

Back for Good

by LiteraryBeauty

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 33

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Hermione was sure she could stay in the Black family library for the rest of her days. It was truly expansive, the variety unprecedented and the content... well, it was enough for the young bibliophile to forgo food and slumber for its more persuasive charm of knowledge.

However, Hermione Granger was not on a typical fact-finding mission, nor was she collecting research. She had a goal, an end to which she was striving, and she was certain the answer lay within the maudlin walls of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The secret she sought was closer every day. She had only yet to crack the right tome, to peruse the exact sentence that would bring him back, but she had no doubt that he would be returning to them soon.

After the war had ended and life was supposed to go, Hermione could not fill the empty void within her that seemed to grow with every marriage, every birth, and every new friendship. Something was missing, someone should be here. The way Sirius Black had disappeared beyond the Veil was mysterious and unfair, and Hermione had known something was wrong with the picture. People don't just vanish; the Veil had called Sirius for a reason, there was something more to this than just another death of one of their friends. There was no closure behind his death and if there was anything Hermione Granger hated, it was unfinished business.

Expansive though the library might be, there was not enough information on the Veil to push Hermione in the right direction, though she had learned more than was previously known. For example, in modern wizarding folklore, the Veil was considered to separate the world of the living and the world of the beyond, but in ancient times, the Veil had been a conduit between two dimensions and her research suggested that communication, if not direct travel, through the Veil was possible.

Hermione sighed and closed yet another personal journal of a Black ancestor, having found little more than conjecture and speculation. She pushed the book back onto a space on the shelf, but something seemed to be in the way. The path was clear, but the book would not slide into the space. She frowned, stared at the empty space on the shelf and raised a curious finger to see if something was actually there. To her surprise, her finger fell upon a book, invisible to her eye but tangible to her touch. This was more than a Disillusionment spell, which would make the cover of the book seem innocuous, or a spell to deter her attention.

She pulled the invisible book from the shelf and gazed upon it. She only saw her hands raised in front of her chest, palms forward, but she could clearly feel the somewhat tattered and leathery texture of the book. She tried every spell in her arsenal to get the book to reveal itself, even whispering in desperation, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good!" but to no avail. The book remained hidden from her sight and somehow she just knew it would have the answer she needed. She had to uncover its secrets.

After eating dinner and falling into bed, Hermione, as the current, sole occupant of Sirius' family home, pondered what the next step was. Obviously, more research was in order, but that was her answer for everything. The invisible book was perched on her bedside table, awaiting its undesired reveal, because for whatever reason, she had felt ill when she thought about putting it back on the shelf. She felt as though if she did, she would never find it again. She leaned over and caressed the cover, reassuring herself it was still there. She fell into a restless sleep.

She was tied again, always tied. She couldn't see the ropes but she could feel them twisting, tightening. There was screaming around her and the smell of old blood assaulted her senses. She could see nothing in the darkness and her voice made no sound. She pulled ever harder against her restraints, her hands above her head and her feet tied together below her, but no relief was to be had. Her feet scrambled for purchase on the cold stone beneath her and found none.

Suddenly, all was silent and a faint whispering could be heard in the distance. It grew stronger until indistinct voices could be heard, voices that seemed to be pleading to her, but she was in no position to acquiesce. The voices grew louder until they were deafening her, they seemed to be inside her head and the noise grew to cacophonous levels.

Suddenly something cold and sharp touched the flesh above her heart. It sliced into her, drawing a silent scream from her lips as the knife drew over her skin. The wound was inflicted quickly but the pain did not recede, and she could feel the warm wetness spilling over her sides and down her stomach, too much blood for what felt like a flesh wound, but it was pumping out of her and onto the stone below, and the noise in her head finally died away to silence as her blood poured out of a single wound. She couldn't breathe, couldn't move, the blood pooling beneath her, slicking the stone and drenching her body. Too much blood.

She pulled her hands once more in vain against her restraints before her vision faded to black.

Hermione woke up gasping, clutching at her heart to stop the blood flow. Dry, she was dry. There was no blood. Her hands were painfully clenched, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms bitingly. She tried to straighten her fingers but her nails were imbedded in her skin. She stretched them quickly and felt the blood pool in her hand. The dream had never been that bad before.

In the semi-darkness, Hermione reached over the bedside table, feeling for the book that she could not see. Once she felt it and was certain it was still there, she reached further and grasped her wand. Murmuring a healing spell on both her palms, she fell back into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

When Hermione awoke, it was with the feeling that she had not slept at all. She remembered her nightmare, as she always did, and was disturbed at its content but not afraid. After all, dreams are not reality! She stretched languidly on the bed and glanced over at the alarm clock to see it was early morning, her internal clock faithful as ever. Dressing quickly, she moved to the kitchen to get a pot of tea started. Toast and tea in hand, she retired to the overly large dining room, wondering what need there was for so much space and feeling quite insignificant in the large wooden chairs.

She thought about what she would do today. She wanted to see Harry, but she could not tell him about the book she'd found. For reasons she promised she would examine later, she wanted to keep the book's existence a secret until she knew exactly what it meant. After all, it could be nothing more than a family recipe album, she told herself. No sense getting excited over Grandma's oatmeal chocolate chip cookies.

She knew Harry had mourned Sirius and was not expecting him to come back any more than he expected Dumbledore or Remus to return. To everyone else, Sirius was as dead as the rest of them. But something told Hermione he wasn't quite gone. And so she kept her plan a secret, knowing it would only hurt Harry more, getting his hopes up to have them dashed again.

Now that the war had ended, there was no real reason for the Order of the Phoenix. They still existed in theory but the meetings were long over. Grimmauld Place became nothing more than a relic, a useful place for people to come and go. Harry let her stay here in return for her keeping up with the place, maintaining the wards and preventing doxy infestations. Sometimes other people stayed here as well; Lavender had stayed for the week before her wedding to Ron, and Ginny had done the same before her nuptials to Harry. Alastor Moody came and went, probably checking up on her, Hermione groused. She was used to being treated like a daughter by all her surrogate fathers in the Order. She sometimes liked having other people here, but Harry preferred his rebuilt family home in Godric's Hollow, and Ron and his family remained at the Burrow. She was alone and mostly preferred it that way.

She and Ron had broken up after the war when they both realized, Ron with a little help in the right direction, that they were better as friends. Neither had felt passionately about the other in any romantic way, and Hermione, though bookish, was a passionate witch. She thought. She never really had the opportunity to explore that thought, however, since she had been a virgin when she and Ron split, and remained thus due to lack of viable options, and lack of general interest on her part. She went on dates, mostly set up by her well-intentioned friends, but preferred her self-inflicted exile.

She did have to go to work though, as much as she would love to stay and research the book a little more. She worked in the Ministry in administration, but it was a stepping stone and would lead to great things. She had been offered more prestigious titles but liked the extra time her job afforded her for her personal research, which she published whenever possible. She had her own money from the Order of Merlin pension, and all in all lived a fairly contented life, except for the nagging thought that would not leave her, telling her that Sirius needed help.

And so she was helping the only way she knew how, by burying her head in tomes and reading until her vision blurred.

After she returned from work, exhausted and mentally weary, Hermione made a quick dinner and indulged in a bath. It was strange to be so alone; some days it felt like she didn't open her mouth to speak at all. But that was somewhat true; once she Floo'd home from work, it was rare that she spoke aloud, and she knew she was grateful she had not begun to talk to herself, but fretted that day was not far.

Hermione wrapped herself in a towel and reached for her bedside table drawer for her moisturizer. Her hand froze in midair when she processed what she was seeing. The book. The book! It was there, plain as day, right before her eyes! She gasped, not daring to touch it, and sat upon the bed, drinking it in. What had happened?

Garnering courage, she stroked her finger along its cover and could have sworn she felt an answering finger brush down her spine. Shivering briefly, Hermione hefted the book into her lap. The title, to her eternal gratitude, was "Ancient Necromancing Rituals and Artifacts". Scarcely believing her fortune, she carefully opened the book. Her breath was taken away by the page the book had, of its own accord, flipped to. *The Veil*.

But once she began to read, the words faded before her eyes. "No!" she cried out, watching the answers she had dared to dream would await her dissipate. Only the title of the chapter remained, a monument to how utterly she had failed.

She left the book open beside her on the bed, staring at it as she dressed, not daring to tear her eyes away lest the words return. What had made the book appear in the first place? She was sure this was part of the puzzle. Somehow, overnight, the book had deigned to make its presence known. Had she done something? Said the "magic word" in her sleep, somehow?

She closed the book, allowing herself to study the cover in more detail, now that the contents were absent. It appeared to be bound in human flesh, which disgusted her but did not surprise her. So many ancient Dark texts were made of flesh and written in blood, though this seemed to be written in magic instead, blood not having the ability to fade and reappear at will. She passed her fingers over the cover in a desperate attempt to appease it somehow, when her eyes were drawn to two small rust-coloured smears on the cover, beneath the title. It seemed the smears were as old as the book itself, but they felt almost moist beneath her fingers. Something tickled her memory: last night, she had grazed the book with her palm to ascertain its presence before healing her hand wounds. She had touched the book with her blood!

There was a reason wizards and witches did not go around doing blood magic to get whatever they wanted. It stole something from the person, demanding sacrifices in return for its delights, often after the fact and always more than the person was willing to give. But Hermione was determined...she would give of her blood to read the text, and she would bring Sirius back no matter what the cost to her. This was all she had cared about for the last three years since the end of the war; she would accept the

challenge and Harry would have his godfather back.

Hermione found a ceremonial dagger among the items in the attic, and after checking it for its own Dark magic, for it would not do to bind herself to two masters, so to speak, she sterilized it and placed the book on the kitchen table, her quill and parchment at her right, dagger ready to press into her left hand. She opened the book.

Again, it flew to the page she most desired. She wasted no time and plunged the dagger in her fingertip, barely whimpering at the pain in her frenzy to read the words. She squeezed drops of her blood onto the page and the book absorbed them instantly. Slowly, word by word, the text appeared. She copied in a flurry, not taking the time to absorb what she was reading. Page after page she anointed with her blood until she had opened four fresh wounds on her fingertips and finally dragged the blade across her palm for a more free-flowing stream. The pain was barely registering in her vigor.

She turned the page yet again and saw the heading, "In which what we desire returns to us." This was it!

She dropped more blood onto the page, but though the book absorbed it, it was not revealing the words. She howled in frustration. There was more, she knew the answer was right there! Desperate, she dragged the knife deeper in the wound on her palm, but though it bled profusely and she began to feel lightheaded, the words remained unsurfaced.

Suddenly something cold and sharp touched the flesh above her heart. Hermione gasped. That must be the answer, then. Her dream had told her what to do...the book wanted blood from her breast, from above her heart, not her hand! The freshest blood, the purest! It was so obvious now, Hermione laughed to herself and tore the sweater from her body, leaving only a thin camisole. It was cold in the house, but her body had a sheen of sweat covering it, and she felt no chill but the one in her soul. She placed the blade over her heart and paused, knowing this was the moment she could not turn back from. Once she spilled this blood, the dark magic would have a hold on her.

She hesitated no more and drew the dagger sharply over her heart. She cried out, the pain much greater than that of her hand, almost too much; it felt like the wound was on fire and frozen at the same time, like it delved much deeper than the surface, like it went directly into her heart, into her soul itself. She stood up, wavering slightly, and leaned over the book. The blood dripped steadily onto its pages and the words appeared instantly, much faster than before. She copied two paragraphs of information, again not fully registering the words, and then turned the page, her blood still dripping, and her camisole morbid in its anointment. This page was a recipe for a potion. As she wrote, all but one ingredient was familiar to her, but she knew who indeed would find it for her. The last page before a new title regarding earthbound spirits was revealed was an incantation in another language, one she did not recognize...no words were familiar, and she only hoped she would say it correctly when the time came. When she had copied the last word of the incantation, the book slammed shut and Hermione fainted.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

There was a sibilant noise surrounding her: a long, drawn-out hissing that faded and grew but did not relent. The longer the noise lasted, the more Hermione felt it was voices, though she could not tell what they were saying, or if they were saying anything at all.

When she turned to move, to see if she could locate the noise, a painful throbbing began in her left hand, matched by one in her chest. She let out a low moan, and immediately the headache set in.

Okay, one thing at a time. Where am I? She felt around herself and became aware that she was lying on a hard surface with slats. The floor. So far, so good. Why am I on the floor? The answer for that did not seem to be forthcoming, so she moved onto the next question. What is my next move?

Hermione felt the back of her head and encountered a substantial bump. Apparently, she had fallen or been dropped. Fallen....

And then it all came back to her at once, flooding her senses until she gasped. "The book," she croaked, her voice harsh in her throat. She pulled herself to her feet with sheer force of will and saw the book was closed on the tabletop, her parchments strewn haphazardly across the surface but otherwise unharmed.

She sat at the table reading over her notes and collecting her thoughts. She ignored the twin pains in her hand and chest. It would be easy enough to perform the spell she had copied. The potion would be the tricky part. She would have to brew it herself, something she knew she was capable of but which made her nervous nonetheless. A potion like this with nearly twenty ingredients was highly volatile and could be made unstable with only the slightest miscalculation.

She would have to go to Knockturn Alley to gather the ingredients. She would go alone; Hermione did not intend to tell anyone of her plan.

Hermione made another copy of the potion's ingredients, including measurements, and placed the parchments containing the potion recipe and incantation in a small cavern between shifting wood slats on the third floor of the house. She took the second copy and divided it into three shorter lists. She would go to two different apothecaries, one twice, on three different days...just in case someone grew suspicious of her intentions, or, Merlin forbid, recognized the potion from its ingredients.

Getting out her cauldron and a grill for the fire and placing them on the dinner table, Hermione wondered what else could be done immediately. She figured she would have to go to the Veil itself to perform the spell. She would be able to get in without a problem with her clearance from her job. Once there, she would consume the potion, speak the incantation, and if everything went perfectly, Sirius Black should be back on the other side of the Veil within moments.

Hermione couldn't be sure what life was like beyond the Veil. She hoped that Sirius was being held in some sort of stasis, where he wasn't hungry or sad or even fully conscious. She prayed that he was not scared or in pain, and that the Veil was not like Azkaban, with Dementors sucking away his mortal soul. She would not let herself think of what he might be like upon his return, only that everything would be okay. And if it wasn't, and he was some sort of zombie or something equally distasteful, well, she would deal with that when the time came.

Hermione even went so far as to clean and prepare Sirius' old room for him, praying Harry wouldn't choose that time to drop by unexpectedly and ask her exactly what the hell she was doing. The sheets were clean and the bed was freshly made when Hermione stopped her endless movement and sat down by the window in his room.

She could still sense him here, even after all this time. He hadn't stayed here long, and in a way, she felt like she never really got to know him at all. But something was driving her, compelling her to try this one last thing. Just this last effort, and if it did not work, she would never tell anyone. She was even prepared to give a part of her soul just to try to get him back. He deserved at least an attempt.

By the time Hermione had prepared the bedroom for its erstwhile occupant's return, Hermione's bandaged hand was aching and bleeding through the gauze. She just might have overdone it with the physical activity; she still felt weak from the blood loss, and her hand felt incredibly sore now that she had slowed down enough to realize it.

The cut on her chest had scabbed while she was unconscious and did not hurt as much. Actually, it didn't hurt at all, not even when she stretched her arms high above her head, trying to loosen the kinks that had formed during her little floor nap.

When Hermione thought to check the time, it was nearly three in the morning. She had passed out around seven p.m., she estimated, and had woken up a few hours later. Now, she was exhausted and she had to be up for work in four hours. Resigned, Hermione changed the gauze on her hand, noticing the scab was nearly black and was very red around the edges, especially through the twice-sliced cut across her palm. Oh, well, she thought; she would clean it more thoroughly tomorrow and take a light potion to rid any infection.

She was asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

It was dark again, and her lack of sight made her other senses stronger. The taste of blood was heavy in the air and the stone was beneath her back once again. She was not bound like before, but felt as though her limbs weighed a ton each, and her movements were slow and sluggish. Moving even an inch was an effort, and she resigned herself to staying still until she could decipher her surroundings.

A whispering began all around her, starting low but gaining in volume until she was sure her head was splitting. A voice came that was louder than the rest, but consisted of a hissing sound with no discernable location. It told her to drink from the chalice, but she was confused; there was no chalice. The moment that thought completed, she could feel the cold metal in her hand and she struggled to close her fingers around it. She brought the chalice to her lips in a motion so slow it was agonizing even for her, and sipped.

It was blood.

But the voice would not let her put it down and told her it was all right; it was her blood, after all. Disgusted but determined, she drank and drank. She started to feel dizzy and sick and could not finish the libation. The voice was angry; it hissed and spat at her. You must finish, it told her. You must drink it all.

She raised the glass once more and drank the rest, letting the dregs settle and drinking those too. When the chalice was truly empty, she let it fall from her fingers. The voice hissed its pleasure. Then the pain began.

The next three days went by slowly. Hermione gathered every ingredient on her list but one. Essence of pure azure. She had never heard of it and neither had either apothecary. Returning to Grimmauld Place and organizing her ingredients on the counter, Hermione was satisfied that she would find this last ingredient. She would not think that her plan was over before she could even finish the first stage.

Finally, on Friday evening after work, with everything prepared but the potion itself, Hermione decided to Floo the one person who would be able, if not entirely willing, to help her.

Severus Snape, of course.

As she suspected, Snape was not thrilled to see her.

"To what do I owe the dubious pleasure, Miss Granger... or it must be Mrs. Weasley by now, surely?" His tone was cool and calculated, but Hermione could sense it unnerved him to be in the presence of someone who knew all his secrets. Indeed, it was hard to hate him when he had sacrificed so much for her and her friends. For love.

"It's Miss Granger and probably shall ever be," she said self-effacingly. "I'm here for your expertise...I would never presume to waste your time otherwise." Hermione was the brightest witch of her age, after all, and nothing got through to Snape like flattery, especially sincere flattery.

"I live to serve, as you well know."

Hermione snorted in a most unladylike manner and approached his desk, the Potions master's office looking exactly the same as it did when she left, and as it would look evermore, she suspected.

Hermione cut to the chase, as she was wont to do, and simply stated, "Professor, I'm looking for essence of pure azure. I need it for... an experiment, and no apothecaries have heard of it. I knew you would know where to find it."

Snape looked at her appraisingly. She could see the wheels turning in his mind and hoped this mystery ingredient would not give away her intentions. The silence seemed to stretch forever as he weighed her words, considering her request.

"Indeed, I do know where to find it," he said in that infuriating voice that made her certain he lived to toy with her.

"And where would that be?" She forced the words out through her teeth, endeavoring to be congenial but growing more annoyed at the thought of Sirius in purgatory, waiting for rescue.

"In this very office, of course. I only have a few pinches, however, and it will cost you." She had expected him to bargain and had brought a substantial amount of Galleons for trade. She could not contain her glee at the fact that he had what she was in dire need of, and he raised a questioning eyebrow at her grin.

"I'm so glad you can help me. I was beginning to think it was hopeless!" She consulted her ingredients list to see exactly how much of the elusive stuff she needed. Only a dash! Hermione exhaled gratefully. But her giddiness was not to last as the list was promptly snatched from her grasp. She reached for it, but Snape held her at arm's length and read from her parchment.

"A very interesting combination here, but of course this is not the entire list, is it?" His voice was one of mild surprise and possibly... worry?

"No, sir." He never failed to reduce her to her former schoolgirl self, and some part of her wanted him to figure out what she had planned so she could share in her excitement and possibly gloat over her brilliance.

"These are the darkest of items, meant to make a Dark potion. A dangerous potion." His words were not a question.

"Yes, sir."

"And you have good reason to be in my office, begging for an ingredient which will be used in a potion that will almost certainly kill, maim, or otherwise destroy the imbiber?"

"The best reason, sir."

His eyes were upon her again, studying her for an interminable length of time, until finally he nodded. "Miss Granger, do not mistake my agreeability for naiveté. I may not know what this potion does without the rest of the list, but I know if you consume it or give it to someone else for consumption, you will not make it out the same as you were before. I cannot admit to caring whether you live or die for your sake, but I will feel a twinge or tickle of guilt if I indirectly bring about your demise, not to mention the more important fact that I could be brought to charges once it is discovered that I provided you with the killing ingredient, for that is what essence of pure azure truly is. If you combine it with the blood of a virgin taken willingly, your soul will be divided, and no wizard or witch can live a whole life having made such a sacrifice."

For someone who was unaware of the potion's directive, he certainly made an argument against taking it. But the reason for following through was still too strong, and Hermione was nothing if not brave. A part of her soul she could do without, for what good was it to her when her friend was suffering unknown horrors? How could she live with herself knowing she had not made the choice to at least try to bring Sirius back?

And as surely as if he had cast Legilimens, Snape was aware of her intentions. She could see the dawning knowledge on his face and silently begged him to understand. And he did, because it was this little witch who had returned to the Shrieking Shack and healed him from Nagini's near-fatal attack; she had not left him to die and could not leave Sirius to die. And even Severus Snape could not begrudge Hermione her well-intentioned recklessness.

Hermione had nodded gravely through his speech on the potion and was now waiting for him to make a move. He rose wordlessly and left the room. She sat puzzled, uncertain if she had been dismissed or if she was to wait. Unwilling to surrender, she settled in for the long haul. Fortunately, Snape was back within twenty minutes with a tiny vial of a bright blue sand-like substance. There was just enough for the potion, no more. No second chances.

Before handing it over, Snape made one last bid. "If you do this, nothing will ever be the same for you again. Perhaps you should think of yourself for once?"

Snape would never understand the Gryffindor mentality. Hermione only shook her head and smiled as if she did not know how to do what he suggested. He sighed dramatically and handed her the vial. His hand closed around hers as she grasped it and he said only, "See me when it is done."

There was no hiding anything from that man.

He shrugged off her thanks and left her in his office to see herself out. She did just that and Floo'd home. She would start the potion tonight, and it would be done by tomorrow afternoon.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

With the potion simmering in the next room, Hermione was left to her own devices. There were only two ingredients left to add: the essence of pure azure, and her own blood. Blood Magic was the strongest and Darkest magic there was; it always, *always* took something from the person who performed it. Usually something vital. Virgin blood was the most potent blood, and would bind the potion to the virgin irreversibly, and made the potion exponentially more powerful.

But Hermione was not afraid.

She had wanted to tell Harry that she was going to the Department of Mysteries to see the Veil. She knew it wasn't wise to go alone, with no one aware of her location. She could disappear into the Veil and no one would ever know. But she was afraid to tell Harry in case he stopped her, or worse, tried to go in her stead. There was no one else she trusted anymore and decided a note would have to be enough. She felt silly leaving a note on her own table when no one had been at Grimmauld Place in weeks. The note was short and sweet, and she finished just in time to add the final ingredients to the potion.

First to be added was the essence of pure azure. She measured out a dash and weighed it carefully in her hand. It had to be sprinkled in slowly while stirring a half circle every two seconds for four rounds. She did exactly as instructed. She then waited seven minutes exactly, before plunging the dagger into the flesh above her heart. She would not make the same mistake twice by trying to use blood from her hand. Her flesh burned and stung as the blood welled on the dagger tip. Thirteen drops while stirring continually at an even pace. She counted the drops carefully, aloud. She brought the dagger back to the wound on her chest again and again until the last drop sank into the potion.

Immediately, Hermione felt a heavy weight in her heart that spread throughout her body. She felt like she was being anchored to the ground and could barely move. Her muscles stiffened painfully, and she was held impossibly tensely. Then, a grey mist surrounded her like an aura, and entered through her mouth. A terrible ripping sensation began within her, and she felt like her insides were coming out. She tried to scream but choked on the mist while the ripping continued. Finally, something snapped and pulled free, the mist flowing back out of her body and into the potion. The potion turned the darkest black, and the fire below it vanished. Hermione's body began to feel normal again; she could move, and her muscles were loose and obedient. She knew she was missing something, but did not feel any different.

It was time.

Hermione bottled the potion and gathered the incantation from its hiding spot on the third floor. She grabbed her cloak, her work identification, and made sure she had everything she needed. She brought healing draughts in case Sirius was wounded or weak. Wand, potion, incantation, and dagger just in case something unexpected came through the Veil instead of Sirius. She was ready.

She Floo'd to the Department of Mysteries and found herself before the Veil almost before she knew it. The room looked exactly the same as it had when she'd been here last. The Veil stood on a stone dais, and she sat before it. She organized the potion, the dagger, and her wand around her. She held the sheet with the incantation and hoped her pronunciation was flawless.

Holding her wand trained at the Veil, Hermione began to speak. Almost immediately, she felt the power rushing around her, the Veil shimmering violently and the air becoming thick and difficult to breathe. Her words flew out of their own accord, and she wasn't sure if she was in control anymore. She spoke the words fiercely and clearly, somehow knowing she was saying them correctly. It was like the Veil wanted her to speak the words. It trembled before her eyes, and she began to hear a whispering sound, first emanating from the Veil, and then from all around her. It seeped into her skin, making her shiver and shake. She felt so cold.

When the incantation was finished, she let it fall from her fingers. She felt odd, unmistakably strong, yet detached from herself. She reached for the potion and removed the stopper.

She drank deeply, nearly gagging as the potion burned her mouth and throat. She could feel it settle like a rock in her stomach, and her insides began to cramp. Her grip on the potion tightened, and she could not finish. She felt faint and was glad she was sitting down. She wavered slightly. Then she heard a sound in her ear, just like in her dream; a hissing voice ordering her to finish the potion. And just like in her dream, Hermione did. She used her finger to scoop the dregs out, and downed every single drop. When she swallowed for the last time, she heard a noise like an explosion and felt her body begin to convulse. Then it was like she was looking at herself from above, seizing on the ground, eyes rolled back in her head, hand convulsively grasping the potion bottle.

