oh, if only she could live at Hogwarts!

Thanks to my beta, WriterMerrin, who works so hard to make each chapter special (at least I think so). Please review! They are so encouraging! I also like reading your thoughts and questions. :)

Chapter 58

Chapter 58 of 74

Severus and Hermione square off over her decision to become an Auror.

A/N: This fic is open for nomination for the 2009 Owl Awards! I hope you will check out this fic and the other wonderful stories on that site and put in some nominations!

The reviews have been so lovely! I appreciate each and every one. Keep them coming. Again, my deepest thanks to WriterMerrin, who keeps working with my pitiful grammatical errors! Lots of tense stuff ahead, so be warned. Severus is going to be madder than a wet hen.

The first of September arrived, and with it came the Hogwarts Express. Hermione was stationed at the end of the line where the students got into the carriages to take them to Hogwarts. She kept her eyes open, looking for Harry. She watched as Ginny, Ron, Luna, and Neville walked by. Ginny and Ron still weren't speaking to her. After they discovered her real past and identity, they had said they were afraid of her and felt betrayed. Only Luna and Neville said "Hi." The rest of the Gryffindors, having heard about the truth behind Hermione's life, decided to stay as far away as possible. Hermione wasn't too fussed. Sure, it stung that Ron and Ginny weren't talking to her, but the rest could hang.

Tonks jabbed Hermione in the ribs with her elbow and said, "That's the last of them. I didn't see Harry. Did you?"

"No," Hermione said as uncertainty began to creep inside her. "Let's go."

They jumped onto the departing train as it creaked its way out of the station.

"Go get that conductor to stop moving," Tonks said brusquely.

Hermione carefully made her way up to the front and pointed her wand at the Conductor's head.

"Stop this train right now," she said in a deadly whisper.

The conductor raised his hands and then furiously began to stop the train.

She stayed with him, silently keeping watch over him and her surroundings. At last, she heard a distant, "I got him!"

Hermione jumped off the train and saw Tonks with a bloodied Harry.

"Harry?" Hermione gasped. "What on earth happened to you?"

"Malfoy," he said through gritted teeth.

"What did he do?" she asked.

"I just wasn't careful enough," he muttered, not looking at her. "I have to get to the castle."

Tonks was in front of them, telling the conductor to go on. "We'll walk you to the castle, Harry," said Tonks. "Hermione and I got guard duty. Here, let me fix your face."

"Oh, right," Harry said, his face a bit brighter. "How do you like Auror training?"

"A bit mind-numbing at first, but now I get to do some actual field work," Hermione answered as she smiled.

"In this rain?"

"I got me slicker," said Tonks. "Hermione here's got a right proper Macintosh! Here we go! I'll send a Patronus to let them know we're coming."

Hermione watched a wolf or a werewolf leap out from Tonks' wand and bound its way towards the castle. Tonks' face fell at the sight of her own Patronus.

"It changed, you know," she whispered to Hermione. "It used to be a frog, jumping up and down all the time. Then one day, it became a werewolf."

"Hey, Tonks," Harry asked. "How did you find me?"

"Hermione and I noticed you didn't get off the train, and I knew you had that cloak on you. So when I noticed a compartment with the blinds drawn, I figured I'd search there."

"But what are you and Hermione doing here anyway? Why the guard duty?" he asked.

"We're stationed at Hogsmeade now to give the school extra protection. Dawlish, Proudfoot, and Savage are with us. Hermione will get some proper training when not on duty. She'll be a full-fledged Auror before the three years are up, that's for sure!" Tonks said proudly.

Harry glanced at Hermione briefly before setting his gaze straight ahead. Hermione figured he didn't want any reminders of Hermione's real life.

They remained silent the rest of the way, and when they reached the gates, Harry raised his wand, and Tonks stopped him. "Don't try. We'll have to wait it out in the rain."

"It won't work, Harry," said Hermione. "Not with all the extra enchantments Flitwick and Dumbledore have placed on the castle walls."

"Anti-intruder jinxes on all of them. Security has been tightened a hundred-fold this summer," informed Tonks. "But don't worry! Someone's comin' for you. I told you sending the Patronus ahead would help."

Hermione squeezed her hands and kept silent. When they arrived at the gate, Severus was there to greet them. Her heart leapt at the sight of him. Tonks and Harry knew about Snape and Hermione's marriage, but Severus must have felt he needed to keep in character. He was a right bastard. He glowered at Harry as he took out his wand and tapped the padlock once, so the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "How considerate of you to grace us with your presence, Potter."

Harry gritted his teeth and looked upon the Potions master as if he were filth. Severus spoke to Tonks, not once taking his unblinking eyes off Harry.

"You may leave, Nymphadora, Hermione. Potter is old enough to care of himself, I'm sure."

He shut the gates in their faces with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand so they slithered back into place.

"Your Patronus is quite... ah, interesting," he said with obvious disgust. "The new one looks a bit obnoxious."

He turned on his heel and walked back inside with Harry without even so much as a glance at his wife. Tonks was furious, but Hermione was livid.

"Your Patronus is quite interesting," Tonks mocked him. "Who does he think he is?"

Hermione was silent as she stood listening to the rain patter around her.

"He didn't even recognize you as his wife. He obviously knew who you were! He said your name! Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione, but your husband can be a real prick sometimes."

"Yes, well, speaking of pricks," Hermione began, "Severus will pay dearly for that scene. He'll have to keep on with his own prick for quite some time," she said testily. "He will suffer for that insulting display!"

Tonks snorted. "You're going to make him go without, even if he took the time to sneak away to be with you?"

"Not only that," Hermione spat, "but I'll lead him to believe he's going to get some snatch and shut the store down right in his face!"

"Circe's tits, Hermione!" she swore. "You've got a vindictive streak in you."

"You have no idea," she said as she looked at her mentor coldly. They remained there in the rain and mud. It was fucking cold, and Hermione felt if she didn't get relieved soon, she would get a horrible cold. If that happened, she'd have to take that bloody Pepper-up Potion with steam pouring out of her ears. It wasn't very dignified or helpful when one was trying to learn about concealment.

Soon, Dawlish and Savage showed up.

"Wotcher, Dawg," Tonks muttered. "Where's Proudfoot?" she asked Savage.

"Lucky wanker got the short straw. He gets to stay in tonight," said Savage as he pulled his slicker tighter around his neck. "Why don't you and the firstie go get him off his arse. He can help with some combat training."

"We'll see," Tonks said. "Cheers!" she called as she and Hermione walked off. As soon as they reached the boundary line, Tonks said, "Meet you in front of the Three Broomsticks." The two witches Apparated from there.

"Well, look what the kneazle dragged in," said Rosmerta stoutly. "Care for a Firewhisky?"

"Ta, Rosmerta," Tonks said tiredly.

Hermione had forgotten what dry felt like. She was well and truly knackered. She was starving too, but sleeping took precedence. After she drank her shot, she asked Tonks, "Where's our room?"

Rosmerta tossed her a key and said, "Number four, up the stairs last on the hall," she said quietly. Hermione took the key gratefully. "You coming?" she asked Tonks as she nudged her.

"No, I think I'll have another," she said morosely.

Hermione frowned. "I'm not getting out of bed if you pass out," she warned her.

"It's all right, Hermione," she said with a toss of her hand. "I'd like to be alone anyway."

Hermione said goodnight to Rosmerta and made her way up to her room. She barely managed to light a fire and get out of her wet clothes before collapsing into bed.

The next morning, all five Aurors sat together for breakfast and a morning meeting. Dawlish was the Senior Auror, so he led the discussion.

"All right, then," he said as he cleared his throat. "I'm bloody well tired and want to get in me bed. So, I'll make this short an' sweet. Every morning, we'll meet for breakfast to go over news with a nosh. We've got a snoot full, so listen up.

"First off, we need to recognize what we do and what we don't do. We don't provide special favors for little brown-nosers. We make sure the village is safe, Hogwarts is safe, and that includes the road from here to there. We stand guard in rotating shifts. We've got to mix it up a bit, keep 'em guessin'. Now for the big news. Snape?" he called out.

"Sir?" Hermione answered.

"Your husband is the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Congratulations. Did you know that?" he asked.

Hermione felt her face go numb. "Uh, no...I haven't spoken with my husband since the end of last school year. Last night, I saw him for a moment, but he didn't talk to me."

"S'true," Tonks corroborated. "He was a bloody arse."

"You don't have any knowledge of what has happened these last three months?" he asked.

"Like I said, Dawlish," Hermione repeated. "Severus and I knew the plan. We had to go our separate ways. If there's something I need to know, he'll tell me."

"You know there's a bloody curse on that job," whispered Savage.

"Yes, I am well aware!" snapped Hermione as she stabbed at her food.

Hermione continued working. The days were passing by quickly. The evenings were mostly spent working with Tonks and one of the other Aurors with combat training. Things were relatively calm, and the Aurors were a bit unnerved. They had expected at least *some* sort of upset either at the castle or in the village, but nothing was amiss.

Hermione was patrolling outside and watched as Ginny Weasley walked towards her

"Hi, Hermione," she said, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Ginny," she said with a nod.

"Look, I'm sorry we took everything so badly," she apologized. "It's just so hard to understand how you kept so much of your life from us. Also, it's a bit difficult for us to understand why you married Snape."

The mention of her husband churned Hermione's anger. "So, what do you want?" she snapped.

Ginny exhaled and looked around her before whispering, "I thought you would want to know that Harry has this book that he got in Potions. Our new professor, Slughorn, well, he's not the smartest bloke in the world. He's definitely not the discerning type. Anyway, Harry didn't have the Potions book he needed for class, and Slughorn gave him one. There are all these different notations in it, spells and different ways of making potions. I'm worried since, well, you remember how everything turned out with Tom's diary."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "You're saying he's taking orders from this book?" she asked.

"Not really *orders*. It's not as if he's being possessed. It's just that he's really getting into this book, and there are a lot of spells that look like they were created by this Prince person."

"What?" Hermione snapped at her.

Ginny's eyes flew wide open. "I-It says right on the book, 'This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.'"

Holy fuck! thought Hermione. *Severus! All his stupid little revenge plans, scribbling in that book. That book could be very dangerous in someone else's hands.*

Hermione remembered Severus losing his temper and slicing Sirius' chest open with his own spell, Sectumsempra. That spell was there along with others, most of them harmless, but some could really hurt or perhaps kill someone.

Hermione took Ginny by the shoulders. "That book needs to be returned to Slughorn. Harry shouldn't have that book," she said while reminding herself to steady her voice. "Ginny, would you pass a message to my husband?"

"Sure," she whispered, sounding afraid.

"Tell him number four. He'll figure it out," she said cryptically. Then she walked away from Ginny. She hated the silence, the feeling that he didn't care that they were apart. He had made no attempts to contact her, to inquire about her safety. She was so angry with him. She didn't know what she was going to do when he came knocking on her door.

Hermione didn't have time to think about her husband's reaction when, the following evening, Severus burst open the door and advanced on her menacingly.

She shakily pointed her wand at him, and he laughed. He turned his head from her and continued to laugh. Then his eyes met hers. "Is this what we've come to?" he snarled. "I don't even know you anymore."

Hermione lowered her wand, looking at him as if he had wounded her. He quickly grabbed her and threw her on the bed, forcing her nightgown up her legs. She began to scream as she tried to keep the material down.

He stopped, covering her mouth. "What kind of Auror are you?" he demanded. "You can't even handle me trying to assault you! Do you think a Death Eater, not your husband, would be any kinder or gentler?"

Hermione was sobbing now. He got up off her, and she curled into a ball. She could feel his anger washing over her.

"I told you to stay safe! I told you to stay at the Burrow or at Hogwarts! Imagine my surprise when I discovered from other people that my wife is now becoming an Auror! What in the bloody hell were you thinking? Do you want to get killed?" he roared.

Hermione cringed at his voice, the way his words hit her like a whip, punishing her, accusing her, belittling her. She covered her face. She didn't want to see his sneering visage watch her tears.

"*You are pathetic,*" he bit out at her.

Hermione raised her head and looked into his hate-filled eyes. She launched onto him and began to beat, scratch, and pummel any flesh her hands and nails met.

"You mean, spiteful shit!" she screamed. He threw her off him and touched his face with his fingers.

He stamped one foot on the floor. "FUCK!" he swore as he saw the blood on his fingers. He laughed again as Hermione scrambled to her feet, standing now in her rumpled nightgown, panting, and focusing her wand and eyes warily on him.

"Is that what they teach you at the Auror Department?" he sneered. "To attack with your nails?"

Hermione straightened her back and lowered her wand. *If I had known that the man who was my friend and husband would be attacking me! If I had only known that was what I should expect from the man I have shared my body with, the man who knew what I had been through, I think I would have been prepared!* she bit out at him.

She turned from him with her back straight and unyielding. She sat down at the vanity next to her bed, brushing her hair and ignoring him.

He stood there in silence. She looked at him through her mirror and said with her voice cold and cruel as she could, "Get out, Severus. Go back to your students you can control and whip into submission like the petty tyrant you are. I have no use for you."

"Why did you defy me?" he challenged her.

She turned and glared at him. "I don't owe you a damn thing. You forfeited that right the moment you barged into this room. I've been at the castle day and night, and not ONCE have you even expressed your care for me or your concern for what I do. You haven't even acknowledged me as your wife! I could have even accepted your anger...even your disappointment. But what you did by attacking me was unforgivable, Severus. Do you understand? *Unforgivable!*"

He turned slowly towards the door. He spoke to her while keeping his back to her. "I had to show you what you are doing to us, Hermione. I needed you to realize what was at stake. I am so angry that you have pitted us against each other! Isn't it enough the Dark Lord is doing that already?" He slammed his fists on the door. "You can't send me away, Hermione. I demand an answer. Why?"

Hermione looked at his back, watching it quiver and shake. "You did a terrible thing. You used our intimacy as a way to punish me. If any intruder had come through that door, I would have hexed him into oblivion, but not you. Why should I have to fear my husband?"

He turned around swiftly and said ferociously, "That is the fucking point, Hermione! That would be exactly what the Dark Lord would love, to get you in his clutches and force me to hurt you for his own warped pleasure. What I did to you would be just a taste of what I would be compelled to do if we want to live. Can you understand that? That is the cold, hard reality!"

"Why couldn't you just have told me?" she accused him.

"No amount of words could prepare you for that reality. It is killing me, knowing I can't touch you, can't love you. I am under so much pressure; I can't even speak of you to anyone. It's just plain torture that I have to pretend I have thrown you away, that I despise you. Isn't it enough? But no! You have to place yourself into the mix. Did you ever think of what you might have to do if you caught me? What I would have to do to escape from you? Do you realize I would have to kill you?" he whispered at the end.

Hermione gasped. Severus sat on the bed with his hands in his face. "Why do you have to make this so difficult?" he choked out.

Hermione stood, facing her husband, her arms folded across her chest. "Do you really think that it would be any different if I were at the Burrow or at Hogwarts? If they want to get to me, they will. At least I will have a fighting chance if they do come. So don't you accuse me of acting like some petulant child who has defied her father!" she snapped.

She walked to get her robe from her bureau. "Nothing about this war is fair. Your trying to hide me away like a precious china doll won't stop me from being broken. I'm not an object that you can tell what to do and make me do it. You can't decide my future. You can't do your work *and* protect me from any and all danger." She slipped her robe on and sat on the opposite side of the bed, their backs to each other.

"I love you, Hermione," Severus whispered.

"I love you too, Severus," she replied. "However, saying the words doesn't make what happened here resolved. I think you should return when you are able to show your love for me, not just say the words and treat me like your inferior."

She marched over and wrenched the door open, signaling her desire for him to leave. He left, sadly and with desperate, pleading looks. However, Hermione was unmoved. She meant what she had said.

When he had left, she slammed the door and charmed it shut. She stood there trembling. Slowly, she made her way to her bed, curled up, and cried.

"Well," said Dawlish over breakfast one morning. "If we could get that book from Potter and analyze it, that would be ideal. Do you think we could just demand it of him, Tonks?"

"I think so," she replied as she looked furtively over at Hermione.

"All right," said Proudfoot as he faced Hermione. "Come and spill it, love. What's got you all shaken up?"

Hermione shrugged. "I had a fight with Severus," she whispered.

"You mean you've actually had contact with him?" asked Savage, wide-eyed.

Hermione fixed her glare on him. "*I am* his wife, you realize!" she practically yelled.

"Settle down," ordered Dawlish lazily. "Hermione, you know that Severus is neck deep in You-Know-Who's shite. From the intelligence coming from Robards, Severus is now his right-hand man. Lucius Malfoy mucked it all up by not getting that prophecy. He's really pissed off at the lot of them. Snape is the only one who has been able to keep his arse clean."

"He's angry that I joined up with the Auror Department," Hermione blurted out.

They all looked at each other and then at her. Finally Tonks said, "I can't actually blame the poor sod for thinking that way. After all, I thought it would be safer if you went into hiding."

Hermione's head snapped up from her plate. "Oh, and get killed just like Karkaroff? No, thanks! Listen! If they want to get me, they'll do it. At least this way, I get to learn to protect myself," she raged.

"She's right, you know," said Proudfoot. "Still doesn't make the situation easier."

"Nothing is easy about war," huffed Hermione.

She stabbed at her breakfast, and Dawlish said, "All right then, best start the day. Tonks, Snape, you go off for guard duty. Savage and Proudfoot will relieve you."

They set off and began their work for the day. Hermione just wanted peace and quiet. She didn't want to have to prove herself to anyone. She was doing what she felt was right, just as Severus had done. Even though they were on bad terms, she still did not regret her choice.

Ginny came out around lunch and handed them some hot sandwiches and hot cocoa.

"Ohh!" said Tonks as she wrapped her hands around the cup. "Ta, Ginny."

"Hermione, can I talk to you alone?" she asked quietly.

"Sure," said Hermione. "You can walk with me on my next circuit."

Ginny was nervous, whatever it was. Hermione sighed and said, "Just come out with it, Ginny," she said impatiently.

"Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Harry is starting to get really obsessed about Draco. He swears something is going on. You've always been the logical one, so I thought I'd tell you and you could give me your assessment."

She continued. "When we were at Diagon Alley getting fitted for new robes, Draco and his mum were already there at Madam Malkin's. Twice she fiddled around his left forearm, and he nearly bit her head off. Harry reckons he's taken the Dark Mark.

"Then we followed him after he got rid of his mum, and he went into Knockturn Alley. He went into Borgin and Burkes. We used the Extendable Ears and heard what he said. It was a bit odd; we couldn't make sense of it all, but he wanted something fixed, he needed to know how to do it. Then there was something he bought, but didn't want to take it with him. I saw it. It was a necklace with opals on it."

"So," Hermione began slowly as they walked past the owlery. "You think that Draco is doing something ghastly for Voldemort? That he's really a Death Eater now, trying to get more Death Eaters into the school?"

Ginny looked around her nervously. "Yes," she whispered. "I don't know how he'd manage it, with all the security Dumbledore has placed on the castle walls, it's been declared impenetrable!"

"Well, I won't say Harry's instinct is unfounded; however, more proof is what's needed, Ginny. You'll have to actually catch him doing something. By the way, how are things with the D.A.? Are you all still meeting?"

"No," replied Ginny. "It's been so chaotic. Harry's so obsessed with that blasted book and then there's Quidditch. Harry's the new captain for Gryffindor."

Hermione smiled. "Good for him! That must be a nice change after the ban he got from Umbridge last year," she said.

"Well, there's so much disorder, and Harry is just far too cocky in Defense class. Ron thinks it's all so terribly funny, but he's getting detention all the time! Oh, and then there is the 'Slug Club.'"

"What?" Hermione whined. "Don't tell me that blowhard is doing that again!"

"He's invited me. He was rather fond of my Bat-Bogey Hex," she said while laughing. "Do you remember him?"

Hermione snorted. "Yes, I do. He was my Potions teacher. Although, he favored Lily a great deal. Lily, Severus, and I were always the top three in school. Some classes I outshone them, while others, like Potions, I was always third place. Lily and Severus were always vying for the top spot. Lily was a dab hand at Potions. Lily and Severus were in the Slug Club. I was far too busy trying not to upset the balance of people's futures to get involved. Then when I was practically pushed into the spotlight by the Slytherins, I hated it and got continuous backlashes about it from Sirius."

"It's so strange to hear you talk about Harry's mum," she said. "Sometimes I look at you, and I still can't believe how old you are. Hermione, why did you and Sirius not ever get along? Did something happen between you two?"

"Ginny," she said, "out of respect for Harry, I cannot go into any details. Just suffice it to say that he and I never got along. He never hated me like he did Severus, but he never trusted me, never had any faith in me. Everything to him was a slight, a shot, a deliberate knife in the back every time something happened. But finally, our last argument was so bad I did hurt him on purpose. I hurt his pride and his ego, and that was the end. We never spoke after that."

"Well, to be frank, Hermione, I'm concerned that Harry is following in Sirius' footsteps. Ron told me about their first Defense class with Snape, and it was a complete disaster. Harry mouthed off so badly that he got into serious trouble. The Quidditch team is in shambles, Harry's in detention, and all he can think about is that ruddy book!"

"Do you think you could get it away from him for a bit?" Hermione asked. "I mean, the Aurors could perform some enchantments on it. If Harry's feeling a bit paranoid about Draco being up to something, it would only stand to reason he would be at least a little suspicious about the book."

"No," Ginny answered. "All he can think about are the perfect potions he makes and how much praise he gets from Slughorn about how much he's like his mum."

"Well, try Ginny. And in the meantime, I will plan on talking to Harry this weekend. First Hogsmeade trip of the year!" she said as she went her own way. She was going to have to think about how to get that book from Harry, or at least get it to Severus. She just knew it had to be Severus'. It had to be.

Chapter 59

Chapter 59 of 74

A meeting with Harry goes pear-shaped, and Severus has something to say.

A/N: My thanks and gratitude to WriterMerrin, who really went above and beyond, working on this chapter. Without her, this chapter would have been garbled nonsense. Please read and review! Let me know your thoughts!

The day of the Hogsmeade trip arrived, and with it came news of more dementor attacks and the shocking arrest of a Stanley Shunpike, 21, who worked on the Knight Bus.

"What a complete crock of shite!" swore Dawlish. "I know that boy, and he doesn't have the guts to be a Death Eater!"

It was difficult to ignore the fact that Voldemort was influencing the Ministry of Magic. It made all the Aurors very nervous wondering what would come next. Therefore, with the day beginning with a gloom over it, Hermione wasn't about to allow herself to be distracted from her objective: getting her hands on that book.

Unfortunately, her practical training had to take precedence over any extra-curricular activities. Hermione had started working with Savage on Stealth and Concealment. Dawlish and Tonks admitted he was one of the best. Savage had taught her how to quickly disillusion herself at a moment's notice, how to know if someone was trailing her, and how to follow a target undetected.

"It's a lot about being Invisible," he explained.

"Another face in a faceless crowd," Hermione murmured.

"Hey!" Savage replied, "That's ruddy brilliant! That's exactly the point. Where did you get that?"

Hermione looked into his young face. Andrew Savage was a handsome, black-haired youth with an angular chin and cheekbones, with a bit of a rounded nose. His lips were full enough and he had gorgeous white, straight teeth. His first year had been 1985, the year she'd left to return to her timeline.

"Well, Savage," she explained. "It has to do with what I did in the First War."

"But I thought you had left for the Muggle world back then," he said, confused.

Hermione nodded. "It's true, I did. However, that didn't mean I was completely ignorant of what was going on. Especially when the Death Eaters kept coming into my local discos, kidnapping and killing the local girls."

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Well, I began to put a stop to it. It wasn't for me to figure out if a guy was a wizard or not...well, let me say I could figure out who was a Death Eater because I knew most of the younger ones."

"Really?" Savage asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Severus was friends with them in school, and I was recognized as 'Head of Gryffindor'...bunch of rubbish," she said waving her hand about dismissively.

"No, I heard about that," he replied. "It went out of fashion when Voldemort fell. I mean, once he was gone, Slytherins just didn't hold any more clout."

Hermione nodded. "Well, I saved some girls, Obliviated them if they saw any wizard play and went about my business. I learned how to 'fit in.' I dressed as the Muggles around me. It's a bit easier for me since I am a Muggle-born. I also learned how to change my hair color. Sometimes I just used Kool-Aid on my hair for a cheap dye job. I couldn't be using my wand for frivolous purposes."

"So, you already were using the techniques of Stealth and Concealment?" Savage asked.

"Yeah," Hermione said as she had thought about it. "I guess I was."

"Well, we need for you to learn this stuff magically. Also, we have to keep in mind you weren't specifically tracking anyone down. They were coming to you. Therefore, you'll need thorough training in that area. That's an Auror's bread and butter, knowing how to track down dark wizards. After that, I think you can hold your own, but that's the heart of it, finding the buggers," Savage informed her.

Tonks and Hermione walked along the main road in Hogsmeade. They were going to find Harry first and try to get him to talk about the book. Hermione had kept the details of Severus' Potions book to herself; she wanted Harry to either tell the truth or lie to her face. If she could get into a confidence about the book, he might be persuaded to hand it over. Once recovered, she hoped she could find out how deeply he had immersed himself in that book and uncover any dark spells he may have found.

It would be all so simple if Severus could take it away from him, but they still had not made up since their fight. Besides, Harry was notorious for sidestepping Severus. She'd have to reach Harry. Hopefully, Tonks could help.

Hermione saw Ron first, and he was actually happy to see her. "Hey, Hermione." He waved as he ambled over to her slowly.

"How are you, Ron?" she asked him.

Ron scratched the back of his head, looking a bit frustrated. "It's all right. Got loads of work! Thought all the free periods would give us some time to relax, but the classes, homework...it's brutal!"

Hermione gave a nod to Tonks, signaling she was fine for now. Hermione wasted no time changing the subject to Harry. "I heard from Ginny that Harry's got a new Potions textbook he's rather keen on," she said, hoping to garner information from him.

"That ruddy book!" he snarled. "He's forever rummaging through that thing. He's getting the best grades in Potions and won't share it with anyone. You won't believe what he did to me this morning. Seamus, Dean, and Neville were laughing like berks! I woke up this morning dangling by my ankle. There I was, yelling at him to let me go, and there he was, tearing through that damn book. He didn't even know the proper counter-curse...had to look it up! Git. He's learned loads though, from this Prince fellow."

"Mmm, that's what Ginny said. You think it's a boy and not a girl?" she asked, seeing if she could throw anything to stop Harry from finding out it belonged to Severus.

"Hermione," Ron said as he leaned into her. "It says, 'half-blood prince not half-blood princess.'"

"Where is Harry, anyway?" she asked as she looked around.

"He's off with Ginny. I don't like watching them snog."

"Oh!" Hermione said happily. "Harry and Ginny are an item, now? Well, good for them. I always thought they'd be well suited for each other."

"You did?" Ron said, looking at her doubtfully.

"Yes, I did. Now, take me to them. I want to speak to Harry about that book. I'm mighty curious."

A ruckus in the street had Ron and her rushing towards the scuffle. Harry was struggling with Mundungus Fletcher on the ground outside the Three Broomsticks.

"Geroffme!" the old man was wheezing.

"Those are Sirius' things! How could you steal from him? He was your friend. You bastard!" Harry was screaming.

Tonks Apparated to the scene, and she and Hermione pulled Harry off Dung, who, the minute no one was on him, Disapparated immediately.

Harry turned on them. "How could you let him go?" he shouted. "He was nicking Sirius' things...which by the way happen to belong to me by wizarding law!"

Tonks took him in hand. "Hose down, Harry. Dung's goin' nowhere. We'll get him and find out what he's been up to," she said. "It's always the same old story with him."

Hermione took Tonks aside, "I think I can do this myself. I spoke to Ron, and he's not happy about this book either. With him and Ginny, I think we can reach Harry."

"You're probably right," agreed Tonks. "My being there could only make him go on the defensive. It's much more friendly this way. I'll see you later, yeah?"

Hermione nodded and turned back to Harry, who was still a bit upset, but Ginny was doing a marvelous job of getting him to calm down. She stroked his arm and whispered to him. Hermione waited for the moment to pass.

Hermione approached Harry and looked into his eyes. He was murderously angry. She needed him to calm down...fast. "Hey, Harry, let's just go into the Three Broomsticks and have us some butterbeers, my treat, yeah?" she asked.

"All right," he grumbled.

After they were all settled in, and the row with Dung over and forgotten, Hermione decided to speak to Harry about the book.

"Oh, no you don't, Hermione," he said defensively. "I'm not handing that book over for nothing! The Prince has been helping me all year. I even won a bottle of Felix Felicis with it."

"Well, that's nice, Harry. However, you need to hand it over the Aurors. After all we went through with Ginny during second year, we don't want a repeat performance, do we?" she asked.

Harry smiled coldly at her. "Oh, that's right. *Our second year*. Our last year, if you remember, before you went time-hopping," he snarled.

"Are you ever going to let this go?" she demanded in frustration. "It was an accident. I couldn't come home until twelve years later. It wasn't my choice to stay or leave!"

"Yeah, just like it also wasn't your choice to leave the fighting to everyone else!" he yelled.

Hermione looked at him, shocked.

Harry continued. "I know all about it, Hermione. I know all about how you and Snape took off, letting braver and better people do your fighting and dying," he spat.

Hermione lost it. She pointed her wand at him and stood. "Up, now!" she demanded.

Harry glowered at her. "No," he said, defiance written clearly on his face.

Hermione leaned into him and whispered in a dead calm, "If you don't come with me, I will hex your arse off, Harry Potter. Now. Get. Up."

Harry stood up, and she ushered him out the back way. Ginny and Ron were right behind them. Once the four of them were alone, she lit into him.

"All right, fine. You want to know about your precious godfather? You should go pay a visit to Remus, Kingsley, and Moody. Oh, and Molly Weasley and Dumbledore...as a matter of fact, the whole blamed Order!" she yelled. "They all know about what kind of an animal he was!"

"ANIMAL!" Harry roared. "You..." He was grabbed by Ron and forced back against the brick wall. Hermione placed her wand at Harry's throat and looked deep into his eyes.

"You remember Christmas at Grimmauld Place when Sirius couldn't find Kreacher? Well, when you corrected him about the ability of a house-elf to Apparate without permission, it sparked a fight between us. He was not being a responsible godfather, sulking around, acting like a prat half the time. He was what he had always been: a spoiled, selfish, little boy who couldn't resist insulting or hexing anyone he didn't like *or* blaming other people for the mistakes he made.

"Remember we weren't talking that whole week? Do you remember that New Year's Eve? If you weren't completely blotto, that is. Well, your precious godfather came into my bedroom while I was sleeping and tried to rape me!" she seethed.

"You liar!" Harry shouted, and he began to struggle against Ron.

"Ask Lupin. He found me, running naked into the hallway, bruised and marked up."

"You and Snape probably drove him to it!" he shouted aimlessly.

Ginny stood up to him, getting in between Harry and Hermione. "How exactly does a person incite another person to rape?" she asked him.

"Always goading, never letting him have a moment's peace," Harry spat.

Hermione blasted a nearby garbage can and made the three of them jump. "He called me a freak!" she howled. "He insulted my husband and our most intimate moments. He never could resist a chance to humiliate me, make me feel worthless, ugly, and filthy. He had always been a bastard to me, and it was the last straw! I told him he was jealous. He was just *jealous* that Severus had a young witch to sleep with at night, and he had no one.

"He didn't lash out then. No, he waited like a coward until I was sleeping in my bed and pretended to be Severus. Then when I realized it was Sirius, he said the most vile and disgusting things. So don't you tell me he was some misunderstood, poor man. He was a bitter and hateful fuck! He did things...he..." She began to cry. Ginny rushed to her and held her.

"Hermione," she whispered. "I believe you."

"It's not just that," Hermione said as she wiped her eyes angrily. "Sirius was a devious person. He even used James and Lily so he could get back at Severus. I saw it all. Avery told me, made me watch..."

She gathered herself together and shouted, "Harry you have NO IDEA what really happened in those days! Sirius didn't know *shit* about anything that was really going on. Now, I want you to hand over that goddamn book!"

"No," Harry responded, his tone full of malice. "It's mine, and it's been helping me all year. What do you care anyway?"

"Ron told me about the Levicorpus Spell, Harry. There are things that are in that book that could be dangerous. This Prince fellow was obviously well versed in Dark magic and a dab hand at making his own spells."

"Who cares?" he shouted. "It was a stupid, funny spell that was just a joke."

"Harry," Hermione said, trying very hard to keep her voice calm. "You remember a similar experience during the World Cup two years ago? I haven't forgotten. Muggles lifted...hoisted up by their ankles for sport...and for what? A joke? Humiliation? Who was responsible for those acts? *Death Eaters!*"

Hermione and Harry's eyes locked. "Harry," she whispered. "I know things that would make you scream in terror and revulsion if I told you. Now give me that book."

Harry shook her head at her. "You know, you sound like Lucius Malfoy. He was desperate to get the prophecy from me as well. You just don't want me to succeed. You're just like Snape!"

"How can you say that?" Hermione breathed. "My third, fourth, and fifth years in school with you were all about protecting YOU!"

"Hermione," Harry said. "You have been lying to me for years. You have been like a sister to me, yet each time I turn around, you are revealing yet another piece of information you've been hiding from me. As far as I'm concerned, this friendship is over!"

He spun around and strode back into the Three Broomsticks. Ron made some sort of flimsy excuse to go after Harry while Ginny stayed. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. He doesn't mean it. I'm sure of it. I honestly think he'll need time to accept the truth. But if it's any consolation, I believe you. My mum told me before Sirius died. She was afraid of him getting to another girl. I'm really sorry...I'll try and talk sense into him," she said in one breath.

She disappeared, and Hermione walked around the Three Broomsticks so she wouldn't have to see Harry. She Disillusioned herself and watched the people come and go. She noticed as she stood across the street from the Three Broomsticks that Draco Malfoy was trying to have some kind of private conversation with Rosmerta.

She couldn't see both of them clearly, so she didn't know what he was doing exactly *It looks as if some sort of package is being handled between them*, she thought. Hermione would have to report this suspicious behavior to Gawain.

Hermione and Tonks were tucked from the day's work and were settling into bed for the evening. Savage and Proudfoot were on for guard duty. Hermione hadn't even begun to undress when there was a banging on the door.

"It's Dawlish! Get your arses downstairs posthaste! A girl's been cursed!"

Hermione and Tonks grabbed their wands and flung open the door, then lowered them when they saw it was Dawlish.

"This'll be good training for you, Snape," he said loudly. They all went down the road that led to Hogwarts, and there was a group of students mingling around something.

"Out of the way. Auror business!" Dawlish shouted.

"Nobody touch her!" Tonks bellowed to everyone. "Stay back!"

"Where is the object?" Dawlish asked around him. A girl who was kneeling next to the cursed girl sniffled and pointed to a silver necklace with Opals. Opals *That was what Malfoy had been looking at when he was in Borgin and Burkes!* Hermione thought. She had to talk to Minerva immediately. She and Dawlish gathered information as a cot was conjured and the injured girl was placed on it.

The cursed girl was Katie Bell. She was thrashing and screaming on the ground. Hermione placed a Silencing Spell on her.

"Where did this necklace come from?" Dawlish asked the girl who had been with Katie.

"I don't know!" she said through sniffling and crying. "She got this package and was acting so strange about it. She kept telling me it was none of my business. I tried to grab it from her, but it tore. That's when she began to scream."

Hermione saw Harry standing not too far away with Ron and Ginny by his side. She strode over to him and hissed, "You hear that? Now do you believe me? I expect that book in my hands tonight!"

Dawlish had the package held carefully. "Best get this to Professor Snape. He and Bill Weasley can have a crack at it. I'll do it; you get these young people safely back to the castle."

Crestfallen, Hermione led the group towards Hogwarts where she would not even get to see Severus. She was getting concerned. Was *hæver* going to make things up with her? She knew Harry wasn't going to let her have that damned book now. She had lost her temper and a perfect opportunity. She wished she could just rail at Severus for being so careless with his property, but she just didn't have the heart. She couldn't even reach him. Everything was just going straight to hell.

Hermione and Tonks rounded all the students up and marched them back to the castle.

"Tonks," Hermione whispered. "I need to get into the castle and talk to Minerva. It's important, or I wouldn't ask for you to cover for me. This necklace business is not isolated."

"What are you thinking?" asked Tonks.

"Well, I know for a fact that that particular necklace was in Borgin and Burkes just before the start of term and that Draco Malfoy was speaking to the proprietor of the establishment about that necklace."

"Crikey, Hermione! You think Draco and Katie?" she asked her.

"Of course, not," Hermione interrupted. "But I think he might have placed her under the Imperius Curse. That friend of hers said was acting strangely, wouldn't tell her anything about the package. I mean, what girl does that to her best girlfriend if there isn't something dodgy behind it?"

Tonks looked at her and said, "All right, Hermione. You just don't take all night about it! Gawain will have our arses if you aren't back in the morning!"

Hermione nodded and went her way to see Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva?" Hermione asked as she opened the door to her office.

"Hermione!" she said. "How nice to see you. Come in."

Hermione closed the door behind her. "They haven't contacted you? You don't know what's happened?" she asked her former professor suspiciously.

"NO! What is it?" she asked shakily as she rose from her seat.

"Katie Bell has been cursed," Hermione said. "She had this necklace, and her skin had contact with it. She went into some sort of fit. It was as if someone was putting her through the Cruciatus, but no one was there doing it."

"Oh, my heavens!" said Minerva as she went to leave her office.

Hermione stopped her. "Minerva, I saw Draco Malfoy in Hogsmeade today. He was there for only a short while, and it was at the height of the business day. He was talking to Madam Rosmerta very suspiciously, and it was in her establishment that Katie Bell had been in last."

Minerva gasped. "You think Draco Malfoy has Rosmerta under some sort of *curse*?" she whispered.

She grasped Hermione's hand, and the younger witch held her close to her. "I think it is worse than that, Minerva. I have reason to believe Draco Malfoy has taken the Dark Mark. I think he has placed Rosmerta and perhaps Katie under the Imperius."

"But why?" Minerva asked. "I mean, besides the obvious. But Draco? A student?"

"You need to call an Order Meeting...but only the Advance Guard."

"Yes," she whispered. "Albus is gone off to do more work for the Order, but I can get in."

"Fine," said Hermione.

"Oh, and Minerva, if Harry or the others come asking about Draco, just throw them off the scent. I don't need Harry's mucking about. I can't be there all the time to save his sorry hide," she said harshly.

Minerva sent Hermione an owl that Harry had indeed tried to point the finger at Draco. As Hermione sat at her vanity, reading and re-reading the parchment, she knew that she was going to have to speak with Severus. It irked her that he had not yet come to apologize for his deplorable behavior and his violence, but for the good of the Order, she was going to have to place her own personal feelings aside. She would just have to make that clear to Severus. It isn't personal; it's business.

She folded up the parchment and tapped a drawer with her wand, opening it and placing the note inside. There was a knock on the door. Hermione quickly tied up her dressing gown and grabbed her wand.

"Who is it?"

"Severus," said the low, baritone voice behind the door.

Hermione laid her head on the doorframe. She took a couple of deep cleansing breaths and opened the door.

"May I come in?" he asked politely.

"You may," she answered coolly, keeping her wand and eye trained on him.

He came in and removed his traveling cloak. He sat down on a chair and said, "I miss you. I treated you like a seventeen-year-old and not the thirty-seven-year-old you are. I forgot that you have choices, and I even told you that once after Black...well, I told you not to ever be anyone's victim. You always have a choice. I'm not happy, mind you." He stood and crossed his arms, his posture rigid and imposing. "I'm fucking angry, I do not approve of your choice; however, it *is* your choice. I will support your

decision to be an Auror. There was indeed a great deal of logic to your argument, and I can only hope we never have to cross each other in battle."

His cool reserve failed him then, and he stood, reaching out for her, holding her close. "I couldn't handle that, Hermione. I'd turn my own wand on myself before I'd hurt you," he whispered into her hair.

