

Manifestation Of Dreams

by EchoLynn

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Private Notes

Chapter 1 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

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WARNING: This story will contain themes and topics of a sensitive nature! If you are not 18 or older, this fanfiction is not for you! You have been warned!

Hermione fought back tears as she hugged her two best friends, Harry and Ron, goodbye. The three of them had grown very close to one another through their years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They were, in fact, so close that they had made a blood bond with each other the night of their graduation, to always stay friends. No matter what.

They spent the next year closed up in the library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place looking over journals and Pensieve memories that Dumbledore had left Harry to help him in his search for the remaining four Horcruxes. Now finally, after painstakingly putting together the pieces that Dumbledore had left them, they had a vague idea of where the last pieces of Voldemort's soul were hidden. Once they were confident that they knew where to look, they called together an Order meeting to discuss their departure. Right away it was deemed important that Hermione stay behind, as much as all three of them wanted her to go. But the research was done, and Hermione was needed at Headquarters.

It was important for her to stay, much to someone else's utter annoyance, so that she could be trained efficiently in the art of potion making. Severus Snape was the only person who currently provided all the important potions that kept the Order itself going, the Wolfsbane potion for Remus Lupin, their resident werewolf, being the most important. They all knew that with her skill and drive she was the best person for the job. Though Severus Snape wouldn't admit it, she had a gift with the "subtle art of potion making." It was just the smart thing to do to have two well-mastered potion experts, instead of just one who, at that, could very easily be killed by his own "job" for the Order. He was their only spy...their "in" with the Death Eater ranks...and, more importantly, one of Voldemort's top men. One of only three who Voldemort trusted without fail.

So it was with heavy hearts that Hermione, Ron, and Harry parted on this night. It was decided that for their safety on the journey, they would send only brief, non-descript notes each time they found a Horcrux; just a simple word to let those who remained behind know things were going well.

VICTORY.

They were only to contact the Order or come home if they were found by the Death Eaters or severely hurt. They were now well trained in basic Healer spells, so they could take care of themselves if their injuries were not life threatening. Hermione held her two blood brothers, her two best friends, in a fierce grip; they hugged her just as strongly.

"You guys remember all your Healing spells? Do you have all your supplies? You promise to be careful, right? Promise you won't do anything stupid! Please?" she asked them, with a notable tremble in her voice. Ron and Harry grinned lightly at each other over her shoulders.

"Mione, I promise we'll be careful. We do realise how serious this is. It's not one of those dangerous adventures from our school days. You helped us plan this carefully...how could we possibly do something stupid when it's all laid out for us?" Ron replied, trying to keep the tears from overcoming his own eyes. He never talked about it, but he still had feelings for her, deeper feelings than their blood bond. He, like Harry, had been afraid to "get into" anything with the doom of the war hanging over their heads, circling ever closer. He promised himself that if they lived through the final battle, he would throw caution and fear to the wind and pursue her. But for now he kept his feelings to himself. He didn't even know if she felt the same, but that was something he could worry about later.

"Ron's right, Hermione. You planned this whole thing; this isn't like those other 'adventures' we had. We know what we're getting into, at least in a general sense. We've trained for this. We'll be careful, I promise," Harry said as they dropped their arms from the hug and looked at each other. They were all silent for a moment; then, knowing they had to leave, they held out their right hands, the ones they had used to seal their blood bond, and shook in an awkward three-handed shake. After giving each other one last rather watery look, Harry tapped his wand on the Muggle soda can and said, "*Portus*" and once Ron placed his own finger on the can, they were gone.

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Three long months later, after having just received a note...the first...that stated a simple "Victory." Hermione found herself smiling as she made her way into the room that was their HQ potions lab. It was a very secure room, accessed through a hidden door in the library. Hermione knew that Severus Snape was there at the moment, and she looked forward to a hopefully uninterrupted lesson. Often he left her suddenly, when his Dark Mark burned, leaving her frustrated at the interrupted lesson but understanding of the reason. As she came into the room, quietly as previously instructed, she went straight to her very own desk. She grabbed the hair clip that was placed next to her ink bottle, and started with the arduous task of pulling her very full (often described as bushy) and curly hair into a bun so that it was out of the way. She slipped the protective Dragonhide apron on, pocketing the matching gloves.

Severus Snape didn't look up when he heard her enter the room. He knew she would not dare disturb him until she was properly ready to begin her lesson. The first, very awkward day of her Apprenticeship, he had lectured her thoroughly but simply on what he expected of her. Ever the diligent and eager student, she remembered his words immediately. Honestly, though, coming from Severus Snape, who could *forget* his words?

Miss Granger, I want you to know that it pains me to have to suffer your presence when I was under the impression that I was rid of you in a teacher-student capacity. Though I admit it is important to have someone else taught the mastery of Potions for the Order, do not flatter yourself by thinking you are my first choice for my Apprentice. You are simply the only person who is trustworthy and available. So listen closely, because I will tolerate nothing less than perfection and obedience. When you come into this lab, you will do so without noise. You will find a way to keep that bushy nonsense you call hair out of your face. We don't want it contaminating anything. You will put on the proper protective gear...this Dragonhide apron and these gloves. Once you are sure you are ready, you may approach me. But don't speak until I acknowledge your presence. Do you understand and agree to these terms? He had said all of that with a glare in his eyes, and the occasional smirk thrown in for good measure whenever he was happily able to insult her in some way.

She had been aching to reach into her robes for her wand and hex his oversized nose off, but she restrained herself. So, with a personal goal of not letting his words of insult "hit home," she diligently followed his rules and his teachings. He was secretly excited about teaching someone who actually wanted to learn, someone who had that special spark in their eye as they learned something new about potion making. And even though she had perfected every potion she had been taught thus far, on the first try *every time* no less, he refused to let it go to her "already big head", as he saw it. The hardest part for most people, when it came to potions, was that they never took the time to learn about each individual herb or ingredient. That was where the painstaking mastery of Potions took place. You had to really know the ingredients inside out and how they reacted with each other. You had to know their properties, how they worked, so that you would know when to add them together in the perfect sequence, and what ingredients together would achieve the effect you sought. This detailed part of Potions was something his students had barely tapped into in their N.E.W.T year, but Hermione dove into the subject with happy abandon.

On her off-time she could be found with her nose in extensive Potions books like *Intricacies of Potion Properties*. She would read each book at least twice, determined to remember them word for word, to make sure that she truly understood them. She of course wanted that knowledge to be second nature to her, like it was for Severus Snape. Deep down, she vowed to outdo him one day, just to spite him for his "inaugural" speech.

So Hermione stood there patiently for nearly twenty minutes before Severus finally decided to acknowledge her presence. With a very brief glance, ignoring her irritating smile, he said, "I'm afraid there will be no normal lesson today. I'm due to be called away any time now. I wish for you to make these batches of the basic Healing potions, as we're running low on them," he stated as he handed her a list. He continued, "After you're finished I want you to take stock of the stores. We're running low on several ingredients and you'll need to stock up at the apothecary before I return. You know which ingredients to put on my own list. I'll harvest those as soon as I return, if I'm able. I'm not sure what sort of 'mission' I'll be on after this meeting. You'll have to make do with what's there as far as those ingredients go. Though I'm sure you won't need them, since they're generally only used in potions that you are not skilled enough to master as yet," he explained. Turning on his heel, he strode over to his desk to continue with his work.

She followed him, curiosity finally taking hold of her. "Pro...Severus, when are you going to tell me your locations for those types of ingredients? Surely a vital lesson in potion making is to learn how to correctly harvest and collect the ingredients. You've mentioned briefly that you would teach me these techniques. I know you can't do so tonight, but I feel it's important for me to learn this. I believe I'm learning quite fast, and I should think very soon I would be brewing those complicated potions. Shouldn't we start the harvesting lessons, then?" she inquired cautiously.

Severus was tempted to whip his wand out with a hasty "*Silencio*," but thought better of it. Turning to face her, he replied stiffly, "Do not presume to imagine yourself capable of such tasks just yet, Miss Granger. You still have a lot to learn before I consider wasting my time teaching you those steps. I also don't have time to traipse about the countryside and the mountains with you at present, for it will take a considerable amount of time. I will have to arrange the timing carefully so that we are not followed and I won't be killed for being absent from the Dark Lord's presence when he summons me. It's very dangerous and will have to be planned down to the finest detail. Now kindly turn around and get to work!" He ended his speech with a deadly glare that had her obeying, at least for the moment. Hermione knew that he was right, about the dangerous part of it anyway. She was ready for this step, though; he knew it too. Severus went back to work at his desk, unaware of the plan forming in her determined mind.

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Hermione's "responsible" side kicked in as she started working on the basic Healing potions he had requested. She knew it would be difficult to make time for the harvesting lessons, but she also knew...as did he...that it was important for her to learn everything she could as quickly and thoroughly as possible. It was an unspoken fear of everyone at HQ that whenever Severus left the house, it was very possible that he might not return. As she was thinking this over in her head, she wondered what she could do to learn the harvesting techniques on her own. It would be smart to have a plan ready if the worst did happen and he didn't return. She contemplated her options as she worked, brewing the potions on his list. *The most difficult part of harvesting is actually finding the ingredients in the wild. Generally, masters comb the countryside for their "spots" where a particular climate is known for certain ingredients. That would take too much time; I need to find some places soon, she thought as she stirred the required number of times for her burn-healing paste. If I could find out the locations he goes to, it would save me all that time! But he would never tell me, or let me go alone,* she thought, frustrated. Part of her frustration with Severus Snape was due to his treatment of her. He wasn't any more cruel or harsh than he had been as her professor. That was the problem; they were not merely student and teacher any more. Usually when one took an apprenticeship it was important for master and apprentice to view each other as equals, but Severus refused to take that step of trust and civility with her. Suddenly she heard the tell-tale hiss from Severus as he clutched his left arm.

His Dark "master" was calling.

She watched him as he gathered himself together, slipping his Death Eater robe on and pocketing his mask. As he swept past her he glanced at her briefly to acknowledge her usual "Good luck," and with a nod, he left the lab. Hermione had almost called out to him because he forgot to give her his usual last-minute instructions. She sighed and let it go, though, figuring he must not have anything major he needed her to accomplish if he hadn't said anything. She finished the list of basic potions he had set her, took off her Dragonhide apron and gloves, and retrieved the two ingredient lists so she could take stock of their stores. She carefully measured those that appeared low to estimate how long they would last. It was important, in case the apothecary himself was low on any of the needed supplies, to know what was most urgently needed.

When she was done with her list and Severus's "special" list, she approached his desk to place his list in the tray. She was about to walk away when his journal caught her eye. She knew from brief, unnoticed glances she had stolen out of curiosity that this book contained recipes for potions he had created himself and for those he was still researching. She had asked him about it once and been told to "mind her own bloody business." Now, in Severus's absence, her curiosity got the better of her. Usually he never failed to properly store and ward his journal, but he had been so distracted by this summons that for once he'd actually forgot. For a moment she felt a tremor of fear pass through her, wondering whether his state of mind could be ready for this meeting if he had forgot such a simple task.

Shaking away the feeling, she reasoned that he was well versed in his role as Death Eater and would not be so careless when in the face of real danger. She picked up the journal cautiously as she sat down in his chair to peek at it. She told herself that a quick peek would cause no harm, that after she had accomplished much of her training as his apprentice he would bring her into the fold of these creations anyway, as another learning experience. She gasped in awe as she turned the pages slowly, a feeling of deep admiration swelling inside her as she looked over the complicated and ingenious potions. She slowed down as she reached the back of the journal, where his main research and basic data seemed to reside. Suddenly her eyes lit up as she registered the meaning of one page. There was no mistaking the detailed directions and maps drawn there, depicted with codes...it showed the locations of his secret harvest grounds. Without thinking twice she pulled a spare piece of parchment off his desk and laid it next to the journal. With a determined "*Copia!*" she copied the page's directions and maps onto the blank parchment.

She carefully closed the journal and placed it as close as possible to the exact position it was in before she had opened it. She folded up her map and quietly retreated to her room. She had some planning to do, because once she knew how long Severus would be gone, she would take her trip to the apothecary shop in Diagon Alley for ingredients. She would also take a little detour on the way home, but first she needed to brush up on the basics of harvesting from her ever-handly books.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this first chapter! Please be kind and review! *HUGS*

Dark Master

Chapter 2 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus Apparated into the usual clearing just outside the hidden meeting place. He nodded knowingly at the hidden Death Eaters who stood guard around the clearing as he pulled his mask out of his pocket and slipped it over his face. As he walked to the hidden cellar door that led to the bleak and depressing dungeons of a long-forgotten castle, he focused his mind on his Occlumency shields, making sure to plant the "useful" information in front of the shield, should the Dark Lord try to read his thoughts. He could never be too careful about such things. As he made his way down the slippery staircase and through the moist hallways of the dank dungeon, he thought briefly of his "conversation" with Hermione earlier. He knew she was right...he really needed to show her the proper ways and the right locations for harvesting the special ingredients, but he also knew that it *would* have to be planned carefully. Suddenly he cringed at the knowledge that he'd left his "Dark" journal on his desk without warding it. He could only hope that, especially after that particular conversation, she would not notice its presence. Unbeknownst to her, it was the journal that he used in his Death Eater persona. He had to have extensive proof of his "hard" work for the Dark Lord's cause, and he made sure that it appeared to be every bit a journal dedicated to the Dark Lord's purposes.

He had, of course, a real journal that housed his real work, including the antidotes to the horrible potions he was forced to brew during his subterfuge. He started to worry when he remembered how easily she'd let their "conversation" go to continue her assigned work. *A little too quickly, as if she was going to put thought into the situation despite my instructions to the contrary. I know her Gryffindor ways all too well; if she ever got hold of the "Dark" location map, she would walk straight into Voldemort's hands*, he thought with increasing worry. As he approached the main chamber for the meeting, he cut off that line of thought. He couldn't risk worrying about that now. Shields and proof of "devotion" in place, he pushed the door open and walked forward, crawling the last few feet to kiss his Dark master's robes.

"Rise, Severus. Take your place beside me. We have *interesting* news to celebrate this evening," the snake-like man hissed at him. Once Severus was standing in his place, looking devoted and important as one of his rank should look, Voldemort turned to his many Death Eaters who were gathered that night. "My friends, it seems we have reason to celebrate this night," he commented as he felt the anticipation rise from his most loyal and high ranking Death Eaters.

Severus observed briefly that there were only eleven at this meeting, which meant it had to be big news. Severus turned his attention back to Voldemort.

As he started walking around the circle, he said, "It seems your dear brother Lucius has finally cracked the Head Unspeakable. Very soon we shall see what meagre plans the Ministry have against me. You should all congratulate Lucius for his well planned and powerful Imperius, which will soon reap great rewards...and I daresay *fun*...for you all." Voldemort smiled a sinister smile that evoked a very strong feeling indeed at this news.

Revulsion.

But Severus bowed his head and projected happy thoughts like the rest of the mindless monsters who filled the room.

Voldemort took a moment to randomly read his servants' minds, conveniently skipping Severus as he chose his prey. Once he was satisfied that the few he checked were truly excited at the thought of the revels that lay ahead, he slithered back to his chair, which might as well have been a throne for the grandness of it. He clapped and motioned with a mere flick of his hand for those who were present to depart, saying, "Join your lesser brothers in the hall, if you will. Macnair was so kind as to gather a few pieces of entertainment for you. Enjoy," he cackled as they made their way to the great hall across from the main chamber. Severus started to follow the others so he could make his rounds. He wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. He was nearly to the door when his Dark master called for him. "Severus, come here for a moment," he called.

Severus walked back toward Voldemort and started to kneel to kiss his robes once more, but Voldemort signalled that it wasn't necessary. "How may I be of service, my lord?" Severus asked with measured reverence.

"You have not informed me of the Depreciate Potion's progress of late. Tell me, how is it going?" Voldemort asked him with a penetrating look as he casually invaded Severus's mind.

Severus, knowing he was supposed to pretend ignorance at this invasion, spoke clearly as if he didn't know what the Dark Lord was doing. "It's coming along well, I think. I've tested it several times on the wands you so graciously procured for me. There's a hitch in the sequencing of the ingredients, unfortunately, so I have to take it step by step, testing the possible variations in the order in which the ingredients should be added. I'm confident I have the right ingredients; it just needs to be perfected as far as the steps go. I'm sorry I haven't accomplished this sooner, my lord," he said, starting to kneel as if really ashamed. He knew, though, that his act was perfect.

"No need to kneel before me, Severus. I'm quite pleased that you've figured it out thus far. I know that you are truly close...I can see it. It's something I admire in you, this need for perfection. I would expect nothing less from my Potions master. Let me know if you need any more of the ingredients; I daresay you might have depleted your stores quite a bit in this perfecting," he said.

Severus bowed his head respectfully. "I am low on a few things, my lord. But I would rather gather the ingredients myself, if I may. I mean no disrespect, but the flux-weed Lucius brought me last time was not picked at the right hour. It's best picked at midnight, at the full moon. That pouch was quite weak and set me back a few tries; I believe it was picked an hour or so too soon," he said humbly, bowing and kissing Voldemort's robes anyway. It was always a dangerous thing, to accuse a fellow Death Eater of any sort of lack, especially one of the same rank.

Voldemort assessed him a moment before saying, "I understand, Severus. I shall not leave the important ingredients to him any more. From now on, if you wish someone to help you, tell them your instructions. I give you leave to order whomever you need to gather what you need. Be sure to tell me if they fail to do so correctly." Severus bowed and thanked him graciously. With another flick of his hand, Voldemort indicated that he was done with him. Severus kept the happy bounce that his feet wanted to do out of his walk as he thought of the punishment that bastard Malfoy would get for this. He knew damn well that Lucius knew better than to pick something like that too early. He also knew that Lucius would think him too cowardly to bring Lucius's lazy vindictiveness to their Dark Lord's attention. This would be a fun night indeed. He might stay a little longer than usual.

As excited as he was over the punishment Lucius Malfoy would obviously receive, he forgot momentarily about the journal and Hermione.

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Hermione paid the shopkeeper for the basic ingredients she had picked out as carefully as if Severus had been hovering over her shoulder the whole time. She shrank the package instantly and carefully placed it inside her knapsack. She had re-read a few chapters that explained the basic points of harvesting as she waited to see if Severus would return soon. Usually he was either gone for a few hours or, if he didn't return that soon, it was usually a day or more before he did. She assumed he would arrive tomorrow when she heard the clock chime three hours later. Hermione walked quickly to the kitchen and told Remus where she was going. Since it was around three in the afternoon, he had no reason to assume she was lying when she said she would be back in a few hours from her errands in Diagon Alley.

Leaving the apothecary shop, Hermione walked swiftly to the Apparation point near the back door of the Leaky Cauldron. Closing her eyes, she envisioned the creek bridge that she knew was a short walk from the meadow where she would find Severus's hidden cache of nature. The second she appeared on the bridge she swiftly pulled her wand out of her sleeve and cast a Disillusionment Charm. She was not stupid, after all, and at least if she was lectured later about her impromptu harvest trip, she could say she took precautions. She looked around her to see which direction was generally northwest of this point, and having calculated the sun's position, she set off on a fast-paced walk through the woods. Of the many books she had read, half of them were Muggle-related. As she listened closely to her surroundings while she walked, she thought of the Muggle self-awareness colour system. Basically there were certain colours that reflected dangers and the need for caution in every situation. Out in the middle of nowhere, alone, walking through these woods with which she was unfamiliar, she knew her colour would be at least orange. Thinking of that colour, the information flashed before her eyes.

Orange...Outside of your comfort zone, in an unknown area. Be aware. Keep a keen eye on your surroundings.

So, gripping her wand more tightly, she continued to trek through the woods for another fifteen minutes until she finally saw a clearing ahead. She slowed down and stopped behind a large tree, carefully looking the whole area over, listening for any sound, any movement. Anything. After several tense minutes of silence, she felt it safe to start her search of the meadow for the essential ingredients. Right away she spotted a patch of white willow. She smiled happily as she pulled her knapsack off her back and felt around for the special clippers she had brought, along with the pouches for her harvested herbs. Carefully, with her wand now back up her sleeve, she started harvesting the white willow as she remembered seeing it done in the moving pictures of her book. She smiled to herself again as she clipped the last stem. She knew there was no way Severus could criticise her work. It was textbook-perfect. While Muggle white willow was from a tree, magic white willow was a small weed that glowed with a white mist during the short time each month when there was no moon.

Hermione walked on and contained the urge to squeal when she spotted the red clover. This was a powerful natural ingredient, very delicate in nature, that was the main stimulant in Blood-Replenishing Potions. She was so excited at the large amount of these flowers that she dropped her guard completely. She knew it was very hard to find these, and also difficult to harvest them without damaging their potency. She hardly breathed as she concentrated on carefully taking the clippings, placing them reverently in a special pouch that was spelled to cushion, thus retaining the natural shape of whatever ingredient was placed in it.

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Alecto Carrow signalled to Amicus Carrow the second she noticed something unseeing, clipping some weeds and then they would disappear. She knew that someone was in the meadow this time, and it wasn't Snape. Snape wouldn't hide himself if he were here as they'd been told he would be. Whoever was in the meadow was Disillusioned. And after watching closely for a few minutes, it was clear that someone was there.

Amicus cursed as he made his way over to his sister. This was the fourth time she had signaled him this evening, and he was getting bloody tired of her jumpiness. As he walked up to her quietly, he was about to start cussing a blue streak when she slapped her hand quietly over his mouth and turned his head toward the meadow in front of them. He nearly bit her hand when he finally saw what she was calling him about. Carefully removing her hand he leaned over to her ear, still watching the Disillusioned stranger clipping away at the weeds, and said, "It's not Snape. But it's got to be someone he knows. He found this place, and besides himself, Lucius, and the Dark Lord, we're the only ones who know of it." He paused for effect before adding, "Unless he told one of his Order pals."

Alecto smiled hugely as they both prepared to capture this unknown person. Lucius Malfoy had "asked" them, meaning paid them a great deal in Galleons, to watch this place and see if they could catch Snape, claiming that Snape was not their master's spy but truly a spy for the Order. Lucius wanted proof that what he knew himself was true. He would be Avada'ed as quickly as he could blink if he didn't have said proof when he brought this to the Dark Lord's attention. The Callows were told that if Snape was not doing anything that could implicate him, they must find a way to ruin his ingredients; that way he would at least be punished and lowered a peg or two in the ranks if he screwed up the Debasing potion, which they knew nothing about, of course. Both of them smiled at the thought of the additional Galleons that had been promised if they caught whoever it was.

They approached quietly from two different directions toward each other and their prey. When they were both close enough, they slowly raised their wands together and gave a sudden shout that made Hermione drop her knapsack. She heard the word "*Stupefy!*" seconds before she felt the impact of the twin spells.

As the powerful jets of red light hit her from both sides at once, Hermione gasped loudly. She felt as if she were being squeezed through a vise-like grip, and then the pain became too much. As she fell to the ground, she wondered briefly if Snape would be able to find these herbs she'd collected for him, and then she knew nothing but blackness.

A/N: I hope you liked this update. More to come soon. Please read and review! *HUGS*

Innocence Lost

Chapter 3 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus was smiling on the inside as he watched Lucius Malfoy twitch on the floor. A short while after he had started his rounds of socialising, the Dark Lord entered the room, and as everyone stopped what they were doing to bow in respect, he pointed his wand at Lucius, casting a non-verbal Cruciatus as casually as if he were just saying hi. As Lucius started to cry out in pain, Voldemort looked around at his followers and declared, "Listen closely. Your brother Lucius is being punished for his laziness. He is being punished for damaging precious herbs intended for my Potion master's project...a project that is of the greatest importance. I will not accept this behaviour again," he said as he waved his wand, taking the curse off the now stone-faced Lucius. "If any of you are asked to procure ingredients for Severus, you will do as you are asked. If you damage the herbs you will pay dearly," he said as he started walking toward Severus.

Severus bowed low, as expected, and knelt to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes. "Now rise, Severus. I declare you my most loyal Death Eater," Voldemort said as he turned to the room to survey everyone. "You are all now his servants as well. I give him full authority to punish any of you in my absence. Bow and show your respect!" he hissed. Severus allowed a small smirk to show on his face as Lucius came to him and took his turn at bowing and kissing Severus' hem. Once everyone in the room had paid their respects to the topmost Death Eater, Severus Snape, their Dark Lord left the room. Many continued with their base pleasures and socialising, but there was a distinctly quieter note as the revel continued that evening.

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Lucius glared daggers at Severus as he leaned against a darkened corner, wondering what on earth he could do to destroy his old protégé. Suddenly startled by a tap on his shoulder, he turned to his left and found Amycus Carrow standing there. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be watching the meadow!" he spat out at him as quietly as possible.

Amycus smiled as he leaned closer. "We captured you quite a prize, Lucius. We put her in the dungeons at the Manor like you instructed us to if we found someone. You're going to love this...it's that filthy Mudblood, Granger. You know the one, Potter's friend," he said with unreserved glee in his eyes.

Lucius smiled widely at him. "Very well, let's go home and I can see for myself," he replied, wondering what the girl's first lesson should be. He also wondered how he should approach the Dark Lord about her. He had to time it right so that he could reveal what he suspected as Severus's true regard for his "apprentice." It was well known in the higher ranks that he was teaching her privately when he was with the Order. Severus had approached their Dark Lord when she was assigned to work with him and promised the Dark Lord that he would teach her and use her for the information that she might share regarding Harry Potter. *This is a great development indeed*, he thought as they approached the Apparation point outside, then Disapparated to his home, Malfoy Manor.

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Severus watched as Amycus spoke quietly with Lucius and then as the two slipped out of the room in a hurry. He wondered briefly what they were up to...it definitely would not be anything good. Lucius was a very vengeful wizard; Severus would have to watch his back closely now. He was pleased about his new rank. It would make him even more useful to the Order's cause. But at this point there was nowhere to go but down, so he would have to be very careful. Suddenly he remembered his earlier worries about Hermione and his un-warded journal. He made his way across the room as quickly as he could with so many people stopping him to congratulate him. He had to get back to Headquarters as soon as possible.

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Lucius entered his dungeons and chuckled to himself as he looked inside the very first cell. Lying inside, completely unconscious, was Hermione Granger, now his personal toy. He turned to Alecto and Amycus as he pulled a large pouch of Galleons from his robes. "Very well done, my friends. Now, get out of here and tell no one of your find. This is a delicate situation, and utmost secrecy is needed. Do I make myself clear?" he said, the last part coming out of his mouth as softly as a caress, although warning laced his words.

"We wouldn't share this with anyone, Lucius. You can trust us. Thanks for the nice payment. Let me know if you have any other little jobs we can do for you," Amycus said as he grabbed his sister's arm and steered her out the door. They knew better than to cross Lucius.

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Lucius unlocked the cell door with a wave of his wand and entered the cell. He leaned over Hermione's unconscious form and checked her sleeve, pocketing her wand; then he checked her other pockets as well. Seeing that she was clean of anything that could harm him or help her, he stood up and waved his wand again with the incantation, "*Sceacul!*". Instantly her body lifted into the air, her hands above her head, and shackles appeared around her wrists, keeping her upright with her feet barely touching the floor. With a simple "*Ennervate!*" Hermione started to come to.

Her eyes fluttered and she tried to focus them. She was uncomfortable, and her wrists hurt. Focusing her confused mind, she gradually realised that she was chained to something, and when she really focused on who was in front of her with that sadistic smirk, she gasped. "Malfoy!"

Lucius glared at her, knowing that her even saying his name was wrong. He reached forward and backhanded her hard across her face, leaving her lip split at the corner, bleeding lightly. "There are some rules to follow, Mudblood. You will never disgrace my name by saying it. You will call me sir. You will not bother with pleas of freedom...and trust me, you don't want to. When I'm through with you, you will be brought before the Dark Lord, so be thankful that I'm willing to have a little fun with you first. Do I make myself clear?" he replied nastily, leering at her in a way that made her cringe.

Steeling herself, she spat in his face. "That's all the thanks you're going to get, you bastard. You're going to regret ever keeping me here. Malfoy!"

Lucius's lip curled in amusement. "So, you're going to be a feisty one, are you? Well, that's just fine with me. I think I'll enjoy breaking Potter's little Mudblood friend. Oh, and you will break. I'll make sure of it!" he assured her. He waved his wand and she flew toward the wall face-first, the chains still holding her arms tightly above her head. She heard him whisper another incantation, and before she could understand what it was, the first strike of the whip he had conjured lashed her back and she screamed in agony. Again and again she screamed as the whip started cutting into her skin, shredding her clothes. When it was obvious she was on the verge of blacking out, he stopped. He walked up to her and leaned close to her ear as he patted the broken skin on her back. "Like I said...you *will* break."

She whimpered as his hand came in contact with her torn skin. She felt him move away and chanced a look over her shoulder. Her eyes froze in horror when she realised he was taking his clothes off as he stared greedily at her body. She really did black out this time. Her conscious mind and magic helped her in the vain hope that she would not remember what he was so obviously planning to do.

With a flick of his wand, she was stripped of her clothes, and with the act of a monster, she was innocent no more.

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It was close to one in the morning when Severus arrived back at Headquarters, and immediately his fears doubled. The lights were on in most of the rooms of the house. He rushed through the door into the kitchen, realising right away that his fears must have come true. Remus, Molly, and Arthur were sitting quietly at the table, drinking tea. As soon as Severus registered the fear in their eyes he asked stiffly, "How long since she left?"

Remus looked at him oddly before asking, "How did you know Hermione was gone?"

"I just assumed her Gryffindor instincts would find a way to do something stupid. We had a discussion...basically she was whining about learning how to harvest potion ingredients. I explained the need for patience to plan an outing such as that. She went back to work on the potions I set her, and when my Mark burned, I stupidly forgot to ward my journal before I left. My Dark journal. Being the nosey little know-it-all that she is, I can only imagine she was captured after finding my Dark ingredients harvesting map," he said as he pulled up a chair, sat down, and poured himself some tea as well.

Molly leaned forward, tears falling down her cheeks as she screeched at him. "Well, don't just sit there and help yourself to tea! Go find her! Surely you can find out where they would keep her, if they did catch her!"

"Molly, more is at stake than the life of Hermione Granger. I'm not happy just sitting here and drinking tea and not finding her, but I can't risk the suspicion that would arise if I started checking Death Eater houses," he said, irritation lacing his voice. He got up after downing his tea and headed for the door. "I need to confirm where she went. I'll be in the lab or her room to see if she left any clue to where she might have been captured."