Hermione watched her body from above, glad that she could not feel what her body was going through. Suddenly, her body's eyes snapped open, and she stopped shaking. Hermione watched with detached interest as her body grabbed the dagger, drawing it deeply across the already-bleeding wound on her chest. *I am going to be a veritable patchwork by the end of this*, she mused pensively. The blood flowed and flowed, anointing the ground and spreading around her still-again form. There was more blood than should be possible, she was sure. The blood crept toward the Veil, and the second they connected, Hermione felt a great jerking sensation, and knew no more.

When Hermione awoke, she immediately knew something was very wrong. Her body felt ice cold and she was weaker than she could ever remember feeling. But that was not unexpected.

No, the problem was that she was in a bed. Her bed.

She bolted upright and immediately screamed at the pain in her chest. She looked at herself and saw that she was in clean clothes and her wound was free of spilled blood. But it was wide open, and she thought she could see bone, it was so deep. It throbbed, and there were red lines spidering off of it. She fell back against the bed, trying to catch her breath. The door immediately opened, but her eyes couldn't focus on who it was. She saw shaggy black hair and olive skin.

"Sirius?" she asked weakly.

"Of course not! It's Harry! What in Merlin's name have you done, Hermione? You almost died, I could have lost you! How could you be so selfish? I cannot believe you would do something like this, so reckless; it's not like you!"

Throughout his tirade, Hermione felt her heart sinking. It hadn't worked. Sirius should have come out immediately, and if Harry was angry, that meant there was no Sirius. She closed her eyes.

Harry sat on the bed beside her and stroked her hair. "Hermione... what did you think would happen?"

"Sirius was... supposed to... come back through. Everything... went perfectly. I don't... understand." A choked sob escaped her. She had failed.

Harry held her while he told her what had happened. Snape had firecalled Harry after attempting to contact her repeatedly to no avail. He told Harry what he suspected, saying that he believed she might be at the Veil. By the time Harry and Snape got there, she had almost bled out. Only her own healing draughts and Snape's blood replenishing potions had saved her. They brought her back here, and Snape was ready to murder her.

"Harry... I'm so sorry. It should... have worked. He should... be with us."

"Please don't do this. Don't you get it? He's gone! You don't come back from the Veil. You don't come back!" he shouted, and she cringed at the finality in his voice. She did not argue, only closed her eyes again, letting sleep take her.

When she awoke, she saw Snape in the armchair next to her bed. She immediately froze, and pretended to be asleep, but she must have given herself away. Without looking up from his Potions journal, he drawled, "So, the little lioness attempts to rebuild the pride. How does it feel to have relinquished a part of your soul for nothing?"

"Not for nothing," she answered immediately. "I tried my best. Now I can live with myself."

"It will not be much of a life, with a portion of your soul missing." His voice was accusing, like she had personally affronted him. "You foolish, stupid girl. You have no idea what you've done. Your suffering is far from over, Miss Granger. Get used to pain, for your life just might consist of it."

Hermione only sighed. She had done the best she could, and now she could only try to forgive herself for her failure. And try to get Harry to forgive her for being selfish, and not telling him what she had planned. She didn't care about Snape...he would never understand, and she wouldn't waste her breath trying to explain it to him.

"Can I have some food please? I'm starving."

"Seeing as how you haven't eaten in nearly three days, I don't find that surprising whatsoever," he muttered sarcastically, leaving the room.

Three days? Had she slept, been unconscious? Died? Now that she had nothing to research, nothing to look forward to after having had a mission for so long, Hermione felt bereft. She reached for the Potions journal and began to read. Snape returned with her food, and she ate heartily, making herself sick in the process.

Three more days went by in this manner, with Harry demanding to know what she was thinking, and Snape abusing her intelligence and demeaning her choices. Once she was able to walk around on her own, she asked that they leave. Snape didn't hesitate and was gone after a final rejoinder on her lack of foresight, but Harry delayed.

"Please, Harry. I can be alone. I'm done trying, I promise. I accept that he is gone." Her voice shook on her final words, but she meant what she said. Harry looked at her appraisingly and finally nodded.

"I'll be by every day, though, to make sure you're recovering as best you can." Hermione nodded, knowing she could not escape his concern.

"And Hermione... no one else knows what happened at the Veil, okay? I've told everyone you're under the weather. That's all. No one needs to know." Hermione was thankful for this, not wanting her few friends to think her crazy, or to know of her failure.

When Harry left, Hermione decided she would read a little before catching up on the work she'd been avoiding. She nearly fainted when she saw the Black Family Library was completely empty and devoid of books.

The small potions cabinet was bare of ingredients.

The cutlery drawer had no knives.

And her wand had been limited so she could only use basic spells and charms, or signal for help. She had been neutered. A fury built within her the likes of which she'd never experienced, and she raged, throwing a lamp and tearing paintings from the walls, creating a path of destruction all the way to Sirius' room, where the rage reached a pinnacle. Before she knew it, her hands were bleeding, one finger was surely broken, and there was not a piece of furniture or linen in the room that was not destroyed beyond repair.

She slept amongst the damage.

When Hermione awoke, she was grateful to discover she could perform healing spells with her wand, and she fixed her broken finger, and her swollen and bloodied hands. The work was amateur, and her finger looked a little funny and clicked when she bent it, and she wasn't able to fix the scars from all the cuts, but at least her hands were useable.

Hermione set about cleaning up the mess, ashamed and embarrassed that she had destroyed Harry's house, Sirius' home. She did not touch Sirius' room though. She started to pick up a piece of tinder that may have at one point been a chair, but a feeling of coldness and emptiness stole over her so quickly she felt ill, and she left the room, feeling immediately better upon exiting. She did not return.

Hermione cooked herself a pork chop for dinner, eating with her bare hands and feeling deliciously savage. She couldn't stop the thoughts about Sirius from circling in her brain. He was still alive. She knew it like she knew her own name. She could feel it in her blood, and she never felt it as strongly as when she was raging through the house. It was like he was right there.

Hermione dropped her head into her hands and sobbed.

She returned to work as usual, citing illness for her absenteeism, and threw herself into her job. She barely stopped for lunch, and worked through to the last minute. She gathered up as much as she could and brought it home with her, dumping it on the dining room table and beginning again like she had never left work. She carried on thus through dinner and well into the night. She didn't notice the tears streaking her cheeks or the way her hands were shaking. Finally, when she was too exhausted to do anything but absently click her poorly healed finger, she carried herself upstairs to bed. She passed Sirius' door and said, "Good night," under her breath, knowing she was going crazy and not caring in the least.

Her dreams were tortured and guilt-ridden, images of Sirius being tortured, being killed over and over, having his gut plucked out daily by vultures, pushing rocks up mountains only to have them tumble endlessly. This was the reward for her failure, and she accepted it.

She had just awoken from a vignette of Sirius on a stone slab being dissected with rusty tools when she heard a banging on the front door. Knowing it was well after midnight, Hermione ignored it, unwilling to open the door to some drunk wanting money to Floo home.

The banging continued for a straight minute, every desperate crash strumming directly into her heart, and finally Hermione couldn't stand the tension. She pulled on her dressing gown and walked to the front door, approaching it cautiously. The banging stopped, but still she was compelled to open the door.

When she did, Sirius Black fell through the threshold, and onto the floor at her feet.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Hermione opened the front door. When she did, Sirius Black fell through the threshold and onto the floor at her feet.

She felt like cold water had been thrown on her face. She couldn't move, even as the soaking wet lump at her feet shivered and trembled. When it tried to raise itself onto its hands but couldn't and fell back down, Hermione could only stare.

With a calmness belied only by her widened eyes and shaking hands, Hermione closed the front door. Sirius Black was inside her house. His house. Sirius was back from the Veil. *He was alive.*

Hermione's breathing became shallow, and her chest felt like someone deposited a person onto it. A person shaped like Sirius Black. Sirius Black, who was currently near-convulsing face-down on the floor.

Holy shit!

Hermione immediately dropped to her knees and turned him over. His eyes were open, but they didn't seem to have sight. He stared blankly past her face as his body was racked with shivers. She pulled him into her lap, wondering what the hell she was supposed to be doing right now.

"Sirius... oh, my gods, Sirius, can you hear me?"

No response, no flicker of recognition. Hermione placed her hand gently on his face, which looked precisely as it had on the day he'd entered the Veil. Even his clothes were the same, with no sign of age or misuse. It was as though not a day had passed since his disappearance. He didn't seem to be in any sort of physical danger, just shock. How he made it home from the Veil was a mystery to her.

She carded her fingers through his hair, contemplating what she should do next. Obviously she had to Firecall Harry, but first she had to make sure Sirius was all right. She held his face with both hands, dreading the cold feel of his skin beneath her fingers.

"Sirius... I'm so sorry. I don't know what to do!" This exclamation cost her a lot, as she hated admitting ignorance or helplessness.

Her hands on his face seemed to calm his movements. He closed his blank eyes, relaxing slightly against her. He only twitched occasionally as she continued to pet and placate him.

She knew she had to get him warm. His clothes were dripping with icy water, and she realized it must have been raining out. She scooted out from beneath him, wondering how she could get him into a tub. She laid him gently on the floor, thinking she would fill the tub first. Looking at him uncertainly, she decided he would be okay for a second. She ran to the main floor bathroom and started to fill the tub. She heard a low moan coming from Sirius, but by the time she ran back to his side, it had grown to a tormented scream. He had been trying to stand up again, but fell down after a fruitless attempt.

The unearthly cries stopped as soon as she touched him again.

"I'm running a bath for you, okay? We just have to...get you to it. I'm going to use a spell, and we'll have you in the tub in no time, all right?"

She waited for an answer and received none. Eternally grateful that Snape had seen fit to take the limitations off her wand that very day, she cast, *"Mobilicorpus,"* and trained her wand on him. He rose from the ground a little quickly, and Hermione had to refocus her magic to get him stabilized. Shaking from the effort of not hurting him, she was able to get him into the bathroom without him protesting.

Once there, she lowered him to his feet and propped him up against the wall, thinking if nothing else, she could at least support him if his legs would help. He was able to stand, but continued to stare lifelessly at her, looking without seeing her. She quickly unbuttoned his shirt and took it off him, his body making the movements she needed it to, but without taking initiative. His limbs remained where she placed them until she moved them back, and she was able to undress his top half. Her hand hesitated over the fly of his jeans, and she mentally shook herself for being childish. Nonetheless, she averted her eyes as she pulled his pants down, leaving his tight black boxers on.

She levitated him right into the tub, and he jerked slightly at the change in temperature, but relaxed slowly, eyes falling shut.

Hermione sat by the tub with him, unwilling to look away for a second, lest he fall under the water line. She added more hot water twice, and she even washed his hair for him, knowing what pride he took in his mane.

While he was resting in the tub, Hermione finally let her emotions hit her. He was back; he was truly back, truly alive. She hadn't failed after all; everything was fine. A sob escaped her throat, and the loud noise seemed to startle Sirius, because he frowned, though she thought him asleep. She tried to muffle the noises, but couldn't stop the wrenching cries that escaped her. *Harry will be so happy to see him. I've given him his family back. Everything is going to be okay...*

Hermione's tears turned to laughter, and her shoulders shook as the enormity of what happened hit her. In her mirth, she did not notice that Sirius' frown had disappeared. He looked so at peace, she was loath to take him out of the tub. But she had to get him in bed so she could get Harry.

She began to mechanically dry him off with a large towel, leaving his dripping boxers on for the moment. His hair took a while to dry, and she knew instinctively he would not appreciate a drying spell on it.

"Okay, Sirius. You're all warm and clean; now I'm going to use the spell to get you out of the tub, and then I'm going to dress you and put you in your bed. Then when you wake up, you can see Harry."

Hermione was thrilled to see a flash of emotion in Sirius' blank gaze at the mention of Harry before it was quelled. She got him out of the bathroom and started toward his old room before she remembered she had completely destroyed it in her uncharacteristic rampage.

She turned to her room instead, the only other furnished room at the moment. Once there, she found a pair of black pyjama pants and an old tee shirt of Ron's, kept for sentimental reasons. She put the tee shirt on him by lifting his arms, which stayed in midair until she guided them down to his side again.

Okay, now the pants, she told herself. Hermione couldn't stop the flush that stained her cheeks, unwilling to admit that she was affected by the body of her best friend's godfather. After all they had been through together, Hermione was unable to touch him clinically. Mentally shaking herself, she put her fingers into the waistband of his boxers and began to tug. The trail of black hair on his lower belly leading into his shorts was too much, however, and Hermione pulled her hands away as if burnt.

Laughing unsteadily, she stared at him. He stared back, unmoving. Remembering herself and internally berating herself for her silliness, Hermione cast a drying charm on the underpants. She nearly cried at her inability to be detached, and she hastily adorned him in the black pyjama pants. She guided him to the bed, pulling the covers back and leading him in.

She pulled the sheets tight against him, freeing his hands from beneath them, as she herself hating having her hands trapped. His eyes closed almost immediately, his breathing steady. A light snore was escaping his lips, and Hermione stroked his hair gently. She reached down to kiss his cheek, but stopped halfway and patted it awkwardly with her hand instead.

"Welcome home, Sirius Black."

She left the room and did not see one hesitant arm rise from the bed to reach for her before falling back onto the sheets.

Once outside the room, Hermione leaned on the wall heavily. Being in his presence was having a strange effect on her. Her body felt hot and itchy, uncomfortable, yet her mind was somehow at peace. And now, making her way to the fireplace to Floo Harry, she felt like she should be in there with Sirius. She felt really wrong away from him.

Probably my admittedly lacking nursing instincts kicking in, she told herself, reaching for the Floo powder.

Harry's tired face appeared in her hearth, and she asked him to come over. He kindly reminded her of the time, and the fact that they both had work in only a few hours, but she insisted, and a few moments later, Harry stepped into her living room, grumpily dusting himself off.

"Are you okay?" he asked immediately, his Auror training kicking in when he saw the strange look on her face.

"Yes, of course. Harry, I...you need to see this," she said, certain that telling him would only result in him vehemently denying it and wasting time.

He looked at her sideways, wondering if she'd well and truly lost it. "Okay, then. Let's see."

She took his hand, leading him to her bedroom. He stopped outside the open door, digging his heels in. "Whoa, Hermione! What exactly do you need to show me in your bedroom?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Harry James Potter! Do you think I'm seducing you or something?" she demanded incredulously.

He laughed nervously, saying, "Of course not, I'm sorry. It's late, you know," he admitted by way of an excuse.

She gripped his hand tighter, dragging him into the room. "Just come, okay?" He followed her, his eyes searching the room and falling upon the bed. He narrowed his eyes and took a step closer. His hand flew to his mouth, and he gasped.

"Is that... is that...?"

"Yes, Harry. It's Sirius. He came back tonight, I don't know how, but he's here and he's alive."

"Oh my... *holy*... Sirius...." Harry couldn't stop the tears from escaping; he had never stopped missing Sirius, feeling he had been cheated out of his only family. And now here he was, looking like not a day had passed, sleeping soundly in Hermione's bed as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Harry turned to Hermione, gathering her in his arms and crying unashamedly into her hair. "Thank you, thank you," he murmured, not taking his eyes from Sirius for a second. Hermione was crying as well, wishing Sirius was awake for this reunion.

"Harry, I don't know when he will wake up or if he will be the same. Please brace yourself for any unpleasantness. He did look like he heard your name, though."

"What do you mean? He hasn't been awake? How did he get here?"

Hermione tried to lead Harry to the sitting room to talk, but he wouldn't leave Sirius's side. They sat on the bed, Hermione sitting close the pillows, absentmindedly brushing the hair off the sleeping man's face, then taking his hand in hers, stroking her thumb over the back of his hand.

Sirius' sleeping form let out a sigh and shifted ever so slightly. Harry's eyes lit up immediately, but Sirius still seemed to be deeply asleep.

Sitting on the bed, both holding onto to Sirius' hand as if he would slip away any second, the two friends talked about his dramatic arrival and subsequent bathing, and how he hadn't responded to her voice or words, except Harry's name, but seemed in perfect health. She didn't mention the haunting scream, thinking Harry didn't need to know since it was only a momentary thing and hadn't recurred.

Hermione brought a cot into her room for Harry, who wouldn't think of leaving his godfather alone. Hermione lay down on the couch in the sitting room, her eyes burning as she thanked the gods for Sirius' miraculous return. She'd never seen Harry so happy, so excited. If anyone deserved this, it was Harry.

Making a mental note to owl Snape in the morning to tell him the news and possibly to gloat, Hermione let sleep take her, thinking only of the dark-haired man on her pillow.

The dream had the same qualities as the others: darkness, quietness, and a near-overwhelming sense of foreboding. But this was the first time she was not on a stone slab, secured by ropes or encumbered by heaviness. She seemed to be free to move. An insistent whispering was rising in volume all around her, but thankfully never to the deafening proportions of her other dreams.

An intense ripping sensation made itself known within her. She gasped in agony and clutched herself, but she knew the place from which the ripping began was not a physical place, but a spiritual one. It was not her body that was in danger, but that did not lessen the pain.

A low, keening cry surrounded her, and it reached vociferous levels before she realized it was coming from her. She felt so alone, so scared... something was missing... she was fragmented.

She let her head fall back and screamed.

She awoke with a start, her body beaded with sweat. She could tell it was still the middle of the night by the blackness surrounding her, but she felt wide awake. She spent a few moments contemplating trying to fall back asleep for an hour or so before she had to get up for work. Then she realized there was no way she could leave Sirius here by himself! *Maybe Harry could stay with him*, she mused. As much as she would love to play hooky and stay here in case something happened, she knew she couldn't afford it.

She got up, knowing there was no way she'd be sleeping now that she was thinking of Sirius and when he would recover. She got herself a glass of water and brought it into her bedroom. She stepped up to the bed and knelt, making no noise, and looked up its occupant. Sirius had moved in the night and was lying on his side, hugging a pillow to his stomach. He looked so young, so peaceful. After he'd escaped from Azkaban and had been subsequently trapped in his house until his name was cleared, he'd looked like death warmed over. His hair had had no lustre and his eyes had been haunted. But the longer he was free, the more he'd returned to his old self, until he was as fit and handsome as he'd been in his youth. But even now, though physically intact, there was a look to him like he'd seen horrors, and Hermione knew she could never understand the depth of the damage caused by the prison. But in slumber, he looked childlike, and Hermione could not resist cupping his warm cheek in her palm and gently caressing his face. She grazed her thumb over his eyebrow and gently pushed his hair over his shoulder.

She was about to turn away when his lips opened and she heard a small moan. She gasped, knowing he was responding to her touch. She quickly put her hand back on his cheek, and his eyes immediately opened. Instead of being slightly out of focus, Sirius looked directly into Hermione's brown eyes. She smiled hesitantly, silently urging him to say something, but he only looked at her. A flash of pain lit across his features, making him close his eyes tightly. She didn't take her hand away, however, and soon his breathing became regular, and she knew him to be asleep again.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Hermione woke Harry to ask if he would stay with his godfather for the day, and she was told he'd already owed his boss asking for a week off. She nodded and told him she'd be going to work. She asked him to Floo her if anything, anything at all, happened, and he replied that he would.

She moved to the bed. She took Sirius' hand in hers and squeezed it gently. He did not wake up or squeeze back, so she left with regrets.

She was in the copy room at work, making a seemingly infinite number of copies with her wand, when one of her colleagues ran through the door, panting.

"Harry Potter is looking for you!" he cried, his eyes alight at apparently having met the Saviour of the Wizarding World.

"At the Floo?" she queried.

"Yes! He needs you to come...he told me to find you!" The sound of pride was unmistakable in his voice, as though he'd been trusted with the Holy Grail and not a mere errand.

Hermione followed him quickly to Harry's face in the fireplace. "What happened?" she immediately demanded.

"I don't know!" His voice was harried. "He only just woke up, and when he saw me, it was like he knew me! But then he started screaming like he was in pain, and nothing I did seemed to help, and he couldn't tell me what he needed!"

Hermione could hear Sirius' tortured shouts in the background, and her heart nearly stopped. "Harry, I'll be right there. Floo Professor Snape. I'm sure he can help!"

She ran out of the building to a public Apparation point and was almost immediately outside her front door. She let herself in and saw Harry talking to Snape through the Floo. She didn't stay to listen, but ran immediately to her room, her heart wrenching at the screams.

She flung open the door and ran to the bed. Sitting beside Sirius, she tried to assess any damage. He seemed exactly the same as the night before, but his eyes were screwed shut, and he was thrashing on the bed, moaning and shouting.

She couldn't stifle her sob at seeing him like this, wishing she knew what to do. She touched his forehead to check for fever, and like magic, Sirius' body fell still. A sense of calm stole over Hermione as his body settled and all noises stopped. Not really aware of her actions, Hermione lifted back the covers and lined her body up with his, her front pressed to his side. The feeling of calm increased, and for some inexplicable reason, Hermione felt she could fall asleep at that moment, despite the panic.

Harry ran in, saying, "Professor Snape is coming after his last class." He looked shocked at seeing her body next to his godfather's, but was relieved that the ungodly noises had ceased. "What are you doing?"

"I don't really know. It worked, though," she informed him honestly. Harry only nodded, wishing Sirius could tell them what was wrong.

Harry felt strangely uncomfortable, so left to make them all lunch. He would make some for Sirius, even if he didn't eat it, just like when for a year after Sirius' trip through the Veil, he had had his room cleaned like clockwork, awaiting his return. Now, he berated himself for giving up, giving in, when Hermione had not. I owe her so much, he thought.

Hermione munched on the sandwiches Harry had put together, never leaving Sirius' side. It made her feel better to be touching him, probably because she could ascertain his realness that way. She could also feel his breathing and it calmed her.

When she got up to go to the bathroom, she could hear Sirius moaning as she was washing her hands. She re-entered the room just as he was gaining volume. When she touched him, he fell back into silence.

Okay, Hermione thought considering. Obviously this is more than just a coincidence. He needs to be in my presence to be calm. Hermione thought of the possibilities. It seemed likely that she had created a connection between them through the magic she'd done to bring him back. Or, it could be that he had imprinted on her in a way, being the first person he saw after his absence. There was no way to know for certain, but she had a feeling Snape would enlighten them in the snidest way possible.

Harry looked troubled at the new development, but couldn't bring himself to be jealous or sad, since he had Sirius back. That was all that mattered.

"Do you think we should be telling people?" he wondered aloud. "About his return, I mean."

"It's up to you, Harry, but it's my opinion that we should wait until he returns to normal." She paused, thinking about her words. "Or at least until he is aware of his surroundings. Just in case new people frighten him or stress him out." She couldn't explain the insane feeling that made her want to keep it between them, keep Sirius to herself.

So she said nothing.

"You're right; I don't want to slow his healing or anything." Harry sighed. He just wanted Sirius to wake up, take him into his arms, and tell him everything would be all right. Harry had never had anyone do that for him, and he needed it.

Hermione fell asleep in the bed against Sirius with Harry keeping a watchful eye over them both. She woke up when she heard Snape's voice in the other room along with a woman's that was vaguely familiar. Harry told them about Sirius coming back, and she heard surprised exclamations from the woman. Harry was obviously excited as he told the story, sounding a little sad when he spoke of Sirius' apparent hysteria. She then heard Harry explain how Hermione had calmed Sirius, and Snape's responding words were too low to catch.

She looked at her bedfellow, whose eyes were still closed. She placed her hand over his heart and immediately felt a strange sensation in her own chest. It was a few moments before she realized their hearts were beating in tandem, at exactly the same time. She took her hand away, and her heart skipped a beat and began pumping at her regular, slightly faster rate. How very unusual, she thought, trying to ignore the feeling of wholeness she'd had when their heartbeats had matched.

"Well, isn't this a pretty picture," came the slow drawl of Severus Snape. He didn't seem too surprised to see Sirius, but he hid his emotions very well. Hermione only rolled her eyes. She knew he'd been concerned when they'd found her at the Veil, and it was hard to be rude to someone who cared if you lived or died, whether they denied it or not.

But she tried anyway.

"Not anymore," she snarked, trying out her best glare on him. He only snorted and attended the bed. Madam Pomfrey, owner of the familiar voice, also entered the room, trailed by Harry. She seemed slightly in shock, but ran her wand professionally over Sirius a few times, then performed a few spells, some Hermione recognized as diagnostic, another as a hydrating spell, and some she did not know.

"Well," Madam Pomfrey began, "he seems to be the very picture of health. He was a tad dehydrated, but otherwise perfectly intact. If you use the hydrating and nutrient spells, he will not create any waste until he eats real food." Hermione had wondered how they would handle that.

"Other than that, I say let him rest as much as possible and try to move his limbs to keep him limber. There is no atrophy, so wherever he was seems to have basically put him on pause. I believe he should be fine in a few days. If not, we will take him to St. Mungo's." Her tone brooked no denial, and the young friends nodded gravely.

After promising to keep what she'd seen a secret for now, she nodded once to them, then to Snape, and walked briskly from the room.

Snape himself gazed at Sirius inscrutably. "It has never, ever been done," he murmured, tearing his eyes from his old enemy to look at Hermione. "Never."

"I know," she answered, a little unnerved by the intense stare of which she was on the receiving end. "But it has been done now, and we need to help him."

"He has been a victim of untold horrors, for who knows how long. Obviously time does not work the same way past the Veil; it could be that while only moments passed for his body, an eternity elapsed for his mind. He could be quite mad when he awakens. Or, he may never awaken at all."