"But I did," he said as he released her. "I acted like a complete arse, and all I can say is that I regret everything I said and did that hurt you and made you feel that my love and my respect for your intelligence was less than what I have always felt for you. I love you, and I want us to move forward...together."

Hermione looked at him and turned her head in thought. When she turned back to face him, she noticed he was leering at her figure in her dressing gown.

"Feeling randy?" she asked wantonly.

"Yes," he admitted in a low baritone.

"Have you come to make peace with me just because you want a piece?" she quipped.

"NO!" he said vehemently. "I'm here because I can't stand this distance between us, and I need your forgiveness!"

"Do you want me, Severus?" she asked as she began to stalk towards him.

"You know I do," he bit out.

"Then take me, husband, and mind your manners," she whispered.

"What does that mean?" he whispered, brushing her lips with his fingers.

"That means I want you to do it right, the way I like it," she whispered. Then she grabbed his neck and kissed him firmly on the lips. Without words, they began to hastily remove clothing from each other. Hermione opened her mouth and urged him to open as well. They stood there, hands exploring and seeking the other, eager for the difference. Hard seeking soft, heat searching for friction that would make them both explode.

Somehow without stopping, they found their way to her bed. Hermione arched her back, relishing how his lips heated her flesh.

"Careful," she whispered. "This bed squeaks."

Severus lifted his head from her lower belly. "How the hell do you know that?" he asked in alarm.

She grinned lazily. "Because when I masturbate, I have to keep my movements at a minimum, otherwise Tonks complains." She started laughing in spite of herself, and Severus smirked as he continued his exploration of her inner thighs.

"Sod it," he murmured as he rose above her. "I'm going to make everyone in this damn place know there's some decent shagging going around here."

"No!" Hermione moaned. "No one can know about this!"

Together, they whispered, "Silencing Spells."

Severus grabbed for his wand, which was on the floor at an awkward angle.

"No, I'll do it," panted Hermione as Severus rubbed his cock against her wet pussy.

"Shit!" she groaned as she grabbed her wand and tried to whisper the incantation. When she finished, she threw the wand to the floor. "Now!"

With that, he thrust himself inside her, and Hermione moaned along with her husband.

"Shite, Hermione. How long have I been making love to you?" he groaned.

"Years...I-I can't remember," she panted.

She watched Severus as he arched, burying all of him inside her. "I will never grow tired of this," he grunted.

He leaned over her, holding her knees to her shoulders. He was fucking her properly now, and it had never been so good. The squeaking bed somehow added to the thrill of it all. Severus' beautiful body hovered over her, his eyes leering lustfully at her breasts as they bounced with each plunge of his cock inside her, making her cry out those tiny, soft mewls that always drove him wild with excitement. He was going to come with her, and they whispered, urging the other on to completion.

Hermione's mind was reeling. The squeaking of the bed, the panting and grunts coming from Severus mingled with her own desperate cries for release made her feel she was floating away from everything.

"Please, Hermione," whispered Severus. "My sweet girl, melt around me. Let me feel you come undone."

Hermione's cries grew sharper, and she begged him to go faster. He drove into her and began to seize up, roaring his release. She gasped over and over, his name on mantra on her lips. Even after they had stilled and lay intertwined in the other, she couldn't stop whispering his name.

As their breathing calmed, Hermione remembered that song from long ago that she had always liked but never understood. She understood it now. She felt it deep inside. All she needed was air to breathe and the man next to her to make love to...

Chapter 60

Chapter 60 of 74

Ginny tells Hermione her plan to steal the Half-Blood Prince's book from Harry. Hermione goes on an outing with Savage and Mundungus Fletcher to learn about Stealth and Tracking.

A/N: My thanks to WriterMerrin for her extraordinary work on this chapter. I hope you all enjoy this chapter, and again, please review! I love each and every one I get. The OWL Awards are soon coming to a close. Please go over and nominate your favorite fics before it's too late!

"We have a lot to talk about," Hermione said as Severus dressed.

"I realize that. Thus the reason for my getting dressed," he said as he slipped on his boots.

"I need you to know something, but I need you to keep calm about it."

Severus rumbled his long hair with his long, white fingers then rubbed his eyes. "I hate it when you do that, Hermione. I can't promise that. So just tell me."

"Ginny Weasley said that Harry received an interesting textbook when he began Potions this year. It bears the label 'The Half-Blood Prince.'"

Severus eyes grew furious. "Why?" he said, his voice growing testy.

"Don't ask me!" she said defensively. She pointed a finger at him. "You obviously left it behind when you moved your storage items from the dungeons to the Defense storerooms. Why on earth you kept that book out..."

"...It's a teaching manual!" he snapped.

"Well, it's now become more than that. He's using the spells in there, you realize. He already, according to Ron and Ginny, has become proficient in *Mufflato*, *Levicorpus*, and *Langlock*. He studies it constantly as his reference guide for all his Potions work. It will be only a matter of time until he discovers one of your darker spells."

Severus began to pace the room. "Have you confronted him about the book?"

"Yes," she answered, to which Severus threw his hands in the air.

Hermione gasped. "I needed to know how badly he was connected to it! I remember how hard you worked on your Potions books." She gave him a suspicious glance.

"Hold it. Did you place a dark spell on it?" she breathed.

Severus avoided looking her in the eye. "Well, that answers it!" she said as she tore the sheets off her as she got up from the bed. "There is no way he will hand it over now. It also explains his obsession with finding out who the 'Prince' is."

"He wants to find me out?" he asked with an incredulous look on his face.

Hermione gave him a saccharine sweet smile. "Irony, isn't it? Harry always claimed he never could learn anything from you, and look at him now! His Potions grades have never been better."

Severus smirked at her sarcastically. "Well, we need a plan. I will try to keep an eye on him, but I can't make any promises."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"I'll tell you later. Can you stay for Christmas?" he asked as he put his cloak back on. "I'd really like to spend some time with you alone."

He kissed her, and Hermione nuzzled his neck with her face. "I suppose we should take advantage of whatever time we can steal. Things are getting desperate now."

"Yes," he replied, sounding a bit sad. "There are things I cannot tell you now, but in time, I shall. Love me, Hermione. Remember the promises you and I made to each other?"

"I promised that even if the world were to turn its back on you, I wouldn't."

He closed his eyes. "Yes," he breathed. "You *will* hold to it?"

"I will."

He wrapped his arms around her. "I'll hold to you as well, and I will never stop loving you. Remember, Hermione. No matter what the future brings, I will love you, and that will never change."

They smiled as the magic around them swirled. "Why does it do that?" Hermione mused as she watched the sparkling rainbow of shimmering colors swirl about them.

"I don't know," he whispered. He looked at her. "It comforts me, though," he said quietly.

They kissed again, and he was gone. Hermione placed her hand on the door and ran her fingers along the grain of the wood. There were terrible times ahead. She could feel it. But she willed herself to remain in the present time.

I'm here today, she thought. Tomorrow can wait.

"Stealth and Tracking almost did me in," explained Tonks. "That's why I've handed you off to Savage. He's the best."

Hermione nodded and finished off her morning tea. "Fine. How do we go about this?"

Savage placed his arms on the table and said, "From our previous conversations, you've got stealth spot on. You know how to blend into a crowd when you need to and all that. However, you've never had to actually 'track' anybody. We need you to know how to be offensive in your thinking. Defense is your first reaction."

"I'm off," said Tonks. "Good luck."

Hermione said a hasty goodbye and turned back to Savage. "Now," he whispered carefully as he leaned in closer, "I know what I'm about to say is unorthodox; hell, it may even be illegal, but you know what?" he asked as he glanced around the room cautiously. "It'll be bloody well worth it. Now let's go."

Hermione followed Savage outside and Apparated with him into Muggle London.

Hermione looked out of the alley they were in. "Why are we here?"

Savage smiled. "We're here to meet our contact. And there he is!"

"Cor Blimey, Savage, you old cocker!" Mundungus Fletcher wheezed. "Ain't it enough I got bloody 'Arry Potter on me arse? Now the Aurors are comin' for me too?"

"Dung," Savage said as he placed a hand on the old man's shoulder. "We all know you and Sirius were old friends; hell, even he didn't want the shite. He's probably up there in heaven laughing his arse off at the thought of the ruddy Black fortune being peddled in Knockturn Alley!"

"Eh, an' what about 'er?" he asked, suspiciously pointing at Hermione.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "What about me, Dung?" she challenged him. "D'you think I'm gonna turn in the only person who agreed with Severus that Sirius was better off dead than living? Besides, Harry and I are no longer friends."

"Well now, there's an interestin' piece o' gossip," Dung muttered as he rubbed his stubbly chin.

Savage spoke up. "Look, Dung, Hermione is here to work on her Stealth and Tracking training. You helped me, and I got the best marks in my class. So, what do you say? Help out, and I'll make sure Potter gets off your back for a while... let you breathe a bit."

"A' right then," he agreed. He turned to Hermione. "Wot you want me to call you?"

"Just call me Snape," she said briskly.

"Fine," he replied. "Let's get started." Dung led them out into an area of London that was busy, but grimy and dingy.

"Now, you see where we are: a highly pop'lated area, but with a lot o' people lookin' and dressin' the same. You'd do best to brush up on your Transfigurin' spells. You'll need to know how to look in a situation."

"You see, Hermione," added Savage. "It's all about fitting into the scenery. Just like how you would do when going out to the clubs at night: a face in a faceless crowd."

Dung ushered them into another vacant alleyway and transfigured them into dingier clothes.

"Now," he said. "We are all in Stealth mode for where we are. Let's talk about trackin'."

"Trackin' people takes a great deal o' discretion an' patience. You need good eyesight, fortitude, and a keen mind. You got to be awares o' your surroundin's," Dung continued. "Furthermore, you 'ave to know where to look. Lookin' and havin' good eyes is all well an' good, but it's the one who knows where and how to look that will catch the prize!" he exclaimed.

He led them to a bench in a derelict park. He sat and began to puff on his pipe. "Now, Snape, you got to know *how* to look for wot you want. So, for me, it's allus a good deal ta git a bit of somethin' wot people think is nuthin'. Now where d'you think I'm going to find it? Buckingham Palace? The Minister of Magic's House?" he asked comically.

Hermione smirked and shook her head.

"That's righ'," he said with a knowing look. "I go mos'ly where the Aurors won't find me easily. I ten' to go to Portobello Road, Notting Hill, otherwise, places where lots o' people are muckin' about an' are shabby like me, lookin' for a deal. I fit in, and nobody'll think what all 'bout it."

Savage, who was sitting on Hermione's other side, said, "Now, when it comes down to tracking suspected Dark wizards or a person who is wanted and known to be dangerous, you have to be aware and knowledgeable of the places the target might frequent and learn the target's likes and dislikes. You have to think like the person you are tracking. And during all that time, you'll have to deal with dodgy people, unsavory lots, you know? And they'll always want you to grease a palm for an answer."

Hermione nodded. "I know all about getting what I want from people. I used to do it all the time."

"Wot's this?" rasped Dung. "When 'ave you ever been on th' wrong side o' th' law?"

Hermione smiled at Dung's shock. "During the first war, I knew how to get what I needed from men. A smile and a promise, flash a bit of skin, and they will throw money, drugs..." She stopped talking and watched the faces on the men beside her.

"Blimey, Snape," said Savage. "You should be teaching the ruddy class!"

"Oh, no!" said Hermione, shaking her head furiously. "I admit that I am good at some parts of being an Auror, but I don't know if I would know the first thing about catching a dark wizard."

"Oh, that's simple enough," said Dung as he coughed.

"How?" asked Hermione.

"You become a dark wizard, or in your case, a witch."

Hermione turned to Savage. He nodded in agreement. "You see, Hermione, think about the old days when Barty Crouch was in power and You-Know-Who was out there cursing people left and right. Old Barty let us Aurors do the most dangerous types of magic in order to subdue and capture them. Now, Old Mad-Eye, he's good. He's tough and takes no prisoners if they fight him, but he never placed anyone under an Unforgivable. Didn't have to. He'd scare the piss out of everyone who knew the bastard and squeeze until there were no more places for the poor bastard to hide. He made them all aware of his presence. Moody always got his man, but what they don't tell you is how many got away for the sake of one or two criminals.

"What I do," said Savage, "is I ingratiate myself into their society. I learn their ways quickly, adapt their verbiage, and if I can't, I make myself become a likeable bloke. I'm nobody, no threat. Then when the time comes, I don't go it alone. I don't go at all! I call the Aurors in, and they rain down on ten or twenty, breaking up gangs, syndicates, whatnot without blowing my cover. It's the way I work. And if I'm not mistaken, it's how your husband likes to do things as well."

"You're right," Hermione whispered.

"Now, more practical things," Savage continued as he counted on his finger. "You have to be fit. You need to be able to cast a powerful glamour on yourself that can't be detected. You have to be prepared to duel at a moment's notice. You have to be able to maintain linear information. Your test showed us you have a photographic memory."

"I do," admitted Hermione.

"Well," Savage said with a smile, "You are incredibly well suited to do this work. It's all about practical application. After this gig in Hogsmeade, I think we'll be ready to get out there and start arresting people. It's all getting to be a mess. We're the lucky bastards out around Hogwarts, not out by Diagon Alley, or worse, working in Muggle London, calling the Obliviators every blessed day."

After spending the day watching Dung make several illegal purchases and contacts, Hermione was starting to get the idea of what they had been telling her. Dung had an amazing memory for people's likes, dislikes, what areas they specialized in; then when another contact came to him wanting to know about an obscure item he had heard about, he could tell them...for a price...who the best person would be to contact. Hermione watched in awe as Dung led them on a seemingly wild goose chase for a good deal on some silver. There seemed to be a lot of people wanting a piece of the same. Dung faked disinterest, outright lied and, at times, even extorted and blackmailed

people for information. He could recall the dastardliest things a witch or wizard had done from ten, fifteen, even twenty years ago.

"That was the most incredible thing I've ever seen!" she said to Savage as they made their way back to the Three Broomsticks.

"You're going to start seeing things a lot differently aren't you?" he asked her.

"I'm sure I will," she agreed.

"I dare you to make an experiment. Just pick someone that you normally see every day and keep tabs on them, but not one of us...we work too closely, it wouldn't be a fair test...not that you won't ever be asked to spy on one of your co-workers. Bloody shame, but it happens," Savage admitted.

Hermione looked around as she walked across the floor on her way to her room. She saw Rosmerta. Rosmerta was someone she saw every day, and she had seen her talking with Draco Malfoy. She picked her and decided to keep her ears and eyes open.

The days began to fly, and Hermione worked hard at her training. There were duels, hand-to-hand combat training, transfiguring and untransfiguring objects. Hermione did not disappoint her fellow Aurors. She impressed her colleagues and continued to flourish as an Auror-in-training.

She also continued to meet with Ginny as she made her rounds at Hogwarts. The fifth-year was having a hard time of things.

"Katie Bell still is in St. Mungo's," Ginny told her one late November day as Hermione completed her first circuit around the grounds.

"What else is going on?" Hermione asked gently.

The redhead shrugged. "Harry's really mad, Hermione. We can't even mention you around him. He's got that damn book plastered to his side, and he's getting detention every other day. The Quidditch Team is falling apart at the seams. Katie's absence made for a pretty tense try-out. Dean Thomas got the spot, which meant Seamus Finnegan didn't, and now's he's hacked-off at Harry. Ron feels completely incompetent since Harry and I are involved with the 'Slug Club' and he's not. He about killed Dezmelda during our last practice, and all he can say is that 'it's nerves.'"

Hermione draped her woolen wrap around her tighter. She stifled an urge to laugh. The teenage days of drama! She could only shake her head.

"Well, it seems Harry still hasn't discovered the person behind the nom de plume," she pressed.

"No, he hasn't, but that still doesn't stop him from being a complete prat about it. I think it's cheating. I've actually thought about telling Professor Snape about it. Harry won't even let us near it. It's as if he can't see without it, like there's some compulsion curse on it. I can't forget how he totally went off on you in Hogsmeade last month...OH!" she said loudly. "I haven't told you the biggest news. Ron finally got a girlfriend."

"Really?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes, it's ghastly! He spends most of his free-time snogging Lavender..."

"...Lavender Brown?" Hermione gasped.

Ginny giggled. "Yes, she's gone round the twist for Ron, and they are just pathetic, but they seem to really like each other, so live and let live, right?"

Hermione nodded and was impressed with Ginny's acceptance of Lavender. Ginny had never cared much for Lavender or Pavarti, who was always, in Ginny's estimation, a bit too boy-crazy and far too girly-girl for her liking.

"But, you know, Ron likes his fame way too much. Lavender is all about finding a decent wizard who will adore her give her lots of babies, and some notoriety in her life. After all, Ron is Harry's best friend..." She stopped short.

"Hermione, I'm sorry," she said, her face blushing.

Hermione smiled at her. "Don't apologize, Ginny. It's not your fault what's going on between Harry and me. I just hope Harry doesn't make you choose."

"Well, if that happens, Harry will lose!" she snapped. "I'm no longer the little girl who had the crush on the famous Harry Potter. I know Harry...the real Harry. I know, well, I just know the real him," she said as she blushed.

"I understand, Ginny," said Hermione sympathetically. She knew what she had meant, for she knew the real Severus. Behind the cold and unemotional front, black robes, and sneering face was a man who had a laugh that could make you feel he could make everything all right again. She knew how greasy his hair really was...and it was greasy if he didn't wash it every day...she also knew how his face contorted right when he was about to have a fantastic orgasm and how he hated to have his quills in his drawer haphazardly. They all had to be separated, just like his change. Knuts in one pocket, Sickles in another, and Galleons still in another. It was as if the coins were never to touch the others or something. She had stopped trying to figure out the mystery years ago. They were his quirks, and he was her wizard.

"Well anyway," Ginny continued, "we've got this Slug Club Party for Christmas coming up in a couple of weeks, just before hols. Harry and I are going, but don't know how long we'll stay. Are you coming? I mean you are Snape's wife."

"I don't think so," she said. "The last thing I need is to be seen with Severus. It could make life for him particularly heinous if the Dark Lord found out."

"So, what are you going to do for Christmas?" Ginny asked.

"I am planning on staying here with Severus; that is if the Auror Department lets me have some free time."

"They should," Ginny said grudgingly. "You and Professor Snape haven't had the most typical of marriages, have you?"

Hermione smirked. "You may be right. This year certainly has been trying."

"Are things okay with you two?" she asked.

"We'll be fine, Ginny. Every couple struggles, some more than others, but when you can work things out and be honest about your mistakes, you can fix nearly everything. Yet, I will say that having a break and spending some quality together would be a much needed blessing," Hermione replied.

"Have you given any thought about just stealing the book from Harry?"

Ginny nodded her head. "If I could nick Tom Riddle's diary from his things at age eleven, I'm sure I can at least do that and hide my tracks better."

Hermione nodded her head approvingly. "Well done, Ginny. Go over the top."

Hermione found herself back in Gawain Robards office in London a week later.

"It says here on this parchment that you are requesting a two-week vacation from your Auror training to spend the holidays with your husband. Granger..."

"...Snape," she spat at him. 'My name is Hermione Snape. Perhaps this is the reason I need this vacation. No one can seem to recall that I am a married woman and have been for a year and a half. Yet, the time my husband and I have been able to be together since June has been virtually non-existent.'

Gawain watched Hermione. She was keeping her temper in check when it was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to tell him she needed to be with her husband, she needed to have lots of hot, sweaty, dirty, kinky sex and debate with him over potions ingredients and tell him all about her Auror training. She wanted to tell him it had been too long since she had oral sex (giving and receiving) and seeing that look on Severus' face when she slapped his bare arse. She wanted to hear about his dunderheads and watch him roar up and down about how each year was growing exponentially worse. She wanted to get drunk with him and bitch about Voldemort and how they hated being apart. Then she wanted to dream together about the life they wanted: the babies and the plush couches. She wanted to think about all the wonderful Christmases they were looking forward to having with all their children and tease over which houses they'd be in. She just wanted it, even if it could only be for *two weeks*, just to be a bloody wife!

Gawain folded his hands and said, "I know things have been difficult. You've already had your fair share of dealing with this damn war. From what Dawlish says, you have shown an amazing depth of knowledge, and your psychological tests were excellent. You just may be the first Auror to ever finish the program in less than three years. So, I'm giving you your two weeks. However, you can personally thank each one of your team for this gift. They all let me know I'd better give it to you, especially Tonks, who threatened to hex my bullocks off if I didn't let you go. Besides, she told me a VERY interesting story about a couple shagging in the room you two share at the Three Broomsticks. It sounded as if someone had cast a Silencing Spell that was a little less than pristine. Therefore, she had to fix the situation before anyone realized what was going on."

Hermione was mortified.

"No pun intended, Hermione, but from the sound of things, you need to get laid more often. Happy Christmas," he said with a small smile.

"Happy Christmas," she choked out as she made a hasty exit. She was beyond embarrassed. How was she going to face her fellow Aurors ever again?

A/N: Please read and review!

Chapter 61

Chapter 61 of 74

Severus confides in Hermione the secrets he has kept to himself for years.

A/N: This was originally the first part of HUGE chapter. So, there is more adventure and revelations to come. PLEASE REVIEW! This was the most difficult chapter I had to write for this fic. I do want to hear from you. Thanks!

Tonks was spending Christmas with her parents. It had been a while since she'd had a proper vacation. Molly Wesley had sent her owl after owl, begging her to come to the Burrow. She told her Remus was going to be there, but Tonks wasn't in the mood to deal with him.

Hermione packed and watched Tonks sulk as she looked out the window, sipping on her cocoa.

"Tonks," Hermione said. "You are going to have to make a decision. This living in limbo is tearing you apart. I hate seeing you so miserable!"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I just love him. I love him and to be near him and not able to kiss and hold him is just torture! It will just hurt less if I don't go," she reasoned as she wiped her tears away with her sleeve.

Hermione was silent, but went and gave her friend a hug.

"Do you want him hexed? Poisoned? Honestly, Severus wouldn't be fussed, really," she asked with a sly smile.

Tonks laughed. "I love you, Hermione. Oh, God, why can't I just hate him or at least not give a flying fuck!" she said in exasperation.

Hermione clapped her hand on top of Tonks'. "I had to wait, and there were times that Severus thought it would be too much trouble. I had to fight and at times he did as well. You know, I think your absence at the Burrow will get him thinking. Don't give up, Tonks. I know he loves you. He looks at you the way a bloke would if he was in love!"

Hermione went to finish packing and headed to the castle. Tonks joined her since she was relieving Dawlish for guard duty. She hugged her friend good-bye, and Tonks shouted after her, "HEY, HAVE AN ORGASM FOR ME!"

Dawlish and Proudfoot roared with laughter. As she walked through the gate, she could hear the mocking noises of a bed creaking and the screams of a woman having an orgasm. *Bastards!* she thought.

The moment Hermione entered her home...for where Severus was, was home...she gasped as she was attacked from behind as her cloak and robes were stripped from her.

She giggled at the fervor Severus was showing at getting her naked.

"The little idiots are gone...finally!" he whispered lowly in her ear. "Now, we have exactly two weeks for me to fulfill every naughty, deviant, horny, little fantasy I've been wanking off to for the last few months!"

"Where do we start?" she breathed, completely turned on from the idea.

He spun her around. "You aren't afraid?" he asked her darkly.

"Honestly, Severus," she said. "What kind of *deviant* sexual naughtiness can embarrass me after all this time? Especially when I am the one who control *the whip*?"

He Floored her inside the Gryffindor common room. He breathed in the smell of wood smoke and years of Gryffindors past.

"Severus!" she hissed as she covered herself with her arms and hands. She was freezing. "Aren't there any Gryffindors staying for Christmas?"

"Not one," he said lazily. "I checked the roster. Now, I want you to take that Gryffindor banner off that wall and kneel naked on it and give me head right on top of it."

"You are perverted," she said without hesitation at his request. "Besides, am not in charge of your humiliation?"

Severus flashed her a very wicked smile. "There are only two Slytherins staying for Christmas, Hermione, and my word is law. How does the thought of me giving you oral pleasure on top of the Slytherin banner strike you?"

She smirked and bit her lower lip. "You're on."

The next morning, they stretched out in their bathrobes in front of the fire, eating a delicious breakfast. It was heavenly! Hermione opened her robe and crawled to him, snuggling on top of him as he rested his back on the end of the couch.

"Are you finished eating?" he asked as he slipped his hands underneath her open robe and stroked her back down to her bum where he cupped her cheeks and pulled her up higher onto him.

"I don't know," she said as she sighed in pleasure. "I love being like this with you. I think Christmas is my favorite time of the year!"

"Anytime I can be with you is my favorite time of the year," he declared.

"Do you have any other plans for us?" she asked. After last night, she felt incredibly depraved and impish. She was looking forward to doing more of the same.

"My plan is to eat, sleep, and make love," he said. "Of course not particularly in that order," he added.

"Well, we should sleep then," she decided as she burrowed into his chest. "I can't have sex on a full tummy."

"Well, there are some things we need to discuss, Hermione. I don't want to do this, but our time is so limited. These next two weeks we can digest it all and come to a conclusion."

"Oh, no," she moaned as she sat up. "I don't want to hear this, do I?" she whined. "At any rate, it's not fair! These were to be OUR two weeks of decadence and perversion." She climbed away from him in a huff. She crossed her arms childishly. "I declare ANY discussion that has nothing to do with the preoccupation of eating, sleeping, and fucking, to be a perversion! And, may I add that two out of the three said activities can be placed in the sexual column!"

"Well," he said, laughing softly as he lightly skimmed her naked breasts with his fingertips before closing her robe. "I'll begin with the easier development and try to make this as painless as possible. You know I would rather save any pain for you to wield. I was at the Slughorn party. I didn't plan on going, but you need to understand something. The Dark Lord has placed it upon me to watch over the young Malfoy while his father is still in Azkaban. He was caught trying to sneak in, and I was caught in the shuffle.

"Well, you remember Slughorn...the blowhard...he couldn't keep his trap shut about Potter. He jabbered incessantly about how brilliant the boy was doing in Potions. Of course, Potter didn't want to even look me in the face. He looked as guilty as I had ever seen him."

"Well," Hermione said as she threw up her hands, "Ginny told me Harry was becoming more and more obsessed about the thrice-damned book. It takes up all his time; he's *infatuated* with it. I daresay he'd shag it if he could."

"Well, I removed the spell," he told her. "I only placed it there so that if it were ever stolen, I would be able to find it eventually, since the dunderhead who purloined it wouldn't be able to resist showing it off and taking it with him everywhere. I will get that book from him, Hermione. I promise."

"Okay," she replied, deciding not to bring up Ginny's plan of stealing it. "That takes care of that issue. What else is there? Are we done?"

Severus got up from the couch and sat in a chair. Hermione sat on the corner of the couch, kitty-corner from him.

He began to massage his forehead. "Hermione, this is not easy to tell you, and I know you are going to be angry, but please let me explain and then you can rail at me."

Hermione was silent. She didn't know what to say. She felt her face was numb, like there was no blood in her head.

Severus continued. "It's a complicated story. You know that when the Death Eaters were rounded up and sent to Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy was among them. The Dark Lord is one vicious bastard. He is also quite vindictive and creative in his revenge. Lucius was in Azkaban, so he never had to face the Dark Lord to account for failing to produce the prophecy. The Dark Lord surprised us after the arrests to go over what our next attack would be.

"The Dark Lord said Dumbledore had to be murdered and that the honor would go to Lucius Malfoy's son, Draco."

Hermione gasped. "No," she breathed.

"Oh, yes," he insisted. "Of course, the little shite didn't have the withal to understand that he was being sent to his death in his father's stead. Well, you can only imagine Narcissa's reaction. She was hysterical and had to be contained by her sister."

Severus stood up and walked over to the fireplace, glaring into the flames as he continued.

"So, the plan went into action. I informed Dumbledore as always after a meeting, and not soon after, Dumbledore had me report back to his office. He is dying."

"His hand," Hermione whispered.

Severus turned around to face her. "Yes. However, he waited too long for me to heal him. All I could do was buy him time."

Hermione tucked her legs underneath her. "What happened to put Albus in such danger for his life?"

Severus strode to her side, leaned in, and said, "Now, what I am about to tell you is confidential. I'm telling you because you are my wife, and you deserve to know."

He took a deep breath as he knelt on one knee and said, "For years now, Albus has been collecting memories of people to aid him in his search for how the Dark Lord could finally be destroyed. Remember when we were seventh years, meeting under the owlery stairs? I told you then that the Dark Lord was obsessed with immortality. He chose Regulus Black to work with him closely on this obsession, and that was why he died. The horror of it unhinged him."

Hermione moistened her lips and furrowed her brow as he went on talking.

"I confessed I was making potions for the Dark Lord. I created a terrible potion, which I know now from questioning that wretched house-elf, Kreacher, that at one time was hidden in a cave where a locket...Slytherin's locket...was placed. It is no longer there. That was how Regulus died. He forgot the deadly effects of the potion, and now his body is in that cave...the one I tried to tell you about...one of the Inferi there in the lake. That was his family's punishment when the Dark Lord found Regulus' dead body there and Slytherin's locket missing. That locket is no ordinary wizarding locket. The Dark Lord had a part of his soul placed in that locket. When a person does that...splinters their soul and places into an object...the object becomes a Horcrux.

"After I had taken the locket from Kreacher, I Obliviated his memory and gave him a fake locket in return. He has no idea that he no longer owns the true locket.

"Now, the creation of a Horcrux is complicated and is the most dreadful, darkest magic there is. The Dark Lord learned about the incantations and intricacies of it whilst in school here at Hogwarts. When the caster speaks the incantation, it is not just a spell and a waving of a wand that makes a Horcrux. You must *kill* first in order to splinter your soul. Then the Horcrux is ready for creation."

Severus took Hermione's hands into his own and whispered softly to her as he kept his eyes trained on hers. "When the Wizengamot came rounding up all suspected Death Eaters, it was a part of my agreement in order to be under Dumbledore's protection to reveal *everything* to him about my involvement as a Death Eater. I did... save one. I knew about the Dark Lord's Horcrux. The Dark Lord is amazingly like his nemesis in the area of dispersing information. Both he and Dumbledore are fanatical about no one person knowing everything about their plans. Dumbledore forgot when he took me under his wing that I had extensive knowledge about the Dark Arts. He also forgot I am a spy. Nothing escapes my attention if it reaches my senses. Albus is ignorant that I know about the Horcruxes and the Dark Lord's ugly secret of immortality. That was Regulus' peace to make before his death. He informed me of everything I needed to know about that *potion* I made in ignorance for our lord. You must understand, Hermione. A man, such as I, in the work I do... I must have information that I can hold to myself for my own protection. Call it collateral if you wish."

Hermione was jubilant. She jumped up excitedly and said, "Let's go fetch it! Let's get rid of it because then he'll be fully human again. Harry can kill him now!"

Severus jumped up as well and placed his hands on her shoulders, urging her to sit.

"Hermione, you aren't paying attention! I said *Horcruxes*, not Horcrux. Plural, not singular! According to what I have witnessed whilst saving the headmaster's life and the years preceding, Albus has in his possession two Horcruxes. He was not cautious about keeping Tom Riddle's diary secret after Potter had destroyed it. He never said what it truly was, but I knew. It was then whilst looking into that bloodied up diary with its noticeable holes from a basilisk that I knew there are more than only one Horcrux. I knew the Dark Lord had created more than one. "

"Numerous?" Hermione felt her knees tremble.

Severus nodded as he slid his hands off of her. "Now, through my observations, Albus has destroyed some of these Horcruxes. I saw the ring that killed his hand. I knew it right away as a Horcrux from the broken state of the stone inside the ring and how the Sword of Gryffindor was out of its normal place on the wall. Yet, I believe, Albus has no concrete proof, but a hunch of just how many. Then, there remains an issue *you* need to be made aware that I am afraid will be too much for you to bear. I destroyed the locket. I took the Sword of Gryffindor and in Dumbledore's office, killed the bit of the Dark Lord's soul inside it.

"There are three ways to kill a Horcrux: the poison from a basilisk, Fiendfyre, and lastly, the Sword of Gryffindor."

"What does this all have to do with Draco?" Hermione asked, growing angrier at each word.

"Narcissa came to Spinner's End with Bellatrix the summer Wormtail was staying with me as a part of my punishment and atonement for marrying you. She was hysterical and demanded I help Draco to complete his task. Bellatrix was so smug, *so sure* I would refuse. However, I knew in order to keep my place in the Inner Circle, I would have to do it. I made an Unbreakable Vow to kill Dumbledore in case Draco became unable or unwilling."

Hermione was boiling with rage. "How could you do that?" she screamed at him.

Severus held up one finger. "Let me finish!" he snapped. "I knew Dumbledore had only months or at most a year to live. It was the perfect plan, he had said, to use what was killing him to solidify my standing with the Dark Lord and assure him, once and for all, that I am a true Death Eater. If it were not for the fact he needs me alive to create his potions and remain his spy, I would be dead. Now, I have a chance to be elevated to his right hand, privy to any and all information about each move he wants to make against the Order."

Hermione licked her thinned out lips. "Still," she replied in a staccato tone, "It was an awful chance to take with Bellatrix at Spinners' End. I doubt she has forgotten how I tried to strangle her."

Severus smiled wickedly. "My only regret is that I was not there to see that lovely bit of Dark magic!" he said dramatically as he kissed the back of her hand.

"Dumbledore knew Narcissa would be coming to my door, begging and pleading for assistance since Lucius was in Azkaban and no longer in the Dark Lord's favor. I swear at times, Albus has to really be a Slytherin deep down. He ordered me to swear I would consent. So, as a part of the Unbreakable Vow, I am to keep Draco in my sights constantly whilst in school and keep him safe, and for Dumbledore, keep him alive long enough for him to assist Potter in all the work he has to do."

"What work is that?" Hermione spat out, clearly overwhelmed.

"My guess is going through each memory the old bastard has collected, getting Potter to understand the Horcruxes: the importance of them, history behind them, and how to locate them."

"Wait," said Hermione as she held out her hand. "You said you know there are more than one Horcrux. What are they?"

She jumped up and sat at his desk, taking out a fresh sheet of parchment and dipped her quill in the ink. "Tell me," she ordered.

"You do need to realize that this is based on incomplete information. I do not know the number. I knew there was the diary that Potter killed with the Basilisk fang in the Chamber of Secrets. That tipped me off as to the fact there were more than one.

"Second, is the locket for which Regulus gave his life. It was during that horrible year the Order camped out at the Black house when I took and destroyed it.

"Thirdly, and this is where it all comes together, is a ring that belongs to an ancient pure-blood family, the Gaunts, who were the descendants of the Peverells. That ring was of legend, full of Dark magic and enchantments that claimed to be too powerful to resist. The night Dumbledore called me to his side, claiming he was dying, I saw that very ring. Dumbledore placed that bloody ring on his finger, and it began to kill him. He had no idea I knew about that ring's history. It had only been lore...that is until I saw it! He had taken it off and told me he destroyed it. I saw the large crack in the stone, and glanced to see that the Gryffindor Sword had been taken down. Another clue that the ring had been a Horcrux. However, the damage had already been done to Albus."

"The bloody fool probably thought he could withstand its power!" Hermione spat. She shook her head angrily. "Let's keep on track. And number four is?" she pressed.

"I honestly have no idea, Hermione," he told her. "I do have a theory, but I would need to do some research into Ravenclaw's history. I think the Dark Lord has taken items of significance from each house and made them into Horcruxes."

Hermione looked at what she had written down. "I see your pattern," she murmured as she nibbled on the tip of her quill. "Only the most exquisite and precious items would do."

"Yes, very astute," he said stiffly.

"We have four houses plus a diary and a ring... perhaps. However, Peverell... *Peverell*? Isn't that..."

"...Related both to Slytherin and Gryffindor," Severus finished for her as he walked up and down the floor in front of the desk. "Yes, there is even a more outrageous tale that goes much deeper, but I haven't the energy nor the interest to go into it," he said wearily. "Suffice it to say that it is Albus' personal quest that I can barely tolerate, let alone understand the obsession that goes along with it. I decided a long time ago, while we were apart those three years before the Dark Lord fell the first time, that it would do me no favors to focus on *anything* other than Horcruxes.

"So, what else?" she asked.

"I don't know of any more objects."

He reached to comfort her, and she flinched. "Wait, this is so... so incomplete in Arithmancy. Can it be that there are seven?"

Severus' face snapped up to look into hers. "I don't know," Severus said slowly. "Albus did hint, unknowingly, at the fact Potter could possibly be one. It would explain the Dark Lord's attempts at possessing his body, Potter's ability at speaking Parseltounge... I could go on endlessly about the connection between them."

"What?" Hermione said in a voice she never remembered using before. "Does Albus think Harry is a H-Horcrux and so what then? He has to be killed?" she shrieked.

Severus grabbed her arms. "Hermione, please! We don't know what will happen when the killing curse is cast. The last time it marked Potter. The next time, it could erase the Dark Lord's hold over Potter forever!" he insisted.

"Do you believe that?" she snapped at him.

"No," he whispered. "I think as Albus does. Potter will have to be sacrificed."

Hermione wrenched herself free from Severus. "That is total and complete bullshit!" she shouted. "You can't! You can't KILL him!"

Severus ran his hand through his hair. "You think I didn't say the exact same thing to Albus when he told me?" he snarled. "I was furious! I told him after all these years of keeping him safe and alive, not to mention all the fucking sacrifices that *you and I* have made in our lives, and now he was just going to hand him over for nothing?"

"And?" Hermione nearly shouted as she stood and crossed her arms.

"Albus remains undeterred. Although first things first: I have to make sure Albus dies like a martyr...which isn't a complete inconvenience. The down side to it is that he wants me to do it."

"HE WHAT?" Hermione roared.

"Hermione," Severus warned. "Don't do this!"

Hermione strode towards the fireplace. "That manipulative *bastard*! I'll kill him...he won't have to wait for the bloody performance with a crowd; I'll just do it short and sweet!" she shouted. "You agreed to this on top of making an Unbreakable Vow! My God, Severus! How could you place your life in such peril?"

Severus blocked her from the Floo and said, "Hermione, you're not thinking! You couldn't possibly cast the Killing Curse."

"You want to bet?" she shot back as she pointed her wand under his chin. "Don't forget that I placed Lucius under the Cruciatus Curse and nearly suffocated Bellatrix to death. I am more than capable of performing Dark magic! He's not going to do this to us! He's not!"

She began to break down. She wept bitterly as Severus held her.

"I-I don't want to lose you, Severus. I love you," she said as she continued to sob. "You will be an outcast...hunted down. You could be killed in your flight away from the scene of the crime! Don't do this to us!"

Severus held her tighter. "I don't want to lose you either, sweet girl. I will be all right. You will have to face the fallout, and I hate that I cannot take you with me, but you would never be safe with me. Hogwarts will keep you safe for a while, then perhaps on the run with Tonks or Remus...if they trust you. You have to brace yourself for the reality, Hermione," he said as he held her face in his hands. "You are going to be reviled, hated, and possibly become a social pariah."

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"I am, too," he whispered.

"I *hate* Albus," she said bitterly.

"I just want to be free," Severus whispered. "Free from all the promises I made when I was just a stupid child. You were right, Hermione. I never should have returned. I should have disappeared into the Muggle world with you."

Hermione shook her head. "There is no use in 'what ifs,'" she said. "What's done is done. We'll get through this...won't we?"

Hermione was so sure he would agree with her, she didn't even think about it. But then his face turned dark and sad.

"Honestly, I don't think I am meant to survive this, Hermione," he whispered. "That is why I want to find this one Horcrux...for you! For you to use as leverage in case you are condemned as a traitor when I am dead."

"NO!" she shrieked. "No! We have our dreams, our life, babies, and our own business, with hugging, kissing, and tripping over toys...NO! I won't let them take it from us. Not after everything we've been through! NO! NO! NO!" she screamed again and again.