Remus watched as he left the room, wondering if she hadn't been captured, which seemed the only option at this point, where was she?

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Severus noticed right away that the journal had been moved. It was sitting perfectly in the middle of his desk, and by unconscious habit, he always laid books and papers more toward the right. He opened the book, and even though nothing was missing he could easily imagine her copying the map. He just *felt* it. He walked over to her own desk, and when a brief search turned up nothing he knew she had taken her own ingredient list with her. Ever since he had begun allowing her to gather the basic ingredients by herself, he always made sure she went to one place only. He would have to stop by there tomorrow and ask the shopkeeper if he remembered what time she'd left.

He left the lab and walked upstairs to her room, which was right across from his own. He had been living at Grimmauld Place since Hogwarts closed after Dumbledore's death and Severus had proved his own innocence in the matter. Everyone in the Order was now aware of Dumbledore's subconscious plea to him to save Draco. Severus thought it a pity that even though the Death Eaters believed him to still be loyal to the Dark Lord, Dumbledore's "murder" had not saved Draco from his fate. He was killed mere hours after leaving the tower, another crime Lucius had decided to lay at Severus's feet.

Upon entering Hermione's room he saw her book, which she had left on the ottoman in front of her chair. It was a book about herbs and where they could be found. He picked up the book and leafed through it to see if she had marked anything. There were creases on the pages toward the back, which detailed how to harvest herbs. *Even if she's reckless, at least she tried to do something smart*, he thought to himself. He laid the book back down on the ottoman and made his way back down to the kitchen. When he entered the room he said, "I think I know where she intended to go. I'm going to check the area for her, see if I can find anything that proves she was at the Dark Meadow. I'll return as soon as I can." With that he swept from the room, hoping that maybe she was really just stupid and was still there safely picking herbs, maybe having lost track of the time. He thought it unlikely, though.

He Apparated to the little bridge over the creek, and after Disillusioning himself he made his way swiftly through the woods, grateful for the moonlight that lighted his way. He slowed his pace as he approached the meadow, pulled out his wand, and cast a detection spell. The wand would grow warm in his hand if there was anyone within a mile of him. It did not, so he knew he was safe, though he did not remove the Disillusionment Charm. He canvassed the meadow until he found her knapsack, a pouch and a pair of cutters lying next to it. He picked up the pouch and cutters and stuffed them into the knapsack and made his way back to the bridge. As soon as he arrived back at Grimmauld Place, he showed them what he had found; then he left the room for the comfort of the lab as Molly started sobbing into Arthur's arms and Remus hung his head. They would have to bide their time until it was safe for Severus to search for her.

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Once he had closed the lab door, Severus dumped the knapsack out on the table and inspected what Hermione had gathered. From the look of it, he had to admit to himself that she would be a great Potions master one day...her clippings of white willow and red clover were perfect...that was, if she lived.

A/N: I hope you liked this update, even though it was a rough chappie to read... more to come soon! *HUGS* PLEASE read and review...

Unrest

Chapter 4 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Lucius sat in his study, pondering his new "toy." He would no doubt enjoy his time breaking her, as he had found out the previous evening. He had enjoyed destroying her innocence, more so when he realized she truly *was* innocent. He had figured that since she was a dirty Mudblood, she would long ago have passed her trashy self around amongst her friends.

Sitting back in his chair, he wondered what he could do with her once he was bored with her. He wanted to somehow use her against Severus, but he knew that his old protégé had long ago adopted such control and outward calm that it would be hard to make him crack. The only thing Lucius could think of was using her to bring himself higher in the Dark Lord's graces, though it would be tricky. He could reveal his capture and torture of her to their Dark Lord, and after he was rightly punished he could explain his reasoning. He could see it now: *You see, my Lord, I can bring her before you at the next meeting. Severus will undoubtedly step forward wanting to "claim" her for himself! In the act of his "rescuing" her, she will grow still closer to him, thus revealing more in the long run about Potter!* He smiled as he imagined being rewarded for

his cunning, and best of all, if this played out just right and didn't backfire, Severus couldn't do a thing about it except "rescue" her. *Or what will be left of her, if anything, when I'm through!* he thought with a savage grin.

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Pain. Soreness. Throbbing. Those were the thoughts that assailed Hermione's mind as she started to come around. She tried not to think of the place other than her back where those words screamed to her. She felt as if every nerve in her body had been cut open. Groaning, she tried to stand up to relieve the numbness in her hands, but she cried out as she felt pain radiate from her feet to between her legs as the muscles tried to brace her body. She whimpered in fear when she heard a malicious chuckle behind her.

Lucius had set wards in the cell to alert him when Hermione was moving around and had walked into the cell quietly, growing excited at the evidence of the obvious pain he had inflicted on her. "Morning, Mudblood. It seems you're ready for some more lessons. I'm sure you just can't wait to truly grasp the knowledge of your place in this world. Let me see what I can do to help you," he said, laughing madly at her uncontrolled sobbing as he started stripping his robes off once more.

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Severus was deep in thought when he arrived back at Headquarters after having visited the apothecary shop early that morning. He had questioned the shopkeeper thoroughly. He went straight to the kitchen to eat a little breakfast and share his thoughts, or at least a few of them, with his fellow Order members. Again, it was just Molly, Arthur, and Remus. The rest of the members were mostly only present for major meetings once a week, if they were available. They were scattered across the Wizarding world, busy with various jobs and missions, assignments that varied from spying, tracking, recruiting, investigating, and just keeping abreast of things in the course of undercover at jobs at the Ministry as well as other places of importance. Severus filled his plate with a light breakfast after nodding to the others when he entered the room. He ate in silence, mentally going over his words so as not to reveal anything they, meaning Molly mainly, couldn't handle.

He cleared his throat to get their attention as he pushed his plate away from him. "I spent last evening looking over the Death Eater meeting memory closely, and I visited the apothecary shop this morning and questioned the shopkeeper. I believe Hermione was taken shortly after arriving in the meadow, a hour or so after sunset. I have a good idea of who it was that took her, but I won't name the Death Eater to you until I'm sure of it. It would do no good for you to know and dwell on that person anyway.

"I'll do everything I can to discover her whereabouts for sure, as soon as possible. But you know that I can't let it jeopardise my own mission as a spy. She willingly disobeyed our wishes, knowing she was walking into danger the second she walked out of this house without at least speaking to us first. She took an oath like the rest of us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some potions to brew in the mean time. Remus, I need your assistance for a moment, when you're free," he said as he rose from his chair and swiftly left the room. Moments after he entered his lab, having started preparing the ingredients for another try at the Depreciate Potion, he looked up to see Remus enter the room and close the door behind him.

Remus flicked his wand at the door, casting a non-verbal Imperturbable Charm, and turned his attention to Severus. "Please tell me what you left out in the kitchen. I know you know exactly who took her. Tell me what's likely to be happening to her. If we're able to get her back, it will be easier to help her if I'm not shocked by what's happening to her," he said plainly, but his need to know was clear.

Severus nodded in understanding. "I'll bet my wand arm it was Lucius Malfoy who took her. Not directly, but I believe he had Amcyus Carrow watching the meadow...Amcyus is known to do odd jobs for him. During the revel last night Amcyus appeared in the room and whispered something to Lucius that Lucius seemed very happy to hear. He left right away; the timing was perfect. Amcyus would have just got done stowing her in the Malfoy Manor dungeons," he said, stopping for a moment as he watched Remus sink down into a chair, his face paling considerably as the information sank in.

"What's that bastard likely to do to her?" he asked, so quietly that Severus was amazed he heard it at all.

"Do you want it sugar-coated or spelled out in detail?" he asked simply, but with an edge to his voice.

"Just spell it out. It's best if I know what to expect," Remus replied with obvious reluctance.

"Lucius loves to play with his victims. Whips, beatings, and rape are his favourite weapons for 'breaking' his toys, especially anyone like Hermione who he considers beneath the use of his powers," Severus said. Anger boiled inside of him as he imagined what would be done to her, what was likely happening to her right now.

"Oh gods!" Remus said as he lowered his head between his knees, fighting the urge to be sick. "Severus, how far will the animal take it? Will she be able to recover?"

Severus thought about it for a moment. "I don't know. We both know she's a very stubborn and strong person, but I honestly never knew a woman to leave his dungeon, if they leave at all, and be the same person ever again," he said, thinking hard about Hermione's character. "I imagine she'll close up inside of herself to some extent, if not completely. Lucius thrives on a challenge such as her resolve will present. But maybe, if we get her back, she will recover. She'll never be the same again...you can bet she'll never be the young woman that she was before...but maybe she'll be able to function, and find a little happiness in the end. She's a brave and stubborn Gryffindor, after all." Sighing, and pinching his nose against the headache that was forming, he continued. "The best thing will be for her to have work to do, to help her ignore the worst of the pain. I will engage her in her lessons when she is able. I'll keep her so busy she'll be able to acclimate herself to life again through keeping to a routine. I swear I will do everything I can if we find her."

They were both quiet for a few moments as they thought about Hermione. Suddenly Remus broke the unsettling silence and said quietly but resolutely, "I'll speak to Arthur; he would be the best person to break this to Molly. I suggest we don't tell anyone else, especially Harry and Ron. They would cut their search short to look for Hermione, and she wouldn't want them to stop their mission for her. We can warn them when they get home what the situation is, whether or not we have her by then." He pulled himself out of the chair and left the lab, shoulders hanging low as he fought the urge to cry.

Severus stared at the door. *Stupid little chit! She should have waited! What the hell was she thinking?* Severus screamed to himself, sweeping the ingredients and tools off the surface of the table with a sudden vicious swipe. He gripped the edge of the table with knuckles that whitened from the strength of his grip. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself, and his grip started to loosen. *Nothing can be accomplished by a tantrum. I need to concentrate on what I can do to help the foolish little know-it-all,* he lectured himself. He waved his wand to place the tools in the cauldron, where he sterilised them. With another wave it was filled with water and set to boil over the roaring fire. He turned to the ingredients that lay scattered on the floor, waved his wand with a non-verbal "*Evanesci!*" cursing at the waste that he Vanished. He conjured a piece of parchment and a quill after steering his mind into "useful" mode and started a list of the potions he assumed she would need immediately if he was able to rescue her. He wanted to make sure she would live, and being prepared for the worst was the best he could do for her at the moment.

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A day went by. Then a week. Before anyone knew it, Hermione had been gone for a little over three months. Remus, Molly, and Arthur were devastated, wondering if she was gone forever; Severus listened to everything around him when he was in the company of Death Eaters, hoping to hear something that might help him in rescuing Hermione.

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Lucius steeled himself as he made his way to the main chamber to reveal his capture and plan to the Dark Lord. He was quite peeved that his fun was somewhat hampered by the Mudblood's near catatonic state, though the fact that he had broken her was a victorious memory that made him smile. The Dark Lord had responded quickly to his letter sent by owl, asking for a private audience. He knew he would be punished for this but hoped that in the end it would justify his means. He entered the room and bowed, then knelt to kiss his Dark Lord's hem.

"Rise. What is it you wished to tell me that required a private meeting? It had better be good," the Dark Lord hissed.

"My Lord, I have captured someone useful to our cause. I realise I will be punished for my forthrightness and for proceeding as I have without permission, but if I may, I have an idea of how she can be quite useful," he said, fear evident in his voice.

"You have gone against my wishes? In what manner?" the Dark Lord said, anger at the Death Eater before him causing his eyes to glow a violent red.

"M-my Lord, three months ago I captured Hermione Granger, Potter's Mudblood friend," Lucius said cautiously, dropping to kiss the Dark Lord's robes once again. Before he could go on, he screamed out as a powerful Cruciatus wracked his body with pain. After a few moments of the spell, he was released from its grip and, panting, he chanced a look at his master's face, wondering if he was permitted to continue. "D-during the past three m-months I have tortured and raped her many times. She has been broken. I-I have thought a-about this thoroughly, and I believe my actions may be of help to our noble cause. She is Severus's apprentice, and if she were to be 'rescued' by him, she might be more r-receptive to his efforts to gain information from Potter, once she recovers." Again he was sent writhing to the floor, the Cruciatus robbing him of the ability to breathe. He collapsed in a limp heap when the spell was lifted once again, fighting the urge to cry as the tremors continued to roll throughout his body.

"Look at me!" the Dark Lord hissed. He invaded Lucius's mind immediately and brutally. He watched Lucius' memories of the past three months and snarled as he discovered his servant's deepest thoughts, his personal vendettas that so clearly showed disrespect and disobedience toward his master. When his every thought had finally been looked over, Voldemort retreated from his mind, furious. "If it were not for your contacts in the Ministry, I would kill you right now. Very well, we will go through with this idea. If it fails to work, I will kill you anyway, very slowly, Lucius. I do not like my servants to disobey me. You will summon Severus before me, and we will discuss this further. Go," he said quietly, rage evident in his hissed command. Lucius lowered his shaking body to kiss his hem once more and grunted as his head was roughly kicked away. He picked himself up and left the room quickly to do as his master bade him. *At least I'm alive*, he thought bitterly.

He owed Severus and waited at the entrance of the Death Eater dungeons. For an hour he sat on the bottom stone step trying to relax, the tremors slowly subsiding. He looked up when he heard the cellar door open and watched with loathing as Severus walked slowly down the stairs. Lucius stood up shakily as he came face to face with Severus. "Took you long enough. Our lord awaits us," he said through clenched teeth as he headed back to the main chamber with Severus in tow. They both bowed and kissed Voldemort's hem, then stood and gave him their utmost attention.

"My Lord, what is it you bid me to do for you?" Severus asked him, making sure he sounded eager and willing.

"Why did you not tell me that Hermione Granger was missing, Severus?" Voldemort asked him.

Severus controlled his shock as he realised what was going on. "My Lord, forgive me. Those ridiculous Order members didn't even notify me for days as to her absence. I had assumed she was off somewhere researching; she mentioned as much the day before she left the Order's Headquarters. She was quite adamant about her research, and I didn't want to waste my time hunting her down to see what had happened to her. I was concentrating my efforts on the Depreciate Potion, my Lord. I accept any punishment you deem necessary for my lack of obedience in not informing you of this," he said as he knelt on the floor, expecting the worst.

There was a tense, silent moment as the Dark Lord considered him. "Look at me, Severus," he said evenly, but the command was clear. Severus lifted his eyes, having already shielded his mind with the convincing memories that proved his loyalty, and his regret in disobeying his master, firmly in view. "Very well. I can see the truth plainly, and I hold you to be not at fault. It is your brother Lucius who is at fault, and you will be permitted to punish him for his theft of your apprentice."

"Thank you, my Lord," Severus replied humbly, kissing his master's hem.

"Rise, Severus," Voldemort hissed softly. "Your brother has developed a plan to rectify his mistake, and his life will depend on the usefulness of this plan. This evening you will both agree on a time for Severus's arrival and rescue of the Mudblood. I give you free rein to do whatever comes to mind to rescue her as you walk in on Lucius toying with her. Just don't make the damage permanent...I need him functioning again soon," he said. Turning his face toward Lucius, he continued, "I will decide what further punishments you are to receive before the next meeting," he said coldly, turning back to Severus. "I assume you are quite close to finishing the Depreciate Potion. I trust you can accomplish that as well as conditioning the Mudblood to heal and open up to you exclusively. Now both of you, make your arrangements for this evening. Leave me!" he said, his rage evident in his tone.

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Severus seethed with anger, but he was also relieved that he would be able to bring Hermione home at last. He focused on containing his anger for the moment, content that he would be able to release it fully when he arrived to rescue her. When they reached the Apparation point, he turned to Lucius. "You will not touch her again. When I arrive in an hour, I assume at the Malfoy dungeons, you will be attacking her verbally only. I imagine you have played with her enough already," he said stiffly.

"See you in my dungeons in an hour then, Severus. Look at it this way...if you ever get the urge to play with her yourself, at least her innocence will no longer be a reason to restrain yourself, as *noble* as you tend to be," he said with a smirk, and he Disapparated before Severus could start doling out punishment right then and there. Severus cursed and dug his fingernails into his palms as he clenched his hands in anger before Apparating to Grimmauld Place. He had to ready things for Hermione's "homecoming".

A/N: Please read and review! *HUGS*

Homecoming

Chapter 5 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus rushed into the house as he arrived at Grimmauld Place, nearly bowling Remus over as he headed straight for the lab. Remus followed him after himself, wondering what was going on. When Remus entered the lab, he saw Severus un-warding a cabinet that contained all of his most powerful potions. As Severus rifled through his stock, Remus said, "Severus, what's going on? What's wrong?"

Severus didn't even turn to face him as he answered, still looking for the right potion. "I was called before the Dark Lord; Lucius came forward and admitted to his capture of Hermione. He wanted to use his abuse, and my ordered rescue, as a way for her to open up to me for the Dark Lord's benefit, as he put it. I have little time before I need to be at Malfoy Manor to retrieve her." He paused as he found the potion he was looking for and uncorked it, sniffing it to see if it was still viable. Satisfied that the potion was still good, he locked and warded the cabinet before heading for the main stock cabinet. He gathered the potions he imagined he would need for treating Hermione once they got her back. He lined up the potions, making sure he had Calming Draught, Pain-Relieving Potion, Essence of Murtlap, Skele-Gro, Blood-Replenishing Potion,

Bruise-Healing Paste, and Wound-Cleaning Potion.

He turned to Remus and started spouting orders. "Take all of these and lay them on the nightstand in her room. Make sure the room is spotless and the bed has fresh sheets. Make sure to conjure plenty of bandages and place a bowl of warm water with lavender mixed with the Wound-Cleaning Potion next to her bed with cloths for washing. Brace yourself, because it won't be pretty; but I won't have time to lecture you. I'll need steady hands so we can help her with whatever will be wrong with her," he said as he started for the door. Suddenly he stopped. "Also, make sure the book on Healing spells that Molly keeps around is there as well, just in case there's something I need to look up. I'll be back as soon as I can. I suggest you make sure Arthur and Molly are not here when I return. Molly will be more of a hindrance in her hysterics than a help." With that he left Grimmauld Place, intent on his rescue mission, hoping against hope that his efforts would not be wasted on what was left of Hermione Granger.

Remus went to work right away, mentally preparing himself as best he could. He owled Arthur, warning him to keep Molly away for a day or two, promising to contact them as soon as possible.

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Severus Apparated into a grove of trees located at the rear of Malfoy Manor. He had never forgotten, from the early years of his training as Lucius's protégé, that the fastest way into the Malfoy dungeons was through a secret door that appeared with a simple incantation. He pulled his wand out of his sleeve and pointed it at the exact spot in the wall and said, "*Accessus!*" As soon as the iron door appeared, he opened it and proceeded quietly down the stone steps. His fury, which he had barely held in check until now, came back fully as he heard Lucius's voice clearly upon approaching the first cell.

"So, little Mudblood. What kind of fun would you like next? It's been a few days since I whipped you properly. I don't think the cane I used on you yesterday was enough, do you?" he said in a sickly-sweet voice, running his fingers lightly over her jaw.

Severus contained the urge to gasp as he saw her fully. She was facing his direction, but her eyes were unseeing, staring at the floor. Her hair was matted and dirty. He fleetingly thought they might have to cut it off, the tangles looked so severe. He assessed her again; from the smell that emanated from the cell, he imagined she had not been cleaned up once since her capture. She hung from the ceiling by her wrists, her feet barely in contact with the floor. He realized there was a possibility of permanent damage to her hands, from the look of the deep cuts, as the cuffs of her manacles seemed embedded into her skin. She was visibly bruised on nearly every limb of her body, thought it was hard to distinguish the bruises from the dirt that covered her. Countless cuts and lacerations were all over her body, but the majority of the damage had to be on her back, as he noticed the deep cuts that reached around to her sides. Just as Lucius was about to continue his verbal assault, Severus whipped out his wand and screamed a Bone-Breaking Curse, aiming perfectly for Lucius's left knee.

Lucius cried out in pain as he collapsed on the floor. Severus approached him, pointed his wand at him, and said, "I hope you've enjoyed your twisted fun, my friend. Because you will never be able to seek these pleasures again." Severus pulled his special potion out of his pocket and uncorked it. "Now will you drink this willingly, or are you going to be difficult?" he said, glaring at his enemy.

"I'm not drinking your poison, Severus," Lucius said with a defiant smirk to hide his fear. Despite the Dark Lord's orders not to harm him permanently, Lucius was no fool; better yet, he knew how cunning Severus was when it came to following orders.

"Very well. *Petrificus Totalus!*," Severus said forcefully. Lucius was frozen in a very awkward position as he tried to brace his shattered knee. Luckily for Severus, he froze with his head turned up and his mouth opened just enough, as if he'd been about to say something before he was placed in the Body-Bind. Severus strode over to him and poured the vile-looking potion down Lucius's throat, glaring at him with a smirk in his eyes for a moment as he watched Lucius's throat involuntarily swallow the potion. Severus turned away from him without a further thought, conjured a warm cloak, and waved his wand, breaking the manacles that held Hermione upright. He tried not to let his concern overcome him as she fell into his arms, and he folded the cloak around her as he hefted her up into his arms, cradling her broken body as gently as he could. The whole time she hadn't moved; her eyes still stared at nothing. A slightly glazed look of pain was the only thing he could read from them. He left the dungeons without releasing Lucius from the curse. It would wear off in an hour or so. It was the least he could do. He had thought briefly, after giving him the potion, of staying longer and inflicting more pain, but his first priority was helping Hermione.

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Severus waved his wand, opening the door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and hurried upstairs to Hermione's room. He glanced briefly at Remus, who stood up immediately and moved to help him lay her carefully down on top of the bed. "Merlin, look at her eyes!" he whispered as he looked at her helplessly.

"Where is the bowl I asked you to prepare? Bring it here. We need to clean her up. That bastard has let her rot this whole time. It will be easier to tell the bruises from the dirt once she's clean," he said through gritted teeth. They both unwrapped her from the cloak, trying to avoid looking at her chest and lower as they worked to clean her up. Briefly, they cast a *Mobilicorpus* spell, lifting her high enough above the bed to cleanse her back. Even with the dirt removed, she still looked horrible. They cleaned the sheets quickly before lowering her carefully down onto the bed again. Severus waved his wand over her body, casting a health detection spell, and waited the standard minute. Suddenly, a bright light flashed above her, and a sheet of parchment listing her injuries appeared, floating above her. He grabbed the paper and skimmed it, relieved to see that there were no serious internal injuries. Everything should be able to heal eventually. He passed the list to Remus and started pouring the healing potions down her throat after he lifted her up carefully.

-Zero Life-Threatening Injuries-

-One Hundred and Six Non-Life-Threatening Injuries-

Three Broken Ribs

Two Broken Wrists

Four Fractured Vertebrae

Extensive Female Reproductive Damage

Small Fracture of Left Cheekbone

Extensive Emotional Damage

Seventy-Four Lacerations to the Back

Eighteen Bruises on Various Limbs

Severe Dehydration

Moderate Malnutrition

Remus dropped the list, sickened at the injuries that were listed. He walked over to the other side of the bed and began helping Severus as he applied potions and pastes to the visible injuries. "Did you make him suffer? Tell me that bastard will never do anything like this again," Remus said stiffly as he glanced at her face, which was now calm, the potions having put her to sleep. He was relieved to see her eyes closed; it was haunting to see the look on her face when they were open.

"The Dark Lord allowed me to punish him, but nothing that would hamper him from still being useful. I shattered his kneecap and gave him a *verspecial* potion. He will never be able to take a woman again...he is now permanently impotent," Severus replied, smiling with satisfaction at the mere thought of Lucius's reaction when he finally figured out what the potion had done to him.

"You may not be able to safely kill that bloody bastard, but if I get the chance..." Remus said, cringing when they turned Hermione over to mend what was left of her back. It would heal, but she would be severely scarred. They worked together, making sure they didn't miss anything, and finally Severus stood up and stretched his back and conjured a sheet to cover her with.

"I'll stay in here tonight, just in case she wakes. It's likely that she'll have nightmares, and I'll need to keep a Draught of Dreamless Sleep close at hand. Let's give her a day or two before you write to Molly and Arthur," Severus said, as he transfigured a small bed for himself, complete with sheets, a wool blanket, and a pillow.

Remus told him goodnight, making him promise to call for him if there was a problem. Severus sat down on the cot and just stared at Hermione for a while. It was obvious that she had closed up inside of herself. *Think...what can I do to help her?* he thought to himself, frustrated. He left the room briefly and headed for the library. Searching the shelves, he found a medical book that he thought might help. He perused the index of *Mysteries and Answers of the Unstable Mind: A Guide to Treating Emotional Trauma*, and decided to read for a while; hopefully the book would enlighten him as to how to approach the problem at hand. It would take a lot of work; he knew that much. *There's got to be a way to break through the wall she's obviously built around herself, because I won't rest until she's capable of understanding the meaning of my words when I chasten her properly for bringing this on herself!* he thought angrily to himself, though he knew he would never yell at her. *She's been through enough to remind her of how stupid she was to take off on her own, and Lucius will pay for this with his life when the final battle comes!*

Severus walked back into the room, and after checking to make sure she was still asleep, he lay back on his small bed and started reading. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep any time soon, anyway.

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Severus didn't know when he had drifted off to sleep, but he was suddenly woken from his light slumber when he heard whimpering. He shot off the bed and sat down next to Hermione, who was thrashing and whimpering in her sleep. He carefully shook her. "Hermione, you're dreaming! Hermione!" he said, trying to wake her. "Hermione! WAKE UP!" he shouted. Suddenly, she sat up quickly and scooted back against the headboard, hugging her knees. Severus reached out for her, trying to make her focus and realize it was him and not Lucius, but she jerked out of his reach even further and jumped off the bed, stumbling a few times as she ran over to the corner of the room, crouching down between a chair and a window. Severus grabbed his wand and waved it to light all the candles in the room. He grabbed a throw blanket from the bottom of the bed and started walking toward her slowly, stopping when she tried to sink further back into the corner. "Hermione, it's me, Severus Snape. I was your professor, do you remember me?" he asked cautiously, afraid she didn't remember anything.

She tried to speak, but it was obvious that she couldn't. He waved his wand, conjuring a glass of water and levitating it toward her. "Hermione, it's just water. Now take a drink so that you can speak. Your throat's just dry...you were severely dehydrated when I found you," he said, trying to get her to drink. She shook her head and started to tremble. He waved his wand again, saying, "*Expecto Patronum!*" Then he pointed his wand in the direction of Remus's room, watching the silvery Panther dart out of the room. Severus folded up the blanket and levitated it toward Hermione as well, setting it down next to the water, hoping she would cover herself up. It was one thing when she was incapacitated and needed medical attention, but walking around, or in this case crouching in a corner, still naked, was not proper. He was starting to get uncomfortable with this whole situation. He stood there quietly watching her for a moment while he waited for Remus to get there. She was shaking terribly, staring at the floor in front of her feet, and tears were pouring in a steady stream down her cheeks.

He heard Remus's footsteps and turned to the door the second Remus entered the room. Severus just pointed toward the corner and said, "I need your help to convince her it's us and that she is home. I don't know what to say to her, she won't drink the water or touch the blanket to cover herself!" Severus said, irritated, and a tad bit embarrassed by her nakedness.

Remus walked forward very slowly. "Hermione? Hermione, it's me, Remus. Your old professor, your friend. It's really me," he said almost desperately as she finally looked at him, disbelief clear in her eyes. He wracked his brain, wondering what he could say that would make her understand she wasn't being tricked by Polyjuice, or some other magical potion or spell. Suddenly he knew what to say. "Hermione, I can prove it's really me! In your third year when I taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, we were going to the staff room for the Boggart lesson. On the way, Peeves was annoying us, and I said a spell to make him swallow an old piece of gum, remember? 'Waddiwasi!' And remember the end of the year, when Sirius escaped? I forgot my Wolfsbane Potion, and I nearly attacked you, Harry, and Ron?" She stared at him for a few moments, and he sighed in relief as she nodded. He started to walk forward again, and she backed up more, her eyes going wide. He held up his hands, realizing she didn't want anyone near her just yet. "Okay, I'm stopping right here. But can you please use the blanket to cover yourself? If you drink the water, it will help your throat so that you can speak to us," he said, hoping she would comply.

He smiled encouragingly as she reached for the blanket and covered herself. She was slower to drink the water, looking from the glass to his eyes several times as if she was afraid it was poisoned. She finally drank the whole glass down, some of it spilling down her chin, which she didn't even notice. She set the glass down and looked back at the floor. She opened her mouth to speak, and it took a moment for her to croak out, "How long was I-I there? How did I get home?" Tears were running down her face again as she said those words.

Severus spoke up this time. "You were there a little over three months. I looked for you, but I didn't know for sure who took you or where you were. I rescued you last night. You were at Malfoy Manor," he said cautiously. She didn't say anything for several minutes. Remus and Severus just stood there, understanding that she needed a moment.

She finally looked up at Severus, and as she started sobbing, she choked out, "Thank you, Severus." She started rocking as sobs wracked her body. Severus was almost happy, though, thinking that she was at least letting it out and was once again aware of herself. As he watched her cry, he didn't know what came over him. Memories of how she looked when he first stepped in view of her cell, how she looked when he tended to her injuries, and how distraught and lost she looked now were too much for him to just stand there. He walked cautiously over to her and sat down next to the window. He tentatively held out his arms, as awkward as such a gesture was for him, and was surprised when she scooted over and buried herself in his uneasy embrace. Remus dug quietly through her dresser drawers for her pajamas. He signaled to Severus as he laid them on the end of the bed, then he left the room.

When she had cried herself to sleep, Severus picked her up and laid her on the bed. Turning his head away from her, he cast a spell and her clothes folded themselves around her. When he heard the rustling of fabric cease, he turned around and tucked her under the covers. Lying back on his small bed with an exhausted sigh, he wondered about his earlier inclination to comfort her as he had. Unable to figure it out, he grunted in irritation as he laid his arm across his eyes, hoping he would get a little sleep before the morning.

A/N: Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Please remember to review! *HUGS*

Strength

Chapter 6 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the

unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus woke a few hours later, hearing a moan of pain from the main bed. He sat up quickly and looked over at Hermione. Her eyes were barely open and her face was scrunched up; the pain she was in was clearly bad at the moment. He walked swiftly over to the nightstand and fetched another bottle of the Pain-Relieving Potion and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Here, let me help you sit up. You'll stop hurting if you take some of this. All that jumping around and crouching between furniture and walls didn't help your situation," he said grumpily. He almost regretted his attitude, but he was not a morning person, something she knew fairly well after the months before of living in the same house as him. He also assumed that she would consider his "usual morning grumpiness" to be a refreshing change from being babied.