Harry glared at him, wondering why Hermione thought he would help. "He will awaken, Snape, and he will not be mad. Everything will be fine. You can see yourself out."

Hermione sighed, knowing she needed to speak to Snape in person. "Harry, I need to talk to the professor, and since I can't leave Sirius..." She left her sentence unfinished, knowing Harry would understand. He looked uncertain, but then Snape interrupted.

"Actually, it may help to see exactly what happens when you do leave his side, Miss Granger."

Harry protested, "You just want to see him in pain!"

Snape turned his calculating gaze to Harry, "Potter, you may not want my help, but you need it. I must determine if it is just any comfort he needs, how fast acting the calming effect is, how long she can stay away and a number of other factors. I can either hear it second-hand and make an uneducated guess, or Miss Granger can demonstrate, and we can go about helping Black. My interest in this case is purely educational, not vindictive."

Harry looked chagrined, and he left the room saying he didn't want to hear the screams. Hermione only nodded, preparing herself to endure them.

Snape nodded at her, and she left the bed to stand by his side.

Nothing happened. They waited a few minutes, but the only sign of distress was a slight toss of his head and a clenching of his fingers. Snape told her to leave the room, and she walked out to the sitting room. Within moments she heard frantic, incoherent shouting. Snape called for her to return. When she stepped into the room, Sirius calmed down, his head tossing and body shaking, but he made no noise. Even with his eyes closed, he seemed aware of her presence.

Snape bade her approach the bed. The closer she got, the less his body moved. When she touched him, he stilled completely.

"Interesting. Get Harry back here."

She did, and they repeated the process, getting Harry to go to Sirius instead of Hermione while she waited in the hall. It didn't work, even when Snape instructed him to lie directly beside Sirius on the bed, like Hermione had before. Harry did, but Sirius tossed and screamed.

She came back in the room and the effect was immediate. He still jerked, his hands stretching out beside him, until she took one in hers.

"Well, it appears that the spell has bound Miss Granger to Black. It is most likely irreversible, but the bond seems to be weakening quickly, given that you said he didn't calm until you got into bed with him before. You can only hope it dissipates to the point that you can have a normal life, Miss Granger. As for when he will wake up, it is anyone's guess. Continue to talk to him, keep him hydrated as Pomfrey instructed, and try not to distress him."

"But why did he begin to... need me only today? Why not last night?"

"I can only hypothesize that immediately after exiting the Veil, he was in a protected state of some kind, or maybe so entrenched in his own mind that he was overpowering the need."

Hermione nodded, thinking that was possible. Harry only looked scared for the only family he had left.

Snape left after asking to be kept updated, and Harry began a rant on how Snape saw this as a science project and not someone's life.

"I know he's difficult Harry, but he is brilliant. Sirius has you and me for bedside manner; we only need Snape's expertise."

Harry muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Yeah, fat lot of good that did," but Hermione hoped he was too mature for such statements, and her look told him so. He smiled sheepishly and Hermione grinned. Harry walked to Hermione and hugged her tightly. He just held her for a few moments, and Hermione knew what he meant by it.

"Everything's going to be okay, Harry. Why don't you go home and get some sleep? I know you barely slept last night."

"But you'll call as soon as...?"

"As soon as anything happens, Harry, I will call you," she promised. He let himself out, and Hermione sat on his cot by the bed. An owl tapped at her window, and she was irritated to see her work had been sent to her from the Ministry. She was apparently not permitted personal time. She shrugged and got to work, not leaving the bed for hours, until finally she had to get something to eat, and she wanted to grab a book. She looked sceptically at the door, wondering how fast she could make dinner. She cast the hydrating and nourishing spells over Sirius, thinking she would do it whenever she ate, to make sure she did it enough.

"I'll be right back, okay, Sirius? I'm only going to make dinner. Promise."

For some reason, she expected an answer, but got none. She ran from the room to the kitchen and threw together a sandwich, wishing she'd thought to ask Harry to make some for her before he'd left. She didn't hear the moaning begin until she was already running back, plate and water in hand. She grinned.

"I made it!" she announced.

She ate silently, running out once more when she was finished to fetch a book. No moaning this time, but a strange tugging sensation in her chest. She scratched absently at the scar over her heart and settled down in the cot to read. She promptly fell asleep, waking once in the night to a low groan that was unlike his other more panicked noises. She got up to check on him, but he appeared to still be asleep.

She was just falling asleep again in the stiff cot when she heard the noise for the second time. She put her hand on his forehead but got no response. Too tired to think, she crawled into bed with him, covering them both to the chest. She didn't wake up again for the rest of the night.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

When Hermione awoke in her bed, she yawned lazily. It was so nice to wake up before the jarring noise of the wind-up alarm on her bedside table. She went to throw her arms above her head and stretch when she realized she was held down. It was unlike her to have the covers over her hands, but they were trapped up in the sheets. When she struggled to be free, she became aware of a heavy arm on her stomach, holding her down.

Fighting a panic, Hermione breathed deeply. It was still too dark to see clearly, but the arm certainly belonged to a man. A rather large man.

Just as she was inhaling to loose a shattering scream, she remembered where she was. In her bed, with Sirius. It was his arm on her, not some crazed rapist intent on defiling her. She stiffened and took stock of what was happening. Sirius had actually moved in the night and put his arm over her. She couldn't help but be excited at this development.

She gingerly removed his arm, slipping out from beneath him. She got a small thrill from touching him, but forced herself to remain detached. Just as she was slipping from the bed, his hand shot out and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her backwards into the bed. He wrapped one arm around her middle; the other arm was beneath her neck, holding her opposite shoulder. He was spooned against her backside, pressed so firmly against him she could feel his chest hair tickling her spine.

"Sirius?" It was still too dark to see if he was actually awake or if his actions were instinct or unconscious. Her heart was racing with the thought that he might actually be awake. She hadn't allowed herself to think that he might never recover, but the dread of that idea had been held over her head every moment.

In response, he only pulled her closer to him. Every movement on her end created a tightening of his grip on her, until she was forced to stop struggling lest she be strangled. She tried to think of what the proper thing to do in this situation would be, but she couldn't get her brain to work properly when she was beginning to feel his hardening arousal pressing against her bottom. Apparently, despite his lack of cognitive ability, his body was perfectly functioning.

That's good, Hermione, keep speaking in clinical terms. That way you'll forget all about that thick, hard...

"Where the fuck am I?"

Hermione gasped and immediately spun in his arms. In his apparent shock, he'd loosened his grip, and she was finally able to move. She looked at his face and was able to make out that his eyes were wide open and his mouth agape.

"Um... you're in your house, Grimmauld Place. And you're in my bed. Well, you've been sleeping here. Without me. Until last night when I ended up in here too." She was babbling but she couldn't stop, a huge grin spreading over her face and tears sparkling in her eyes.

"And who... are you?"

Hermione had prepared for the fact that he might not remember her, or anything, from before his time in the Veil, but it still hurt to think he'd forgotten her. "Hermione Granger."

"Hermione..." Sirius gasped. "Oh, my gods! Hermione!" His voice was frantic. He pushed her onto her back and quickly straddled her hips, his hands on her shoulders, shaking her. Hermione was all too aware of his erection pressing against her lower belly, but she was too excited that he was actually awake and coherent to give it a second thought.

She could see a panicked look on his face, and she leaned as far as she could to turn on the lamp. He stared at her face, seemingly memorizing her features.

"Where is Harry?" he demanded. She felt a thankful ache that he remembered his godson as well.

"Harry is fine, he's with Ginny. Everything is fine."

Sirius nodded, looking relieved. He met her eyes again and said, "You've gotten old."

She snorted and began to laugh. She laughed out loud, losing control over her laughter while Sirius looked at her, slightly shocked. Her mirth wracked her slight frame until emotion caught up with her and her laughs became sobs. Her breath was hitching and tears were streaming from the sides of her eyes onto the pillow.

"Hermione, stop that." She inhaled sharply at his command and was able to contain herself. She sniffed delicately and gave him a watery smile.

"You're okay, Sirius, you're back and you're okay." Her hands were running up and down his arms, which were still pinning her shoulders to the bed. She felt a strange shock at the contact and took the time to marvel that his muscles were extremely well-formed beneath her hands.

"I... I'm okay? I remember... my cousin aiming at me... the green flash... and falling backwards. Then..." he looked confused and shook his head, "I remember the front door of Grimmauld Place. That's it, until now. What's happened?"

No wonder he thinks I look old, she mused. He has no idea years have passed since his "death." Hermione took a deep breath, which was difficult with a body on her. The scar on her chest was itching like crazy, and she rubbed it absently through her shirt. Sirius' eyes were drawn to her action, and she saw him wet his lips with the tip of his tongue as he followed the movement. Her eyes widened, and she put her hands on his shoulders, pushing him away.

He rolled off of her and sat on the bed beside her. She moved to sit cross-legged in front of him. She took a deep breath, fortifying herself to tell him what had happened.

"Sirius, five years ago you went through the Veil. We were sure you were dead, because no one ever comes back from beyond the Veil. Ever. But it was like I could feel you, sense you. I couldn't give up. I found a spell and a potion, and I brought you back." Her wide smile was back, and she was internally smirking at her overly simplified explanation, but Sirius only looked confused and lost.

"While you were gone, we won the war. We... lost some people, though. Remus died. I'm so sorry."

Sirius nodded, seemingly taking the news in stride, but a flash of intense hurt crossed his eyes before he closed them. Hermione went on to list the casualties, then the marriages and births. He seemed pleased to hear about Teddy Lupin, but his smile faded quickly. He didn't ask about the death of Voldemort, but there was all the time in the world for those details.

"So, I've been gone for five years." It was not a question, but Hermione nodded anyway. "Why do I feel so... wrong? So strange, so incomplete, so off?" His words were rushed, and his face was the quintessence of confusion.

"I think it may take some time for you to get entirely back to normal. I should think it's perfectly natural to feel out of sorts after all you've been through. I can't even believe we're sitting here, talking like old friends when everyone thought you were dead!"

"Everyone but you," he reminded her. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, feeling another jolt when her fingers grazed his bare skin. He gasped, and she yanked her hand away. Hermione's heart was hammering; what was happening to her? He grabbed her hand back and held it in his, stroking it with his long fingers. He had a look of intense concentration on his face. His eyes closed, and he brought her fingers to his mouth. Kissing her fingertips, he looked at her again.

Hermione had let her eyes slip shut and her head fall back slightly. His simple kiss on her fingers was more erotic and satisfying than any fumbling, clandestine touch she'd ever experienced. When he opened his mouth and ran his tongue gently over the pad of her forefinger, Hermione moaned.

He couldn't help but taste her. He knew he should be more concerned; he'd just been informed he had basically come back from the dead. And he'd awoken in the bed of his godson's best friend. He'd been told his own best friend was dead, the war was over, and he was alive. All these thoughts flickered through his mind like fireflies, and yet the only thing he could focus on was the alluring scent coming off this young woman before him, the silkiness of her fingers, and the feeling of completeness that came when he held her hand.

She was beautiful in her passion. Sirius knew something strange was happening; he was rock hard from merely licking her finger and wanted nothing more than to throw her back against the bed and take her as hard as he could.

He dropped her hand like it burned him, and her eyes shot open. She mumbled an apology and jumped from the bed. He didn't stop her; instead he stared at her like he wanted to devour her, and he would have, given half a chance.

She was gathering her work clothes from her drawers. "I have to go to work. I'll Firecall Harry, and he'll Floo right over. He'll be so happy to see you, he missed you so much." She spoke quickly and went to leave the room, but Sirius was out of bed in a flash, hand tight around her wrist. She stopped, but didn't turn to him. She couldn't explain the strange feelings inside her, the need to let him touch her, the feeling of discontent that began the moment she left the bed. She knew it was related to the spell she'd cast, the bond that was between them, but she didn't know how to handle it. His hand on her wrist was enough to make her breath catch.

Sirius breathed her scent in through his mouth. She was exquisite, and she'd been right in front of his eyes for years. He'd only ever seen her as a child, but the creature in front of him was no doubt a woman. He stepped closer to her and placed his hands on her upper arms, drawing her back against his warm, firm chest.

"And you, Hermione?" His voice was silken sin. "Did you miss me?"

Hermione fought the urge to loll her head back and give in to the sensation of his voice in her ear, but she controlled herself. "Of course. I brought you back, didn't I?"

His mouth was ghosting over the shell of her ear, and she felt more than heard his next words.

"Yes, you did. And soon you will tell me how. And why."

He let go of her arms and she stumbled forward, letting her momentum carry her out of the room.

Sirius heard the bathroom door shut, and finally let out the breath he'd been holding. His mind was racing and his heart pounding. He'd been away... for five years of his life. He'd lost so much. He took a moment to think about Remus, his only friend for so long, even when Remus had believed him a murderer. And now he was gone... but at least he was with Tonks. Sirius had been surprised when Hermione said the two of them had finally gotten together, and he was thrilled that Remus was finally, officially, his family. And little Teddy was his family as well. He'd have to get to know him.

That made him think of Harry. Amazing, strong, resilient Harry. How much fun they could have had if only there had been no war. If only they'd been normal. But now everything is normal, he told himself. He could see Harry, teach him and be a parent to him. Sirius' name had been cleared; he would never have to hide again.

And he had Hermione to thank for that. The strange, lovely, intoxicating witch who had no idea of her own power. He had sensed that much from their brief moments together. She had absolutely no clue she was sex incarnate. Neither had he, for that matter, but he sure did now. For some reason he needed her, and nothing kept Sirius Black from what he needed.

Five years in oblivion did little to change the man inside him, and what he wanted, he made sure to get.

Hermione had hurriedly dressed and was now waiting for Harry to arrive. He practically flew through the Floo, looking at her frantically. She pointed him toward the bedroom, smiling at his excitement. She waited until she heard frantic exclamations from both men and smiled softly before leaving the house to Apparate to work. She wanted desperately to stay, but Harry had the week off anyway, and she'd only be in the way. She was at work before she knew it, a daze forming in her mind that consisted only of Sirius' soft tongue against her fingers.

The memory made her wet even before she'd entered her office.

The day went painfully slowly, especially when Hermione began to feel ill around lunchtime. Her stomach was twisting, and she had a massive headache. In addition to that, she had a general feeling of discomfort and malaise. She kept herself busy, Firecalling Harry on her lunch break to see how things were going. He'd answered, laughing harder than she'd seen him do in years. He'd told her he and Sirius were playing cards, and she heard Sirius in the background exclaiming his disgust at his alleged defrauding at Harry's hands.

When she heard his voice, her clenched stomach relaxed, and her headache abated slightly. When he poked his head into the hearth to tell her that she would get to play the champion when she was done breadwinning, her unease dissipated. She could not believe how Sirius seemed to be completely back to his old self and that he and Harry were carrying on like not a day had passed.

But after the rest of the day plus two hours of overtime, Hermione was nearly dead with fatigue and melancholy. She felt ready to throw up at any moment, and her skin was crawling. The scabbed-over scar on her chest was causing her extreme discomfort, and the red lines emanating from it were visibly throbbing. She reminded herself, not for the first time, to do something about that.

Hermione made error after error with her work and was wholly unable to concentrate by the end of the day. Her co-workers looked upon her with pity, but were also frustrated by her inability to get the job done, which in turn caused them all more work. Hermione was the last to leave when she finally wrapped up one final report.

She grabbed her purse and left the office. On the way out of the building, her stomach clenched so tightly she was sure it would wrench itself loose. She fell to her knees in agony and vomited on the carpet in front of her. Her body heaved as it expelled her lunch and dinner. She could barely stand, but somehow made it to her feet. She had intended to Apparate home but wouldn't dare to in her current condition. Regretfully leaving the vomit on the floor, she made her way to the Ministry Floors.

She gathered enough strength to call out her location in a clear voice and stumbled through the Floo, right into Sirius' arms on the other side.

Sirius had felt quite out of sorts during the day, but pushed the feeling away because he was so excited to be with Harry. Harry had chattered at him all day, unable to contain himself. Sirius had asked him to keep his return a secret just a little while longer. He still felt very odd and was beyond worried that the Veil would snatch him back as quickly as he'd been returned.

Toward the end of Hermione's work day, he'd felt positively deathly. Harry was worried about his health and wanted to call Pomfrey, but Sirius assured him it was just too much excitement. He'd gone down for a nap in Hermione's room, and Harry insisted on staying with him on the cot. Harry fell asleep almost immediately, like a child after a day at the zoo. Sirius remained awake, scared of the pain he felt, and unable to remain still. He had been constantly scratching and rubbing his arms and chest, feeling like a drug addict in withdrawal.

Suddenly, he'd had the unquenchable urge to go to the Floo. He knew Hermione would be through it any minute, and though his mind was confused, his body informed him she was the only way to stave off the discomfort. No sooner than he stepped before the fireplace did Hermione careen through, looking like death itself. He managed to catch her as she fell.

Immediately, their mutual sickness quelled. Her stomach settled, and her headache disappeared. His flesh stopped itching, and he felt completely normal. They both gasped at the immediate relief, but once the discomfort was gone, they drew sharp breaths for a different reason.

They both felt the sensation of rightness in the other's embrace. Sirius wrapped his strong arms around the frail witch, drawing her into his strength. She melted into him like it was the most natural thing to do.

Their hands roamed all over each other's bodies, touching as much skin as possible without being indecent, before Sirius grabbed Hermione's hair and forced her to look up at him. His hands on her skin were hot, and he felt fevered, but somehow healthier than ever. He looked into her whiskey eyes and saw only invitation.

When he bent his head to devour her plump and trembling lips, they heard Harry's sleepy voice from the hallway.

"Is that Hermione? Sirius, you owe me a rematch for the last game, and then Hermione plays the winner."

When Harry entered the room, the confused pair had sprung apart, Hermione looking guilty and flushed; Sirius looking slightly annoyed and completely determined.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Over the next five days, Harry spent nearly every waking moment with his godfather. He'd essentially moved into the Black house and was staying in a room on the third floor, with only a newly transfigured bed for furniture. He was making the most of his week off and making up for lost time with Sirius.

Sirius had told Hermione that he wanted to stay in his own room instead of hers, and she hastily told him she needed to tidy it up a little.

The clean-up took nearly an entire evening before the room was put together enough for his return. Hermione was ashamed of her temper, having never lost control of herself to that extent before. She wasn't able to repair a lot of the damage, but she did the best she could, figuring even with improperly repaired sheets and slightly rickety drawers and chairs, it was better than wherever Sirius had been.

The first night Sirius spent in his own room ended up being akin to torture. He had nightmares and woke up soaked in sweat and incoherent with fear. He couldn't recall what he'd dreamt of, except an overwhelming sensation of dispassion, detachment, and loneliness. He was hardly able to catch his breath after he'd awoken. On top of that, his skin felt like it was on fire, and his mind was jumbled. He felt a need, a need so strong and yet wholly incomprehensible.

When he'd gotten up to get a glass of water, he'd unlocked his door...locking doors behind him became a habit after his stint in Azkaban where privacy was a many-splendored thing...and Hermione's sleeping form had toppled into his room. It appeared that she'd slept propped against his door. She fell on his feet, still slumbering, and Sirius was shocked to find he felt at peace, though a little embarrassed at her state of dishabille, as she'd been wearing only shorts and an oversized tee-shirt. She'd worn revealing clothing in the summers when she was younger, but it felt different now, especially since he was touching her.

He'd gathered her in his arms and put her back in her own bed, poured and drank a glass of water, and checked in on her again on his way back to his own room. She appeared to be asleep, but she was making small whimpering noises that Sirius recognized all too well as the evidence of a nightmare.

He'd crawled into bed with her, and they both slept peacefully. Thus began the pattern. Every night, they would attempt to sleep in their own rooms, but every night they ended up in one another's beds, arms wrapped around the other in a desperate embrace.

Neither spoke of their strange need for the other, though both spent many hours reflecting on it privately. In the mornings, Hermione always woke up first, getting dressed in the near-dark and silently leaving for work. Sirius never awoke to her exit.

Hermione came home every day at lunch to play a few games of cards, or just sit in the living room reading while Harry and Sirius carried on. Their discomfort was bearable if they spent an hour together midday, but by the end of the day, both were invariably exhausted. Harry didn't suspect anything was off, but realized that Hermione and his godfather seemed to be getting on better than ever.

On Hermione's part, she spent every spare moment researching exactly what had happened. Obviously they were bonded and needed each other for comfort, but she needed to know how long it would last and what would happen when they inevitably couldn't be together at some point.

Her research efforts were fruitless. She could find even less on this mysterious bond than she had found on the Veil originally. None of her studies even gave her a lead. She could only hope the mutual need would diminish, because she was starting to feel perverted, caressing Sirius' arms in his sleep to get relief for her itching skin and headaches.

For Sirius, the reason behind the bond was less important than the fact that it existed in the first place. Ever the man of action, Sirius didn't care about the why of the matter...he just needed to know how to fix it or make it go away. Since he'd discovered that touching and talking to Hermione made the pain go away, that's what he did. To him, it was a small thing in the grand scheme; he only had one family member in the world, his godson. He got to see him every day, so he was happy. He only had one friend...Hermione herself...and he had her as well. There didn't seem to be much of a problem, when you got right down to it. However, he could tell Hermione was perturbed by her need for him, and he intended to make things go a little more smoothly for her. After all, what was more natural than touching a lover? So, it stood to reason that the only way to make Hermione comfortable and make his life easier on all counts, was to get Hermione to agree to be his lover.

And what Sirius wants....

"Are you sure you don't need me? I hate leaving you here."

"Harry, son, of course we need you. You have no idea how much I've enjoyed our time. But it's hardly fair to Hermione to have to cook and clean for the both of us because Merlin knows I'm hopeless; besides, I know Ginny misses you, she owls you twice a day. Have a heart, man."

Sirius said this good-naturedly, but the truth of the matter was he needed his godson to leave. The last day had been especially painful, and Hermione's visit during her lunch break had not helped enough to get them through the day without extreme discomfort. His temper was wearing thin, and he would hate to snap at Harry because all he wanted was to touch his best friend.

"I don't mind cooking!" Hermione protested half-heartedly, knowing Harry would feel guilty if she didn't, but at the same time, wishing she could curl up on Sirius' lap to stop the agony in her skull.

"No, Sirius is right. I can't stay here forever, especially not if we want to keep Sirius' return a secret for now. I'll come back tomorrow night though, if that's okay."

He looked to Hermione, who technically lived in Grimmauld Place, and she looked to Sirius, who owned it. Everyone smiled awkwardly at the unusual situation, and it was agreed that Harry should return the next evening.

Harry Floo'd home to Ginny, leaving Sirius and Hermione standing in the sitting room looking like they'd been saved from the firing squad.

Sirius started to cross the floor to gather Hermione in his arms, for better or worse, but she stopped him with a raised hand.

"Did you know I performed the spell to bring you back an entire week before you actually returned?"

Sirius shook his head in denial. "No, I didn't know. What does the mean? Where was I?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but it worries me. Why the delay?"

Sirius thought about it for a moment, wishing the talking would stop so he could get some relief. "Maybe it took that long for the Veil to accept your offering, or maybe the Veil couldn't find me; it's possible there are hundreds or thousands of souls like me on the other side...we just don't know."

Hermione thought the first concept had merit, but she wondered what about her offering might have been lacking. She had no choice but to shrug it off, as she would get no answers from Sirius, who could recall nothing but intense emotions, and even those only came to the surface when he was sleeping, leaving mere impressions but no concrete details.

Hermione hugged herself with her arms, her body craving physical touch with Sirius, but her mind telling her it was wrong, that Harry would hate her, that Sirius would think her depraved.

Sirius could see the dilemma in Hermione's face, and he instinctively knew that she was restraining herself from what they both needed. She bit her lip in consternation, and the decision was made for him.

He was in front of her in three determined strides, taking her upper arms in his hands. Both sighed with contentment at the contact, but it wasn't enough.

Hermione put her hands on his chest, surprised at the strength she found there, despite having seen it in person whilst bathing him. She blushed at the memory, and Sirius was certain he'd never seen a more enchanting sight.

His hands moved up to her shoulders, then her neck. He cupped the nape of her neck in one hand, her jaw in the other. Tilting her head up, his eyes were drawn to her lips, which she was worriedly nibbling between sharp white teeth. He used his thumb to pull her lip loose, and it was white for a second before the blood rushed back to it. He had to taste it.

He brushed the softest of kisses against her sweet lips, barely grazing them, and he lauded himself on his restraint. She huffed a sharp breath against his lips, and her breath was minty and warm.

And as quickly as it happened, it stopped. She was out of his arms before he could even establish she was moving. She pulled at her hair with both hands, wishing she could run her fingers through it like normal people. She turned away from him and walked to the kitchen.

A drink would settle her nerves.

She quietly poured herself a glass of Firewhisky and sat down at the table. This was an unfortunate situation, to be sure, but she was Hermione Granger, for Merlin's sake! Nothing escaped her, nothing eluded her. She would find a way out of this and Sirius would be free, *actually free*, instead of this mock freedom that tethered him to her. A fate worse than the Veil, he probably thought.

Dropping her head in her hands, Hermione fought back the tightening in her throat. It mattered to her whether he liked her or not, something she'd never felt before with anyone, let alone him. She'd never even registered him as more than Harry's godfather in all the time she'd known him.

While Hermione was indulging in some liquid amnesia, Sirius was pacing the hallway by their bedrooms. It was very strange, this attachment. It wasn't altogether unpleasant. He'd expected to be free, sure. If he'd been in a position to expect anything at all, that is. He knew he'd been gone for five years, but it was only a day to him, no time at all.