Hermione felt as though her heart were breaking in two. She couldn't breathe, and her chest was so heavy. Severus forced a potion down her throat and held her to him, stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have said that. I'll fight for us; I'll do it. I will do what I must to keep alive. Just have faith in me, and remember that we may have to endure another separation, but when it's over, it will be over for good, and then we shall never be apart again. Once the Dark Lord and Albus are dead, I will owe no one anything, and for the first time in my life, I will be free," he whispered. "*Wewill* be free."

Hermione had calmed down, and she embraced him as she straddled him. "I will do anything you ask. Just tell me what to do, and I will do it. I'll do anything to keep you alive," she whispered as she began to pepper his face with kisses. Severus thrust his fingers into her thick hair and kissed her with abandon.

"Make love to me, Severus," she pleaded once she freed her mouth from his. He was moving down her neck. He bit and nipped while he kissed her as if he were driven by a fierce need to possess her. "I want to feel us together as much as we can. I don't want to waste a moment when I could have you inside me."

Their coupling was frantic and desperate. The frenzied clawing in order to be as close as possible drove their desire to an impossible peak. They were panting and gasping

for air as they both lay on the floor naked in front of the fire, clutching each other's body as tightly as they could, afraid and scared, just as when they were children, after his father's attack on her, and Severus had led her to his bed to hold and comfort her. How she wished they could go back in time and do it all over again differently!

Chapter 62

Chapter 62 of 74

Christmas with Severus brings many things to light for Hermione about her husband's secret life.

A/N: Here is the second part that continues with the events of the last chapter. Enjoy! And please review! I want to hear from you. Thanks to WriterMerrin for her continuous hard work battling plot holes and grammar problems.

For the next few days, Hermione forbade Severus from mentioning what he had revealed to her. She wanted one week to be silly and seventeen as she was physically, and she wanted Severus to join her. She waited one morning until he was in the shower to rifle through her underwear drawer and find a pair of skimpy see-through knickers, very much like the ones she wore the day he had pulled that stupid Levicorpus Spell on her. She transfigured it pink to look exactly like the underwear she had worn that day. She also got Dobby to get her a Gryffindor uniform and hid it until she was ready.

She lured him up to the Astronomy Tower with a note saying she had nicked his wedding ring whilst in the shower. She conjured large, cozy pillows to lie on, just like the ones they had when they had studied up there all those years ago. When he ascended the stairs, he wore only his frock coat, no billowing robes. He saw her sitting with her *Hogwarts, A History* book he had given her years ago. She knelt in front of his sitting form and opened her palm. Resting there were their wedding rings. She placed his on his finger, and he placed hers on her finger as well. He bent down to kiss her, and he looked down at her, smiling.

"What are you up to?" he asked her playfully.

"I'm your fantasy girl, Severus. You were the one who said you had all these adolescent fantasies to explore." She stretched out her long legs from underneath her.

A smirk flashed across his face, and then he flipped her into the air by the ankle. She squealed for real since he gave her no warning. She was flashing her knickers to him, but trying to keep herself covered. He walked to her; his face inches from her upside down one. "If you take off your blouse, I'll let you down," he offered.

After giving a huff of indignation, Hermione hastily removed her shirt and became aware that being upside-down made keeping her breasts contained in her bra very difficult. Without warning, he released her, and she fell onto the pillows, disheveled and her eyes flashing. He leaned over her and said, "I was generous to let you go, Hermione, seeing as you were at my mercy. What will you do for me?" he whispered.

"Nothing!" she said in annoyance. "Taking off my blouse should have been enough."

Severus flashed a feral grin at her. "No, I think that you've advertised something to me. Now that I have seen your intriguing selection of underwear...and may I say, that bra is expressly salacious...what is a nice girl like you doing wearing such naughty knickers if you don't want anyone to see and enjoy them?" he reasoned.

"I like to feel sexy," she replied.

"You're blushing, Hermione," he purred. "We've been friends for a long time. I can't help but see you are very pretty. May I see you in just your bra and knickers? You surely didn't buy them just for no one to see them."

Boy, he is really pouring on the adolescent charm here. His logic is leaning toward the point of begging! Well, I can play along Hermione tapped an index finger on her cheek, feigning consideration, and with a shrug slipped out of her skirt. Now she was clad in only her bra and knickers. Severus bent down to capture one foot and, one at a time, slowly removed each shoe and sock.

"I think it's only fair that this be equal," he offered as he stood to undress. Hermione watched as he stripped down to his underwear.

"You are sporting quite a package," she said, reclining back on the pillows, toying with one finger between her teeth.

"Do you want touch it?" he asked as he stepped forward, lifting an eyebrow as his eyes burned into hers.

Hermione played the coy virgin and timidly placed a hand over his bulge. She quickly removed her hand, and Severus caught her wrist fast as lightning, placing her hand back on his erection. He moaned his approval. "I would like to touch your knickers. They look so soft," he whispered.

"Okay," she said nervously. He reached out and ghosted a hand over the lacy material. He leaned in closer to her and whispered, "Can I just slip a finger inside?"

"Mm-hmm," she replied as his hair brushed her cheek. He slipped one long finger sideways underneath the lace and gently stroked her mound before edging it between her slit. He withdrew leisurely, swirling her juices around her wet lips.

Hermione let her head roll backwards as she groaned.

"Let me take them off, Hermione," he whispered gently in her ear. "You are so beautiful."

She lifted her hips, and he pulled off her knickers. He spread her thighs and lowered his head to lick and suck on her clit until she was gripping fistfuls of his hair, crying out her orgasm. He rose up to hover over her, naked and hard. He wiped his mouth with one hand and said in a deathly calm voice, "Take off that ridiculous excuse of a brassiere. I want to see your breasts."

Hermione sucked in her breath and obeyed him. He teased one nipple after another with the tip of his tongue. She was squirming as he sent shivers up and down her body. "Please, will you?" she asked.

"What?" he asked, impatience evident in his tone.

"Please go inside me," she whispered.

He lifted his head and kissed her mouth. "You mean you want my cock in your sweet, little pussy?" he whispered against her lips.

"Yes," she moaned.

"No," he growled. "I am going to enjoy what is in front of me until I make you scream out my name."

Hermione's eyes rolled into the back of her head while she panted and moaned through each ripple and tremor that shocked through her body. She was sweating and whimpering pleas for him to make her climax.

He pushed her full breasts together and took her red, aching nipples into his mouth at the same time. Hermione gave an involuntary shriek as pleasure rocketed through her, making her clit throb to the point of pain. She wailed and cried, screaming at him to do something...anything...as she bucked her hips against him, trying to find something to give her satisfaction.

Severus pinned her down with his powerful thighs as he chuckled at his wife's frustration. He paused to look up into her eyes. They were nearly black with desire, her cheeks and lips reddened with the heat of her arousal. He swiftly descended back to her hardened nipples and ravished them, sucking and biting greedily until he heard his wife screaming his name.

He let her out of his hold and lowered his head to relish her release as if it were sweet cream and pushed his thick, mushroomed head swiftly into her tight, wet well and teased her with his languorous thrusting.

"More," she panted.

"As my lady wishes," he rumbled into her ear.

He made love to her, and then he fucked her. He slowed down and made love to her again. The words changed with his rhythm. Slow and agonizing pleasure was all she could feel when he said, "My sweet girl, you are perfect."

Then when he pummeled into her, he seethed that she was his dirty whore and uttered things so shocking she couldn't believe they were coming from her husband.

After they finished, he inhaled the scent of her knickers and slipped them inside his trouser pocket. She snuggled to him in the moonlight and shyly asked, "Those things you said...I've never heard you say such words before."

Severus placed his frock coat around her naked form and held her close to him. "I apologize, Hermione. Since the Dark Lord's return, I have been subjected to watch far too many perverted sexual acts. Some of the women become highly aroused being called filthy names. It makes me want to do it as well at times," he whispered, looking embarrassed. "Only of course to see if you would enjoy it as well. Sometimes, I would be lounging in a chair, watching a witch and wizard fuck, and I would imagine the woman I was watching was you and that I was doing those things to you, fantasizing you enjoyed it."

Hermione felt herself becoming stimulated by the thought. "Do you think of me like that? I'm your whore? Your slave?" she whispered.

"No," he said as he held her tighter. "You are my lovely, sweet girl. I have played out this fantasy in my head for years; I wished I'd had the guts to approach you, to have that time be our first time. Of course, it would have been just slow and clumsy, of course. Nevertheless, I would have done my utmost to make love to you as gently as possible. I was just in the moment; my mind wandered to this other fantasy. Before I realized it, I was incorporating the two."

He looked down at her and asked, "Do you feel bad? I don't want to hurt you."

"No," she whispered. "It's your fantasy, and I consented to it. There shouldn't be any judgment during these times together. Now that I understand your motivation, as it were, I find I am oddly aroused by it."

"Do you have any fantasies?" he asked.

Hermione propped up on one elbow. "Well, I always thought about if I ever came to you needing help with my homework...before we were friends, just hanging out because of Lily. Your price would be for me to do something sexual for you, and you would grow very excited when I agreed since no girl had ever let you touch them or touched you." She hid her face in the hollow of his shoulder, feeling embarrassed.

"Very good, Hermione," he said, sounding rather impressed.

Hermione looked up slyly at him and saw his approving face. She became emboldened and continued. "I also want to fuck you under the owlry stairs. I remember you once masturbated for me, and my God, I wanted to just take my wand and split my jeans in half and let you take me swift and hard," she added.

He looked at her, his eyes searing, making her feel completely vulnerable and naked. She couldn't help wriggling with renewed stimulation...it was all so very erotic.

"Severus, you're getting me randy," she said as she giggled.

Severus moved over on top of her, and they eagerly made love. Hermione fell asleep afterwards, clinging to her lover, friend, and husband, feeling at the sweet innocence of their past and the present trust and strength after years of testing, melding time...even if only for the night.

The rest of the week was spent in pure adolescent bliss. Severus and Hermione rarely left their quarters, and if they did it was only to make love in some obscure area that suited their fancy, or to play in the snow. Christmas night was spent lying naked on the couch that Hermione had enlarged to suit them lying with a duvet to cover them.

"Severus," Hermione whispered. "Can you believe it will be 1997 in a week?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Why?"

She watched the fire crackling and snuggled against him. "When did we fall in love?" she asked.

Severus frowned. "I can't recall the date, I think I was in love with you before you were in love with me, but I knew I was in love July 15th, 1976. The night we went out, and I kissed you for the first time. But it seems morbid; it was also the night my Mother killed herself," he whispered.

She turned and faced him. "I loved you from the night Lily broke off our friendship. So, June of 1976...do you realize that we have loved each other for twenty years?" she whispered.

"Happy Anniversary," he whispered as he captured her lips in a devastating kiss.

"Well, my darling," Severus announced. "Our week of hedonism is over. I do believe I've taken you in every possible place we could, but honestly, Hermione, why did we have to do it in the Shrieking Shack?"

Hermione was at his desk, going over papers. "Because," she said absent-mindedly over her work, "you needed to replace that space with a good memory...although I now feel damaged. A splinter in one's arse whilst climaxing is not ideal."

Hermione said abruptly, "I want to talk to you about Draco."

"As do I," he said. "You know he's plotting feverishly to kill Albus. I don't know what he's doing; the blighter won't tell me a damn thing. He's becoming more paranoid by the day. I tried to explain that I had made a promise to his mother, but he is so determined to do it himself, he won't confide in me."

Hermione spoke up. "Well, I want you to know I saw Draco talking with Rosmerta the day Katie Bell was cursed. It was very strange how he had interacted with her. It looked as if he was handing her a package, but I couldn't tell. Now, we know from Katie's friend...Leanne...that Katie did not have that package before going into the Three Broomsticks.

"Now I know that necklace was from Borgin and Burkes. Ginny confirmed it since she had seen it with Harry right before the start of term. Is he trying to get Dumbledore cursed and then killed? And what about Rosmerta and Katie? What accounts for their behavior?"

"The Imperius Curse is all I can think of," said Severus.

"You actually think that *Draco*...?" Hermione said.

"...Yes, I do," replied Severus. "Draco has a job to do. His life depends on it. You are staying at the Three Broomsticks. You need to familiarize yourself with the signs of a person under the Curse. You need to notify Gawain as well as soon as you return.

"So," he said as he leaned back in his chair, "How is the Order these days? Lupin? Tonks? Any progress on their front?"

Hermione laughed as she walked over to him for a kiss. "Since when have you ever cared about anyone's love life?" she asked.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "Now that I have my own wife, I am feeling a generous need to care about others woes, and besides, I am under orders from the Dark Lord to scrape up information on the wolf."

"Ah-ha!" she said. "Now that I can believe. Well, he is living amongst his own kind and has basically given up hope of being a part of normal society. Umbridge's legislation did him no favors, of course. So he is keeping an eye on Fenrir. He is trying to stop the others in the pack from joining the Dark Lord. He insists they would just be used and that they should leave the fighting to the 'real' wizards, not half-breeds like them. He's just hopeless, like all of them are. Dumbledore hasn't been as forthcoming with information as he is with Harry, it seems. He's constantly busy with him, but I don't know what's happening. We are all on eggshells for when the Ministry topples. If Fudge were still in office, it already would have happened by now."

She was standing next to Severus with a piece of parchment. "I have here your interesting theory. I'm going to go have a chat with Filius. If you have a feeling the Dark Lord got his hands on a prized possession of Rowena Ravenclaw or one of her family, I want to check out that lead. I will be back later."

"I'll join you," he said as he jumped up to grab his robes.

Together, they walked the deserted corridors. Severus placed a *Notice-Me-Not* Spell, just in case there was a busybody in a painting. Severus held her hand, and Hermione squeezed his in return. She loved holding hands with him. They so rarely ever got to do so.

Filius Flitwick lived up in the North Tower. It was always so nice up there. One always received a feeling of tranquility when ascending the North tower. Hermione had always thought Rowena Ravenclaw must have placed a charm on her tower that would give those entering a feeling of clear-mindedness and focus. Worries just did not seem so urgent and unbearable when in Ravenclaw territory.

Hermione lifted the heavy silver knocker on Filius' door and banged three times.

The door opened, and the diminutive professor welcomed them.

"Why, Hermione and Severus! What a surprise. Come in, come in," he said as he ushered them inside his rooms. Hermione appreciated that he made his quarters comfortable for larger-sized people. His sitting room was cozy, draped in calming hues of blue and a bit of silver.

"I was about to take a cup of tea. Would you care to join me?" he asked in his squeaky voice.

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Filius. After all, we are here for an important visit. I hope we won't be intruding on your time?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Today is for me to work on my own charms and research. One always must keep up on the latest developments in one's field, you know," he said with a knowing look towards Severus.

"Perhaps, Filius, we have come at a bad time. I understand the preciousness of time when it comes to these matters," replied Severus.

"No, no, now sit!" he chided them. In his usual perfection, he charmed his tea service to meet all their needs.

Hermione spoke to her cup. "I would like to have tea with a dash of milk and a spoonful of sugar, please."

After they all had their hot tea in hand, Hermione began her questioning.

"I was wondering, Filius, if you could tell us about Rowena Ravenclaw. Severus and I were having a discussion about the precious personal items of each of the Founders, and we came up short on Rowena Ravenclaw. I'm afraid neither of us actually knows anything about her."

Filius looked positively ecstatic. "Oh, I do love to talk about the wonders and tales of my own House. It always seems like boasting when one brings it up oneself; however, if directly asked...that is a different matter!

"Well," he said, looking off into thought. "Rowena Ravenclaw was a beautiful witch. She befriended Helga Hufflepuff...good friends...in fact. Although it all could be exaggerated because of the hostile nature of Slytherin and Gryffindor's relationship.

"She devised the ever-changing, moving staircases and was only interested in teaching those selected students according to intelligence and wisdom. In fact, our House motto is *'Wit beyond measure is a man's greatest treasure.'* She valued a sharp mind, wisdom, creativity, and cleverness in her students. She died young. She was the first of the Founding Four to pass over. She had a daughter, Helena, who is our very own Grey Lady."

"Oh my!" blurted out Hermione in shock. "Does she ever talk about her mother?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Filius, turning a bit pale. "She and her mother had a very antagonistic relationship. Helena wanted very much to outdo her mother in all of her achievements. Helena was said to have been more Slytherin than Ravenclaw. Well, she left her mother, and Rowena fell desperately ill with worry. She begged the Bloody Baron to find her daughter...he was alive at that time. By then, Helena had not only run off from home, but she had also stolen her mother's prized Diadem. Rowena didn't care so much about getting the Diadem back as much as she wanted her only child returned to her side.

"Rowena knew that the Bloody Baron wanted to marry Helena, and at the time, he had been her daughter's suitor, so she thought it would be only logical to send him to locate her. He tracked her to Albania, but she rejected his affections and refused to return with him to see her dying mother. Due to his hot temper, he killed her in a fit of rage because of her refusal and also because of his jealousy of her freedom. After he had stabbed her to death, he was overcome with remorse. He then took his own life."

"You mentioned a Diadem," said Hermione. "Severus and I were talking about the precious items left behind. Slytherin's locket, Griffindor's sword..."

"...Don't forget Helga Hufflepuff's cup!" he interjected. "However, it also has been lost to the ages. However, I assume you were about to add the Diadem of Ravenclaw! Well done, Madam Snape," he said happily.

"Very interesting," Severus said softly. "Whatever happened to it? Helena was able to return from Albania with her imprint as well as the Baron. What of the Diadem?"

Filius sighed. "It seems to have as well been lost to the ages," he admitted sadly. "There is a picture of it in our House common room; however, that is all we Ravensclaws possess. Some would say we traded a tangible bit of junk for the daughter of a Founding member who can tell us about the days of old, if she were hard pressed; nevertheless, it does weigh heavily at times."

"Well, look at our houses, Filius," said Severus as he sipped his tea. "Both Hufflepuff and Slytherin own no such valuable pieces, nor do we have progeny from Salazar or Helga to soothe us."

"True, Severus," Filius said, looking chastened. "One must always look towards others. There always will be someone who has lost more than yourself."

"Tell us about the Diadem," asked Hermione.

Filius smiled. "All the girls love the story of the Diadem. It was, from what the picture shows, a beautiful piece of jewelry. Inside, according to what Helena told us, was inscribed our most treasured attribute, *'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure.'* As far as what could be gathered from the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron, the Diadem was hidden safely in a hollow tree in that forest, far away in Albania. Its return would mean everything to us Ravensclaws, but unfortunately, we have given up any hope of its recovery."

"That is so unbelievably sad," Hermione murmured. "Thank you so much for telling us the history of your house, Filius."

"Oh, it was my pleasure, Hermione. Thank you for dropping in, Severus."

After they were out of the North Tower on their way towards the dungeons, Hermione spoke softly to Severus. "Did you hear that? Albania! I have an idea..."

"Not here, Hermione. Wait until we are home," he whispered as he glanced around at the portraits among them.

Upon entering their quarters, Hermione took off her robes and said, "Don't you think you're being a bit paranoid?"

He looked at her gravely. "No, I don't. Hermione, these walls have eyes and ears. They also can travel to other people homes and places of work. They are incredible gossips."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hermione as she grabbed the front of Severus' frock coat. "Then you really shouldn't have shagged me in the alcove outside Gryffindor Tower!"

"I don't think shagging will get anyone killed," he shot back. "Besides, I know how to cover my tracks."

"If you found me shagging someone else, there would be murder," she muttered.

He grabbed her from behind and lifted her up from the ground. She squealed as he deposited her ungracefully on their bed. He climbed on top of her and kissed her face and neck.

Hermione was laughing now as he began to tickle her ribs. "Sto-op!" she shrieked as she giggled. "I want to tell you my theory."

Severus sat back on his knees and began to take off his robes. "You have until I'm naked, Hermione, and then no more Diadem talk," he warned in a growling voice.

Hermione thought fast. "I have until you and I are both naked and then no more, okay?" she suggested.

"Fine," he replied.

"Okay, remember that after Harry defeated the Dark Lord, he went away to hide and gather his strength. He went to *Albania*. Well, why the hell *Albania* of all places? I think he must have talked to the Grey Lady or the Bloody Baron, found out about the Diadem and retrieved it with the help of Wormtail. Now, Severus, no tickling while undressing me, I'm trying to talk! I think the night he came here to apply for the Defense job, he knew he wasn't going to get it. He is many things...but stupid is not one of them. I think he hid the Diadem here, already a Horcrux, and we are going to...FIND IT!"

Her last two words came out in a scream as Severus penetrated her. He had been serious. Hermione decided enough was enough for the day or the afternoon at least. He took her from behind and lost himself in her. Hermione snuggled her head into her pillow and enjoyed the moans and grunts coming from her husband. He tensed, and she felt his release. He fell down on the bed next to her.

"What was that?" he panted.

"What was what?" she replied.

"You weren't into it," he said as he turned over to spoon her.

"My mind is really busy. I can't concentrate," she said.

"Okay," he caved as he turned onto his back again. "Where will we look first?"

"I have no idea. We have to think like him. Where would he have gone, where no one would have disturbed him, and he could be assured that it remained hidden?"

They fell asleep while thinking over it.

The new term started, and Hermione was busy as ever with training and filling in Gawain and the others about the information she found out.

"I'm telling you, something foul is going on around here. I need to know the signs someone might be under the Imperius Curse."

Gawain sighed and then rubbed his face. "Proudfoot, you want to take this one?"

Proudfoot, a huge man in the cut of one of the great gods of mythology: Thor, faced Hermione and said. "It's hard to tell, actually. It varies from person to person, and it also varies as to the caster of the curse. Then you have to take into account the willingness of the one Imperiused. It's my belief," he said as he looked around at the rest of them hunkered down in Gawain's room, "that the more resistant the person is, the more odd they seem, like they are in a trance. But, then, there are some like Mulciber, he's an expert. He could put Kingsley Shacklebolt and Gawain Robards under the Imperius, and no one would be the wiser."

"So what's a body to do?" asked Hermione in irritation.

"You look for changes in daily tasks. Are they a night owl who's suddenly a morning person? A slacker who all of a sudden is eager to get their work done? Then, there is

the nosiness factor. How much of a nosy parker are they where before they couldn't have given a damn? Do that, keep a journal, and try not to look like you are investigating them. Who is it?"

"I'd rather not say, at the moment. I still need to wait for confirmation," Hermione said firmly.

"Fine," warned Gawain, "but I expect you to keep Tonks informed on all the particulars. If you get discovered and killed, no one will ever know why."

"I understand. Thanks," she replied as she left.

Chapter 63

Chapter 63 of 74

Ron is poisoned, Severus is a wreck, and Harry is still unrelenting. Just another day of well-rounded insanity that is par for the course in Hermione's life.

A/N: Things really are starting to let loose. It is going to be a rush to the moment of another separation for Hermione and Severus. Please review! Thanks again to WriterMerrin for her hard work!

Hermione kept her eye on Rosmerta. Nothing *seemed* to be strange or out of the ordinary with the innkeeper. It was confusing. All the evidence pointed to her and Malfoy. Perhaps when Katie got out of St. Mungo's she could fill in the gaps. Hermione was positive that Katie must have fought like hell to throw off being Imperiused and that would account for her odd behavior.

A few days after the new term began, Ginny came out of the castle, calling out for her.

Hermione waved her hand to her, and the two witches met a distance away from the gates. Ginny was breathing hard, and her red hair was whipping around her face.

"I just can't do this anymore, Hermione!" she said as her voice shook with emotion. "Harry is edgy all the time, and Dumbledore, he's constantly taking Harry out of Hogwarts, and he's seeing these memories. Now, Harry has to get something from Slughorn and it's not working, and then on top of it, he's obsessed that Malfoy is up to something!"

"Hermione, I hate Dumbledore. I know I shouldn't say it, but *I hate* him. He's a manipulative bastard for doing this to Harry. He is putting more pressure on him than he can handle. He's about to lose it, Hermione. I don't know what to do or say. Ron and I aren't any help. Hermione, if only you were with us. You always could get Harry to see the larger picture and get him to think logically. He's just so fucking emotional and bloody-minded, I just want to scream!" she shouted.

She stood still, panting, and wiped her tears away angrily. "Sorry, Hermione. I'm sure my troubles are total crap compared to your life..."

"Don't do that, Ginny," Hermione said to her firmly as she wrapped an arm around the redhead. "Don't minimize what you are going through. You are having a hard time of it. Let's see where I can help, okay?"

"Thanks," said Ginny as Hermione pulled her into a hug.

Ginny took a cleansing breath and began. "On top of what I told you, Dumbledore is pressuring Harry to make peace with you, which he is adamant on not doing. And I am afraid it's all my fault!"

Hermione frowned. "Why should it be your fault? Harry is the one acting... oh!"

Ginny's eyes watered up and she sniffled her nose. "I did it, Hermione," she confessed. "I took the book, and Harry is just so angry! He won't confide with me at all."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Who has Harry been confiding in?" she asked.

Ginny snorted. "Ron...as if he could help get what Dumbledore wants. So, now Ron is going to help him, how pathetic! All Ron does anymore is go off shagging Lavender. He's totally disinterested. I think half the time what Harry tells him just goes over his head."

Hermione placed her hands on Ginny's shoulders. "This is not your fault. Harry *never* should have had that book. What you did was the best thing you could have done for him. You know that, right?"

"Of course, I do," she replied. "But he is so angry! I think he knows I took it, and now he's punishing me for it."

Hermione hugged her friend. "Have Ron meet me, Ginny. You know my schedule and when I do my circuits. Just extricate him from Lavender for a bit where I can talk to him."

"You think Ron will tell you?" she asked. "I'm scared every minute Ron will cave and tell Harry what I did. He helped me to steal it. He had to do it when Harry was sleeping at night. Then he handed it off for me to hide."

"Where is the book, Ginny?" Hermione whispered.

Ginny's brown eyes looked pained. Hermione felt horrible doing this to her.

"It's in the Room of Requirement. I needed a place where I could hide it and no one would know how to find it. So, just ask, 'I need a place to hide something, somewhere secret.'"

Hermione released her breath. "Thank you, Ginny. Now, just let Severus and me handle this. The more time passes, the less Harry will be angry about the book. It's like he's going through a withdrawal of sorts."

Ginny shook her head. "I knew there had to be some sort of curse on it." She looked at Hermione and said, "Are you sure you want to deal with all this?"

"I'm positive, Ginny. If it's as bad as you say, Ron will be MORE than happy to hand off the problem to someone else. Besides, you're right. Ron couldn't possibly help him with what is really going on...just swear to me that you won't breathe a word to anyone...not even Ron! I will talk to him and ease his mind."

"Thank you, Hermione!" Ginny said as she threw her arms around her neck.

The following day, Ron skulked about the castle walls, looking guilty and scared.

"Get a grip, Ronald," Hermione said as she approached him. "What's going on with Harry?"

"Look," he whispered. "You can't understand this, Hermione. Harry is almost off his nut. He's talking about crazy stuff like...Horcruxes and rubbish like that. I don't know why Harry is involved with all this, but Dumbledore's got him all in a fit. 'Make up with Hermione,' 'Get a memory from Slughorn about the Horcruxes'...it's bloody mental, this is!"

"How bad did things get with the Prince?" she asked off-handedly.

"That ruddy book! Carried it with him every damned day, he did. It's a good thing Ginny and I nicked it before anything really bad happened. He'd started with that new spell *Langlock*, the one I told you that glues the tongue to the roof of a person's mouth. It's funny as hell, but bloody dangerous. A person could choke to death if he did it when someone had anything in their mouth."

Hermione's spirits fell. It was obvious that Ron felt like a traitor, even though he was glad the book was gone.

"Ron, please try not to punish yourself. You were being a good friend by helping Ginny get that book away from him. Trust me...it would only have brought spells that are more dangerous for him to use on people. I wish I could help him, but I know he wants no part with me. But if Harry ever says anything that makes you think he might need help, I'm here to help," she offered.

"But, what about these Horcrux things?" he asked while looking around anxiously.

"Professor Snape and I know somewhat about these things, so I need you to ease your mind. Just listen for names of objects, like a cup, crown, or a locket, and don't say a word to Harry. Tell Professor Snape or me as soon as you can. Understand?"

"Okay, sure," Ron said. "Thanks, Hermione, you're probably right. If anyone can help Harry, it'll be you. Okay, see you!"

"Bye," she replied as she watched Ron walk off with a spring in his step and looking relieved. She wished she could feel that way again. She doubted she ever would.

Hedwig came in the early morning with a note from Harry, asking to meet her. Hermione wrote back, accepting his offer of an olive branch and prepared to meet him after lunch for a butterbeer.

"Hey, Hermione," he said nervously as he gripped the chair in front of him.

"Harry!" she welcomed him warmly. "Please, sit down." Hermione decided to get into small talk. "So, anything interesting at school?"

"Apparition lessons," he said blandly. "Hannah Abbot Splinched herself on the first day. Since then nothing much has been interesting. We're starting to get pretty frustrated."

"Is Willy Twycross still teaching?" she asked, feeling strained as she spoke.

"Yeah," Harry said, sounding surprised. "He looks so pale and wispy, like he's done way too many Apparitions."

Hermione laughed. "He looked that way twenty years ago. I shudder to think what he looks like now." Inside, Hermione kicked herself over bringing up her past.

They grew quiet, and Hermione took a breath. "Harry, I want you to know that I believe you about Draco," she whispered.

"You do?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"Oh, yeah, I'm trying to get as much information as I can. The Aurors are aware, and I just want you to focus on what Dumbledore needs you to do. If you need help figuring things out, I'm here for you."

"Interesting," Harry replied. "Nothing to say about the prince, or the book?"

Hermione could feel his hostility invade her. "What do you want me to say, Harry? I am trying to salvage something we once had. I want you to realize I am on your side! I care about you, and I care enough to put aside my personal feelings to support you."

"No!" he snapped. "I knew it was a mistake coming here. You pretend to care, but all you care about is that book! So, wanting to see how I'm doing without it?" Harry stood up, and Hermione could feel a rush of something magical emanating from him. "You think for one minute I don't think you were behind my book disappearing?"

Hermione inhaled through her mouth and tried to get her mind focused. "I don't want to talk about the book, Harry. There is something far more dastardly happening here. I know you are spending a lot of time with Dumbledore, and trust me; I want to help you succeed. You must be under a great deal of pressure."

"Save the speech on how your heart bleeds for me, Hermione," he spat as he turned to leave.

He stormed out of the pub, and Hermione rested her head in her hands *Damn and blast! How could I have mucked it up so badly?* She jumped up and followed him outside.

"Harry!" she called out to him. "When have I ever let you down? What have I done to place your life in danger? Why can't you trust me?"

Harry strode to her. He was mere inches from her face. "You dared to speak of MY godfather as if he were muck under your boots! How can you expect me to trust you if you can lie about him so easily? He was our friend!"

Hermione kept her voice calm as she replied, "You have a very bad record of trusting the very people you shouldn't and distrusting those you should. Nothing is ever what it seems, Harry."

Harry crossed his arms in front of him. "What exactly are you trying to say here *Mrs. Snape?*"

Hermione didn't take the bait. "What I am telling you, Harry, is that your perception of good and evil in people is warped. You thought Snape was trying to kill you during our first year, and you entrusted yourself to a Death Eater masquerading as an ex-Auror and professor. He lured you into his trust, and when he had you alone in his lair, he was a hair's breath from killing you."

"I don't have to listen to this," he sneered.

"Oh, but you will, Harry," she insisted. "There are people like the Malfoys, who are so easy to read. They aren't good people. You knew that from the start. The moment you met Draco, you knew he was not a person to befriend. But somewhere along the way, Harry, you have lost your ability to read people. You see only what you want to see. Sirius was your godfather, and you loved him. Well, I can tell you as an eyewitness that Sirius used your mother, your father, and Snape for his own selfish ends. Sirius wanted Snape dead. He hated him with a hatred that cannot be quantified. I don't know why. The hate was there before I came along. However, he knew about Severus and me. He knew it and hated it. We were always fighting. He acted so creepy...leering at me, saying suggestive things...even after Severus and I were married."

"Sirius can't be what you said. He was so lonely. He had been alone for so long. He had nobody!" Harry argued.

"Just because a person is sad and lonely does not a good person make," she said firmly. "But I want you to rethink your feelings about Snape. Quirrell told you himself, Harry. Severus Snape *does* seem the type. Severus isn't exactly what one expects to be a gentleman. He's rude, contemptuous, insensitive, and overall, a real bastard. However, remember your Shakespeare, Harry. *The prince of darkness is a gentleman.*"

It was the first of March and Ron's seventeenth birthday. According to wizarding law, he was now officially a man. Hermione planned to go see him since she knew the Hogsmeade trip was now canceled due to what had happened to Katie Bell.

Hermione got her present for Ron that she had wrapped ahead of time. It was a new Quidditch broom cleaning kit...the best on the market. She knew he'd go wild for it.

She slowly made her way up to the castle, and as she made her way towards Gryffindor Tower, Minerva stopped her.

"Oh, Hermione!" she said in alarm. "You need to come to the infirmary straight away. Ron Weasley was poisoned early this morning." Hermione didn't say another word. She ran up the stairs to the infirmary and dashed inside. There were Fred, George, Harry, Ginny, and Lavender surrounding him.

"What happened?" she demanded.

Lavender burst into tears, and Ginny rolled her eyes and cuffed Harry upside the head when he shot Lavender a look of pure loathing. He obediently followed his witch, and the three of them stood whispering about the events.

"If Harry hadn't thought of the Bezoar..." choked Ginny.

"Will he be all right?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," Ginny said. "He'll need to spend time in the infirmary for a week and take essence of rue. Otherwise he'll be just fine."

"This is eerie," said Hermione as she looked off into the distance.

"Who would want to kill Ron of *all* people?" Ginny whispered.

"I don't think this is the work of someone trying to off Ron," Hermione said darkly.

"Well, it's certainly not the work of a friend!" Ginny quipped.

"What are you saying, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I'm saying that I think this incident and the incident with the necklace have something in common," she answered.

"I need to speak with Horace," she said abruptly and left swiftly for the dungeons.

Horace was pacing the room; he was nervous and jittery. "Horace?" Hermione called out to him.

"Oh, Mrs. Snape! Do come in. Dreadful morning. Absolutely ghastly!" he raved.

"I don't know if you are aware, but I am working in the Auror Department now," she said with authority.

"Oh, dear!" he shouted. "I had nothing to do with trying to poison that poor lad!" he said in terror.

"Horace, I know, I know," Hermione said reassuringly. "I just need to ask you some questions. Now, concerning the oak-natured mead. Was this drink something you had purchased?"

"No! I was given it to gift Dumbledore for a Happy Christmas. However, it slipped my mind...thank goodness," he muttered.

"Who gave it to you, Horace?"

"Madam Rosmerta. She said she always gives Albus mead for Christmas," he said defensively.

"Thank you, Horace, that'll be all for now," she said as she patted his beefy shoulder.

Hermione was convinced. Madam Rosmerta was under the Imperius, and the caster had to be someone who wanted Dumbledore dead. Someone who wanted it done so badly they didn't care who got killed or injured in the process. So, the culprit couldn't be a seasoned killer. He's trying and failing. Now, who fit all of those descriptions? There could only be one: Draco Malfoy.

Hermione walked down the corridor to their quarters by the Defense classroom and told Severus her theory. He was tired. He looked so weary. She hadn't seen him since the holidays, and in the last two months he had grown terribly thin and drawn.

"Severus," she said as she knelt in front of him. "I'm worried about you," she whispered.

He waved his hand. "It can't be helped. Everything has been set in motion. It's all a matter of time now. Potter must retrieve that memory from Slughorn; then the process can begin. It won't be long now, Hermione; then I will be forever lost to you," he said softly.

"Stop it!" she snapped. "Now buck up and start helping me! We have to find that Diadem and the book. Ginny stole it, and you and I need to find it!"

"I'll try, Hermione," he said quietly. "Please come for Easter, even if for one day. Please," he whispered.

"I will," she promised. "Now, you eat and get your strength up, or you'll be getting nothing from me," she said as she smiled at him.

He flicked his wand and locked the door. He pulled Hermione close. "Let me feel your breasts against me, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione took off her robe, unbuttoned her shirt, and unhooked her bra. He forced her legs to straddle him, and he nuzzled her cleavage with his nose. He breathed and sighed as he rested his cheek on her bare chest. Hermione stroked his hair and made a soft shushing noise to calm his nerves.

"Remember, Severus," she whispered. "Even if the world forsakes you, I will never. I am yours, forever."

He released a flood of tears, and she felt them against her naked skin. He was sobbing in anguish, and she could do nothing but give him her body. She had been there before, holding his head in her lap while he cried out his rage and heartache over losing Lily. She would be there again.

"Tonks," Hermione said as she stepped outside for Guard duty. "I will be spending the night with my husband. I will be there for our morning meeting, but I think that we need to choose an alternate place. The Three Broomsticks is not safe."

"Do you know what you are doing, Hermione?" she asked gravely.

Hermione looked at her solemnly. "My husband is in severe distress, and he needs me, even if just for the night; I cannot abandon him now. We'll decide from the Three Broomsticks where to go."

She went back into the castle and waited for Severus to return from his classes. She had the house-elves bring down a variety of dishes she knew he liked, and after taking a shower, she drew a lavender bath. All Severus needed was to be comforted, fed, and pampered the way only a wife could. She decanted a bottle of wine and lit the candles in the bath. She took out one of her thin, iridescent nightgowns and waited for Severus.

When he came in the door, he looked at Hermione in complete shock. "What are you doing here?" he whispered.

Hermione padded softly to him and took him by the hand, leading him towards the bathroom. "My husband needed me," she said quietly. "So I am here tonight to care for him. You are weary and undernourished. You desperately need to be soothed, and I know how to alleviate your worries. So, let me be your wife tonight," she whispered as she placed his wedding ring on his finger.

He looked at her left hand and smiled that she was already wearing hers. He placed his hands on her shoulders and slid them down her full breasts to her narrow waist. He knelt on the floor and wrapped his arms around her hips and legs.

"You are a goddess," he choked out as he cried. "I don't deserve you."

Hermione knelt on the floor with him. She began to slowly remove his clothes, and he looked at her face and touched her hair, winding a curl around his finger. He allowed her to lead him into a warm bath with a soothing smell of lavender to calm him. She helped him ease into the water, and he groaned in pleasure as the heat began to work its magic. Hermione poured a glass of wine, gave him a sip, and took a sip for herself.

He continued to watch her, wide-eyed, like the boy he had been who was so alone and afraid in a world too complex for him to handle. She gently washed his hair and the rest of his body. The water soon was soaking her gown, causing the material to cling to her nakedness. When he had relaxed enough in the water, and drank enough wine to make his mind fuzzy, Hermione knew it was time to get him moving. She held out a fluffy towel to dry him and was unfazed by the erection that had grown from her nurturing of his body.

She placed a bathrobe on him and led him to the bed. She cast a drying charm on her gown, noting the groan of disappointment that came from her husband. She motioned him to lie prone on the bed after taking off his robe. She straddled his hips, poured warming and cooling oil in one hand, and liberally applied it to his back. She massaged his shoulders and upper arms, and then focused on his back, making sure each vertebra was attended to. He moaned and murmured his approval as she reached each spot that was worn and hurting. She moved to his buttocks and his thighs, calves and feet. Then she helped turn over and gave him more wine to drink. He pushed the glass away firmly and instead drank from her lips. The glass fell onto the rug, and she watched as his fingers dragged down the straps of her gown and urged her with a lift of his hips for her to remove it. She was in shock as he pulled her down underneath him and manually wrapped her legs around his waist. He continued to kiss and taste her mouth as he placed her hands on her breasts and made her massage the excess oil onto herself. He then removed her hands and replaced them with his own.

He kneaded and stroked her full mounds slowly as she grasped the pillow above her head. She felt so tender inside her core...so moist and pliable as he continued to touch her.

Finally, he entered her and closed his eyes with a look of indescribable joy on his face.

"After all these years, I am still overwhelmed how your body comforts me," he whispered. It was fast, so fast, it couldn't have lasted more than a minute.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "You felt as if you were melting around me."

"Shh," she said, and she brought him food. "Eat!" she ordered. "Or I'll be forced to feed you like a baby and make you say 'all gone!'" she said playfully.