She tried to sit up, but the newly re-grown bones in her wrist prevented her; she nearly started to cry from the pain. Sighing in frustration, Severus laid the potion bottle back on the nightstand and stood up, leaned over towards her, and carefully grasped her under her arms, trying to avoid the still tender skin of her back. It had healed over within the first few hours of her taking the special healing potions, but those could only do so much. There had been so many lacerations before that just below the lining of her tank top by her neck, where the cuts started, it looked like bumpy ripples, still pink and inflamed.

Severus uncorked the bottle with his teeth, struggling to support her shoulders carefully with one arm, and slowly started pouring the potion down her throat. She swallowed it greedily, ignoring the disgusting taste. When she was finished, he figured he might as well give her doses of the various other potions that would speed her recovery. After she was done taking them, she started to look a little green. He had looked closely at her while she was taking the potions, really noticing how she looked extremely skinny from lack of nourishment. He carefully laid her back on her pillows and said, "I imagine you would like something to eat. Give me a few moments and I'll bring you something. What do you want?" he asked her irritably.

She looked at him after a moment of thinking it over and said simply, "Scrambled eggs and toast, I think. I'm not sure I can handle much else."

"Very well. I'll be back," he replied, leaving the room. He went down to the kitchen, where he was shocked to see Remus sitting by himself, fully awake and drinking coffee at the table. "What are you doing up?" Severus asked as he wrote down on the piece of charmed parchment what he wanted for his and Hermione's breakfast. Since it was a house of mainly bachelors and everyone was always busy anyway, they received all of their meals from the Hogwarts house-elves, delivered by Floo. The parchment had a charmed twin; when they wrote their order onto their copy, it appeared on the matching parchment at Hogwarts, and they received their food within minutes.

"I couldn't sleep after last night, when she woke up," Remus said quietly, taking a sip of his coffee. "I'm planning on going over to the Burrow to break the details to Molly and Arthur. I'll make sure to tell them that they aren't exactly welcome just yet. I imagine she'll still be jumpy about any kind of physical contact. I'll make sure to stress that point; no sense in startling her, making her any more uncomfortable than she already is," he said.

Severus nodded his head. "I agree. Make sure they fill in the rest of the Order since everyone is working out of the Burrow anyway. I think she'll be more comfortable around just us for a little while since we were the ones she first saw when she came to," he replied. "I'll be busy enough as it is. I'm sure that despite my added duty of 'nursing her back to health and gaining her trust in the process', I won't be granted any leniency or extra time to finish the Depreciate Potion for the Dark Lord, something I'm sure Lucius is happy about. I'm nearly finished with it, though; I'm actually further along than the Dark Lord knows. I demonstrated old progress to him the last time he asked to see it. As soon as she is able, I'm going to need her to step up and help, whether she's recovered emotionally or not. No one else in the Order can come close to her mediocre talent," he said with a nasty smirk, a reminder of Remus's mere passing grade in Potions.

Remus looked at him, ignoring the snide remark, and said, "Severus, she needs time to heal. I'm not sure it's a good idea to encourage her to bury herself in work. She needs to deal with this fully, not cover up the pain with research and potion-brewing. It would tear her apart eventually if she didn't deal with it."

"I know you're a *friend* of Hermione's, but that doesn't mean you know her well. I taught her for six years and worked one-on-one with her for several months, Lupin, and I promise you she will be able to *cope* with things while she works. She's done it before, and she'll have to do it again," Severus said, turning when he saw the green flames in the fireplace as a house-elf stepped out of it with a covered tray of food. He snatched the tray out of the small hands and started for the door. "If you'll excuse me, I have an invalid to tend to," he said, irritated at the very idea of feeding Hermione. He wouldn't admit it openly, but a part of him felt obligated to help her. He had wondered briefly, a few times, if, had he got over his need for control long enough to share the "Order" meadow's location...long enough to actually treat her like an equal... she would never have been captured.

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He brought the tray into the room and set it down on Hermione's lap. She raised a shaking hand to pick up a fork, dropping it after a moment; her wrist hurt her too much to even accomplish that. She just sat there, staring at the tray, embarrassed at her uselessness. Severus sighed loudly and sat down on the edge of the bed; he picked up the fork and uncovered her food. "Open your mouth," he said as he lifted a forkful of eggs to her face. She looked at him for a moment before lowering her eyes and opening her mouth. She chewed slowly, savouring the taste of food she hadn't had in months.

Severus watched her face as she enjoyed the flavour of the eggs like a truly starved person would. "Hermione, were you fed at all during your time... away?" he asked hesitantly after she swallowed her food.

Still looking down, she replied, "No. I was given a special potion once a week, something that gave me a minimal amount of nourishment I believe, so that I would not die, but not enough to give me any actual strength." A single tear rolled down her face as she said that, then she opened her mouth to accept a second bite of food. Severus watched her closely as he fed her breakfast, catching glimpses into her mind whenever she looked at him briefly.

Pain... Whips... Insults... Assault... Rape... Beatings... Laughter... Anguish...were just a few of the many horrifying glimpses he caught in those brief looks.

He helped her drink some orange juice while he thought of a way to say what needed to be said to her. "Hermione, this is the situation," he said at last, making sure she was paying attention. "You were held for three months. Many things happened to you that should not happen to anyone, but none of us can change that now. Yes, it's hard. What you have been through would cripple most people for life. You are strong, though, determined and... talented. It will take time, but you will overcome this time in your life. But now is not the time...no time is really...to dwell on what could have been, how things could have changed. You will have to be stronger than that, and I believe you can be. You will work hard to build your strength back up, and then you'll throw yourself into working with me.

"I... need... your help with a special potion. The Depreciate Potion. The Dark Lord is growing more impatient by the day. Because of my rescuing you, he has been led to... believe... that you will be of value to me, and in turn to him. I need to have some convincing memories to share with the Dark Lord about how much your trust in me is growing. It's for the sake of all our safety that we play this out perfectly. You do all this, and I promise you in our spare time I'll help you overcome this event, and I will either deliver you Lucius's head on a spike or the opportunity to get rid of him yourself if that is your wish. Will you... help... me?" he said, the seriousness in his tone of voice entrancing her, making her feel appreciated.

*He wants me to help him, as an equal!*she thought with wonder. She took a moment to mull over his words, understanding that it must have been very hard for him, Severus Snape, to ask for help...and from a former student he always seemed to hate, at that. She was overwhelmed by this rare act of civility. Looking him in the face, she said, "Thank you, S-Severus. Of course I'll do whatever I can to help the Order, and you. I can honestly tell you now, though, that I wish to never see *that man* again, so if you get the chance to get rid of him, then by all means kill the bastard," she said, a steely note to her voice. She took a breath and continued, "I promise to follow all of your orders and wishes from now on also. I'm...I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you all. I can't thank you enough for... bringing me home."

Severus was in awe of her, though his reaction to her words never showed on his stern-looking face. He was awed by her strength, apologizing for something that wasn't entirely her fault. He had known for years now how resourceful she was when faced with roadblocks. He knew he was just antagonizing her, insulting her, whenever he

refused to treat her as an equal, like she was lacking in any talent. Here she was, apologizing for her mistake, which he was to blame for as well. He thought briefly of apologizing for his own part in what had happened, then he mentally sneered at the idea. With a curt nod he rose from the bed and headed toward the door. "The book about the appropriate exercises and your wand are on the nightstand. We have work to do," he said as he swept out the door, intending to give himself a moment's peace in the laboratory before he did something stupid. Like act even *more* friendly.

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Remus caught himself as he appeared at the edge of the Burrow's driveway, nearly falling as he once again landed halfway in a deep rut in the road. Catching his balance, he walked slowly to the door and knocked.

"Who's there?" asked Molly Weasley, the nervousness in her voice evident.

"It's me, Moony," he replied.

She unlocked the door and swung it open quickly. "Remus, my dear, come in," she said as she led him into the small kitchen and poured him some tea. "Any news on Hermione?" she asked him cautiously.

"Molly, is Arthur here? I would prefer that we call a meeting for anyone who can attend before I share what I have got to say," he said.

"He's at the Ministry, but I'll page him," Molly said. She pulled out one of the fake Galleons that Hermione had made for the Order, just like she had done for the D.A. in her fifth year. Molly waved her wand over the fake Galleon and watched it glow red as the message appeared.

"All who can attend, please come."

Molly bustled about the kitchen, preparing more tea and small sandwiches for whoever showed up, while Remus fidgeted with his teacup. The first to arrive were Kingsley and Tonks. Next were Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George. They all sat down and looked from Remus to Molly, wondering what was going on.

Clearing his throat, Remus began. "Last night Severus rescued Hermione," he said with a brief smile as the others all around started to clap or exclaim in their happiness. He waved his hand to get their attention. "She'll be okay, in time. But I came here to warn you to be careful when you do finally see her. She's been through some terrible things, and she's rather jumpy if you try to get near her. She just needs some time to adjust to being home, I think. She will also have to work even closer with Severus in the lab, so when she's completely able to function again, she will be busy. Severus and I think it would be a good thing if only one of you stopped by at a time, starting later this week. We don't want to overwhelm her."

Molly waved her own hand for attention and worriedly asked him, "Remus, what do you mean by a terrible time? What do you mean by 'completely able to function'?"

Remus looked down at his hands and chose his words carefully. "This does not go beyond this room, nor is it ever, EVER to be brought up around Hermione. But it's probably best you know; that way you'll really understand what I mean when I say she's jumpy if she's touched." He released a heavy breath and said, "Lucius Malfoy was the one who had her these past three months. From what Severus said, she was chained by her wrists from the dungeon ceiling the entire time. She was beaten and... and raped repeatedly." He stopped as people either started to cry, cuss, or both at the thought of their sweet and intelligent Hermione being brutalized by Lucius. "I know it's hard to hear; believe me, it was hard to witness the immediate aftermath when we healed her. But please respect her enough not to let this knowledge show in your eyes. If you can't keep it to yourself, don't even come to see her," he said stiffly as he rose from the table and left them there. They all sat in shock, trying to absorb the news, several of them starting to plan revenge on the monster that had hurt their Hermione.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this update. Please read and review! *HUGS*

Infertilis Potion

Chapter 7 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Hermione sat there quietly while she tried to eat her breakfast. She was still shocked at Severus's obvious offer of friendship. Or at least what could be termed an offer of friendship when dealing with Severus Snape. She dropped her fork as she saw a flash of her rescue. She remembered she was begging to die for the thousandth time since she was captured, when suddenly she glimpsed Severus Snape looking at her with his usual stony face. Stony looking at first. When she looked closer at him, she saw the truth of his feelings in those black eyes of his. He was sickened, and furious. It was at that moment that she knew her nightmare was over. Shaking her head to clear her 'capture' out of it, she picked up her fork and continued to force the food down her throat.

Hermione's mind wandered as she set aside her breakfast tray and carefully dressed for the day. Except for wincing in pain, Hermione ignored her injuries as she pulled on a turtleneck blouse. Normally she would have worn a simple tee-shirt for comfort. But one look in the mirror at the back of her neck convinced her to dress for cover. She pulled on a pair of tennis shoes and reached for her wand. Carefully pocketing it, Hermione walked slowly downstairs and knocked on the door to the lab.

Severus opened the door and stared for a moment at the determined look she gave him. "You do realize that you should be resting and gathering your strength," he said silkily as he waved his arm in invitation and stepped back from the doorway.

As she walked over toward her own desk, she replied, "You know I'm not one to sit around when there is work to be done. I can at least sit at the desk and study your process for the Depreciate Potion. I need to know it inside out. I can do the wrist and neck exercises while I read; there isn't enough time for doing one thing at a time."

"Very well. Just don't come whining to me when you've overdone yourself," he said indifferently, not wanting to admit to the spark of concern that had flashed through him at first. "Let's get to work then. Here are my notes and my journal entry for the potion," he said as he laid the materials out in front of her and walked away to finish his own work.

They both worked quietly for hours, Severus stocking up the Order's potion stores, Hermione exercising her wrists and neck as she immersed herself in his notes. It was this scene that Remus found as he rushed into the room, trying to catch his breath and sigh in relief all at the same time. Severus looked at him in irritation before going back to his work and ignoring him. Hermione hadn't even noticed him yet, as absorbed as she was. Remus walked over to Severus and asked him quietly, "What on earth is she doing down here working? I've been looking all over the house since I tried to bring a small lunch to her empty room twenty minutes ago. She should be resting!"

"Calm yourself, Lupin. She is taking it easy well, her body is. Can't say as much for her mind, though. She is reading and doing her healing exercises. You know how she gets when faced with deadlines... pushy and determined. So please, by all means, try and get the girl to go to bed. This might just be interesting enough to set aside this life or death potion for the theatrical pleasure of seeing you berated..." he said with a slight smirk as he continued working with the contents of the silver cauldron in front of him.

Remus frowned at him as he walked over to Hermione, careful to make his steps loud in hopes of not startling her. She lifted her head briefly before looking back down at her book.

"Don't even bother, Remus. Severus is right, I will berate you right out the door if you try. I promise I'm taking it easy; just leave me be. I'm just reading...."

"Fine," he replied. "Would you at least care for something to eat? I'll bring your lunch to you here if you don't want to eat in your room," he said grumpily.

"In here is fine. I'll nibble as I read. Promise," she said with a barely registered acknowledgement that he was still there. Remus left the room quickly and returned minutes later with a tray of food and bottles of her Healing potions.

"Drink those after you eat, please," Remus said before swiftly leaving the room with a concerned look on his face.

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Severus, try as he might, could not concentrate on his work. His mind kept reviewing thoughts of Hermione, just like his eyes kept stealing covert looks at her. He had been tortured himself a time or two. But even he in all his years as a Death Eater/spy had never endured what she had. He wondered at what really had made her keep going in the face of such hardship. Except for the resulting wrist exercises that she was doing every half hour, it was almost like nothing had ever happened to her.

That thought disturbed him.

He knew that, if anything, suppressing pain and experiences was the last thing one wanted to do. He, in his youth, had participated in several revels, which helped him along in his decision to change his life and turn spy. At first he'd suppressed the memories with ease. But the nightmares they'd engendered were too much for him, reducing him to an exhausted mess. Because of the lack of sleep, he had become sloppy a few times, which resulted in punishments dealt out by the Dark Lord personally. After a particularly bad Crucio-fest, Severus had taken a few weeks to himself and just thought about all of the bad things he had seen and done, brought back every last bad memory that haunted him. When he'd felt he had "beaten" the past, he'd turned all that pain, hate, and sorrow into determination to do whatever he could to rid the world of the Dark Lord and his minions. That's when he had turned himself into a spy for Dumbledore.

Thinking of that now, he knew that's what Hermione must be doing, or what she needed to be doing. He decided then and there to watch her closely. If she showed the same signs of suppressing memories, he would have to do something to "provoke" her into facing the past three months.

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Later that night, when Hermione was sure that everyone was asleep, she crept down slowly and quietly to the library. She figured she might as well do a little research since she was unable to sleep, owing to bad dreams she couldn't remember or just wouldn't think about. Something had been bugging her these last few restless hours.

She remembered that on her first day of imprisonment, she had been forced to drink several unknown potions. She had wondered what she had been forced to drink since her first guesses of poisons were ruled out, as she was still alive. She found a medicinal encyclopaedia and started reading. It was an hour later that she ran across a chapter on Anti-Conception potions and Diagnosis spells. She nearly dropped the book when she found it, having never thought of this. She then determinedly read the whole chapter three times and, once she was sure she understood the spell, pulled out her wand to perform the Diagnosis spell. She felt the slight tingling that was described in the book, and then a green haze appeared for a moment at the end of her wand.

This time she did drop the book.

The green haze confirmed it. She was not pregnant, nor could she ever be pregnant. The green haze basically meant that she had been given a potion the effects of which were irreversible that prevented her from becoming pregnant. She was unsure of what to feel: happy that she couldn't possibly be carrying a bastard child of the man who'd destroyed her innocence or sad that she would never have a child at all. She used to dream of having a family one day, but that was all a moot point now.

Hermione fell asleep in one of the library chairs that night, having forgotten to close the book and put it away.

~{}~

Remus was panicked. He had awoken early this morning and had decided to check and see if Hermione needed anything or if he could convince her to study Severus's journal in her room. But Hermione was not in bed. After his second tense search for her in two days, he had found her asleep in a chair inside the library. He was going to put away the book that had obviously fallen out of her lap when he saw the subject to which the book was opened.

He didn't know what to do, what he could say. *It can't be true, but why is she reading about pregnancy? Why else would a person read about it?* He wondered frantically as he looked repeatedly from the book to Hermione. He quietly put the book back where it was before and then hurried up to Severus's room, where he barged in.

"Severus! Wake up, we have a problem!" he said, throwing Severus's dressing gown to him.

"What in the bloody hell is the matter, Lupin?" Severus said icily as he got out of bed and slipped his robe on.

"I don't know what to do was looking and she was asleep it was on the floor was just going to put it away but it just can't be!" Remus rambled on until Severus held up his hand to silence him.

"Stop your incessant rambling. Tell me, calmly, what happened," Severus gritted out.

Remus took a deep breath and said, "I was looking for Hermione, but she wasn't in her room again. I looked all over and found her asleep in a chair in the library. I was going to put away the book she'd dropped on the floor and let her sleep, but when I picked up the book, I panicked when I saw what she was reading. Severus, it was about diagnosing pregnancy! What are we going to do or say to her?"

Severus stared at him a moment, wondering if becoming a werewolf had turned Remus stupid or something. "Remus, tell me, how is it that you're a half-blood but you don't even know the basics for how things work in the Wizarding world? For instance, it is well documented and known that all crimes of rape of Muggle-borns by purebloods involve the use of the Infertile Potion? That no pompous, evil pureblood who committed such crimes would dare risk impregnating a Muggleborn? She was more than likely being her usual know-it-all self and trying to determine what potions she had been forced to swallow. Imagine you were a girl though it's not a far stretch, by the evidence of your constant panicking and molly-coddling and you were repeatedly raped. Wouldn't pregnancy as a side-effect be one of your fears? Something you would want to know about?" Severus gave Remus a disdainful look as he saw the resignation fall over his face.

"Now, if you don't mind, I need to get ready for the day since I will no longer be able to sleep. Get out," Severus said as he nearly shoved Remus out the door.

As Severus showered and dressed, and Remus calmed himself with some tea, they both worried about Hermione and the potion that she had more than likely been given, which would prevent her from having her own family one day.

A/N: Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed this update, as much as I enjoyed writing it for you! Please Review! *HUGS*

Avada & Love Combined

Chapter 8 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

The loud burst of thunder rocked the windows, startling Hermione and waking her from her nightmares suddenly. She cringed in pain as she carefully stretched her sore muscles, regretting having fallen asleep in the chair. Spotting the book lying on the floor, she picked it up and slowly made her way to the shelf to put it away, refusing to think about the revelation she'd had the night before. *No sense in worrying about something you can't change* she reminded herself. She walked carefully over to the French doors and peered out at the storm that was raging, just as her emotions were raging. She watched in silent contemplation as her mind swirled with thoughts; most of all she was trying to force her mind to think of a way to help them end this bloody dreadful war, once and for all.

She was sick and tired of the struggle, of all the pain and death: sick of the evil that threatened her very sanity. As these thoughts came over her, she unlocked the French doors and stepped out into the storm. She walked across the patio and sat on the low wall that gave them a view of the large city park behind Grimmauld Place. She didn't care that she was already soaked to the bone from the heavy rain; she didn't care that lightning flashed all around her. She just sat there hoping her mind would come across an idea that would help them destroy that bastard Tom and his minions.

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Severus had been working in the potions lab since Remus had burst in earlier that morning. He had expected to see Hermione join him and bury herself in her own work, but when noon came around without her appearance, he started to wonder if her "research" from the night before had upset her too much. Checking the cauldron one last time, he left it to simmer while he searched her out, intent on getting her to snap out of her moping and do her job.

He checked her room, only to find it as empty as it must have been when Remus had looked for her this morning. Wondering if she could still be asleep in the library, Severus made his way back downstairs. He entered the room and was about to turn back around to look elsewhere when he noticed the French doors were ajar and stepped over to have a look. He saw her sitting on the wall, staring off into space, completely drenched from the heavy rain that was falling from the turbulent storm.

His first instinct was to berate her for the stupidity of stepping out in the rain and exposing herself to a possible cold, as weak as she was already. But upon seeing the look in her eyes he decided against it. She looked determined. Angry. He had to admit it actually pleased him to see such looks on her face; better those than fear and depression, he thought briefly. Stepping lightly, he opened the door, unconsciously casting a non-verbal spell that created an invisible umbrella over his head. As he approached her he cast the same spell over her head, causing her to look up toward him to see the cause of her new "shelter". She acknowledged him with a nod before she looked back out toward the park.

He sat there beside her on the wall, waiting for her to say something. He told himself that he was just concerned for her because he needed her help in the lab with deceiving the Dark Lord. But in truth, a small part of him was there to be a friend to her. He had seen her thoughts flash through her mind when he had asked for her help the other night. He had spent so many years spying, suffering, all of it alone, that he didn't know how to be friendly even. So he sat there, his company all he felt he could offer someone who had just been through a trauma as horrible as her three-month capture.

Hermione was having one of those moments.

A moment that only those who lived to learn and excel in academics had when something big was forming in their mind. Like a new picture that was broken into a puzzle, she had the edge pieces in place and was looking for the inside pieces that completed the picture. Hoping that he might be able to help her find those pieces, she finally spoke. "Have you ever done any reading on Muggle bombs you know, those atom bombs?"

"Yes, back in my own school days. Why?" he answered, curious as to where this sudden train of thought was going.

"It would take something that's the equivalent of those bombs to destroy Voldemort; that's what I was thinking earlier, and then I thought, why not think of those bombs literally? I mean, we know he has special protection against any form of Muggle weapon and against known magical ones. So why don't we make a magical nuke-type bomb? One that's specially designed to kill a man who has done everything in his power to be immortal," she replied, looking at him finally.

He was surprised at the idea but he thought it might have some merit. "That's certainly an interesting idea, but how would we go about such a feat? Where would you suggest we start?" he asked, a little skeptical. From what he had read of the Muggle atom bombs, they were difficult to make. A Wizarding version would surely be much more difficult to make.

"Well, I'll need your help with the actual creation but I have a good idea of where to start. You know how to 'bottle' a spell, right?" When he nodded that he did, she continued. "We need to create a safe way to bottle the Killing Curse and then combine it with our blood."

"What do you mean, *our* blood?" he asked, confused at her direction.

"I mean *our* as in every member of the Order, and also from any willing victims of Voldemort. One thing that always stood out to me was what Dumbledore said about love, and Voldemort's lack of it. I think that the magic of love that flows through all of our veins, combined with the Killing Curse, could create a magical bomb so powerful that even Voldemort couldn't survive. It was Lily's love that saved Harry and killed Voldemort's first body. I think that ALL of our love combined with the curse will kill both his body and what's left of his soul. I just don't know how to go about making the bomb because as I'm sure you realize, it would be dangerous to create. But IF we could create it, I think it would work."

He was amazed at the idea. It really sounded brilliant and promising, despite the dangers involved. He was sure he could manage it, with her help. Of course he couldn't outright say such a thing to her. "This idea is... *interesting*. I will do a little research and let you know soon if this may be possible. Merlin knows we can't afford to throw out any idea we can think of for destroying the Dark Lord," he said in a bored tone of voice as he got up off the wall and headed for the doors. "Now, if you're through sitting out in this storm, why don't you get something to eat and join me in the lab? We have some 'acting' to do for the Dark Lord's benefit," he said, and he went inside. Despite his tone of voice, Hermione could tell that he liked the idea. She smiled slightly, her first smile in a month, as she went back inside to dry herself and get something to eat, as ordered.

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Severus was reading a Muggle book on physics when she entered the room, hair dry and in clean, dry clothes. She went straight to her desk and reached for the clip that kept her hair out of her face, donned her gloves, and grabbed her journal. She approached Severus and stood waiting for instructions. He nodded his head and laid out a

book on potions, pointing to the chapter on *Binding Body Magic*. "Read and memorize that chapter first. I'll be working on the Killing Curse base potion while you work on perfecting your ability to bind the magic to bottled blood. If it's not done properly, the magic will diminish within hours of storing it in phials. Once you've accomplished that I'll give you further instructions. Let me know when you're ready for blood. I'll give you a little of mine to work with," he said dismissively, going back to his own reading.

Hermione smirked to herself as she went to work. It was the first time she had ever seen her snarky Professor put aside his own work to figure out her own idea, much less anyone else's. She was definitely determined to make her first attempt, and every one thereafter, perfect.

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Hours into their work Severus suddenly jerked his left arm, his Mark burning. Hermione looked at him, concern written on her face mixed with a little bit of fear. Thoughts of him being summoned brought to mind the kind of people he was "working" with. He put down his own journal and went to his desk, retrieving his Death Eater garb. "I'll be back as soon as I'm able. Please be *honest* when I make you promise me that you won't wander off on your own outside the house, and that you won't attempt to store any phials of your own blood in an over-eager attempt to master such a skill. We have a way to go to accomplish this 'bomb' potion. There's no need to solve it all in one night; patience is what will help us create the potion. Promise me!" he said forcefully, standing mere feet from her and looking her sternly in the eyes.

She was frozen for a moment from the intense concern she could feel radiating from his piercing look. "I-I promise," she replied quietly. She didn't break eye contact, knowing he was probing for the truth in her words. With an acknowledging nod he swept from the room, leaving her to stand there wondering when Severus Snape had started to care at all, much less show such obvious concern for her wellbeing.

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Severus didn't even acknowledge the Death Eater guards as he Apparated to the clearing and headed for the cellar door, slipping his mask onto his face as he went. He forced himself to relinquish thoughts of the apprentice he had left behind. He walked purposefully into the gathering, and as usual he crawled the last few steps to kiss his Dark Master's hem. "Rise, Severus," Voldemort said quietly. Severus joined his "comrades" and silently wondered what horrible thing he would hear from Voldemort's lips this time.

"I have come to a decision regarding Lucius Malfoy," Voldemort began, ignoring the few who brazenly began to wonder aloud what Lucius had done wrong. "I am demoting you, Lucius. As useful as your connections are, it *displeases* me that you would go behind my back and plan things that to your unthinking mind could hurt my plans. As further punishment I will allow Severus to exact punishment on you here, tonight. I realize he has already done so recently, but I think for you to be truly *humbled*, you should writhe in pain before us all. Severus...?" he said, turning to face the astonished Death Eater. As Severus stepped forward and brought forth his wand, he thanked the gods that he had a mask on to hide his surprise.

"What punishment do you wish me to give him, my lord?" Severus said, a note of "Happy to serve you" in his voice.

"Anything you wish, as long as it results in marks that can be covered by his clothes. We wouldn't want him looking shabby when he makes his rounds at the Ministry," Voldemort replied with a slithering chuckle, joined by a brave few others.

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It was two in the morning when Severus arrived back at Grimmauld Place. He was a bit shocked to find the potions lab empty except for the work he himself had left out, and a note. After he put away his Death Eater garb, he approached the workbench and sat down on his raised stool and read the note that Hermione had left him.

Severus,

I tried to wait up for you; I wanted to see how the meeting had gone. But the lack of sleep my dreaming has caused me has finally caught up with me. Maybe I'll sleep through the night without a problem, maybe not. Remus offered me some Dreamless Sleep potion, but I declined. I figure it's better for me to just deal with it than delay the problems and deal with them later when they're worse from time. I've left a copy of my notes inside the book you were reading.

Hermione

Her letter was short, but it revealed much to Severus. It was obvious she counted him as a friend, someone she could talk to. She obviously cared for him to some unknown degree, a thought that made him wonder about the young witch who was hopefully asleep upstairs. Leaving those thoughts for a later date, he set aside her letter and opened up his book to go over her notes. Just from reading the first paragraph and perusing the diagram she had made, he knew she would have no problem bottling the blood without "spilling" the magic within it. He raised his wand and cast his Patronus, sending it to summon Remus. It was a handy spell for those moments when he was just too busy or tired to go in person. When Remus arrived Severus motioned him over to the stool across from him, where Hermione usually sat.

"I need you to set up a meeting at the end of next week. Hermione and I are working on a new potion, one that if the preliminary tests are successful could play a great part in the ending of this war. Don't tell everyone that; just tell them we're having a regular information exchange. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up yet," Severus said, marking down the pages from the index that he needed to read.

"I think Friday would be the best day for everyone. I know for a fact there are no standing plans for any missions or recons; would that day be okay for you?" Remus asked.

"It will be fine, even if I'm called away for my *other* meetings," Severus replied.

"But if you're not there, what would be the purpose of holding the meeting?" Remus asked him, confused.

"Hermione will be more than capable of holding the meeting without my presence, for it was her idea in the first place, this new potion," Severus said quietly.

"I'm not sure if that's a great idea. I mean, no one else has seen her since her return. I think the pressure might be too much for her. I guess we could try and get her to go see everyone one by one before then, when you two aren't busy," Remus suggested.

"We'll be quite busy, but I'll make her take the time. We should speak with her tomorrow, and then if she agrees we'll schedule times for them to come here," Severus said.

"That sounds fine. I'll talk to her over breakfast."

"No. You're too much of a pushover. I'll tell her myself before we get engrossed in work tomorrow morning. Bring us lunch and then I'll inform you of her answer. Now leave; I have a few things to finish up before I find my own rest," Severus said, his last words laced with snarkiness.

Remus left him then, wondering what kind of potion Hermione had thought of that Severus was willing to work on *It must be something extraordinary*, he thought as he made his way to bed.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this update! It took me a while to finish it, since I had to rewrite the whole thing lol. Please read and review! *HUGS*

Long Time No See

Chapter 9 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

The next morning Hermione was downstairs and working in the laboratory before Severus had even risen. He dragged himself out of bed around eight a.m., despite his urge to sleep for a week. He was tired of the dangerous work, but if getting less sleep meant the creation of the potion that could end it all, he would sleep when it was all over. *If I live through it at least* he thought morosely. As he entered the lab, he wasn't surprised to see Hermione there already. She was writing in her research journal, with several tomes about potions spread out around her. He went about his own work, experimenting with different types of spelled-potion stabilizers. He made sure to set his cauldrons up at the far end of the room, away from Hermione. The average, everyday stabilizer took up to two weeks to make. The powerful ones he was experimenting with would take up to a month to brew to completion. Which meant that he needed to prepare them all, and plenty of each one.