He also knew he'd have to return to the real world eventually. People would expect that of him, and though he felt a divine rush in not giving people what they wanted, he knew the members of the Order, as well as the Weasley family and other people who considered him a friend, would want to know. He only hoped Hermione was ready for the backlash that would come when people discovered exactly how he'd been brought back. Blood magic was illegal for many reasons, and she could be in serious trouble. Hopefully she'd thought of that, like she thought of everything. He smiled affectionately.

She hadn't told him all the details about the spell and potion, namely the virgin blood part. She kept that to herself, not even telling Harry. It just wasn't important. She also didn't reveal how much blood she'd used, or that she'd scarred herself fairly badly in the process. The wounds wouldn't heal, despite her working knowledge of healing charms. The scars on her fingertips and the palm of her hand were mangled as well, though they should have healed nicely even without the aid of magic. But never one to dwell on appearances, Hermione tried not to give it a second thought. It wasn't as though she wore shirts that revealed her décolletage, anyway; the scar on her chest would be hidden from view.

Hermione was on her third glass, wishing Sirius would stop pacing above her head. She clicked her finger. It still looked a little funny and was as annoying as he *One more battle wound*, she thought self-pityingly. She tried to ignore the now-familiar sensation of her flesh crawling, tried to drown it in alcohol, but to no avail. She felt like giving up, giving in. It was too hard! Was she supposed to spend the rest of her life following him around like a puppy, desperate for scraps? What happened when he found someone, kicked her out on her butt, and she was left with these cravings?

It was during her fourth drink that she remembered she had barely done any research that day and had not even opened her briefcase to do any real work. She still had one day before the weekend, and Fridays were always full of last-minute demands on her time. She would be behind before she even began! She allowed a dramatic moan to escape her lips and wondered, not for the first time, why she hadn't accepted a more prestigious position when they'd been offered to her after the war. She really was a glutton for punishment, always doing everything the hard way.

Sirius felt more than heard Hermione's displeasure. It felt like a sudden curtain falling over his good mood. When her groan reached his ears, he was down the stairs before he knew it. Seeing her head cradled in her arms with one hand clutching a near empty glass of familiar amber liquid, Sirius had to smile. *She always took on so much*, he thought, wondering how he knew that but knowing it was true.

He confiscated her glass and the bottle of Firewhisky, relocating it to a more elusive hiding place. He pulled up a chair directly beside her and pulled her limp body into his arms. She leaned gracelessly against his chest, and both sighed in relief at the contact. She was flushed and her skin was clammy, and he knew she'd regret drinking come the morning, as it appeared she did not hold her liquor well.

Heaving her body into his arms, he carried her to her bed. It was still early to go to sleep, and she hadn't even had dinner, but Sirius knew she'd be out of commission for the night. She tried to deny it, but her words were slurred, and she giggled at her own incoherence. Certain he'd never heard her giggle, hadn't even been certain she knew how, Sirius had to laugh out loud. *What an outrageous situation for an old man like me to be in*, he thought musingly. *But she never would have brought me back if she'd known I'd be her ball and chain.* His thoughts were resentful toward himself, but he felt only the sincerest gratitude toward her.

That night, there was no self-deluded attempt to sleep apart. Partly because he didn't want her falling down the stairs in search of his room, but mostly because Sirius longed to hold her in his arms, feeling her breath on his neck and her silky skin under his rough palms.

He fell asleep holding on to her like an anchor in an uncertain world, and there were no nightmares that night.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Sirius woke up first for the first time since they began their clandestine night-time meetings. Hermione was snoring lightly, something she never did while sober. Sirius marvelled at the fact that he knew her well enough to know that. But as soon as he thought that, he realized he did not really know her at all. What had persuaded her to bring him back, to never give up?

When they'd known each other before the Veil, they had tolerated one another well enough. She didn't like him always taunting Snape, or his encouragement of Harry to have a little reckless fun. He hadn't appreciated her know-it-all attitude or the way she took it upon herself to scold him like she was the adult and he the child. But they'd got on well enough, giving one another a wide berth and mostly communicating for Harry's sake only.

Below the surface though, he could admit now, as he gazed upon her still form bathed in moonlight, that he'd respected her more than just about anyone he knew *She reminds me of Remus*, he thought, and his heart ached for a moment. They were both so intelligent; they were both *sgood*, always trying to do the right thing, and both always looking out for Harry. He'd actually entertained the notion of the two of them getting together, because if anyone could handle Remus' lycanthropy, it was Hermione. But when Tonks made her desires known, Remus was lost, and Sirius shelved the thought.

On her part, though Sirius never knew it, Hermione had had her own impressions. She enjoyed his sense of humour when it was not directed at Snape or another victim. She loved his carefree attitude, all the more because she herself could never adopt it. But those feelings were buried beneath frustration at the exact same attributes: his cruel humour and lackadaisical nature.

Knowing what he knew about her, Sirius wondered why she was the only one who'd never given up. She'd always seemed so realistic, sensible to the point of coldness. What had kept the coals of his survival burning?

Hermione sniffed indelicately and shifted in the bed. He knew she didn't have to be up for about an hour, and he intended to use that time wisely. He hadn't perfected his plan to seduce her just yet, but the sensitive nature of his plot might just get thrown to the wind if she kept grazing her leg against his like that.

Though he couldn't deny the fluttering of arousal the brief caress gave him, he pulled his body back. If he denied himself for a while, the relief would be even sweeter when it came; he also suspected she might not appreciate being molested in her sleep. He brushed her unruly hair away from her face, drawing his fingers across her silky cheek and over her lips. They were so soft, slightly parted, with the bottom lip sticking out precociously in a delicious pout. Sirius rested his fingers against the plump lower

lip and her tongue came out to wet her lips, grazing his fingertips in the process. Sirius groaned and pulled away, turning onto his back and questioning the merits of his self-torture.

He was sure that if he just started kissing her, he'd be making love to her in no time. He honestly didn't believe she'd pull away. He sensed that she wanted him as much as he wanted her, even if she wouldn't...*couldn't*...face it. But despite the antics of his youth and his brief freedom after Azkaban, Sirius was wise enough to know when a woman was special. He'd met few of them, or perhaps hadn't appreciated them when he had met them, but he knew Hermione was one. She was delicate, a little bird with hollow bones, ever fragile and timid. He would take his time because she deserved it.

She was special. She was different. She was touching him.

She was on her side facing him, and she'd snuggled right up to his side, wrapping both her arm and thigh over his front and pressing her face against his chest. She sighed contentedly, and Sirius' self-control slipped a little. A lot.

She smells so good, she is so soft. Sirius never felt older than the moment her young flesh snaked across his skin, her leg coming dangerously close to his groin, and her hand grazing a bared nipple until it settled on his side. *Merlin*, he thought; *if she makes me this hard in her sleep, what could she do awake?*

With that treacherous thought in mind, Sirius left the bed. Good intentions weren't worth a Sickle when the mere heat from her body flooded his cock with blood.

A cold shower and a self-reproachful lecture later, Sirius was gratified to hear Hermione awaken. A loud groan reached his ears, even though he was still in the bathroom. He grinned wryly; she must be regretting her indulgence now. He stood still, trying to hear what she was doing. A loud thump sounded, and he thought maybe it was time to go back and see if she needed help.

He approached the bedroom door and immediately wished he'd stayed in the bathroom, where it was safe.

Hermione was frantically pulling open drawers. She'd donned a simple pair of black underwear and a matching bra, but she couldn't find the trousers she'd wanted to wear today. And to make matters infinitely worse, her headache was raging and she was certain it was not the result of a Sirius deficiency. *This is why you never drink*, she reminded herself harshly. Even if she didn't get drunk, she always felt like crap warmed up the next day. She bent over, opening the bottom drawer and was about to smile in success when she heard a groan from the doorway.

She turned around quickly, her eyes falling upon an awake and blushing...*blushing?*...Sirius Black. She froze, knowing she should hide her state of undress, but really, he was the one watching her get dressed! And there was nowhere to hide, anyway. Taking a deep breath, she glared at him, mentally yelling at him to leave, since actually yelling might rip her skull in two. She hastily donned the pants, and found a red blouse to go with it. When she turned back toward him, his eyes were closed and his fists were clenched. Hermione worriedly wondered if he was wishing she had her own place and wasn't living in his house, when her eyes were drawn to his crotch. He was definitely... awake, she noticed.

Gulping, Hermione finished dressing and thought about moving toward the door, but knew if she did, she would be closer to him, and she might even brush by... it, on her way out the door. So she just stood there. Thankfully, Sirius moved first. Not meeting her eyes, he crawled back into the bed, facing away from her. *Well, if that isn't a dismissal, I don't know what is!* she thought, a little hurt by his actions. She quietly stomped (because stomping to her satisfaction would result in her immediate demise, according to her head) and went to the bathroom.

Sirius was humiliated. His actions were that of his fifteen-year-old self; he hadn't gotten that turned on by a woman getting dressed since he was a teenager. And worse yet, she'd seen. So much for being the suave seducer. Now he would be lucky if she saw him as anything other than a total pervert, a voyeur, a dirty old man. When he heard Hermione go down the stairs, his hand, of its own accord, moved under the covers toward his straining cock.

Gripping the length in hand, Sirius mentally pictured Hermione in her black panties and bra, smiling softly at him in the doorway. Instead of getting dressed quickly enough to win a medal, in his head she held out her hand to him. He crossed the floor, and she smiled wickedly up at him, before falling gracefully to her knees in front of him. Sirius groaned, and his hand began to move faster, his other hand moving towards his balls to speed up his release. Hermione looked up at him and lowered his pants. Still meeting his eyes, she slowly licked the precum off the tip of his cock, moaning softly as she tasted him. Sirius' rolled back in his head, and his grip tightened on his member. A few more quick, brutal yanks and he bit his lip to keep his cry from escaping. He couldn't contain his groan as he spilled himself over his belly, colour returning to his gaze, and heartbeat returning to normal.

They really needed to talk, Sirius decided.

Hermione finished making a lunch for herself and Sirius, putting his in the fridge like she always did, and looked up the stairs. Her feet deciding for her, Hermione made her way to the bedroom. She paused in the doorway. Sirius was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. He looked a little flushed, and Hermione hoped he wasn't angry at her.

"I'm leaving for work now," she announced. Sirius started, raising himself slightly in the bed to look at her.

"Okay."

"I'll come home for lunch," she informed him, though they both already knew this.

Sirius cleared his throat and looked away. "Okay."

"And tonight..." Hermione wasn't sure if she wanted to say this, but knew it had to be done. "Tonight we should talk about... what's been happening. I don't think our current way of dealing with things is working."

Sirius demonstrated his incalculable knowledge of the English language by nodding and saying, "Okay."

She nodded back, and left the room hastily. She'd wanted to go back in for one last touch before she had to leave, but something about his attitude held her back. He'd looked... angry, at first. But then she recognized the feeling not as anger, but *hunger*. And that scared her almost as much.

As the days were wont to do since Sirius' return, this one trickled by, and every second on the clock was a distinct noise in Hermione's ears.

Even the venture home for lunch did little to dispel her anxiety, and Hermione was glad they'd decided to talk tonight, because avoiding the problem was making her crazy. The respite they found from touch and proximity felt good for a minute, but the discomfort came back as soon as they parted. She chuckled a little desperately at the picture they must make, hugging one another desperately in the sitting room the moment she came through the Floo, holding hands to get their lunches, sitting on the couches, thighs touching, as they ate in silence.

She'd cast one more longing look over her shoulder at Sirius before she stepped through the Floo. His face had been one of pure agony, but he didn't meet her eyes.

Now she was watching the seconds tick by, her body feeling like it had run a marathon, and her mind exhausted and disrupted.

Harry sent an owl saying he wouldn't be by tonight after all, as he and his partner would be staking out the house of a notorious Death Eater. They were slowly rounding them up, but if anyone knew how to be slippery, it was Death Eaters. Hermione owed back with an invitation to dinner on Sunday instead, telling him to bring Ginny. She was certain he'd told his wife about Sirius, and Ginny was probably beside herself in excitement.

Finally it was time to go. She gathered up her weekend work and fairly ran toward the Floos. She was not really looking forward to the talk with Sirius, but she was excited

to see him.

Sirius had spent the day reading and pacing, thinking about what he wanted to say to Hermione when she got home. He wanted to tell her his plan for them to actually be... a couple? Together? Sirius frowned, wondering how he would propose the idea. He hadn't thought much about the details, just the sex. She would probably want to date and stuff. Well, he could deal with that, he decided. It wouldn't be so bad; she was bloody gorgeous, funny and smart. *Young...* his mind unhelpfully inserted. *Too young for you....* He quickly turned off his brain, annoying organ that it was, and thought about the sex some more.

Sirius was jolted from his licentious thoughts when he heard the Floo activate and saw Hermione come through. After a brief spell to cleanse her clothing of ash, she was crossing the floor to the couch where he was lounging, leaning back against the headrest, both legs stretched out on the seat, fingers laced behind his head. Tight jeans passably concealing erection.

Hermione stood in front of him, looking about ready to order him to move his feet for her to sit down. He pre-empted her by giving her a challenging stare and raising his eyebrow. She frowned.

Sirius didn't move. If she wanted to sit, she would sit on him.

Locked in a battle of wills with Hermione hardly understanding what was happening, Sirius turned onto his side, moving so his back was pressed into the back of the sofa, leaving a little room for her, not enough to sit, but if she lay right next to him, holding onto him....

"Hermione love, come on. Lie with me. We both need you to." His voice was at its seductive best, low and vibrating right through her.

Hermione took off her shoes and sat in the small space his body left on the cushion. Sirius wasted no time and pulled her down, her back snug against his front, her legs trapped beneath one of his. His arm snaked over her side to rest casually just below her breasts. He praised himself again for the choice of jeans.

Hermione held herself impossibly stiff, until the comfort of being in his arms took over, and she could only sigh. The tension melted from her body, and she put both her hands on the arm holding her against him. She could hear Sirius smelling her hair.

He nudged her bushy mane aside with his nose, and lowered his mouth to the junction of her shoulder and neck. He pressed his lips to her, not moving, just waiting. She didn't make a move, not a noise, so Sirius regretfully removed his mouth.

"Time to talk?" he asked, not relishing it, but wanting it out of the way.

She nodded, removing his arm so she could sit up. He was loath to let her go, but he did.

They rearranged themselves to sitting facing each other. Sirius reached for her hand and held it in his lap. Having her body against him was better, but her hand brought relief as well.

She began, "I know this isn't the ideal situation, and I assure you I had no idea it would be like this when I brought you back. But I think it's in our best interests to try to bring some comfort to one another until we can figure out how to... make it go away."

Sirius frowned. She sounded so official, so stiff. "So, if you'd known you'd have to touch me, you'd have left me there to rot... or whatever?"

"No, no..." she backpedalled. "I only meant... well surely, you..." She stopped abruptly. This wasn't going well. "I meant that you probably wouldn't have wanted to come back at all if you'd known!"

Sirius laughed. "I would have wanted to come back if it meant I had to snuggle the Dark Lord himself!" And as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized he'd compared her to Voldemort. This could be bad.

Hermione looked appalled, and then her flashing eyes narrowed and settled on his. "Well, I could always send you back and you could go find him!"

He sighed. He had never been good at this whole "talking" thing, and she was not making it easier.

"Okay, Hermione. I didn't mean it like that. Let's just try to get through this talk without killing one another, because I don't think I could live without you right now, you know?" Words meant to be casual were loaded with feeling, and Sirius kicked himself. He used to be so charming with the ladies, but this one had him confessing things meant to be hidden.

She looked placated, and said, "I know what you mean. So what it comes down to is that we need to be in near-constant contact."

"That's the crux of it, it seems," he agreed.

"*Why?*" Her words were plaintive, and he realized it must be driving her absolutely barmy to not know.

"Hermione, maybe you should tell me exactly what spell you cast. Where did you find it? What were the precise instructions?" Sirius wasn't sure he could glean more from the situation than she herself had, but he wanted to try to help her.

"I've already been over it, there's nothing that would indicate a reaction like this." She gestured between them with a pained look. "I'm so sorry."

He gripped her hand tighter. "Please don't be sorry for bringing me back. Please. I know this is... odd, but we can make it work. And maybe... I can make it good for you?" He had meant that last part to be sexy, but it sounded like a plea.

She looked puzzled, and Sirius seriously questioned the seduction techniques of her previous partners. He hoped he wouldn't have to come right out and offer his cock, but he would if he had to.

"If touching me feels good, love, then I want you to touch me. Whenever you want. Wherever you want. However you want..." His voice fell so low she had to lean forward to catch the last part. She looked into his heated gaze, and his grey eyes were slate with desire. Her mouth fell open, taking in his words. He wanted her to touch him?
Like that?

He leaned closer, placing one hand on the side of her neck, the other holding hers firmly within it. He tilted his head, and whispered against her lips.

"Hermione... touch me."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

"Hermione... touch me."

Hermione, usually quick on the uptake, took a few minutes to absorb what Sirius was saying to her. *He wants me to touch him. Like that. He wants us to... what?*

Hermione tried not to lean into the hand gently caressing her neck, but the feeling was so soothing, and she felt relaxed sitting so close to him. Her lips parted, and her head tilted back slightly, pressing into his touch and baring her neck. She wasn't sure exactly what she wanted, but she wanted *something* and knew it was his to give to her.

Sirius could see his words affect her, could feel her pulse speed up and her breath come a little faster. He took advantage of her parted lips and pressed his against hers. She gasped softly, but did not pull away, and Sirius pressed his advantage.

He moved his lips slightly against hers, softly, searchingly. Her lips were like silk against his, and her breath was so warm and sweet. He touched the tip of his tongue to her bottom lip, sweeping across its plumpness. He wanted nothing more than to thrust his tongue into her mouth and fuck her with it in an obscene pantomime of what he really wanted to do to her, but with strength seldom previously exercised, he restrained himself.

Hermione moaned as his lips became more persistent against hers, and she parted her lips fully to permit entrance. He took it immediately, and the hot satin of his tongue was stroking hers lovingly. Her hands tangled in his hair, and she luxuriated in its thickness. His own hands had moved over her shoulders and to her waist, where he was pulling her tightly against him.

Sirius broke the kiss first, maintaining his self-control against all odds, and looked into her eyes. They were half-lidded with desire, the normal whiskey colour darkening to a deep chocolate, and Sirius drew in a sharp breath at the need he saw there.

"Hermione... are you okay with this?" He felt more protective of her than he usually did of his conquests, and wanted to make sure she didn't feel forced into this.

"I don't really know. I feel okay with it, until I stop to think. It's just happened so fast, too fast," she breathed. Hermione pulled away, and started to get up, but Sirius held her fast. She relaxed into his embrace, feeling embarrassed but also scared of what was happening to them. She knew Sirius was the type to resent when his life became beyond his control, and Hermione couldn't help but feel guilty that she'd taken away his choice. But his kisses had felt so good, so real...like he wanted it to happen. If only she could turn her brain off.

"I know. But we're in this together, right?" Hermione nodded. She wanted to know more about how the connection affected him, so she asked the first thing that came to mind.

"How badly do you need me?" No sooner had she spoken than her face blushed furiously, and it covered even her neck and chest. Sirius only grinned knowingly and lightly kissed her lips.

"You have no idea... or maybe you do," he said silkily, lightly kissing a pattern on her neck and shoulder.

"I do... but I meant to ask: how strong is the urge for connection, for you?"

Sirius thought for a moment. "It feels okay while I'm asleep, but as soon as I wake up, I need to touch you, to make sure you're there. I can last a few hours during the day, but I start to feel ill about half an hour before you come home for lunch or after work. I don't think I could stand being away from you all day. Then when we touch, I feel like everything is going to be okay, like I'm complete for the first time. Everything falls into place. But the need is for more than just physical touch. I want you to want to touch me as well, and I want you... in an intimate way."

Hermione was thoughtful through his description. It was nearly exactly the same way she felt. The bond between them wanted her to touch him, but not just platonically; it seemed to beg for a sexual connection, and was becoming increasingly difficult to stave off.

"So, are we just supposed to have sex all the time, for the rest of our lives? That just doesn't make any*sense*!" Hermione's frustration was revealing itself enough that her words hardly embarrassed her. She looked pleadingly at Sirius, as though he would have all the answers, when he was even more in the dark than she was.

He only shook his head. "A fate worse than death, to be sure," he began ironically, "But let's not lose our heads. There must be an explanation. No spells are created without documentation, not even Dark spells like this. We'll just have to... research." The last word was stated with distinct disdain, and Hermione smiled at his grimace. But the only book that might have answers was the one in which she found the spell, and for some reason she didn't want to tell Sirius about it, even though, technically, it was his book. She wasn't sure if he'd be angry or disappointed in her, but she also felt like the book was her secret to keep.

"I'll keep looking, of course. And maybe I should get Professor Snape to help me again." Sirius sneered at the name, and looked as though he questioned her sanity. "Well, he was the one who helped me complete the spell in the first place," she said defensively. "Without him, you'd still be floating around in oblivion!" She wasn't sure why she felt the need to defend her former Professor so vehemently, but she'd always hated the pointless animosity between the two, even knowing the reason behind it.

Sirius only snorted derisively, his expression telling her exactly what he thought of her idea.

"Well," Hermione felt her anger grow, and wanted to lash out unthinkingly. "If *you* think it's a bad idea, it must be the right thing to do!" Hermione leapt off the couch and announced her intended location into the Floo. Sirius followed her to the hearth, but she was gone before she could hear his scream of frustration and the sound of a vase being shattered into a million shards.

Hermione tumbled ungracefully out of the fireplace in Snape's office at Hogwarts. Snape was sitting at his desk, facing a young Hufflepuff girl, presumably pointing out errors on her essay when Hermione made her grand entrance.

He stopped midsentence, and set his sights on her. "Miss Granger, another unannounced visit. How nice."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his droll tone and saw the Hufflepuff's eyes widen with terror at this action. The young girl looked at her Professor in fear, but relaxed slightly when she saw nothing like rage on his face.

"I need your help again, Professor. It couldn't wait."

Snape nodded. "Miss Devereaux, please see yourself out. You have until tomorrow to revise this essay to a state of coherence. Second chances are seldom granted, so make good use of it."

Miss Devereaux nodded quickly, and Hermione couldn't resist calling out "Good luck!" to the girl before she fairly ran down the hall away from the dungeons to safety.

"And to what..."

"...do you owe the pleasure?" Hermione finished, and grinned inwardly when Snape narrowed his eyes. *So predictable.*

"It's about the bond, about the spell I cast to get Sirius back. It's... very strong, and I'm worried about the implications."

"You mean to say you shudder at the thought of being inextricably attached to Black for all your days? I can hardly contain my surprise." Hermione stifled a laugh at his wry commentary, and nodded.

"Something like that. But mostly I need to know why it is happening. It isn't as bad as it could be, obviously. But we need to know how long it will last and what will happen if the bond's needs aren't met."

Snape gestured to the seat Miss Devereaux had vacated, and Hermione gratefully took it. She regretted running out on Sirius like that, but his attitude had become stifling. She respected Snape and did not like to hear him denigrated. Her temper seemed to get the best of her more often, these days.

"Miss Granger, I believe I told you at the beginning of all this that the potion you consumed would have far-reaching results. You, in all your Gryffindor ~~bravery~~..." this word he spat like a curse instead of a compliment, "...decided you need not heed my warnings. And now you are asking for help again. Why would I believe you are willing to listen this time?"

Hermione knew she was skating on thin ice. She spoke carefully. "Professor Snape, you're correct, of course. I should have listened, and if it were not for the life of my best friend's godfather in the balance, I would have. I thought I was doing the right thing, and I still do. I was grateful for your help before and always will be. Now, though, I need your help again, and this time I swear it will not fall on deaf ears. Just tell me what I've gotten us into."

Snape looked somewhat placated by her comments. He leaned back in his chair and threaded his fingers together over his stomach. He looked pensive for a moment, and began to speak.

"Essence of pure azure is a highly volatile substance. When combined with certain other elements, it becomes unstable and dangerous. When combined with more than one said element, it can be downright disastrous. There were at least three such items on the list I took from you the last time you were here, and I know that was not the complete list. Who can know how many unstable elements you combined in your potion?"

"However, based on my limited knowledge of the spell you performed, the state we found you in at the Veil, and the symptoms you are experiencing now, I believe I can give you an educated guess as to what is happening to you and Black.

"First though, are you a virgin?"

His question hit her off guard and she sputtered. He rolled his eyes at her indignant reaction.

"You know that virgin blood is also referred to as Soul Blood, do you not?"

Hermione recovered, and shook her head. She'd never heard that terminology. She told him in a tone braver than she actually felt that she was, indeed, a virgin. He nodded meditatively.

"Soul Blood is used as a binding ingredient. It is an anchor for the potion, and is used to create an interactive base for the all other elements. When used with the essence of pure azure, it is used to foster a trade. A part of the person who consumes the potion becomes attached, or bonded, to a part of the person for whom it is meant. In your case, yourself and Black.

"The Soul Blood in your potion removed part of your soul; of this I am almost certain. Dark Magic comes with a great cost, as you were told. But more than that, I believe that part of your soul was given to Sirius, and part of his soul given to you. For all intents and purposes, you are now the same being. That explains your need to be close to one another, and your feeling of completeness when the connection is honoured; your souls are most comfortable around their other portion.