He ate a healthy portion and looked up at Hermione pleadingly. She took mercy on him and banished the plate. He snuggled under the covers and Hermione tucked him in. He grabbed her and pleaded, "Don't leave me!"

"Of course not!" she chided him. She went to her side of the bed and slipped in with him. In a heartbeat, he was holding her against him, his head resting on her soft breasts. She turned off the lights and placed her wand on the bedside table. When she returned to embrace her husband, his mouth found a nipple, and he began to suckle and play with it until he fell fast asleep.

In the morning, she was alone in bed. She jumped up thinking she had overslept, but the clock said she still had an hour before breakfast and the morning meeting in Hogsmeade. She went to find Severus, and he was dressed, groomed, and grading papers as he took his morning tea and toast.

He looked a bit better, but when Hermione approached him, he said in an icy voice, "I would rather not speak of last night, Hermione."

His tone was so formal, even a bit hostile. Hermione was angry. "What has happened to make you so distant from me?" she asked. "We shared something very intimate, and I am still feeling the effects of our togetherness. Aren't you?"

Severus sighed and said, "Yes, I feel it *only too* keenly. That's why I can't talk about it. Perhaps later, but now it is too emotional for me. I allowed myself to be vulnerable in ways I hadn't allowed myself since I was a child. I must be strong and retain my control."

Hermione walked past him and got ready for the day. As she dressed, she couldn't stop the tears from overflowing. She said a hasty goodbye to Severus and left as quickly as she could. She felt confused and hurt. She had never felt so close to him as she had last night.

She reached the Three Broomsticks in time, forced herself to smile as if her heart wasn't aching, and found Tonks sitting alone. "Hey," Hermione said. "What's gotten you so glum?"

"Haven't heard from Remus in a really long time," she whispered. "There were more werewolf attacks, I know he's with that ~~animal~~, Fenrir Greyback. I have to report to

Dumbledore. I can't go on like this, not knowing if he's okay or not." She began to sob now, and Hermione could smell the firewhisky on her.

"Rosmerta," she called out. "Coffee, black, and lots of it. Some dry toast as well."

She rubbed Tonks' back as she urged her to drink the coffee.

"Ta, Hermione," she said. "I'm just a fucking mess, aren't I? No bloke, nothing except me job."

"I'll make sure I get news about Remus, don't worry," she promised her.

"You will?" she asked teary-eyed.

"I shall do my very best."

The young Auror started to perk up a bit just in time for the lads to come downstairs and join them for a spot of breakfast.

"Hey," Tonks whispered as she stood to meet them before they sat down. "We need to go somewhere else secure and talk. It's not safe here."

Dawlish looked hard at Tonks. "Hog's Head?" he suggested. Tonks shook her head. "Not safe, nowhere in Hogsmeade is safe," she mouthed.

Gawain looked concerned. "Fine, we'll Floo to the Ministry and talk in our own place. Let's go."

Once safely inside the Auror Department, Gawain led them to an interrogation room and closed the door. "Look," he said to Tonks. "I don't like leaving Hogsmeade unattended. So this had best be good."

Tonks stepped aside and let Hermione come forward. "It has come to my attention that Madam Rosmerta may be under the Imperius Curse."

"What makes you say that?" asked Proudfoot.

Hermione continued. "I went to question Horace Slughorn after Ron Weasley had been poisoned. He told me he had been given that very bottle by Madam Rosmerta *specifically* to give to Dumbledore."

"Doesn't prove that *she* knew it was poisoned," replied Gawain.

"But this isn't the first time someone nearly died from taking something out of that establishment. According to Katie Bell's friend, Leanne Katie went to the bathroom at the Three Broomsticks with the package containing the cursed necklace. Leanne said she was acting strangely and refused to tell her how it came into her possession...the rest you know.

"I would hate to think Rosmerta would be doing these things on purpose, and I don't think she is. Someone is orchestrating these attempts on Dumbledore's life. I also know that Voldemort has marked Albus for death and that someone has been ordered to do it."

"Who is this person?" asked Tonks.

"I can't tell you. But I will say this: Draco Malfoy was in the Three Broomsticks the very day Katie Bell was cursed, and he was speaking with Madam Rosmerta very suspiciously. I was outside patrolling, but I swear I thought he slipped her a package. Now, that necklace was seen by Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley at Borgin and Burkes just before the start of the fall term, and Draco was in that store talking about that *exact* necklace."

"Fuck me sideways," breathed Savage.

Gawain rubbed his face. "Brilliant. Just what we bloody well need."

Proudfoot remained undeterred. "Still doesn't prove Rosmerta's under the Imperius. Maybe she's in on it. Should we round her up?"

"NO!" shouted Hermione. "We have to wait and keep a sharp eye on Malfoy and Rosmerta during the rest of the school year. If Draco is the one, then he will make his move before the end of term...according to my source."

"Well, we're staying at the Three Broomsticks. I'll speak with Dumbledore as soon as I can. All of you keep your eyes peeled, understand?" Gawain demanded. "That means you keep everything tight at ALL times. I just heard from the Wizengamot that Mundungus Fletcher was sent off to Azkaban for attempting to impersonate an Inferi during a burglary. If it wasn't so damn pathetic, I might be tempted to laugh. Therefore, no one skives off any work. Snape...that means you. Your husband will have to just manage alone, without your charms. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," she replied quietly. "Can I owl him? He was hoping I could come for one day during Easter."

"Owl him, and let him know you won't be coming. *No* more training, and *no* more jaunts outside Hogsmeade. Hogsmeade and Hogwarts is where you will remain for the rest of the year...*outside, guarding it*. Understood?" he asked, looking at each of them hard in the eye.

"Yes, sir," they all said.

They all returned to Hogwarts to their assigned duties. The next couple of weeks went without any incidents...save Harry's Quidditch accident that sent him to the infirmary with a cracked skull. Then one day Hermione saw Harry walking alone by the lake. They saw each other while Hermione was walking her circuit around the castle. She hoped he would come to her, but he ignored her presence and walked father away, his back rigid and unyielding.

The quote is from Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Chapter 64

Many things are discovered before Severus finally takes his leave.

A/N: This is a big chapter with lots of drama and action. I hope you like it. As always, my deepest gratitude to my beta, WriterMerrin, who has worked so hard with me this past year to get us to this point.

The next two months dragged on, and Hermione grew increasingly concerned about Severus. Then one day in May, she received an owl from him.

It has begun. Where is the book?

S.

Hermione's hands began to shake. She went straight to the fireplace, burned the note, and then searched for Gawain.

He was outside patrolling the streets when she found him and flagged him down.

"Gawain, I have got to get down to Hogwarts. Something bad has happened at Hogwarts. It's serious!"

Gawain sent his Patronus to Tonks and Savage. "They'll go and check out the situation. Where are you to be, Snape?"

Hermione sighed and looked at her watch. "In an hour, patrolling in Hogsmeade."

Gawain narrowed his eyes and said, "Then I suggest you get some rest and then report back to me an hour."

He turned and went on his way. Hermione went back inside and went to lie down. That was all she wanted to do anymore. Her mind was not giving her any peace. She tossed and turned at night and was exhausted during the day. She couldn't wait for the school year to end. Then she could have some more time with Severus. Yet, whenever she thought that, her hopes sank. Severus was so sure he was going to die or they would never be together again as they had planned.

She came down the stairs to start her shift. As she headed towards the door, Gawain halted her.

"Well, I just got the Patronus from hell. Your husband is demanding your presence at the castle's infirmary. He says it's more important than making sure the crime-riddled streets of Hogsmeade are safe. Quite the funny man, your husband," he bit out.

Hermione went past him without comment and grabbed her broom. She still detested flying, but short jaunts like from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts were tolerable.

She reached the front doors and walked inside. She went straight up to the infirmary and saw Madam Pomfrey tending to Draco Malfoy.

"I just received a Patronus from Severus that you would be arriving," the matron informed her. "Draco will be all right, though he lost a great deal of blood."

Hermione looked into her worried eyes. "What kind of wound, Poppy?" she whispered suspiciously.

"I don't know, but Severus did. He made sure the boy was stable and sealed the gash." She lifted the sheet off Draco to reveal a huge, white binding on his chest.

"He came in with a horrible slash across his chest, and there was blood everywhere. I-I don't know what happened to him."

"Where is Severus now?" Hermione asked as she stared grimly at the familiar scene in front of her.

"He's in his office, waiting for you," she whispered as she hovered over Malfoy's pale face.

Hermione knocked on the door and was confronted by a very angry Severus Snape. He pulled her inside and closed the door, warding it securely.

"Your friend Potter decided to use my Sectumsempra spell in a duel with Draco. He nearly died. Do you know what happens if Draco dies before this is all over?" he raged.

"Severus, calm down. I know the dangers of this as well as you. What I can't understand is how he got that spell! Ginny stole it and hid it from him right after Christmas hols."

"Well, I demanded it from him, and he insisted he didn't have it!" he snapped.

Hermione looked up at him ruefully. "He wasn't lying. He must have found the spell before the book was taken and decided to save it for when he needed it."

Hermione laid her hand on Severus' arm. "Severus, we have to get up to the to the Room of Requirement. Who knows if he has torn pages from it to use even darker spells? I can't believe it! He must have known someone would take it from him!" As they left, she quickly grabbed Severus' ledger and dashed off.

He followed her and cast a Disillusionment spell around them. "Why there, and why are you taking my grade book?" he asked.

"Because it is Unplottable. Ginny needed a hiding place for the book."

She stood in front of the invisible door and started to pace back and forth. *I need a place to hide this ledger where I can find it again.* She repeated it three times, and the door opened to reveal a room that was gigantic in proportion. It had to be as big as a cathedral or a football field.

"This was your epiphany?" Severus sneered.

He picked up a bloodstained axe. "Oh, yes. I can see the need for a place like this. Perhaps we shall find that American gangster, Jimmy Hoffa or 'Lucky' Lucan," he said sarcastically.

Hermione glared at him. "Try to be a help, not a fucking critic. Let's follow the pathway here. Put that axe down! You're giving me the willies," she hissed.

"Now, where would Ginny hide it?" she murmured to herself.

They came upon a cabinet of sorts. "Look at the dust prints," she said. "Someone has been touching this. She followed the prints to a small door at the bottom of the cabinet. She opened it and saw the book."

"Hello," she crooned, picking it up and smiling like a cat that had found the cream.

"Hello to you, as well," said a purring voice.

Hermione turned quickly, grabbing her wand. She saw Severus reaching up to grasp an object on top of a marble head. Hermione clutched the Potions book to her chest.

Severus held a dinghy, tarnished, yet very antique and exquisite looking Diadem. He peered at the inscription inside. "Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure," he said with a smirk on his face. "Well, well, we have appeared to have killed two kneazles with one stone."

Hermione looked at him angrily. Poor Crookshanks had never really fit with the change in his mistress and had decided to go off his own way. She had never seen him again after the summer of her (second) third year.

"How can you be so unfeeling?" she gasped.

"It's only a saying, Hermione."

She began to tear up. "Poor Crookshanks. He was such a good cat," she whimpered.

"Hermione," said Severus, frowning.. "This is not like you. What has come over you?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, I don't know...the fact we found the book *and* another Horcrux is just so unbelievable! So we were right."

"Yes, I will go to the Headmaster's office and destroy this. I can do it with Gryffindor's Sword."

"You'll be careful, won't you?" she asked. "You won't get yourself *curse*d, will you?"

"Come with me, Hermione. Watch how it is done. You may need to go with Potter to find the others before this is all over."

"The Sword of Gryffindor?" she breathed. "That's what will destroy them?"

"Well, it's because the sword was used to slay the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Goblin-wrought metal has the ability to absorb other magical properties. Don't forget the basilisk fangs. The poison in them will also destroy a Horcrux, and then finally, there is *Fiendfyre*. It is a magical fire that will dissolve the object, thus destroying the soul in the process."

"Amazing!" Hermione breathed as she kept her eyes fixated on the Diadem.

The two made their way into Albus' office where the Sword lay up on the top of a high shelf.

"Good day, Fawkes," said Severus to the phoenix. Fawkes looked at Hermione strangely as she greeted him. "Hello, Fawkes."

She sat down nervously, wanting the whole process to be over with. Fawkes came and nestled in her lap, snuggling against her belly, resting quietly.

"What is this?" she whispered as she gestured towards the phoenix.

"He likes you," Severus said as he deftly handled the sword. The Horcrux inside of the Diadem exposed itself just as Severus poised to strike. An angry red eye peeked out from one of the silver swirls.

You will destroy her!" it hissed. *You will KILL her!"*

Hermione felt frightened and yelled at Severus to kill it. He faltered, and Hermione began to cry. Fawkes flew to perch on Severus' shoulder and trilled out a song that carried over the hissing sounds of Voldemort's evil soul.

Severus regained his purpose and punctured the Diadem, killing it. The scream of the dying soul was dreadful to hear, but it grew softer and softer and then, it was gone. The Diadem looked as dead and harmless as the ring by Dumbledore's desk.

Snape conjured a large cloth, wrapped the Diadem inside it, and sealed it shut.

"What are you doing, Severus?" she asked.

He looked at her pensively as he grabbed her arm. "I want you to keep this for insurance. Soon, very soon, we will have to part, but I shall not die. You may wish I were dead. But you cannot forget that it is /who must kill Dumbledore."

"I don't want to think on it, Severus," she said as she tried to escape his grasp. "Let's just go away. We can take the sword, find the rest of the Horcruxes together, and have Harry kill him. Dumbledore doesn't need you!"

"However, Draco does," he whispered. "The Vow, remember?"

Hermione knew she was being irrational, but just couldn't take it anymore. "Hang the Vow! Narcissa was a manipulative bitch to make you do that. She knew that if you refused, Bellatrix would take that as proof you weren't a real Death Eater," Hermione said angrily.

Severus held her close to him. "Draco isn't evil. He can't have this on his soul. It isn't in him to kill."

Hermione wrenched herself from Severus, "And what of your soul, Severus? What of your soul!" she demanded.

"I fear Albus believes mine is beyond repair," he whispered.

"He's wrong!" she barked at him. "Don't ever believe that lie!"

Hermione turned and walked out of the room. She had the hidden Diadem with her and left to return to Hogsmeade. Severus stopped her at the entrance, just as she was taking up her broom, and took her by the shoulders, holding her close.

"I love you," he murmured in her hair. "I will never stop loving you."

Hermione whirled around and threw her arms around him, and they held on tightly to each other. She had closed her eyes during her embrace and felt she was on fire. She opened her eyes and looked at Severus as his eyes roamed around them. The magic that surrounded them had never been more powerful. Hermione exhaled and let the magic fill her soul and calm her fear. She finally let him go and sped off, the tears cold on the sides of her head as she flew faster and faster back towards Hogsmeade.

Gawain was waiting for her when she got back. "So, did you accomplish what you needed to?"

"Yes, I did, Gawain, and don't look at me as if I stepped out on my job for a shag. Draco Malfoy was nearly killed, and Harry Potter did it. I don't know what's going to happen now."

"Bleedin' hell," he muttered. "Why would Potter..."

"...Because Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater and attacked him. Harry used a dark spell that he had heard about, but didn't understand how it worked, so there you go. Thank God, Severus was nearby when it happened, or we would be carting Harry off to Azkaban."

"Will the Malfoy boy be pressing charges?" Gawain asked.

"I doubt it. He's got bigger fish to fry," she mumbled quietly.

One evening in early June, Hermione said, "Tonks, I feel positively dreadful. My stomach is all queasy, and I'm constipated and bloated."

"Your time of the month comin'?" she asked as she flipped through *Witch Weekly*.

Hermione rubbed her eyes. "I can't remember the last time I had a period. I've been such a bundle of raw nerves. Now Harry and Dumbledore are off again, God knows where. I just want this term to end."

Tonks got up from her bed. "What do you mean you can't remember your last period?" she asked.

"I don't know; I just can't seem to focus," she said in confusion. "Just always so tired."

Tonks took her wand and cast a charm over Hermione's belly. "Hermione," she said in voice she had never heard Tonks use before. "You're pregnant."

"What?" asked Hermione, confused.

"Hermione, you are pregnant. And it's a girl."

Hermione's mouth fell open. She was speechless.

"When was the last time you and Severus... *shagged*?" she whispered.

"It was the night I told you I needed to be with him; he was so over-worked and sad. Ron's birthday...the first of March."

"Well," she said. "That makes you three months pregnant, Hermione. You can't be in Auror Training and preggers!"

"But I'm not even showing!" Hermione said. You'd think by three months, I'd be showing!"

Tonks took her by the arms. "Hermione, you need to rest. I'll go talk with Gawain, and we'll figure out where you should go from here. Probably back to the castle and stay with Severus...or perhaps the Burrow? It would be calmer for you. But let's figure this out, okay? I'll let you know what Gawain says."

"Okay," Hermione said shakily as she lay down.

She was pregnant.

With a girl.

Hermione was asleep when Tonks' Patronus woke her. "Get up!" she yelled. "The castle has been overrun with Death Eaters!"

Oh my God!

Hermione jumped up and grabbed her wand. She hopped on her broom and headed out towards the castle.

The entrance way was dark and empty. It was eerie and strange. There should be sounds of fighting. Then she heard a crash from far away. She ran up the stairs and stopped in her tracks. She couldn't see anything in front of her. She dropped on her knees and crawled along, trying to listen for footsteps. She heard more crashes and shouts that were definitely coming near the Astronomy Tower. She tried every lighting spell she could think of, but nothing happened.

By accident, she ran into Lupin, Minerva, and Tonks by the light of the stairs heading up to the Tower.

"Good, you're here!" Nymphadora shouted. "The bastards have barred the way. They're up there."

"We got one, though" said Lupin. "Careful, don't trip over the body."

"Who set off the Dark Mark?" Hermione asked.

"That arsehole," growled Tonks, pointing at the dead body. "He got scared waiting for the others, came back down, and we got him."

"I almost bit it," panted Remus. "Luckily, we had Neville, Ron, Ginny, and Luna to help us, so we weren't completely taken unawares."

Minerva swore. "I can't get this bloody charm to give way. Where the hell is Filius?" she shrilled.

Hermione said, "We can't do anything all bunched up here. We're like sitting ducks if they start coming down! Break up into threes. One third stay down the stairs, around the corner, another down to the corridor, and another stay working on the lock and meet the lot as they try to leave. They have to come down sometime."

Hermione went with Tonks and Savage to the second position while Minerva, Lupin, and Gawain stayed up at the entrance, trying to break the wards.

Before Hermione was out of earshot, Minerva spat, "Where the hell are Severus and Filius? I sent Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley for them thirty minutes ago!"

"I've got to find him!" shouted Hermione.

"Oh, no you're not!" said Tonks as she dragged her down the corridor. They went near a window, and Tonks crashed it open with her elbow. "Look!" she shouted.

There were Bill and Charlie Weasley coming in the distance. "Brilliant," Tonks said quietly with a smile.

They waited until the Death Eaters started to make their way out towards the exit. Wands were drawn and spells were flying everywhere. Tonks was battling a huge, blond Death Eater while another came hurtling towards Hermione, and she began to duel as well. A well-aimed Stupefy sent him crashing into the opposite wall, unconscious. Hermione ran with the others and saw Severus running after Draco towards the exit. Lupin ran towards it and was repelled backwards. Death Eaters were escaping one after another. Once they had reached the invisible barrier, they couldn't be stopped.

Neville tried just as hard as Remus did and was thrown completely off his feet. Once the last Death Eater escaped, the barrier was broken and Hermione saw Harry running madly after Snape. She followed them while Tonks screamed at her to stay back.

Hermione watched as Harry and Snape fought and screamed at the other. Hagrid's house was ablaze, and the flames coming from it cast an apocalyptic vision upon the scene in front of her. She was screaming at them to stop, and Harry turned his wand to her, attempting to hex her. Severus hexed him first and sent him flying ten feet away.

"Hermione, get the hell out of here!" Severus roared, keeping his eyes fixed on Harry as he charged towards them.

"You fucking whore!" Harry shouted from afar. "How could you do this?"

Hermione ignored Harry as he railed against her. He was still far enough away for her to speak to Severus one last time. She wasn't able to get a word in, for Severus kissed her quickly and said, "I will find you, Hermione. This is not the end. I will find you!"

Harry was coming closer, and Severus took off in a sprint towards the Hogwarts boundary line.

Hermione turned and ran towards Hagrid's hut and began to help him put out the fire. When she'd finished, Severus was gone, and Harry was walking towards her with a look of hatred on his face.

"You bitch!" he screamed. "You knew he was in league with Voldemort all along. You knew about this, didn't you?"

"Harry, please, things are not as they seem!" she pleaded as she fell to her knees in exhaustion.

"How could you? How could you choose him over me?" he howled.

Angry words rang in Hermione's head.

"I can't believe you, Hermione! How can you choose him over me? I've been your friend...he couldn't stand you!"

"Please, Lily, I'm not choosing. Look, James and Sirius never liked me anyway. It's not as if anyone ever cared..."

"I CARED!" Lily screamed as she pushed Hermione to the floor. "You just wanted me out of the way, didn't you?"

"Lily, NO! I never wanted to come between you two!" she protested.

Hermione lifted her head in defeat. There was no choosing, there was just doing what was right to make things better for them all.

Harry dragged Hermione up to the castle roughly by the arm. Hagrid bellowed at Harry for being rude, but Harry told Hagrid that Hermione was a traitor and no longer trustworthy. He stripped her of her wand, but Hermione was too worn out to care.

Harry marched her to the infirmary at wandpoint where the whole group stood shaky and in shock.

Filius was unconscious in one bed while Bill Weasley was in the other, his face mauled grotesquely. Hermione didn't know if he was going to make it or not. Someone whispered that Greyback had mauled him. The Weasleys were sniffing, and Poppy was keeping up a brave front, putting salve on his mangled face.

Harry pushed Hermione in front of him. "She tried to stop me from getting Snape. She's in on it."

The others looked upon her in horror.

"Tell them, Ginny," he ordered as his grip on Hermione's arm intensified. Hermione winced in pain.

Ginny pulled out a piece of paper from her jeans pocket. "I found out who the Half-blood Prince is. Eileen Prince was a student here and had married a Muggle, Tobias Snape. They had a son, Severus Snape, and lived in Spinner's End in Manchester."

"Of course, that's nothing new to you, is it, Hermione?" Harry spat bitterly. "You knew all along there were spells that could kill someone. I didn't know what that curse would do to Malfoy. I can't believe you tried to manipulate me when you knew what that book was the entire time!"

Minerva came close and stood up to Harry. "This is an infirmary! What are you doing, Potter?"

"Just trying to get a little bit of justice, Professor," he announced, never taking his green eyes off Hermione for a second.

"Justice?" shouted Hermione. "That book had already been out of your possession when you cursed Draco. If you didn't know what the spell would do, you had no business casting it! Don't blame others for your poor judgment."

"Dumbledore is dead."

Harry's blunt announcement cut through the air like a knife. There were choked cries and audible groans. "I saw it all," Harry said bitterly. "Malfoy was as normal, a coward, couldn't do what his master, Voldemort, had ordered him, so Snape stepped in and cast the Killing Curse as Dumbledore begged for his life..."

"...That's a lie!" Hermione protested.

"Really?" asked Harry. His face was hard as granite, and his grip was becoming more painful by the second. He tossed her wand to Remus and told him to keep it safe for the trial.

"That's right," Hermione insisted. "Dumbledore was dying anyway. The curse that destroyed his right hand was arrested from spreading throughout his body because of Severus' action. However, the curse from the object Dumbledore handled was too powerful. It only gave him borrowed time...a year at most. Dumbledore *knew* he was dying, and he knew that Draco Malfoy had been ordered by Voldemort to kill him. Dumbledore didn't want Draco's soul marred by murder, so he bound Severus to do it.

"Besides, Draco's mother and Bellatrix LeStrange came to Spinner's End this past summer and browbeat him into an Unbreakable Vow for Draco's protection. Dumbledore approved it all!"

"You lie," Harry seethed. "Severus Snape was nothing but a sadistic bastard who lived for his own glory. He deluded you in his lies."

"If Severus wanted you dead, you would be dead, Harry Potter!" she shouted. "You and I saw how he never took an offensive stance against you, but a defensive one & you were the aggressor. Only when you tried to hex me did he retaliate."

"Potter, I think Hermione should be released until we can figure out what the devil is going on here!" Minerva demanded in her shrill voice.

Harry placed Hermione next to Tonks, who took her hand in hers. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

Hermione nodded. She felt numb. Her husband was now on the run, and she was pregnant and facing imprisonment.

"How's the baby?" Tonks mouthed.

Hermione nodded she was fine, and the baby as well. She folded her hands protectively across her belly and listened silently as everyone began to piece it all together.

Minerva sat weakly in a chair. "I always wondered ... I can't believe this," she whispered.

"Snape was an accomplished Occlumens, the best, in fact. Better than Dumbledore and Voldemort combined," said Remus.

Hermione tuned them all out. All she could think of was Severus. He was gone, and she was left behind. A part of her was angry she had been left behind, but then how could she be with him, knowing he was with Voldemort now. He would be gone until the end...the bitter end. What was even worse was that Severus didn't know he was a father.

She regained her interest in the situation when Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came in. Molly was crying hysterically, and Fleur was right at her heels. Molly grabbed the medicine from Madam Pomfrey and started to apply it to Bill's face when Fleur grew indignant and wrenched the jar out of Molly's hands.

Hermione watched as the Weasley family finally accepted Fleur into their fold. She was genuinely happy for them, yet she felt so alone. Then, just as she thought she could feel no worse, a gut-wrenching cry emitted from Tonks, and she flung herself at Remus.

Tonks had Remus by the front of his robes, and Hermione felt tears coursing down her face. She sat and heard Tonks' plea to Remus. Hermione wanted to shut them out as they argued about their relationship. Hermione felt her heart was swelling in pain, ready to burst inside her. She sat in her isolation, no comfort, and no friends. She was utterly alone.

"We have other matters more pressing," Remus said uncomfortably.

"Right," said Minerva. "We need to inform the Ministry and gather together the Order. We need to make some decisions."

Harry spoke up. "Until the Minister can be notified and a decision made, I think Hermione Snape should be locked up in the Prisoner's Tower," he declared.

Remus looked concerned. "Harry, don't you think that's a bit preemptive?" he asked.

"It wasn't harsh enough for Sirius when the Ministry took him after he saved us from you the night you transformed. Besides, I also want a full inquiry into Mrs. Snape's statement that Sirius Black tried to rape her New Year's of 1995."

Harry was so angry and potent in his rage; the others didn't know what to do or say.

Tonks went to Hermione's side. "You need to plead your condition," she whispered.

"I don't trust Harry or the Ministry at this point," Hermione whispered in return. "If you care for me, you will keep my secret."

Hermione Snape's hands were bound, and she was led away by her fellow Aurors: Gawain and Proudfoot up to the drafty Prisoner's Tower, where her personal effects were tossed in with her. She made sure the Diadem was still safe among her things, and she began to place extra layers of clothing on to sleep. As she made a makeshift bed on the cold stone floor, she began to rub her belly and speak to her daughter.

"I don't know what we'll name you, love. But at least you can know that your daddy and I made you in love, and we are all going to be happy one day. Your daddy and I have it all planned out. After the war, we'll get a little cottage, maybe in Hogsmeade, and we'll give you a loving home with lots of soft blankets and soft toys. I can see you now: a lovely, dark-haired, curly head know-it-all like me with the wisdom and cunning of your father. You'll have his dark, lovely eyes and my pink cheeks. You'll be so special, and we'll give you lots of brothers and sisters, I promise..."

A/N: Lord Lucan, a professional gambler and socialite whose nickname was "Lucky," has not been seen since November 8, 1974. He went missing hours after his family's nanny was battered to death and his estranged wife was assaulted in their London home. There have been dozens of supposed sightings around the world.

Chapter 65

Chapter 65 of 74

Hermione is on the run from the Death Eaters.

A/N: I want to thank all of you who reviewed the last chapter. I know it was hard to take, and things aren't going to get better just yet, but I hope you will stick with it. We only have NINE chapters left!

Over the next two weeks, Tonks proved to be Hermione's most loyal friend. She informed her of the Wizengamot's progress concerning her trial, but the wheels of justice proved to turn slowly. However, Tonks never failed to arrive daily with food for the prisoner and escort her to where she could shower and listen to the gossip going around the Auror Department and the Ministry.

Each day was the same. "How are you, Hermione?"

"Well enough."

Tonks was extra enthusiastic this day. "We're getting a room ready for you with your own bathroom, couch, and bed where you can be comfortable. Scrimgeour is going spare. The Ministry is hanging on by a thread. There might not be a trial after all! We don't know if Hogwarts will even open for the fall semester," Tonks added.

Hermione's mind told her she should be happy about the prospect of no trial. However, the pain and fear of not knowing where Severus was or if he were safe kept her in a state of constant turmoil.

From her cell, Hermione had watched the funeral for Dumbledore, and she had not felt any remorse about his death. In fact, she was glad the wizard was dead. At least

Severus only had to answer to one despot. Her lack of grief over Dumbledore's death bothered her, but it couldn't be helped. She hated the old wizard and was unable to shake the feeling that he had used them all terribly. After the funeral, she heard Fawkes singing a lament, and it had been then that she had cried.

Very soon, June moved into July, and the heat was sweltering. Worse than that, Hermione was beginning to show, and the extra clothes were making her miserable. She took to wearing her robe, which hid her pouch. She made a ritual of talking to her daughter about her mother and father. She told her stories about their friendship at Spinner's End, and the years they had been separated and then when they had been reunited. She told her about Horatius and of her time traveling. She decided to name her Serena. Somehow, it made Hermione feel closer to Severus.

The day came that Hermione moved into the room which had been created for her. It was small, but functional for her needs. It was a cheery room with yellows and soft blues. She was now able to relax and wear lighter, loose-fitting clothes. The biggest blessing of all was the large four-poster bed. It was luxurious and heavenly. Hermione knew whom to thank for that concession. Tonks wanted Hermione resting as much as possible and to eat all the enormous quantities of food she brought each day. Hermione's only concern was how long she would have to remain locked in her comfortable cell.

One morning, Harry barged in while she was reading aloud to Serena. She hastily pulled the covers up to hide her growing belly.

"You could have knocked," she snapped, gripping her covers as tightly as possible.

"You are a prisoner, Mrs. Snape," Harry replied without emotion. "I wanted you to know that your husband was at an important meeting at Malfoy Manor during the last two weeks. According to the source, Voldemort viciously murdered Charity Burbage, your Muggle Studies teacher, and fed her corpse to Nagini. The news was distributed amongst the Muggle-borns. You need to pack up, *Mrs. Snape*. Scrimgeour's reign as minister will be ending shortly, and this castle is in danger of Voldemort taking over. Even if Snape is your husband, I doubt Voldemort will bend the rules for you."

"Why do you hate me so much?" Hermione blurted out as he turned to leave.

Harry spun around and glowered at her. "Because you chose him over our friendship," he spat. "You turned on me, Dumbledore, and everything we were all about *for him*."

"That's not true," Hermione insisted. She reached under her bed and tore open the cloth that held the remnants of the broken Diadem.

Harry inhaled sharply. "Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Severus and I have been working on finding the Horcruxes. We found it and destroyed it with Gryffindor's Sword. Severus is not your enemy...Voldemort is!" she said furiously.

"Why did he kill Dumbledore when he was begging him not to?" he demanded.

"You and I don't know for sure that was what Dumbledore was referring to, but he *could* have been begging to die. He was *dying*, Harry, and he knew his time was at a close. How better to secure Severus' place amongst the Inner Circle of the Death Eaters than to be the 'killer' of Dumbledore?"

"You know, Trelawney told me Snape knew about the prophecy. Snape told Voldemort about my parents. He is just as culpable as Wormtail!" Harry shouted accusingly.

"That is not true, Harry!" she hollered. "Wormtail was their friend and had their trust. Severus was on a job, and he never even ~~heard~~ the whole prophecy! He just reported the message. At one time, Severus loved your mother. They had been friends since before Hogwarts. He loved her until she turned from him. Even though he recovered from her rejection, he never wanted to hurt her, Harry. When he found out Voldemort marked your parents for death because of what he had said...he was devastated! All he ever wanted was to protect Lily, me, and all the other Muggle-borns from Voldemort. Joining him seemed to be the only way to keep an eye out for whatever Voldemort may have been planning."

Harry stared at her, trembling in rage. His fists clenched by his sides as he struggled to keep his mouth closed. Just when Hermione thought he had reigned in his ire, he drew his wand and pointed it at her. "You keep hiding and withholding. You never can just tell me the whole truth!" he yelled. "You tell me bits and pieces...never the whole truth! Dumbledore would have told me if he had ordered Snape to kill him! He *trusted* me!"

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to keep her temper under control. "The history of my personal life is none of your business if I choose not to reveal it. And if I choose not to, that means I have a damn good reason, and you should respect that!" she hollered. "And you are a fool, Harry Potter, if you think Dumbledore would have given you all the information he knew. He *never* gave any of his allies the grand scheme of his to defeat Voldemort."

Harry lowered his wand, so she decided to go for it.

"Dumbledore took you to that cave, didn't he?" she asked him.

Harry closed his eyes and turned his back on her. "It was all for nothing. The Horcrux we were looking for was gone!"

Hermione laughed quietly.

"What?" he snapped as he turned to look at her.

"I am a source of untapped resources, Harry. Regulus Black was a Death Eater who stole the Horcrux from the cave. Severus got the real locket from Kreacher and destroyed it. Don't you get it? Voldemort forced Severus and Regulus to take the Dark Mark. Everything Severus did, he did to save your mum, me, for all the Muggle-borns who were being tortured and ill treated. When Regulus finally caught on to how evil Voldemort really was, instead of keeping it quiet, he lashed out, and his Master murdered him."

"So, where is the locket now?" Harry demanded. "And what of the other Horcruxes?"

Hermione chose her words carefully. "I don't know. It seems that Voldemort has a penchant for gifting those he deems worthy to hold onto the bits of his soul. Lucius had the diary, you could say 'Hogwarts' had the Diadem, and the Gaunt house held the ring. Even Slytherin's locket, although no longer there, was in that precise cave where Voldemort first discovered that he could hurt people. Therefore, he chose to turn it into a place of horror. So, again, it is a clue that he hides these precious items in a place where he holds a deep connection with, or with a person whom he feels is worthy enough to be entrusted with such priceless items."

Hermione tapped her finger against her lips and said, "We know that he is a psychopath. One thing some serial killers do is to take little treasures from their victims and either hide them where only they can have access to them or will hide them in plain sight."

"Do you know all of the Horcruxes?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "We were close. The ones destroyed were the diary, the ring, the Diadem, and the locket. We are sketchy on the others, but we think it may be a total of seven. That remains three: the Cup of Hufflepuff, Nagini, his familiar, and then one we don't rightly know." Hermione remembered what Severus had told her about Harry being a Horcrux. It was all she could do to keep an impassive look on her face and not blurt it out.

"So you and Snape believed that one of these last Horcruxes included Nagini?" Harry's voice carried a tone of disbelief.

Hermione was unmoved. "Yes, that was why you could dream of being Nagini, attacking Mr. Weasley. At the time, Voldemort had been possessing his snake." She shifted in bed and prayed to God that Harry wouldn't derive a conclusion and realize he was the last Horcrux.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "I still don't know if I can trust you."

Hermione managed a sad smile. "Fine. Don't believe me. Prove me wrong. But, Harry, I cannot believe you would think I would work against you. Especially with all Severus and I have done for you when you were unawares."

Harry shook his head before looking into Hermione's eyes. "I can't trust you. You lied for years, and with everything you've said and done about Sirius, I just can't risk it."

She lay back down and gave in to her weariness to nap. Serena was complaining, and Hermione felt her stomach flutter. She had no idea how long Harry remained staring at her, but he eventually departed with the Diadem, and after he was long gone, Hermione was able to relax and release the tension inside of her.

"Good-bye, Harry Potter," she whispered.

Hermione was too afraid to tell anyone about the pregnancy. She made sure she practiced some stretching techniques and ate balanced meals. By July, she had a small bump and was starting her fourth month. Her fitful sleeping problem had left her, but now she was just randy as hell and dreamt of Severus every night. She would wake up in a sweat, remembering the feel of his cock penetrating her, Severus whispering how luscious she was now that she was carrying his baby. At first, she felt wrong relieving herself, but then she decided she couldn't stand it any more and began to masturbate when she would wake from such vivid dreams. Yet, it still wasn't enough. Hermione missed Severus desperately.

Tonks was still a faithful friend. She and Remus married towards the end of July, and Hermione still insisted that Tonks not reveal to anyone about the baby.

Tonks paced the room nervously. "How are you going to be on the run and care for you and your child?" she demanded.

Hermione stared out of the window and said hollowly, "I thought about going back into the Muggle world like I did the last time, but I honestly don't know if I will be safe."

"Well, you can always stay with my mum and dad, okay?" she asked her as she squeezed her hand.

Hermione was already thinking ahead. She would have to rely on the kindnesses of other sympathetic wizarding families...not that she would find many. Perhaps if she pleaded her case, Molly would let her stay. However, Hermione knew she couldn't go. Not with the baby. She calculated the due date and decided she had to be due around the beginning or middle of December. She would have to be settled then someplace warm for the birth. She wondered at times if Spinner's End was still available to her. However, she had no way of finding out...not when her wand was still being held from her. Besides, she was just too afraid to take the risk...for her, their baby, and Severus.

The first of August, Tonks had come by to return Hermione's wand to her and told her Harry wanted her to know he was tucked away at the Burrow. Hermione knew this was Harry's offering of an olive branch, but she did not trust him. Not after putting her under arrest. Tonks told her that Bill and Fleur's wedding would be the following day. Hermione wished she could be there.

The day of the wedding, she was in bed, reading to Serena when Tonks' Patronus came bounding through the window.

"The Ministry has fallen; Scrimgeour is dead. Ron, Ginny, and Harry are on the run as well as the Order. Get out of Hogwarts. He will be coming to take over Hogwarts soon. Find a hiding place. You are a wanted woman!"

Hermione panicked. She jumped up and began to pack. She still wasn't showing much, but had a real baby bump now. She threw on a robe, grabbed her clothes and her wand, and shoved it all into a bag. She changed her hair to black and straightened it. Then she trimmed it short. She tanned her skin with a glamor and changed her robe from Gryffindor to Slytherin. She made her way out of the castle and skirted the edge of the forest, making her way towards the mountains. There were caves and some berries and fresh water nearby that she could eat. As soon as she felt she had traveled high enough and deep in one of the caves, she collapsed on top of her bag with her soft clothes and wished she still had her bed.

She began to weep. She was truly alone now...alone and four months pregnant. How was she going to survive on the run? She finally slept, and when she awoke, her body was stiff and desperately hungry. She searched for a nearby stream and carefully made her way through the brambles and bushes that caught on her clothes. She found a stream and drank from it furiously. She had to find food. Serena was complaining and kicking her angrily. *She's got her father's temper, that's for sure*, Hermione thought wryly.

She knew she was going to have to make a decision. If it were only herself, she could wait it out, keep on the run, finding hiding places, wearing clothes to keep her warm. She had been camping since she was a small child; her parents taught her how to build fires and scavenge for food. However, she wasn't alone. She had to think about Serena and how long she could safely stay on the run as her belly grew. Then when winter set in, what would she do? She decided she would figure it out later, but for now she would Apparate home and see if she could stay there. Her parents would have questions for sure, but once they knew her condition, they wouldn't press for long. When winter arrived, and if the war was still on, she would remain and have Serena there...if Death Eaters didn't find her first. And then there was always Andromeda.

Hermione Apparated into her fenced-in backyard. However, there wasn't a fence any longer. As she took in the sight in front of her, she screamed. The Dark Mark hung heavily in front of her eyes. Her screams brought her neighbor, Mrs. Fitzsimmons, over to her side.

"Oh my! Hermione Granger, where have you been?" she asked wildly. She picked Hermione up off the ground where she had collapsed and led her into her house.

Hermione sat in the kind lady's kitchen as she bustled around gathering food and tea for Hermione to eat.