They worked in silence for over an hour, until Severus had the main steps completed and was able to take a moment's break. "Hermione, there is something you need to do before I start assigning you to larger tasks. This potion is going to be a two-person job at the very least, especially when we approach the final stages. You need to take the time and see the rest of the Order members...." She started to protest but he held up his hand to silence her and continued. "I realize you may not wish to see anyone, and if I were you I wouldn't want to see the lot of them either. But they are curious and worried. It would save us any interruptions if you got the 'reunions' over with so that you could give me... *this* potion your full attention."

For a moment he paused, cursing himself silently as he wondered what in Merlin's name had caused him to almost say such a thing. To Hermione's credit, she seemed to have missed that part. She still looked upset over the idea of seeing the rest of the Order. Gathering his sanity about him, he continued as if he hadn't almost said such a thing. "I realize it will be hard, that is why Remus and I have decided to accomplish this irritating feat in an Orderly manner. We will consult schedules and have them come by the house, one by one. That is, unless you feel up to getting it all over at once..." he said, raising an eyebrow as he waited for her to finally comment.

"Well, I can visit the Weasleys, but the rest of them can visit me here. There's no way I'd be able to luck out with just one Weasley wanting to see me. They would be too stubborn; I'm surprised you've kept them away as long as you have," she remarked quietly.

He smirked at her, a rare occurrence lately. "Very well, I will arrange for Remus to take you over to the Burrow after lunch. We'll notify the rest of the Order that if they would like to see you for a moment, they can come by tomorrow around noon. Anyone who can't make it will just have to live without assuaging their curiosity about the 'captive'," he replied, his words laced with snarky-ness.

They both went back to work after Severus wrote a brief note and sent it flying out of the room to Remus, just like the inter-office memos at the Ministry. Hermione acted as if this were an ordinary day as she continued studying the tomes before her. But in truth she was reeling inside, confusion and feelings vying for her main concentration over her research. It had been a miracle, nothing less, that kept her from showing her reaction to that little "slip-up" he had made earlier. Oh, yes. She had heard him just fine. She just didn't know what to think or do about it.

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Remus entered the lab quietly, seeing that Hermione and Severus were deep in discussion about some diagram from the tome that was opened in front of them. He waited until they noticed him before approaching. "Hermione, it looks like you'll be having lunch at the Burrow. After I sent the owl to Molly, she Flooed me and insisted that you eat lunch with them. Fred and George are going to close their shop for a few hours to be there, but Ginny will not be there. She was unable to postpone her classes at the university. Those French Deans of students are a bit strict about attendance, but you can write to her. Arthur's boss is letting him take a long lunch, so he will be there as well. Are you about ready to go?" he asked her, sad to see the nervousness in her eyes.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess. I just need to put away my things, and I'll meet you at the Floo in a moment," she said as she started to mark her pages and carry her things over to her desk. Remus accepted it for what it was: she just needed a minute to herself. He left the room to await her by the Floo in the kitchen.

Severus watched her put away her things at a deliberately slow pace. He could see the near-panic in her eyes, her quickened breathing as she tried to prepare herself for the onslaught of questions and 'Molly-coddling'. "You know, if you're moving slowly as an attempt to think of some escape from the madness that awaits you, you're wasting your time. You could simply tell them to have lunch without you, that you're too busy. It would make more sense to keep working on this potion," he offered, almost concernedly.

She smiled lightly at him as she picked up the pace and put the final things away at her desk. "Thanks, but I really should get this over with. If I don't, we risk an invasion that could very likely mess up this potion. Better to get it done with. I'll see you in an hour or so," she said as she made her way to the kitchen, leaving behind a very confused and irritated Potions Master.

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Molly kept fidgeting. She had set the table a while ago, and just moments before she had laid out all of the food. Arthur, Fred, and George kept glancing at her, wishing she would calm herself, but they all knew better. They were all unsure about seeing Hermione, about what to say. The only thing that made sense was to act as if nothing was wrong, but that was proving impossible for Molly Weasley. She sat down for a moment, then popped right back up to look out the curtains again before remembering that they were arriving by Floo, not Apparation.

"Molly, sit down. Pacing and working yourself into a state won't help this situation. You heard Remus when he talked to us last time: she'll need some normalcy! The last thing she needs is for you to burst into tears and crush her in a smothering hug, which is exactly what it looks like will happen if you don't calm down this instant!" Arthur said a little forcefully. She looked at him, shocked that he had just about yelled at her in the same sort of way she usually yelled at him.

Her lip trembled for a moment, and she sat down and started to cry on Arthur's shoulder. "I just can't help it! She's like a daughter to me, and to think of what she went through...."

"I know, dear, I know how you feel. But you can't let her see you like this. Just keep in mind that she wouldn't be coming over for lunch if she didn't feel up to it. Calm yourself, and remember to act as normal as possible. That's what she needs from us, Molly, normalcy," he replied soothingly as she blew her nose into her handkerchief. Moments later they all turned to look toward the living room when they heard the tell-tale whoosh of the fireplace. Each member of the Weasley family took a deep breath as they prepared themselves to see her again.

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Hermione dusted herself off before checking her turtleneck sweater for the hundredth time. Remus laid his hand on her shoulder in a brief, comforting squeeze. He led her into the kitchen where Molly was fussing over Fred and George's hair.

"Really, you both should let me cut it. It's beginning to look a lot like Bill's hair, and surely you don't want your appearance to hurt your sales at the shop, or turn away the girls," she chided them.

Hermione smiled lightly when they finally "noticed" her entrance. "Hi, everybody, what's for lunch?" she asked quietly, trying not to laugh at the obviously staged conversation they were having.

Molly approached her and carefully hugged her, muttering, "It's good to s-see you, dear. Lunch is ready why don't you take a seat?" Molly walked back to the table to sit down, taking a deep breath as she did to keep the tears at bay.

Fred and George greeted Hermione cheerfully as they normally would, both of them trying to not look at her too much.

Everyone passed around food as they filled their plates, all of them awkwardly silent.

Hermione kept tugging at the collar of her turtleneck, just to make sure it was covering her scars. Molly kept looking over at her every time she tugged on the sweater, wondering why she was wearing something so warm. To attempt to stop herself from staring, she got up to refill everyone's tea. After refilling everyone's glasses to the brim, she sat down, only to jump up and blush with a startled, "Dear me!" Unbeknownst to her, the twins had placed a Muggle whoopee cushion on her seat.

Everyone started laughing hysterically over her reaction and the embarrassed look she had on her face, and Molly faced her sons and tried to give them a stern look. But she started to laugh a little herself when she couldn't achieve a proper "you're in trouble" look. After that moment things went a lot more smoothly, and it really started to seem almost like old times.

That is, before the owl and the Panther Patronus swept in through the window. The owl held a glowing purple envelope, which was a sign of trouble for the Order. The Panther circled around Remus and Arthur, signalling their need to be at Headquarters immediately.

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Remus opened the envelope, his hands a little shaky. He read it aloud to the quiet and nervous group at the table. It read:

URGENT: ALL SENIOR MEMBERS ONLY

IF AVAILABLE, COME IMMEDIATELY TO HEADQUARTERS. ARRIVE READY TO SIFT QUICKLY THROUGH THE WRECKAGE FOR ANYTHING WE CAN SALVAGE. HEADQUARTERS HAS BEEN NEARLY DESTROYED BY SURPRISE ATTACK. REQUEST SUGGESTIONS FOR HASTY RELOCATION OF HEADQUARTERS. ALL WHO COME SHOULD ARRIVE WITH THEIR WANDS AT THE READY. TWO OUT OF SEVEN DEATH EATERS HAVE ESCAPED AND MAY STILL BE AROUND. USE CAUTION AND HURRY.

SS

Hermione and the twins watched as Arthur and Molly went upstairs to quickly change into more practical clothes. Remus sat quietly with the three, though he had a piece of parchment and was making some notes about ideal locations for the Order's new headquarters. It was important to set that up, but it would be difficult to find a place to suit their needs. A few moments later Arthur, Molly, and Remus left the Burrow to help Severus out. Hermione, Fred, and George moved to the living room to wait and see what might happen to them all next.

A/N: I would to thank everyone for their patience as they waited for this update. *Pause to duck the food being thrown at me...* ;p I will be adding the rest of the chapters asap... and you'll be happy to know that I am currently writing the final chapter! Chapter 22 ;) So you have much more to come! Please be kind and review... Thank you! *HUGS*

The Pains in Relocation

Chapter 10 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus waited patiently under his Disillusionment charm for the Order to arrive. He had constructed temporary wards surrounding what was left of the house to provide a minimum of security. Remus, Arthur, Minerva, and several others arrived minutes later and passed through the wards, all of them looking around at the devastation that was their headquarters. Only a few walls still stood, with a number of great black boxes visible throughout the wreckage.

When Severus had permanently moved his lab to Grimmauld Place, he had insisted on adding some of his own personal security measures for cases such as this. All work that was directly related to the war was warded with a special spell he had invented himself. In case of such an attack, all pertinent papers, potions, and equipment would magically be sorted into protective boxes the instant the main wards detected any form of trouble. The boxes themselves could only be opened by four people: Arthur, Molly, Remus and Severus. Even a person under the best of Polyjuice potions could not fool the special box wards.

Severus waved his wand, removing his Disillusionment and walked forward to confer with the others. "I have not detected any remaining Death Eaters, but judging by this mess I'm sure they believe they successfully killed anyone that was here. It is fortunate that I was on my way out the door when the idiots attacked," he remarked.

"Severus, I thought you said something like this was unlikely to happen since you also worked on your 'DE' potions here. Why would Voldemort order an attack that could harm his own cause?" Molly asked, a confused and upset look on her face as she gazed at the ruins.

"The Dark Lord would never order this. I can bet there will be a few severe punishments the next time I'm called to his audience. Only the lowest of buffoons would do something like this in the vain hope of rising in the ranks. The only thing that will rise for them is their pain threshold... if they're lucky," he replied in an almost bored tone. "Enough chattering. We need to discuss the relocation of our headquarters. Does anyone have any ideas?"

Remus smirked at Severus, finding it funny that he would neglect to automatically offer up the only other place he knew of that had a potions lab ready for use. Clearing his throat he said, "Severus, I'm shocked you wouldn't suggest your manor. Surely with its hidden location, many rooms, and stocked potions lab it would be the perfect place?"

Severus frowned at him. It was the one place he'd been hoping he wouldn't have to mention. A last resort. He had forgotten that Remus knew of his manor. Years ago

something had happened to Severus as he worked at his dull job as a Potions Professor at Hogwarts. He had started to hope. In that hope, he bought an old mansion in the county of Derbyshire and had spent some time there each summer fixing up the place, building his potions lab, even going so far as to build a great orchard, a greenhouse, and a garden where he could plant a lot of his own ingredients. His dream was to work on potions research and get out of his job as a teacher in the process. The house had been nearly finished when there were signs that Voldemort was planning to return during Harry Potter's first year at Hogwarts. Severus hadn't been back there since, his hope of ever being alive long enough to enjoy the place dying. He just figured he was lucky enough to live out the first war; it would take a miracle for him to survive a second.

"I thought you lived at Spinner's End, Severus. When did you acquire a manor? Does it have enough rooms for large meetings?" Arthur asked him.

"Spinner's End is where I live, yes. It doesn't matter when I bought the manor, and yes, it does have an adequate number of rooms. But surely there is somewhere else we can move headquarters? I...."

Remus interrupted Severus and said, "No excuses, Severus. You know very well there isn't a better place available. Now quit trying to come up with useless excuses and help us move the boxes. We'll need to Portkey there as a group since you are the manor's Secret Keeper.

Severus scowled at Remus before relenting and conjuring a quill and a piece of parchment. He wrote down the address of his manor and tapped the parchment with his wand, making copies for each of them. With a flick of his wand the boxes scattered throughout the wreckage flew toward them and stacked themselves neatly in the middle of the group. Another flick, and a charred doorknob by his feet was transformed into a Portkey that he held out to them. The moment each touched a finger to it while placing their other hand on the stacked boxes, Remus, Severus, Minerva and the others disappeared with what remained of Number 12, Grimmauld Place.

Remus's last thought before they experienced the familiar sensation of being pulled by their navels was how they were going to explain the destruction of Grimmauld Place to Harry when they returned from the Horcrux hunt.

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Hermione had excused herself from the Weasley kitchen when she was done pushing the remainder of her food around. Fred and George exchanged looks of concern as they watched her exit the door and proceed to the bench that overlooked the gnome-infested garden.

She barely noticed the cackling gnomes as one by one they darted out of their holes and wreaked havoc in the garden. Her thoughts were on the future. So many thoughts and worries circled in her mind. Where would the Order go now? How were Harry and Ron doing on their quest? Would all of Severus's and her hard work on the "Avada Bomb" go to waste now that headquarters had been attacked? And the last thought that seemed to hover on her mind lately screamed at her for an answer.

What did Severus's subtle changes and slipups really mean?

She had thought about him a lot during her school days. Most times it had been with resentment of his treatment of her, but at others she had wondered about him. Once in her fourth year she had actually not paid attention to his lesson in class. Instead she spent it wondering about his character. After some very calculating thoughts, she had concluded that if she had been in his place, with a drunk for a father, as an Slytherin outcast... she had realized that if the roles were reversed, she might have turned out the same way Severus Snape had. In essence they were very much alike; the only difference really was their different upbringing and their ages.

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Severus tried not to look around as he directed the others as to where the best place was for the boxes. He tried to ignore the exclamations they made about the manor's potential. And he glared daggers at them when they tried to ask him why he'd given up on the manor. After seeing that they were well enough on their own while they debated which rooms should be rearranged for large meetings and such, he slipped up the grand staircase that was laid with a rare black wood he remembered salvaging. The house was dreary and every room smelled of neglect. The few pieces of furniture were covered in dingy, dusty sheets.

As he made his way down the long hallway that led to the north wing, he remembered the day he had found the manor. He had considered contacting a real estate agent in Diagon Alley, but for the sake of privacy he knew it would be a better choice to seek out properties on his own. So under a Glamour that altered his appearance enough that he would not be recognized, he spent several hours every day for weeks scouring the for-sale ads in the *Daily Prophet* and visiting the few properties that interested him. He had originally overlooked the larger ones, since he only desired just so much room, but when the smaller ones proved to be unsatisfactory for his needs he decided to check out the manors.

The first thing that caught his eye when he toured the manor was the vast property that went with it. The manor itself was Muggle-built and owned until the turn of the century, when the family that had owned it went bankrupt and abandoned it. As he inspected the manor he was shocked to find himself liking it with its three sitting rooms, two-story library, and grand dining room. The upstairs consisted of the north and south wings, both of which held a combined total of twenty luxurious bedrooms. The master bedroom was enormous, with floor to ceiling windows that gave him a wonderful view of the back of the property. Which is where he ended up building the garden, greenhouse, and orchard.

He had signed the contract and met the agent the next day with a bag full of Muggle cash he had received from Grigotts for the transaction. Before the man left he asked Severus what he would call the manor. Severus had decided to call it Prince Manor, though he never told the man that. He just shrugged him off and told him to leave his property, in a very Snapeish fashion.

As Severus reached the master bedroom, he halted by the bedroom door next to his. To ensure his privacy, he had no intention of showing anyone but Hermione where his potions lab was located. There were two entrances: one through the mirror that doubled as a secret door from his own bedroom, the other was a matching mirror in the library across from the fireplace. He couldn't ask Hermione to walk all the way to the library when there was a closer entrance to the hidden lab. His decision made, he walked into his room and sealed the door. Then he proceeded to create a doorway between his room and the one next door that he would tell Hermione to take. The other members could fend for themselves. With a flick of his wand, cleaning materials appeared and he set them to work. He examined the mirror door and found it to be in good working condition except for a tiny squeak of resistance, which he fixed right away. Satisfied that the room would be livable, he left to search out the others.

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The Order members greeted Severus curiously as he returned from somewhere in the manor. Severus and the others conversed on their plan for introducing the hidden manor to the rest of the Order. After agreeing, everyone left the manor except Severus, who had opted to stay and see what could be salvaged in the greenhouse.

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So deep in thought as she was, Hermione was startled when Molly arrived with a sudden pop. "Oh, Hermione dear, we'll be leaving in a few moments. I'll just go and collect the boys and then we can meet the others at the new headquarters."

"Mrs. Weasley, how... umm... how is Severus? Is he okay?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

Molly answered her over her shoulder as she went into the house. "He's fine, dear, nothing to fret over."

A few moments later Molly and the twins were outside with Hermione, gathered around the tin can that was their Portkey. George asked, "So, Mum, where is the new headquarters?"

"Prince Manor," she replied, and they were pulled away in the blink of an eye.

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Hermione was in awe of the possibilities that cried out to her as she gazed at the manor. Prince Manor. She had never heard of this place, never known that Severus

owned it. Which meant it was something private for him. Something he probably hated to see as the new headquarters. Molly and the twins had already gone inside to meet the others, but Hermione excused herself and wandered around the outside of the house, hoping to delay having to see *everyone*. She smiled as she came around to the greenhouse, and she closed her eyes to imagine what it would look like fully stocked with the many herbs and plants it would house year-round. It would take some work, but if Severus didn't tend to the garden, greenhouse, and orchard, she would. As she wandered through the remnants of the orchard, she failed to notice the man staring at her intently from the master bedroom window above.

A/N: Sorry for the wait. I post this story at several sites, and one of them was having an issue with chapter three... so I was busy trying to fix the TOS issue. More to come soon! Please read and review! *HUGS*

Privileges Of An Apprentice

Chapter 11 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

The dining room at the manor was much fancier than the small one that everyone usually crammed themselves into for big dinners together at Grimmauld Place. But despite the ability to accommodate everyone with comfort, the majority of the Order went about their discussions and plans as they ate the food that Molly had cooked for them.

All except Hermione. When Remus had found her wandering in the orchard, she had refused to join him and the others for dinner. Instead she had decided to go and settle into her room, promising that she would fix herself something to eat when everyone had gone. When Hermione had picked out a room, she only had a few moments before Severus had come to move her to another room.

"What's wrong with the room I chose?" she asked him curiously as she followed him into the north wing.

"As much as I loathe being here *and* letting the Order use this place for a headquarters, it does have its advantages: one being the lab, which is much more adequate than the one that used to be at Grimmauld, and the other being that we are going to be the only ones with knowledge of the lab's location. That way we can actually manage to work in peace," he replied as they reached the end of the hall and he opened the door next to his own. "This will be your room. Through this door to your left is access to my own room. Follow me and I'll show you the upstairs entrance to the lab," he said as he led the way into his room, toward the mirror. "Give me your wand," he demanded suddenly, looking at her reflection in the mirror. He waved his own wand over hers, effectively bringing down the wards for the doorway for her own wand. "To enter you have to wave your wand in front of the mirror; it will open to this spiral staircase, which leads directly down to the lab. There is a second entrance in the library; the mirror down there looks the same as this one. Any questions?"

In fact, Hermione had a lot of questions that came to mind. But she decided to respect his obvious bad mood and shook her head before heading back to her new room. She had some clothing and such to order from the catalogues Remus had given her to replace her wardrobe that had been destroyed at Grimmauld Place.

Severus watched her quietly exit his room into her own. Deciding not to worry about her quiet demeanor, he waved his wand over the mirror and proceeded to prepare the lab for their work the next day.

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Hermione's thoughts about the move and the loss of her things were two-sided. It almost helped that she was in a new environment, someplace that held no memories of her capture. But the loss of certain items, mainly books and some trinkets that had been gifts from Harry and Ron, were hard to bear. She pondered the likelihood of replacing those things as best she could as she scanned the catalogues, choosing her clothing carefully. It was a relief that she would have plenty of shirts and sweaters that would adequately cover her back and neck; she even ordered eight turtleneck sweaters, something she wouldn't have done before as she preferred a rounded or V-neck style. But if she was to see the rest of the Order on a more regular basis, she would be more comfortable with her new situation if her scars were properly covered.

She was so engrossed with the catalogues that she jumped when there was a loud knock on her door. "Who is it?" she asked as she carefully stacked the catalogues on the little coffee table in her room.

"It's Remus. I've brought you some dinner," he replied patiently, waiting for her to open the door. When she did, she stood back and let him enter. "I thought it might be best if I brought you the food instead of you waiting for the others to leave. It seems there is an impromptu meeting going on, so most of them will likely stay the night," he said as he set the tray down on the coffee table. "I see you've got your clothing orders all filled out. I'll take them to Molly. She's volunteered to turn in all our orders and bring them to us when they're filled," he said, picking up the orders.

"Thank you, Remus. Hopefully she'll have them before the meeting in a few days when I have to present this new potion," Hermione replied quietly, taking a seat and reaching for her silverware.

"Hermione, is something bothering you?" Remus asked, sitting down next to her. "Besides the meeting, I mean."

"What am I going to say to Harry and Ron when they return, about what happened to me? Part of me wants to never tell them, but too many people know already. They'd find out, and it would be worse if they found out that way," she replied, dropping her fork and laying her head in her hands.

"Just tell them the truth and ask them to honor your wish to not speak of it unless you feel like it. They'll be upset, to put it mildly. But they love you. If you don't want them to ask you about it, tell them that," he offered.

Severus stood in the doorway, having listened to this part of their conversation before he decided to interrupt them. Clearing his throat and startling them both out of their conversation, he said, "I thought it would be prudent to advise you both that I have to leave. The Dark Lord has summoned me, most likely so I can be present when he punishes the morons who attacked Grimmauld Place. I may be all night, so I won't be able to finish arranging the lab. Could you please finish while I'm gone, Hermione? All that's left to do is to properly store all of the ingredients in the new cabinets in an orderly fashion. It shouldn't take you more than a few hours to accomplish, and that way we can get back to work tomorrow afternoon after I've rested," he said, never taking his eyes off her as he said it.

"Severus, it's getting pretty late. I would be more than happy to help organize your ingredients if Hermione wishes to get some sleep. I've seen how you categorize your stocks, so..." Remus began, but Severus interrupted him with a roll of his eyes.

"As much as I *appreciate* your offer, Hermione is my apprentice, and as such she will have the privilege of this task. Not to mention the small fact that you do not *and will not* know the location of the lab. I relented when you forced the idea of using this manor as the new headquarters. The one satisfaction I gain from it is the knowledge that I can have absolute peace while I'm here. If you wish to summon myself or Hermione when we are in the lab, send out a Patronus. Now, Hermione, will be you able to do this tonight or not?" Severus said, effectively hushing any response to this "exile" that Remus might have made.

"I'll take care of it, Severus," Hermione replied quietly. The intense look that Severus was giving her was making her a little nervous.

"Very well. I'll see you tomorrow, then," Severus remarked stiffly as he tore his eyes away from her and exited out her door, leaving Remus oblivious to the fact that Severus had entered through his own room to begin with.

After a hasty "Good evening", Remus left Hermione to finish her meal before she headed down to the lab. Remus waited in a dark portion of the hall, out of sight, for almost an hour, hoping to follow her to the lab. When she never emerged, he finally peeked into her room and found her gone. He left to seek his own bed, wondering how she had managed that.

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Severus sank to his knees before the Dark Lord, as was expected of him, before rising and joining the others in the circle. "Severus has confided in me what actually happened this day at the Order of the Phoenix's headquarters. Therefore I will leave it to him to punish the survivors of this unsanctioned attack that set back his work for me. Severus, do you wish to toy with them first or just kill them?" Voldemort asked.

Severus, knowing the smart move all around, answered swiftly. "I believe toying with them first might help teach everyone here this evening what to expect if they disobey you in any way, my lord."

Voldemort smiled as he waved his hand for Severus to start their night of entertainment. As Severus raised his wand to deal the first bit of torture, he hoped that in doing something as horrible as this he might be able to get his mind off the apprentice who awaited him.

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Hermione couldn't help herself when she first entered the lab. Before getting to work she inspected the whole room from top to bottom, marveling at the absolutely perfect design and layout. *It must have taken him months to build this room!* she thought in amazement. When she inspected, she found only one cabinet that she couldn't open to use for storage. Upon waving her wand over it, she discovered that it was very heavily warded. While wondering what Severus would guard so secretly, she left it alone and started the task of sorting the ingredients into their respective places.

After an hour of hard work, she was finished and excited about this new lab. Not feeling at all tired, she retrieved her supplies and started working on her potion base for the "blood" portion of the Avada bomb. She was merely practicing the steps up to the point where one was suppose to add actual blood; since Severus had given her strict orders to not go beyond that point, she stopped the potion there and bottled it to give to Severus as proof of her ability to properly execute the potion with ease. She had already bottled eight phials of the base and set them upon his desk by the time he walked into the room around three in the morning. She didn't even notice his arrival, affording him a few moments to watch her closely as she concentrated on her work.

She had a little bit of moisture around her brow line from the constant steam her cauldron emitted. She alternated between chewing her bottom lip as she read a passage from the instructions to pursuing her lips slightly when she measured the ingredients and added them to the cauldron, and finally breathing slowly, in perfect time with her strokes either clockwise or counter. These actions were something he had noticed every time they worked together. Only one other person had ever aroused such interest in Severus Snape, and she was long dead.

Lily.

Shaking his head to clear it of such thoughts while telling himself that he needed to concentrate on work, he swept away from the doorway, startling Hermione. He quickly put away his Death Eater garb and looked closely at the phials she had waiting for him. With a wave of his wand, he tested each phial and smirked when the hazy blue color that appeared above the stoppers confirmed they were absolutely perfect. "I see you're ready to attempt the finished potion," he said suddenly. He rolled up his sleeves and approached her cauldron, making sure to keep a good amount of space between them.

"Thank you, yes, I'm ready for that. But shouldn't you at least eat first, maybe even get a few hours of sleep before you start cutting yourself?" she asked hesitantly as he pulled a dagger from the drawer next to her that housed an array of potions knives.

"Thank you kindly for your concern, but we are both awake, and now is better than later when we still have so much work to complete before the meeting," he said in his "bored" tone of voice, barely wincing when he cut deeply into the palm of his right hand. "Now, hold this phial very steady as it fills up. Good. When you pour it into the potion, make sure to pour it carefully and slowly, making sure that it doesn't splash upward while you mix it into the cauldron. It needs to look like it's disappearing into the potion... That's it. Now step back, it's about to bang," he said calmly, smirking at her shriek when the potion seemed to explode before settling nicely into a deep blood-red color that bubbled lightly over the heat. "Now remove it from the fire and start bottling it. It needs to sit for twenty-four hours before we can test its strength," he instructed while carefully healing his hand and setting up his own work station.

When she was done with the bottling, she started to pack up her area, often glancing at Severus as he began to work on his own base potion, the one that would contain the Avada Kedavra spell. "Is there anything I can do to help you with the Avada base?" she asked him hesitantly. She leaned on the table, watching him stir his cauldron with steadied, practiced movements.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Read through the section on the Avada curse, the section on bottling dangerous spells, and the section on combining bottled spells and body magic carefully. I need you to start listing the possible ways we should approach this. There are any number of ways to combine the steps, but there will be only one way to get the maximum effect without killing ourselves in the process. As you write out the procedures, contemplate everything you know about this potion carefully. I'll look over your notes tomorrow after we confirm your blood magic phials are perfect."

Hermione went straight to work. She made herself pay close attention as she studied the chapters and wrote down the problems they needed to avoid, making it easier to determine the order for the steps. She couldn't let Severus down by screwing this up, not when he was trusting her with something so important, something he had asked her to do that was so unlike him. Another occurrence for her to ponder later, when she was alone in her room.

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Molly Weasley tapped her foot on the carpet in an impatient manner as she scowled at Remus. Before she went to bed, she had mentioned to Remus that she wanted to talk to Hermione, just to check on her really. Remus told her not to bother, that Hermione was busy working in the lab. When Molly asked him where the lab was, Remus had told her truthfully that Severus refused to share that bit of information with him. So there they both sat, awkwardly waiting for Hermione to come back into her room. Two hours after sitting down huffily and refusing to leave, Molly heard the other door open and in walked Hermione, unmistakably from Severus's own bedroom.

Molly didn't know what to say, so she quickly managed "Is Severus in there?" as she shot up off the couch. Remus was close behind, an uncomfortable look on his face. Molly burst through the door Hermione had come through, startling Severus who was in the process of untying his shoes. She nearly slammed the door on Remus's arm when she quickly shut the door behind her before Hermione could manage to get through as well.

"What do you have to say for yourself? What exactly is going on here?" Molly asked Severus boldly, motioning toward the door that led to Hermione's room. Hermione could be heard knocking insistently on the door, wanting to add to whatever "discussion" was going on.

"I have no earthly idea to what you are referring, Molly. I certainly hope you have a good explanation for what I could possibly have done to cause you to come bursting in here to disturb me," Severus answered smoothly, continuing to untie and remove his shoes.

"I'm talking about your sneaking around with Hermione. Remus and I just witnessed her coming from your bedroom in the middle of the morning! Not to mention the amount of time you both have been hidden away in the house in a lab you tell no one else how to get to! What are you doing with that child? I demand to know!"

Severus was pissed, to put it mildly. "How dare you throw accusations like those at me? Not that it's any of your business, but there's a hidden entrance to the lab from this very room. That is why I created a door for her, so it would be easier for her to get to the lab and do her work! We've spent the last few hours working on a potion that could very well end this damned war and save your nosy little life!" he said stiffly, anger filling the room even though he hadn't raised his voice at all.

"This whole situation is just not right!" Molly persisted. "Hermione is a child. She's been through enough. It's just not fitting for her to be in such close and unsupervised contact with a man your age. I'm putting a stop to it right this instant, for her own good!"

Severus didn't even have a chance to answer before the door between their rooms blew off its hinges and crashed against the far wall, knocking Remus to the ground in the process.

Hermione entered the room swiftly, apologizing briefly to Remus before she whirled around to face Molly. "No, this is going to stop right now! First of all, I am NO child, Mrs. Weasley, so stop using that word because it will never be fit to describe me again! Secondly, yes, I've been through hell. I was tortured and raped repeatedly by that bastard Lucius! But I refuse to stand by while you try to 'protect' me from the world. We're in the middle of a war. The best way for me to contribute to the fight is to help Severus, which I WILL continue to do, without your or anyone's supervision! How you can think such things at a time like this I'll never understand, but it ends now. Severus is my boss, and also... my friend. I trust him with my life since he risked his to save it! Don't you ever question that in such a manner again!" she finished heatedly. She turned and stalked from the room, leaving the others in a mild state of shock after her outburst against Molly.

Remus, not knowing what else to do, said, "Well, I'll get this door back on its hinges, and then I'm off to bed. Molly, let me walk you out...."