"It may also explain the week-long delay after which you performed the spell and yet Sirius did not return. Soul Blood searches by intent, and would have to delve both into your deepest desires and into his in order for it to make the right connection, so as to not bring back the wrong person. The trading of souls also takes time, and Sirius could not be brought back without a whole soul; the Veil would not have let him pass. If you had died during that week, you would have been stranded in purgatory, and Sirius would have two souls fighting for supremacy within his body. You would have damned both yourself and Black for eternity."

Hermione was nearly shaking by the time Snape's melodious yet dreaded voice fell silent. How could she have been so foolish, so naïve? She had bound them to a lifetime of slavery to one another. She tried to mentally search herself to see if she could sense a piece of her soul missing. She couldn't feel a vacancy, but that made sense: Sirius' soul-portion would now be in that place.

"I... see. So... what do I do now?" Her words were calm but the underlying shakiness belied her controlled demeanour.

"Now, you go and tell Black, survive the fallout, and try to live without murdering one another. It will be impossible, I'm sure; I'll check the Daily Prophet for your obituaries on a regular basis."

Hermione was slowly shaking her head, as though she could banish all she had just learned, or better yet, banish that part of her that always had to have answers for everything. *Would it be better to not know?* she asked herself. *Time will tell.*

"Professor Snape, I understand the need for contact. It's like our souls are trying to reconnect, correct?" He nodded in the affirmative. "Then why do we need more than just... a friendly sort of touch?"

Snape looked at her blankly. Hermione plunged on. "I mean we want to touch each other sexually, okay? There's a very, very strong compulsion to... do it." Hermione mentally slapped herself for being so childish, while she simultaneously internally giggled at her words.

Snape looked positively uncomfortable, but she was sure she saw mirth in his eyes at her own discomfort. *Ah, Schadenfreude*, she snarked to herself.

"Your souls want the deepest connection possible. More than a physical connection, they want a spiritual and mental one as well. The best way to become connected, though some may not agree these days, is to be sexually intimate. It is truly an act of becoming one. The release will bring relief that will last longer than the touches you've been giving one another. I can't say how much longer, but I doubt Black will wait to find out once he learns this...like the mutt needed an excuse to bed you." Snape looked thoroughly disgusted at the thought.

His eyes gentled, and he looked at her with something as akin to pity as Snape could manage without spontaneously combusting.

"Miss Granger, I'm sorry you had to sacrifice yourself like this. It must be disheartening to know that your first time will be forced instead of natural. I would not wish that on anyone."

Hermione only nodded blindly, barely hearing his words. She would have to sleep with Sirius; that was the only way to get on with their lives. Maybe it would only need to be once a month or something. That way, they could go on with their lives, maybe even date other people. Get married. *It isn't so bad*, she told herself. *Just a little caveat, nothing serious*. She snorted at her mental pun.

She had to get back before she fell apart in Snape's office.

She stood, a little unsteadily, and Snape came around the front of the desk to lend her an arm. She took it gratefully and put her weight on him.

"I meant what I said, Hermione. I am truly sorry that this is happening to you. I wish..." But he didn't finish his sentence, and walked her to the Floo instead.

Hermione was in no state to notice his use of her given name, and just called out her destination in a dull voice. She thanked Snape, and he nodded.

Once she arrived at Grimmauld Place, she bypassed Sirius, stepping over a broken lamp without even noticing its presence, and went straight to her room. She heard Sirius calling her name, but she only shut her door, and went to lie on the bed. She felt so defeated. For once in her life, there was no way out, no way to fix what she had done.

And she didn't know if she would fix it if she could.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

The look on Hermione's face when she came through the Floo had broken Sirius' heart. She looked absolutely devastated, as if someone had stolen her candy and kicked her puppy. He wanted to go to her, but he was still angry at her abrupt departure and knew he should calm down before they spoke again.

Plus, he had to get this place cleaned up, since a tornado bearing his name had come through.

Sprawled somewhat lazily on the couch, Sirius aimed his wand at various broken and battered items of furniture and artwork and went about putting his house in order. It was not the first time he'd flown into a rage, and he knew all the best spells for repairing his oft-abused fixtures.

Once finished, he allowed himself to think on their kiss. She was a good kisser, he would give her that much. She was all soft and smooth and perfectly compliant to his own particular style of kissing. She'd let him take the lead in a way that suggested she preferred it that way, and that line of thinking inevitably led him to wonder what else she would let him take the lead in.

Which inevitably led him to think about tying her to his bed.

Which inevitably led him to drop his head into his hands and groan out loud.

He wanted her, he knew that much. He wasn't used to working so hard to seduce a woman. It usually fell into his lap; he'd make the first move, and the object of his desire would succumb to his undeniable charm. But for whatever reason, Hermione was denying his allure, and he was damned if he was going to let her keep that up.

In Sirius' mind, he had two choices. He could play hard to get, distancing himself until she became desperate and threw herself at him. This option would take time, patience, and self-control.

The obvious choice was his other option: go after what he wanted ruthlessly and with absolutely no regard for anyone or anything but his own satiation. And, of course, Hermione's.

While her bond-mate made an important decision regarding her sexual satisfaction, unbeknownst to her, Hermione was pondering her future with Sirius. She knew she had to tell him what she had learned from Snape, but she was scared. The great Hermione Granger was scared to talk about sex. To a man. To Sirius.

Her face immediately flushed. His kiss had been so demanding, so forceful and yet so attentive to her own movements. She felt like for once in her few kissing experiences, she could play the passive role, let him guide her, teach her.

She was so thankful to not have to take on the teaching role this time. And it was one of Hermione's many hidden desires to have a man really take over, really let her relinquish control. She hadn't trusted anyone else in her life in that way, not like that; but she had a feeling she could trust Sirius to take good care of her. To see to her own needs as well as his own.

Hermione reclined back on her bed, wondering if she could somehow leave Sirius a note with Snape's message or otherwise chicken out of telling him what needed to be done. She closed her eyes, knowing she would have to come up with the courage to talk to him about sex and reconcile the part of her that still saw him only as Harry's godfather and still saw herself as thirteen years old. She was an adult now, and Sirius was a man... a kind, attentive, devilishly handsome and devastatingly sexy man with a delicious-looking trail of coarse black hair under his belly button that lead to places of which she'd only imagined.

But maybe it was better to stay away from thoughts like that altogether.

The door opened, and Hermione knew, due to the immediate settling of her scattered thoughts, that Sirius was in the room. She didn't open her eyes, thinking if she pretended to be asleep, she could avoid the confrontation for just a little longer.

Sirius cleared his throat and Hermione contained a snort. *Very subtle*. But she remained in repose, trying not to jump up when she felt his weight settle on the bed next to her. She was in the middle, and he was quite close to her, enough to disrupt her thought process. *Why am I pretending to be asleep again?*

She felt a hand, perhaps the back of his fingers, slide along her bare arm, and little shocks followed his movements, leaving a trail of heat. His fingers slowly traced each of hers, and her hand twitched slightly, wanting to grasp him but restraining. It felt so good to be touched by him, it felt so real... but Hermione's treacherous mind reminded her there was nothing real about this situation; it was contrived, his feelings weren't genuine but forced. But that became more difficult to believe when his fingers ghosted over her lips and cheek, around her ear and back down her neck. His actions caused her body to tremble, and she wondered how long she could maintain the façade of being asleep.

Not long, apparently. For when his lips descended on hers, his warm breath melding with hers and his tongue snaking out to taste her, she couldn't withhold her gasp. Her eyes opened against her will, and she could swear he wore a triumphant smile.

But that smile disappeared when she pressed her lips more firmly to his, demanding more from him, but still not taking control. She only pressed their lips together; it was up to him to move. She held the kiss for as long as she could and almost gave up, when his mouth slanted over hers and the kiss became brutal, desperate. His tongue moved sharply, quickly against hers, and his body moved over hers, both hands braced on the bed beside her head. He was holding his body atop hers, not letting them touch, but Hermione knew it was a Herculean effort, since she herself was having a hard time not rocking her hips upward to meet his.

Sirius seemed to regain his control and slowed the kiss to a bearable heat. Hermione's lips were traced and her tongue gently sucked. She felt herself falling off a precipice, wanting desperately to grab something...someone...to hold on to and fall with her, but knowing someone had to stay grounded, and it certainly wasn't going to be her.

Sirius slowly lowered his body to hers, his legs on either side of hers and his hips aligned with hers. He could feel her heat even through his jeans, and it nearly made him lose his precarious control. It would feel so good, so perfect, to grind his pelvis into hers until the friction brought them both to climax, but as much as he wanted that and so much more, he remembered that they had to talk.

What a horrible, horrible thing to remember. No other recollection had ever caused him so much pain. Yet recall he did.

"Hermione," he rasped, trying to show her he was still in control of himself and failing miserably, "I wanted to say I'm sorry."

Hermione was jolted from the blissful weight of his body on hers by his inopportune verbiage. "It's okay, no problem," she assured him, punctuating her words with quick, hot kisses on his neck. Sirius tried to take a deep breath to centre himself but found his lips to be otherwise occupied once again. Hermione drew his tongue into her mouth where she worshipped it, and Sirius saw no reason to leave.

But he had to at least finish what he started. The talking part, that was. "I shouldn't have insulted Sni...everus in front of you. I know you... respect him," Sirius barely stopped himself from finishing with, 'for some reason.'

Hermione looked at him, surprised by his admission. "I do, Sirius. He is a good man. Thank you. I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have left like that... sometimes it's hard for me to contain my temper these days, and I don't like that feeling."

Sirius didn't doubt that. He sensed it frustrated her very much to show any weakness. "Where did you go?"

He knew the answer, but thought he might enjoy a little self-flagellation by hearing her say it.

Hermione scooted out from under him, and both felt bereft from her movement away. She sat up at the same time he flopped onto his back, hands laced behind his head.

"I went to see Professor Snape," she admitted, looking away in case his gaze pierced her. He only nodded, gesturing for her to go on.

"He gave me some answers, though they might be... difficult to hear. They were for me, at least." She had already gone this far, clearly there was no backing out. And he deserved to know, to make an informed decision. He stayed silent, so she plunged on, drawing a deep breath and barely pausing until she'd relayed Snape's entire monologue.

A lovely shade of magenta, Hermione didn't even pause when she told Sirius that having sex (or intercourse, as she clinically called it) was the only way to alleviate their mutual discomfort to a manageable level.

To her shock, when she braved a look at his reaction, he did not look completely disgusted. Thoughtful, yes. Repulsed, perhaps not. She pursed her lips, waiting for an answer.

"So..." he began, lips twitching, "We find ourselves in an unusual position. We are both attracted to one another, yes?" Hermione couldn't answer for him, but nodded for herself. "Yes," he agreed. "And we are both consenting adults who happen to enjoy one another's company, as well as live in the same house, alone, by ourselves. Together." Again, Hermione nodded, lips white from staying tight so long.

"And we have to have sex in order to live."

Again, Hermione could only nod, but feeling she should contribute, said, "Um, essentially."

Sirius looked like he was carefully considering her valuable input, and nodded decisively.

"Well, it appears the decision has been made for us, then." And with no further compunction, he grabbed her hips and dragged her body onto him, settling her between his thighs and taking her mouth in a violent coupling. He groaned when her mouth immediately opened, and he buried his fingers into her dishevelled hair, not allowing her to pull away.

Which she wouldn't have done, even without his death grip on her mane.

He broke the kiss to whisper against her lips, "The things I will do to you, Hermione, you have no idea." She whimpered and he took her lips again.

Nearly an hour and many half-hearted attempts to leave the bedroom on both their parts later, Hermione and Sirius decided it was best for all parties to get some food and a shower (not together, Hermione admonished) before bed. It had been the very longest of days, and she was especially exhausted. And tomorrow Harry and Ginny would be coming over for dinner, and she needed to clean and get ready for that. Not to mention all the work she'd brought home with her.

After tucking into a sandwich, Hermione was thinking about the turn of events as the warm water cascaded over her skin and trickled over her body. She wanted Sirius, more than any other man she'd ever known. It felt so right when he touched her, kissed her. He didn't seem to ask permission, he only took everything she offered, and she felt relieved that he didn't treat her like some wilting violet. She was strong, she'd proven it innumerable times, and yet men always seemed to handle her like glass.

But not Sirius. He held her like a woman, like she was fire instead of water. She felt so sexy in his arms; she felt confident around him. It was a dangerous, heady feeling. The pounding of the water matched the blood in her veins, and Hermione couldn't...and didn't want to...stop her fingers from sliding over her soap-slicked skin and into her light brown curls at her apex. A moan escaped her parted lips when her fingers brushed her swollen nub. No man had ever put her in such a state, of that she was certain. Leaning against the coolly-tiled wall, Hermione's fingers danced and pressed until her movements became frantic and she cried out her release, desperately hoping, a little too late, that the sound of the rushing water masked her wanton racket.

But Hermione had no such luck, and by the time she had towelled off and hightailed to her bedroom to don pyjamas, Sirius had already disposed of his own frantically discharged release, having heard Hermione's soft moans. His choice had been between attacking her in the shower and fucking her blind or relieving himself by his own hand in the cold comfort of the kitchen.

Hardly sated but more in command of his senses, Sirius took to the shower when he was sure Hermione was in bed.

Merlin, but he wanted that girl. She was just so fucking innocent, so untouched. He usually didn't go for that type, preferring a woman who knew her way around a hard-on, but there was something about her tentative touches, her enthusiastic responses, that made him rethink his approach.

He wondered about her past. How many men had had her? Not many, he mused, and most likely none that would make her feel like he would. Her innocence was the only thing that had stopped him from ripping her clothes off her body in the bedroom earlier, and if he didn't know better, he might have thought she was a virgin. But there was no way she'd been with Ron all those years and remained virginal, especially if they'd still been together in those lost years, during which he knew nothing of her life. She very well might have been with numerous men while he was beyond the Veil. Sirius couldn't identify the strange twist in his gut when he thought about that. He did not enjoy thinking that other men had known her like that. He had never been anyone's first, and didn't intend to be, but he couldn't deny that he wished there had been no men before him.

Maybe he was just being selfish.

Sirius wondered about how Harry would react to him and Hermione. He knew his godson loved Hermione, and as with Remus, Sirius had entertained the idea of them getting together one day, especially before Ginny. And he also knew Harry loved him, almost to hero-worshipping levels, and though that made him simultaneously proud and uncomfortable, Sirius knew he would be shaking the foundation of trust when Harry learned he and Hermione had to be together. He could only hope Harry would understand the necessity of it. There really was no choice, after all. They had to follow the bond; they were playing by rules beyond their control.

It didn't matter that Sirius knew he would have pursued Hermione even if the bond didn't exist, because even when the bond between them abated, his desire for her was intense. She was smart, funny, beautiful and she wanted him as well. Harry would just have to deal. He was adaptable; Sirius knew he could handle this. He'd probably gape and gasp and fly off the handle, but he'd calm down and be rational.

Because Harry was known for his rationality. Just like Sirius was known for his self-restraint.

Speaking of which, he was now pondering the intelligence of getting into bed with no boxers on and ravaging Hermione. But somehow (and this is what gave Sirius hope about Harry reacting positively to the news) Sirius controlled himself and donned underpants.

He crawled into bed none too quietly and immediately drew the warm, sleeping body into his arms. Hermione sighed against his chest, and her fingers reflexively clutched his bicep. Sirius grinned into her hair, smoothing it away to diminish the chance of choking to death on it in his sleep. Everything was going to turn out just fine.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

The morning sun streamed in ribbons across the bed Hermione shared with Sirius. She awoke slowly, not to the brutal alarm clock, nor to the noises of the city. Instead, she woke up naturally, with no apparent catalyst.

She blinked rapidly to force her eyes to focus and looked over at Sirius. Objectively, he was a truly handsome man, one who had lived a rough life, maybe, but who still had a lot of life left. He had crinkles around his eyes, and Hermione wondered at the fact that a man with so much so be sad about could have laugh lines. His lips were slightly parted and looked a little dry. His hair was spread over the pillow case, and some had fallen onto his face, over his eye. Hermione brushed it back, careful not to actually touch his face, just his hair.

She thought back to their talk the night before. He'd been extremely... amenable to the news that they would have to be intimate in order to fulfil the needs of the bond. It was strange, thinking of the bond as a sentient entity, but she'd come to believe it truly was. She couldn't deny that it shifted the responsibility from her, for which she was truly grateful. She admitted her hand in what happened, but it felt nice to be able to say, 'the bond is making me want to wake Sirius up with a nice, wet kiss,' rather than admit to herself it was her own desire.

But she had to wonder what it would feel like to have a man want her *foher*, not because he might perish otherwise.

Since she would never know, she could at least enjoy Sirius' attentions for the time being. Once they found a cure or a solution, she could think about her real life. Until then, she would be stuck playing house with a man who probably wanted anyone but her.

Hermione slipped from the bed, intent on performing her morning ablutions before Sirius woke up. Today was Sunday, and Harry and Ginny would be coming over for dinner. Sirius wanted to tell them today, and she didn't disagree. She didn't want to be the one to tell Harry, though; but she would if she had to. It would be easier for her to be the bad guy than Sirius; she was more used to it and could handle it better. Sirius was too much of a friend to Harry and not enough of a father figure. He would absolutely detest having Harry be mad at him. And so would she, but she knew they'd be forgiven. She was not prone to the same dramatic outbursts as Sirius was, and even he admitted as much.

Hermione, towelled and, still dripping from the shower, wrote out a quick list of food she'd need for their dinner. She planned on making a simple chicken in white wine sauce, with caramelized asparagus and roasted potatoes. She might not be the greatest cook, but even she could handle chicken.

When she heard the shower running, she returned to the bedroom to get dressed. She tugged on simple white underpants and a lace-trimmed white bra. She had just opened the wardrobe when she heard the bathroom door open. She quickly went to grab something with which to cover herself, but before she could manage, she felt strong arms circle her waist and she was lifted off her feet.

Sirius laughed as he unceremoniously threw her on her back upon the bed, clamouring over her and pinning her down. Hermione half-heartedly struggled, sensing he actually wanted her to, until his lips met her neck, and he tongued her still-damp flesh.

"You thought you could escape me, huh, baby?" His voice was rough and playful, and he nipped her shoulder with his teeth. Hermione meant to squeal, but whimpered instead.

"No! I was only..." She meant to tell him she'd been preparing for dinner later, but he didn't really want an answer and let her know as much by firmly kissing her lips. She dutifully denied him entrance, not appreciating being silenced in such a manner, but he was persistent. He playfully licked her closed lips, giving a frustrated grunt when she pursed them. He kissed all around her mouth, running his tongue along the seam of her lips and finally biting her bottom lip not quite gently. Hermione gasped at the

sting, and Sirius dove in.

His tongue roved her open mouth, and she could no longer think to deny him. Their tongues caressed each other, Hermione almost immediately ceding control to Sirius, who relished it. They both became aware that Sirius was entirely naked, pressed firmly against a nearly-naked Hermione, and Sirius couldn't stop himself from grinding his erection against her thigh. He groaned at the friction and tried not to think that he was acting entirely too much like Padfoot right now, rutting against her leg like an animal.

Hermione bent her leg at the knee, and Sirius' groin connected with hers instead of her thigh. She gasped against his lips and he grinned. He could feel the dampness of her panties against his bare cock and resented the only barrier between himself and certain heaven.

Sirius shifted his weight to the side so he could snake his hand down into her panties. Hermione was holding onto him with both hands, and her nails imbedded themselves into his flesh when his fingers grazed her swollen lower lips. They both moaned at the contact; Sirius was amazed at how wet she was, ignoring the fact that it might be because of her shower. His middle finger slipped into her folds, seeking out her hidden pearl. Upon his discovery of it, Hermione quietly keened, pressing her hips up against his hand, desperate for more contact.

Sirius would have loved nothing more than to mount her and thrust his hardness into her, giving neither of them a moment's respite before pounding them to an ecstatic release. But something held him back, and he maintained his position beside her, kissing her languidly as he gently fingered her clit.

Hermione broke the kiss when his fingers gently pinched her swollen nub, and her head fell onto the bed, her mouth open but no noise emitting. Sirius kissed and sucked on her neck, his fingers moving faster and faster as he felt her hips move more insistently. Without even slipping a finger into her, Sirius brought Hermione to the most intense orgasm of her young life. She cried out, clenching her fingers unforgivingly around his biceps, shutting her eyes tight against the waves that flooded her body. Her hips circled of their own accord, and Sirius was entranced by the movement, wishing he hadn't listened to that little voice and had buried himself within her like he'd wanted to.

When the surges ceased and Hermione came back to herself, she could only smile weakly. She suspected she was supposed to return the favour, but just as she was gathering the nerve to touch him, Sirius pushed himself off the bed and, winking at her lasciviously, headed back into the bathroom to finish his shower.

Hermione lay on the bed for a few blissful moments. The bond was giving her absolutely no stress, and she couldn't even feel it when she mentally reached out for it. It was satisfied. For now.

Sirius had sensed Hermione's hesitation in touching him. Her hands had not strayed lower than his waist the entire time. Rather than make her feel uncomfortable or obligated to reciprocate...which she absolutely was not...he escaped to the shower to give himself some much needed release. Using his new memory of Hermione writhing on the bed beneath him, Sirius brought himself off in record time, grunting as thick ropes coated the tile wall. He rinsed the wall off obligingly and thought about the next time he'd get to touch Hermione.

After going to the grocery store for Hermione, Sirius was permitted to do nothing else to help for dinner. Grimmauld Place was very tidy, the table was set, and dinner was nearly finished. Sirius staved off boredom by randomly mauling Hermione while she cooked, perversely enjoying her protests more than her acceptance.

By the time he'd ripped her nylons and popped the buttons off his own shirt in a fit of passion, Hermione was forced to banish him to the sitting room. Abandoning nylons altogether, Hermione snickered to herself. Sirius had a way of making her forget the bond. It was almost like he was touching her and maintaining his closeness to her so she *could* forget, never giving the bond a chance to make its needs known.

She appreciated the effort, and it almost worked. But Hermione's mind, even with warm, rough hands trailing all over her body, never shut off entirely, and it was always crying out, 'He doesn't really want this, not from you!' And she wasn't in the habit of ignoring her mind, so she never truly forgot.

Harry had Firecalled in the morning to confirm their invitation, and Sirius had responded that the dinner was still on. And right on time, Harry announced to Sirius, who was sitting in front of the hearth wondering what else he could do to torment his semi-unwilling lover, that he and Ginny were coming through.

They both somewhat gracefully entered the sitting room, and Harry immediately ran to Sirius, hugging him tightly. He was still having a hard time believing his godfather was really back, and it satisfied him to feel Sirius solidly in his arms. Sirius returned the embrace, hearing a gentle sniffing in the background. He released Harry and looked at Ginny. She had tears on her cheeks and her smile was bright but shaky. She took a hesitant step toward Sirius, and he strode to meet her, picking her up off her feet and swinging her around.

"Sirius! Put me down!" she laughed through her tears. Harry had told her he'd returned, but seeing him in the flesh was different. Hermione came in from the kitchen to see Sirius thrust Ginny in Harry's willing arms. She smiled from the doorway, and Sirius saw an opportunity.

He crossed the floor to Hermione and pulled her into the room by her hand. Hermione smiled her greeting at her friends, and they responded. Harry's eyes rested on Sirius' hand which was still holding Hermione's, and he looked questioningly at his godfather.

"Harry, listen." Sirius began, stopping as he heard Hermione squeak beside him. He ignored her and continued on. "There's no point in delaying this. When Hermione cast the spell to bring me back, it traded part of her soul for part of mine, and now our souls want to be together, and in order for that to happen, we have to *be* together. We have to have sex, basically. Otherwise, we could both become very ill and possibly even die. But I will take good care of her, don't worry about that."

Hermione's mouth gaped open and she looked ready to faint. Sirius had just summarized in less than a minute what it had taken her a day to prepare mentally. All her gentle wording, all her planning of telling Harry after dinner... gone, because Sirius couldn't keep his trap shut. She slapped his arm, but he only grinned at her.

Harry and Ginny both looked astonished. Ginny's face was slowly forming into a knowing grin, but Harry just looked uncomprehending.

"You have to... have sex? What kind of crazy magic is that? This stuff doesn't just happen! There's no reasonable explanation for a spell that forces people to randomly need sex!"

Sirius laughed and looped an arm around Hermione's waist, pulling her shock-stiffened form tightly against his side. "Well, Harry, apparently such things do occur, since we're smack-dab in the middle of it right now. You're a grown man, you can handle it. It's not ideal, I suppose, but at least you didn't bring me back... or Snape!" Sirius barked out a laugh but then seemed to absorb the horror of what he'd just said. His eyes grew wide, and he shook his head rapidly to rid himself of that mental image.

Harry only nodded blankly. He looked to Hermione, seemingly for confirmation. "It's true, Harry. But it's okay, we just have to figure out a way to fix it. As long as Sirius is back, it will always be worth it."

Sirius leaned down quickly and brushed her lips with his, pleased that she still thought it was worth it. Harry gasped softly and Ginny's grin grew wider.

Clearly, this would take some getting used to.

Sirius apparently believed the best way to acclimatize Harry to the news was to constantly confront him with it. He repeatedly kissed Hermione, touched her gently, held her hand, and even smacked her butt once, not daring to again after the indignant slap she'd delivered to the back of his head. All this served only to further fluster and perplex Harry. Ginny made inappropriate comments about their sex life throughout dinner, which only went slightly cold while they waited for Harry to recover.

However, by the end of the night, Sirius' approach seemed to be working. Hermione had to admit she was glad Sirius had been blunt and told Harry at the beginning of the night, since if she'd had her way and waited until later, they'd be sending Harry home in a near-coma as he adapted.