"Hermione, it was a terrible fire. Your parents must have been sleeping; there wasn't anything left." She smothered a cry as she put the kettle on. "We didn't know how to find you; everything was in your parents' house. The police tried to go through your parents' office at their dental practice, but found nothing with which to find you. We've been waiting for two weeks now. We had no way to find you. Your parents' friends buried them in the local cemetery. Your accountant gave me a folder, now where is it?"

She bustled around and found what she was looking for. "Oh, here," she said. "Your accountant is liquidating your parents' practice and selling the land where the house once stood. Their will states that the sale of the practice shall also go to you. Your parents were very good with money; the accountant placed in the bank a tidy sum for you in your name."

Thank God, I can disguise myself and get it exchanged into Galleons at Diagon Alley. I can never go into Gringotts, she thought sadly.

Hermione saw the food in front of her and began to eat like a starving woman.

"Hermione," Mrs. Fitzsimmons asked as she watched the young woman wolf down her food. "I've had five children, and I am not a fool. What can I do for you? How far along is the pregnancy?"

"Five months," she answered between mouthfuls.

"Why are you on the run?" she asked as she sat down across from her.

Hermione looked at the kind neighbor. She had always been so nice and good to her family. She had known her as far back as she could remember. But she wasn't a witch. She couldn't tell her the truth.

"Mrs. Fitzsimmons, I need to tell you something, but you can never repeat what I am about to say. There is a man who has been stalking me. He won't leave me alone. He threatened to kill my parents, and now they're dead." She began to cry. So much had been actually the truth.

"Is he the f-father?" the older woman asked in wide-eyed fear.

"Oh, no!" said Hermione. "I'm actually married. I'm going on the run with him. He's a good man; he is taking care of me as well as he can. I was coming here to get supplies. I didn't want my husband to come...I was afraid for him. I-I guess I was right to be."

"Well, I can help you!" she said. "What do you need?"

Hermione thought it over quickly and said, "I need a good knife...like a hunting knife, twine, some bread, cheese, some cans of soup and an opener if you have it and some water."

"My dear! How will you carry all of this?" she asked, concerned.

"Don't worry. I'll take the bus to where my husband is waiting."

"Oh, Hermione, why don't you help the police arrest this monster?" she pleaded.

"Believe me," Hermione said, "The police know and are trying their best to get him. For now, the safest thing is for me and my husband to go on the run."

Mrs. Fitzsimmons packed the things Hermione asked for and said, "Please come back if you need anything else, food, clothes, anything! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," she replied. She gave her old neighbor a hug, and before she stepped outside, she said, "Don't open the door unless you KNOW the person. If someone you don't know comes snooping around uninvited, or a city worker, something like that, don't open the door and get out of the house another way. He's already killed friends of mine. He is very dangerous."

"Why haven't I heard this on the news?" she panicked.

Hermione lied quickly. "I think they don't wish for the entire populace to be afraid because of one man's obsession with one woman. Please be careful."

Hermione left the house, and as soon as she could, she Apparated into the Forest of Dean where she had spent many a happy summer, camping with her mum and dad. As soon as she found a suitable hiding place, she built a small fire and ate some food. Serena calmed down, and Hermione finally let the reality wash over her. She cried desperately until she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Please review!

Chapter 66

Chapter 66 of 74

Sirius' attack on Hermione and Harry's refusal to trust in Hermione finally culminates in death.

A/N: This is a very emotional chapter. I am very sorry if anyone is upset by the turn of events. PLEASE pay attention to the warning section. My thanks to karelia and kittylefish for agreeing to finish the beta work for the rest of the fic.

Two weeks went by, and Hermione discovered to her surprise that she was faring well in the forest. She had rationed her food and laid traps for small animals, like rabbits and squirrels, to kill and eat for protein. The bread was gone, but it couldn't be helped. The cheese kept fresh, and she had water and berries in the nearby bushes to keep Serena happy.

One evening, she heard voices close to her site and grew nervous and afraid.

"You've got nerve, boy! I'd never go into public to risk anything for a ruddy paper," one man's voice said.

"But, this was worth it!" said another voice that sounded strangely familiar. "Look, it's got everything in here. All the new edicts and whatnot."

"Damn," said another voice that sounded strange. "That bint's got it in for anyone not fully human!"

"Or pure-blooded," reminded the other voice.

Hermione listened in more and more until she recognized the voice. It was Dean! Dean Thomas! She picked herself up and went to find them. They were surrounded by a roaring fire and were eating like kings.

Dean was with two men Hermione didn't know and two goblins. They were terrified, but Dean said, "Wait...hold it!"

He stood up slowly and said, "Hermione?"

Hermione burst into tears, and Dean rushed to her side and hugged her. "Shush, now. It's all right. You're with friends now."

"This is Hermione. She is a Muggle-born as well. Hermione, have you been on the run all this time?"

"For a month now," she said tiredly. "Let me get my stuff, if I can join you? I'm all alone."

"Sure, sure!" said one man as he got up. "Let me get it for you. Can't be too far off now, can it?"

Dean helped Hermione sit down near the fire. The other man and the two goblins were eyeing her cautiously.

"You'll be having a baby before the winter begins," said one man. "Who is the bloke who got you that way?"

Hermione was silent. She didn't know what to say.

"Aye, what I figured. Those bloody Snatchers. Some are stupid enough to think why not get a bit from a Muggle-born before handing her in. Got away in the end, did you?" he asked as he ate what looked like rabbit stew.

Dean fixed her a plate of stew, and Hermione ate heartily. The rest looked at her as if she were an animal to be pitied.

Dean drew a breath and said, "Look, Hermione's married. She got hoodwinked and tricked into marriage, and the Death Eater got her pregnant looks like. Right, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded, afraid they would hurt her and Serena if she told them the truth.

"Who was it?" the man asked.

"Is it still at least common courtesy for you to identify yourself before I tell you one of the most intimate details of my life?" she answered coldly.

"Dirk Cresswell. I was the head of the Goblin Liaison Office. I was sent to Azkaban for refusing to register as a Muggle-born with the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, but I escaped by Stunning Auror Dawlish. I went on the run with Dean Thomas, Ted Tonks, and the Goblins Griphook and Gornuk who were with me on the transport to Azkaban."

"What is the 'Muggle-Born Registration Commission'?" asked Hermione.

"Oh, that's the work of our good, old friend, Dolores Umbridge!" said Dean sarcastically.

The man returned with Hermione's gear and said, "My name's Ted Tonks. And you are?"

"Hermione Granger," she said. "I was working with your daughter, Nymphadora, in the Auror Department."

"Oh! You're one of Harry Potter's friends!" he said excitedly. "Now why are you out here by yourself?"

Hermione replied without emotion. "I had a falling out with Harry. He was very angry when I married my husband."

"Who did you marry?" asked one of the goblins.

"I'd rather not say," Hermione said nervously.

"It's okay, Hermione," Dean assured her as he placed a hand on her knee. "We know he tricked you, lied to you, hell...he lied to everyone."

He turned his face to the group. "She's Severus Snape's wife."

The goblins began to choke on the food. Dirk and Ted went pale as ghosts. "You're carrying Snape's child?" Dirk asked her, obviously shaken by the revelation.

Hermione nodded while she looked about her nervously.

Ted spoke up. "You don't know what's been going on, do you?" he asked with a look of worry on his face.

"No," she said. "I was in hiding at Hogwarts until Tonks, er, Nymphadora sent me a Patronus that the Ministry had fallen, Scrimgeour was dead, and I had to get out of the castle."

"Damn right!" Dirk said in agreement. "At that moment, You-Know-Who probably had a contingent already on their way to take over the castle. You were probably running out as they were headin' in! It's September, you know. Hogwarts is open, and your husband is the Headmaster."

"What?" Hermione said breathlessly. She felt as if her body had gone numb. *This can't be happening!*

"There's a lot you don't know, Hermione. We'd best fill her in, guys," said Dean.

"Well," started Dirk. "First, you need to know what happened the day you went on the run. First, the Ministry was taken over by the Death Eaters. But we all went on with our work. We had a new Minister of Magic, Pius Thicknesse."

"Wasn't he the wizard who took over Amelia Bones' job as Head of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"The very one!" Dirk confirmed. "Now, the Death Eater, Yaxley, has got the job now that Thicknesse is Minister. But the thing is, I've known Pius for years, and he's not the same man. He's under the Imperius Curse, and You-Know-Who is *really* the Minister of Magic now."

Hermione felt weak. "Oh my God," she whispered.

"Then things started changing. Yaxley and Umbridge came up with the 'Muggle-Born Registration Commission' and began to rifle through everyone's personal information records. They made a list of those who worked at the Ministry who were Muggle-borns, married Muggle-borns, or had family members who married Muggle-borns," he said with a nod to Ted.

Ted spoke up, "Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater forever. My wife, Andromeda, is his wife's sister. They came to my house and put my wife and I under the Cruciatus Curse before sending me off to Azkaban with this group."

"That's not all they did," Dean added. "They also got a hold of all the student records of everyone alive who had attended Hogwarts. All the Muggle-borns were put on the list, ordered to register as a Muggle-born, and surrender their wands."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "Severus did that? He just let them have those records?"

"Please!" said one of the goblins. "Spare us your wifely faith in a sneaky opportunist like Snape. That man has no loyalty...except to himself," he added as he looked at Hermione's swollen belly.

Hermione lifted her chin defiantly. She wasn't going to lose faith in him. She could feel the thrumming of the magic in her body. They had taken vows and oaths. He was

just playing a part...a spy.

Dirk cleared his throat and continued. "At first, they were sly about it. You were urged to comply and rot like that. Then, when they came to me, I told that Umbridge bitch where she could stick her register! Then I was carted off to Azkaban with these fellows. That bint even wrote a pamphlet called *Mudbloods and the dangers they pose to a peaceful pure-blood society*."

He thrust a newspaper under her nose, and she saw it with her own eyes. She couldn't believe what she was reading.

"Can you believe that tripe?" Dirk said angrily.

"Where is the Order?" Hermione whispered.

"There is no Order, missy," said Dirk. "Everyone is either in hiding, a part of the Underground Resistance, like the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, or they are just going with the flow!"

"Dirk!" said Dean angrily. "This is a lot for Hermione to process." Dean held a protective arm around Hermione and kept her close. Hermione felt grateful for his concern for her.

Dirk became furious. "Well, she'd better buck up and face facts. Do you realize that you are in the top five of the Death Eaters' wanted list? Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, Remus Lupin, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. They're looking for you. Now what are you going to do when that baby comes?" he demanded.

Hermione didn't like his pushy tone. If she had been her normal self, she would have just hexed him for being such a prick, but the pregnancy was making her confused and emotional. "I-I don't know, I could go underground, hide in the Muggle world, perhaps," she said.

"When are you due?" asked the other goblin.

"December."

"A hard time to have offspring."

"It wasn't planned," she muttered.

"These things never are."

"What's your name?"

"Griphook," he said. "This here is Gornuk." He pointed towards the other goblin. "We refused to work like animals under the new regime, so we were sent to Azkaban."

"I can't believe Dawlish is doing this!" Hermione said incredulously.

Dirk snorted. "Most don't have a choice. Dawlish's wife is a half-blood. He was told to comply or she would be sent off to Azkaban as well."

"I can't believe this is happening," Hermione mumbled.

"Believe it, girl," said Dirk roughly. "The Ministry of Magic is nothing more than a holding pen for Muggle-borns. Trials are continuously going on, and those, like Dean, received a notice to report to the Ministry. That's the stupidest thing you could do, but many are fools, believing the lies that if they cooperate, they will be shown leniency, or they can't hide properly and get caught by the Snatchers and are sent off to the Ministry. If you get to the Ministry, there's only one way out...on a transport to Azkaban."

"Have many of our fellow Muggle-borns been sent off?" Hermione asked Dean.

"Couldn't tell you," he said. "I've been watching out for my own back."

Hermione thought for a moment and asked, "Who are the Snatchers?"

Ted spoke up this time. "Snatchers are those who work for You-Know-Who, and they go out and search for Muggle-borns in hiding and turn them into the Ministry for a nice fee."

"Bounty hunters," Hermione whispered.

"Too right," Ted replied. "Well, there are a bunch of them, and they all work in groups. We were lucky. The group that sent us on the transport to Azkaban was thick as two short planks held together with stupid glue! Others, from the info we got while waiting in the queue, are pretty ruthless. Fenrir Greyback, that bloody werewolf, his group is the worst. They're brutal. What's worse is that the Ministry doesn't care if you bring them in alive or dead."

Hermione placed a hand nervously around her neck. Dean put his arm around her. "We'll take care of you, Hermione," he said. He looked at the others and said, "Hermione is the smartest witch in my class. She'll know how to get us out of tight spots. She's been on the run all this time alone without getting caught whilst pregnant! She'll be an asset."

"Oh, one more thing," Dirk said. "Never say his name. Say 'You-Know-Who.' The name has a tracking spell on it. Snatchers will be all over our arses if we so much as breathe his name. So, remember it!"

They agreed to remain together, and Hermione shared the tent with all four of them. She was resolved to never be argumentative and help pull her weight with the cooking and casting protective spells around the site.

As the weeks passed, Hermione noticed Dean was growing attached to her. At first, he was just helpful, offering to help her cook or placing a stool under her feet when they swelled. Hermione watched the others for signs of knowledge, but no one said a word. There were times she thought she saw a ghost of a smile playing around Dirk's face, but that was all.

One night, Dean crept into her bed. It was a rather tight fit, and it made Hermione very uncomfortable. Dean kept pulling on the blanket gently to keep her warm and bundled. She was appreciative of his chivalry; however, she couldn't help but think that there was something more to his coming to her bed in the middle of the night. She stared warily into his brown eyes as he began to whisper to her.

"Hermione, I want you to know that I would do anything to help you and Baby Serena. I think we could make a life together."

His hand brushed her cheek, and it was so wrong. She couldn't tell him she didn't want him, could she? What if they kicked her out to face winter alone? Dean knew she was married, and even if the rest of the group hated Severus, it didn't change the fact that she *loved* him, and it would always be him for her...always. Somehow, she gathered the courage and took his hand off her cheek.

"Please don't think I'm ungrateful, Dean," she whispered into the dark. "You have saved me and my baby. You have always been a good person. You are a good and kind man. But my husband is out there. I made a vow to him. I have loved him since I was a girl. Even if he were to... n-never see me again, I would always be his. Please don't

make me choose between my husband and the safety of my daughter."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "I would never do that, Hermione!" he declared. "I care about you too much. It's just you are so beautiful and we are here, together. I thought we could make a new life for us. Who knows how many Muggle-borns are left?"

"I know," she replied. "But as bleak as things may seem, I cannot betray my husband. I love him. He is a good man."

Dean nodded and slowly retreated from her bed. Hermione was dizzy from the emotional exertion. It hurt to think about Severus. The thought of never seeing him again scared her. Her eyes filled with tears. The strain was eating her alive. She didn't know how much more she could take.

One early morning in October, Hermione woke up feeling sick and dizzy. She was beginning her seventh month, and every day was becoming harder and harder to handle. Her back hurt, her ankles swelled from walking so much, and the lack of food had made her very thin. Food was a touchy subject. With the cold settling in, it was getting harder to find food enough for everyone. Going off to hunt was suicidal; who knew if there were Snatchers out there waiting to hunt them down? Dirk complained a great deal over the lack of food. He resented Hermione getting the largest share, but when he came close to crossing the line about "maybe it would be for the best if....," someone would stand up and shut his mouth for him. There were a lot of bruised knuckles and swollen eyes and lips going around, and Hermione felt responsible. Ted and Dean reassured her they would rather go hungry than see her lose any more weight. The goblins kept their opinions to themselves, but Hermione could see the pity in their eyes.

She wished she had the guts to let them be and end the waiting. It would literally be two fewer mouths to feed, but she couldn't and reproached herself for her selfishness. She was a bloody coward, but she figured she had no other option. There was simply nowhere she could go and be safe.

During dinner one evening, the topic of hiding out at Andromeda's arose. Ted told her she was more than welcome to try, but the Snatchers were thick around the area. If she could hold out until November or December, just before the birth, she could go. The snow would probably keep the Snatchers inside, not out on patrols as much. Therefore, that was the plan: holding out for December.

However, on this ominous morning, everything changed. Once Hermione tried to lift herself off the bed, she screamed in pain. She sat up clutching her belly and tore the cover off her. She was bleeding badly, and the pain wasn't stopping. It would grow mild, and then she could relax and breathe. Then all too soon, she would grit her teeth, and the excruciating pain would start all over again. The ripping, pulling, and pressure would not stop.

Dean and Ted were helping her. Dean Scourgified her bloody clothes and sheets at regular intervals. Dean held her head in his lap and let her grip his hands to withstand the pain. There was a lot of shouting, a great deal of crying, from Hermione, and then there was the never-ending screaming.

The screaming was awful. The sweating and the vomiting were terrible as well. There was nothing to help Hermione's agony. The shouting and clamoring of the men and goblins around her seemed so far away from where she was...locked in the grip of never-ending pain.

"Will you just let me silence her?" Dirk hissed. "We're going to get caught with all this noise!"

"Don't you have any pity in you?" shouted Dean. "She's in agonizing pain! Besides, we have wards all around us. No one can hear anything!"

"It still doesn't make me feel safe. Just shut her up! SHUT UP!" he shouted at Hermione.

"You had best watch yourself, Dirk," Ted told him in a deadly calm voice.

"Don't yell at a woman when she's birthing."

Hermione's face contorted as she tried to keep quiet, but it was so awful and hurt so much, she couldn't stop the occasional scream that would rip from her throat.

Dirk paced in front of them as he fisted his hair. "I'm not saying to not let her scream, just put a Silencing Spell on her, for Merlin's sake! Do you want to get us all killed?" he shouted.

Ted looked at Dean grimly. Dean whispered into Hermione's ear, "Hermione, I will only silence you as long as we need, and then I will remove the spell. We just can't have the screaming be heard."

Hermione cried and nodded her head to give him permission. She couldn't believe it was all coming down to this. She felt she was dying. She had been so concerned about Severus getting killed, she never thought about the possibility she might leave him behind.

Ted was in charge of the delivery as Dirk and the goblins looked on in pitiful silence. "Hermione," said Ted. "I was there for Dromeda when Dora was born. I need you to look at me, focus on me!" he demanded.

Hermione came down from a contraction, and he said darkly, "Hermione, the baby is coming. I can't stop it. You won't need to push; your womb is doing it for you. I need you to just let your body relax and let nature work."

"No," she mouthed weakly. Then the pain was washing over her. She screamed silently, "Nooo! Stop it, please make it stop!"

She saw the grim, pale faces around her. Dean was crying, Hermione was voicelessly screaming and begging them to make the pain go away.

Hermione cried and screamed for an eternity until the baby came out on its own. Hermione collapsed onto Dean's chest, exhausted and sweaty. Dean removed the Silencing Spell, and Hermione made low, panting gasps as she tried to remain conscious. Another sharp pain seized her, but it eased into a spasm compared to what she had endured earlier.

"Give us one more push, Hermione," Ted whispered.

"What is it?" she moaned as she gave one last, feeble effort to expel what was lingering inside her.

"It's just the afterbirth, Hermione," Ted answered. His voice remained soothing and low. "Completely normal."

"Why isn't she crying?" she mumbled.

"Need to get a Patronus to Andromeda," Hermione heard Ted whisper. "Dirk, please, she'll die."

Die? Am I dying?

Hermione watched as Dirk's raven Patronus took off. "We have to leave her here, they'll be on us soon!" said Dirk.

"My baby," whispered Hermione.

"She's dead, Hermione," whispered Dean as he took off his sweater and wrapped Serena in it.

Hermione began to wail in anguish. Dean covered her mouth and made shushing noises. She couldn't believe her daughter was gone, stolen from her because this fucking war had her on the run. She wanted her; she needed her daughter with her.

She stopped crying and gulped back her sobs as she rasped, "Give me my baby. I want to hold her!"

Ted set Serena into Hermione's arms. She used her hand to clean off the blood from her daughter's face. She was so small. How could she have felt so much pain at such a little person coming out of her? Hermione wept silently as she kissed Serena's little face.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," whispered Dean. "We have to bury her and get you moved to Andromeda's house."

"No," she hissed as she held Serena possessively against her chest. "I will not bury her here, alone in a place I can never find her again!"

"My baby, my baby," she cried out as she held her daughter to her breast. She was still there, holding Serena when Andromeda appeared at her side.

The dark-haired woman reached out and surrounded Hermione with strong, loving arms that reminded her of her own mother. She looked up and peered into Andromeda's face. She had kind eyes with an aura of determination that played around her mouth.

She spoke firm, yet soothingly to the younger witch. "Let's go Hermione. Come, I shall take care of you and Serena."

Chapter 67

Chapter 67 of 74

Hermione comes to grips with what has been occurring in the Wizarding world.

This is a long chapter with a great deal of information for Hermione to swallow. I know the last chapter was a great shock, and I hope this chapter will help with the bluntness of the last.

Thank you to all who reviewed last chapter. I really appreciated it. Also, my continued thanks and gratitude to karelia and kittylefish for their beta work. You gals are awesome!

Andromeda took Hermione to a free clinic near the Muggle city where the Tonks family lived. The doctor diagnosed Hermione as anemic and malnourished.

"Hermione, why haven't you been caring for yourself?" the doctor asked. "Your body is stressed, and you are underweight. Before the birth of the fetus, had you been feeling suicidal or depressed about being pregnant?"

Hermione was furious. She resented having to lie about what had happened to her and the implications the doctor was expressing. "First of all," Hermione said angrily, "my baby is not a fetus. Her name is Serena. Secondly, I tried, I really did, but the baby's father was cruel and wouldn't let me have enough food. He told me he would kill me if I left him. Lastly, I tried to get as much food as I could, I tried!" She broke down in sobs, and Andromeda placed her arms around her.

"I loved my baby!" Hermione cried out. "I wanted her! I want her back...I miss her!" Her racking sobs finally made her unable to talk. The doctor called in a nurse, laid Hermione down, gave her a sedative, and she quickly fell asleep.

Andromeda asked the doctor, "Will she be all right?"

"She will," he answered as he checked Hermione's vitals. "At least she is open about her grief. I would be more concerned if she weren't emotional. A situation like this, a stillbirth, when it all could have been prevented...have the police been notified about the baby's father?" he asked, sounding anxious.

"They are looking for him, but we think he's done a bunk," she blurted out. "American bloke."

"Where will she live now?" the doctor asked.

Andromeda didn't miss a beat. "She will live with my daughter and me. They're best friends, and I've got room, so it'll be best for her to stay with us."

"Does she have any family of her own?"

Andromeda brushed some of Hermione's curls away from her face and smoothed them down. "No, her parents died in a gas explosion some months ago. Poor thing, she's really had a lot of pain and stress these last months," she whispered.

Andromeda looked up sharply at the doctor. "How is she physically?" she asked. "She lost so much blood, and it happened so fast."

The doctor sighed and said, "Well, Hermione is going to be fine. It was an unfortunate experience. I believe from what you've told me, the cause was Antiphospholipid Syndrome, which causes the baby to starve of essential oxygen and nutrients in the womb. This happens when the placenta fails to provide nutrients due to blood clotting. She doesn't have any damage that won't heal. Her uterus expelled everything, according to what the ultrasound has shown us. If she starts to have more heavy bleeding, cramps, or fever, take her to hospital."

Andromeda took an extremely groggy Hermione back to her house where she could get some much-needed rest. Andromeda made her drink rich, nourishing broth, full of vitamins to help her body heal. She gave her Blood Replenishing Potion and additional potions to heal her body. When Hermione's milk came in, despite all of Andromeda's efforts to prevent it, she cried for days...even after Andromeda gave her another potion to dry up her milk that was successful.

Hermione spent the next few days recuperating and trying to sort out her feelings. It was a rather tense situation. Tonks was pregnant, and the emotions of rage, envy, hate, anger, sadness, and guilt came out at random moments. Therefore, Hermione thought it best if she didn't spend a lot of time with Tonks until she could get a hold on her state of mind.

After a few more days, Hermione was doing much better. She went outside with Andromeda to walk about and get some fresh air in her lungs. Tonks and Andromeda told her they had buried Serena and carefully guided her to the small grave in the garden patch. Hermione slowly knelt by Serena's grave. She placed her hands on the earth,

and she wept. Mother and daughter knelt by her and silently let Hermione grieve.

Finally, Andromeda spoke. "It's a cruel thing: war. It forces people to do things they never thought they would have to in a million years. Your baby should have had a proper funeral with a priest, a coffin, plus your husband and parents at your side. I am truly sorry for all you've lost, Hermione."

Andromeda stood and spoke over the tiny grave.

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believeth in me shall live, even if he were dead; whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Hermione then recited the words she knew from when she had been a child. The three witches spoke softly in unison.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

After an adequate silence, Andromeda spoke over the grave once more.

"We therefore commit Serena Snape's body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life. Amen."

Hermione stood in front of the grave of her little baby girl. She missed her kicking, missed the dreams she had created, the personality that she had seemed to have already developed whilst in her womb.

Where was Severus?

Where was her husband when she needed him the most?

She told Andromeda she had to owl him. Andromeda advised against it, but Hermione couldn't go on anymore without him knowing the pain she was enduring. As she held the quill over the parchment at the kitchen table, Andromeda stood at the sink, silently objecting to what she was about to do; all Hermione could think to write was of the painful utterance of Jesus to His Father.

Why have you forsaken me?

She crumpled the parchment and laid her head on the table next to the paper clenched in her fist. She squeezed her eyes tight and heaved wracking sobs that made her feel as though her whole body was going to explode. Andromeda came to her side, and Tonks rushed in from the next room. Andromeda gently extricated the parchment from Hermione's hands. Hermione turned her head to watch Andromeda unfold it. Tonks looked at it solemnly. Hermione hid her face and muttered, "Throw it in the fire; just throw it in the fire."

Andromeda walked out of the kitchen, and Tonks embraced Hermione's shoulders. What was so painful was that she could not give up the hope that Severus still cared for her...still thought of her. It seemed after all this time, after all the pain and testing their relationship and marriage had suffered, it couldn't just end like this, could it?

Life became a daily terror. Hermione was a wanted woman, and word had spread that she wasn't with Potter. Andromeda blew in the door one day and told them the whole story.

Andromeda had taken to going around Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade to get whatever snippets of information and gossip she could find. They couldn't rely on the ~~Prophet~~ anymore to tell them what was really happening across Britain, so Andromeda, being the safe pure-blood and not restricted in her movements, went to spy and find out what she could.

She took off her cloak and sank into one of the dining room chairs. "Well," she began as her daughter handed her a hot cuppa. "Oh, ta, darling," she breathed.

"It's getting worse. The Snatchers are getting bored, and they are bringing in less and less Muggle-borns from the 'Master List,'" she said with a roll of her eyes. "The talk is that there are no more Muggle-borns left in the country. They have either all been killed, taken to Azkaban, fled the country or are in hiding."

"Girls, the Ministry is going to start searching people's homes." Andromeda and Tonks looked at Hermione.

"I know I should leave," Hermione whispered, "but I can't leave Serena. She doesn't even have a headstone!" She began to cry again, and Tonks wrapped her arms around her, cradling her.

"You will think no such thing!" Andromeda chided her as she put her teacup down forcefully on the table next to her chair. "You will stay in this house. We just need a plan, is all, for when they come round. Unfortunately, the bitch of it all is that you will have to stay on the second floor until the war is over, or circumstances change, and you are either forced to leave, or Severus decides to collect you and take you back to Hogwarts."

Hermione sat shaking her head. "How could he just abandon me like this?" she whispered. "How could he...knowing what fate is left for me...do nothing?"

It was the first time she had actually come out and spoken about her doubts over Severus. She felt the thrumming of magic that had become commonplace, bringing to her mind all the promises and oaths she and Severus had sworn. It always served to help her to hold on and keep her faith, but she was starting to fall apart, and each time she saw the tiny grave in Andromeda's garden, it seemed another cord that bound her to Severus had been severed.

The Ministry officials came to Andromeda's house every other day to interrogate her and Tonks. Hermione had to stay in a hiding place in Andromeda's attic. When they came to raid the house, Hermione would leap into the sliding closet, pull the chord to open the tiny attic, hoist herself up inside, and pull the small door closed. She would then hide in a large footlocker that was empty and wait for Andromeda or Tonks to release her.

It was a nightmare that frightened the young witch beyond anything she had ever endured. Shutting the lid of the footlocker and hearing it catch...knowing she was trapped and unable to move was traumatic. Yet, she did it. Soon, the Snatchers discovered the small attic, and Hermione heard the footfalls of some Snatcher trying to find her. Once, the wizard had called for Tonks to open the footlocker, and Hermione heard her reply, "Don't know, actually. It's old. We have used every charm we could to open it. We even tried to pry it open once, but it still wouldn't open."

"*Alohomora*," the man said. Hermione squeezed her eyes tightly, praying the wards Andromeda placed on it would hold.

Only when the Snatcher had left did Hermione breathe freely again. Andromeda always took care to dash up and release her from the locker as soon as it was clear. No matter how long or short they stayed, Hermione always hoisted herself upright, gulping breaths of air. She hated that footlocker.

The worst thing about living on the second floor was that Hermione couldn't tend to her daughter's grave. Yet, Andromeda, ever faithful, cleared the leaves and broken twigs away from it. She apologized to Hermione for not being able to lay down stones or flowers to mark the grave.

"One day, Hermione, after the war is over, we'll get a proper marker and make it a real nice resting place for her," Andromeda promised as she set them down the tea in Hermione's bedroom.

"Hermione," she said as she reached her hand over. "It has been a month. Do you realize it is November? You must eat. You cannot allow yourself to grieve to death."

Hermione looked at Tonks. She had not been well. The morning sickness was upon her. Hermione remembered how she never had such a terrible time with morning sickness. Perhaps if she had, she would have known she was pregnant sooner and then Serena would be alive inside her today.

Hermione gave a start and flung the witch's hand off hers. She walked over to the window to peek at her daughter's resting place. "That's where I want to be! I have nothing anymore. No home, no husband, no baby, no parents, and all my old friends are scattered to the winds. I have lost everything I ever loved and cherished. Severus was right, we were never meant to survive this war."

Tonks jumped up to grab Hermione's arm as the girl continued to weep. "What's this about Severus?" she asked.

"Severus told me that Dumbledore had a plan for Severus to kill him instead of Draco. Dumbledore still had hope for Draco and didn't want him to be a murderer," she answered sadly. "But by taking Draco's place, Severus would forever be a marked man: forever the wizard who had killed the mighty Dumbledore! I will never be with him again."

Andromeda narrowed her eyes. "Why in the world would Dumbledore want to die?" she asked in disbelief.

Hermione ran her hands through her unruly hair. "Because he already was dying. A curse had slowly been spreading through his body. That was why his hand was black. Severus had tried to stop the curse from killing him immediately, and it had given him a few more months to live and help Harry," she explained.

"So, Severus is really on our side?" Andromeda whispered.

"Yes," Hermione said solemnly.

Andromeda gave a whoop. She leapt to her feet and declared, "We're not going to lose after all! If Snape is on our side, we can't possibly fail."

Hermione faced her. "At what cost?" she choked out through her tears. "The wizarding world gets it all, and Severus and I lose everything! It's too much to be borne! This makes our love...our lives...just some huge, fucking waste!"

Hermione lay on her bed and cried. Andromeda vanished away the tea, and she and her daughter left Hermione to grieve in peace. At least they could give her that one thing.

The first winter frost arrived, and Hermione spent her mornings peeping through the darkened windows and scratched away at the frost so she could peek out and look at Serena's lonely grave. December had arrived and with it came more raids than ever. It was rumored Potter had nearly been caught, and it was widely known now that he was on the move with Ginny and Ron.

"Hermione, I have some things I think you'd be interested in reading. You need to keep up with what's been going on in the world since you went on the run," said Andromeda one dreary December afternoon.

She took out a scrapbook with articles cut out and pasted within its pages. She and Tonks made themselves comfortable before Hermione opened it and began to peruse.

"Oh," she said right away. "That was I day I went on the run." She lifted her head and gestured to Tonks. "She sent me her Patronus to let me know I had to get out of the castle, that Scrimgeour was dead, and the Ministry had fallen to the Death Eaters."

She read further and said sorrowfully, "I didn't know he died trying to protect Harry's whereabouts."

Tonks piped up. "We're not certain, but that's the word on the street. So if it's true, he died a real hero because it had been complete pandemonium after the wedding."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Well, after Kingsley's Patronus came, everyone scarpered. Unfortunately, not everyone was fast enough. Those caught had their houses ransacked, even the poor Weasleys, they had the Burrow searched from top to bottom, and everyone was interrogated. It was a complete fiasco. We didn't know who was going to be arrested, or if people were going to get tortured...it was just scary. Then, the Death Eaters searched every Order member's house. No one died, but they all were pretty rough on us," she said quietly.

Andromeda spoke up as she held her daughter's hand. "They placed my husband and I under the Cruciatus. Dora had just found out she was pregnant and was hiding with Remus. We were pretty shaken up."

Tonks had tears in her eyes. "Remus left. He thought if it had not been for him, none of this would have happened. Mum told him they would have come anyway since she's a pure-blood and Dad's a Muggle, but he blamed himself anyway. He stayed away for a while in fact, even though I had just told him about the baby."

Andromeda cleared her throat and began to speak. "Dedalus Diggle's house was burned to the ground. It was just unbelievable. We all had Fidelius Charms on our homes...some were Unplottable. However, according to Remus, when he returned, the Death Eaters had full control of the Ministry and that meant knowing where everyone lived. They had complete authority to use any spell to brutalize those they interrogated. So, in a very short time, they found all the Impenetrable and Unplottable houses. Even the wards and signatures most wizarding families place on their homes were bypassed. It was terrifying," said Andromeda.

"But Harry got away, right?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes," said Tonks. "They were at the old headquarters at Grimmauld Place, and Remus saw them there: Harry, Ron, and Ginny. Don't have a clue as to where they are now. Grimmauld Place was searched as well by the Death Eaters."

"Dumbledore...The Truth at Last?" read Hermione from another cutout.

"Oh, yeah," said Tonks. "That's an excerpt from the book Rita Skeeter wrote. I have the book there." She pointed at the bed. "When this war is over, we'll get the real story, although it won't undo the damage done. She really places Dumbledore in a bad light."

Hermione read on. She had to admit, although she had no warm feelings for the man who had torn her and her husband apart, forcing Severus to do his filthy work for him, the prospect of learning his past held a great deal of interest for her. She read intensely until she reached Rita's interview where she spoke on Grindelwald and Dumbledore's relationship.

"Strange," Hermione muttered.

"What is it, dear?" asked Andromeda as she reached for a biscuit.

Hermione shifted on her bed and said, "She says the legendary battle between the wizards was not the mighty display we have all heard about. She goes on to say that Dumbledore had a relationship with him."

She read on and gave a snort. "Now, she's on about Harry! Right, she has a 'close bond' with Harry. What rubbish!" she said loudly. "She has the gall to suggest that Harry was the one to kill Dumbledore and pin it on Severus!"

"Shh!" said the two witches. "Keep your voice down."

Hermione apologized and went on. "Harry's relationship with Dumbledore was unhealthy and sinister."

She grew silent, and Tonks said, "Hermione? What's going on?"

"Well," she said as she toyed with the fringe on her blanket. "It's just that Albus had his moments. He could be quite *manipulative*."

Both women nodded slowly and silently as she spoke. Perhaps Hermione wasn't the only person in the Order who felt the way she did about the wizard.

The next cutting was of a huge picture of Harry on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* with the heading "Wanted."

"I just can't believe this. It's like the whole world's turned upside down," Hermione whispered.

"Well, don't forget, love, that the *Prophet* is controlled by You-Know-Who now," Tonks reminded her. "Remus told me all about it. The coup was seamless. The *Prophet* reported that Scrimgeour had resigned and that Pius Thicknesse is now the new Minister of Magic."

"Unbelievable," said Hermione. "That man has to be under the Imperius Curse." Hermione thought for a moment and then said in panic, "All the areas of the Ministry? What of the Unspeakables?" she asked.

"Well," said Andromeda. "During the first war, Rookwood joined the Death Eaters, and he had been an Unspeakable. I'm sure anything is possible."

"Why?" asked Tonks.

"Severus and I knew someone we worked with in the Time Room. He helped me to get back to my timeline here. I have wondered about him many times over the years. He was a very wise wizard," said Hermione sadly. "We met him through Albus."

"Wish I could help you, mate," said Tonks. "Security is real tight. Now with the big hullabaloo over the Muggle-born Registration Act."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said. "Your father, Dirk Cresswell, and Dean Thomas told me about it."

"It was scary as hell!" Tonks exclaimed. "First, if you aren't a pure-blood and on the list, you have to go down and prove you have at least one wizarding parent."

Andromeda was furious, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. "I had to go down there because they hauled Dora out of work to put her on the line for registration!" she said angrily as she gestured wildly with her hands. "I was livid! However, once they knew it was me, Andromeda *Black* Tonks, that was her mother, Dora was out in a flash and back to work."

Tonks spoke up again. "Unfortunately, most of the people believed if they just cooperated all would be well. It was a complete ruse. Muggle-borns were taken straight to trial, their wands broken, and transported to Azkaban. Some, like my Dad, Dirk, and Dean got lucky. Then some refused to go in; they probably sensed it. My Dad refused to stay at home; he knew they were coming for him. Unfortunately, he was caught by the Snatchers."

"Yes," Hermione said darkly. "I heard all about them."

"And you should see the *disgusting* statue in the Atrium. The sign reads 'Magic Is Might,' and there is a wizard and witch sitting on what looks like the crushed and mangled bodies of Muggles."

Hermione felt ill. "That is barbaric on a level I can't even fathom," she breathed as she gripped her throat.

The two witches nodded. "That's why it's so important to keep safe and locked up," Andromeda reminded her. "You are Undesirable number two, right after Harry Potter!"

Tonks flipped to the page where her picture was on display, and Hermione gasped. She covered her mouth as she saw her picture hugely displayed on the cover of the *Prophet*. It had been dated at the beginning of September, right after her escape from Hogwarts.

"Here," Tonks said again as she flipped a couple more pages. "They keep a list of those who failed to register. Your name is there. Each week the list gets shorter, but it is slow going. I reckon more will be caught, with winter setting in," she whispered with a shiver.

Hermione shook her head as Tonks showed her the pamphlet that Dean had told Hermione about in hiding. "Mudbloods and the Dangers they pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society." Hermione noted the pretty rose attacked by a weed with fangs. It didn't take a genius to figure out who was who in that illustration.

"Show her about Severus," Andromeda said as she refilled all their teacups.

Tonks showed her a page with her husband's face, looking regal and annoyed, as if he were above it all. Hermione smiled. She didn't realize until that moment how deeply she missed and needed him. The feeling went down into the depths of her empty womb, and she ached for him to know and for them to comfort each other.

She read the caption and choked. "What? Hogwarts is open?" she hissed. "How can it be? Who's even going to school there?"

Tonks spoke up. "Well, there is the whole of Slytherin house, and there are a fair number of pure-bloods and half-bloods in each house. Luna, Neville, Seamus..."

"...Not Justin Finch-Fletchley," Hermione mumbled.

"Who?"

"Just another Muggle-born, like me."

Hermione turned her thoughts back to Severus. "How could they make him headmaster?" she asked in disbelief.

"Well," said Tonks, "Snake-face is in charge of the Ministry, therefore, he is in charge of Hogwarts. Then there are the Carrows: Alecto and Amycus. They are the Muggle Studies and Dark Arts teachers. And it's no longer 'Defense Against.' It is just 'Dark Arts.' From what Remus has been able to gather from his contacts, it's sheer torture there. The students are forced to learn Unforgivables and are placed under the Cruciatus for punishment and 'educational' purposes. Sometimes the students have to perform it on each other. It's pretty bad."