Molly stormed out of the room, embarrassed but still believing she was in the right.

Severus sat down in the large chair near the windows after Remus left.

Her friend. *She considers me her friend*, he thought, remembering the fiery passion in Hermione's eyes when she had defended him to Molly. Something changed inside of him right then, though he would never admit it. He was starting to care for Hermione Granger deeply.

A/N: Wow... That is the longest chapter I've written in a while lol. I hope you enjoyed this update... Please read and REVIEW! *HUGS*

Tension

Chapter 12 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

It was around noon that Hermione finally gave up pretending to sleep and forced herself out of bed for a quick shower. While she tiredly scrubbed her hair, she kept thinking about the meeting and all it would entail. She knew there would be looks of pity and anger, confusion and even curiosity. She just didn't know how to handle them, despite the logical way... ignoring them. There really would be no way to ignore them when there would be so many people there. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Hermione toweled herself dry and stood before the full-length mirror that hung on the back of the bathroom door.

She studied herself carefully as she looked at her naked body. The front was almost as it should be, really. She was quite well put together for a young woman her age, with only the slightest hints of the scars at the very edges of her skin in the view. Taking a deep breath to prepare herself, she slowly turned her body, keeping her head still so that she could view the damage she knew would ruin her momentary fancy. Though the scars were not as red as they had once been, the raised texture of them cast small lines of shadow, insuring that the damage to her body would be seen for how truly bad it was. Hermione steeled herself and finished dressing, making a mental note to have someone remove the mirror before the next time she set foot into her bathroom.

She exited the bathroom and stopped for a moment when she noticed Remus sitting on the couch, eating off the tray of food that sat on the coffee table. She smiled lightly as she approached and quietly ate her own food that he had brought for her. "So... interesting little conversation we had with Molly last night," Remus said carefully, hoping to get the awkwardness of that situation out of the way before he said what was really on his mind.

"Interesting is not the word I would choose to describe her little diatribe last night, Remus. Nosy, delusional... now those might be more appropriate descriptions. I still can't believe she would deduce something so horrible from someone walking through a different doorway... no. Not to mention that if her fantastical theory were true, it would be bad. Who is she to judge? It's none of her business!" Hermione finished with a huff.

Remus tactfully measured his words before he spoke. "Hermione, you need to realize that with Harry and Ron gone, most of her family hardly present since we're all busy, you are a bigger focus for her 'mothering.' She thrives on being a mother, a caretaker if you will. So as any right-minded mother would, she deduced the worst just in case it was true... and in her mind she's scared some sense into the both of you. Now I know her assumptions were wrong, but it all comes down to her doing her duty as a mother. She would be lost without that, hence the 'mollycoddling' no pun intended," he said with a smile. "And since we're on the topic, may I inquire as to the truth of your feelings?" he asked carefully, putting up his hands to stall the obvious lecture he was about to receive. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to, and I know that it's none of my business. But as a friend I would like to be here to help you, if you need to talk. So...is there something worth talking about?"

Hermione glared at him for a moment and then grudgingly gave him a half smile. "Honestly? I think he's a good friend, albeit a strange one. It's really hard to tell at all if he feels the same, though I get the impression he does. Severus isn't exactly the type of person you can just be a friend to, you know what I mean?" she remarked, smiling when Remus nodded instantly in agreement. "I can say that I no longer think of him as my snarky old professor who used to torture me in class," she added, giggling. With a more serious face she went on to say, "No, Severus Snape is not your average friend. He's more than that for me. I think there's an invisible but very strong bond between us. Ever since that night when he rescued me from that hell-hole," she said, the last words so quiet that if Remus didn't have increased hearing due to his curse, he wouldn't have heard her.

Remus absorbed her words, then replied, "I can't claim such closeness as that with him, but from my years of experience trying to decipher his personality and moods, I can honestly tell you I have no doubt he thinks the same thing about you. Just remember not to take offense if he stiffens up and pushes you away. After the pain Severus suffered during the first war, losing the only true friend he had back then, he's more than likely going to tread carefully when it comes to letting down the wall he's built up. I know we all view him as one of the bravest wizards in this war, but when it comes to his feelings for others, he's weary of putting himself in a situation where he could experience such pain again."

Hermione nodded as she finished off her tea. She knew very well that men such as Severus were hard to reach for such reasons. And knowing that it was Lily that he'd lost, she could only imagine how truly pained he was by memories of her... all the more reason for Hermione to not push her friendship on him. After a few parting words, she left her room and headed straight for the lab, careful to not wake the still slumbering Severus as she opened the door.

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Hermione's face hurt from keeping up her fake smile. Her heart ached every time she caught a glimpse of sympathy from the various members of the Order. She had spent a mere hour working on notes for the meeting she was going to host when Severus had arrived in the lab and told her to put her work away and go visit with everyone that was present upstairs. She'd protested, claiming that she needed to work on her "speech," but Severus, being who he was, would hear none of it and banished her from the lab until she did as she was told.

When she first entered the enormous sitting room, she paled when she realized that nearly everyone in the Order was present and spread out among the twelve couches, twenty-something chairs, and four plush window seats. Schooling her features, she ignored how silent the room had become and went about the torturous job of saying hi to everyone. One by one Hermione drifted from fake conversation to even more fake conversation, well aware that each time she walked away to greet someone else she was followed by open stares and whispered worries. She had hoped that since the majority of those present were usually considered responsible adults, they would act as such; but the simple fact was that she was far too interesting for them to ignore. Hermione knew that beyond that, everyone really did care about her, but even the most well-intentioned person would be all the more likely to be unable to resist gossiping a bit... even about someone they cared for.

It was by the grace of Merlin that the first real gathering with "people," that had Hermione running towards the library an hour after entering the sitting room, was over. She didn't even pause to examine her surroundings when she entered the circular stairway that was only a couple of floors away from the lab. As soon as the mirror-door shut, Hermione sat down and cried.

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Severus's heart throbbed painfully as he listened to the crying coming from the library stairs. Several times he nearly dropped what he was doing, thinking to attempt some out-of-character rush to console Hermione, but then his normal senses returned and he told himself she wouldn't want him bothering her. So when he heard the obvious sounds of her footsteps, he tactfully concentrated on his work as she entered the room, honoring her pain by not embarrassing her with his knowledge of it.

Without looking up from the cauldron in front of him, Severus cleared his throat and said, "Now that all that useless consorting is finished, I would like you to get busy with your work. You'd better have eaten a good lunch, since I intend for us to work through the night. I need you to prepare all of the ingredients for the blood-magic base potion, but not with the small cauldron you've been using. I want you to make use of the twenty-gallon cauldron over there and make a large enough amount to stockpile. We'll need as much of the base as possible ready for the meeting so everyone can give us their blood. If we're going to start experimenting with our actual goal by the end of the week, we'll need as many phials as possible."

Hermione didn't even wait for him to finish his instructions before putting on her gloves and pulling back her hair. She shook off her crying fit as she immersed herself in one of the things she loved the most.

Work.

Severus smirked to himself, happy that he could help in that small way. A busy Hermione was a happy Hermione.

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Severus ate his food in silence, though his thoughts were nothing close to quiet. Hermione sat next to him eating from her own tray, both of them having grown quite famished by having worked until one in the morning without a break. As their work had progressed through the afternoon into the evening, Severus' mind kept going back to the night before when Molly had accused him of acting in a less than gentlemanly manner to put it nicely. At first thought it was laughable for him to even consider it. But after hours of thinking about it when he wasn't concentrating on specific tasks, the idea had him almost nervous. The last person who had so consumed his thoughts besides Voldemort had been Lily Potter.

This led him to this moment, one he had sworn he never would be at again. The moment when he wished he could vocalize his wish to associate more often with someone in a non-work related atmosphere. Severus, being as analytical as he was, knew his feelings were crowding him once more... and he was at a loss as to how to share them. So he did the only thing he knew how to do. He kept his mouth shut and decided that if by chance Hermione shared his feelings, he could wait until she made the first move. He just didn't realize how soon that would happen.

"Severus, I was wondering if we could do something other than hang out in the wonderfully equipped lab when we sit down to make our official game plan," Hermione said quietly, watching him carefully to see his reaction.

"What exactly did you have in mind, Hermione?" he asked just as quietly, curious.

"Well, let's go somewhere that isn't enclosed so we can breathe fresh air to help us think more clearly. I know you must have mastered the skill of overcoming the scented steam that constantly hovers over our heads, but I haven't. It's suffocating sometimes, and I think it would be good for us to be as clear-headed as possible when we work on the plan," she said carefully, hoping he would agree to think about it at least.

At first his mind entertained horrible memories of the last time she had gone on such a trip for work, but when he really thought about it, he knew that such a trip under the right and, more importantly, safe circumstances would be really good for her. Not to mention that it would give them both a chance to traverse the difficulty of becoming friends.

"Very well. I'll let you know after the meeting if I can come up with the perfect location that will stimulate your ability to help me plan. In the mean time we need to finish what we're doing and then make a list of our ingredients so I know what we need to replenish," he said, getting up from his chair with a flourish to continue working. Hermione did the same, and both of them did their best to hold back the faint smiles that threatened to burst onto their faces.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this update, as short as it was! I also hope you forgive any differences in my writing lol. I've noticed while re-reading chapters that my writing sometimes (at least to my eyes) changes a bit; mostly it depends on what I've been reading at the time. I will tell you as of a few hours ago I finished a four-day marathon reading 'Eragon' and 'Eldest'. So maybe for those of you who have read them yourself, you understand lol. Okay, I will quite rambling now so that you can get on with reviewing this chapter!!! "HUGS" ;p

Closer & Further Away

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

He was late on purpose. He knew it, she knew it. Hermione fidgeted as she waited for everyone to find a seat so she could get the meeting over with. When everyone was finally seated, Hermione gave a half-smile and tried to control the fidgeting of her hands as she started without *him*. "Well, um, thanks for showing up for this meeting. I guess I should start by saying that what I'm about to share with you is only a possibility, but something Severus and I have decided is worth our and your time." She cleared her throat, smiling on the inside when Severus quietly entered the room and stood unnoticed at the back, giving her a small nod of encouragement.

"A few weeks ago an idea came to me. First off, have any of you not heard of the Muggle nuclear bomb?" she asked, continuing when everyone nodded that they had. "Well, my idea is to create a Wizarding version of that bomb. We all know the measures Voldemort has taken to safeguard himself. So imagine if something like this were possible. Despite his best efforts, I believe he wouldn't stand a chance. *If* it were strong enough..." Hermione paused there while everyone started to murmur. Most of them sounded excited at the idea.

Kingsley raised his hand and asked, "How would you even go about making a 'wizard atom bomb'? I've read about those. Muggle scientists are the ones who came up with the idea, and from what I've read it's not only dangerous as a weapon, it's dangerous to make. What would you build it with that would make it strong enough to kill Voldemort?" There was a fresh outbreak of murmurs as the others wondered the same things and waited patiently for Hermione to fill them in.

"You're right, it will be dangerous to make. But we have Severus Snape, the most accomplished Potions master in all of Britain. He has assured me that we can overcome those dangers. As to how to make it? The process so far is very complicated. Part of the reason for this meeting is that we're at a stopping point until we receive help from all of you. To sum up our formula, we're going to combine the bottled Killing Curse with bottled Love. Now, I'm not talking about love potions, but the love that exists inside us all, namely our blood. We need all of you to give us phials of your blood that we will use in creating the final formulation of the 'Avada Bomb', as we're calling it. You'll need to do so again if we succeed. If this works, we will also be training a few of you who we know can handle it to go out and get phials of blood from any ally and victim willing. The more 'love,' the better, basically," she said, pausing for air after her long explanation.

"What made you guys decide to use blood magic as one of the bases of this bomb?" asked a curious Arthur.

"Dumbledore. He always told us that love was the one thing Voldemort didn't understand. Because of Lily's love for Harry, Voldemort was swept from his body. I just thought what if we combined a few hundred...if not thousand...bits of love and then combine them with the Killing Curse? It just seems logical to me. I don't think he could survive, and Severus agrees. Which is why we're working really hard at perfecting this... at making this a reality," she finished smoothly.

Everyone broke out into excited conversation. Many of them got up and either hugged, congratulated, or asked Hermione where her wand and the phials were. Hermione smiled as she retrieved the crate full of phials and started, one by one, bottling their blood. Severus smirked as he made his way up to the front and helped her bottle the Order's love. He was happy to see her almost normal again. This scene of excited, happy people was exactly why he had wanted Hermione to give the presentation. He knew that bottled love was the strongest when the giver was happy and excited. When they were done, they had a little over sixty bottles of love for the testing phase.

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Severus calmly swept into the room and bowed before the Dark Lord's feet. Receiving permission to stand and join the others, he got up and proceeded to pay close attention to Voldemort's lecture. When the majority of the Death Eaters had been dismissed, only those considered most loyal remained for further instructions. Voldemort beckoned Severus forward; after kneeling a second time, he faced the Dark Lord, his mind firmly sealed against the invading red stare.

"Severus, how goes the work on the *Depreciare* potion?" Voldemort asked him quietly. The few other Death Eaters scattered about the room stepped as close as they dared towards the Dark Lord, hoping not to miss a single word of this exchange.

"It goes better, my lord. Though I am not as close as I could have been. I have definitely figured out the sequence up to four of the ingredients. The other nine should come along smoothly, I think. Like I've said before, it's simply a process of elimination. Now that my apprentice is somewhat recovered, my work should move along more swiftly. I have very high hopes that I will have it finished for you before you're ready to make your move," Severus replied, forcing images to the front of his mind of his feeling of satisfaction at having figured out the fourth ingredient. Satisfied that things were as good as they could be given the setback that Malfoy had caused him, Voldemort dismissed everyone with a promise to call on them again soon. Severus skipped the usual gathering, knowing that in the Dark Lord's eyes he would merely appear eager to finish his "work".

Severus made a few stops on the way back to his manor, hoping Hermione would still be up and ready for their outing. *Now is the time to plan*, he thought as he closed his eyes and Disapparated.

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Hermione was busy writing with her quill when Severus finally came back and quietly put away his Death Eater garb. She watched him and wondered if he was okay as he went about the room gathering things into one of his magically expanding bags. One of his ingredient bags, she noticed. The very thought of it made her stiffen a bit. Choosing to ignore that feeling, she hesitantly asked him, "Are you leaving again so soon? Is he sending you on some mission or something?"

"Nothing of the sort, actually. You requested before that we talk about our strategic planning out of doors. So we will. While we plan our next move, we'll kill another bird with the same stone and collect fresh ingredients to replenish the stocks. I mean for us to be gone for an entire day, so I hope you don't mind camping," he said, trying to ignore the faint color that now spread across her face.

She was so scared by the idea that she could barely get her voice above a whisper to reply, "I don't think I can go."

Severus stopped what he was doing and walked towards her. When he was less than a few feet away, he stopped and looked into her face, his mere presence forcing her to look into his. "Miss Gran Hermione. I realize a trip like this will bring back old memories, painful ones. I realize you can choose to stay here and ignore it. But I believe it is in your best interest to face such fears. I assume you will be joining the rest of us when the final battle ensues?" he asked, nodding at her when she nodded her own head.

"If you truly want to fight at your friends' sides, it would be best to prepare yourself by overcoming the fears that have resulted from your capture. The first one you can conquer by entering that very same clearing again. Then you will have to reconcile yourself with seeing those who took you from the clearing to seeing Lucius Malfoy again. I promise to help you in any way I can to move past those fears, but you have to help yourself as well. I will be with you tonight. I've already gone ahead and doubled the wards. Nothing is going to happen except the harvesting of herbs and the planning of our potion. Will you trust me with your safety this evening? Will you let me help you?" he asked, hopeful that she would pull on her bravery and say yes.

Hermione couldn't help the smile that graced her face at the earnestness of his request. Suddenly feeling much braver, she turned around and headed for the stairs up to their rooms.

"Where are you going?" Severus asked, incredulous.

"I'm going to pack an overnight bag and find my book on outdoor spells. You just can't go camping without it," she said, heading up the stairs to do just that. Severus smirked, pleased that she was going to push through her fears but also happy that she trusted him to help her do it.

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Less than fifteen minutes after leaving the lab, Hermione was holding her bag and on the point of heading for Snape's room when she turned and saw that he was already there in her doorway, waiting. He waved her through her door into the hall, and both of them walked silently next to each other for a moment. "I've taken the liberty of informing Remus that we're to be gone for a whole day. He has assured me that he'll refrain from interrupting our strategizing unless something drastic happens. Also, I left him with the book on binding body magic; he promised to study the chapter on binding blood magic. He did rather well in Potions, though not as well as me, back in our own days at Hogwarts. He agreed to ask a few other members who show the least bit of ability with potions. He will make sure those who are qualified will start their own studying so they won't be a waste of our time when we teach them the actual process," he said, trying to understand the strange feelings inside him as they approached a safe Apparation point outside in the grove. He would have denied the truth had anyone suggested he was feeling nervous or anxious.

"So, um, is there a faster way to get to the meadow without stopping off at the edge of Diagon Alley like I...like I did before?" Hermione asked quietly, wanting to get the feeling of dread over with and just *get there*.

"Hold on to my arm tightly. We'll use Side-along Apparation. I created the wards so that only I can arrive there without resorting to the long route," he said, feeling a little unsettled as she tightened her grip on his arm. With a crack, both of them vanished.

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Severus watched Hermione closely as they set up a Wizards' tent and organized their gear inside. Hermione agreed when Severus said they might as well get the herb gathering over with his excuse to get her out into the meadow to work, and to hopefully overcome her fear. Severus directed Hermione to an abundance of chamomile while he chose to harvest Blessed Thistle. They worked close together, both of them not daring to speak a word: Hermione because she was barely controlling her breathing, she felt the exposure of the meadow wash over her, Severus because he knew she needed to conquer her fear on her own. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Severus suggested they get something to eat out of the picnic-style basket he'd brought along. So as the sun set, they entered the tent and quietly ate their food. Both of them unsure of what to say. Both of them content to share silence. Both of them fighting their feelings of unease. Though neither would admit even to themselves that the unease had little to do with the danger of the world they lived in, but with their complicated thoughts and feelings for each other.

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Ron and Harry were tired and dirty, but very happy. They had just sent off the second "Victory" note and now they rested by a roaring fire, eating their meager fare. "So how do you think... everyone... is doing?" Ron asked quietly, wishing he was at his mum's dinner table right then.

Harry smiled. "I'm sure Hermione is keeping herself quite busy as Snape's assistant. You know her; she strives to outdo everyone's expectations."

"I still wish there was someone else who could have been trained. I mean, here we are, and Hermione's stuck up in a stuffy room with our most hated Professor," Ron remarked, his face turning to a grimace at the mere thought of spending all day *every day* with Snape.

"You forget that Potions was one of Hermione's favorite subjects. Despite the dingbat, I'm sure she's having the time of her life," Harry said, hoping to reassure his best friend of Hermione's happiness, something Harry noticed more and more that Ron was thinking about.

"Well, as soon as this war's over, I say we take her with us on some kind of vacation. It'll be just the three of us again."

Harry smirked and asked, "What about Ginny? I wouldn't want to leave her behind. I miss her the way you miss Hermione."

Ron frowned at his friend and mumbled something. Harry asked him what he'd said, and Ron replied in a louder grumble, "I'm still not sure what to think about you and my sister having... feelings..."

Harry laughed and clapped Ron on the back. "Honestly, Ron, would you rather it was me or some other bloke you don't even know dating your sister?"

Ron frowned and replied, "I'd rather she be a spinster... But if she's going to date anyone, I guess you'll do."

Harry smiled at Ron, both of them settling into a peaceful silence, both thinking about the girls they had left behind.

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Hermione was having a nightmare; that much was obvious as Severus got out of his bed and headed across the vast tent to Hermione's "room." He had been startled out of his sleep when he heard her whimper. But he had expected something like this. He carefully pocketed his wand after lighting the lamps and shook her shoulder gently. She bolted up with a cry and scooted as far away as she could from the hand that had touched her, the hand that in her dreams violated her in ways she was desperate to forget. It took a moment before she realized she'd been dreaming, and the hand actually belonged to a worried Severus Snape, who had woken her. With a sob building in her throat she crawled over to where he sat and wrapped her arms around him, the tears and anguish consuming her as she sought the solace of safety in his arms.

Severus sat there frozen, his arms halfway around her, unsure of how to handle this Hermione... the broken Hermione. Clearing his throat, he said awkwardly, "You're awake now, Miss Gran Hermione. It was just a dream."

Hermione sniffled and replied in a crackly voice, "I know it was just a dream, but it was horrible. He was... touching me again. It felt like I was still there in that room... I felt dirty again."

Severus stiffened, the image of what she just described causing him to tighten his lax hold on her. His normal self-preservation went flying out the window as his emotions stirred. He cared deeply about this young woman. But he didn't say that out loud. All he said was, "If it's the last thing I do, I promise you that Lucius Malfoy will plead for death before I actually kill him. I promise. You'll never have to fear him again."

Hermione smiled at Severus and lay back down in bed to try and sleep. As much as she hated to let go of him, she knew he was a very sensitive person. The last thing she wanted to do was cling to him, lest it scare him away completely.

Severus went back to his side of the tent and spent the rest of the night thinking about Hermione, Lucius, the Avada Bomb, and his Dark Master. He couldn't for the life of him remember the moment when everything had become so complicated.

A/N: Well, I hope you liked this update... I think it was a bit slow at times, but everything that did happen was necessary. Please read and review... And if it's not to late, don't forget to add your voice and vote in this year's Dobby Awards! *HUGS*

Withholding The Truth

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Hermione stretched languorously as she slowly awoke from her sleep, her mind automatically flying to thoughts of Severus and how he had comforted her during the night. As she slowly sat up and looked around to see if he was in the tent, she wondered how she should act. Happy that Severus was not inside the tent, Hermione swiftly went to work and got changed, choosing a comfortable periwinkle-blue tee-shirt and pair of jeans from her knapsack. As she changed her clothes, her movements slowed down as memories of Severus holding her close while she cried flashed before her eyes. *Should I ask him about it?* she wondered briefly as she started to slide off her pajama pants and pull on the jeans. Only to shake her head as she lifted her nightshirt over her head...always a tough feat in the morning when her hair tended to be a bit bushier from sleep... and pulled the tee shirt over her head. *What are you thinking, Hermione? Severus is just a friend; he would never...it's just not plausible...oh Merlin, what AM I thinking?*

Hermione was so engrossed in her own inner squabble that she never realized Severus had entered the tent. He froze for a few moments as he realized she was changing; then, nearly overcome by the mesmerizing scene before him, he bolted as quietly as possibly after regaining his senses.

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Severus strode away from the tent across the meadow and started harvesting Lena Berries as if he was a robot performing a programmed function. He hadn't meant to walk in on her changing, but it was too late to lament it. When he had allowed himself a mere few moments to gaze at Hermione as she'd slid her pajama pants down her legs, he had become quite inflamed by the site of her young and beautifully put together body. And when she had removed her shirt, only to pull another on, his thoughts had run unchecked before he came to his senses and did what any other decent person would have done.

He'd fled as fast as his feet would carry him.

He had barely even noticed her scars. All he had seen was his greatest temptation since his school days. Since Lily. As he tried to shake the enticing images of Hermione from his mind, he scolded himself for allowing his mind to wander in such directions. As if on a normal basis he was above his human instincts. The fact was that Severus Snape didn't have much of a history with women. Sure, he'd dabbled a little here and there with a few random doxies in his younger years. But since the trio's first year at Hogwarts, when it was evident that time was the only factor before another war started, he had cut himself off from such trivial pleasures. He was not someone who could consider a future with someone. But now, as he carefully filled the bags, enchanted for a greater capacity, with the Lena Berries, he realized that for the first time he actually had someone in front of him whom he could almost see a future with.

At that thought Severus dropped the bag and actually started to chuckle at himself. At length, shaking his head, he gathered his things and moved on to the red clover, determined to not let his imagination run away with him. *I'll probably die in this war...not to mention the glaring fact that someone like Hermione Granger would never develop any sort of feelings for someone like me,* he thought, and he set his mind to work again.

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When Hermione emerged from the tent to join Severus in their work, he greeted her with a stiff 'Good morning' and ignored her for the first few hours. And then the only words that escaped his mouth were brief and snarky corrections on her technique. Hermione began to wonder if she could have dreamed the events of the night before. Resolved to find out what was bothering him, she asked him timidly, "Severus, is something wrong? You seem to be in a rather... aggravated... mood."

"Nothing that a few extra hours of sleep wouldn't cure, Miss Granger, I assure you," he replied carefully.

"I thought we were on a first-name basis... Professor," she stated simply, wondering if he was sickened by the act of having comforted her last night.

"Forgive me...*Hermione*," he countered sourly.

Hermione stood up, dropped her cutting knife and bag of ingredients on the meadow floor, and glared at Severus, her hands clenched at her sides. Severus in turn stood up and glared right back. "Try to be careful with those, will you? Snaring Weeds do not grow as quickly as other herbs," he chastised, stooping to pick up the bag and checking to make she hadn't damaged them.

"Severus, what happened between now and last night that has you acting so cold toward me again? Did I... repulse you or something? Has comforting me made you so bitter and irritable?" she asked vehemently.

"I don't have any idea what you are speaking of, Miss..." he started to reply, only to be cut off by her huff of outrage.

"It's *Hermione*! And you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. We're supposed to be friends; there's nothing wrong with what you did for me last night! When are you going to grow up and let someone get close to you for a change instead of hiding behind your position...your pride?" she spat, a single tear dropping from her eye.

Severus was shocked, to say the least, but he didn't let that stop him from responding with equal vehemence. *Hermione*, I don't know what's caused this little tirade of nonsense, but it stops *now*. Finish your work so we can get back to the lab. There are more important things to discuss, to accomplish. You'd be a fool to waste your time on a man like me!"

Hermione's face drained of all anger and filled with sadness. "Don't you understand?" she said as she stepped forward and shoved his shoulders with as much strength as she could muster, her eyes pleading with him to understand her. "You're the only person who truly understands me, who's seen the worst of me...has seen me *broken*. No one, not even Remus, will ever know me as well as you. You're my only true friend. Yes, I have Harry and Ron, but they'll never understand the changes in me. I don't want them to!"

Severus glared at her before lowering his eyes in shame... in fear, and quietly saying, "Hermione, you do not want me as a friend. I will likely die before the end of this war. Why get close to someone you'll just lose?"

Hermione reached out and slipped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest as she hugged him. "I know that it's possible either of us could die at the end of it all; but that doesn't mean I'll prevent myself from enjoying the now... with my friend. And you *are* my friend, Severus Snape," she said quietly.

Severus froze for a few moments while he adjusted to the overwhelming feeling of Hermione holding him so closely. Albeit reluctantly, he chose to ignore the fear inside of him, choosing instead to hold her back.

Hermione sighed in what she could only think of as relief when he wrapped his own arms around her in turn.

"What are you doing to me, Hermione?" Severus asked, not really expecting an answer, his voice revealing the conflict of his emotions. They held each other for a few moments before quietly letting go to finish their work. Though they didn't speak of it, they both knew they had reached a sort of truce. What remained to be seen was where exactly the truce would take them from there.

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As the afternoon sun shone brightly, a quiet Hermione and Severus returned to the Manor and went their separate ways. Hermione gave a shy smile as she walked in the direction of her room; Severus nodded and went straight to the mirror in the library. Though neither of them acknowledged it, they knew a bit of time to themselves was needed; or rather, Severus needed it after their eventful trip.

To most people an open declaration of friendship was not something they would say was particularly eventful, but for Severus Snape it was a big occurrence indeed. As he shut himself up in the potions lab and carefully put away his ingredients, Severus thought over the events of the past twenty-four hours. The image of Hermione willingly wrapping her arms around him while declaring how much she cared about him was something he could not push from his mind. Though if he admitted the truth to himself, he did not want to.

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Hermione was so absorbed in her notes that she didn't hear Remus when he knocked and cautiously came into the room. He cleared his throat and said, "Sorry to bother you, but I thought you might want to know...we've received the third 'victory' note from Harry and Ron."

"Oh, Remus, that's wonderful! That means that there's just one Horcrux left," Hermione replied, ecstatic that her friends were doing so well on their mission.

"It shouldn't be long now until they return home; then we can put a final plan together," Remus replied, hope for everyone's future lighting his features.

"Remus, when they come back, how do you think they'll respond to my... capture?" Hermione asked, setting her quill down and watching him closely.

"Hermione, you know them better than I do," he responded. Then, realizing the truth was what she was looking for, he said, "I'm sure they will both over-react at first, but once they calm down they'll just want to be there for you."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," she said sadly. "Could you do me a favor, Remus?"

"Of course, Hermione. What do you need?" he asked, suspicious about what she might ask of him.

"Do you think you can... tell them when they get back? About what happened? Without me around?"

Remus sighed and sat back in his seat, giving Hermione an almost guilty look as he replied, "No, Hermione, I can't do that. You're their friend. Their best friend. They would want to hear this from you."

Hermione sat back in her own seat and looked at her lap. "I can't do it, Remus. They won't react the way I... need them to."

"Well, that's just the way they are. When they over-react about things, you need to remember that they only do so out of love for you," he said simply, hoping to encourage her.

Hermione looked at him for a moment, her eyes almost glazed as she imagined quite clearly just how they would react, what they would say. "Remus, I can't tell them. And I won't," she stated firmly.

"You would let them find out what happened some other way? By overhearing members of the Order mention it offhandedly in conversation?" he asked with a frown that showed his disappointment in her.

"No. I'll talk to the Order personally at the next meeting. Besides, when they get home the last thing we need is for them to wrap themselves up in some rash plot to kill Lucius. They need their heads straight. Not telling them is for the good of the Order, as well as for my own personal sanity," she retorted stiffly.

"Hermione, since this is about something so horrible, it's up to you in the first place. But I'm telling you now, you'll hurt them if you keep it from them," Remus said, standing up and heading for the door.

"No, it will hurt them and all of us if I tell them...at least... until after it's all over. I'm sorry, Remus, but I've made up my mind," she said to his retreating back. She flinched when she heard the door close behind him, though it did not slam.

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Hermione controlled her breathing as she tried to focus on the words Remus was saying. The meeting of the Order had been going on for nearly an hour already, and still he had not yielded the floor.

Having gone over everything that was written in his notes, Remus sighed and asked the room at large, "Is there anyone here who would like to take the floor? If not, at this time I will call this meeting to an end." Remus frowned when Hermione stood up from her chair in the back and made her way forward. "I give you over to Hermione," he said morosely as he stepped aside, flashing a look of annoyance in a bewildered Severus's direction as he wondered if his influence had led Hermione to her decision.