But let it never be said that Harry Potter could not rally. Soon enough, he was laughing with the couple, even sharing a joke with Ginny over the unlikelihood of the pairing.

Ginny took Hermione aside as the evening drew to a close.

"Mione, what are you going to tell Ron?" Ginny seemed a little concerned. She knew her brother was not right for Hermione and vice versa, but they had been practically an institution, and Ron still occasionally pined over her.

"The truth, I suppose. Though I suspect you or Harry will tell him before I do. We don't talk much anymore, you know that."

Ginny nodded and assured Hermione she would pass on the news, perhaps later in the week after Harry was a little more understanding. No sense in getting them both worked into a state.

As Hermione went to turn back to the dining room where Sirius and Harry were having a low talk, Ginny held her back.

"Are you... are you okay? I mean, I know you and Ron never... had sex. Have you ever...?" Ginny looked a little nervous asking, and Hermione suspected she already knew the answer, but she responded anyway.

"I'm a virgin, Ginny. That's the main reason this spell was so... effective, I suppose you could say. And I'm going to have to lose my virginity to Sirius. I've accepted it. It could be worse; at least I know he won't be a bumbling, uncertain... you know. He'll be good, I bet." Hermione blushed at her musings, and Ginny wholeheartedly agreed with her sentiments.

"I'll bet he's bloody amazing! You'd better tell me everything."

Hermione shook her head, telling Ginny that it was private, but they both knew the details would come out eventually. It was too good not to share. They exchanged smirks and returned to the men.

Harry looked much less shell-shocked, and Hermione knew Sirius had explained the finer points to him. It was a complicated situation, but Harry's acceptance made it infinitely easier.

Hermione and Sirius walked Ginny and Harry to the Floo, hugging them both goodbye. When Harry took Hermione in his arms, he whispered, "I know he won't hurt you, Hermione, but if you ever want to talk... I understand his moods pretty well. You can talk to me." Hermione nodded gratefully. She didn't realize Harry told Sirius the exact same thing when he hugged him next.

It had been a trying day, and the pair wanted nothing more than to fall into bed. They retired sluggishly, barely undressing before they collapsed on the bed. Sirius gathered Hermione in his arms, trying to let her know he only wanted to hold her, not harass her as he'd done all night, and she let him wrap his arms firmly around her. The bond hadn't bothered either of them all day, even when Sirius had gone to the grocery store. It seemed that even Sirius touching Hermione sexually was enough to appease the bond.

Thinking, as always, of the implications, Hermione fell fast asleep in the arms of the only man who'd ever brought her comfort.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Hermione woke early and quietly the next day, preparing for work without a sound to wake Sirius. They had both slept like the dead the night before, and neither was bothered by the bond's strictures. Hermione's fairly regular bad dreams had given her respite for the night as well, the whispering sound she always heard just beyond the reaches of her consciousness having abated for the time being.

Hermione brushed a soft kiss over Sirius' sleeping cheek, feeling a nice little jolt at the contact. She wondered whether she was blessed or cursed to be bound to such a handsome and sensual man. Blessed because he was obviously good in bed and seemed to genuinely care about her and like her as a person. Cursed because she would never know what it was like to have a man love her because he wanted to, not because he had to. She wondered if, if they never found a solution, Sirius could ever grow to love her.

Dismissing her thoughts as morbid, Hermione headed to work for another dull day.

Sirius woke up later than he'd ever admit to Hermione. Sometimes it was just too nice to sleep in, even if he wasn't sleeping and just daydreaming. He'd lain in bed for hours after he'd awakened, just using the time to think about his current predicament. Truth be told, things could be much, much worse. He could still be beyond the Veil in stasis, not knowing he was dead or as good as, not knowing everything he was missing.

He also admitted that he was grateful it had been Hermione to bring him back. She had grown into a truly lovely young woman, and she had such passion brewing just beneath the surface. He'd seen her incendiary side the day before when he brought her to orgasm. Watching her face had nearly made him come, and he'd had to hold back from wantonly thrusting against her leg to get himself off. The girl could make him embarrass himself if he wasn't careful.

But now that he'd had a taste, all Sirius could think about was *more*. He wanted more. He'd pursued many women over the years, both before and after Azkaban, but no one had intrigued him like Hermione. He loved talking with her as much as kissing her. Okay, almost as much. But he was fascinated by her mind. There was something to be said for the only witch in history to ever successfully bring someone back from beyond the Veil. It was a true accomplishment, and Sirius was proud that he'd had a hand in it, even if his part was not exactly heroic (especially since she'd told him she'd bathed him like a child the first night he'd come back. Way to make an impression!).

Sirius prided himself on being one of those rare types who could sit around and do nothing all day. He didn't need to work: Harry had told him the fortune Sirius had left for him was still intact, and he'd given it back to Sirius. He hadn't wanted to take it, but he knew that Harry had more than enough money to last him several lifetimes in the manner to which he'd become accustomed. The Black fortune would last Sirius his entire life with more than enough left over to support his children and grandchildren, of which he hoped there would be many. So he didn't plan on working, but he knew eventually he'd have to do something with his time. He'd always wanted to write a book, but could admit to himself he had no real writing talent. He needed a hobby.

Reclining on the sofa in the library, Sirius grabbed a couple books off the shelves and put them on the coffee table in front of the sofa. There was much more in the Black library than just Dark Arts texts, including a number of both Muggle and Wizarding classics he'd always meant to read. Now was as good a time as any, he supposed. But instead of choosing one, Sirius rested on his back on the sofa, arms behind his head.

He glanced over at the pile of books, wondering where to get started, when he saw a very odd thing. The pile of books seemed to be floating. There was a space of about three inches between the bottom book and the coffee table. Sirius wasn't unaccustomed to strange happenings in this library, but this seemed unusual even to him.

He picked the books up, and his fingers grazed against the empty space between them and the table, which wasn't empty at all. Moving his books, he touched the space. Using his fingers to define its shape and perimeter, it was clear it was some sort of invisible or Disillusioned book. The cover seemed to be leather, and when he opened it, he got a very uncomfortable sensation all over his body, like ants crawling on him and biting him. He closed it quickly.

Sitting back on the sofa, Sirius wondered what it meant. Why was this book here, on the table? What did it contain? Sirius knew the best way to make a text such as this reveal its secrets was to give it a blood sacrifice, but he was completely unwilling to do that. Blood magic was Dark, and he had no intention of travelling that road, the road that had led just about every other member of his family to madness and death. He left the book where it was, thinking to ask Hermione if she'd pulled it out. He doubted it, since it would have been nearly impossible to find, but she might even know more about it than he did.

He plucked a Muggle novel up off the pile. He was sure he'd bought it in his youth, but he'd never read it *Northanger Abbey*. Should be fascinating. He sighed and settled himself in for a long day of nothing.

Hermione was ready to pull her hair out, but was loath to make a bigger mess of it than it already was, thanks to the constant tugging and twisting she'd been doing all day.

She wasn't going to be able to go home during her lunch break today. She wouldn't even be able to stick her head through the Floo and talk to Sirius. Her project manager had rejected her team's latest proposal on the grounds that the Ministry had no money in the budget for it. This was ridiculous, since Hermione had specifically researched the budget, found out how much was allotted every year to projects exactly like this, and made her proposal accordingly. But now with the deadline coming up, they had to rework the entire assignment, finding money in other places, and downgrading the entire thing to cost half the money they'd proposed.

So she'd be working all through lunch and most likely doing few hours overtime. Just the thought of being without Sirius that long made her stomach clench in fear. She had no idea what would happen to them. She was hoping that because of... what he'd done to her yesterday, it would tide them over until she got home. It was her only hope; there was just no way to get out of this project, especially with her team counting on her.

Around one in the afternoon, Hermione felt a little queasy. It wasn't overwhelming, just highly uncomfortable. She rubbed her upset stomach and got back to work.

Around four p.m., Hermione's head was aching, and her stomach was in constant clenches. Each thought of Sirius brought a wave of yearning so strong, she almost cried out.

At six in the evening, the time which she normally got home for her second dose of Sirius, Hermione was sweating, having blurred vision, and her skin felt clammy and twitchy. She'd vomited twice, and she could barely hear through the ringing in her ears.

When eight p.m. came, Hermione was sure she would die. It was no longer a matter of getting the job done; it was a matter of life and death. She had to get home now or she would surely perish. She couldn't bring herself to think of what Sirius was going through, and she silently promised him she would never hurt him like this again. She already hated her job; it didn't make sense to suffer this torture for a Ministry that resented her existence, as evidenced by the constant rejections of her hard work. The only thing that kept her in place was the knowledge that her teammates' jobs were on the line as well.

Stumbling along the corridor, gripping the wall and ignoring the odd looks she got from other employees, Hermione made it to the public Floos. Her project wasn't finished, but she'd no longer been able to read the writing in front of her, and making a cohesive thought was beyond her capacities.

Fairly screeching "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," Hermione launched herself into the Floo, twisting and turning and nearly throwing up in the Floo system, before she was deposited, mercifully unconscious, on the floor of Sirius' sitting room.

A loud thud awoke Sirius from an exceedingly raunchy dream. He had only a moment to contemplate his options (jerk off or investigate noise) before a sweeping sense of nausea assaulted him. His body was wracked with pain immediately, and he was able to see the dark sky through the library window. Merlin, what time was it?

Sirius tried not to panic, but the pain was as deep as his bones, and he was fighting to maintain consciousness. Heaving himself off the sofa and letting his momentum carry him to the top of the stairs, Sirius fairly slid down them. He paused at the bottom, hoping beyond hope that Hermione was okay, was here within his reach. Gathering what was left of his strength, Sirius crawled into the sitting room. He saw Hermione's deathly still form in front of the fireplace, and got to his feet to get to her.

She looked awful; she was sweating and twitching. Moans were escaping her lips, and her face was deathly pale. He threw himself down beside her, gathered her in his arms with the last vestige of strength, and promptly lost consciousness.

Hermione woke up feeling extremely hot. She was so hot, she was sure her flesh was on fire. She tried to escape the heat, but she was pinned down.

Her eyes felt like they were covered in sand, but she forced them open anyway. She was looking at... something blue? It was too close. Pulling her head back, her entire body protested movement. But she was able to see that the blue thing was a shirt, and it was adorning Sirius, who looked a little worse for the wear.

She remembered getting into the Floo, but that was it. She must have fainted... Oh, Merlin, she nearly killed Sirius! *am so stupid, to risk his life just to finish some silly project that doesn't even matter*, she berated herself. She didn't want to leave his arms, but she was so very hot. She tried to get up, but failed. Sirius wasn't hot though, so where was the heat coming from?

Hermione groaned. She was lying right in front of the fire. Today was not a good day for her brain; perhaps it had been completely fried.

Reaching for her wand, she put out the fire and snuggled into Sirius' arms once more.

A sleepy voice sounded, "Mione?"

"I'm here, Sirius. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't think it would be so bad. I'll never, ever do that to you again."

"S'okay, you're here now." He kissed her lips gently, but the effort proved too much, and he laid his head back again.

"Are you okay, can you move?" Hermione didn't think she could, but she really wanted to go to bed.

"Yeah, I can move. We should head upstairs, it's almost midnight." Hermione was aghast; she confirmed his assertion by looking at the clock. She tried to prop herself up, but only groaned and flopped back down. Her joints were stiff and sore and her muscles felt stretched beyond reason.

Sirius pulled himself to his knees beside her and pulled her into his arms. It was a major effort to get to his feet with her in his arms, but he managed. Getting her to the bedroom was a Herculean task, and he nearly dropped her twice along the way, almost deciding that sleeping on the stairs would be as good as the bed.

Finally in bed, Sirius undressed Hermione, feeling nothing but exhaustion and a male appreciation for her lovely form, but no desire. He was too tired.

Pain and relief brought tears to Hermione's eyes, and when Sirius got into bed, she clung to him like a lifeline, which, indeed, he was.

He stroked her hair back from her face. Her skin felt cold despite the blazing fire, and he was worried for her health. She was looking into his eyes, her whiskey orbs conveying her apologies, but Sirius wasn't mad at her. He only wanted to make her feel better.

He started rubbing her arms, neck, stomach...wherever there was bare skin, he caressed soothingly. He avoided areas that would inflame him, since he absolutely could not follow through. Hermione sighed in something akin to contentment.

She pulled his head to hers, their lips meeting in a half-languid, half-desperate kiss. Relief spread through them both slowly, starting in their bones and spidering outward to their sensitive flesh.

Tongues grazing in a sensuous dance, Sirius and Hermione both revelled in the kiss and the relief it brought. It was almost enough. In the back of both their minds, they realized the only way to relieve the pain entirely, but neither had the energy nor the inclination. The kiss would have to be enough, for now at least.

Sirius tried to maintain the kiss for as long as he could, feeling better from it and wanting more, but when he moved his mouth to her throat, sliding his lips along her collarbone and ghosting over her neck, her lack of response made him aware that she'd fallen fast asleep. Her face was no longer pained, though she was still chilled to the touch.

He kissed her once more on the lips, trying not to think about how afraid he'd been for both of them and wondering how the hell he was going to live his life like this. He tried, and tried hard, to banish the thought that being without Hermione felt like being Kissed by a Dementor. He didn't want to make comparisons, but try as he might, he still fell asleep with the uneasy feeling that he was horribly, horribly trapped.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Sometime in the middle of the night, Hermione slowly woke up. Her long sleep in front of the fire, distressed though it had been, was making it impossible to stay asleep. She imagined it was around four in the morning, and it would probably start to get light out very soon.

Hermione felt incredible guilt for what she'd put Sirius through. She suspected half the pain she'd felt was actually his. She'd had the suspicion for a while that she would be able to sense his pain. Since the first time she'd lost her temper for no reason at all, she'd begun to wonder what had brought about that change. Then she'd come home from her visit with Snape, and though she hadn't noticed at the time, the living room had been totally trashed. She'd even recalled having to avoid stepping on a lamp. So, it would appear that along with everything else, she'd inherited some of Sirius' temper, because though she could be fierce, she was never needlessly violent and almost always kept control of her temper.

Sirius didn't seem to be experiencing the same transference, but until he started doing research just for the heck of it, she supposed he might not notice. She would keep an eye out for anything unusual, and she decided not to tell Sirius unless it became a major issue. After all, maybe she could use a bit more... impulsiveness in her personality. But to be fair, Sirius could use some rationality in his own.

Hermione shivered as Sirius moaned in his sleep. He turned slightly and draped an arm over her midsection. She held still, not wanting to wake him up or reveal that she was awake. The heat and weight of his arm was all she could think about, and she swore she could feel his coarse arm hair through her camisole.

The hand tightened on her side and began to draw small circles on her ticklish flesh. Hermione bit her lip and tried not to let a sound come through, but it was difficult when that devilish hand was moving up her stomach to her ribcage. Hermione sighed; his hand was scratchy, pulling her shirt higher with its roughness. She was quite sure he was awake now, but she didn't dare open her eyes to confirm that. She wanted him, she would never deny that; but she still had reservations about giving herself to a man who was forced to want her. It was humbling and somewhat humiliating.

"Hermione... what are you thinking right now?" Sirius' voice was thick with sleep, but she could hear the smile in it.

"Nothing," she whispered, her voice catching as the hand slipped past the valley between her breasts to trace her collarbone.

"We both know that's not true. Tell me the truth."

Hermione heaved a sigh. Of course he knew she was thinking; when wasn't she? She thought about lying again, but in a moment of clarity, realized she would have to tell him how she felt. He was going to take her virginity eventually, and she owed it to herself to be honest with him about her fears. Not that she thought he could alleviate them, but maybe he felt some uncertainty as well.

"I'm scared. Not of you," she added quickly, seeing the hurt look on his face. "But of what I feel, and why. I always... I always dreamt of falling in love, getting married, and having children. I didn't think I'd be in a position to have to be intimate with someone in order to stay alive, and certainly not with... you," she finished lamely. It was true: she'd never considered Sirius to be an option, mostly since he had died before she'd been old enough to consider anyone other than Ron as a candidate for her affections. Given time, surely she would have recognized his many... attractive attributes, but thinking about it and doing it were two different things, and she felt out of her league. About twenty thousand leagues below her league, actually.

"You can still have those things, Hermione," he told her in a soft voice. Hermione froze *he saying...*? He went on, "I'll just be a little... complication. You're a brilliant and damn sexy witch. I'm sure you can find a man who doesn't mind that you have to... attend to me... every now and then," he finished with a broad smile, obviously proud that he'd found a solution to her dilemma. She looked away, and she didn't see how quickly his smile fell or that his face took on a sickly pallor.

"And I guess you would do the same?" she asked.

"Well, I don't really intend on getting married, not anytime soon, anyway. But I guess if you were seeing other men, I wouldn't be opposed to seeing other women." His words sounded certain, but Hermione was sure she saw a flicker of unease on his face.

"I don't think I could ever be with two wizards at once. I'm not that kind of girl. Even if you and I weren't really together. I'll just have to... deal with it."

"Well, what if I married you?"

Hermione felt a pang in her heart and a panic that she wasn't entirely sure was her own, before she laughed out loud. "Sirius, everyone knows you're not the marrying sort. I'm sorry I even brought it up." Hermione went to move away, hurt by his callous "offer."

He pulled her back quick as lightning. Holding her tightly in his grasp, he rubbed her back with one hand and held her neck in the other. Her face was pressed against his chest, and she struggled for a moment before succumbing to the quintessentially male scent and feel of him.

"You might have a lot to learn about me, Hermione Granger. I am the marrying sort. I happen to think I'd make a very good husband. And father."

Hermione felt like a world-class prat. "I know you'll be a good husband. Just... not mine. And of course you'll be a *amazing* father! I know that like I know your name is Sirius Black."

"So, you don't think I'd be a good husband to you?" Sirius' voice was teasing, but slightly tight, and she knew she had hurt him.

"You're not understanding what I'm saying. I mean, if we had to be married, you'd be a good husband, certainly. But you'll never be my husband, so you'll never be my *good* husband. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"What if I really want to be your good husband?"

Hermione only shook her head against his chest. "You shouldn't feel like you have to marry me out of guilt or gratitude. That would be so wrong! Can we drop it? I only wanted to tell you I was nervous about losing my... about being intimate for any reason other than love."

Sirius' voice rumbled under her head, and his breath whispered against her ear. "I'll only say one other thing. If I were to marry you... it *would* be out of guilt or gratitude. It would be... because of what you said."

Hermione tried to focus on what he was saying, but his hands were stroking her arm and back, and his body was warm against her, so hard compared to her softness, so large compared to her petite frame. So perfectly... *Sirius*.

He tilted her face up to his, and his lips were insistent against hers. She moved softly against his mouth, delighting in the low growl she felt in his chest. Holding onto the back of her neck with an insistent grasp, Sirius deepened the kiss, his tongue passing her barrier and exploring her mouth. No hollow was left untouched, and Hermione felt herself melting into his arms, pressing her body fully against his. His arousal was pressed against her thigh, and she couldn't stop her leg from moving over his, pressing her centre against his.

Sirius moved them from lying on their sides and pressed Hermione into the bed on her back. He pressed one leg between her thighs, and her hips twitched at the contact. She wanted to finish their conversation... but she liked this one better. The kind with no talking....

Sirius ran his hand up and down her side and slipped it beneath her tank top. Her skin felt enflamed by his touch, like she could feel the trail he left behind for long moments after he'd moved on to a new place to explore. His kisses were leaving her reeling and she barely had enough time to recover from one before he was lavishing another upon her, stealing her breath and dizzying her senses. His kisses were hard and demanding, and Hermione relinquished everything he asked of her.

When his fingertips grazed the underside of her breast, Hermione moaned into his mouth. She could feel him smirk against her lips, so she rotated her hips against his groin to wipe it away. It worked, and Sirius' hand faltered as he absorbed the feeling.

Taking his hand away from her body, Sirius pulled her camisole over her head in one swift movement. She put her arms around his body, partially to hide herself from his view, but mostly because he looked too delicious to not touch. She tugged at his tee shirt and he took the hint, removing it quickly and tossing it over the edge of the bed. She remembered his body well, but being this close to it, feeling it against her own bare skin, was something quite different. Her body was raging with blood as she ran her hands flat over his chest and stomach, delighting in his crisp hair and hard muscles. His skin felt aflame, making her feel cool in comparison despite the fire within.

He brushed a wayward curl behind her ear and met her eyes. "So lovely... so perfect."

Hermione closed her eyes against the barrage of emotion, wishing with all her heart that he meant the words he said, that they were not forced or false.

Deciding for once in her life to accept her emotions at face value, Hermione arched into the hand that had captured her breast, caressing her flesh and gently pulling her turgid nipple. Her hips were moving of their own volition against his, and he was responding in kind.

When his mouth finally left hers to move down her body, Hermione could only ride out of the sensations: his hot mouth on her nipple, biting and laving, his hand moving down her stomach and pulling her pants down and off. He left her for only a moment to remove his own trousers and underpants, and when he settled atop her again, his hard length was separated from her by only the flimsy barrier of her panties. He kissed both her breasts again before moving down her torso, leaving a cool trail as his tongue anointed her.

He circled her navel, nipping lightly on the skin before moving lower. His fingers preceded him, and he caressed her through the cotton containing her. She writhed at the contact, wanting something she only had a clinical idea about. With one quick motion, her panties were gone, and Sirius was settling between her thighs. He caressed her lower lips reverently, parting the silken curls and sliding a finger down her slit. Hermione tried to still her wayward hips and grasped the sheets in her fingers convulsively. The anticipation was almost more than she could bear when he finally lowered his mouth to her.

Hermione keened as Sirius licked and sucked her clit, using his fingers to circle and caress around her entrance. Hermione didn't know how much of her hymen was actually intact after all the years of hard activity, but she worried he would feel it if he entered her with his fingers. Not wanting to give away her last secret just yet, Hermione leaned down and grabbed his hand just as he was about to enter her, holding his fingers in hers.

Glad to have made that choice, though Sirius looked at her questioningly, Hermione let the waves take her away. She felt a tightening flow through her, her toes curled as the crescendo built and Sirius licked harder and faster until she could stand it no more and came with a wild cry as he firmly sucked on her clit one last time. Her head thrown back, she panted, her hand squeezing Sirius' to a point of near-pain.

He rose up to lie beside her, rubbing her quivering stomach with his hand and kissing her neck. She turned her face to meet his in a kiss, and she could taste the foreign flavour of herself on his mouth and tongue. Sirius devoured her mouth, bringing Hermione down from her cloud with the insistent hardness rutting slowly against her thigh.

Again following her instincts and leaving her rational mind behind, Hermione pushed Sirius onto his back. She placed open-mouth kisses all over his chest; he tasted slightly salty and she couldn't get enough. Circling his nipple with her tongue, she bit lightly and smiled at the groan Sirius didn't even try to hide. She snaked down the length of his body, caressing his heated flesh and nibbling on his belly button just as he had done to hers. His light laugh was cut off when she placed a light lick on his hipbone.

Hermione could no longer avoid what she was about to do. Settling herself between his spread thighs, Hermione took in the sight of him. His cock was rigid and straining, darker than the rest of him. She could see a thick vein on the underside pulsing in time with her own heartbeat. He was very thick, more so than she'd expected and much longer than could fit into her mouth. But she would try.

Too shy to meet Sirius' eyes, she leaned down and swiped the cloudy liquid from the crown. She heard her lover gasp and smiled at her power. She wasn't experienced in this arena, but she had researched...if Playwitch could be considered such.

She swiped a long lave from the base of his cock to the head, swirling her tongue around the plumed tip before surrounding it with her mouth. She sucked gently, bringing one hand to stroke his throbbing shaft and the other to gently caress his silken balls. Sirius gasped her name, and she could feel his eyes on her, watching intently. Under his scrutiny, Hermione felt emboldened rather than embarrassed, and she looked up to meet his gaze.

His face was the picture of pleasure, his mouth open slightly, breathing in heavy gasps, and his eyes were half-lidded and the darkest she'd ever seen them. She sucked a little harder, and his head fell against the pillows, unable to maintain his gaze.

Hermione felt him get even harder beneath her fingers and in response, moved her hand faster, flicking her tongue against the bottom of his head.

"Hermione, I'm going to..." Sirius gasped out, but she wouldn't move. With an animalistic shout, he flooded her mouth and Hermione fought to swallow his come as more came to take its place. Finally, he finished, and Hermione swallowed the last of it. It hadn't tasted as she'd expected, but she would do it again because of the way he was looking at her right now.

Sirius dragged her body up against his. He encircled her with his arms so she was facing him, her breasts pressed firmly against his chest, his hair tickling her sensitive skin.

"You are... amazing, love." His words were husky and sent a thrill through her. She smiled and kissed his lips lightly, but he wouldn't let her pull back and kissed her thoroughly.

"You weren't so bad yourself. But then you probably already knew that." He winked at her, and she had to roll her eyes.

Sirius' leering face was interrupted by an intense yawn, and, watching him, Hermione couldn't resist the one that took her over as well. She had a couple hours before she had to be up for work, so decided to try to get back to sleep.

Sirius watched her breathing slow and even out. She looked ethereal in the moonlight, and he felt a tightening in his chest at how very innocent she looked, how very young. He would always be grateful that it was she who had rescued him, but a part of him hated that he would be taking away her youth, forcing her into a relationship from which her loyalty would not allow her to stray. Sirius' heart had nearly stopped when he'd told her she was free to pursue other men, but she'd reacted as he'd hoped. He'd meant what he said about marrying her, too. He could think of worse matches, that much was certain. Sirius didn't believe in that all-consuming, all-encompassing love from fairy tales. It would be enough for him to enjoy the company of his wife; if she was intelligent, fun, and sexually compatible, that was more than enough for him. And Hermione was all those things and more.