"How could Severus allow this?" Hermione whispered. Looking off in the distance, she had never felt so detached from him in her whole life. Even during the three years they had been apart, there had remained a ray of hope, a light to hold onto. Now, she felt nothing anymore, only that damn thrumming magic that still kept her attached to him... somehow.

December went with sadder news on the war front. More people were missing; Andromeda and Tonks were growing stir-crazy, worrying over their husbands. The day Serena would have been born had long since come and gone. She looked out of the crack in the window and stared at the tiny mound of earth. She felt so empty and displaced. Where was she going to fit anymore? She thought about finding Harry and joining him on his quest for Horcruxes, but the thought of leaving Serena made her feel ill.

"Tonks," Hermione said over breakfast one late January morning. "Why isn't Remus with you?"

Tonks smiled and said, "He blames himself. He thinks being away and working with the Order will somehow make him a worthy man in my family's eyes. I told him it was shite and that it was only his fears talking...but he comes around to check up on us now and again. He promised when I get close to the delivery, he'd be here."

"When are you due?" Hermione asked.

Tonks looked at her in shock. It had been the first time Hermione had even acknowledged her pregnancy.

"April, middle, sometime," she said. "You know how these things are..." She stopped talking as her face went red.

"Hermione, I am so sorry. I didn't mean for that to come out like that...bugger!" she swore.

"It's okay, Tonks," Hermione said as she finished her eggs. She felt a bit better about things now that she had faced Serena's due-date and hadn't died from the emotional pain. Not that she thought she could be around for the birth, but she could stay until March. The weather would be changing, and she could make her way towards the mountains where Hagrid was hiding until the battle was ready to start. Hermione had a hunch it wasn't going to be much longer now, and it would finally all be over.

However, she felt betrayed and confused by Severus' position as headmaster. As his wife, she had the right to demand why...but she would rather be arrested and sent to Azkaban before she set one foot inside Hogwarts' gates.

All she could do was wait.

The winter did not stop the Snatchers from bothering Andromeda and searching the house for any Muggle-borns she might be helping. Hermione passed the time reading Rita Skeeter's book on Dumbledore and reading the various remaining newspaper clippings that Andromeda had collected over the months.

The book engrossed her. She read and re-read it, trying to understand this person who had been Albus Dumbledore. In the book, there was included a letter, one of the many correspondences Albus and Gellert Grindelwald shared. To read that Albus had been so connected to a wizard who would become a Dark wizard later in life was unnerving. She read the letter repeatedly; the words 'THE GREATER GOOD' etched themselves in her mind. How noble she had always thought that sentiment was. Now realizing those words were erected over the gates of Nurmengard Prison...the prison Grindelwald had built and then been imprisoned in...made her want to sick up.

The Greater Good, Magic Is Might, The Right To Rule, it was all a bag of wank in Hermione's mind. She was becoming tired of it all. Yet, the book called to her, and she refused to stop until she had read it cover to cover. One passage Hermione found the most compelling said that Albus never turned from Muggle-borns. Even after turning away from Grindelwald, he wrote, "... *where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more.*" This was exactly what Hermione felt was the motivation behind his sugarcoated, precious "Greater Good."

Severus, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Sirius, Marlene, Lily, James, and herself...she couldn't think anymore of all who had followed the seemingly benign and fatherly wizard into battle. The question for Hermione was, "What can be defined as necessary force? Who has the right to make that choice for a nation of people?"

Hermione wanted desperately to think he had changed, but from where she knelt, looking through a crack in a glass window to gaze at a small, unmarked grave in Andromeda Tonks' garden, it was impossible to keep faith in that belief anymore.

The scripture and prayer Andromeda spoke over Serena's grave was taken from the funeral rites of the Anglican Church.

Chapter 68

Chapter 68 of 74

Remus comes back to his wife, and Hermione decides she can no longer stay at Andromeda's.

A/N: Hello! We are one step closer to Hermione and Severus' reunion. Please review! It's been a long road. I can't believe it has been over two years since I first began this fic. My thanks again to karelia and kittylefish for their hard work!

During the days, Hermione perfected her timing getting up into the crawl space when the Snatchers came round, and she spent her evenings listening to *Potterwatch*. It was a fantastic way to hear the voices of old friends and to hear news of the Resistance. They gave them all so much hope during the dreary winter nights.

Tonks especially looked forward to hearing from Remus. She told Hermione all about his hiding at the Weasley's Great Aunt Muriel's house with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan.

"But of course he'll be coming soon! He promised to be here for the birth."

Hermione watched Tonks as her belly grew larger and larger. She was now in the same month Hermione had been when she'd lost Serena. Hermione tried not to dwell on it, but it was becoming clear that she couldn't stay. She felt torn between the tortures of seeing Tonks healthy and happy with her glowing face and the fierce need to remain with her own child. Wasn't it enough she had to endure knowing Serena was deep inside the cold, frozen earth when she should be in her arms, growing and thriving under her watchful eye?

One late night in February, the three witches gathered to listen to *Potterwatch*. Lee Jordan announced that Dirk Creswell, Gornuk, the Goblin, and Ted Tonks had been killed on the run. The look on Andromeda's face was agonizing. Hermione and Tonks both sat with her in dreadful silence as the program continued and then ended in a silent tribute for the lives lost.

After Tonks turned off the wireless, Andromeda started to wail a gut-wrenching cry. Hermione was all too familiar with that emotion. She silently left to go downstairs and make them all a fresh pot of tea. They had grown lax in their security since it was getting harder for Tonks to climb the stairs. Hermione was standing with a pot of tea in her mittened hand not four feet from the door when someone knocked. She froze, her hand holding the pot, trembling. Mother and daughter came downstairs, and Andromeda strode into the kitchen and called out sharply, "Who is it?"

"It is I, Remus Lupin, married to Dora Lupin. She is pregnant with my child, and if you don't open this door, I shall tell all and sundry what she likes me to do to her when we make love!"

"Open the damn door!" Tonks shrieked.

A gust of snowy wind swooshed over Hermione as she stood frozen in place, looking at Remus. It had been a long time since she'd last seen him...the night Severus had killed Albus, and she had been placed in the Prisoner's Tower.

"Hello, Hermione," he managed to get out before he was attacked by his wife.

While Tonks kissed her husband, Hermione turned her back to them and poured everyone a cup of tea. Remus hugged mother and daughter and gave them his condolences. He couldn't promise a body, but there was no doubt Ted was gone. Andromeda was beside herself with grief. She sat and cried desperately into her handkerchief. Hermione wanted to disappear. It didn't seem proper to witness this private family affair. Lupin stopped her as she quietly went upstairs to avoid the tender scene.

"Hermione, I must speak with you." His voice was grave.

Hermione came down the steps and watched Tonks take her mother to her bedroom to rest. After he watched them depart, Remus said to her, "I have word to you from Harry. He has been successful with finding the Horcruxes. However, he says they are now at a dead-end. What else is left?"

Hermione felt torn between anger and relief. After all this time, all the rage, and the estrangement between them, she resented that Harry was asking more from her. Nevertheless, she wanted this war over as much as anyone did.

"Well, I told Harry I always suspected Nagini was a Horcrux. He will have to lure the Dark Lord to Hogwarts; the final battle will have to be there. The Dark Lord doesn't know about the diadem, and no one must tell him. Once Harry arrives to where the Dark Lord is, the snake must be killed, regardless. It's a menace. Besides, it nearly killed Arthur Weasley. Then Harry...he will have to offer himself to the Dark Lord. Harry must let the curse strike him, and it should destroy the Horcrux within himself. Then the bastard will become mortal, and Harry will finally be able to kill him." Hermione stood there, not focusing on Remus, feeling strangely disconnected while she spoke.

Remus looked concerned. "Are you sure about Harry?"

Hermione sighed as she looked down at her trembling hands. "It's a hunch, I know, and Harry must know he's done all he can with what I have told him. There is an obsession You-Know-Who has always had about ownership over the belongings of the four founders. Now, Harry knows the diary had been a Horcrux...and I gave him the Diadem. If Harry has the locket and Hufflepuff's cup, that is all I can do to help him. The rest is mere conjecture."

Lupin cleared his throat roughly and whispered, "He has missed you terribly, Hermione. Why didn't you go with him? He could have used your help. Ginny has been brilliant, but you're *Hermione*. I know he would feel more secure if you could be there to help him deal with the last. He feels terrible over how things ended between you both."

Hermione felt her temper rise but remain silent.

Remus lowered his voice and said, "I know you must still have some *anger* over how things went after Albus' death...but Harry still considers you as a friend."

Hermione stood up straight and faced him with her hands on her hips. "*A friend? A friend!* He cared so much that he had me locked up because he hated my husband. He thought I had been a traitor!" she bellowed while gesturing with her hands. "Even when I gave him the evidence to prove my innocence, he still wouldn't believe me!"

"I thought you both had worked that out. I know he is aware of his guilt," Remus said, looking confused.

Hermione turned her back to him looking at the curtain that she knew just outside was the grave of her daughter. She wanted to throttle Remus, Harry, and everyone who had contributed to any part in the death of her baby.

"Being aware and saying it is two different things, Remus. Being wrong doesn't change what happened," she said in a staccato voice.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

Remus came around to her side and looked at her profile. "No, Remus, I am far from all right," she replied as she grew increasingly agitated. "I am sad, and I miss my husband. I have lost *so much*, a-and I don't know what to believe in or what to do anymore."

"Go help Harry, Hermione," Lupin said, a touch of urgency in his tone. "Talk with him. Work it out."

She turned sharply to face him. "I can't leave here!" she protested. "Not yet."

"What's happened to you, Hermione?" he whispered as he gently placed his hands on her arms.

Hermione shoved him from her. "It's none of your business! Now leave me be." She bounded upstairs and flung herself on her bed, crying despondently. How could she tell Remus about Serena before Severus? She felt like she was going to lose her mind. She had to leave this house. She couldn't stand being here with Tonks so pregnant and healthy while she could only remember being so ill, starving, and struggling to find enough food to keep Serena alive. Nevertheless, in the end, it had been no use. She

had been without her husband to console her, and now Tonks was downstairs with Remus to stay, soothe her through the last part of her pregnancy, labor, and help them grieve Ted's death. She didn't have Severus to lean on when she had learned of her parents' deaths. At that moment, she hated them both for being together and happy for their baby.

Hermione knew and didn't care she was feeling sorry for herself. She didn't really care. She missed Severus and then she hated him. She remembered the vow that she said to him that she would never turn her back on him...even if the world did, she would never. The magic never failed her, even at the worst moments; it was her evidence that hope survived. However, what about Severus...did he feel the same pull or experience the same despondency or wavering trust in their love? Where was Severus when the world had turned its back on *her*, killed their baby, and wanted her dead as well?

Where was he?

The thought of leaving Serena's grave made her insides feel frozen. She didn't know if she could leave her. She thought at times, while peeking out the window at the tiny snow-covered grave that she was being a good mother by keeping vigil over her baby girl. It was the only thing she could do now.

"Hermione?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. It was Remus! Couldn't he just leave well enough alone?

"Go away," she said.

He opened the door.

She jumped up. "How dare you come in here without my permission! Get the hell out of here!" she screeched.

He went to her and enfolded her in his arms. She tried to fight him, but she realized he was soothing her. The smell of him, male and strong, and his arms, sturdy and robust, made her miss Severus more than she could handle. She couldn't breathe and couldn't hold it in anymore.

She choked and sobbed as the words forced themselves out from deep inside her. "They killed my baby! Harry made me run for my life, and Severus abandoned me! He hasn't even tried to find me or come for me," she screamed into his chest. "He just left me all alone. He promised he would love me. He swore!" She punched and hit at Remus as she let out her pent-up rage. He never let her go, never stopped holding and soothing her, whispering in hushed tones.

She wept as Remus picked her up and carried her down to the kitchen and set a cup of tea in front of her.

"I'm not supposed to be down here," she grumbled as she swiped at her eyes angrily.

"I really couldn't care less, Hermione. For the first time in my godforsaken life, I couldn't give a fuck. Sometimes there are things more important than covering one's own arse," he said as he poured a cup for himself. "I think you know that lesson by heart now."

Andromeda and Tonks came in and sat at the table looking concerned.

"This will be the plan, Hermione," Remus continued. "Tonks will send her Patronus to Hagrid."

He glanced at the witches to see if there were any objections. Andromeda looked fearful, but Lupin continued with his hand on Hermione's arm. "Now, if we do this, you must leave this house immediately. I will Apparate you to where Hagrid is hiding. There are others with him: Firenze, Colin and Dennis Creevey, and some other students who ran away from Hogwarts. I've heard many stories, Hermione. You are Severus' wife, and you deserve to know.

"Severus has been killing himself trying to keep the Carrows under control. Three times now, he's had to stop Fenrir Greyback from entering the castle. He is one man surrounded on all sides by many evil people. Neville and Luna broke into his office, trying to steal the Gryffindor Sword, and they were caught. The punishment should have been a caning for both of them at the *minimum*. Mostly, what happens, even for the smallest of offenses is the Cruciatus Curse. You know what Severus did? I know the answer because Hannah Abbott, who was a student there when it happened and went into hiding during the Christmas hols, told me first hand. Severus, instead of handing them over to Filch and the Carrows...which was mandatory policy...handed them over to Hagrid to do patrolling in the Forbidden Forest. You know Hagrid. A real sadist, that Severus Snape!"

Hermione laughed. She was shocked at the sound. Andromeda and Tonks began to laugh as well. A smile spread over Remus' face.

Hermione quickly sobered. "I can't leave Serena. I need to be here with her. I *can't* leave her!"

Tonks and Andromeda each took one of her hands. "Hermione, Hermione," Andromeda called to her, getting the young woman to focus. "I will be here. I buried her and have cared for her grave in your stead. And I know it isn't right. You should have had the right to care for your own daughter's grave. But you can't right now. You need to go and try to make contact with Severus, to help with the war effort. The Order needs you. I will remain here and watch over Serena's grave."

"I know it must seem stupid," Hermione whispered, "but I have been watching through my peephole in the window upstairs, looking over her, keeping watch over her grave. It makes me believe I'm being a good mother."

Tonks and Remus began to weep quietly. Andromeda's eyes were full of unshed tears. She steeled her voice and said, "Hermione Snape, you are a good mother. A good mother would entrust her child into the hands of a person who will care for that child, just as you have. I will be here with Dora and Remus. Now, go help win this war and try to reach out to Severus. Be safe and remember he has a role to maintain."

Hermione nodded. She stood to go upstairs, but abruptly stopped.

She faced them and took a shaky breath. "I'll go. But, I will not fight. I'm through fighting. I've done my share...I've had enough! The kindness and love...I-I won't forget what you risked. Just don't expect me to go back there and fight. I will go back only to get my husband and leave. We don't owe anyone anything! And if that means Azkaban, well, we'll just disappear. I hope you can understand my feelings on this."

She went upstairs to pack her clothes, and Tonks packed another large bag chock full of foodstuffs, bread, cheese, meats, and cans of various vegetables and soup.

Hermione shrank it down and placed them in the pockets of a traveling cloak Andromeda gave her. Once she was ready, she watched Tonks send her Patronus with the following message:

"A friend is coming. Please send the scattered Galleons our regards."

As the werewolf bounded towards Hagrid, Remus took Hermione's hands, and they Apparated to a mountain range. It was cold, and the wind was blowing fiercely. They walked a few yards downward where the wind was not so strong and came upon a camp settlement. Hagrid came out of nowhere and pointed his crossbow directly at Remus' heart. His expression then softened, and a broad smile came over his face.

"Blimey, Remus!" he said. "Me heart can't take tha!"

Hagrid looked at Hermione and his mouth fell open. "Is tha' 'Ermione?" he asked.

Hermione began to cry again and hurtled herself into Hagrid's friendly arms. Hagrid was holding her close to him, telling her she was safe now.

Hagrid will make it all right again. As long as Hagrid is here, I will be okay," she thought.

"Well, I have to get back to Dora now," said Remus. "Good luck everyone!"

"Wait!" Hermione shouted out to him. She ran to where he was, a ways from the others. "Where are you going? Will you be at the battle?"

Remus cupped her face and said, "Of course, Hermione." He started to turn to leave but halted.

He looked at her with eyes she had not seen in a very long time. "I love you, Hermione. I always have. I love Dora and our child very much...don't mistake that. But if I were to die, I would want you to know that I have loved you and a part of me always will."

Hermione was speechless. She didn't know what to say. He kissed her then, gently on the lips. "Goodbye, Hermione," he whispered. Then he was gone.

After he had Disapparated, Hermione walked slowly back to Hagrid's camp. Remus' kiss had been unexpected, and it had by no means excited her. However, what she had felt was finality to that part of their relationship. If Remus lived, never would he mention his love for her ever again.

Hermione made her way towards the campfire and looked at all the old friendly faces of days past. Sure, everyone could do with a decent wash, but the smiles and grins on their grubby faces made them look lovelier than if they had all been wearing silken robes.

Colin Creevey came immediately and pumped her hand, giving her a slap on the back. "Hermione, I'm so glad you've joined us! It's not going to be long now," *Potterwatch* says."

Hermione looked around as everyone clamored around for a welcoming hug or handshake. Hermione remembered her parcels and began to take out her bags, her wand, and brought them to their original sizes. Everyone squealed and shouted happily at all the food at she had brought.

She told Hagrid as she passed out the food, "Tonks sends her love."

Chapter 69

Chapter 69 of 74

Hermione hears stories of those students who suffered at the hands of the new government.

A/N: Well, this is that last chapter before Hermione and Severus are reunited. I know you've all been waiting for this!

Thanks to my beta, WriterMerrin! Yea! I'm glad she's back. :) PLEASE REVIEW! I love reading your thoughts and reactions to the twists and turns!

That night, everyone sat around the fire and exchanged information they knew. It was horrifying to hear. Hermione realized just how fortunate she had been compared to the others. Hagrid and Hannah confirmed Remus' story about Severus.

"Neville has taken over the resistance against the Carrows," said Hannah Abbott. "I can't believe he hasn't been kicked out!"

Hermione saw Terry Boot and Susan Bones nod their heads.

"I was expelled," Terry said. "Got caught writing graffiti on the walls about the D.A. Snape expelled me. Told me to keep my mouth shut and to go to Hagrid."

"Same with me," said Susan. "The Carrows kept torturing me because of my family. They are truly evil. Finally, Professor Snape got me out of class one day, told me to not tell a soul what he was doing, and to go to the mountains to Hagrid. He had a drawer full of Portkeys. He gave me one, and it took me right here. I didn't even have time to pack anything, but others who came after who were more fortunate brought me some of my things." She shot a grateful smile towards some of the other girls.

Kenneth Towler, who had already graduated two years before, lounged against a log and stretched out his long legs. "I cannot for the life of me figure out why people like Seamus Finnegan and Patricia Stimpson are still around and about. I even heard that Tracey Davies and Malcolm Braddock even returned to school."

"Yeah, so what?" said Colin as he wrapped his arms around his legs. "They're Slytherins! What do they have to worry about?"

Kenneth sat up and said, "You all don't get it, do you? All the people I named are half-bloods. You wait...they'll come after us next. That's why I went into hiding. I saw the signs."

"What did you see?" asked Hannah, her eyes wide with concern.

"Well, first off," Kenneth said as he stoked the fire with his stick, "everyone had to register if they were Muggle-born. Then after the identity cards were handed out, they were given a red 'M' stamp on their card to show they were Muggle-born. And it is the law to carry your identification with you at all times. So, you could be minding your own business, someone taps you on the shoulder and says, 'Hey, mate. Give us a look at your I.D. card.' Then, there is that red 'M' just glaring out for all and sundry, then Bob's your uncle! You're done for."

"Then came the second edict that all *half-bloods* had to register. When those came out, there was a big green 'H' on mine. I said to myself, 'Ken, me lad, you got a problem.' It was then I packed up and went off. I wasn't going to wait around to see how long I could last before the final battle!" he said hotly.

"Tonks was taken right out of work at the Auror Department," Hermione said suddenly, just remembering. "She was on her way to a transport to Azkaban when her mother, who was a Black, came and proved her status."

Kenneth nodded. "Names are important. Although they prefer if you had a wizard for a father rather than a witch for a mother if you are a half-blood. Last names can get a person in trouble if it's not a known wizarding last name."

The longer Kenneth spoke, the more animated he became. "I saw the people I worked with at the Ministry arrested and sent off because they had been labeled as 'dissenters.' Then all the Muggle-borns were ordered to move into all the major wizarding towns, like Ottery St. Catchpole or Godric's Hollow, even wizarding London and Hogsmeade. So, I watched as they moved, and I shook my head because now they were like sitting ducks. Sure enough, the Snatchers finally came for them, bit by bit."

The night before they came, someone heard that they were coming. The month before, a number of people had been sent owls stating they were to report at the Ministry for some important work, and they were needed. It was all a trap, so not everyone reported to the Ministry. So, the Snatchers came in the middle of the day and took people right out of their homes. I saw Justin Finch-Fletchley and his family taken from their house. It didn't matter that his parents were Muggles. They were taken as well...just because they *knew*."

"What happens to the family members of Muggle-borns?" asked Terry, sounding fearful.

"I was told that they are executed right after being taken from their magical children," replied Kenneth. "I saw all this going on and said to meself that it made no sense to stay. I became even more convinced when I had been ordered to register and prove my lineage with the Ministry. However, it only makes sense to see the escalation of it all. People think that because they are half-blood that they are safe. They aren't. And if this war continues, they'll round up the half-bloods next, and then it will be all the blood traitors. It won't stop until You-Know-Who's paranoia is sated, and that will never happen because he's effing psychotic."

Everyone was silent then. No one knew if any of their family was alive unless they already knew before joining Hagrid. Hermione didn't want to talk about the war anymore. She knew her parents were dead. She turned to Hagrid to speak with him.

"So, you have contact with Severus often?" Hermione asked Hagrid.

"No, nuthin' much," the half-giant answered. "More like he brings me a message when a student comes up ter stay wit' us."

"It's too bad you had to go off on the run," she whispered.

"It's better this way, Hermione," he said. "I don' have ter make meself all happy an' all about' You-Know-Who bein' in charge, and all, tha' if I was back teachin' at Hogwarts, which I wouldn't, bein' a half-breed an' all."

When Hermione went to sleep that night, she dreamt of the last time she had made love to Severus. It was the night she had conceived Serena. When she woke, she prayed with all her might she would have him back in arms again and would never have to be without him again.

"Well, it's just insane," said Parvati Patil, who came during the Easter hols, a month later, in April. She and her sister, Padma, were pure-bloods, but could no longer stand being at the school. By the looks of them, they had gone a few rounds with the Carrows.

"It's gotten worse," said Padma. "Everyone except for Slytherin has bruises and black-eyes. It's not even school anymore...it's a house of horrors!"

"What news of the outside?" asked Hannah.

"Well," said Parvati. "Our Mum owed us and said Diagon Alley is nearly closed down. Wanted posters for Harry Potter are plastered everywhere, and so many of the old shops are closed. People are living destitute in the streets, begging for food or Galleons. There are so many people who have lost everything. It's really hard for the ones left behind. My mum wrote that you couldn't ever be sure if you'll see your family again. There had been a neighbor of ours: a pure-blood husband who had come home a month ago from work, and his Muggle-born wife was gone! He went to the Ministry and everything, but he never found out what happened to her."

Padma interjected at this point. "Or look at what happened to Tonks' mum and dad," she said. "Oh, and Luna Lovegood has been kidnapped by Death Eaters! Right off the Hogwarts Express. Don't even know where she is now."

They showed them all their old bruises and contusions. "Poppy was ordered not to heal us," said Padma. "There are a lot of students hobbling along on improperly healed bones, and others are all scarred up because they were never healed fully."

Hermione looked around them. She had thought she was the only one who had suffered and lost. They all had shared their stories. Colin and Dennis had lost their entire family in a Death Eater attack. They'd had a couple of little sisters back home, and now they were all dead. Susan had lost so much of her family, she figured she had to be the last of her family line by now. Then there was the perpetual spasm in her right hand. She said it was residual effects from repeated subjection to the Cruciatus Curse.

"And I don't care what anyone says about Severus Snape!" she said boldly as tears welled up in her eyes. "He saved my life! I'd be dead today if he hadn't intervened."

Terry Boot had been whipped until he had nearly died; his parents had been marked for death for hiding a Muggle-born in their house. The last he heard, they had been sent to Azkaban to be executed. It was all so sad.

"I heard there was a lot of that going around," said Colin.

"What? People hidin' Muggle-borns? O'course!" said Hagrid proudly. "Tha's what our Tonks did fer our Hermione."

"What about you, Hermione?" asked Parvati. "What happened to you?"

Hermione hadn't planned to say anything until she had spoken with Severus first, but she felt a tug on her heart to let it out. She started out with a small, nervous voice.

"I had been in the Tower where Harry had the Aurors put me after Dumbledore had been killed. I stayed, even though after a while, Harry told me about his search. Dumbledore had sent him on just before he died. Tonks gave me my wand back and sent her Patronus to leave as the Death Eaters were coming to take over Hogwarts...so I fled. I-I was pregnant. I was afraid about the baby. I went to my parents' house and found out that the Death Eaters had already killed them and destroyed the house."

Hermione was crying again as she told them about hiding alone until finding Dean Thomas and Tonks' dad. Then she told them how she lost Serena and went to live with Andromeda and Tonks until now, and that was where their baby had been buried, in Andromeda's garden, when Remus had brought her here.

"Oh, Hermione!" Hannah said as she went to hug her. Hagrid was sniffing as well. Everyone was shocked.

"No wonder you want to see Snape so bad," whispered Colin.

Hermione nodded. "He never knew I was pregnant. You see, I had only found out the night Dumbledore died. I never got a chance to tell him," she blurted out as she wept.

It was May, and the weather was delightful. Also, thanks to some of Hermione's spell work, some scars and bones not quite fully healed had been set right again. They were sparring every day now, under Hermione's training. Being an Auror in training had come in quite handy. More were coming to join Hagrid's group; some were past students, and it was so good to see old friends again. Hermione had nearly broken down and bawled like a baby when she saw Fred and George. They still were in Hogsmeade at their shop, but the Death Eater patrols were really getting old.

"I'm about ready to sneak Puking Pastilles into their food, but Rosmerta won't cooperate with me," said George.

"Well, that's were you went wrong, George," said Fred lazily. "You should have sweet talked her and stuck it in when she wasn't looking."

News of the Gringotts break-in came to them by word of mouth, and it was incredible news...like fresh water for the thirsty. The sighting of Harry Potter gave so much hope

to those who had nearly given up. Hagrid assured them it wouldn't be long now.

Hermione couldn't stand the way everyone was gushing over Harry. If he hadn't been such a bastard, Serena would still be alive. She was more determined than ever to get to Severus and leave before the fighting started.

The final battle was more imminent than even Hermione could have imagined. One evening in late May, Fred and George awakened them. "Aw, bless 'em," said Fred.

"Up and at 'em!" his voice rang out. "Start Apparating into the Hog's Head; Harry is already inside Hogwarts in the Room of Requirement, and we're needed to get Snake-face's arse once and for all!"

Hermione jumped up and grabbed her wand. She pulled her long hair back in a ponytail and changed into different clothes and her cloak. She Apparated into the Hog's Head and joined the queue. *Soon*, she thought. *Very soon, and I shall see Severus again!*

Hermione was shocked at the strange way everyone was crawling into the portrait on the wall. When it was her turn, she and the Patil twins went together through the dark tunnel.

"I don't like this," whispered Padma.

"It'll be okay," Hermione reassured her. "We're all together."

When they finally reached the end of the long tunnel, they found themselves inside the Room of the Requirement. The room was bursting with familiar faces, some badly bruised and beaten, but hearty and ready to fight. Soon, Harry was hurtling himself at her.

"Hermione!" he shouted happily as he hugged her tightly. "I've missed you."

Hermione's body immediately stiffened at the touch of him. "Of course, Harry," Hermione said uncomfortably. "So what's the plan?"

Harry's face beamed as he held onto her arms. "Well, we have them all, thanks to you. Otherwise, we'd still be trying to puzzle out the Diadem."

Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. "Well, you can thank *my husband* for that," she ground out.

"Uh, yeah," Harry muttered as he ran a hand through his hair. "Hermione, I still don't know about Snape. Look at these people! They've been beaten and starved. How could he let that happen if he were on our side?"

Hermione barked a laugh and tried very hard not to hex him. "Harry, sometimes I think you place too much stock in Severus' abilities. What the bloody hell was he going to do? Do a one-man show and tell all the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who how things were going to be at Hogwarts? He could only do so much. Try listening to the other stories of how he stopped people from being punished brutally or killed and how he helped them escape!"

Michael Corner came out of nowhere and challenged Hermione. "I was here all year long, and there were plenty of times Snape did nothing to lift one finger to help. If he is so noble and good, why did he run off earlier?"

"What?" Hermione spat furiously.

"Yeah, Hermione," said Harry, looking truly sorry for the first time. "He ran off...we think to warn You-Know-Who."

Hermione was fairly shaking with impotent rage. She couldn't believe how little control she had over her own life. "Or to be an advisor...and a poor one to put wrong information into his ear," Hermione explained. "That's what he has done for quite some time. I'm telling you, I know because he told me. He killed Dumbledore because he was already dying!"

Everyone in the room hushed and silently listened to Hermione shout out into the crowd. "You remember Dumbledore's hand, all dead and black? Well, he had been cursed. Severus saved his life and even prolonged it. He was dying anyway! Draco had been ordered to kill Dumbledore by the Dark Lord. Albus knew of the plan then ordered Severus to do it...that he wanted Draco to still have a chance not to turn into what his father had become. He wanted to save Draco's soul."

"It was a mercy killing?" shouted someone from the back.

"Yes!" Hermione excitedly, relieved someone was finally getting it. "He HAD to do it. He made promises to keep certain people safe. It's what I've done my whole life since I came back. I've worked with the Order and with Severus to keep Harry safe and to help the Muggle-borns. So, don't tell me he's evil. He's not!"

The room was buzzing again as Hermione grew quiet. Ginny came to her saying, "Did you hear the news?" Tonks had a baby boy. They named him Teddy...well, Theodore, actually, and Harry and I are to be the godparents. It looks as if he'll be a Metamorphmagus, like his mum. I've never seen Remus so happy before!"

Hermione nodded silently. She didn't want to hear about babies and happy families. She wanted Severus, and that was all. The rest of the wizarding world could get stuffed for all she cared.

Harry started to address everyone. "We know that the Carrows are incapacitated and that Snape has left the grounds. He will be back with Riddle. Now, we all must go to the Great Hall, and I want you all to sit at your House Tables."

When everyone started filing out, he spoke with Minerva quietly. Hermione followed everyone. It was odd to see Xeno Lovegood at the Ravenclaw Table with Luna and the entire Weasley clan together at Gryffindor's table.

Minerva took to the podium and spoke to the assembly.

"I want our prefects to rouse all of the students and have them evacuate the castle at once through the Room of Requirement. Once there, arrangements will be made to send them somewhere safe until their parents can be notified. There is no time for owls or packing. No one is to take anything with them except the clothes on their back and their wands.

"Professor Slughorn, please rouse your Slytherins, I am sure they would all wish to leave the castle as well. In fact, I insist upon it. Any Slytherin that stays to fight will be considered a combatant and will be cursed on sight. You will leave with them, Horace, as chaperone, and keep them all safe."

Horace Slughorn went his way without a word, and Minerva addressed the crowd again.

"I have no time for quarreling. If you are under the age of seventeen, you must return to the Room of Requirement. If it comes to it that reserves are needed, you may be counted on to fight. Do not argue this matter. All who are under seventeen...leave now!"

There were grumblings, and Ginny remained firm in her chair after the last underage wizard had left. She set her jaw and crossed her arms defiantly as her parents yelled at her to go.

"I have been out there fighting for a year! Ask Ron and Harry how Bellatrix captured us and tortured me at Malfoy Manor, and how we escaped. I went through the Cruciatus Curse. I have earned my right to fight!"

The matter dropped abruptly as a thunderous voice echoed throughout the hall. It was HE.

"I know you are prepared to fight and your efforts are futile. You cannot win against me..."

Hermione blocked out the rest. She couldn't give a flying fuck what he had to say. She just wanted this over with.

"Give me Harry Potter and you will live. You have until midnight."

Minerva waited until she was sure there was no more to be said then she called the three houses together. All of the Order had arrived, except Tonks who was staying with her baby and mother. Hermione saw many faces from earlier years that had graduated before her, like Cho Chang, Angelina Johnson, and Oliver Wood. Minerva gave the floor over to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Right. We have exactly thirty minutes to get prepared. The teachers of Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix have already constructed a battle plan during these past months. Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, and McGonagall will take fighters to the three highest towers: Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and Gryffindor...where they will have a good overview and excellent positions from which to cast spells.

"Remus"...he pointed to Lupin..."Arthur"...he pointed to Mr. Weasley..."and I will take groups of fighters onto the ground. We'll need volunteers to organize the defense of the entrances of the various passageways into the school."

"Sounds like a job for us," called Fred, indicating himself and George, and Kingsley nodded his approval.

"Professors Sprout and Trelawney will have the high ground from the main interior. If you are called to join a certain leader, go with them. No bargaining for a better position. This is war, not a practice dueling session. These people are out for your lives." He paused for a moment to see if everyone was aware of the gravity of the situation.

"All right then, leaders, divide up your troops and get into positions!" he called out.

McGonagall turned to Hermione. "Normally, I would want you at my side at Gryffindor Tower, but I know you have the skills that are needed on the ground with the Aurors. Are you fine with that?"

"I don't think so," she replied calmly.

Minerva sucked a breath while she looked at her young friend and ex-student in shock. "You will not fight with the Order?"

"I was treated as a Prisoner of War BY the Order!" Hermione growled at her. "I suffered and paid far more than anyone here, and I will be damned if I will shed one more drop of blood for this war. I am going to get my husband, and you all can go to hell!"

A/N: I know Hermione's decision not to fight in the battle has seemed a bit severe for her type of personality, but after all she has suffered, endured, and sacrificed, only to be called a traitor in the end and cast out as a pariah from the Order on Harry's say-so, I think she's got the right to say, "I'm done."

The italicized portions are either taken directly from Rowling's *Deathly Hallows* or paraphrased.

<i>Amor Ignorat Tempus</i>

Chapter 70 of 74

Severus and Hermione are reunited at last.

A/N: Whew! This was a tricky chapter. I hope it will have been worth the wait. Thanks to WriterMerrin, who worked over this chapter with me, checking and rechecking bits I was unsure of, helping me to clarify other passages that were vague. Enjoy! Oh, and please REVIEW! I LOVE REVIEWS!

Hermione watched the Order Guard walk out into the open. The night sky shone with brilliant stars. The Aurors and the best of the Advance Guard of the Order of the Phoenix were staggered around the front of the castle, waiting for the inevitable attack. Hermione saw Savage and Proudfoot, but no sign of Dawlish.

"He was killed some months back," Kingsley said from behind her.

She whirled around. "Who?" demanded Hermione.

"Dawlish, of course. The man was too weak to withstand the Death Eaters. He just gave up and lost his mind. He died soon after he was admitted into St. Mungo's."

Hermione frowned. Already, the war had ruined so many lives, and the real battle hadn't even started.

"It's been a long time since the days on Fenwick Farm, eh, Hermione?" asked Kingsley.

Hermione laughed bitterly. "Since the days of Spinner's End and both Severus and I being little third-years," she added.

"True. It has," he agreed.

"What happened to Moody, Kingsley?" she asked as they kept their eyes trained out into the distance.

"It was the first battle. We were trying to get Harry safely to the Burrow," he replied sadly. "He fell in an air fight...we never found his body, only his magical eye."

"Please, Hermione," he whispered. "I don't fault you for refusing to fight. I don't know all of what happened, but I have continued to remain in contact with Tonks for quite a long time."

Hermione gave a snort as she turned her back to him. She'd be damned if he'd witness her tears. "Then we have nothing else to say," she snapped.

She heard his feet shift behind her. "Please don't think too harshly of us all, Hermione," he added.

"And why not?" she shouted as she turned around again to face him. "You all abandoned me! You left me here alone and never gave me a chance to prove myself. All anyone wanted to believe was Harry Potter! Well, you can have your precious 'Chosen One.' I haven't any use for him or any of you!"

"So what do you want?"

Hermione looked at him with pure loathing. "I want my life back! I want my daughter alive. I want Severus, and for all of you to let us be!"

She felt tears on her cheeks, and she was panting after she had calmed down from her outburst. She knew she looked angry and hateful, but she didn't want to hide how she really felt.

Kingsley nodded his head solemnly. "You've earned it," he whispered. "And we will respect it." He walked away from her to join the front of the battle.

Hermione was sober after that and didn't speak again for quite some time.

Hermione waited and waited for midnight. The tension was terrible. She cast all the protective charms she knew around herself and waited for the fight to commence. There was nothing she could do until the fighting began. Severus had to still be with his master. So, she began to wait.

The Death Eaters arrived, swooping down in black wisps and attacking full force. Hermione knew Severus had to be there, somewhere. She had trained with the best and knew how to duel and fight to the death. She had no problems disarming, slicing and hexing her way through any Death Eater who stood in her way as she searched for her husband.

An explosion from the right came from something hitting the castle.

"My God!" said Hermione in astonishment. There were two giants headed her way. The entire army on the ground shifted towards the left to get out of the brawling giants' path.

The fighting that had shifted left now was shifting back out towards the right, and the Advance Guard lured the Death Eaters inside a pocket of exposed land and let the fighters from the Astronomy Tower cut them all down with their own hexes while they, on the ground, finished them off completely. Another wave of Death Eaters were coming up from the valley, and werewolves, led by Greyback, were mixed with them. Hermione searched in vain for Severus as the werewolves led by Greyback poured over the ridge and began their attack.

The werewolves were upon them, but at least they had no wands. The killing was brutal. It took a lot to take down a werewolf. Lupin fought like a man possessed and kept on and on attacking each wolf he could find while more Death Eaters came their way.

Hermione fought Death Eaters she had never met, none she could recall from school days. She wondered as they fell around her what she would think if she were faced with Avery and Mulciber now since the Battle at the Department of Mysteries.

The fighting was taking a turn. Kingsley recalled the troops to come back into the castle. Hermione was relieved. It was better coverage for her; she knew every alcove and secret niche in Hogwarts due to Severus' kinky penchant for sex in the open. As she searched, she fought, and when she saw Dolohov stun Remus and go in for the kill shot, Hermione flung herself in front of Remus.

"*PROTEGO!*" she screamed, and Dolohov fell over dead in front of her from his own curse. A slicing hex nicked her in the shoulder, and she shot back a Sectumsempra to the caster. She barely had time to run for cover when the most gigantic sledgehammer came through the front of the castle's main gates. Everyone hid for cover and tried to gather the wounded out of the way. The Death Eaters in the middle of the Advance Guard stood smugly with the giants, as if nothing could harm them now.

Hermione was searching frantically for Severus, but Death Eaters refused to retreat. One after another, she was forced to fight, and still Severus was nowhere to be found. She heard Kingsley give the call to attack without quarter, and the Advance Guard sliced them all down. In her growing frustration and anxiety, Hermione sent a hex of flying arrows that speared one fat Death Eater, pinning him grotesquely against the wall through the cracks in the stone masonry of the entrance way to the castle.

She retreated back to the main gates after the next wave of Death Eaters had cleared out of their way. The Advance Guard began their assault on the giants. The house-elves joined them in their fight, spilling out from the castle, hurtling themselves onto the largest giant, biting, clawing and stunning...anything they could to stop its progress forward. The other giant had turned and run away from the castle when faced with another giant defending the castle. The weakened giant was enough for the other to overtake him, and the frightened giant moved out from inside the castle's interior, avoiding attack. For a while there was peace. Only in the rear of the castle was the fighting raging. The rest of the Advance Guard that was still alive or not severely wounded ran towards the fighting. Hermione ran blindly through them in the opposite direction, refusing to watch the killing and dying until out of the corner of one eye, she saw Harry and Ron running towards the Whomping Willow. She wanted to ignore them, forget what they had once meant to her.

Fuck! she thought as she turned from her direction towards them.