Hermione nodded in everyone's direction and cleared her throat. "...um... I'm here today to ask a very serious favor of all of you. As you know, Harry and Ron are likely to be home soon from their... assignment. I've thought about this, and I hope to have everyone's word. I would like all of you to refrain from mentioning what... happened to me. At all. I realize this seems coldhearted of me, since they're two of my best friends, but in all honesty nothing good can come of them knowing before the end of the war," she said, leaning against the wall as she waited for the murmuring to quiet down and ignoring the few frowns aimed directly at her.

"Please, everyone, you all know Harry and Ron as well as I do. They over-react to things, putting themselves and the rest of us in danger when they fly off to do something rash. For the sake of our war effort, it's best not to tell them. I will honestly add that I am not ready to tell them as yet anyway," she said, holding her hands up and ignoring the urge to cry as she tried to get their attention again. "Look...at the very least, please acknowledge that what happened to me is my own business and that you haven't the right to say anything in the first place. I'm asking you to accept my wishes and acknowledge the wisdom of this request. Please," she finished lamely.

Molly Weasley and several others nodded their heads in agreement; the rest of the Order just looked at Hermione disapprovingly as they slowly left the Manor to get on with their jobs and assignments. Hermione, feeling completely overwhelmed, went through the door behind her and fled to the potions lab.

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Severus glared at the few who lingered long enough to discuss Hermione's request; most of them stated that they didn't think she had a right to hide things from Harry and Ron. Before he could walk over to bully them into agreeing with Hermione, Remus approached and asked him for a word in private. Severus followed Remus to the overly large kitchen.

"Severus, did you have anything to do with Hermione's decision to keep her... capture... from the boys?"

Severus nearly snarled at Remus as he replied, "I most certainly did not. Though I can't fathom why you would disagree with her reasoning. Not to mention the fact that she is right...it's her business and no one else's."

"Severus, they're her friends; don't you think it wise for her to tell them? They could help her cope with it better than any of us," Remus said heatedly.

"Lupin, you're a fool. Haven't you realized that Hermione is coping quite well despite what's happened to her? Surely even you can see that she's right. They *will* fly off the handle and do something stupid once they find out. *Unless* they are not told until after this bloody war is over and Malfoy is either dead or in Azkaban. Do you not believe

that after everything she's endured she has the right to cope as she sees fit and delay telling two people who will likely lose all sense? They may be her friends, but they're still too immature to handle such news in a dignified and helpful way."

Remus glared at Severus. "Fine. I see you're siding with her. As I've told her, I personally will not reveal her capture to Harry and Ron. But I hope when they do find out, it doesn't hurt her far worse than if she was to tell them sooner."

Severus turned around and left Remus alone, heading straight for the lab. He knew the best thing that he could do for Hermione was to keep her busy working on the Avada Bomb.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this chapter! So sorry for the long wait. Please read and review! *HUGS*

Harsh Obligations

Chapter 15 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus kept looking over at Hermione as they worked on the sequencing of the Avada base. She was thorough in her work, but there was something about her manner, and the fact that she'd said hardly a word all morning, that had Severus wondering what she might be thinking. Fed up with guessing, he put down the silver knife he was using and stared at her intently until she finally raised her head and gave him a questioning stare in return.

"Yes, Severus?" she asked.

"Out with it, Hermione. What's been going through that mind of yours that's prevented you from saying more than three words together since you entered this room?"

Hermione set down her quill and looked at him as she answered. "I've been thinking about the potion. If it works as well as we hope it will, there's a problem we need to figure out before the battle.

He just looked at her, waiting for her to go on.

"Severus, how do we go about keeping all of us safe when the potion is thrown at Voldemort? I've made the calculations, and if they're correct, anyone within two hundred feet of Voldemort will die."

Severus' eyes widened as he realized he should have thought of this "snag" himself, and much sooner. They'd been so excited by the idea of the Avada Bomb that they'd overlooked how to keep all of the good people safe from the blast. "You're right we need to have some plan in place to prevent our dying as well. What comes to mind immediately is for everyone to Apparate out of the area after the person who's thrown the potion does so. But how would we coordinate such a mass Apparation? Not to mention we have to take into account that the Dark Lord is more than likely to have some very powerful wards against Apparating at all," Severus said, his mind going over the scenario and wondering how they could manage to come out of the battle alive.

"Well," said Hermione, interrupting his thought process, "would Voldemort likely set up wards against Portkeys?"

"I should think not. He has control of the Ministry; therefore, I believe he would overlook such wards, since in essence he controls all the *official* Portkeys," Severus replied smoothly.

"Well, why don't we make sure each and every one of us has a Portkey? We can all just Portkey away the moment the potion is thrown."

"Interesting idea, but how would we coordinate everyone's safe exit? I doubt there would be time for the person with the potion to signal everyone and expect them to run to some Portkey for safety. And the person who throws the potion will be in the most vulnerable position. Such a plan is unlikely to ensure the safety of their life," he remarked, wondering who would be willing to sacrifice their own life for the good of the Wizarding community.

"Well, the only thing that makes sense is for everyone to have his own Portkey. Every last one of us! We can make them small, something that can be worn as a necklace, under our clothes. So that it's always touching our skin," she said, wondering how many they would need.

"As lovely as that idea is, Hermione, how would we control so many Portkeys? They have to be activated by someone who has working knowledge of the Portus spell."

"Well, can't we charm them all to activate at the same time? Something like a Protean Charm mixed with a Synchronizing spell. We can get one person to hold a master Portkey and Disillusion them, with the sole purpose of activating the Portkeys at the right moment," Hermione said, thinking over all the possible complications. She wondered if there was a hole in such a plan. Severus spent several moments going over her idea, searching for holes himself.

"The only problem I see with this plan, which is quite intuitive, is the question of where the Portkeys should be set to take everyone when they activate. It would be unwise to all leave the battlefield together. It's likely there will be some Death Eaters or some other creatures of the Dark Lord's outside the presumed 'safe zone.' We need to *know* where the battle will happen, where the Dark Lord plans to stand, so we can charm the Portkeys to take us a hundred feet or so outside of the safe zone," he mused, wondering how they would achieve such a victory.

"How much information do you think you could persuade out of Voldemort? Because if you can't get him to state his plans for the battle, we need to force his hand and set the battle time ourselves. Either way it will be dangerous to set up, but it's our only option," Hermione said, resting her head on her hands as she mentally went over every detail even more carefully.

"Persuading the Dark Lord to reveal his plans is nearly suicidal, even for a Death Eater in my position. Our only choice is to prepare for both. We'll have to set several Order members to prepare a battlefield of our own choosing. If by some miracle I find out what he has planned, then we can prepare that one as well. Overcompensation is the only option when so many lives are at stake. Also, how are we to protect these Portkeys and guarantee that everyone wearing one will be moved safely?"

"That's simple enough. We can cast some powerful shield charms on the Portkeys themselves, and a semi-permanent Sticking Charm to make sure the Portkey is actually touching skin. Like you said, overcompensation is the only way."

Severus smirked at her (the look almost passing for a smile) as she started to write down their whole plan so Remus and the others could start arranging their Portkey-to-safety plans. Before he could comment on how great her thought was, his left forearm started to burn with Voldemort's summons, and Severus hissed.

Hermione looked up at him, her quill dropping to the table as her eyes widened in fear. She slowly straightened and he looked at her for a moment before approaching his desk and retrieving his Death Eater garb from the top left drawer. "Be careful, Severus," Hermione said quietly. She watched him pull the robe over his head and properly store his wand up his sleeve. When he stood there ready, his mask in his hand, he looked at her for a moment before giving in to his desire to comfort her. He walked slowly over to her and put his arms around her in an awkward hug.

"I will. Get those plans to Remus and the others while I'm gone. We have no way of knowing for sure how soon the end will come, but I will do my best to stall things at my end."

Hermione nodded against his chest and let go as he pulled away and left the lab to go to his Dark Master. It was several minutes before she managed to drag her eyes away from the doorway, and she continued to write out their Portkey-to-safety plan.

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Severus, mask and thoughts in place, bowed before Voldemort and kissed the hem of his robes before standing at his side and waiting for Voldemort to speak. The room contained only those who were most trusted, so Severus knew something was up.

Voldemort leaned forward on his throne and addressed them all. "I have called you all here tonight because we have work that needs to be done. We have been quiet as of late, and the general calm in our world is going to certain people's... heads. They assume we are weak or otherwise troubled, and I intend to show that we are still to be feared. I have decided that a few raids and attacks on the right people will benefit us greatly in the near future. Before the night is out, we will strike a blow at the Order of the Phoenix, and even the Ministry itself, that will scare even those who live outside of Britain. Now, as to the attacks themselves, this is what I want of you...."

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Hermione rubbed the moisture from around her eyes as she looked up from the bubbling cauldron to check the time once again. It was a little after four a.m. and Severus still had not returned. Something about the unexpected summons did not sit well with her, so she had decided to stay up until he returned. Looking back at the potion in front of her, she carefully lowered the flame and set the cauldron on a cooling pad so she could bottle it. That was when the indistinct shape of Remus' Patronus came bounding into the room and opened its mouth. In Remus' hurried voice it said, "Come quickly. There have been several attacks. Bring all the healing potions you may have."

As the Patronus faded away to nothing, Hermione stared in horror at the place it had been. Then she shook herself and quickly gathered all their healing potions, pastes, and several books about healing. She hurried up the stairway into the library and was assaulted by screams, tears, moans, and urgent voices echoing down the halls. She quickly followed the noise until she reached the ballroom, which had previously been dusty and dark. Now the room looked as if it had been hastily scrubbed and brightened with many candles, like those from the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Laid out on conjured tables were nearly twenty people who had been injured. Mrs. Weasley and Remus circulated around the room, doing what they could to stave off the worst of the injuries.

When Remus spotted Hermione, he rushed over to her and took several phials of Blood-Replenishing Potions from her. He said, "Can't explain just circulate and do what you can to help those closest to the door; they seem to be worse off than the rest."

Hermione nodded and set the box of potions on a table near the door; then she pulled her wand out of her sleeve and started to diagnose the person closest to her.

-Two Life-Threatening Injuries:

Severe loss of blood

Cracked skull

-Ten Non-Life Threatening Injuries:

Fracture of left cheekbone

Extensive emotional damage

Eight bruises on various limbs

As Hermione read the list over and Accio'd the Skele-Gro and Blood-Replenishing Potion, she briefly noticed that the witch she was treating was an Auror who had been to a few Order meetings but was usually too busy to attend. Hermione carefully lifted the woman's head and poured first one, then the other, potion down her throat while massaging her neck to help the potions go down. When the bottles were empty, Hermione cast a skin-stitching charm that would leave a scar but would at least prevent her head from bleeding any more as the Blood-Replenishing Potion went to work. Satisfied that the woman's other injuries could wait, Hermione went to the next person and the next.

Broken bones, deep gushing wounds, collapsed lung, poisoned, burned those were just some of the many horrible things Hermione helped to heal as best she could as a few more Order members trickled in, bringing more wounded. After several hours of working nonstop, the wounded tended to as best they could be, Hermione, Remus, and Molly sat down on a bench near the main door for a few moments. They looked out with pained faces at the many people they had helped while waiting impatiently for news about the attacks.

"Remus, what do you know? What's happened? Where are the others?" Hermione finally asked.

Remus leaned his head back against the wall and rubbed his tired eyes as he replied. "Kingsley showed up with two of the injured and informed us that the Death Eaters attacked the Ministry tonight. Several minutes later a few Order members from Hogsmeade and Godric's Hollow showed up with more wounded. It seems Voldemort has kept the Death Eaters busy tonight. So far three people have died at the Ministry, two died in Hogsmeade, but luckily no one we know of in Godric's Hollow."

Hermione let that sink in, knowing that with three such horrible attacks in one night they were extremely lucky the death toll wasn't higher. But of course, the night wasn't over. "Remus, have you or Kingsley heard anything from Severus?" she asked timidly, afraid to hear the answer.

"No. We assume he had no way to warn us. Kingsley mentioned that one of the other Order members swore up and down that Severus was there and saved his life without being found out, but we won't know for sure until he arrives himself."

Hermione looked down at her hands, smudged with dirt and blood from her work, as she thought about Severus *It must be terrible to participate in such attacks with no way to stop them or warn people without giving yourself away*, she thought sadly. With a shake of her head to clear away worried thoughts of Severus and his plight, she stood up and stretched.

"I'm going back to the lab to start brewing more supplies. Several of the injured will need more potions and such in the next few hours, and we're all out of Blood-Replenishing potion. If you guys need me, just send out another Patronus," she said as she headed for the doorway. Stopping next to it, she turned and looked at them. "Please let me know when Severus gets back." With that said, Hermione left Remus and a sour-faced Molly to go and brew the required potions.

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Severus limped through the quiet hallways of Prince Manor and quietly looked into the ballroom after hearing several voices from the open doorway. No one noticed him, since he'd disillusioned himself after Apparating onto the grounds; he watched a weary-looking Remus talk with several of the injured. Thirty-seven people lay on conjured beds in his ballroom, he noticed after doing a head-count. A total of fourteen were dead that he knew of. Three he had killed himself in an effort to prevent further suffering, as his fellow Death Eaters were inclined to torture first and kill later.

Severus cringed as the faces of a fellow Order member and two Muggles flashed before his eyes yet again. Faces filled with pain, confusion, and most prominently, fear. Exhausted from the long night of horrors, he left the doorway and made his way slowly to his room. All he wanted for the moment was to shed his Death Eater robes and wash away the blood and filth that seemed to weigh him down.

When he reached his room, he went straight to the master bathroom and closed the door, locking and warding it so he could be sure he wouldn't be disturbed. Careful not to further aggravate his wounded leg, Severus threw his robes off and stepped into the shower. The water gave off heavy steam as it cascaded over his weary body; the runoff that drained beneath his feet was dirty and tinged with red from the blood.

The large gash on his leg stung from a combination of the heat and soap; but Severus didn't care. He felt as if he deserved every bit of pain. After washing thoroughly, he leaned his arms against the shower wall and just let the water wash over him as he tried to block out the images of the attacks. He tried to imagine what he could possibly say to the Order. Especially Hermione. They knew, as did he, that with his precarious position as a spy in the Death Eater ranks, there would be times when he would have to participate in evil-doing in order to help them stop it for good.

But tonight had been different. Not since the night Lily and James Potter had died protecting their son had he felt so... wrong. The self-hatred he felt made him sick to his stomach. *I want it to end* he thought desperately as the water washed over him; he ignored the fact that it had grown cold in the last few moments.

Finally moving from his silent, grief-stricken stance, Severus left the shower and dressed in a simple pair of black pants and black shirt. Un-warding and unlocking the door to his room, he slowly made his way to the bed and collapsed. The last thought that went through his mind was that he would need to explain his lack of warning to the Order. But at the moment he was far too upset and exhausted. Without even healing himself first, he fell into a fitful slumber.

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Hermione bit her lip as she carefully poured the last of the healing potions into a phial and stoppered it. With a careful flick of her wand, the cauldron was wiped clean and neatly stored on the proper shelf. She stretched her neck while walking toward the stairs. The moment she entered Severus' room through the mirror, she froze. He was laid out on top of the covers with his mouth slightly open, deeply asleep. With careful movements she slipped off her shoes so she wouldn't make any noise and crept over to the bed. She waved her wand over him to see if he was injured in any way.

-Zero Life-Threatening Injuries

-One Non-Life Threatening Injuries:

Deep gash on shin of left leg

Leaning over him to make sure he was still sleeping deeply, Hermione waved her wand, carefully creating a slit in his pant leg. With a quick look at his face to make sure it hadn't wakened him, she cast a stitching charm on the gash and watched as his skin laced itself back together. Satisfied that he remained asleep, she re-sewed his pant leg with another wave of her wand and then just stood there for a moment, looking at his face as he slept. It was lined lightly with the stresses of his life. His eyes moved sporadically beneath his eyelids as he dreamed. With a sigh, Hermione conjured a chair and ottoman next to the bed and made herself comfortable. As she settled down to watch him sleep, she slowly fell into an exhausted slumber herself.

A/N: Thank you so much for reading! Please remember to review... *HUGS*

Things Have Changed

Chapter 16 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Hermione awoke, the bang of Severus's conjured glass slamming onto the night-table accomplishing what he had intended. She stretched her limbs, looking over at him. Severus sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. Cautiously, Hermione went to sit beside him and slowly put her hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay? Do you need something?" she asked him quietly.

"Why are you here? Why do you even care if I might need something? You shouldn't have bothered healing my leg. I deserve every bit of pain that's given to me," he replied nastily. Hermione pulled her hand back and looked away.

"I care because you're my friend. I care because no matter what you've done, I know you do it only out of necessity..."

Severus hissed and stood up. He turned to face her with a glare that would have intimidated even the meanest student. "Necessity, you say. You think of murder as a necessity, one that I may be forgiven for doing in the name of war?"

Hermione scowled at him as she rose to her feet and advanced on him. Poking her finger into his chest, she countered, "This is war, Severus. I know you well enough to know you haven't *murdered* anyone. You might have saved someone from terrible, prolonged agony, but you haven't *murdered* anyone. You haven't killed anyone who wasn't dead to begin with! I can't honestly say I understand how hard this role is for you, but that's no reason to be nasty with *me*, your *friend*. But for the sake of our friendship and your *sanity*, bring it on. Give me everything you've got so you can get it out of your system and get back down to the business at hand!"

Severus stood there for a moment and then did something he just couldn't prevent...he reached out and grasped both sides of her head and pulled her into a fiercely passionate kiss. Hermione was frozen for only a moment before she wrapped her arms around his waist and gave as good as she was getting. It was several moments before Severus finally pulled away, just an inch or so, and rested his forehead against hers, both of them breathing deeply after moments of not breathing at all. "Thank you, Hermione," Severus said awkwardly.

Hermione stood there in bewildered silence as Severus let her go and went into his bathroom and locked the door. With a gentle touch of her fingertip to her swollen lips, Hermione walked slowly into her own room to get ready for the day. As she closed her door and locked it with a flick of her wand, her mind could only form one thought. *What was that about?* she thought, astounded.

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Hermione controlled her breathing and chastened herself as she made her way to the large dining room where the Order was meeting. She chose a chair at the back of the room and avoided looking at anybody. She knew Severus wasn't there yet, but she also knew that as soon as he joined them her face was likely to turn a color that would shame a red rose.

Sure enough, the moment she noticed his silent entrance she blushed and looked away from him. During the brief moment when their eyes connected, she saw the smirk hiding behind his carefully serious visage. Severus stalked to the head of the table and called the meeting to order.

"I asked Remus to let me speak first so I could apologize for my failure to warn you all about what happened late last night. There was no way I could have warned anybody without giving away my position as spy. I know it will not comfort most of you when I say how truly sorry I am for my... part in the attacks."

Severus looked around the table, his eyes meeting a few sad faces, a few angry ones, but for the most part the Order was still in shock over the heavy blow it had received. "Fourteen good witches and wizards gave their lives yesterday. Thirty-seven were injured. But despite our great loss, we have to press on, if only to honor those we have lost," he said, bowing his head in a moment of silence. When he lifted his head, he pulled his wand from his pocket and the list of Portkey instructions from his other pocket. With a quick copying charm, a stack of the instructions piled up before him on the table. With another wave of his wand, they flew around the room to land in front of each person present.

"What you see before you is our final plan for the battle. Miss Granger and I have developed a strategy to get everyone to safety after the Avada-Bomb is thrown at the Dark Lord. We will need two volunteers. One person will need to make the Portkeys himself. Another will need to be our safeguard at the battle. This person will need to stand, Disillusioned, with the sole purpose of activating the Portkeys at the precise moment the bottled Avada-Bomb leaves Potter's grip...assuming he agrees to be the one who throws it. This person will have our lives in his hands. Are there any volunteers?" Severus asked, glancing around to see if anyone would raise a hand.

All the members looked at the sheets of parchment they had been given and considered the task before them. "I'll do it!" Molly finally replied firmly.

Severus nodded in her direction. "Very well. Now, who will volunteer to make the Portkeys? They must all be charmed with the spells listed on the parchment before you. It will be a painstaking task, and one that needs to be finished as soon as possible."

Remus and Hestia both raised their hands, agreeing to take on the task.

"Very well," Severus said with a flick of his wrist, recalling the parchments from everyone who had not volunteered. "Be sure to prepare yourself, Molly. Remus, Hestia, if you follow me after the meeting, I will show you to a room that has the supplies you'll need. Remus, the floor is yours."

Remus stood and took the spot at the head of the table, turning to face the room. "Before you leave, I would ask all of you to take a few moments to help us with those you brought here after the attacks last night. Some of them are well enough to go home, some will need to go to St. Mungo's. Others should recover just fine and will be given beds in the spare rooms upstairs. Molly will direct you as to who will go where. Also, I want to share this letter that came by owl just this morning. It's from Harry and Ron," he said happily.

Several people in the room began talking quietly, but Remus held up his hand for silence so he could read the letter.

Victory! We are coming home. Give us time to get there safely. We are tired, so make sure the ghoul is shut up properly.

Love, Harry and Ron

Molly started to cry, and the others exclaimed how happy they were that Ron and Harry, were safe. Arthur left the room immediately, dragging the tearful Molly with him. It was obvious that they intended to head for the Burrow in preparation for the boys' return.

Hermione smiled at their departing figures, then met Severus's blank stare. Remus cleared his throat and formally dismissed the meeting.

When Severus rose from his chair and swept out of the room, Hermione was swift to follow.

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When she entered the lab, she immediately went to work brewing more potions for the few wounded who would be staying at the Manor.

Severus looked up at her several times, but it was obvious that she didn't feel comfortable talking after their previous encounter. He put down his black eagle owl quill and walked over to her; he leaned his backside against the table next to her, arms folded, and waited for her to acknowledge his presence. He smirked, imagining how funny this might seem to her since this was how their whole association as Potions master and apprentice had started out in the first place; only now their roles were reversed.

Hermione sighed, put down her chopping knife, and looked up at him. "Yes?" she said, her voice betraying her nervousness.

"I think it might be prudent to discuss what happened this morning. Firstly, if I have offended you or overstepped some boundary, I sincerely apologize. Personally, all I have to say for my actions is that your passionate plea for me to vent as I wished... well, it caused a rather surprising reaction. But the way you responded to my actions leads me to believe you did in fact enjoy it."

Hermione smirked at him and replied, "Yes, I enjoyed what you did. It was a surprise to me as well, but I can truly say you didn't overstep anything. I'm still a bit stunned, but happy nonetheless."

Severus looked at her for a moment, and something was communicated between them more deeply with piercing looks than if anything had been said out loud. "Very well. Just for future reference, if I were to approach you again in such a manner, would you be receptive? Or would you rather we both kept our distance for the time being...especially since two people who care for you deeply, but loathe me, are to arrive soon?"

Hermione cocked her head to the side. Harry and Ron had been the last thing on her mind just then, but she realized it was smart of Severus to consider how her friends might react to whatever it was that was going on between him and Hermione. "It's very likely they wouldn't be happy to find us snogging in a corner somewhere. Since this development is so new, would you agree that we should keep any actions to ourselves for the time being? Besides, knowing you as I do, I imagine you'd rather not share something so personal with the lot of them anyway, at least not yet. Agreed?"

"Your reasoning sounds sensible to me, Hermione. And you're right, I would rather we avoid the tantrums that would ensue if they were to find us...as you say...snogging in a corner somewhere," he replied with a smirk, lightly grazing her chin with the tip of his finger. That simple act in and of itself startled the air out of her lungs. Her eyes focused on his intense gaze.

Severus and Hermione looked deeply at one another for a few moments before Hermione, her skin crawling with nervousness, cautiously lifted her face and pressed her lips ever so gently against his. Severus was shocked by her overture, but he didn't let that stop him from deepening their second kiss. Both of them held each other closely as they explored this new facet of their relationship. An unknown amount of time passed as they enjoyed the feeling of their passion. It was only when the timer for Hermione's cauldron alerted them that they finally pulled apart, both of them gasping for air.

"Well, it seems we have some work to attend to. Might I be so bold as to request a postponement of our... explorations?" Severus asked her, the tone of his voice

promising a thrilling encore.

Hermione smiled as she picked up a silver stirring rod and started to blend the bubbling brew in counter-clockwise movements. "Yes, you may request a postponement," she replied, a chuckle escaping her when she thought of his adorable request.

Both of them retreated into their work. Neither bothered to mention Harry and Ron's homecoming. Later that night, after a dreamy goodnight kiss, they went to their respective rooms to sleep, though neither could avoid thinking about the sudden change between them.

The last thought that crossed Severus's mind as he drifted into a contented slumber was of the young woman who had turned his world upside down.

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"Mum! I'm starving," Ron bellowed as he brushed the ash from his clothes just before Harry appeared in the fireplace behind him and did the same.

"Ronald! Oh, my sweet Ronald! And Harry, dear! You're both home...and safe!" Molly sang happily as she rushed forward to hug and kiss them both. "Oh, look at you both! You've grown so much...and you look so peaky! Don't worry, my dears, I'll fix you some *good* food...it must have been rough out there on your own without proper meals for so long. Why don't you have a bath while I prepare you something? You're a bit ragged-looking from your travels," Molly said, the words rushing together in her effort to baby them both.

"Molly, dearest, give them a break. They've only just arrived, and I'm sure they'd like to relax for a bit," Arthur said as he came forward, pulled Molly off the boys, and hugged them himself.

"How was your mission? We received the letter, but naturally you couldn't divulge anything in case it was intercepted. I trust you were safe from any real danger while you..." Arthur began, only to be interrupted by Molly.

"Now who's pestering them? Honestly! Why don't you come tell us all about the mission while you sit and have something to drink in the kitchen? I can cook you something while I listen," she said insistently, pushing Harry and Ron in the direction of the kitchen. As soon as they were seated she served them some tea and biscuits and started to put a meal together.

"Mum, where's Hermione?" Ron asked curiously. "Harry and I were hoping she'd be here waiting for us," he said, his tone of voice reflecting his disappointment.

Molly pursed her lips disapprovingly as she busied herself with preparing the meal.

Arthur cleared his throat and answered for her. "She's busy at the moment, but she did want to be here when you arrived. You can see her when she has a moment tomorrow; in fact, I believe she plans to spend her lunch with you both at the Manor."

"Manor? Since when is Grimmauld Place called a Manor?" asked Harry, a confused look on his face.

"Oh my, Harry, we forgot you didn't know," said Molly, sitting down for a moment to address them both. "Harry, Grimmauld Place was destroyed in an attack not long ago. We had to relocate the Order; luckily Severus had an old Manor that not even Voldemort knew about. After the attack at Grimmauld Place, we salvaged what we could, but it wasn't much. The few things we were able to save are in boxes at Prince Manor," she finished quietly, waiting for the blank look to disappear from Harry's face, for him to respond to the news.

"No one was hurt, were they?" he asked quietly.

"Not that day, no. Have you two heard about the attacks that happened yesterday? I don't know if you've kept up with the *Prophet*, but attacks took place at Hogsmeade, Godric's Hollow, and the Ministry."

"Who... died?" asked Ron, his freckled face pale. "Hermione wasn't hurt, was she? Is that why she wasn't here? Mum?"

"No, Ron, she's fine. She's just busy with her... work, as I said. We did, however, lose fourteen people in the attacks, and thirty-seven were badly injured. Hermione was at the Manor with Remus and me when the injured came in, and with her help we healed them as best we could. But after things settled down, she had to spend extra hours brewing more healing potions since we'd run out...and that's in addition to the hard work she's been doing on the Avada-Bomb she and Severus created," Molly replied.

"Avada-Bomb? She created a bomb? Mum, why don't you start at the beginning while you make us that food? Obviously we've missed out on a lot, but I really am starving," Ron said so seriously that Harry and Arthur laughed while Molly chuckled and got up to finish preparing the meal. It was with rapt attention and a lot of questions that Harry and Ron listened to everything that had happened while they were gone. *Almost* everything. Molly and Arthur exchanged brief looks and skipped over the part about Hermione's capture.

After eating two large helpings of turkey sandwiches, fried potatoes, and fried squash, Harry and Ron went to bed; both of them were exhausted, but excited about being home.

The last image Ron saw in his head was of the happy reunion with Hermione that he expected to have the next morning.

A/N: I hope you guys have enjoyed this update. I was a bit 'iffy' about certain parts of it... but after re-reading it several times, I can't think of a thing I would want to change.

Please Remember To Review!!! *HUGS*

Awkardness & A Memory

Chapter 17 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Hermione jolted awake at the knock on her bedroom door. Peeking at the clock on her nightstand, she grumbled and pulled the cover back over her head. *Who in their right mind would be bugging me at eight a.m.? I thought Severus said he was going to pass on the message to let us both rest late without being disturbed unless there was an emergency,* she pondered. Suddenly she sat up and called, "Just a moment!" She reached for her robe and belted it around herself, straightening her hair as best she could, and headed for the door.

Hermione and Severus had stayed up until nearly four a.m. working on the base potion with a whole thirty minutes spent creating suitable "memories" to show the Dark Lord. With a last look in the mirror, she opened the door, only to be bowled over and knocked to the floor from the force of the two hugs that enveloped her. She panicked for a moment before she realized it was Harry and Ron. Both of them pulled back and sheepishly helped her to her feet. "Nice to see you too," she said grumpily as she tried her best to keep the pain from showing on her face from having landed so hard on her back.

"Hermione, we've missed you! And guess what we've decided to kidnap you for the whole day!" Ron said happily. He helped himself to a seat on the little sofa, putting his feet up on the table that was strewn with books and parchments from her research.

Harry less rudely sat down in one of the chairs across from Ron.

"It's great that you're both home, but I'm afraid I don't have time to let you kidnap me. Severus and I are busy with a very important potion you'll have to ask Remus all about it and there simply isn't time for a break. We're actually pretty close to finishing the base, and "

"Hermione, we haven't seen you in months! Can't Snape spare you for a day?" Ron protested.

Hermione put on the best forced smile she could muster. "Look, I've missed you both, too. But this is really important, to all of us. I can visit with you for lunch, but that's it, okay?" she replied, taking in the disappointed looks on their faces. "Look, I've got a few minutes right now since Severus isn't awake yet, so why don't you tell me how your trip went?" Hermione offered. She sat down in the other chair and fidgeted uncomfortably under Harry's searching gaze. *He knows something is wrong,* she thought, a little panicked.