Sirius closed his eyes and sank into the pillows, scratching his chest absentmindedly and trying to ignore the strange feeling in his stomach, a twisting feeling that wouldn't go away. He made a mental note to ask Hermione about the vicious scar on her chest. He'd wanted to before, but though she didn't seem the type to hate imperfections, he hadn't wanted to risk spoiling the mood.

Finally, sleep put an end to his aimless musings.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

For the first time since she'd started her job, Hermione slept through her alarm. It was nearly lunch time when she finally woke up. She had no intention of going in that day. Working so long had nearly killed her and Sirius the day before; she was pretty sure she deserved at least one day off.

Truthfully, she felt fine. Well rested and in good spirits. Sirius must have been even more tired than she, since he was still out cold beside her. She absentmindedly ran her fingers over his chest, but he frowned in his sleep and she stopped. She didn't want to leave the warmth of the bed just yet, so she settled in to watch him sleep.

After about half an hour, Hermione decided they'd slept enough. If Sirius ever wanted to get to sleep at a reasonable hour that night, he'd have to get up soon. Smiling a little evilly, Hermione set to tickling Sirius' ribs. He didn't jerk away like she'd hoped he would. Instead, he groaned and tried to escape her fingers. Frowning at her failure, she placed small kisses on his lips and face. His eyelids fluttered open, and he smiled at her.

He immediately winced and closed his eyes again.

Hermione was getting worried. Why wouldn't he look at her? Was he ashamed of what they'd done... or disappointed that she'd been there when he awoke?

"Sirius, is everything okay?" She prided herself for keeping a level tone.

But Sirius' tone was anything but level. "No, something is really wrong."

Hermione immediately forgot her self-esteem issues in favour of concern for the man in her bed. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he moaned. "I feel sick... really fucking sick, actually. Everything hurts... something's wrong."

"What, specifically, Sirius?"

He took a deep breath, trying to combat the pain. "My head is pounding, my stomach's twisting... I feel weak, exhausted... my skin's on fire, and my blood feels like it has glass in it." He groaned. "Specific enough?"

Trying not to panic, Hermione ran through what would be causing this illness. As far as she knew, she was doing everything right; they'd certainly had enough contact during the night to combat any residual pain from the entire day apart. There was no reason why Sirius should feel ill. It could be a regular human sickness, of course. But his symptoms were so like those from when he needed her, only more extreme.

"I'm going to kiss you, okay? To see if that helps," Hermione informed Sirius, but he only nodded weakly.

She pressed her lips lightly to his, increasing the pressure when she got no response. She teased his lips with her tongue, and he opened his mouth obligingly, but she could tell it wasn't helping.

"I'm going to have to get help. I can't...I can't lose you! Not like this. There is an answer, we just have to find it. Stay here. I'll go see Professor Snape."

Sirius groaned at the mention of the hated name. "Why do you always run to him for answers? I thought you were the smart one."

Hermione frowned, but knew it was (mostly) the sickness talking. "Severus Snape is one of the smartest men I've ever met. If it weren't for him, you would not even be here for him to save again! He's the only one who can help us, I just know it. I won't be gone long."

Sirius only nodded and accepted her parting kiss with as much energy as he could spare, wanting to show her he was the only one. He felt irrationally jealous of Snape. Sirius knew that he himself was intelligent, but his brains just could not compare to Snape's, and he knew Hermione held smarts in the highest regard.

A few moments later he heard her call out, "Snape's dungeon office," into the Floo, and he felt a flash of pain behind his eyes before he lost consciousness.

Hermione had had the presence of mind to grab the invisible Dark text before she ran to Snape's. She had read everything it had to offer, but maybe Snape could find more answers somehow. She put a lot of stock in his abilities, and she counted on him to help her.

She tumbled out of the Floo and landed on her knees in his office. She cried out from the contact, but stood up quickly. Snape was not at his desk.

Glancing at the Grandfather clock in the corner, Hermione saw it was lunchtime at Hogwarts. He would be in the Great Hall.

Not thinking about her inappropriate attire of a camisole and pyjama bottoms, Hermione clutched the invisible book to her chest and ran to the Great Hall as fast as her legs would carry her. Never an athlete, she was panting by the time she arrived.

She flung the huge door open and bent over, trying to catch enough breath to yell to Snape.

Dragging as much air into her lungs as they could hold, Hermione screamed, "Professor Snape! I need your help *right now!*"

Panic had seized her on the run over, and she was nearly hysterical with it now. *Sirius was dying Sirius was dying she'd killed him he was dead dead dead.*

Every single head in the hall whipped toward the girl in her pyjamas, eyes wild with fear and hair in terrible disarray. Most recognized her, either from school or from the papers, but many of the younger ones looked lost and a little scared.

All the professors were looking at her as well. Snape had immediately leapt to his feet as soon as she'd said his name, and he was now billowing violently down the centre aisle, glaring at all and sundry. Minerva McGonagall was on her feet, looking concerned for her former pupil, but she calmed the students with her soft brogue and silenced the hall.

Hermione felt only relief as Snape approached her, grabbing her arm and leading her quickly from the hall. He did not let go as he fairly dragged her to his office.

"Miss Granger, what is the meaning of this? Do you always go around causing such distur..."

"Professor Snape, Sirius is dying!" The panic still had a hold on her. She'd felt it ever since she exited the Floo, and she couldn't escape the feeling of fear that was flooding her. *Something is really wrong!*

"What are you talking about? Haven't you... taken my advice?" He looked awkward, and this was the only thing that clued her in to what he meant.

"Well, we haven't had sex yet. We've done other stuff, just last night. So there's no reason for him to be sick!"

Still dragging her along, Snape queried, "What are his symptoms?"

"Headaches, stomach-ache, severe fatigue... something's wrong, sir! I just know it. I can *feel* it!"

"Please do calm yourself, your histrionics will solve nothing...you know this."

Hermione let his impossibly low voice sooth her frazzled nerves. *Remain calm, find the answer. You are his only hope.*

"I'm okay. I'm okay." She nodded, trying to believe it.

"Is there something wrong with your arm?" He looked at her questioningly. She was holding onto the invisible book, and it looked like she was holding her arm to her chest protectively.

"No, sir. It's the invisible book. The one with the potion and incantation to bring him back."

"Invisible? How odd." They finally arrived in his office, and Hermione fell gracelessly into the chair opposite Snape's desk. She dropped the book onto his desk with *thunk*.

Snape ran his fingers over it, feeling for the edges and opening it to touch the pages, hidden though they were.

"How were you able to get it to reveal itself?"

"Have you a knife?" Hermione was not looking forward to cutting along the barely-healed wound on her chest yet again, but she wouldn't hesitate for a moment.

Looking at her sceptically, Snape passed her a shining silver blade he used for slicing potions ingredients. He always kept it razor sharp.

Without a moment's pause, Hermione pulled down the front of her camisole slightly, baring the scar over her heart, and ran the blade firmly across her sorely abused flesh. Snape shouted her name and leapt up to stop her, but she was already running her fingers through the wound and slicking them across the book.

Snape grabbed her wrist firmly in his hand and yanked her away from the book. "Merlin, Granger, what have you done? Have you any idea...?"

"Of course not! I think we've already established that I have *no idea* what I'm doing! Just *help me!*" Her words were nearly hysterical, and she tried to rein herself back in. She silently begged him to speak to her in that calming voice; she needed something to quell the fear threatening to drown her.

"Hermione, be quiet for a moment. What's done is done. Obviously, this was one of the worst things you could have possibly done, but there's no need to dwell on it since, evidently, it is not the first time you've used this method to read the book." He'd gestured to her scarred chest, and she shook her head.

"We'll talk about the repercussions later. Now, we must read and help your friend."

Hermione opened the book and found the page with the information on the Veil. She smeared more blood across the blank page, and words suddenly filtered into sight.

"In which what we desire returns to us," Snape murmured.

"But there was nothing after this! The next chapter was about... earthbound spirits!"

Snape gingerly turned the page. It was blank. Hermione looked at her former professor desperately. He returned her gaze, letting it fall to the open cut on her chest. He raised his hand and trailed his fingers through the blood that was dripping to stain her shirt. Hermione shuddered at the touch, thankful that he didn't just shove his fingers into the wound like she had. Snape didn't meet her eyes, but placed his wet fingers on the page.

It was a new page.

Hermione groaned. "Why can't we ever have all the information the first time?"

"Because that is not how Dark texts work, of course. I told you at the very beginning there would be a dear cost. Now, we learn what it is."

Snape read out loud when Hermione's eyesight refused to focus. She tried to take steadying breaths, focussing on his melodic voice, but it wasn't working anymore. She needed to see Sirius.

Snape had finished and was looking at her expectantly. She groaned. "I'm sorry. Could you paraphrase for me?"

"It's nothing you don't already know. Until you offer a sacrifice, Sirius will suffer unbearable pain. He needs an anchor of blood to keep him in this world. Your offering was good but insufficient."

Hermione felt like screaming in frustration. "*What does that mean?*"

"Your virginity, stupid girl. Try to follow along. A sacrifice: because it's not how you wanted to lose it, I'm assuming; but also because you are offering a part of your body that is pure, untouched. It will anchor him to this side of the Veil, and the Veil itself will release its final hold on him. It will bind you together in a different way than before. The original bond was meant to bring you together. Because you have not consummated, the bond is giving you an ultimatum. For some reason unknown to us mere humans, the Veil wants you and Sirius Black together. You have to offer him your virginity...and *soon*...or he will surely die, and you very well might die from the withdrawal. It is most unfortunate, but easily remedied. Go home and copulate, and stop bothering me!"

Hermione couldn't find the strength to be shocked at Snape's outburst. She suspected she had been rather slow on the uptake regarding this whole mess, but he usually wasn't so abrupt with her.

"Professor Snape... thank you. Thank you so much for your help. It means the world to me, and I don't know what I would have done if..." she broke off. Sirius might have died without his help. More than once. She'd known they would have to have sex, but she didn't realize there was a time limit, and now that she knew the clock was ticking, there was only one thing she could do.

Snape seemed mollified by her words. "Miss Granger, you can always count on me. As much as it displeases me to see Sirius Black alive and relatively well, and even more so to see him forced upon you, I am glad that his presence is at least making *some* people happy." His words sounded more than a little forced, and Hermione knew it was both from saying the words aloud and because he probably didn't mean them.

Hermione impulsively hugged him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He didn't return the embrace in the slightest, leaving his arms stiffly at his sides. His rough frock abraded the wound on her chest, and she frowned. Pulling back, she noticed she had bled on him.

"I'm sorry." She gestured at the blood that barely showed on the severe black material.

"It's not a problem. I work on potions; I am continually stained." Hermione nodded. She made to move back to the Floo to return to Sirius and fulfil her part of the original bargain.

Snape stopped her, and she turned. He placed a potion into her hand, a clear viscous salve in a squat square bottle. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"It will help heal that rather unsightly wound on your chest."

Hermione nodded her thanks and returned again to the hearth.

"Miss Granger!" She turned again, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

Snape looked uncomfortable and cleared his throat. She was pretty sure she knew what was coming, but decided not to spare him. He'd called her stupid, after all.

"It will also help with discomfort... afterward. Apply it... directly.*Go!*"

Hermione couldn't help the laugh she left behind as she stepped through the Floo. Her panic had dissipated once Snape had told her the solution to Sirius' illness, and she was more in control of her emotions. That, and making Snape squirm never ceased to amuse her.

With the best intentions in mind, Hermione ran up the stairs of Sirius' home and entered the bedroom they shared. Sirius appeared to be asleep, and Hermione snuck into bed beside him. She decided it would be best to wake him now rather than risk his health by letting him sleep.

"Sirius," she whispered as she shook him gently. "We need to... talk."

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

Sirius was slow to wake up. Hermione had to nudge him quite a few times to get a reaction.

"Wha... what?" His voice was groggy, and he couldn't seem to open his eyes.

"Sirius, I know what's wrong. You might not like... okay, you'll definitely like it, who am I trying to kid," Hermione joked, making light of the situation in order to contain the fear that had threatened her when he didn't wake up right away.

"Well, I actually feel a little better... but if you think I'll like it, I'm not averse." He pulled her body against his and kissed her soundly, holding her in place with his strong arms, not letting her settle or catch her balance.

"Sirius! I just need a minute to talk to you," she blurted between kisses.

Sirius sighed and plopped her back on the bed beside him. "Your minute is granted; go over and face dire consequences. Like not getting the snogging of your lifetime."

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Hermione decided not to pull punches. "I went to see Snape. He helped me again, and..."

"Gods damn, Hermione, you are bleeding everywhere! What the fuck did he do to you?"

Oh, yeah. Hermione's shirt and chest were covered in blood. The cut was concealed for the moment, but Sirius was looking for the source of the mostly-dried blood.

"Sirius, Snape didn't do anything. I did it."

"*What?* For fuck's sake, why?"

"I had to! To get the book to show itself! To read the chapter and get the answer! I would have done anything to help you!"

Sirius pulled her camisole down to expose the cut and a generous portion of her breast. The wound was angry-looking, that much was true. But it was a flesh wound, nothing to write home about.

"There are other scars beneath. You've done this before?" His voice was hard and brooked no denial.

"Yes. I had to bring you back, I had to do it! It's just a scar, Sirius, please."

He got up abruptly and left the room. Hermione lay against the coverlet, wondering if she could find him and have sex with him before he died. Hermione spasmed her legs and arms against the bed like a child having a tantrum. *This is so not how I pictured the sweet seduction of my first time!*

Sirius returned with a washcloth and small basin of soapy water. He sat on the bed beside her and wet the cloth. Without looking at her face, he gently washed the blood from her body. He spoke only to tell her to take off her shirt, and Hermione obeyed only because she'd never seen this side of him. He didn't even glance at her breasts in any non-clinical way; he merely washed the blood from her body and did his best to clean the wound itself.

"This looks infected. Not this new wound, but the older ones. I think we need to go to St. Mungo's." His voice had no inflection, and Hermione wondered what was happening in his brain, especially since he'd said 'we,' and he was thought to be dead.

"Actually, Snape gave me a salve that he said would help. Let's try that, and if it doesn't work in a couple days, we'll go to the hospital." Hermione had mastered the art of the placating compromise from years of doing it with Ron and Harry, and Sirius was not immune to her rationality.

"Two days, and then we go. Understand? Where's the damn salve?"

She wordlessly handed it to him. He took the lid off and dipped his fingers into it. He smelled it suspiciously and even brought it to his lips to taste. Apparently satisfied when he didn't immediately keel over and die, Sirius massaged the salve into her chest.

Try as she might, Hermione couldn't hold back a whimper when the cool salve and his gentle fingers caressed her heated skin, despite the sting of him touching the cut. Sirius' hand hesitated, and she was sure she could see his fingers tremble. But he continued to tend to her until he was satisfied.

"I need to tell you what Professor Snape said," Hermione told him, hoping that his position of power over her reclined form would be enough to make him feel he had the upper hand.

"I'm listening." He cleaned away the excess salve and covered her gently with the bed sheet.

"Sirius, the reason you got sick is because we didn't do what the bond wanted. It isn't satisfied with... what we've been doing." She watched emotions flicker across his face before he settled on chagrin.

"I know."

"What do you mean? How could you know?"

"It was more a feeling than anything. I just... I've wanted you so badly from the start, more than I should have, given the circumstances. And then, after last night... I mean, I can honestly say it was the best... um... I've ever had. And yet I didn't feel... satisfied."

Hermione nodded, trying her best not to take his words personally. Sirius gathered her in his arms. "Hermione... it *was* good. Please believe that. It's this bond! But as much as the bond wants us to have sex... I want it more. I'd love to have been able to seduce you properly, make you want it just as much, but I don't think there's time."

"There's not. It has to be today." Her words were flat, and as much as she felt excited, she was disappointed that fate had allotted her such a loveless life. But maybe she deserved it for all her meddling.

"Well. Do you want to... um. Have a shower? I know I do." Sirius bit his lip, and she had to smile at his awkwardness. She was a little glad to know this was hard for him, too.

"Yeah, actually, I feel pretty grimy. Let me go first, okay?" He looked like he wanted to propose going at the same time, but she hadn't taken that suggestion well the first time, and apparently he remembered. He nodded, and she left.

Hermione couldn't help but feel like a bride being prepared for her wedding night. She wasn't sure exactly what to do, so she just paid extra attention to the places he might give extra attention and made sure she was all smooth and soft. Even if it was not the ideal first time, she knew Sirius would make it pleasant for her. Merlin knew he knew exactly how to play her.

When she was finished and Sirius was in the shower, Hermione debated over getting dressed. Part of her wanted to maintain her modesty, as well as give Sirius something sexy to look at, but for expediency's sake, she decided to just perform a few drying spells and get under the covers nude.

When Sirius entered the room wearing only a towel, Hermione couldn't avert her eyes. It wasn't polite to watch him, but she did it anyway. He didn't seem to notice. He dropped the towel into the hamper and crawled into bed with her. He was wholly unashamed of his nudity, though he had no reason to be. He was a beautiful specimen of maleness, all sharp angles and hard muscles. Even his tattoos were sexy, though Hermione didn't usually go for the marked type.

Without wasting any time, Sirius pulled her on top of him. She struggled to straddle him, and he smiled at her discomfort. Glaring at him as she settled her legs on either side of his, she tried to avoid contact with his burgeoning hardness, but he rolled his hips into her and she couldn't escape it.

"Do you know how long I've wanted this?" he murmured against her ear. He licked and kissed a spot beneath her ear that made her feel faint.

"No... how long?" Hermione was half-teasing; she was treading dangerous ground here. She didn't want to hear: 'Since I got back from beyond the Veil, of course.' For some reason, she wanted to hear something like *forever* or *always*, even though she knew that wasn't so.

He smiled against her cheek, nuzzling her softly. "Too long, love. Much, much too long."

Hermione placed small kisses on the corners of his mouth, teasing him with flicking licks and soft touches of her lips. He growled at her and she raised her eyebrow in return. A challenge.

Sirius picked up the gauntlet as she knew he would. He reversed their positions in one smooth movement, tossing her onto her back and settling between her thighs. She raised her knees and held his hips with her thighs. She could feel his arousal against her mound, and he took her mouth violently at the same time as he thrust his cock against her lower belly. Both moaned at the contact, and Hermione's hips moved in an ancient dance.

"Mione, gods, where did you learn that?" His voice was strained, and she was thrilled to have that effect on him.

"Just feels good... *gods...* doesn't it?" She, of course, hadn't *learned* anything, it was just coming to her. Her body knew what to do, even though her mind was a flurry of emotion and sensation and little practical knowledge.

"Everything you do feels good..." Sirius groaned, rocking his body against hers, sending sparks throughout her veins to settle back between her thighs. "But this feels *fucking amazing*," he added, grinding against her and nipping her lips playfully.

His hands caressed her breasts, and he bent to lave and suck her nipples. She moaned at the delicious contact, and he bit gently on the flesh of her breasts, teasing her nipples with his fingertips. Hermione felt a fire build within her, and her body would not let her forget or ignore the impossible hardness against her belly. She reached down to touch him, running her fingers lightly over his silken shaft. He moved into her hand as she closed her fist around him.

"Careful, Hermione. If you want this to last, you'd better go easy," he warned her playfully, and Hermione responded with a tug before she brought her hand back to his side instead.

Sirius pulled his body from her slightly and stroked between her folds with his thick fingers. She was wet already, and he slicked her thoroughly, spreading the wetness. Hermione bit her lip as his fingers grazed her clit before slipping slightly into her body. But he drew them out immediately, and Hermione shut her eyes against the sight of him tasting his fingers. But she experienced the outcome anyway when he kissed her lips with her flavour on his tongue. She whimpered at the sheer wantonness of the act.

"Taste so good, baby. Wish you hadn't denied me so long," he whispered against her lips. She wanted to deny it, but she knew it was her fault he'd gotten so sick. She'd been so afraid, so stupidly cowardly, and for what? Being with him like this was the best thing she'd ever experienced.

"I want you, Hermione. Will you have me?" Hermione heard the vulnerability in his voice and tried not to think that he meant more than just this, just right now. Tried not to hope he meant more.

"Yes, Sirius. I want you, too. So much..." her words were cut off by his soft but demanding kiss, and her body soared.

Sirius lined his cock up to her entrance and seemed to breathe deeply. He looked to her, a heated gaze that seemed to glitter in the air between them. His eyes were nearly black and his face overtaken with passion. Hermione rolled her hips in acquiescence, and Sirius exhaled sharply. He thrust into her with one deep, slow movement, intending to fuck her good and hard when he felt her impossible tightness give slightly and heard a stifled gasp from the woman beneath him. He watched her wince in pain. *What the...?*

Her eyes were pleading with him, and he realized what he'd really known all along *She's a virgin*. His mind raced with all the things he would have done differently. He even thought about stopping, but that notion was dismissed when her tightness clenched around him. The only thing to do now was make it as good for her as possible.

He moved slowly from her, pulling out only a few inches before returning to her heat. Her sublime tightness was wearing down his resolve, which wasn't exactly steel to begin with. He gritted his teeth against the sensation and made love to her as gently as he knew how. Hermione was responding, her hips rising to meet his, her breath coming in huffs against his neck.

"You," he breathed, "are amazing. So tight, so perfect." Hermione tried to focus on his words and let her body move as it seemed destined to do. Any nervousness abated when he'd entered her, and now only pleasure remained.

Instead of responding, she pulled his face to hers for a kiss, and he told her everything he felt about her in that transfer. How he adored her bravery, her sweetness, her innate goodness, her sacrifice. All for him. All of this was for him, and he was going to treasure it like the precious gift it was. Not just her virginity, but her trust.

He rocked into her body, falling into her dark chocolate eyes and feeling a delicious calm settle over his body. He felt both frenzied and completely at ease. She trusted him, she wanted him... he wanted to make her feel good. He kissed her hard, pouring his passion into the kiss rather than letting his hips showcase his need.

He felt the telltale signs of her orgasm and thrust a little deeper into her, trying not to hurt her but needing her to come ~~soon~~ before he did. His fingers manipulated her clit and got the reaction he wanted. She cried out against him, *his name*. Her body trembled with the sensation, and he continued to thrust shallowly until he plunged one last time, deeper than before and came with a short grunt. His vision went black, and he barely held himself from crushing her. Her body drew every ounce from him, and he couldn't help but feel that she was made for him. He pulled gingerly from her and they both winced at the feeling.

Hermione and Sirius were both lying on their backs, panting lightly. His hand searched hers out and held it tightly. Suddenly, both were accosted with a sudden ripping sensation deep within their bodies, deeper than the core; it came from their very souls. Hermione screamed and Sirius gasped. He tried to sit up to make sure Hermione was okay, but his body didn't seem to be under his control. The ripping continued until they were no longer able to maintain consciousness, and they simultaneously slipped under the spell of forced sleep.

She was floating. She couldn't see anything ahead or behind her, there was only a gentle wave of air upon which her body rested. She felt at peace. She thought she sensed someone there with her, but she was alone. When she looked at her body, since it was the only thing to look at, she was surprised. There were no scars, no imperfections. Her skin was glowing an unearthly white, and light emanated from her.

The hissing sound that always came along with this dream was not entirely absent, but it was not as malicious as it had been before. It seemed... appeased. Almost pleased with her. The sibilance trailed over her naked flesh like a compliment, and she felt pleased that she had done well. She had the feeling she would not hear the noises again.

She spun aimlessly through space, the light from her body flickering but not fading. The presence of another person was always palpable, but not tangible. He seemed to be out of reach. Always beyond her grasp....

Sirius woke up first. He immediately checked Hermione beside him to make sure she was okay. She seemed to be sound asleep and was breathing steadily.

He took stock of his person, but everything seemed to be in order. The memory of that terribly tearing feeling was too fresh to ignore, yet there was no residual evidence that anything had happened. Sirius rubbed his eyes until he saw brilliant patterns in his eyelids. It had felt like he was being torn apart... but he was fine now. Better than fine. He felt more complete, more centred than he had since he had returned from beyond the Veil. He didn't feel any need or any illness. It was brilliant.

But unnerving at the same time. What did it mean?

And Hermione... her screams still resonated in his head. He checked her again, but she was perfectly alive and seemingly well.

He couldn't believe she hadn't told him she was a virgin. He regretted that. He would have done things differently, taken more time. *but you couldn't have*, his traitorous brain reminded him. *There was no time.*

But didn't she trust him with the knowledge? *Maybe not, but she trusts you with her body and her heart.*

He felt closer to Hermione than ever before, but something was haunting him. Being with her had been amazing, but he wished it had been on their own terms. He hated not being in control. After spending twelve years in Azkaban where his soul was not his own, and then five years beyond the Veil doing Merlin-knows-what, all he wanted was a little free will. It wasn't too much to ask.

But it wasn't Hermione's fault that his will was denied him. She only meant to bring him back, not to tie her to him. And yet... she must have known, even a little, what could happen. People don't go around sacrificing life blood like she had without having even an inkling of the consequences... and if Snape had been helping her all along, it was likely that he would have told her. Sirius imagined it was a big joke to Snape, tying an innocent young girl to a washed-up old reprobate like him; just the kind of thing Snape would get off on.

But what would Hermione gain from tying Sirius down? She didn't seem like the type to go after him for his money; they were usually easy to spot, though Sirius had been fooled a couple times in his youth. And now that his fortune was restored to him, he couldn't be too careful. But she hadn't made any demands on his Galleons at all.