"Where are you going?" she shouted.

"We have to get the snake!" bellowed Harry above the din.

"You idiots!" she yelled. "Do want to die?"

Hermione bared the entrance way to the Whomping Willow as Ron and Harry tried to pass her where Voldemort was hiding. The tree was perfectly still, giving more credence to the idea that someone had entered. She hated that snake. She'd never seen it, but from what had happened to Mr. Weasley, it didn't bode well for Harry and Ron to run in all pell-mell without a plan of attack. She had her wand drawn on them.

"Move, Hermione!" Harry shouted as he pointed his wand straight at her.

"He's banking on you coming to him, don't you see, Harry?" she hissed as she shifted to stop them from entering. "Place yourselves strategically and wait. If he grows impatient, he will send some minion to fetch you."

Ron nodded as he listened to Hermione. "She's right, Harry. You have him cornered now. There is no way he will retreat back to Hogsmeade. His ego won't let him. I reckon he'll be expecting you to go to him," he deduced.

"So what do we do?" asked Harry nervously as he looked around them. "Make our last stand here?"

"Just wait," Hermione hissed as she found some cover for herself. "Just be prepared to capture whoever comes out of that hole."

"Why are you doing this, Hermione?" Harry asked her. "You don't want to be here. Just go find Snape. No one is going to stop you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please, Harry. You actually sound sincere and concerned."

"Hermione, I get it now. I betrayed you. You have every reason to walk away and never look back. I wouldn't blame you for it. So, why?"

"Perhaps I am invested in making sure my husband is rid of his final master."

Not five minutes later, Lucius Malfoy came out of the tunnel. Hermione jumped out at him. He leapt backwards, looking terrified. He had no wand, no means of protecting himself.

"Well, well," said Hermione. "I just seem to pop in and ruin your plans, Lucius. Now, tell me, where are you scurrying off to?"

Malfoy was weary. He looked weak and terrified.

"Look," he said, "if I don't do everything he tells me, he will kill my son and my wife. Do you understand?"

Hermione took his ragged clothes and gaunt face into consideration. The look in his eyes was of sheer terror. "Lucius," said Hermione as she kept her wand steady, pointing it straight at him. "Let me ease your suffering. Just let go of what *he* wants and allow the Order to take care of you, Narcissa, and Draco. Now, where are you going?"

"I must get Severus. The Dark Lord is most insistent he come!"

"Playing Wormtail's role now, are you, Malfoy?" sneered Harry from behind Hermione.

"Harry, we don't need any barbs. Look at the man!" Hermione snapped, never taking her eyes off Malfoy for a second. She touched Malfoy's face with her wand and saw the marks, the beatings he must have had to endure.

"Why serve a master who is so cruel?" she whispered.

"My family, dammit!" he cried out.

"I can protect your family, Lucius. Just tell us where Snape is and who all is in that Shack," said Harry.

Lucius struggled, but his need to survive was greater than any belief or principle. "The Dark Lord is in there with Nagini. Severus has been overseeing the troops from the far hill towards the south," he replied.

"Ron, get Malfoy inside, and reunite him with his wife and son. Place them under arrest. Any Auror will do," Hermione ordered, never once taking her eyes or wand off the elder Malfoy.

Ron placed magical bonds on his wrists and led him back towards the castle. As soon as they were out of earshot, Hermione turned to Harry. She placed her hands on his shoulders and inhaled slowly before she spoke. "That snake bastard is waiting for you in there. I bet you he knows all his Horcruxes are gone, save Nagini, and he's not going to let her go without a fight. You need to get him to come out. Kill the snake, and then you can kill him." She looked into his face. "Dumbledore never told you...he was too scared...but you know that beast placed a part of his soul inside you, don't you?"

Harry nodded in recognition, but his eyes looked blank. "That's why he tried to possess me...but he failed."

"Albus always thought you would have to give yourself up to him. Let him strike you down with the Avada Kedavra. He will kill his own soul, but you will be free. He'll think as you lie there seemingly dead that he's won. He'll think he's beaten you, Harry, and like the pathetic bully he is, he won't be able to resist strutting around and declaring his victory. But you will be waiting...waiting for him to get far enough away from his familiar so you or someone else can kill that menace. After that, you will find yourself finally on equal footing. Then you'll kill him and end all of this!" Hermione told him passionately.

"Hermione," he replied. "I don't understand how this is all possible!" His green eyes were so wide and so full of fear, she could read all the vulnerability inside him there.

Hermione was insistent as she grabbed his arms. "Yes, you do, Harry! But for now, wait for him to come out of that lair. Frustrate his plans, gather your own contingent of fighters waiting at the first opportunity to watch your back!

"Good luck," she said as she squeezed his shoulders. "I'm going to get Severus, and we're leaving."

"Hermione...I can't do this without you," he said in a frightened child's voice.

He looked so lost, so much like the first-year she knew so many years ago. She wanted to forget everything that had come between them and make his fear go away. She kept her distance, forcing herself not to crumble. "You've been doing it! If you must, go break into Snape's office, use his Pensieve and let Ginny view your memory of what I just told you. Ginny will help you! She was always meant to be there for you. You are a team, you and she. Who else knows this snake bastard more than the both of you?"

Before another word could be said, Hermione took off running for Severus. She watched for him, scouring the battlefield for his outline. She looked up at the higher ridge. He was standing alone, watching from a distance the carnage of the battle, looking hopeless and alone.

As Hermione came closer, he pointed his wand at her; then when he saw it was she, his face broke apart, and he reached out, grabbing her body to press her against himself. He was trembling. Hermione could feel the raw, emotional pain radiating from him. She drew away to look at his face more fully.

Severus' face was drawn and full of pain. "I failed you," he whispered. "I promised I would find you, and I didn't. I was to be your rescuer..."

"No," Hermione told him, her voice firm and absolute. "You have been looking out for me since we were children. You carried such a load of responsibility for me, Mary, and Lily...every Muggle-born in Hogwarts. You've had to keep your word to protect Harry."

Severus tried to interrupt her, and she placed a finger on his lips. "Just take us away, Severus," she whispered. "It's nearly over, and Harry will win. Besides, Lucius was asked by the Dark Lord to fetch you. It's not good. He's turned against you. We have to leave!" She pulled urgently at him, but he remained firm.

"I know," he replied. "There is so much I want to tell you...I scarcely know where to begin. I missed you...I starting thinking we would never be together again."

Husband and wife stood facing each other, unable to speak, not knowing where to start. Hermione released her tenacious hold on him and let her body mold into his, giving all of herself to him. Severus pulled her to him and enveloped her in his arms. He leaned to kiss her, and Hermione yielded, nearly losing herself as he explored her lips and mouth. The first time in months, she could let her mind go and forget all the pain and anguish. In a whirl, they left Hogwarts and the war behind, landing in a strange cottage.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked as she looked around. It was a small, modest place with a little kitchen and a generous sitting room with a comfortable couch and two

plush armchairs. Severus went and lit the fire for them and came towards Hermione, who was looking at all the books that wrapped around the room, lining the top of the walls.

Severus placed a hand on her shoulder. She jumped out of reflex, and he hushed her.

"It's all right, Hermione. This place was Dumbledore's. He always kept this place a secret. He needed somewhere to go when Fudge tried to have him arrested when Umbridge was at Hogwarts," he said as he took her hand in his.

"Come with me. The bedroom and shower is in here."

Hermione's stomach fluttered when he took her hand. She was so happy they were finally together. They stood in the bedroom and just stared hungrily at each other.

"Your hair is long again, just as I remembered," he whispered as he lightly touched her curls.

Hermione smiled timidly as he placed his hands on her hips.

"So round and soft," he whispered. "You are more filled out than I remembered. You are lovely." He dragged his hands up and down around her waist, hips and thighs, sighing as he looked into her face.

"I suppose you want to shower?"

"Yes, please."

He gestured his hand toward the bathroom door, and she quietly went in and took off all her clothes. She found some soap and shampoo. She looked at her naked body in the mirror. Her body was different after having Serena. She had stretch marks on her stomach, and her breasts hung a little lower. There was no disguising it. Severus would know, and she had no idea how to tell him.

As she showered, she heard the bathroom door open. When she finished, she emerged from the shower and saw Severus sitting on a chair watching her. He didn't say anything as Hermione tried to get the towel around her without showing him her body. She started to towel dry her hair and saw from the mirror that Severus was getting undressed behind her. She watched him discreetly, feeling the need for him blaze through her core. She looked at his erection. He was ready. She knew him. After all this time, she still could feel the connection between them. She forced her eyes from his body, her breathing growing shallow and uneven. He went into the shower, and Hermione walked back into the bedroom to look for something clean to wear. She found a number of Severus' white shirts, pants, and robes. She took a white shirt and put it on. She spell-dried her hair, and as she was settling into bed to sleep, Severus came out, naked, and fixated his eyes on his wife.

"Are we safe here?" she whispered as she lay curled up under the blankets.

"As safe as anywhere," Severus replied. "It is Unplottable, even for a Death Eater, for I know their tricks. We'll hide out here and wait for the news about the outcome."

At first it was awkward. They had spent so much time apart, and although time apart was no stranger to them...secrets were. Severus knew it too. He came to his side of the bed and carefully urged her to release the blankets and let him see her. As the bed shifted with his added weight, Hermione's mind flashed back to that first night at Spinner's End. How scared they both had been! He cautiously unbuttoned the shirt she wore, his eyes reveling in the thrill of revealing of her body to himself. His hand ghosted over her plump breasts before placing delicate kisses around each nipple.

Hermione watched her husband drink in the sight of her nakedness. His stare reminded her how long it had been since she had made love. Then she thought about Serena and began to cry.

Severus was alarmed. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She hit him in the chest and pushed him away.

"Why did you leave me like that? Do have any idea what they did to me?" she shouted at him.

"I was told you were placed under house arrest at Hogwarts," he replied, confusion apparent in his voice.

"Didn't it strike you as odd to know that I wasn't there come September?"

"Actually, no," he replied bluntly. "There was no way you could have set one foot inside Hogwarts without being arrested and sent to Azkaban, or worse!"

Severus cradled her in his arms. "Hermione, I was sick with worry for nearly a year until I got word that you had been with Andromeda and later were safe with Hagrid."

"And that's all you were told?" she asked him as she pulled away from him and walked to the bureau to put on one of his robes.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" he asked.

She stopped at the doorway, but didn't turn around. "I have to talk to you, and I can't do it in bed," she whispered.

She heard him get up from the bed and put on his robes. They walked silently into the kitchen where Severus made them a pot of tea.

He sat across from her as they waited for the kettle to heat up and confessed, "Yes, every day I missed you and worried for your safety, and although I was concerned about you being discovered in hiding, I knew it was the safest place for you. Then with Hagrid and the others, you were with friends."

"That's not exactly what happened, Severus," she admitted as her eyes filled up with tears.

Severus was showing signs of distress. His twitch near his mouth started, and the vein in his temple began to throb.

"Tell me, Hermione!" he demanded.

She looked at him and said in a very detached voice as tears poured down her face, "The night Dumbledore died, I found out I was pregnant. I was having a girl and was already three months along. After the battle was over, I was interrogated and placed in the Tower jail overnight until arrangements could be made for my immediate house arrest. I was placed in a room with a bathroom attached, and my food was brought to me by the house-elves.

"I started getting a baby bump during my fifth month, and since I knew it was a girl, I named her Serena. It made me feel closer to you. The night the Ministry fell, I got a Patronus from Tonks to get the hell out of Hogwarts. She had given me my wand back illegally during her last visit, so I was able to pack a few things and get out of there before the Death Eaters came. I Apparated home and found my parents had been dead and buried and the house blown apart. My neighbor gave me some things to help me on my way. I knew I couldn't stay there. I need to go where I wouldn't be found."

She lowered her eyes to focus on the table. She could no longer stand to watch the look of horror coming over his face. "I went to the Forest of Dean where my family and I had camped many times over the years, and I spent a month alone, trying to find shelter and food. When the food I had was running out, I had a hunting knife. I made snares for squirrels and rabbits and ate them."

Severus jumped to his feet and began to pace in the living room. His face was so angry, angrier than she had ever seen before. She continued, although she was becoming increasingly afraid of telling him about Serena's death.

"One day I-I s-stumbled upon Dean Thomas, Ted Tonks, Dirk Creswell and two goblins, Griphook and Gornuk. They told me about the new rules of the regime. I stayed

with them and shared their tent. Dean took care of me and watched over me. Another month went by, and I was starting my seventh month. It was getting colder; food was getting harder to find for all of us. I couldn't stop losing weight. Dean gave me most of his food so I could keep my nutrition up, but one morning that October, I-I w-woke up, a-and I was in s-so much pain, a-and the bleeding wouldn't stop.."

She screamed as Severus strode to the kitchen and threw the kitchen table across the room into the living room, howling in rage. Hermione sat cowering in her chair, crying and shaking, trying to hide her face as he came to her. She was so scared he was going to blame her, yell at her, leave her, or hit her. Instead, he fell to his knees in front of her and lowered his head onto her lap. His back shook, and he reached up and wrapped his arms around her waist. She heard a gut-wrenching sob escape from him, and she could feel the tears seep through to her thighs as he wept silently. She didn't know what to do or what to say, except place her hands on his back, stroking it to ease his suffering.

"Our baby," he cried out. "Our baby," he said over and over. After a while, he looked up at her as he remained kneeling with his hands still wrapped around her. He looked so sad and destroyed. The pain was etched all over his face.

Hermione just wanted to get this over with. "The birth was over in an hour. There was so much blood. I remember asking Dean why the baby wasn't crying, and he said she was dead. Andromeda buried her in her garden, and we spoke the Anglican funeral rites over the grave." She shuddered as she took a deep breath. She was glad it was over, and now he knew.

Severus stood up, wrapped his arms around his chest protectively, and said, "How you must hate that I wasn't there; I should have been there. I love you, Hermione. Please forgive me," he said as he covered his face and began to cry over again.

Hermione scrambled out of her seat and reached out to him. "There is nothing for you to feel guilty about. Dumbledore, Voldemort...this fucking war is to blame! There is good news, though. I can still have children, nothing is so broken that we have to give up our dreams."

Severus smiled through his tears. "Our little house full of soft sofas and chairs, a roaring fire and cocoa in the winter..."

"...And lemon and pumpkin juice in the summertime," finished Hermione.

"I missed you!" he said emotionally as he held her close to him. "Every day we were apart was torture. I was terrified you were dead, or worse...you had given up and believed I was a monster."

Hermione pushed herself away enough to look at his face. "I was angry. I wanted to know how you could be so silent. I wished every day for you to reach out to me. I felt so alone and afraid you had forgotten all about me or had given up on us! I have missed you *so much!*"

Severus placed his hands on both sides of her face. "You and I have loved each other for so long, and we've suffered through so much, I couldn't forget you if I tried. You are the only person who has loved me without reservation or care for your own reputation. Even when I was undeserving, even when you could have turned your back on me, you were always there." He lowered his head and kissed her.

"Hermione," he breathed as he wrapped his arms around her. "That terrible day when you found me, lost and in pain in front of Lily's house, you sat with me and stayed without reproach or disgust. When you fell asleep, I watched you. You were so beautiful, so comforting...I loved you. I know now that was when I loved you."

Hermione leaned back her head. "You came to my bed that night for a kiss."

Severus looked at her with hooded eyes that were full of desire. "I wanted everything, Hermione. I wanted you to cover me with your body, your hands, and your hair and be a part of me." When he spoke again, his voice was raspy. "Is it too soon?"

"No. I'm healed. I saw a doctor and everything is fine. Where are the rings?"

He had them on a long chain around his neck. He broke the chain off from his neck and removed them. They placed their wedding rings on each other, and Hermione sighed. "I won't ever have to worry about taking it off again." She smiled as she hugged him.

He kissed her as he reached his hands into her robe and found her breasts. "It's been so long, Hermione. I need to be with you."

"Yes, Severus. Let's go to bed."

A snap of his fingers and the kitchen table righted itself as they approached the bedroom. He gently removed his shirt and robe from her and sat on the bed to look at her.

"You are so lovely," he whispered. "It's as if nothing has changed. I love you."

Hermione felt her blushing. "I was afraid you would see all my stretch marks and not be interested anymore."

He stroked her breasts, stomach, and bum. Then he urged her closer to him. "Never, sweet girl. I will always want you. I have dreamt of you, missed you, I need you," he pleaded.

He lifted her up and made her straddle him. He kissed her as he played with her curly hair. They kissed slowly and softly, relearning how to taste each other and savor their passion. Too soon, his kisses became ardent and hungry. Hermione was urged to lie down on the bed as Severus began to play and tease her body. Hermione didn't feel the urge yet to make love, but Severus did. She returned his caresses and enjoyed the feel and closeness of him. Soon he was easing into her, straining to take her gently. Hermione tucked his hair behind his ears and cupped his face. He reached down and captured her lips with his own.

"Please, Hermione, don't you want me?" he whispered.

"I do, it's been so long. So much pain, I just want to enjoy being close to you," she replied. She closed her eyes, and gratitude washed over her as he withdrew from her body. He lowered his mouth between her thighs and teased her clit with his tongue. Hermione gasped at the shock of pleasure that flooded her body. She felt the hair on her arms stand up and her nipples tingle, and she knew she needed him as much as he needed her.

She buried her hands in his hair and pushed him farther in to taste her more. She was shifting her legs as each jolt of pleasure rushed through her.

His hands sought their way to her full breasts, squeezing and pinching her nipples. He was going to make her orgasm, and she could feel it happening. It had been so long since she had felt this need. When Serena died, she had felt her desire for life had died with her. As she peaked, she burst into tears, sobbing through the ecstasy she was feeling. It was too much at once.

Severus rose to her face and asked, "Are you all right?"

She nodded and pulled him to lie on top of her. "I'm ready now," she whispered. "I need you inside me. It's been too long."

She lifted her legs to feel as much of him inside her. As he entered her, they both gasped.

Hermione felt her fears drift away as he sheathed himself fully within her. It was real. Severus was here with her. It wasn't a dream. They had found each other at last. To Hermione's surprise, he still filled her snugly, as if no time had passed, and soon he was panting and growling as he thrust inside her.

"Hermione," he groaned. "I haven't felt this safe in so very long." His movement became languorous and teasing. "There were so many nights I craved this. I needed you so much."

Hermione felt the slow burn of his passion take over her mind. He was still both the loving boy who had kissed her in that record booth and the man who had ravished her so many times over the years. He still was her boy, and she was still his girl.

She felt her whole body relax, and she released her need and fear, giving the emotions over for Severus to drive from her. "You're still so *perfect*," he whispered into her ear. He lowered his head to suck and lave her nipples, and she felt the familiar rising tide inside her building higher and higher. She came again with agonizing sobs racking her body, and he kissed her tears as he spilled his seed into her, whispering her name, thanking her for coming back to him and letting him make love to her.

He rested against her and stroked her arm. "This was the last thing I expected to do today," he said, chuckling.

Hermione smiled and kept one leg tightly around his waist, keeping him inside her. "Sleep," she whispered as she snuggled firmly against him.

"Yes," he murmured. "Finally, after so long, I shall truly sleep."

Amor Ignorat Tempus is Latin for "Love does not know time."

Chapter 71

Chapter 71 of 74

Severus and Hermione decide to find out who won the war and if they will be accepted into the Wizarding world.

A/N: Well, here is the fateful chapter we've been waiting for. How will Hermione and Severus discover what happened after war? Will they go on the run? What about Serena's grave? How will Severus react to seeing it and learning more details about his daughter's death? But most of all, what has Harry done, knowing Hermione left the battle before it was over? As always, my deepest thanks and respect for WriterMerrin who worked on this chapter. You are a princess among women!

When Severus and Hermione woke, the morning sun was breaking over the horizon. They dressed and went into the kitchen for coffee, remaining silent. Without uttering a word, both knew they were thinking the same thing. What if Voldemort had vanquished the Order and Harry was dead? They remained standing, sipping their coffee. Finally, Hermione couldn't take it anymore.

"Severus, when will we find out what's happened?"

He furrowed his eyebrows and said, "Are you already eager to face the world?" he asked softly without looking at her. "I thought perhaps we could remain here for a while...and forget."

She placed her hand on his. "I can't stand not knowing. Where should we go?" she asked.

"The Leaky Cauldron," he said. "If the Dark Lord is anywhere, he's at Hogwarts. The Leaky Cauldron is our best bet. If he has won, and all is lost, we'll disappear into Muggle London and leave the country. We'll take nothing but our wands."

Hermione turned to walk back to the bedroom. Severus caught her hand. "Are you positive this cannot wait? I dreamt of bringing you here so many times; it was my only comfort. I wanted to be with you here and revel in you."

Hermione blushed as he swept the errant strands of hair from her face. "I guess I've been waiting so long for a conclusion, unable to do anything about it... I just want this dreadful feeling of limbo to pass so we can be safe. Once I know we are safe, then I can really relax and enjoy being together."

Severus wrapped her into his arms and whispered against her ear, "You will always be safe with me. I swear I will protect you."

"Severus," Hermione whispered, "you can't make that promise. The best of intentions cannot dictate what will be."

Hermione returned his embrace, resting her head on his chest. She heard his soft baritone rumble against her ear that was pressed against him as he spoke. "So, you don't think I can protect you?" Hermione lifted her face to look into his. His face was full of hurt and pending rejection. "The vows and promises we made were all I had left. I meant to keep my word to find you and make you safe again. I failed, and you suffered for it. Our daughter died because of it."

Hermione placed her fingers against his mouth. "Stop," she murmured. "Let's not start assigning blame between us. Don't do it. We are alive now and together. The most important promise we ever made was to love each other and to never stop believing that it's real."

Severus' forehead touched hers. "Remember the first time you promised to be my friend?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes. You were so sad and lost. You looked as if the world was going to end."

"It was!" he insisted. "At least for me. I thought I would die if you left me too." He lifted her up from the ground so he wouldn't have to bend his head to kiss her.

Hermione closed her eyes and kissed him. Collapsing onto the sofa, Severus pulled Hermione onto his lap, opening her shirt to fondle her breasts. Hermione shrugged out of his shirt and ground her pussy against his hardening cock. Severus toyed with her nipples as she thrust her hands into his black hair, fisting it as ripples of pleasure spread throughout her body. Her hands left his hair to release him from the confines of his trousers. Severus lifted his head, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. She sank her hungry quim onto his rigid maleness, claiming him as he had claimed her the night before. Hermione gasped as his radiated heat warmed her while she slid further down his wide shaft.

Widening her eyes and letting herself go, she allowed her senses to take her over. Her mind was empty, save thoughts of the pleasure while she rocked against him. It was her pace, her way. Severus' face was flushed as his eyes fluttered shut, murmuring things she couldn't hear. She was a part of him again, leaving nothing hidden from his penetrating eyes. He held onto her tightly, his hands splayed on her back, holding her and keeping her to him as his lips blazed a trail from her mouth to her breasts. She cried out as her orgasm took her by surprise. Severus was not far behind, moaning her name.

Severus and Hermione went back to the bedroom and put on their clothes. Hermione's were filthy, but they were all she had on her. She cast some cleaning spells, and when she felt she could do no more, she came out and waited for Severus to finish dressing. Severus put on his boots and looked at Hermione.

He gave her a once over and frowned. "Whatever has happened, you need new clothes."

They took hands and Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. As soon as they stepped inside, the crowd turned and looked at the both of them. Severus had his wand out and at the ready. Tom, the barman, came over with two shots of firewhiskey and said, "We've all been waiting for the two of you to show up! Harry Potter said you would when you both were ready. We all weren't expecting you to surface so soon!"

He placed the shot glasses in their hands, and they were given a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. On the front page were Harry, Ron, and Ginny, waving to the cameras. They were filthy and weary, but happy. The caption read: *Harry Potter defeats Tom Riddle!* And underneath the picture, a second headline read: *Potter declares Severus Snape and Hermione Granger as Spies for the Order of the Phoenix!*

The Snapes looked at each other and then broke out into smiles. They raised their glasses and toasted their success and drank, much to the joy of the patrons there, clapping and congratulating them.

Hermione wanted to see Spinner's End immediately. It was the only place she could think of as home. However, Severus decided his wife was long overdue for a proper wedding trousseau. They went to Madame Malkin's, and Severus insisted on nothing but the finest robes the store had to offer.

Hermione looked at all the clothing in front of her and sighed. "Severus! This is far too much...you know I mostly wear jeans and a jumper."

"Not anymore," he said as Madame Malkin happily bustled around, altering her new robes. She was elated at having customers again...and well-paying customers at that. Hermione decided to allow Severus to pamper her. After all, he hadn't been able to for so long.

Returning to Spinner's End was terribly emotional, and neither knew what to say. A lifetime and more had occurred in this small, dingy house. After Hermione had worked on dusting the kitchen, Severus insisted that they bathe and rest.

"Where will we sleep, Severus?" Hermione asked as she brushed her teeth.

"In my room, of course," he replied with a mischievous grin.

"And why is that?" she asked as she embraced her squeaky-clean husband, still warm from his hot bath.

"I have one more fantasy that never was fulfilled," he said as he led her inside the small room. He took off her towel, and she gasped, "You dusted in here and cleaned the sheets!"

"I'm afraid we'll never be able to sleep in your old room anymore. Wormtail lived in there when he stayed here. But, this room remained my own, and for twenty years I have wanted to do this."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I want to make love to you in my bed," he whispered into her ear as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. "I can't even recall the number of times I had to take the problem in hand, as it were. I have fantasized about you in every way possible. Now that this nightmare is over, I will finally have what I have wanted since I was a teenager. It has been too long since I've heard you make those sweet sounds when I am inside you stroking just right, we are still out of practice."

Hermione jumped on the bed and watched Severus look at her like a predator. She started to giggle nervously as he came slowly towards her. She had turned to get off the bed when her husband promptly grabbed her by the ankles and slid her towards him. She lay prone, stretched out underneath him as he rubbed his erection along the juncture of her bum.

"You feel so good," Hermione murmured against the sheets.

She felt her hair being pushed to the side as Severus began to kiss and nibble on her neck and shoulder. She laughed as he tickled her sides.

"Stop!" she said as she gasped for air between laughing fits. Severus got off of her, and they both knelt on the bed, touching each other gently. Severus brought her lips to his, and they kissed ever so innocently.

Hermione brought her arms up around his neck and shoulders, her breasts lightly grazing his chest and whispered, "I remember that kiss."

"It's a shame they closed down that store," replied Severus. "I would have loved nothing more than to take you there again."

They kissed deeply as their craving for each other grew. He led her to lie back on the bed. He pushed her legs up and slid his hands under her bum, tilting her.

Hermione remained still, absent-mindedly biting on her finger. Severus closed his eyes and sank into her without his hands guiding him. "After all these years, I know how to find you," he whispered.

He opened his eyes and said, "It would be wonderful if we made a baby now, Hermione?"

Hermione couldn't reply. Of course it would be wonderful, but she knew if she spoke, she'd burst into tears.

Severus stroked inside her and squeezed her bum with his hands. He quickened the pace. She caressed her own breasts as her pleasure mounted. Her self-enjoyment elicited a groan from Severus, and his eyes glazed over as he continued to watch her. Hermione's breath hitched, and she began to squirm and mewl as she felt the waves of her impending orgasm building up inside.

"That's it," Severus breathed, his voice husky with lust. "That's what I want to hear, those lovely cries for me, sweet girl."

He withdrew his hands and grasped the sides of her head, hungrily kissing her mouth.

"I love you, Hermione," he gasped as he came inside of her.

"I love you, Severus."

The following day they went to Hogsmeade. Rosmerta was there, looking worried and tired as they came into the Three Broomsticks for a drink and also to find more news about the end of the war.

"Rosmerta," said Hermione as she leaned over the bar and touched her arm. "What's wrong?"

She brushed the hair from her face, and her eyes began to tear. "I'm going to have to appear before the Wizengamot for my involvement in Dumbledore's death. You'd better take Severus to the Ministry. He might be in trouble as well."

Hermione sat back on the stool, and Severus, who had been stopped by an older wizard to wish him well, was standing there a couple of feet from her.

"Did you hear that?" she asked him softly while the din around them grew. A small group of drunken wizards and goblins began to sing in the back.

"I suppose we had better get along to the Ministry," Severus replied darkly.

He came closer as Hermione sat frozen in her seat with her head lowered. She grasped the front of his robes, holding him closer to her. "What if they take you away from me?" she whispered. "Let's go away, just us."

Severus looked at her and replied, "We would always be fugitives then, Hermione. Always looking over our shoulders. That's no life to bring children into."

Hermione turned her head from him and tried to stop the tears, but they came anyway. She felt her husband's arms wrap around her, and she whispered, "I want to go to Andromeda's. I need to be with Serena."

She started to shake, and Severus helped her walk outside. He gave her a handkerchief, and she started apologizing.

"I'm sorry, I-I j-just c-can't help it."

Severus held her to him and Apparated to Andromeda's. When they arrived, he took her small hand into his larger one. "Hermione, you don't have to carry this alone anymore. Serena was my baby too. Let's grieve together."

She nodded, and he kept one arm wrapped around her protectively as they walked up the road to the house. The garden came into view, and Hermione could see the tiny grave marked with small stones. Hermione wrenched free from Severus and sank onto the grave, clutching the grass, wishing she could hold her baby instead. The tears dropped onto the fresh grass, and Hermione whispered to her daughter of how much she loved and missed her. She saw the shadow of her husband behind her. She turned her face towards him and looked into his pained face.

"What was she like?" he whispered.

Hermione laughed through the tears. "She was so impatient. When she wanted to eat, she would kick and punch...I literally thought she had my insides black and blue!"

He smiled as he knelt down on one knee. Hermione tucked her feet under her and rested her hands on his knee.

"She was so beautiful...so tiny...she had black hair and was so...I don't know...she was *mine*. When she was inside me, I never really felt alone...it was like we were in this mess together. When I lost her, I thought I had lost everything."

Severus gathered her into his arms and rocked her as she wept. Hermione felt his body tense, and she looked up at him and saw him watching the house. He swiftly drew his wand and pointed it at someone. Hermione turned and looked and said, "Remus, you're here!"

Remus schooled his eyes on Severus, who was not speaking and had a murderous look in his eye.

"Severus," Remus said calmly. "I will ask you to lower your weapon. You have no enemies here. I assure you."

"Then why have my wife and I been instructed to go to the Ministry of Magic?" he demanded. "Am I still a wanted man by the Order?"

"No, Severus," Remus replied solemnly as he carefully walked towards them. "Harry showed Kingsley his memories from his discussion with Hermione. We also spoke with Lucius. Not that there was much needed to be said. Why don't you both come inside and have a drink? Come and meet my son. We named him after Dora's father, Ted. We're calling him Teddy. He's a Metamorphmagus like his mum."

He offered his hand in a gesture of peace. "Please Severus. Too many have died." Severus looked at him warily, but accepted the outstretched hand and shook it.

Hermione wrapped her arms around Severus' waist and led him towards the house.

"We'll have to get a headstone," he murmured as they walked past the tiny grave.

They sat down at the table and drank. The atmosphere was rather tense. Severus didn't trust Remus, and his wife was an Auror. Hermione watched as Tonks held little Teddy in her arms, and she felt a pang of envy and loss. Severus reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked at him and realized he knew her. The thrumming magic sang through her body, and she understood then the connection between them would always be strong and unbreakable.

"I suppose you all want to know what happened after you both left?" asked Remus as he swallowed the rest of his firewhisky.

"Actually, Lupin," replied Severus, his tone cool. "I'm more interested in how the Ministry sees our disappearance from the battlefield."

"Please, Severus, you have to believe us when we say neither you nor Hermione have to fear. If it will make you feel better, go see Kingsley. He probably would appreciate the help. There are about ten or so Death Eaters unaccounted for. Except for Avery and Yaxley, the others were lower-level minions," he said as he poured all of them another drink.

Andromeda took Teddy, who had started to fuss, from his mum. Tonks joined the conversation and said, "Riddle was furious when you were nowhere to be found. When Ron Weasley brought Lucius Malfoy inside the castle, Arthur Weasley took him briefly into custody and sent me his Patronus for me to formally take his statement and place Lucius under arrest. He explained what his family had suffered. Arthur and I saw the marks from where Lucius had been beaten, and Lucius told them his wand had been confiscated months ago, and he and Narcissa had been living as servants in his own manor. He said it had been horrifying. Day after day, they had to watch Draco be placed under the Imperius Curse in order to inflict Unforgivables on those who had 'displeased his Lordship.' He said the rest of the time Draco was not being manipulated, he just sat in fear. He said they all were afraid: first, because Lucius had not delivered the Prophecy, and second, Draco failed to kill Dumbledore."

"How did the battle end?" asked Hermione.

Lupin answered. "Voldemort called his troops back and gave one last ultimatum. That was when the Advance Guard with the Auror contingent went into forest with Ron and Harry where Voldemort had retreated and was holding his hostages. Hagrid and a few students had been captured and tortured."

Hermione grasped Severus' hand and Remus carried on. "It was horrible. We fought in that dense wood, hexes flying everywhere and ricocheting off of trees. We lost Proudfoot, and Savage and Hestia are in St. Mungo's. Hestia will be fine; we don't know yet about Savage.

We watched as Voldemort struck Harry down with the Killing Curse, and it was sheer pandemonium. It was kill or be killed. We got many Death Eaters, but more were coming as he summoned them. We surrendered only after we realized if we continued it would only be the needless slaughtering of every Order member, and we couldn't do that...not if we had any hope of a future uprising.

"Hagrid carried Harry up to the castle, where everyone began to cry and scream in shock when they saw Harry's body. Then Voldemort made his final mistake. He let his guard down. He thought he had won, but he hadn't. As soon as he released Nagini from the magical cage, Neville Longbottom, who had the Gryffindor Sword, slaughtered

the snake. In the commotion, Harry was back up and fighting, and everyone ran away in all different directions. We all fought, and then some of the other Death Eaters joined in, and everyone came back, and it started all over again in the Great Hall. Ginny killed Bellatrix Lestrange, and Ron with George took down the Lestrange brothers. There were some Death Eaters we saw escape, and as Harry and Voldemort circled one another, we all heard the real story behind the Horcruxes, and Harry taunted him with the fact that Severus had left him, that he had never been with him, all these years had been an act to protect the people he cared about."

At this, Severus squeezed Hermione's hand under the table.

"Voldemort was disoriented and confused that Severus, his most trusted servant, had broken his allegiance. Harry went in for the kill shot, and it was over," Remus concluded.

Tonks slipped her arm into her husband's as he continued, "It was just like that. It was over. We all stood for a long time in silence, and then it was as if we had to wake ourselves from a dream...or nightmare...and then we had to take roll call and gather bodies."

"Whom did we lose?" Hermione asked.

Remus spoke up. "We lost Fred Weasley, but Percy had returned to reunite with his family and fought with us against the Ministry. It was Percy who killed the wizard who killed Fred: the Minister of Magic, Pius Thicknesse. So at least, for Molly, she says the one bright spot is that she lived to see all her children together, and the family reconciled before Fred was killed.

"We also lost Colin Creevey. He must have snuck back in and joined the fight. I never saw him," he added.

"We lost Lavender Brown," said Severus. "She had been dueling Fenrir Greyback, and they took a nasty fall. Trelawney killed him with a well-aimed crystal ball. I tried to get Miss Brown to safety without detection, but she died in my arms. The slashes and bites were far too extensive."

"There was Cho Chang, Michael Corner, and Oliver Wood," Remus continued. "It was very tragic. So tragic."

Tonks continued then as she poured everyone another round. "It took time to sort out the wounded...there were so many...but they will be fine, except for Savage. We're still waiting. After we got the bodies and identified them, we separated the dead and burned Voldemort with his Death Eaters. Each body was photographed, and an item of a personal nature, a wand or a wallet to identify them, was taken before the burning. The Unspeakables did that. Kingsley was named Minister of Magic unofficially for now, but as soon as things can get sorted, and those who are in Azkaban unjustly are released, we'll be able to do something formal. The funerals will begin tomorrow. Kingsley ordered an area just outside Hogsmeade to be portioned off for the dead so they can all be together as fallen comrades and magically bound so no one can disturb the land.

"I know that everyone would love to see the both of you. Lucius told us all about what Voldemort had said. Malfoy knew if you had remained Voldemort would have killed you. He thought the wand he possessed was not working for him, and he was growing frustrated. He didn't want to get you, Severus. He said he was glad to be arrested and taken out of the madness. It's all very confusing, but Kingsley gave a short speech at the end, after Harry, Ron, and Ginny spoke with him, and all the dead had been accounted for. Kingsley declared you and Severus as war heroes who had done more than anyone for the war effort and declared you both as faithful Order members.

"What about Dumbledore? We heard from Madam Rosmerta that she is going on trial for her part in his death!" Hermione said in a terrified voice.

"Oh, yes," said Remus. "No charges will be filed against you, Severus. It was something that had been done as an act of war, and it also had been the strategy of Dumbledore to get you farther into Voldemort's good graces. Could you imagine how life would have been last year if Greyback or Yaxley had been headmaster? It would have been hell. So don't worry," he assured them as he smiled. "It would be a nice gesture to go pay your respects to Kingsley. He may need to enlist you, Severus, to help the Auror Department track down the rogue Death Eaters. Hermione may be needed at Hogwarts to help with the rebuilding. There is so much that needs to be done. I have to go back to the Ministry to help with the Department of Magical Creatures. We've got goblins, elves, and werewolves displaced and scared. It's a mess."

Severus was so quiet; Hermione was worried. He swirled the amber colored drink in his hand and finally spoke.

"I want to know the details of my child's burial."

Remus and Tonks turned their heads sharply towards Andromeda who shifted her eyes towards her family and then Severus. Andromeda turned pale and whispered, "Severus, there couldn't be a proper burial. We wrapped her in a towel and buried her."

"No coffin?" he queried as his voice began to betray him.

"I spoke the rites...Dora, Hermione, and I. But it was after we had buried her. Hermione was so ill, she had lost so much blood, it was days after the burial before any blessings were said over the grave."

Severus reached for Hermione's hand. "We will be settling down somewhere close to the school, perhaps outside of Hogsmeade." Severus turned to Hermione. "A little cottage, modest, but cozy. I will want my daughter's body moved to our property. We shall let you know. Let's go, Hermione."

Severus was eager to leave, and Hermione was puzzled as to why. She stopped and went to Andromeda. "Thank you so much for everything. I know I wouldn't have survived without you."

Andromeda gave her a hug. "Don't be a stranger," she told her. "That goes for you as well, Severus!" she shouted after him.

Severus pivoted stiffly on his foot and faced Andromeda. "I will always be grateful for your care of my wife and child when I could not." With that he pulled on Hermione's hand, and they Apparated outside of the Ministry of Magic.

As Severus and Hermione entered the Ministry, they made no stop to speak with anyone but Kingsley. Hermione kept her hand firmly grasped with Severus'. She watched as they walked by the demolition of a gruesome statue of a witch and wizard sitting on a throne made of human bones. She looked at the gigantic statue with horror. She must have shivered or shook because Severus stopped them and whispered, "Don't look anymore, Hermione. You don't have to worry about it anymore."

He placed his arms around her shoulder. *He's doing that a lot lately. He must feel I need to be petted and coddled* she thought. *Perhaps he needs to feel like a protector since he couldn't before.*

The entire Atrium was in the process of being stripped. It seemed the wizarding world wanted badly to erase any memory of what had occurred here. As soon as they entered Kingsley's undersecretary's office, he came out and beamed at them while reaching for their hands.

"By Merlin, Severus, Hermione, are we glad to see you!" he said with his bright, gleaming smile.

"Oh, but of course in a few months we'll have a big celebration to honor those who died and those who were heroes. You both shall receive the Order of Merlin, First Class," Kingsley informed them as they all sat down in his office. "As you can see, we want to get rid of everything that Voldemort put into this place. There are so many people that we have had to arrest, and still there are many who escaped as soon as they knew the bastard had been killed. Bleeding rats jumping off the sinking ship. You never know how many rats until it's time to bail out," he added darkly.