"Hermione, since when do you call Snape 'Severus?' What's happened that has you fidgeting as if you were waiting for your OWL results?" Harry asked her. Ron frowned as he looked at her more carefully, suddenly wondering why he hadn't noticed anything.

"I don't know what you're talking about nothing's happened. I mean, there was this horrible attack the other day, but other than that I've been busy helping Severus. And since you seem to have forgotten, I'm Severus' apprentice. As a courtesy, he's allowed me to address him as Severus. I actually think he just prefers it to 'Mr. Snape' since he's no longer a professor," she said with a bit of a smirk. Her face had visibly brightened at the mere mention of Severus' name.

Harry stared at her, his eyes going almost squinty as he tried to understand what had lit up her features briefly. *Surely Snape wouldn't do that?* he thought, revolted at the idea. "Well, since we're home, is there anything Ron and I can do to help you? That way maybe you can get your work done faster and spend some more time with us," Harry offered.

"Actually, there is something you can do. Remus and Hestia Jones are in dire need of help in creating enough charmed Portkeys for our battle plan. I'm sure they would welcome your help. Remus can show you exactly what to do, since it's a bit delicate and critical that it be done correctly," Hermione replied. She got up and went into her closet to pull out some simple clothes to change into after her shower.

"Hermione, Harry and I want to spend time with you. Can't we help you with something in the potions lab? I know we've never been good at mixing, but we've been decent at chopping and sorting ingredients and such," Ron said, a hopeful look on his face.

"Ron, Severus doesn't uh allow anyone but himself and me to enter the lab. This manor is his and he reluctantly let the Order use it...but he prefers to keep that room to himself. He only showed me where it was because I'm his apprentice. But like I said, we can visit at lunch, and Remus and Hestia *really* need your help."

"Fine. What a welcome home this has been. Let's go, Harry, *Hermione* needs to get back to *work* with Professor Dingbat," Ron said spitefully.

"Ron, she really does sound busy; you don't need to act like a prat!" Harry replied, giving Hermione an 'I'm sorry, you know what he's like' look.

Hermione avoided looking at Ron as he left the room, slamming the door on his way out.

"Hermione, I'm sorry we were just hoping to have more time to hang out after being away for so long. I understand you're busy with important stuff, but if you can find some spare time, we have really missed you," Harry said simply, his face showing the disappointment he too felt over their reunion.

"I know, I've missed you too. It's just that...some things have changed. The war is escalating, and there simply isn't enough time for 'fun' or hanging around. There comes a point when you have to grow up a bit and concentrate on the important things," Hermione replied defensively.

Harry looked at her for a moment, observing that she still radiated an unusual nervousness. "Hermione, there's something you're not telling us. Something's happened and don't tell me it's the recent attacks. What's going on?" Harry asked, approaching her and holding her shoulders to make sure she stayed facing him.

Hermione shook off his hold and walked over to the large windows overlooking the orchard and greenhouses. "There's nothing to tell you, Harry. Now, if you could give me some privacy? I need to take a shower to help me wake up before I go to the lab. I'll see you both at lunch, okay?" she said dismissively.

Harry looked at her for a moment, his face plainly indicating his disbelief that there was nothing she was hiding. "Okay, I'll see you later, Hermione. Just please remember that we're friends; there's nothing you should feel you have to hide from me," he returned sadly. He left the room and closed the door quietly behind him. The moment it closed Hermione fell to her knees and cried.

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Severus looked up from his notes when Hermione finally joined him in the lab. He'd heard her rude awakening and the conversations that had transpired afterwards, including the sound of her crying. It had taken a strong effort to resist entering her room to comfort her, but he wasn't used to dealing with sobbing women, especially ones who were of interest to him. So, figuring she would be better off without his lame attempts to comfort her, he had gone ahead to await her arrival in the lab. While he waited, he'd formed a plan that he hoped would be helpful to her.

"Hermione, would you please gather your harvesting tools? We're in need of several ingredients before we work on the base today. It shouldn't take more than four or five hours, then we can work on the base this afternoon and into the evening. I think you were right in hoping that we've nearly completed the base. In addition, after those attacks we're in dire need of replenishing the basic ingredients for healing potions," Severus said evenly as he completed his notes and started to gather his own tools together.

Hermione felt a wave of relief flood over her, especially after what had transpired that morning, when she realized she would be able to avoid the awkwardness of visiting with Harry and Ron during lunch. "Just give me a few moments to gather my things and, um, would you mind leaving a letter for Remus and... the others? Just so they know we had to go and will be back later?"

Severus nodded and replied, "Yes, I'll take care of notifying them of our plans. I'll meet you upstairs in ten minutes, then."

Hermione hurried up the stairs and quickly gathered her collection bags and tools, putting them in a knapsack that was spelled to hold an enormous weight without being so heavy a person couldn't carry it.

She entered Severus's room just as he sent a letter flying out of his room, like the Ministry's inter-office memos. "Hold tight, now," he warned, a slight smirk gracing his face as she wrapped her arms around his waist instead of just grabbing hold of his arm. With a whoosh of his cloak as he turned them on the spot, they both Disapparated with a crack.

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"They took off? Remus, what the bloody hell is going on with Hermione? She said she was going to at least spend time with us during lunch and then she just leaves? She didn't even send us the note herself, she had *Snape* do it!"

"Calm down, Ron. I'm sure she would have stayed if she could, but as you can tell, things are quite hectic at the moment. Severus and Hermione... have been working nonstop for months on this Avada-Bomb. You've got to realize how trivial it is to complain about her not hanging out with you when there's work to be done. Hermione cares about what she's doing. It was her idea; she can't just leave it to Severus to accomplish. Besides, she's his apprentice, and with that responsibility comes a lot of hard work. Even if there was no war on, she'd be busy with her apprenticeship. Be sensible," Remus replied, exhausted with Ron's less than mature ranting.

Ron slouched down into his chair and mumbled something. "What was that, Ron?" Harry asked.

"I said I was hoping to...ask her on a date. I've been looking forward to coming home for months, just to see if things might develop a bit between us. I was willing to make a fool of myself so she'd truly know how I felt about her."

Harry, his brow raised in incredulity, responded with a censorious, "You want to prove how much you care for her, yet the first thing you do when you see her is act like a prat just because she's busy developing a brilliant potion that could save our lives and end the war?"

Ron scowled and put his head in his hands. "You're right, I blew it. You don't think she hates me, do you? Do you guys think I still have a chance?"

Remus couldn't believe how ridiculous Ron was being. He had hoped that being away for months on their own, accomplishing a mission that was dangerous and complicated, would have made Ron and Harry grow up a bit more than they appeared to have. He shook his head tiredly.

"Are you two really going to help Hestia and me? If so, follow me so I can explain the spells and charms to you. We've only made a fraction of the Portkeys we'll need, and the sooner we get the job finished, the better for us all," Remus said. He walked out of the room, leaving them to follow.

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Severus and Hermione worked diligently to gather the ingredients. All the while, they discussed the pros and cons of their sequencing for the Avada base and had already discovered a better way to approach their work. As Severus listened to Hermione's logical train of thought, he couldn't help noticing how well she was handling being at the meadow. The moment they arrived, Severus had taken the liberty of a quick kiss on her lips before they separated and went about their work.

He refrained, as they conversed easily, from mentioning Harry and Ron. As thoughts of them entered his mind, he started to wonder how things would change now that they were home. Before they had left, Hermione, Ron, and Harry were nigh inseparable. They had spent months holed up in the library researching everything they could get their hands on about Horcruxes with only the occasional break for a quick game of Exploding Snap, something that had irritated him no end. The lab at Grimmauld Place had been next door to the library, and the sounds of small explosions had forced him to put up silencing charms so he could concentrate on his work.

Severus was also worried that the boys' return would distract Hermione from their work, in essence taking her away from him just when he was beginning to want to spend time with her. Severus stopped his train of thought right there, mentally scolding himself for worrying about such things. *Though this new development has been exciting, there are more important things to worry about!* he thought grumpily. He looked up when he heard Hermione call his name loudly.

"Severus! Are you okay?"

Severus smirked. "Yes, I'm quite all right. I've just been mulling over a few things in my head. Nothing to worry about," he replied easily. "Well, I think we have what we need to continue with our work. Shall we head back to the Manor? If you're hungry, I can stop off in the kitchens to get some food and bring it down to the lab."

Hermione smiled. "As nice as it would be to sit down and enjoy a meal with you, I've already missed lunch with the boys. I really should make an appearance so they won't disturb us later. But you're welcome to join us," she offered, smirking at his scowl.

"As much as I've come to enjoy your company, Hermione, I'm sorry to say that I will never want to willingly 'join' you when you are with those two. In fact, I think I just lost my appetite," he finished, feigning an upset stomach and holding his hand to his waist. Hermione laughed and walked over to hug him tightly.

"Don't worry, I understand that you'd rather not spend any time with them. They feel the same way. I'll be sure to bring you a plate when I come down from dinner, shall I?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Yes, that would be... lovely. And please don't take overlong. Not only do we have a lot of work to do on the potions tonight, but... I was rather hoping for a few moments of time alone with you," he replied carefully, smiling in triumph as her breath left her and a look of passion came into her intense gaze. With a sigh of contentment, Severus leaned down and joined his lips to hers, both of them enjoying each other for a long time. It was just after dusk when they finally pulled apart and gathered their things.

After a loud crack confirmed their Disapparation, a tall, cloaked figure rose from his uncomfortable seat on the ground, sore from sitting there for so long, and also Disapparated from the edge of the warded meadow.

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Hermione spent an hour filled with many awkward silences and even more questioning looks with Harry, Ron, Remus, Molly, and Arthur. After finally feeling she could sneak away, Hermione fixed a plate of food and made her excuses.

After she'd left the room, Harry looked at Remus and the others. "What happened to her while we were gone? She just isn't... the same. You three have to have noticed how distant and nervous she is around Ron and me," Harry said, a look of determination on his face as he waited for an answer.

Remus, Molly, and Arthur shared an uneasy look. Molly tapped Arthur on the arm and, ignoring Harry's question, stated, "Well, we really do need to get home. Are you two going to be staying at the Burrow or here? I do wish you'd stay with us."

Harry looked at Molly and replied, "I'll be there later, if you don't mind. But I'm not leaving this kitchen until one of you explains what exactly it is that we're missing about Hermione."

Molly and Arthur left in a hurry, Arthur stating plainly that some things were none of their business and cautioning them to leave Hermione alone.

Remus, who had also begun to get to his feet, sighed and summoned a bottle of Firewhisky. He resettled himself in his chair and poured himself a two-finger glass. "Harry, as much as I would like to inform you of certain... events... Hermione has asked for everyone to respect her privacy and keep it to themselves. I suggest you take it up with her, though I doubt you'll get far."

Ron leaned forward, his face angry, and asked, "What happened to Hermione? What are you all hiding from us her best friends? Why is she refusing to share it with us?"

Remus looked at them both and wondered, himself, how Hermione could keep something so big from her two best friends. He thought momentarily of Sirius keeping to himself the fact that he'd switched his position as secret keeper with Wormtail at the last moment when protecting Harry's parents. Though that event and what had happened to Hermione were completely different things, Remus still didn't like the idea of helping her keep something like this from two people who could likely help her

cope with it all.

Returning from his inner thoughts, Remus stated simply, "I'm sorry. It's not my wish to keep it from you, but I will respect hers." Remus finished the rest of his glass and left them to get some sleep.

Harry and Ron talked for a while before finally deciding to head to the Burrow. Tomorrow they would officially start making Portkeys with Remus and Hestia, so they knew it was important to get some sleep before then.

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Hermione worked alone late into the night. As soon as she had reached the lab, she'd found it empty except for a note from Severus, stating that he had been summoned and would likely not be back for hours. Finally, around three in the morning, he returned and told her he was going to bed and suggested that she do the same. He was dirty and tired, so Hermione didn't question his abruptness. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and wished him a good night's sleep.

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The next morning Harry and Ron awoke to a black owl tapping incessantly on the window, a small package tied to its leg. Ron opened the window, and the owl swooped in and landed on Harry's arm. As soon as Harry untied the package, the owl dug its claws into his arm, drawing blood, and flew out of the room. "Stupid owl someone needs to train that one," Harry said grumpily as he healed the cuts and vanished the drops of blood from his arm.

"Who's it from, Harry?" Ron asked eagerly.

Harry's brow furrowed as he read the simple 'Harry Potter' written on the packet in shining black ink. "I don't know, it doesn't say. Do you think we should open it?"

Ron waved his wand over it, performing a few spells they'd learned for their trip. When he detected no curses or hexes, he replied, "Go ahead the spells didn't detect anything Dark or dangerous."

Harry carefully unwrapped the small box and opened it to find a small phial with a bright, swirly-looking liquid. "It's a memory! But who from?" he said. He scrambled into his trunk and retrieved the Pensieve he had stored there, left to him by Dumbledore.

After pouring the memory into the Pensieve, Harry and Ron both lowered their faces into the cool, liquid-like substance and watched in horror as Hermione, their best friend, was viciously raped and tortured.

The last image they saw before retreating from the horrible jumble of memories was the person that the memories belonged to: Lucius Malfoy, smiling wickedly into the mirror.

A/N: Whew... there you go, a long and interesting chapter... with a bit of a cliffy at the end thrown in for good measure. *Smiles* Please remember to read & review... and don't worry, I will write you guys another update soon... lol.

Reactions & Success

Chapter 18 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Harry and Ron were both speechless as they sat there, absorbing the horrible memory. With a sudden rush of anger, Ron leaped off of the bed and rushed down the stairs. He was almost out the back door when Molly hailed him. "Ron, where are you going at this hour? You aren't due to be at the Manor until ten."

Ron stopped and looked back at his mom. Molly grew worried, as she perceived the look of fury that emboldened her son's face. "Ronald, what's wrong?" she asked as Harry came running down the stairs after hurrying through putting on his shoes to catch up to Ron.

Harry walked over to Ron and answered for him. "We're going to confront Hermione. We know what happened to her, and we want to know what's been done about it...besides her keeping it from us!"

Molly paled and sat down. "Harry, Ron, you can't confront Hermione. It was her express wish that you not know, at least not yet. It was her wish to not tell you, not only for her own peace of mind but also for your own. She didn't want you two to do anything... rash."

"What has been done, then? Is Lucius dead?" Ron asked, his voice trembling.

"I believe Severus has taken care of things as best he could. It's a delicate situation all around...Severus has to protect his status, so he couldn't kill Lucius. Lucius is too well protected otherwise," Molly answered carefully, gauging their responses. They looked even angrier.

Harry and Ron went straight for the Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. First Ron, then Harry stepped into the green flames and shouted, "Prince Manor!"

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"Harry? Ron? What's happened? Are you okay?" Remus asked when he got a good look at their expressions as they stepped out of the flames and carelessly dusted off some of the soot.

Harry didn't even bother to answer but pulled out his wand and sent his Patronus out of the room at breakneck speed. Ron paced back and forth in front of the fireplace.

"Harry?" Remus asked again.

"We'll wait for Snape to get here. I want to speak to him about this since we've been told he was the one to take care of things *as best he could!*"

"Ron, what's going on?" asked a frustrated Remus, turning to Ron in an attempt to get some information.

"I'm with Harry...we wait for him," Ron spat in reply.

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Hermione and Severus were just about to start the process of combining their successful Avada base with the Bottled Love when suddenly a stag Patronus leapt into the room and opened its mouth wide with a furious sounding, "Snape, get up here right now!"

Hermione's eyes widened as she listened to the angry resonance of Harry's voice giving such a message. "Wh-what's the matter? Should I come up too?" she asked, worry and suspicion clouding her thoughts. She just knew that it was about what had happened to her.

Severus put down the phial he was holding and swept toward the door. "No. I'll handle this...whatever it may be. I'll be back shortly," he replied as he left the room, unconditional fury etched on his face at the interruption.

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Moments later he entered the room where Harry and Ron waited and slammed the door behind him. He looked as if he could kill them on the spot as he spat, "What in Merlin's name is the meaning of this? Hermione and I were about to start the process of combining the two bases together...a very dangerous step that must not be interrupted. You could have killed us! I specifically stated that no one was to interrupt us today unless the Dark Lord himself was attacking!"

"What happened to Lucius Malfoy after he... assaulted... Hermione? How has he been punished?" Harry demanded, without a single care for Severus' temper.

Severus looked taken aback for a moment. But he was still furious, even more so now that he understood why they had summoned him. "I don't have time for this. Let's just say he'll never again enjoy the company of a woman. That is, at least until he's killed in the final battle...which is one of my personal goals on that eventful day."

Ron looked at Severus and nearly screamed. "You castrated him? That's all? Why didn't you *kill* him?"

"You stupid child, I did not castrate him. I gave him a potion that in essence kills his libido permanently. And no, I did not kill him because frankly I do not seek death for myself so willingly. To kill him now would be suicide. And I regret that I even have to remind you how keeping me alive is an advantage to us all!"

"Then tell us where we can get to him! We'll do it!" Harry said forcefully.

"Don't be so blatantly immature, Mr. Potter. Surely you realize how well protected Malfoy is. The Dark Lord himself stays at that Manor now and then ~~he~~ created the wards, which allow only those he chooses to enter the grounds at Malfoy Manor, wards that hold unauthorized trespassers in place. A Cruciatus curse is tied to those wards that can not be released until Malfoy or the Dark Lord himself arrives to see who's been caught. Needless to say, anyone caught in that web will *wish* they'd been caught because if no one is home they will die of the Cruciatus curse! *Furthermore*, Malfoy is constantly surrounded by other Death Eaters. So by all means, if you wish for death, give it a try. Otherwise you'll have to wait in line at the final battle to be done with him!" Severus bellowed at them.

"Why do you suddenly care so much? When did you start to care about anyone at all besides yourself?" asked Ron, his face red with anger.

Severus slowly walked toward Ron, a malicious smile twisting his face when he saw the fear in Ron's eyes as he was marched backward into a wall. Severus raised his hand and clasped it tightly around Ron's throat. Harry and Remus started to pry Severus's hand away from Ron, but Severus had put up a shield charm with his free hand too quickly for them to even finish their first steps.

"Don't you *dare* question me in such a way ever again! I have given my life, and more than your little brain could ~~ever~~ comprehend, to the cause of bringing that *bastard* down. And if you value your life, you will refrain from running off to attempt to murder Lucius Malfoy. You will not go anywhere near Hermione until you calm down and can speak with her without showing off your utter ignorance and disregard for decent behavior! Do you understand me, Mr. Weasley?" Severus said through clenched teeth. He glared at Harry, next to Ron, and asked him, "Do you understand as well, Mr. Potter?"

Ron nodded his head, avoiding Severus's intense glare. Harry nodded as well.

"Good. Now do not disturb me again unless someone is bleeding to death...or about to be," Severus snapped as he released both his hold on Ron's neck and the shield charm and left the room.

Remus, Harry, and Ron were all quiet for several moments after Severus' departure. "Next time, please speak with me first; that way we can avoid scenes like the one we just witnessed," Remus said carefully as he poured himself a glass of Firewhisky.

Harry and Ron finally sat down. "Fine. Tell us what you know. Are there any lasting... injuries?" Harry asked cautiously.

"If I tell you, will you both promise to keep it to yourselves? Hermione has not shared information about her injuries and the after-effects of her capture with the Order. I'm sure she would still rather not talk about it at all, even if you do know what happened," Remus said. When Harry and Ron both gave him their word, he spelled out in detail everything that had happened, from the moment they realized Hermione was missing to the moment Remus found her asleep in the library after she found out she would never have children.

Harry asked lots of questions, and so did Ron. But after it was mentioned that she could no longer have children, Ron grew quiet and left the talking to Harry and Remus. Harry barely noticed his reaction, but Remus did. It was with a frown on his face that he watched Ron leave the room with Harry so they could start their work on the Portkeys for the day.

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Severus watched Hermione as she chewed her lip nervously while she brewed what appeared to be another batch of the Bottled Love potion. He cleared his throat as he stepped into the room and stated, "I've taken care of the disturbance upstairs. If they know what's good for them, no one will interrupt us again while we attempt to combine the two bases."

"Severus, what did they want? Do...do they know?" Hermione asked, afraid of the answer.

Severus walked over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder, albeit a bit awkwardly. "Hermione, they were going to find out sooner or later. I believe I got through to them, and I don't think they'll go off and do anything rash. I'm sure you'd rather they had found out another way, but Lucius is a very sadistic bastard who *will* pay for his crimes when the time is right."

Hermione paled. "Lucius was the one to tell them? I thought one of the Order members must have slipped! How did he tell them? Are they okay?"

"Calm down, he sent them a... memory of your capture, in a phial," Severus replied carefully. When she started to cry, he carefully folded her in his arms and just let her cry. As tears poured down her face, soaking the front of his robes, Severus mentally formed a plan to deal with Lucius the next time he was summoned.

After Hermione composed herself, they quietly set about the dangerous task of combining the Avada Base and the Bottled Love.

After two explosions and several melted cauldrons, at four in the morning they finally completed the Avada Bomb successfully. After checking the potion before them, glowing a blinding green color, Hermione squealed and threw her arms around Severus in celebration of their accomplishment. "It's ready! It's going to work, I know it!"

Severus chuckled. "First, I think we should take a small sample and try it out on someone. That way we can be sure it does work before we risk the lives of everyone in the

Order."

"You're right, but who?" Hermione asked, frowning as she wondered who they could test it on.

Severus smirked as he set about cleaning up their mess and tidying the lab. "I know the perfect people to test this on. I'll let you know after the next time I'm summoned, and then we'll set up the test in a place where no one will witness it. We wouldn't want the Dark Lord to hear of it. Let's get things cleaned up so we can get a few hours of sleep. I'm sure the Order will want to know about our success so far at tonight's meeting."

Together they finished cleaning the lab and putting things away. After a fairly long goodnight kiss, they both separated and went to their respective beds for a little rest...Hermione with thoughts of Severus and Harry and Ron, Severus with thoughts of his plan to test the potion and get back at Lucius for upsetting Hermione.

A/N:Sorry for the shortness... but this was the place to end the chapter! Please remember to review! *Hugs*

Turning Point

Chapter 19 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus awakened to the sting of the summons radiating from his Mark. Getting out of bed and dressing quickly, he pulled out his favorite black eagle owl quill and a piece of parchment to write a short note for Hermione. After tucking the note under the door that separated their rooms, he swept out of the manor in a rush to join his "Dark Master."

As soon as he arrived, he fell to his knees before the Dark Lord and waited until he was bidden to stand with the others.

"Today we will be discussing my plans for the Ministry of Magic. Those of you who are here, are here because of your accomplishments. But do not be fooled by your involvement in these plans. The mission before us is as much for our war effort as it is a test of everyone's loyalty. Each of you will be tasked with a different part of this mission. So I will know, if one part fails, which of you are not as loyal as you claim to be. Now, everyone except Lucius leave the room and await your turn in the gathering room down the hall. Do not leave there until you have been summoned to speak with me about your part in the attack. Now go."

Severus paid close attention to the other four Death Eaters who entered the gathering room with him as they chose seats and took off their masks to await their turn before the Dark Lord. Panic laced his thoughts as he mentally calculated what might be planned, and what Greyback's, Bellatrix's, Nott's, and Rostoff's roles would be. He knew that whatever happened, all he would be able to do was warn the Ministry through the Order members to up the security. Although as he thought about all the possibilities of what kind of attack was being planned, having still more people at the Ministry could be devastating. There was no telling what type of attack the Dark Lord had planned.

So Severus waited, his mind flying from one possible scenario to another, until Lucius entered the room and, with a sneer on his face, told Severus he was to go before the Dark Lord for his assignment.

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Hermione rubbed her eyes after sitting up and stretching. As she focused on her clock, she noticed the white slip of parchment sticking under her door, so she quickly got up and retrieved the note.

Hermione,

I've been summoned. I know it's not usual for me to be summoned at such an unexpected time, but this should actually benefit our plans for testing the potion on my choice of... subjects. Merlin willing, we will be able to carry out the test tonight. If you can, please speak to Lupin and see if he has any suggestions for a location that would be hundreds of miles from ANY prying eyes. The fewer people who know of this potion test, the better. But Lupin will be needed to help me transport the subjects of our test to whatever place we choose. In fact, tell Lupin to prepare a Portkey to the location, which I trust the two of you can choose without me. I am not sure how long I will be, but I assure you that I will return as soon as possible.

Yours,

Severus

Hermione folded the letter and put it away inside of one of her favorite books. With a flick of her wrist, she sent her otter Patronus to alert Remus to a meeting with her in half an hour, and then she went to take a swift shower and dress for the day. While she went through her routine, she mentally listed several places she thought might be safe enough for the testing of the Avada Bomb.

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Exactly half an hour later, Hermione and Remus sat quietly in her room going over a list of possible test sites. After narrowing it down to three, Remus left her after deciding it would be best if he personally checked out each place to calculate the security possibilities for their test. Hermione, meanwhile, went down to the lab to prepare what they would need for their test. From their estimates and educated guesses, they would need to be at a considerable distance from the blast for their own safety. So with that in mind, she packed away a set of shackles that would securely hold the... test subjects, as well as three sets of Omnioculars and a special set of protective robes she thought they should wear... just in case.

Once those were safely packed away in a dragonhide satchel, she pulled out some parchment and started to organize the list of observations and assessments they would need to note after the testing was complete. That way they could better prepare themselves for the moment and keep everyone on the side of the light safe.

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Severus bowed after closing the door and approaching Voldemort. "Severus, I have a rather tricky job for you," Voldemort said as he pulled out his wand and summoned a box that was trimmed with silver fastenings and had a snake emblem on the latch. "This box contains a rather large quantity of Veritaserum that, as you remember, you

brewed for me a while ago at my request. I was saving it for this very day, and now your hard work is about to bear fruit.

"As soon as you leave this room I want you to accompany Lucius to the Muggle entrance at the Ministry of Magic. Through reports from my spies, I have learned that the Minister and all his top officials have been rotating their points of arrival every day. Today is their day to enter via the phone booth located there in London, although once they enter their own special codes they will appear in their own offices, not in the Atrium. As you see them approach, Lucius will Stupefy them and you will pour a phial of Veritaserum down the throat of each of them and leave.

"Do not fail me, Severus. Lucius has other work to do as well, but if the officials are not under the potion's influence by the time they wake from the ambush, then I will be very displeased."

Severus controlled his confusion and calculating thoughts as he bowed and picked up the box. "It will be done as you have instructed, my Lord. And, if I may, I would like to ask something of you," he said, hoping that the Dark Lord was in the right frame of mind to hear requests at such a time.

Voldemort searched Severus' thoughts, and the sudden intrusion nearly caught him off-guard. But Severus was well practiced and made sure to move the right thoughts and images to the forefront of his mind, detailing his plan to get rid of Lucius' most helpful lackeys.

"Very well," Voldemort said finally. "You may proceed with your retribution. I welcome the plan, since it will be effective in bringing Lucius' outside plans to an end. I will speak with him later after you have taken care of his... companions. You are dismissed."

Severus bowed again and left the room to find Lucius and get his part in the plan over with.

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When Remus returned, Hermione was packing away a few last minute books and tools they might need. "Okay, I found the perfect place. It's an island in the middle of the ocean. Nothing but wildlife. I've already created Apparating barriers and several spells that will repel Muggles and hide any of the magic that may be present. There is a small area in a clearing that is safe for all of us to Apparate to. I've also done some thinking about the possible effects on the island itself after the Avada Bomb goes off. I think, if we spell things just right, anyone who happens to come to the island will think a hurricane has hit. We will have to do some serious magic at the exact point when we use the potion... but everything else should be quite convincing."

Hermione smiled at him and put her dragonhide satchel down. "Severus should be back soon; then we can go test it. I'm so excited, Remus. If this works, we can end the war."

"I'm excited about it, too. But before we go you need to think about what is about to happen Hermione. It's never easy being responsible for someone's death. Tonight you, Severus, and me...we will be responsible. Make sure you have your head on right, okay?"

Hermione nodded and replied firmly, "This is war, Remus. I look at tonight as a way to further our cause while eliminating a small but dangerous foe. Whoever Severus chooses to test this on will deserve what is coming to them. I'm not worried about what we are about to do; I'm only hoping that it works the way we want it to. The sooner it does, the sooner an end will come to all of our distasteful but necessary deeds."

"Well said, Hermione. Well said," Remus replied. Both of them settled down at the kitchen table with a couple of butterbeers to await Severus' return.

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Severus was cringing on the inside as he poured the last phial of Veritaserum down the Minister's throat, the others having already received their doses. When the deed was done, he retreated with Lucius and they watched from a darkened alley across the street from the red phone booth as one by one the Minister and his men awoke and rushed into the phone booth, disappearing below the ground. Severus nodded curtly to Lucius and Disapparated away.

Lucius pulled out a phial of Polyjuice Potion and drank it quickly, and then he too Apparated to the *Daily Prophet* to do the other part of his job.

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Severus' Patronus leaped into the room and dropped an old quill from its mouth. In an impatient voice it said, "Pick up the quill. It's a Portkey to my location. You have one minute."

Hermione and Remus leapt to their feet, and after Hermione grabbed her satchel and a cloak, they both picked up the quill just in time. Moments later they landed in the clearing where Hermione had been captured months before. As they picked themselves up off the ground and dusted off their clothes, they noticed two bodies tied up and covered with hoods at Severus' feet.

"Did you figure out a safe place to conduct our test? We cannot be here long. I've got much to do after we return, whether we are victorious or no," Severus said, irritation lacing his words as he double-checked the ropes binding their prisoners.

"Yes, everything is set, Severus. Hermione, let me hold the satchel. You will need to hold one of them with Severus' help. I will hold onto both of you. Severus, you remember the island you took me to several years ago? The one where we found that ingredient we needed at the time for the Wolfsbane? That's where we're going. Help me with the Apparation...I'll concentrate on the safe entry point I created. Are we ready?"

Hermione and Severus adjusted their grips on the prisoners and nodded. Severus and Remus counted to three and the five of them disappeared.

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After they arrived, Hermione gave Severus the magical shackles and watched as he floated the two prisoners to the point Remus directed him to. When the prisoners were secure, Remus and Severus returned to the edge of the clearing.

"Right," Hermione began. "Severus and I calculated that with a quarter of an ounce we should be a minimum of two hundred yards away. So for safety's sake, I say we should be extra careful and double that. Severus, I might have created the concept, but this Avada Bomb would not have been possible without your help. You can float the potion over their heads and release it," she said.