Hermione's fingers remained interlaced with her husband's as she asked, "Where is Harry?"

"At Hogwarts," Kingsley replied. "He, Ron, and Ginny are taking a much-needed rest. They are staying in Gryffindor Tower with the whole Weasley clan. It's been quite an ordeal for them, losing Fred. I think the resting and allowing the house-elves to feed and care for them will be best for them."

Hermione felt there was a gigantic elephant in the room that no one wanted to acknowledge. She was no different, but she had to know. "Kingsley, do the Weasleys hate us?" she whispered. "I know how it looks...we left right in the thick of the fight..."

Kingsley raised a hand as he interrupted her. "Hermione, you must never allow yourself to think this way. If Severus had stayed, he would have been killed. Harry told us you were completely right to steal yourselves away. He was most adamant about it and would not hear anyone even say a word of doubt against either you or Severus.

"Yes, of course we were confused afterwards. There were murmurs, but Harry and Ron silenced everyone with their information. Then Remus and Tonks told us about how they had hidden you after almost dying from losing a child...a child Severus didn't even know about. When we all found out about that, it was just devastating. So many felt responsible for you having to flee for your life in your condition when you had no other choice...only to discover your parents murdered, and you were on your own. It was providential you stumbled upon Ted Tonks and his group.

"Severus, Hermione, on behalf of the wizarding world, I offer my humblest apologies and condolences for the loss of your daughter. Of course, this will all be done officially. Everyone needs to know how much you both sacrificed for our safety and freedom. As soldiers, we always are prepared to give of ourselves, but never do we require the life-blood of our children.

"You had been separated for so long, and Harry has spoken most forcefully that the fault lies with him. He has demanded all responsibility and that if any punishment is required it shall be on his head. Your combined suffering weighs heavily on him. No one begrudges either of you. Remember you both discovered the last Horcrux that neither Harry nor anyone could puzzle out. He told us all about it, and then said he had seen the destroyed Diadem Hermione kept hidden wrapped in a towel. He told us you both destroyed it. That made things so much easier for Harry...and then for us.

"Because of Harry's full disclosure, we know now how much you both endured...so much more than you should have...and we hope that we will not lose you. Harry, Ron, and Ginny all hope that you will still want to be a part of the Reconstruction of our world."

Severus and Hermione stood, holding each other's hands in a vice grip. Hermione turned to face her husband, feeling they were as one, and said, "I can't believe this nightmare is over."

Kingsley stood and shook her hand. "Believe it, Mrs. Snape. And know that if you so desire, you can return to the Auror Department any time, welcomed with open arms. And Severus," he added as he shook his hand, "name the position, and it is yours. If you want to train our Aurors or return to your post as Headmaster, even if you want to just stick around for a couple more years until Hogwarts gets back on her feet and stay on as Potions master, anything you would be interested in during this process, it would mean all the difference, and we would be honored to accept any and all terms you request."

Severus' face did not betray any emotion. "I shall need time to think on it, Kingsley. However, we shall immediately return to Hogwarts and speak with Minerva. I assume she is in charge?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Kingsley replied. "She and Filius are working with the other volunteers for the clean-up. She would be absolutely overjoyed to see the both of you. She is most grieved and is desperate to beg for your forgiveness."

"Thank you, Kingsley," Hermione said as they left his office. "We appreciate your generosity."

"Not at all," Kingsley replied as he opened his door. "This is the least we can do. Anything you require, this Ministry is at your disposal. Even if that means a complete break from the wizarding world. It will become law to punish anyone severely if your privacy is breached. I am your humble servant."

As Severus and Hermione left, Hermione looked to Severus to see his reaction.

"Well?"

"It's a magnanimous start; however, I will not believe a word of it until I see it demonstrated in real life."

A/N: Only three chapters left! PLEASE REVIEW!

Chapter 72

Chapter 72 of 74

The Snapes leave Spinner's End and begin a new life outside of Hogsmeade. A reburial and a surprise visitor makes for an emotional summer.

A/N: It is getting harder and harder to get these chapters right the closer we get to the end. I want to do it justice after all the crap our favorite couple has been through, and I want to tie up all the ends and make it nice and neat as possible, but with enough to leave you all with a surprise at the end. I hope you enjoy this. WriterMerrin, my beta, worked her tail off on this chapter. Much love and hugs for her! :) Thanks to all who have continued to review. I LOVE each and every one!

Severus and Hermione stood a few yards from the main gates of Hogwarts. It was in complete shambles. "It doesn't even look like it anymore," Hermione whispered.

"I know," Severus replied. He turned to her, covering her shoulders with his capable hands, and asked, "Are you well? I feel today you are not at your best."

Hermione smiled slightly. "It just has all caught up with me, Severus. I feel so old, don't you?"

He chuckled. "I do. However, you should feel bright as a Galleon. You are eighteen you realize."

Hermione gave a snort. "Not ruddy likely! I'm actually thirty-eight, you pompous arse...I'm actually going to be thirty-nine this year. Circe's tits! I can't believe how old I feel inside."

"You just need some good, old-fashioned caring, sweet girl," he whispered.

Hermione swatted him lightly on the chest as he pulled her closer to his side.

"You only call me that when making love is on your mind," she scolded him as they up to the main gates.

"It's been constantly on my mind since you came up that hill and we Disapparated from this nightmare," he said as he pointed towards the spot Hermione had found him. "How long has it been, now? I think I'm getting a headache or some tension in my legs."

"Now what on earth do your legs have to do with sex?" she asked him.

"Ah," he said as he closed his eyes and tilted back his head. Hermione gave him another swat. "I suppose you need to be a man to understand how unbelievably weak in the legs we feel after a really good shag," he whispered in her ear just before he gave it a tiny bite.

Hermione squeaked, feeling a tingle directly to her clit as he discreetly slipped a hand inside her robes and gave one of her nipples a good pinch. "Well, you'll have to wait," she said in her bossiest voice. "Right now we have to go speak with Minerva."

Severus stopped and closed his eyes as he leaned against the stone wall of the entrance.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"I am remembering a night back in 1981 when this witch came out of a club and threatened me and Lucius, wearing barely nothing. I can still see the outline of her firm, pert breasts. She had these hard nipples against this thin fabric and a disgraceful excuse for a skirt that could make a man weep with need," he recalled.

"Severus," she whispered. "I am afraid that girl will never come back. Even though I was in my twenties at the time, I hadn't had a child..."

Severus snatched her by the waist and pulled her flush against him and kissed her, forcing her mouth open and eagerly plundering her mouth. He let her go just enough for him to speak against her lips. "I was hard as granite within seconds. When I had you in my arms, kissing you, and you told me you still were a virgin, I wanted to take it right then and there because it was *mine*. You had promised it to me. I look at you and see that woman. You are so very desirable, and I will always see you that way. You're mine...my very own."

They kissed again, and Hermione responded passionately.

"Ahem!"

Hermione and Severus turned and saw Minerva and Filius, who were staring at them with smug faces while they looked like errant teenagers...well, Hermione was, in a way, but she wasn't about to dwell on that thought.

Minerva smiled and reached out her arms to welcome them. She and Hermione embraced while Filius and Severus shook hands.

Minerva hugged Severus and ignored his discomfort over her display of affection over him. She took out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. "We are so happy you both are back. We were afraid you would just leave and never know that you were praised as heroes!" she said in relief.

They all went inside and up to Minerva's office. "Now, Severus, I am only a temporary headmistress. If you want your post back, you are most welcome to it," she offered.

Severus and Hermione sat on one of the couches together, and Hermione slipped her hand into his.

Severus looked into his wife's eyes and then turned to address Minerva.

"As gracious as your offer is, I must decline. Hermione and I have our own dreams for our future: a future that has been deferred for far too long. However, we did speak with Kingsley about the school needing me for a couple of years...just until the school can get back on its feet again. That would be the only offer that would appeal to me. If I accept, I would have to live outside of the castle. Hermione and I have our own plans for our living arrangements."

Minerva gave them both a cup of tea that she had prepared while he spoke.

"Of course, Severus. That would be fine. Of course, I would have to have a new Head of Slytherin house. However, I'm sure that Horace might be convinced to return. If you like, I shall give him the underclassmen and you can teach the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. level students."

Hermione squeezed his hand, and Severus looked down into his wife's soft, brown eyes. Hermione smiled at him and he said, "I think my wife finds that agreement acceptable, if I am not mistaken, of course."

"Yes, Severus, I think it would be wonderful," Hermione agreed.

"Well done!" squeaked Flitwick. "Let me officially welcome you back to Hogwarts, Severus."

Soon they all had some of Minerva's best Muggle scotch and were toasting to each other and the future.

After Severus and Hermione returned to Spinner's End, they went to bed. They both were exhausted from the release of so much tension. Nevertheless, Severus still insisted that he needed to make love to Hermione, and again, upon entering her, gasped at how amazing she felt after all these years.

As they lay in post-coital bliss, Severus ran a finger along the side of her face and said, "Being inside you is my home, the only home I have ever felt accepted and wanted...always."

"Severus," Hermione breathed as her eyes filled with tears.

"Hush," he said soothingly as he gently wiped the tears that were escaping and falling down her cheeks. "I know how much this house has meant to us. Yet, there are so many unpleasant memories around every corner that never cease to come upon me. This house was the place where we discovered each other, had warm and glorious times for a short while, but this is the place my father assaulted you, my mother and me, the place she murdered him and killed herself.

"Then I think of our working in the garden and how I knew I was falling for you...that place is priceless. Then the night I first came to your bed; it was just like it was yesterday," he whispered.

"Then the beautiful Christmas where we planned on having children and more happy Christmases," she added.

"Hermione, we can have a new place," Severus suggested. "We can take some of the things that hold pleasant memories and bring them with us. We can get a small cottage right in Hogsmeade and be closer to the people I know you want to see and be around. This place is going to be condemned, just like the other houses in this area. There is no future for us here, but we can take the best with us, leave the rest, and start anew."

"Can we take my old bed?" she asked.

"No, Wormtail slept in it. But we can bring this one," he said as he raised an eyebrow suggestively.

Hermione laughed. "Okay, we shall take the things we want...but Severus...it's going to take quite a while to find a place that will accommodate our needs. You will need a basement with proper ventilation for your lab."

"Tut, tut," he said reprovably. "*Our* lab, sweet girl. I expect at the end of two years for you to work on planning how we are going to open our own Apothecary in Hogsmeade whilst I attend to beating some sense into the dunderheads. Thank God, only two years!" he added dramatically.

Hermione smiled. "What shall we do first?" she said.

"More sleep," Severus said as his head hit the pillow. "Then eat, make love, sleep, and then in the morning we go to Hogsmeade and start looking for a new house."

"We're finally doing it, Severus," Hermione said happily. "We're actually living like a real married couple."

Severus traced the shape of her naked shoulder with his finger. "Are you happy?"

Hermione kissed him soundly on his lips. "Incredibly happy, Severus. I love you."

"I love you, Hermione."

Severus and Hermione chose a little cottage that needed some repair work. It was small, just what they wanted, with a decent sized sitting room, three bedrooms, and a generous backyard for gardening.

Severus had been concerned as Hermione took over the negotiations of purchasing the house.

"Hermione," he whispered. "Are you sure you want a house that needs fixing? After all, we could just have one built between your inheritance and my nest egg."

"Oh, no, Severus. I am going to need to have a challenge to occupy my time while you are at work," she insisted.

Severus ran a hand across her stomach. "I was thinking your time would be occupied with caring for and nourishing your body for our child."

"We're not pregnant yet, Severus, and no, I need more," she answered stoutly.

Severus smirked at her. "How foolish of me to forget how determined and resourceful you are. You are an amazing woman, Mrs. Snape," he said as he embraced her from behind.

It took time and a lot of emotion out of both Severus and Hermione to leave Spinner's End. Hermione stood sobbing as they made their final goodbye to the house that had stood witness to their childhood...sufferings and joys alike...and couldn't help the nagging in the back of her head.

"Severus," she said. "What if this is what keeps us together? Will we fall apart if we leave here? This place has so many good memories that far outweigh the bad."

Severus took hold of her by the shoulders and said, "But for me, Hermione, the bad is around every corner. This was our past. We have to look to the future. Besides, didn't we take the items that meant the most to us? We can make a new garden in our backyard and work on it together in it this summer. I'll even shag you in it, if good memories are what you wish."

Hermione giggled as she embraced him. "I think I'm ready, Severus. Let's make a new life for ourselves."

They Apparated to their new house and began the process of cleaning, repairing, and plotting out a new garden. They kept the old furniture from Spinner's End until the house was finished, and then they promised each other they would fill it with the soft, cozy couches and sofa chairs to their hearts' content.

They were so engrossed into their work, they had completely forgotten the outside world. Hogsmeade was their universe and their small cottage the center of it.

One summer day, as Severus was repairing the roof and Hermione was working on plotting out the garden, a visitor stopped by.

Hermione felt the sensory charm go off inside her and knew there was another presence on their property. She rose up and stripped off her gloves, tucking them inside her gardening smock and saw Harry Potter standing at their front door.

"Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry turned swiftly around and said, "Hi, Hermione."

"What brings you by?" she said cordially.

Harry looked nervous. "Hermione," he said in a rush. "I am so very sorry for everything. I was so cruel, and I blamed you and hated you for saying that Sirius attacked you, I am so sorry I insisted putting you in that tower, and I am so very sorry about your baby..."

His voice gave out, and Hermione could see the tears running down his face. He wiped them away with the cuff of his sleeve, just as he had when he was a little boy.

"Hermione, I will never forgive myself, I just wanted you to know that." He turned to leave, and Hermione halted him.

"Harry," she said, "come here."

Slowly, he came towards her, and she said, "I am so happy you came by, and I promise I will tell you as much as I can about your parents. You have to promise me, Harry Potter, that you will forgive yourself. I have. In fact, we stayed away because we weren't sure how the Weasleys would have received us. I know about your engagement to Ginny. I don't want to mess that up for you."

Harry breathed in relief. "No, Hermione. We all miss you. It isn't your fault Fred or Lavender died. In fact Luna and Ron have grown quite close. They're taking it slow, but they are spending time together."

Hermione shook her head as she led him into the house. "I always hoped Luna and Neville would end up together," she said wistfully.

"No," said Harry. "Actually, he and Hannah Abbott have been seeing a lot of each other. Her torture and resilient nature under the Cruciatus Curse has given him a respect for her that is starting to turn into something more."

She poured them some pumpkin juice and excused herself. She walked outside and levitated an empty glass up to Severus.

He stopped working and smiled at her. "Thanks!" he shouted.

"I've lemonade and pumpkin juice," she shouted. "Which do you want?"

"Pumpkin!" he hollered in reply.

Without hesitation she flicked her wand and his glass was full of pumpkin juice. "Severus?" she called to him while he drank it down hurriedly. "Severus, Harry is here."

"I know," he shouted. "I saw the blighter as he came up the road."

"Severus Snape!" she yelled at him angrily. "He has come hat in hand, so to speak, to apologize and extend the Weasleys' best wishes for us! Now, get your arse down here and be civil for pity's sake!"

He glided down and stood in front of her.

"Showboat," she snarled, giving him a withering look.

"You're just jealous that I won't teach you to fly," he said smugly.

"Get in, you!" she snapped bossily, and he did with no complaint. Hermione shook her head. She knew her husband. He was going to be nice as pie without making her want to vomit, knowing full well she would have to extend some extra sexual favors in their bed tonight. Yet, somehow, she didn't mind.

August was a very emotional month for Severus and Hermione. Severus, Andromeda, Harry, Ron, Neville, and Remus had performed the delicate task of exhuming Serena from the tiny grave in Andromeda's garden, placing her remains in a coffin and into a new grave next to the Snapes' new garden, complete with a headstone that read,

Serena Snape

Our Baby Angel

First-born and First-loved

Born and died on October the eleventh, 1997

Before the exhumation, there had been a great deal of discussion as to who would be present. Hermione cried a lot, and although the men tried to do it alone and have the women remain with Hermione, she was adamant.

"Andromeda and I performed the funeral rites over her," she gasped between sobs. "I need her there to hold her."

She looked at Andromeda wildly and relented. "You will hold her, won't you? You will hold her the whole time?"

Andromeda placed her hand against Hermione's cheek. "I have always watched over Serena, and I will now. I shall do everything I know you would," she reassured her.

"No," Hermione said as she rose. "I need to hold her. *I need* for her to know I am there, that she's loved."

She broke down into wracking sobs, and Severus held her close to him.

He whispered into her ear so no one could hear the secret sacred things that are shared between a husband and wife. "I shall hold her, Hermione. Then we'll both have had a chance to hold her, and she'll know both her parents loved her, all right?"

Tonks stayed with Hermione shut inside the house with Ginny, Pavarti, Padma, Luna, and Hannah as the work had gone on outside. Earlier, she had discreetly asked Molly to watch Teddy during the transfer of the remains. Tonks didn't want to upset Hermione further.

The women held Hermione and listened as she talked about Serena and how much she loved her. Then the conversation turned to the future, and Hermione talked to them about how she and Severus wanted more babies. The women joined in and talked about all their hopes and dreams. They all wanted babies of their own, and when the time had come for Hermione to see the new grave, she was feeling hopeful.

She took one look into the desolate eyes of her husband and went to comfort him. They looked upon the grave and held one another and wept.

Andromeda and Hermione had repeated the funeral rites, and it was a soothing balm to the last bit of raw hurt Hermione still carried after all this time.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Hermione remained kneeling as Andromeda finished the last words and sank into the embrace of her husband. When it had ended, Hermione felt a soothing calm come over her. She had finally allowed herself to let her daughter rest in peace.

Chapter 73

Chapter 73 of 74

At home with Severus and Hermione.

A/N: OMG! It is the next to last chapter! I hope after the last chapters, which have been gut-wrenching and emotional, you all will like this chapter which shows the funny side of Severus and Hermione's new life. All my thanks to WriterMerrin, who has kept with me on this fic. You are awesome!

Please, if you haven't reviewed, please, PLEASE review! I really want to read your comments and thoughts about how this fic is ending. Also, I want to hear how y'all liked this chapter!

Fall arrived, and Severus went back to teaching at Hogwarts. The summer had been fruitful on many counts. The garden was ready for fall bulbs, the house nearly finished with repairs, just a few minor things left, but the inside was painted and fresh for the new furniture that was arriving within the month, and they spent the last week of August lounging as much as they wanted in the lovely garden they had made together, massaging each other's aching feet and getting used to being finally at rest and content.

The day after Severus' return to Hogwarts, Hermione discovered she was pregnant. Fear that she would lose this baby as she had lost Serena made her decide not to tell a soul until she could be assured all was well. She thought about it as she paced through the house. She couldn't go to Poppy, not at first. Severus would find out somehow. She would be seen by someone just walking through Hogwarts. No, she would have to go to St. Mungo's.

"Well, Mrs. Snape," said Healer Flannery as Hermione sat up from the examining table. "You are indeed expecting. Congratulations!"

Hermione was ecstatic. Her mind whirled with all the accomplishments she and Severus had made over the summer. The house was nearly finished, the lab in the basement ready for Severus' experiments, and she had combined their books in niches along the walls of the sitting room. Soon, the cozy sofa chairs she and Severus had imagined years ago arrived, filling the room, making it the cottage cozy and homey. They finally had what they had dreamt of for fifteen years: a home of warmth and children, summers with lemonade and pumpkin juice, working in their garden, and cocoa for the winter, warming by a cheery fire. Soon, they would have their first Christmas with all the trimmings and a full larder. Hermione was determined to be as fat as a sow if Poppy said she had to be, to make sure this baby was born healthy.

On her way home, Hermione decided to tell Severus about the baby over a special dinner. She had nervously gone around the house, fixing some of the smaller things on the to-do list while dinner cooked in the oven. After placing a warming spell on the finished meal, she went to bathe and make herself especially pretty. She had just emerged from the hallway, zipping up the back of her dress, when she saw Severus coming up the long walk towards the cottage. Hermione felt her insides churning. She was excited and scared all at once. She dashed to remove the warming spell, stow away the dish towel, and station herself by the dining table, smoothing down her dress and taking deep breaths to calm herself.

Severus walked in, scowling as usual. He spotted his wife standing by a beautiful table of delicious-smelling food. The grin on Hermione's face made his scowl melt until his face was relaxed. He strode over to her. "That's something I could get used to," he said as he greeted his wife with a kiss.

His hand cupped a breast, and Hermione squeaked. "Your breasts are larger, Hermione, I could see it, and now I can feel it!"

She raised an eyebrow. "So naturally you had to get a feel?"

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "You're not going to smack a puppy on the nose for chasing his own tail, are you?" he teased her. "I am, after all, your husband. Can I help it if I find you irresistible? Now tell me what this is all about before you burst. I know when you are dying to tell me something."

Hermione giggled and kissed him softly. "Severus," she whispered against his mouth, "I'm pregnant."

He opened his eyes wide, and they traveled down to her stomach. He took his wand and swished it around until all the windows and shades were closed. His face grew serious just as when brewing a difficult potion; she had seen that look many times over the decades. With a swish of his wand, she was stripped naked, and Severus knelt to press his hand and ear against her stomach.

"Severus!" she said as she laughed. "The baby isn't there. The baby is here." She placed his hand just above her pubic hair. "Are you happy?" she asked when he raised his face to gaze at her, yet remaining silent.

He stood up and grabbed her face, kissing her desperately. He picked her up and carried her to their bedroom, telling her he was going to very gently make love to her.

"Severus, the food!" she screeched as Severus laid her down on their bed.

"Sod the food," he growled as he began to strip off his clothes. "I will not miss this chance. My wife has told me she's having my child. Nothing could be more important."

Severus made love to her with a tenderness she had never experienced before. She softly moaned, and he came undone, shuddering as whispers of love poured out of his mouth. "This feels so good," he gasped as he held her in his arms, listening as her tiny cries intermingled with his own rasping pants while he thrust gently inside of her.

Savion Snape was born on May thirtieth, 1999. He was a healthy seven pounds even and twenty-one inches long. He had black hair and dark blue eyes that Hermione swore would turn black like his father's.

All of Severus and Hermione's friends came to see the new baby. Harry and Ginny were the first to arrive. Ginny asked the new parents, "Why Savion?"

Hermione looked at her husband, and he answered as he tickled his son's chin with one long, white finger, "Savion means 'new house.' Savion is our fresh start, our change. He will bring us all our dreams and change everything that was once sad into happiness."

"That's a lot to place on a child, Severus," warned Remus.

Severus never took his eyes off his son. "Savion is not, nor will he be, required to do anything except live and be our son. Just his presence in our lives will make our happiness complete."

"Of course, Severus, you would have to test that theory," shouted an exhausted Hermione as Savion was squalling through his fourth straight night in a row after they came home from the infirmary at Hogwarts.

"Hermione," Severus said as he made them coffee, "babies cry, Poppy warned us, as did Molly." He yawned and continued, "Hermione, put him down and have some coffee. Although, I don't see how a vibrating chair can do anything but infuriate him further," he announced when she placed Savion in the bouncy seat that Ginny and Harry had given them.

"I'm putting on music," he announced.

"Severus, what if it's because my milk hasn't come in yet? He has to be hungry!" she fretted.

"Hermione," he said impatiently, "just turn on that bloody contraption. He's practically suctioned himself onto your breasts every hour on the hour. If anyone is starved around here it's me. My own son had taken over my own personal playground!"

Hermione laughed. "Well, my breasts were not created solely for your enjoyment."

He grumbled under his breath, but Hermione didn't understand what he was saying. Suddenly, the room was full of the slow, melodious tones of their love song. Whether it was the music or the vibrating seat, neither Severus or Hermione cared; Savion was quiet and looking around calmly.

Severus and Hermione both sighed in relief. Then Severus gently took his wife into his arms and slowly danced with her to their song. As it ended, a snap of Severus' fingers made it replay.

Hermione looked up at her friend and husband. "I remember as if it were yesterday, the night you first kissed me to this song."

"All I remember was being absolutely terrified you wouldn't like it and tell me we'd only ever be friends!" he said as he shuddered in horror at the thought.

"Never," said Hermione firmly.

When Hermione's milk came in, it was as if her breasts were hard as rocks and had expanded to a size that, frankly, mortified her.

"This cannot be decent," she muttered as she put on her new nursing bra and tee shirt. "I look like a Vegas stripper!" she complained to herself.

When Severus came home from work that day, he stopped and his mouth gaped open like a hormonal teenager instead of the thirty-nine-year-old he really was.

"Merlin's left nut, Hermione, what the hell happened?" he said, sounding very much like Ronald Weasley.

Hermione huffed in irritation. "They are breasts, Severus. You've been on speaking terms with them for quite a while now!" she snapped as she went to pick up Savion.

"Just hold it," he said dramatically. "Come over here. You used to have breasts, but these," he said with appreciation in his eyes, "are melons."

Hermione huffed. "Severus, if I don't feed him soon, he'll start howling in frustration."

Severus scowled at her. "It's never been a problem for you to let me howl in frustration," he reasoned.

"You are frustrated solely based upon your libido's need. Our son howls because I am where he eats."

Nevertheless, because she knew her husband was just basically a perpetual thirteen-year-old underneath his cold, hard, exterior, she lifted up her shirt and released the material over the cups to let him see as she rolled her eyes. "Can you be less obvious?" she chided him as he massaged and rubbed them eagerly with his hands.

"This is amazing," he said, mesmerized. "They are hard, so firm."

"It's because I am up to my eyeballs in milk. I need to feed him."

At that moment, Savion began to whimper, and Hermione said, "Enough, I'm starting to let down. There's going to be milk everywhere if I don't get to him," she said as she fastened her cups together.

She had meant that as a deterrent. However, Severus took off his traveling cloak and sat down next to his wife as she offered the nipple to his son, staring in blatant fascination.

"You're dripping!" he said in alarm.

"It's okay," replied Hermione soothingly as she watched her son latch onto her. She breathed in and sighed. "Oh, that's better."

Hermione focused on her husband as he watched his son eat in fascination. "How much does he eat?"

"My milk came in this morning. Right now I have absolutely no idea. I just let him eat for ten or fifteen minutes on one side, and then I switch and let him eat from the other for about the same," she explained.

She watched as Severus jumped up in alarm, making Savion startle, "Milk is dripping out of his mouth! Isn't he going to choke?" he said anxiously.

"No, Severus," she said calmly. "He's fine. If he were choking, he would be making choking noises. He's just a bit greedy. Like someone else I know..." she said as her voice trailed off.

"Humph," retorted Severus as he crossed his arms.

"Severus," Hermione said sweetly, "sit down. Please don't tell me you're jealous."

He remained silent as he watched Hermione switch sides. He let out a groan at the sight of her exposed breasts. "It's not fair. I'm going without sleep, without attentions to which I have become accustomed. Now I see my son taking over what's always been mine!"

Hermione looked upon him with pity. "Now, Severus, you're just going to have to learn to share and take turns," she said to him as if he were a three-year-old.

She received a glare and stifled a laugh.

After Savion had been fed and put in bed for the evening, or really, for the next two hours, Hermione came to bed and watched her husband as he was engrossed in a book. He glanced her way, and his face froze in shock.

Hermione was naked. She still was a bit round from the pregnancy, but Severus couldn't have cared less. All she wore was her underwear because she was still bleeding from the birth. She took his book from him and straddled one leg.

"I don't think I could straddle you fully," she said apologetically.

"I couldn't care less," he replied absent-mindedly. Hermione giggled. His black eyes were fixated on her huge breasts.

"Poppy said breast-feeding burns off the baby weight and tightens the tummy," she whispered. "I told you about sharing, and Savion is full...but so am I. Do you want to help me?"

Severus licked his lips and watched as droplets of milk began to drip from her nipples. He slowly fastened his mouth on one and drank.

Hermione shivered with pleasure as her husband drank from her. She was so happy he wasn't disgusted by it.

He released one after a while, and she asked shyly, "How does it taste?"

"Sweet and delicious. It must be all the fruit you eat," he replied as he switched to the other. It had already been dripping on him, and he swiped his tongue slowly underneath the breast and slid it up to the underside of her nipple, catching a fresh droplet of milk.

Hermione gave out a gasp of delight and satisfaction, to which Severus then drank from her hungrily. She took his hand and placed his middle finger against her clit. "Please just touch me there. I need to come," she panted.

Severus slowly brought her to orgasm, to which she cried out loudly and begged him to suck harder.

After she came down from her release, Severus released her nipple and stared at her curiously. "Is it like that when you feed Savion?" he asked.

"No," she whispered, feeling a bit light-headed. "I mean, I do feel good, but it is a different feeling...a bonding, a satisfaction that I am nourishing my son. It's just so unusual. I do feel good when I breastfeed, and I do get a little wet, but when you were doing it, it was so much more...*so erotic*. I felt so needy. You don't think badly of me, do you?"

"No," he replied. "Do you think badly of me? After all, I enjoyed drinking from you thoroughly."

"No, I think it can be our secret pleasure, especially since we can't have intercourse."

"Yes," he said in a suspicious tone. "I have done enough suckling for one night. I think now it's your turn, Hermione."

He uncovered himself, and she gasped at his raging erection. "I have been neglected for weeks now. If I can't have you, I think the least you can do is give me some sort of pleasure."

"Gladly," Hermione said as she lay on her back. "Look, I can't move a whole lot still without hurting. So why don't I lie on my back and then you can straddle me, and basically, you'd be fucking my mouth."

It was furiously fast and rough. She grazed his cock with her teeth, lightly, and he grabbed two fistfuls of her hair and jerked his hips, shooting his essence into her mouth.

Hermione swallowed, which she rarely did, and the gesture was not lost on her husband.

"Do you think you can do that, let's say, a couple times a week?" he gasped.

"Just ask, Severus, things can't be so exhausting that I can't give my husband a blow job. Even if I'm tired, it doesn't take a lot of energy to let you mouth fuck me," she said lustfully.

"You keep talking like that, I'm going to get hard again," he warned.

"Wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, would it?" she asked, looking at him wantonly.

He kissed her and lightly grazed the sides of her breasts. "You are so lovely, my sweet girl," he whispered.

They held each other and quickly slept until Savion woke them up, eager to eat.

Four years passed, and Severus and Hermione had two more children. Their second son was named Xavier. When asked by friends, the Snapes announced it meant "new house." Then, when their third child was born, the same question was asked again. Severus told them her name was Hortense, meaning "garden." Hermione smiled at her husband, remembering the lazy summer days back at Spinner's End when Severus admitted that was when he had started falling in love with her: when they had worked in the garden.

Another four years came and went, and another two children came to finish the Snape brood. It was now a matter of great interest what Severus and Hermione Snape named their children, all of whom were black haired and black eyed. The only two physical attributes from their mother was thick, unruly hair, which Severus was not about to complain about since it wasn't either bushy or lanky. The other was Hermione's small, pert nose their daughters inherited. Alas, each boy had their father's nose, which irked Severus to no end, fearing the future taunts and teasing over their looks. The fourth child born was Antonietta, a sweet and tiny child that always seemed to remind Hermione of her Serena. The meaning was asked again, and Severus said it meant "priceless." The Snapes alone knew the sorrow behind the loss of their first child that would never fully go away. The fifth, and last, child born to Severus and Hermione was Erik, meaning "forever strong." Severus and Hermione kept that tidbit of information to themselves. The love between Severus and Hermione had never died during all those years of separation and pain. At times it had been challenged and questioned, but in spite of everything, it thrived.

Remember, please review!

<i>Dulcius ex Asperis</i>

Chapter 74 of 74

NOW COMPLETE!!! Through difficulty, sweetness.

A/N: I apologize for the delay in bringing you this final chapter. My grandmother passed away, and my mother had major surgery, so I have had my hands full. I have enjoyed this journey with you. It has been quite the trip. I hate to see it end. I want to thank luvsev and WriterMerrin for the work they did to make this fic readable. You gals are the best! :) I hope you all enjoy this final chapter, and if you have not reviewed before, I hope to hear from you. Reviews are love.

It was during Christmas of the fifteenth year of Severus and Hermione's marriage when they realized that all their dreams had finally come true. Hermione was 50, and Severus was a month from turning 49. Hermione looked as though she was 30, for physically, that was how old she was.

That Christmas of 2009 saw the Snape children of ages ten, eight, six, four, and two. Erik was no longer a baby anymore, and the children were older and more into Christmas than ever. The cottage was bursting with children...only half of what Severus really wanted, but Hermione had said she couldn't handle any more children. It had been a very sad and depressing time when Hermione weaned Erik. Severus had been devastated that there would no longer be any of his wife's sweet breast milk to drink. It had become a very special and precious part of their intimacy away from the children where Severus could feel special and doted upon, and Hermione could feel some relief when she needed to rid herself of extra milk and feel very sexy at the same time.

Hermione had felt badly for Severus and so secretly kept offering herself to her husband, so although little Erik was two that Christmas, Hermione was still lactating for her and Severus' mutual pleasure. Hermione had to admit she agreed when Severus declared some of the best sex they had ever had was when he drank from her breasts.

It was the middle of Christmas day, and the Snape household was insanely chaotic with toys and children running, playing and little hands sneaking into the larder for a bite of mince pie. As she sat resting, watching Erik struggle with a new toy, she could hear her husband's deep voice over the bellows of the older children. Sometimes she was amazed at the patience and skill with which he handled the children. He really had been an evil bastard in the classroom, but after four years of teaching after the war, Severus had felt secure enough to make a go of the Apothecary business. So, with Savion and Xavier just little lads and Hermione pregnant with Hortense, they had gone and started the fledgling business.

The reputation of Severus Snape had served him well. Within a couple of years, business was good and the Snapes were able to get a house-elf to work and live at the store. It was fast growing into a family business. Savion was showing great aptitude for potion making and, at the age of ten, was looking forward to going to Hogwarts and studying, as he called smugly, "the subtle science and exact art of potion-making." Hermione had given her husband a look of exasperation when that had come out one night at dinner.

Xavier was the one to show his aptitude for magic at the youngest age: three months. Hermione had nearly passed out in fright when things in the cottage had started transfiguring by themselves. Severus had rushed home from the new Apothecary store when her Patronus came shrieking about losing her mind. Severus had discovered little Xavier cooing and laughing in his bouncy seat. A few spells later, Severus had told his frantic wife their little sweetheart was a Transfiguration genius, and they had begun to have Minerva over and look over the little lad. These days he mostly got in trouble when he would transfigure his older brother's fork or glass into a snail or a rat. Hermione told Severus on many occasions in private that the boy may be a genius, but common sense would tell him to be a bit sneakier about it since everyone always knew who was doing it. Severus told his wife he was probably going to be a Gryffindor since he lacked subtlety.

Hortense was just like her name. She was the sweetest and gentlest child. She was bookish and quiet, who loved her flowers. She loved her Uncle Neville, who taught her anything she wanted to know about Herbology. She was her mother's little helper, puttering in the garden, always making it nice. She also had the closest connection with the tiny grave in the garden. As the eldest girl that had lived, she wondered a lot about her big sister, Serena, and what she would have been like had she lived. Hortense was a fragile and emotional soul whose heart bled for everyone. She always made sure the house-elf in her daddy's store had enough food to eat and clothes to be warm. That was always traumatic when the little mite tried to give Gabby clothes. She didn't understand why Gabby got so upset, and Hermione and Severus would have to explain and calm the poor creature.

Antonietta, or Annie as she was called, was the coddled one. She was the smallest and the most timid of Severus' and Hermione's children. Severus told Hermione many times she transferred her feelings about Serena onto the child, but Hermione tried her best not to. They were working it out with her. Many times Severus would have to tell Hermione to hold back and allow Annie to make mistakes and learn from them. When she fell, Hermione would want to burst into tears and reach out to help her, but her husband kept his grip firmly on his wife's shoulder, and slowly, they were seeing her become less and less afraid as time went on. At four, she was very interested in art. Coloring, painting, chalk...she continued to express herself through her creations. When she was three, she had painted her father's best frock orange because she thought he needed more color. She had got a swat and her paints taken away for a week. That had been a bad week. Xavier had transfigured it into an orange in his attempts to help the situation, and Severus had had to go down to his laboratory for a while to have what Hermione explained to her children as a "Time Out" for Daddies.

All Hermione asked was that Severus place a Silencing Spell when he went down there so the children wouldn't learn anymore curse words than they were already learning from Ron and Luna's children. Hermione had known who the culprit was the moment Savion had come home from a play date with Fred and Phil, Ron and Luna's twin boys, and hollered "Bloody hell!" at dinner when Xavier transfigured his plate into a snake. Annie, who had been two at the time, had cried and clung to her mummy, sobbing throughout the duration of dinner, sniveling about "scary snakes." Both Savion and Xavier had gone outside with their father for a while and when they had returned had sore bottoms.

Little Erik was the most relaxed child for his two years. No magical display of any kind, but that was expected. He was easily soothed and didn't cry much. Savion, who was fast becoming a very powerful wizard and the mirror image of his father and even walked, talked and gestured like him...which scared the living hell out of Hermione...hadn't exhibited magical powers until he was eight. So they waited.

Hermione thought on all these things as she listened to her husband discipline their children. The rule was "No hands in the larder unless you ask permission." After the lecture was over, Hermione watched her three children sulk back into the room where Annie and Erik were playing quietly. Severus was the last to come in, having placed everything back into the larder, when he promptly tripped over one of Annie or Xavier's toys, or perhaps a combination of both, and landed flat on his face.

Now Hermione had never, ever seen Severus trip over anything before, not to mention, she had never seen him fall on his face. The room was silent as everyone stared at Daddy. Hermione dashed over while Severus was propping himself on his elbows. He looked at Hermione and he said, "I have no one to blame but myself. After all, I was the one who said I wanted to trip over children's toys!"

Hermione laughed and laughed, and suddenly the children were laughing as well. Severus got up and hugged and kissed his wife while the older children were pretend retching. Severus and Hermione went to the love-seat to cuddle and have cocoa by the fire. It was a peace that was short lived. Savion and Xavier were fighting again, and before Severus and Hermione could stop them, Savion had Xavier up by his leg with a non-verbal Levicorpus, but he wasn't the victor. As Xavier hung there, he transfigured his brother into a garden snake, and bedlam ensued. As Severus and Hermione were getting the children situated, they heard a strange hissing noise from the corner of the sitting room. There was little Erik, their sweet two-year-old, speaking Parseltounge to the snake that was his big brother.

"BLOODY FUCK!" roared Severus. "Hermione, get Potter over here right now!"

Hermione ran to activate the Floo while the children were chanting, "Dad-dy swore! Dad-dy swore!"

One look from their father, and they all shut their mouths. Severus restored Savion to his rightful form and held him back from trying to strangle his little brother.

"I'll get you, you prat!" Savion yelled.

"With what?" Xavier shot back. "Poison? Daddy'll just shove a bezoar down my throat, you pillock!"

Severus took both boys by the scruff of their necks upstairs to their bedroom for a "discussion" while Hermione was talking to Harry in the Floo.

"Harry, you've got to come now! It's really serious...Erik was just speaking Parseltongue!"

"Get back, I'm coming through," said Harry, who was now the Head of the Auror Department at the Ministry.

Hermione remembered what she first thought after arriving in 1973 as she heard the shouting from upstairs as Severus had it out with his two eldest sons.

I knew I was right when I was thirteen, how I would regret being involved with Gryffindor and Slytherin, she thought wistfully as she listened to the consummate Slytherin and Gryffindor yell at each other whilst the Head of all things Slytherin refereed between them.

Hermione looked around at her house, and she couldn't be happier. It was a right mess with new Christmas toys everywhere, one child crying to be picked up while another sat on a sofa chair, looking as if nothing was wrong in the world as Harry Potter spoke Parseltongue to the little two-year-old.

Finally, the culprits came downstairs repentant, looking red-faced from crying. They sat on the floor with their hands in their pockets and heads down while their father looked down on them imperiously.

Daddy means business! thought Hermione.

Severus came to her side, and Hermione gave him a smile. He smirked and shook his head as they went over to see what kind of news Potter had about Erik.

"I love you, Hermione," said Severus.

"I love you, too, Severus," said Hermione.

~Finis~