She tossed a protective cloak to each of them and then fastened her own. While they donned them, she pulled out her parchment, quill, and the Omnioculars. When they were in position, Hermione pulled out a box that contained the test phial. Carefully she removed it from the box and handed it to Severus. He swished and flicked with his wand, and they watched in anticipation as the phial floated overhead and stopped above the prisoners, who were thrashing uselessly in their shackles and hoods. Hermione's quill was at the ready when Severus released the phial, and he and Remus threw up their most powerful protective shields.

The moment the glass phial broke, a blinding green light lit up the clearing. For a moment the whole world seemed to pause, and then the force of the Avada Bomb extended outward at all angles. Trees in the immediate vicinity were obliterated. Remus' and Severus's wand arms shook as they held their shields in place through the force of the bomb. As the wind from the explosion died down and the glare faded, Remus and Severus released their shields and the three of them picked up the Omnioculars and looked at the devastation that was the clearing.

The prisoners were clearly dead. As were the grass and the bushes. Everything green that had once swayed in the wind was now a desolate brown in death. Severus waved his wand a few times, checking to see if it might be safe for them to examine the prisoners and the blast zone more closely. After confirming they would be safe, they walked slowly towards ground zero.

A cricket crunched beneath Hermione's foot and she looked down. An anthill that had once teemed with scurrying helpers looked like a miniature battlefield with ants lying

where they had fallen in demise. Flowers that once held color were shriveled and lay on the ground.

They approached the prisoners and Hermione gasped when she saw the faces. The blast had ripped off their hoods, exposing them. Alecko and Amicus Carrows' faces were frozen in horror. Dead.

Severus, seeing her shock, wrapped his arms around her as he observed the scene around them. "We need to work quickly."

A/N: Thank you so much for reading... More to come soon! Please remember to review... *HUGS*

Chaos and Definitive Plans

Chapter 20 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

As soon as they arrived back at Prince Manor, they knew something was wrong. The entrance hall was buzzing with voices from the kitchen. A meeting was taking place. Hermione looked at Severus and realized this was why he had been so irritable earlier. He knew what was going on. Severus shook his head at her as if to say "You'll find out in a minute" and motioned for her and Remus to follow him into the kitchen.

The moment they entered the room, several people started talking loudly, asking Severus if he had known this would happen. Others quieted down after really looking at Severus' severe expression. Hermione and Remus took seats against the wall, and Severus walked to the head of the room and called for silence. He cleared his throat and fought the urge to lash out, his eye having caught one of the many copies of the *Evening Prophet* that were scattered across the long wooden table.

"As most of you have come to realize, a number of things have happened at the Ministry today. Before some of you start in with accusations... yes, I knew something was going to happen. The Dark Lord tasked his best Death Eaters to take over several jobs at the Ministry of Magic today. He did not divulge to us the whole plan, only the small part we played. I myself was tasked to dose the Minister and his men with Veritaserum. I had no choice, for he would have known it was me who failed him if I'd warned anyone or failed to do my job. It was a test." He paused while several people grumbled their opinions; others were picking up the *Prophet* and reading it yet again. In Hermiones and Remus' case, they were only now learning for the first time what had happened.

Chaos at the Ministry! The Dark Lord Strikes Again!

Chaos ran free today as an unexpected number of attacks rendered the Ministry of Magic in-effective. Melodie Minute, well-known Ministry Press Secretary, was unable to comment due to being hospitalized indefinitely. It seems the Dark Lord meant to scare the whole country and has succeeded. The Minister of Magic and his closest staff were Stupefied and then apparently dosed with Veritaserum. Several Aurors have confiscated our interviews and forced us reporters to make Unbreakable Vows so that none of the classified information we might have tried to obtain can be released. Half of the Ministry are locked in a secure wing of St. Mungo's; the few who were not present are trying to sort out the different curses and charms that were cast upon the Ministry officials. All we know for sure is that thirteen officials, including the Minister, were dosed with Veritaserum. Seven were cursed with an unknown Dark spell, which has left them in magically induced comas. Fifteen were Imperioed, eleven were Confunded, and two are dead. We have not been informed of the identities of the deceased and are unlikely to know any further details until their families are notified. With all the chaos present at the Ministry today, we can bet that something even more sinister was happening behind the scenes. What was The Dark Lord's aim?

Hermione gasped and looked at Severus. Ron, looking very put out, piped up and asked, "So why didn't you warn us, at least, if you couldn't do anything, huh? There must have been something we could've done to help!"

Severus sneered and replied, "Just what exactly do you think would have happened if members of the Order of the Phoenix had been present, hmm? I would have been exposed, and you all would have lost one of the biggest advantages we hold. Not to mention I would have been killed, but I guess the mere idea of that doesn't bother you, eh, Mr. Weasley?" Several people spoke out in Ron's defense as others continued to read or talk about what could be done.

Harry cleared his throat and, looking at Snape with a stern face, asked, "Where were you three? Where did you take Hermione and Remus, huh?"

Hermione glared at him and stood up to address the room before Severus could berate another of her friends for being rude--albeit justly.

"We completed the Avada-Bomb potion and tested it this afternoon. It was a success," she said, her voice quieting as the room fell silent. "Now, since the potion is successful, that means we're ready to use it. We're ready to end this blasted war. What we need to be concentrating on right now--" she looked pointedly at Ron, Harry, and the few others who had questioned Severus--"are the other preparations for the final battle. We need the Portkeys finished as soon as possible. We need to make final battle plans and clarify everyone's roles. We need to practice our skills and prepare our minds for this. This is it, people. We can end this! Now, if everyone would please get their head in the game, let's get to work!" As Hermione said the last, she conjured a butterbeer and walked out of the room, heading for the room where they were making all the Portkeys.

Everyone else started talking again and heading in different directions, intent on following Hermione or completing their own jobs. Severus pulled Remus aside as the room started to empty and spoke in a hurried whisper. "Keep her occupied for an hour. There's something I need to work on in the lab, and I wish not to be interrupted, even by her--understand, Lupin?"

Remus nodded in agreement and left to find Hermione, wondering what Severus had up his sleeve.

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Severus sighed and pinched his nose after closing his potions book. *I know it's not much, but it may help her*, he thought as he recalled the potion formula he'd just finished writing. Ever since he had found out--due to Remus' silly wake up call--that Hermione could not have children, it had bugged him. In the few spare moments he'd had since that day he had been forming a potion in his mind's eye. Now it was written, the best that he could offer should he die in the final battle. The formula itself would be tricky to brew for even the most experienced Potions master, such as he, but he knew Hermione would be capable. Beneath the formula he had written a short note to her... just in case. It read simply:

Hermione,

If you are reading this and I have not directed you to do so, that means I have died in the final battle. You should know how much you have meant to me. I have altered my will so that, should I die, you will inherit all that I possess. On a more personal note, the formula above is the best gift I have to give you. If this potion works, you will have a future ahead of you sweeter than you thought it would be. If it works, you can use the potion to reverse the damage done during your capture and move on without me. It is my wish, if I am dead, that you do so.

Yours, Severus

Satisfied that he had left her something of value, he put his potions book away and left his lab to join the others.

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Everyone was buzzing about the main floor as they finished plans and arrangements for the battle. Severus looked in on Hermione and decided to join Remus and the others who were discussing locations for luring Voldemort and his Death Eaters for the final battle. Hermione, meanwhile, was busy discussing the battle with Harry and Ron as the three of them charmed the Portkeys. "Ron, you can't just break apart from the front line and attack everyone. That's the best way to get yourself killed. You need to follow orders, plain and simple.

"Easy for you to say. You're not one of the few unlucky people who have been chosen to answer to Moody. Honestly, I always thought it would be us three in the end, right in front of Voldemort, finishing him off together! Harry, you need to speak up and fix this."

"Ron, Hermione's right. The elder members were smart to measure our strengths and assign us certain positions accordingly. If everyone is positioned like that, we have the best chance. Besides, it doesn't take three people to hide under a cloak and wait for an opening to kill Voldemort. Be glad you'll get your chance to down as many of those Death Eaters as possible. My role will be torture--I have to try and keep my eyes focused on everyone around me, and all I'm allowed to do is inch my way forward and kill him! Granted, it will be nice to finally be rid of him. Still, having to watch you guys and not help lest it gives me away... you're better off. Besides, if all this goes wrong, even if we kill him, I'm in the most danger of being left there when the potion bomb explodes."

"You're right, Harry, I know you're right. It just doesn't feel right, though. The three of us have been split up for so long--now, for the final battle? I just wish it could be the three of us watching each other's backs, ya know?"

Hermione smirked at Ron. "I don't know, maybe we are better off this way. I mean, how many times in the past have we been put in more danger because of your stomach, Ronald? I for one wouldn't want to be in the heat of battle only for you to be distracted by your tummy grumbling," she remarked, holding back laughter at his reaction. Harry couldn't help but chuckle.

Ron, his face looking ever so serious, replied, "Ha ha, very funny, Hermione. Besides, I've already packed away a sandwich that I can eat at a moment's notice, so there won't be any issues with my hunger, okay?"

Hermione and Harry just looked at each other and started laughing quite loudly. Ron, realizing how funny it really was, chuckled along with them. As he watched his two best friends laugh at his expense, he wondered if he ever could give up the notion of a family to be with Hermione.

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Later that night Remus went from room to room, calling everyone to attention and announcing another meeting. When everyone had gathered and taken seats or spots against the wall, he started.

"You'll all be happy to know the Portkeys are now ready. Now, everyone, please pay attention as I lay out the plan. If there are any questions concerning strategies, or any problems, please raise your hand to speak. We need to go over every bit of detail until everyone here remembers their place and duty. This is going to be a battle. We need to remember that if we fail to know the plan or to do our assigned jobs, then people in this room will die as a result. So pay attention!"

Remus pulled out his wand as everyone settled in. Several people took out pieces of parchment and quills, others pulled out their wands and practiced wand movements. Wand in hand, Remus conjured a chalk board that floated above their heads at the head of the room; with his wand he directed the chalk and drew the plan for all to see. "Now, as most of you know..."

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At four in the morning, the Manor was quiet as everyone slept in bedrooms, on couches, basically wherever they could find a spot to drop. The plan was set and people had gone to bed exhausted by the thought of what was about to happen in mere hours.

Severus had been summoned during their long meeting only to return thirty minutes later and inform the Order that tomorrow would in fact be the best time to "warn the Death Eaters of a planned dueling practice the Order would be attending." Unable to sleep, he was spending the few hours before sunrise brewing extra healing potions they would likely need after the battle. Even though Hermione had already replenished their stock after the horrible attacks a few days ago, he knew that having extra was always a safe bet. It wasn't long before Hermione joined him as he was bottling the last of his extra potions and healing salves.

"Why aren't you resting? Everyone needs to be well rested before the battle," Severus said matter-of-factly as he put away the last phial.

"Probably the same reason you're not asleep either. I'm too... nervous about today. Too wound up. I don't think even a sleeping potion could knock me out. I just want it all over with, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean. Come on, let's go get a bite to eat before Arthur wakes up. I'd hate for you to be starving while in the middle of the battle," Severus said, smirking when Hermione laughed quite loudly.

A/N: So... Please review cause I'm dying to know what you think of this one. And I've already started the next chapter... so stay tuned! *HUGS* EchoLynn

The Battle To End It All

Chapter 21 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

It was around ten a.m. when everyone had awakened, had a bit to eat, and stood ready and as prepared as they were going to get.

"Now, as everyone knows, all of this depends on whether I can convince the Dark Lord it's not a coincidence that I'm reporting this supposed duel practice. Everyone is to take their places and actually appear to be dueling. And when I warn you via the Protean Charms, *DO NOT* appear to pause or otherwise acknowledge it. From that point on everyone had best remember their instructions for safety. Harry, as you will be protected underneath your cloak, I must stress once again that you keep your mind on the Protean charm, and make sure no one bumps into as you make your way to the Dark Lord. I will wait fifteen minutes before I go to a place that is suitable to lure the Dark Lord. Good luck," Severus said with a curt nod, and he swept out of the room to get his Death Eater garb. Everyone else filed out of the room, and one by one, the Order of the Phoenix Apparated to the field that a few years ago had held the Quidditch World Cup a few years ago.

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Severus tensed when he arrived at the meadow. He looked all around him, as if checking to make sure none of the Order had followed, before he lifted his sleeve and touched his wand to his Dark Mark. To do such a thing without a vitally important reason could mean death for even the most respected Death Eater. Moments later, Severus looked around as he was suddenly surrounded by Death Eaters. Twelve of them enclosed him in a tight circle and assessed him before one of them finally slashed a wand through the air. With a deafening bang, Lord Voldemort arrived, looking very peeved. He waved his wand swiftly, removing Severus' mask at the same moment that Severus knelt before him. "My Lord."

"Severus. It's not often one of my Death Eaters summons me. Few have lived after doing so. What could possibly inspire you to risk your rank and your life?"

"My Lord," Severus said, still kneeling since Voldemort had never bidden him to stand. "I have asked you here to share with you the Order's plan. After your wonderfully planned attacks against the Ministry, the Order was in an uproar. They immediately started to plan ways to prepare themselves for a coming battle, which they were determined to bring about sooner rather than later. They are now, even as I speak, practicing their skills of war as they call it in the field where the Quidditch World Cup was held the year you came back to us. The *WHOLE* Order, my Lord! I felt it would be stupid of me not to warn you. They assume that they've taken every precaution. But the wards around the field are nothing against your skills. I was thinking, if I might be so bold, that now might be the time to give them their wish. Let's go to war and wipe out the Order and those who stand with them once and for all, my Lord!"

Voldemort's face revealed nothing as he motioned for Severus to stand before him and proceeded to invade his mind. Voldemort's eyes glowed red as he watched what Severus had "seen" at last night's meeting after the attacks. The Order, rashly discussing their options, planning their "practice session," confident that they would be safe with the most basic of protection charms around them since the practice session would be so last-minute. Then the Dark Lord noticed Severus' own emotions, triumph and satisfaction as he rushed to alert his Dark Lord. Voldemort released his intrusion into Severus' mind so abruptly that the latter staggered a bit before falling back to his knees. Everyone in the circle was quiet while the Dark Lord stared at Severus, thinking.

Just when Severus was sure he was found out and was about to die, Voldemort bade him to stand with his brothers. "My, my, Severus. This is fortuitous indeed. And I agree with you. I do so tire of toying with those do-gooders, those Muggle-lovers. Yes, let's bring an end to their existence and show the Magical world that we are not to be reckoned with. The Ministry is weakened, thanks to your work. The Order is vulnerable. Let us summon the rest of the Death Eaters, and we shall bring an end to it. We leave as soon as they arrive," he said, summoning Severus and the others around him to explain what he wanted them to do.

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The Order members were on pins and needles on the inside, but agreeably, on the outside they were doing a smashing job of not showing it. All together there were over seventy members, ten of which were clutching Protean Charms to summon the Aurors, and anyone else who would appear at a moment's notice, to battle. Harry was breathing fast as he practiced keeping himself hidden among the others, weaving to and fro but always making sure to pay attention to the Protean charm that would warn him and the others that the Death Eaters were on the way.

Just when most of them were beginning to think Severus had died, the Protean Charms burned warm in their hands and they tensed mentally. The ten Messengers sent out the message for reinforcements, the charmed coin telling them to show up in ten to fifteen minutes. This was the plan that had been agreed upon to keep the Death Eaters thinking the Order was overwhelmed and simply somehow calling out for help.

There was loud series of pops as Death Eaters, hundreds of them, appeared all around. Some stood just inside the tree line, casting protective wards in preparation for the Dark Lord's own arrival. The moment the shock of the battle's actually beginning wore off, the Order sprang into position and started battling fiercely with the Death Eaters. Moments before Voldemort appeared, Aurors and other wizards and witches started arriving to help the Order fight. Some arrived too late, and the Dark wards that were finally in place for the Dark Lord kept them at bay, giving the Death Eaters an edge as the Order fought to get through the wards. Voldemort watched with a bored look on his face as Death Eaters fell all around him, only showing an ounce of emotion when he witnessed the fall of an Order member or two as well.

Severus, confident that his moment had arrived, said a prayer to Merlin, stripped off his cloak, and Apparated into the fray, his subsequent actions clearly stating that he was with the side of the Light. One, two, five Death Eaters fell at the flick of his wand, plainly shocked to see him fighting against them. Voldemort's eyes flashed red when he witnessed the fall of the seventh Death Eater, and then Severus smirked at him and nodded briefly before continuing to fight.

Severus, when he wasn't defending himself against oncoming spells, was slowly bringing down the wards around the Dark Lord, who had now joined the fray and was working his way toward Severus.

Harry, meanwhile, dodged bodies as they fell before him, keeping his eyes on Voldemort and slowly making his way forward each time he was given the go-head via his Protean charm.

Molly Weasley, Disillusioned, sat fretfully on the sidelines as she concentrated on the Protean charm linked to Harry, waiting for the right moment to get everyone out of there. She refused to look at the battle in front of her for fear she would miss the notice and kill everyone.

Remus, Hermione, and Ron now fought side by side as they advanced on the left side, Moody having fallen minutes before.

Luna Lovegood, who at first stood not far from Molly and was also Disillusioned, was dizzy from all the Apparating. She popped in and out of the battle, crouching over fallen comrades long enough to grab them and Apparate back to the Manor to deposit the wounded and then returning to help anyone else who was hurt.

With sweat pouring down his face, Severus almost sighed with relief as he brought down the last ward and messaged Harry to finally do his job. Harry, whose heart was beating fiercely, walked up behind Voldemort, raised his wand and the potion bottle with it, and quickly sent the message to Molly to get everyone out of there.

The Death Eaters paused, some of them noticing the bottle and trying to bring it down. Then suddenly every innocent wizard or witch was gone. The Death Eaters looked toward Voldemort and the bottle. Then as Harry disappeared, the bottle fell with a mighty explosion that even Muggles would notice.

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A mere fifteen seconds after being whisked by Portkey to a location several miles away, the field that was now littered with bodies rang with the sounds of pops all over the place as the Order and Aurors and other witches and wizards Apparated back to the scene to help contain it. Harry, arriving now in the open, walked up to the body of Voldemort, picked up the Dark Lord's fallen wand, and snapped it into pieces. Then Harry's wand flashed, and Voldemort's dead and mangled body burst into flames before their eyes. The cheering was riotous as others followed suit, some to celebrate the end, others merely to help get rid of the bodies.

The whole area looked as if it had been hit by a massive meteor, which was exactly what the Muggle Prime Minister would be telling the Muggle public. Aurors had even duplicated pieces of rock to put there as "evidence" so none of the Muggles who came to investigate would suspect the trickery.

As the scene was brought under control of the Aurors and a few Ministry officials who had not been present at the Ministry the day before, the Order members left the

scene and went to check on family and friends who were now being treated at the Manor.

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The mood at the Manor was bittersweet. The injured were placed on beds in the foyer, the sitting room, the dining room... anywhere a cot could be placed, really. The dead, however, were laid on beds in the ballroom, some of them covered in sheets if their distorted bodies were too graphically injured for family to see. Many people had died, including, Moody, Hestia, nine Aurors, and Percy Weasley. Hermione cried with Molly and the other Weasleys as they paid their respects, wiped their eyes, and talked about what kind of service they should plan and how soon.

Severus, seeing that he was in the way more than anything, decided to retreat to the potions lab after a quick check on how the healing potion supply was holding up. *Working on potions is the best I can do to help... everyone* thought Severus as he retreated below.

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A few hours later Hermione arrived at the lab. Unnoticed, she watched Severus work for a few moments. Finally she cleared her throat and walked into the room, stopping before him. They stood there just looking at each other for a minute before they finally succumbed and rushed at each other. Their kiss was exquisite as their every emotion showed through: how happy they were to be alive and together, how scared they'd been, how much they truly loved each other. When at last they pulled apart to breathe, they rested their foreheads together, their arms still wrapped firmly around each other.

"I was so scared for you, I didn't dare look your way," huffed Severus.

"I was scared, period. The moment you revealed yourself I thought surely the Death Eaters would gang up on you and kill you in seconds," replied Hermione.

"They were too scared of me before; to think I was truly an enemy, they wouldn't have dared. I was more concerned about Voldemort," he remarked, raising his hand to trace her neck.

"We made it, Severus, we're together, and alive!" she breathed as she shifted and buried her face in his neck, tears leaking down her face.

"Yes, Hermione. My Hermione, we made it," he whispered sweetly as he waited patiently for her tears to stop.

When the last tear had fallen, Hermione looked up into his eyes and stared at him for a moment before saying with a slight smirk, "So, if I'm right, you went into battle assuming you would die. What noble thing did you leave me in case you had died? I want to watch you destroy it," she said, smiling when his face revealed that she'd guessed correctly.

Recovering from her observation that was so out of the blue, Severus let her go and went to his desk to retrieve his potions book. When he sat down on a stool and she did the same, he held it up. "In this is every potion I have ever personally created, modified, or studied. I can't just let you destroy it. But I will let you read what I've written for you. But not now some other time might be more fitting, I think," he said, flicking his wand and vanishing the book to a safe place where she couldn't get to it.

Hermione pursed her lips and tried to Accio it back, but to no avail. "What are you hiding from me, Severus Snape?"

He grabbed her wand and laid it on the table, then held her hands in his. "There will be time enough for me to share that with you. For now, we need to discuss a few things."

A/N: Muhahaha... I'm approaching the end, and I'm psyched!

I think... there is one more chapter to go before the end. I may also have an epilogue... or the finale chapter will be one as well as the ending... not sure, but I have started chapter 22! Please please please review. I'm so nervous about this one; was it too short? Did it happen too suddenly? I can't think of a thing I would change... Okay, I will stop rambling and let you review lol... *HUGS* EchoLynn

The End & The Future

Chapter 22 of 22

While Harry and Ron are hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, Hermione is training to be a Potions master with none other than Severus Snape. Tensions are high, but their working together is imperative. Events follow that turn the unlikely partnership toward a very unique and strong friendship. Is it possible for the Gryffindor know-it-all to tame the feared Potions master?

Severus took a sip of his Firewhisky, once again glad that he kept a large stock of the liquor at Prince Manor. He looked around his sitting room, repressing the urge to run screaming from his own house or even run his guests out instead. The only thing that kept him sane was the brown-eyed witch who sat across from him with her nose stuck in an extremely large book titled *The Master's Plentiful Guide to Potion Ingredients*. Taking his eyes from her face once again, he surveyed the other occupants of the room...namely the reason he was drinking in the first place.

Remus was conversing with Arthur, Bill, Ron, and Harry about the new Department of Intolerance Control at the Ministry of Magic. Molly was fussing with Fleur about Bill's "extremely long and unsightly hair." It had been two whole days since the last of the wounded had left for their own homes or been transferred to St. Mungo's. With a little nudge from Hermione, the Weasleys, Harry, and Remus were still under his roof.

Severus had had the urge to kick them out before Hermione asked him, those big chocolate eyes staring him down, if they could stay for a few more days before things went back to a new "normal" for them all. The memory of the shocked and pained look in her eyes after the battle as they treated the wounded, and made arrangements for the dead, was enough to make him grant her anything. So, with his mind now more pleasantly occupied with thoughts of Hermione, he sipped his glass of Firewhisky and listened in on the boys' conversation, which had now shifted to the most recent count of dead or captured Death Eaters.

"It's true, they found...er...parts of him, at least enough to identify that it was Malfoy. I just wish we knew who killed him and how. I would have loved to do in that bastard myself, but I never even saw him at the battle," Ron commented.

"Ronald Weasley, watch your mouth, or I'll jinx it and make you taste soap for a month!" Molly exclaimed, chiding him sternly.

When Severus heard what Ron had just said, he looked at Hermione to make sure she wasn't upset over the topic of conversation. Many, seeing her with her nose stuck in

that book, would think she hadn't heard a word. But Severus could see that she appeared to have stopped breathing, and her eyes were fixed to one spot.

"Perhaps, Mr. Weasley, it is better to leave the dead... buried. Now, if you all don't mind, I think I will turn in early. The official from the Department of Magical Education will be here at ten. Hermione, may I walk you upstairs?" Severus took her arm when she rose from her overstuffed chair and led her from the room without a backward glance. Both of them heard Molly Weasley light into Ron once again, this time for speaking without thinking.

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Severus, sensing that Hermione did not want to talk about Malfoy at all, chatted with her about their appointment in the morning. Tomorrow they would be making her apprenticeship official. Then, of course, he took a few moments to kiss her senseless. With a smile that lit up her eyes, Hermione turned away from him at last and reached for her door. She paused as she turned the knob and turned back to him. She looked down at the carpet cautiously and quietly admitted, "I didn't tell you, but it was I who killed him. Malfoy, I mean."

"Why did you feel as if you couldn't tell me?" Severus asked her just as quietly.

"Because of how I killed him. After everything I did to get myself into that situation, and all the trouble I caused you before, and after you rescued me, I knew you had planned some type of retribution for him before he died. But when I saw him out on that field, I just couldn't bring myself to be as cruel and unfeeling as he was. I cast the Avada Curse on him moments before Harry triggered the end of it all. I said the words...Draco hadn't even seen me. It was just... over. And I was glad," she whispered.

Severus took hold of her hand that was clenched around the doorknob and turned her to face him. When she didn't look up, he gently tilted her face until they were eye to eye. Severus softly wiped away the lone tear that was falling across her cheek and kissed her. When he pulled his head away moments later, he said simply, "Hermione, I wouldn't have cared how he died, just as long as he was dead and could no longer harm you. I'm thankful that despite the horrid events that brought us here, we found each other. You are the manifestation of my dreams, and I thank Merlin for every moment I get to spend with you. I love you, Hermione Granger."

Hermione smiled up at him, another tear...but a happier one this time...falling down her cheek. "I love you, too, Severus Snape. More than I can say."

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~Epilogue Sixteen Years Later~

Severus Snape walked toward the mirror that doubled as a second entrance to his potions lab. Checking his reflection very carefully, he made sure his formal robes were in perfect order, his hair smoothly hanging around his face, and that his general appearance would be up to the night's standards. Satisfied that he had done his best, he walked away from the mirror and picked up his wand and his notes for his speech. With a wave of his wand, the lights in the room went out as he left the master suite. Before he Disapparated, he made sure to stop by the kitchen to speak with the head house-elf, Ramie, and confirm that the other plans for that evening were firmly in hand.

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Severus arrived at the summer office just as the few secretaries and potioners he employed were leaving. He smiled as he entered the research lab and saw his wife, lost in the art of potion making. Hermione Snape was still a beautiful woman, having hardly changed since they'd married fifteen years ago. Many things had changed for them both over those years, but despite the changes time had wrought, they loved each other more with each passing day. Clearing his throat to get her attention, Severus approached her and greeted her with one of those spine-tingling kisses she never quite got used to.

"Severus, dear, what are you doing here?"

"Have you forgotten what day it is, Hermione? Tonight is the dinner with the Ministry. They're honoring us both for the creation of the Conceive Potion... Does that ring any bell?"

Hermione's eyes went wide, and she pulled away from him and walked swiftly to the mirror in their office, which was also connected to the lab. "Oh, no! I don't have time to go home and shower and change...Severus, why didn't you come earlier? We're going to be late! Of all the nights to make a break-through... what *am* I going to *do*?"

Severus chuckled and pulled her wand from its sheath and handed it to her. "You take care of your hair, or whatever you need to do. Don't worry; I brought those dark green dress robes you bought for tonight...they're carefully shrunk in my pocket. Besides, there's no rush. They can't very well start without us, can they, dear?"

Hermione smiled at her husband, thinking once again how lucky she was, and went about getting ready. Severus enjoyed the show as she flitted about their office half naked while she got ready. He promised himself he would make good on his improper thoughts prompted by the view and attack her properly when they got home later that evening...after the surprise, of course.

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Hermione sighed as she sank onto the couch in their sitting room, took off her heels that matched her dress robes, and rubbed her feet. "That was some evening. I didn't think being honored would be so much work. I hardly got to eat anything... I'm famished."

Severus smiled as he sat down next to her and pulled her close to his side. "Yes, but it was worth it, wasn't it, dear? To see all those witches we helped? Just think: Hogwarts will have a small increase of population for a few years, all thanks to us. I'm quite certain I should retire..." he replied, laughing when she poked him in the side for picking on her.

"So, speaking of kids, where are our own thirteen- and eleven-year-olds? Did Molly and Arthur steal them away from the house-elves for the evening?"

Severus huffed. "As if I would willingly let Carina and Brian stay even for a few hours with those people. No, I made sure Ramie kept them busy at home for a change."

Hermione sighed and snuggled a little closer to him. "Severus, quit being such a grumpy wizard and call Ramie, please. I would like to know that our children had a good night...without getting into trouble in the process..."

Severus kissed her on the forehead and then called Ramie.

With a subtle pop, the small elf appeared and bowed to them both. "Yes, master and mistress? Ramie is called?"

"Ramie, I didn't mean to disturb you. I just wanted to check that the children had a fun night and went to bed at the usual time," Hermione stated calmly. One look at the expression that came over the elf's face had Hermione on her feet.

Ramie twisted her hands and backed away from Hermione and Severus. "Ramie told them and told them not to, but they be as stubborn as children their age can be, if master and mistress will please follow me, I will show you what...what they are being up to."

Severus was on his feet just as swiftly as Hermione, making sure his face looked as stern and worried as hers. They followed the faithful house-elf through the house and out of the back door that led to the greenhouses.

"I told them not to play around in there anymore, Severus. Please remember to control your temper with them," Hermione said as they reached the door to the largest greenhouse.

They opened the door and Hermione gasped as she took in the site before her. Both Carina, with her bushy black hair and chocolate eyes, and Brian, with his curtain of brown hair and nearly black eyes, stood before them, smiling. The entire greenhouse had been transformed with thousands of balloons and a spell of falling confetti that

faded into non-existence as it neared the floor. Above a long table set with all their favorite foods was a large banner that was charmed to say "Congratulations Mom and Dad To Think It All Began With The Two Of Us!" in flashing green and silver.

Hermione laughed as she walked forward and pulled her children into a hug. Severus smirked as he, too, walked forward and put his arms around his family.

THE END

MANIFESTATION OF DREAMS

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A Sevmione FanFiction By: EchoLynn

A/N: Whew. I'm sad now. I rewrote this chapter several times, and just now, I am thrilled with it finally lol. I want to say thank you to everyone who has ever given this story a chance, and also for those who stuck with it and gave me such wonderful, helpful, happy-making reviews ;). Also, to my wonderfully talented Beta, Su. You are the secret to my success! Thank you sooo much for all of your hard work, and patience lol.