Though Sirius knew he was a good catch as a date or a lay, he couldn't imagine a witch wanting to trick him into marriage. He was lazy, arrogant, irresponsible... at least, that's what people were always telling him. Maybe she'd had a crush on him in her youth and was trying to bring a fairytale to life. Or maybe she saw him differently than he saw himself; maybe, to her, he was a real prize.

Sirius shook his head to clear his thoughts. Hermione was a sweet girl, a good girl. She wouldn't trick him. She did the noble thing, just as he would have done in his Gryffindor days. Hermione stirred on the bed beside him, and Sirius left the room to have a shower.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Hermione awoke with a gasp. *That pain....*

She took a moment to take in her surroundings. She was in her bed, seemingly healthy and whole. Sirius was gone. She heard the shower running, and her heart rate slowed a little.

She hadn't predicted any sort of pain from the bond at their consummation. Not even Snape had suggested anything negative would happen. But it was undeniable: something bad had happened after she and Sirius had made love. The ripping sensation left echoes in her body, and she could almost still feel it in her bones.

Despite a general sense of completion, which could have been from a good night's sleep or the wildly fulfilling sex from the day before but was most likely due to finally fulfilling the needs of the bond, Hermione nevertheless felt like something was missing.

Why can't anything just go as advertised? Why do I always feel like I take two steps back for every one forward? Hermione wished she could claim everything was well and good in the world, but she'd be lying. Something was wrong, and it wasn't a tangible thing that she could take note of and research, but an underlying feeling that was no less intense for its vagueness.

Hermione reached for Snape's salve on the bedside table. She didn't need it between her legs like Snape had suggested she might, but she definitely needed it on her chest. Her wound was achy and sore, not to mention itchy as hell. But itchy was good. It meant healing.

Applying the medicine, Hermione was glad to note the cuts actually looked a little better. They were less angry, less red, and the cut she'd inflicted only the day before had closed up already. The latest one might not even scar.

Satisfied with the salve, Hermione got up to get dressed for work. She'd taken two days off now and couldn't afford to keep that up, financially or responsibly. As much as she hated her job, she had a team to think about.

Dressed in a smart grey pencil skirt and a dark purple jewel-toned blouse, Hermione went downstairs to make tea. She generally made breakfast as well, but only made toast today.

Sirius was really taking his time in the shower, and Hermione wondered if she'd even get to see him before she had to leave.

Answering her unspoken question, Sirius entered the kitchen, somehow looking like he could rule the world in only a white towel and dripping hair. He leaned against the doorframe and studied her, and Hermione couldn't help but shiver at the appraisal.

Apparently deciding she'd suffered enough, he came up and slid his arms around her, drawing her body against his damp form. She tried to pull back but relented, realizing the fight would end with her clothing wet one way or another, since her struggles invariably made him fight harder for whatever it was he wanted.

He brought a hand up to softly stroke the skin of her jaw and tilted her head up for a kiss. His lips were soft and insistent against her, licking the seam to request entrance. She acquiesced because denial was never an option with Sirius.

Just as she melted into the embrace, he broke the kiss.

"Did you feel that pain last night, after we had sex?" he questioned, and Hermione started a little to hear it spoken of so... casually. It was anything but, to her.

"Yes, that was unexpected." That, of course, was an understatement. It had felt as though her soul had been.. *oh, my gods*. Could their souls have been restored?

"Sirius, do you think the pain was connected to our bond? I mean, I felt like my soul was being torn somehow.... What if the bond... reversed, or something?" Hermione

gulped. Did she feel relief or disappointment at the idea? She quite liked Sirius, more now than she even had in her youth, that much was certain. But did she want to be bound to him forever? And equally important, did he want that? It would be good to have the bond dissolved, wouldn't it?

"I don't know. I definitely felt a *deep* pain, as in deeper than just bodily. What do you think it means?" Sirius looked concerned but not overly so, and his calmness helped even Hermione's breathing.

"I can't be sure. But maybe we should test the bond? See if it's still intact?" She hated the idea that this might cause Sirius pain, but she figured it wouldn't get to the point it had last time, and if they began to feel ill-effects, they would be able to be together to satisfy it.

He nodded, obviously thinking. "Okay. Go to work and we'll see how badly we feel by lunchtime. If we don't feel ill or anything, we'll wait until you get home from work. By then, we should have an answer."

"It's a plan, then. Maybe I should ask Professor Sna..." She didn't finish because Sirius cut her off with a kiss. She fell into it, expressing her concerns without saying a word, knowing Sirius wouldn't know why she felt so distressed, any more than she did.

"Let's try to figure out this one thing before involving... other parties, yeah?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione agreed.

"Yesterday you said something about an invisible book? I meant to ask earlier, but... more important things happened." He predictably winked at her, and feeling bold, she winked back. Laughing, Sirius continued, "I wanted to have a look at it."

Hermione thought about where she'd put it in her hurry to get home to him from Snape's office. She must have put it on the coffee table.

Feeling for it, her fingers hit an edge, and she picked it up. "Here it is, but you need blood to see it, and I don't want you to cut yourself. I can tell you what it says."

"No worries, I won't go hacking up my chest just to do research. You can fill me in later. I just wanted to see it."

Hermione handed it to him, grabbed her briefcase and walked to the Floo. She wanted to go to Sirius for a kiss goodbye, but that felt so... domestic, and she wasn't sure that he would want that from her.

Sirius solved the problem by grabbing her upper arms and fairly hauling her body against his.

"Thought you could get away without saying a proper goodbye?" he murmured against her lips, punctuating with a lick on her mouth.

"Of course not, Sirius," she whispered, parting her lips to accept his 'goodbye.' He kissed her deeply before releasing just as she was falling into it, for the second time that morning. She gave him a light glare, only a four on the Hermione-Glare scale, and tossed some Floo powder into the hearth, stating her department at the Ministry, and whirling away in a dramatic whoosh of flames.

Sirius weighed the book in his hands. He'd meant what he said; he had no intentions of cutting himself to read the words. He trusted Hermione's near-perfect recall, and while not a stranger to pain, he was averse to it on a personal level. He'd seen the book, or at least had known of its existence, from when he'd come across it in the library. He hadn't thought that it was the book, nor had he remembered to ask Hermione about it before.

He'd been so disappointed in his little bluestocking when he'd learnt that she'd used blood magic to read the book. That had been highly careless of her, and careless was not her style.

He went to sit on the sofa, lounging on his back and resting his head on his hands. He studied his boots, wondering what exactly he thought about the possibility of the bond being reversed. He definitely hated being tethered to her and worried about what could happen if they were somehow divided. He certainly didn't relish the idea of dying from sex withdrawal. On the other hand, he wondered if Hermione would consider dating him outside the realm of the bond. She was a brilliant girl and a *brilliant* shag... Sirius cringed internally at the term. She was definitely more than a shag, and yet the bachelor in Sirius rebelled against putting a word to that.

So basically, I want to be a free man with access to Hermione's body and heart If that wasn't a case of wanting your cake and to eat it too, Sirius didn't know what was. If Remus were here, he would know exactly what to do, and better still, he would *tell* Sirius what to do. Sirius closed his eyes against the barrage of emotions that hit him when he thought of Remus. It still hurt to think about, and Sirius hated being the only Marauder left. He felt pressure in that, as though he had a duty to not let his friends down (except Peter...that shit could rot in hell).

Thinking of Remus made Sirius remember little Teddy, who lived with his aunt. He desperately wanted to meet the little guy, one of his only remaining family members, since Tonks was his cousin. He'd been seriously remiss in reconnecting with the real world. He had a responsibility to certain people, and he needed to see it through. As much as he'd love to live in a little world with only Hermione, it wasn't realistic.

He did worry about the fallout Hermione might experience. She could be labelled a Dark witch because of her actions, and Sirius had lived with the stigma of being a Black for long enough to know that could be very alienating and disheartening, especially when it was untrue.

His mind made up to visit Teddy and Andromeda that night or the next day, Sirius felt better. It always helped to make a decision one way or another. The problem was, there were so many decisions to be made, it would be a wonder if he would ever feel normal again.

Deciding to put a stop to his maudlin musings, Sirius sent off an owl to Harry. He wanted to see his godson, to explain to him what was happening, and to hear about Teddy. He knew Harry was Teddy's godfather, and it made him smile to think of Harry, little Harry, being Remus' son's godparent. *I've missed so much....*

Better not to dwell on those things, of course. He had a life to live and a responsibility to the witch who saved him to live it.

When lunchtime came around, Hermione couldn't sort out her feelings. The bond was not putting any sort of pressure on her whatsoever. She felt fine. She hung her head. *I've lost him.* For what man would stay with Hermione Granger when he was a sex god? And now that her knowledge of sex was more substantial than what she'd read in PlayWitch, she knew Sirius was a sex god.

Heat flooded her when she remembered the intensity of her orgasm, the heat of him within her, the way she'd woken up still wet with his come between her legs. But more than that, his *eyes....*

No matter. If their souls were reinstated, she would learn to live with it. At least she'd had him once; at least she'd gotten to know him better.

Hermione ignored the bitter tinge deep within when she'd Firecalled home to have Harry answer the Floo and relate the message that Sirius was 'doing just fine without her.' When she felt the emptiness inside her, she knew, for the first time, that it wasn't just the bond that needed Sirius.

"So, you and Hermione, yeah? How's that going?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. He might have to teach his godson a thing or two about subtlety.

"It's going great," he answered. "We're both a little uncomfortable with the situation, but things are getting easier, I think."

Harry nodded. "I worry about her, you know. She hasn't had much experience in the dating department, and to go from nothing to you has got to be tough."

"Are you saying I'm high-maintenance, Harry James Potter?" Sirius teased.

"Not at all. I'm just saying you're a lot more than she's used to. And I worry that... you know. She might not be able to handle it."

Sirius was curious. "In what way?"

Harry shrugged, and Sirius got the impression he was hiding something. "I don't know. She just hasn't been with many guys...*any* guys, really. Just...be careful with her, you know? With her heart."

Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder and smiled. "I will, Harry. She is lucky to have a friend like you, and vice versa. I wouldn't hurt her for the world."

Harry smiled, looking reassured. "Good, because I'd have to kill you if you did, of course."

Sirius laughed. "Of course."

Harry pulled a pack of Exploding Snap cards from one pocket and a bottle of Firewhisky from the other, a cheeky grin on his face and looking so much like his father that Sirius' heart hurt.

"You're on, Potter."

Hermione walked through the front door of Grimmauld Place, having decided to Apparate home and save her silk shirt from further Floo damage, and was accosted by an impressively drunk Harry Potter.

"Is that my woman?" Sirius called from another room, and Hermione snorted.

"No, it's Hermione!" she called back. A part of her squealed at being called his woman, but a larger part rebelled against the idea of being a possession.

Harry gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek and stage-whispered, "Better not get him started, 'Mione, he's had a lot to drink!" He laughed heartily and dragged Hermione's amused form to the sitting room, where Sirius was sprawled on the couch on his back, one leg on the floor and boots on.

Hermione took in the sight of a languorously reclined Sirius and sighed in pleasure before noticing the utter wreck of the room. Playing cards were everywhere, and that was no understatement. To add to that, they all looked as though they'd been shot with hexes, being scorched and half-burnt. A couple were still *on fire!*

She immediately doused the disasters-in-waiting and chuckled as Harry poured a shot for each of them.

"I thought I heard my girl's voice!" Sirius slurred, grinning madly.

"And I thought I said I wasn't your girl?" she countered.

"How can you deny me, love... *after everything* we've done together?" His voice had dropped to a sultry whisper, but Harry still picked up on the insinuation.

"You shagged my godfather, Hermione Granger?" he demanded, a sly smirk giving away his appalled tone.

"And it was the best bloody shag I ever had!" Sirius declared. Hermione took her shot and Sirius'. She would need it more than he, having to look after these maniacs.

"Hey! No fair. That had my name written all over it," Sirius groused, reaching up with speed incongruous to his state and hauling Hermione facedown onto his body, settling her between his thighs and attacking her throat with wet, but somehow amazingly sexy kisses.

Harry groaned and protested, "None of that, now! I came for a game, not a show!"

Sirius broke away from her jugular long enough to quip, "Like I'd let you see anything!"

Harry blurted, "Nothing I haven't seen before!" He laughed at his own self-perceived hilarity, and Hermione groaned.

Sirius froze against her neck. "What?" he whispered into her ear, voice suddenly clear and full of possessiveness.

"Oh, for goodness' sake. We saved the world together, obviously he's seen me naked a few times, circumstances called for it!"

"Yeah!" Harry agreed. "Circumstances like the time we were all hot and had no swimsuits, so we went in the buff!"

"Harry!" Hermione hissed, suddenly nervous about the tense body beneath her.

"Oh, yeah," Sirius said, "Saving the world, one skinny dip at a time. Anything else you'd like to tell me, love?"

"You want a list of everyone who's seen me naked?" Hermione questioned, voice almost as dangerous as Sirius'.

"In writing, actually. With updated home addresses, if you please."

Before the bickering turned into full-scale Hermione-Sirius war a la before Sirius' death, Ginny's head appeared in the Floo.

"Harry! You had better be on your way *homenow*, and you had better be sober upon arrival! Am I understood?" Her voice was bordering on shrill, and Sirius winced, making Hermione smirk.

"Yes, Gin. I was just leaving!" Ginny's face disappeared, and Harry pulled a Sobering potion from his robes. "Always prepared!" he announced with a wry grin before downing it, gathering what was left of his playing cards, and waving goodbye before stepping through the Floo.

Hermione was immediately reminded of her position atop Sirius when he turned them both over, pressing her facedown into the sofa beneath him, but relieving her of his weight by holding himself up on his elbows. She squirmed to get comfortable, and he bit the back of her neck, moaning and pressing his arousal against the back of her skirt.

"So, this list?" he prompted, licking her neck lightly.

"There's no list," she whispered, amazing at how quickly the heat from their little argument transformed into another kind of heat. "Just Harry and Ron, and my parents, I guess. Oh, and one time Moody walked into the bathroom while I was using the shower."

Sirius growled, the noise causing an immediate reaction in her lower belly.

"Well, I'll just have to prove that I don't share what's mine, won't I?" he whispered dangerously.

"What is your obsession with owning me, Black?" Hermione shot back. "Three such statements in one night. Do I have your name tattooed on my arse or something?"

Sirius started to bunch up her skirt as if to check, and she laughed, hiking it back down and snaking out from beneath him.

"No, I don't. And if you want me, you have to treat me with respect. I'm serious!"

He sat up and pulled her unresisting into his lap. "No, I am. Silly girl."

She slapped his arm and he recoiled as if in great pain. "All right, all right! Really, love. I think you'll see treating you with respect is the easiest thing in the world."

Hermione smiled, placated. For now.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Sirius let Hermione guide him up to bed. He'd sobered up a bit after their little tiff...but he was still waiting on that list of people who'd seen her nude...and now he was enjoying the attention.

Spending the day with Harry had been a blast. The boy (*man*, he reminded himself) was so funny and clever, and just an all-around amazing kid (*adult!*). Sirius was so grateful that he had grown up right despite everything working against him. He'd even spoken to Sirius about wanting kids, and Sirius couldn't hold back his grin. It had been so long since he'd held a little baby....

Sirius pounced on Hermione the moment they stepped into the bedroom. He groaned when his hands came into contact with her smooth skin, and he undressed her rapidly to get more of that feeling.

"Sirius," she laughed. "What's the hurry?" She sounded breathless, and he crowed internally to cause an immediate reaction in her like she did in him.

"I can't wait. I've wanted you all day," he answered honestly, pushing her onto the bed and watching her bounce lightly, fire shining in her eyes. He undressed just as quickly and crawled up her petite figure.

"I've wanted you, too. I'm glad you're not as drunk as I thought you were," she admitted, running her hands over his heated skin, causing an immediate reaction in his groin.

"Not drunk at all, love. I'll prove it to you," he promised, and did so, kissing her with deft precision, parting her lips and drawing her tongue into his own mouth, where he was sure the spicy taste of Firewhisky still resided.

Hermione moaned, pulling away to bite and suck at his lower lip, causing him to growl and move his mouth to her neck. For someone inexperienced as she, she knew exactly how to demand a reaction. He licked the slightly salty skin of her neck, sucking the flesh into his mouth and worrying it with his teeth, purposefully marking his territory. *Hot and no swimsuits, indeed!*

Hermione's hips rolled, desperate for contact, and he settled between her slightly parted thighs. He wanted her *now*, but he could wait. It seemed that she didn't agree, because her body was grinding against his in an insistent motion, and he groaned when her damp pussy slid against his straining cock.

"Mione, need you now," he gritted out, all his effort going toward keeping his hips still.

"Want you, too. Fuck me, Sirius."

He couldn't have held back if he'd had the notion to. Each of her words was like a new jolt into his arousal: her desire, her dirty words, ~~his~~ *same*.

He brought one of her thighs up to rest against his hip and slowly slid into her. Her tightness was shocking, as before, and he recalled images of McGonagall to stave off his orgasm. She was so wet, so ready for him. He hadn't even touched her, and she was dripping. It was intoxicating.

Her head sank farther into the pillows, and she urged him to move with her hips. He obliged, slowing pulling out and sheathing himself again, quickly. She met his every thrust with her own. Her kisses were made of fire and sweetness, and he gorged himself on them.

Before long, his almost lazy plunges turned into an impassioned pounding, her entire body shaking with the force of his thrusts, and little grunts escaping him as he indulged his desire to completely master her body.

His orgasm was impending, and by the look on her face and the tenseness of her body, he knew hers wasn't far behind. A few flicks to her clit brought her off quickly, and she cried out, shutting her eyes, face blissfully beatific. The clenching of her inner walls made it nearly impossible to thrust, but he tried, coming after three final strokes. He could feel his muscles straining as he ground into her pliant body, filling her and barely holding himself up.

He managed to roll off of her before his arms gave out, pulling her body against his and inhaling her sweet, warm scent.

"Beautiful," he whispered, and she smiled before they both fell asleep.

The next day, Hermione brought up the topic she'd been thinking about for some time. She was sitting at the kitchen table with Sirius, drinking tea after they'd finished breakfast. They were both up quite early after having gone to bed early the night before, and she had some time before she had to leave for work.

Brushing crumbs off her black suit jacket, Hermione broached the subject. "When do you think you'll let everyone know you're alive?"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Actually, I was thinking about that yesterday. I really want to meet little Teddy, and it would be good to see my cousin Andromeda again. We

have a lot in common."

"That's a wonderful idea, Sirius. Teddy will be so lucky to have you around."

He smiled. "I can't believe there's a little Lupin out there. I heard he's a Metamorph like his mother."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and he's quite bright as well. He looks just... he looks like his father."

Sirius' face split into a wide grin. "Gods, I hope so. I miss him."

Hermione leaned over to kiss him a quick kiss, which he immediately tried to turn into a long one. She pulled back, shaking her head and smiling.

"And what about the rest of the world?"

"I don't know...maybe I should just take a stroll down Diagon Alley and wait for the fallout. It would be easier than spreading the word person by person."

Hermione considered that. It actually wasn't a bad idea, for all that it was a joke. "Honestly, that might be something to think about. You should tell the important people first, like the Weasleys. They all cared for you very much. And maybe you could talk to Draco? He is your family."

Sirius frowned. "I've never even spoken to the boy, and I'm not sure I want to. From what Harry's said..."

"Yes, but Harry hates Snape as well, and he is a hero."

Sirius glowered. "Draco can find out with the rest of them. I doubt he will even care. Will you come for the inaugural Diagon Alley stroll with me?"

"I think it would be better if Harry went with you, Sirius. It will make sure people know it's really you. And I think he would really like it. He might be feeling left out because of our... association."

He leered at her, saying, "Association? Hermione, my dear, how...*platonic* you make it sound."

She reddened, saying, "Yes, well. In any case, it's ultimately up to you. I just think Harry would be the better choice, the first time."

He said thoughtfully, "I think you're right. Harry it is, then."

"Good. So, I suppose I won't need to come home during my lunch break, now that it appears the bond has... been satisfied."

He smiled softly. "No, you don't *have* to come home," he said, brushing his fingers over her hand. "But you could."

Hermione blushed. "I have fallen behind in my work, lately. I probably should try to use the time to catch up." He pulled his hand away from hers and she missed the warmth.

"Do you think the bond has been destroyed, Hermione? I haven't felt anything since the first night we were together. Not even a twinge."

"Neither have I. I can't really say. The bond was mysterious in the first place, but it doesn't really make sense that it would let us off the hook so easily, does it? I just don't know."

Hermione tried to meet his eyes. She really did. She never saw herself as the type who couldn't meet another's gaze, for any reason. But she was afraid that if she looked at him, he would see right through. She had enough tells as it was; she didn't need her eyes broadcasting for her. She was afraid, plain and simple. She didn't want the bond... but she wanted the *choice*.

But what did *he* want?

"I guess we have to wait and see, then. But, whatever happens, I want you to know..." Sirius chuckled nervously. When she did raise her face to meet his eyes, he was the one looking away. "I want you to know I am so grateful that you brought me back. It doesn't feel like I was really gone, to me... but I know it must have, to Harry. To you. So, thank you. For the second chance."

He took her into his arms, tucking her head under his chin and holding her too tightly for real comfort, but she still wished he would never let go.

She hated to be the first to speak. "I have to go to work, now."

"I'll miss you," he whispered, kissing her hair and then her lips. She let herself fall into the kiss, his lips soft and slow against hers. He seemed to be in no hurry, and the steady seduction was almost, almost as good as the ravenous fire that usually burned between them. Just as she parted her lips to admit him, he pulled away. He smoothed a finger over her softly swollen lips and smiled.

Hermione arrived at work in a bit of a daze.

Sirius decided that the next day would be perfect for his initial outing into the real world. He'd owed Harry, and the young man had responded with excitement. Sirius suspected his godson was eager to be seen in public, possibly for the first time in his life. Though Harry did hate publicity, Sirius knew he was excited to no longer have to hide the secret of his return, especially from Ronald.

Sirius also suspected Ginny was having just as much, if not more, difficulty keeping it between the few people who knew.

In order to tell the Weasleys, Harry had asked them all to meet him at Grimmauld Place for dinner. They were due to arrive around the time Hermione got home. He didn't know how much Hermione wanted to tell them about their relationship, but he had absolutely no intention of hiding it from anyone.

For the first time, Sirius had something he wanted and was allowed to keep...he wasn't going to hide it away for all the world.

And for the next day, Sirius and Harry were planning a relaxing little jaunt down Diagon Alley, during the busiest time of day, with plenty of stops planned along the way. He hoped that most people would get their surprise and mistrust out of the way, because he didn't relish spending the rest of his days explaining himself.

As to that, he hadn't decided exactly *how* to explain his miraculous return. He hoped he could just claim ignorance and say that he just came back one day, no rhyme or reason. He didn't know how amenable the public would be to that, but being Harry Potter's godfather did have its benefits; in the world to which he'd returned, Harry's word was gold.

Hopefully the *Prophet* would pick up the story and by the end of the weekend, everyone would know he was alive and well. And probably owing about five years in taxes to the Ministry, the bloody vultures.

Sirius decided to get the dinner started, knowing that Hermione would hate to cook for so many people on such short notice after working all day...but that, despite hating it, she would do it with no complaints. Not obvious ones, anyway...like he would make...but ones that would get him into trouble later, and he saw no reason to go through that.

He stared forlornly at the pile of ingredients on the counter. They made no sense to him without some sort of recipe. He knew he could cook, but he couldn't make anything he didn't *already* know how to make. And no one was there to show him how to make roast beef or some other suitable meal fit for a large number of guests.

He sat at the kitchen table, contemplating his options. He could order food, Muggle or Wizard. Muggle food might be a hit with Arthur Weasley... but Hermione might not approve because hosts and hostesses were supposed to actually cook...or, at least, that was what *he* had been taught. He had no idea what she might think.

In a fit of frustration, Sirius cried out, "Kreacher!"

And to both their immense shock, the impossibly gnarled old house elf was standing before him, eyes widened and mouth working soundlessly.

"Master! You is returned! Kreacher was told you was dead and Kreacher was free. Now Kreacher sees it is all a trick!"

Sirius gaped, uncomprehending that his house elf was still *alive*, let alone still indentured.

"Well, the rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated." Waiting for recognition in those glaring eyes would be a lesson in futility, so he hurried on. "However, I am back now, and you still work for the House of Black. Are you... capable?" He felt little concern for the old curmudgeon, but he did worry about finding elf pieces in his dinner.

"Of course Kreacher is *capable*," he spat, looking mutinous. "Kreacher is, of course, *honoured* to serve the blood-traitor again."

"Good," Sirius grinned, not quite believing his luck. "Here are the rules. Do whatever I say, and don't let anyone know you're here. Got that? Not the lady who lives here with me, not anyone."

Kreacher nodded, looking at the pile of haphazard materials on the counter. "I is understanding. Is you wanting Kreacher to make dinner from that?" Disdain dripped from his voice, but Sirius knew the elf wouldn't actually harm him. Despite his dubious allegiances, the house elf was loyal to him... just a little vocal.

"And whatever else you can find. I need a dinner for..." Sirius counted in his head. "Eight people. Possibly more if they bring guests."

Kreacher immediately got to work, throwing out some of the 'ingredients' and getting more from the pantry and fridge.

Sirius suspected it was wrong to hide Kreacher's existence from Hermione, but he'd grown up with a house elf and wasn't used to doing everything for himself. It would be nice...for both of them...to be able to relax a little. Kreacher could cook and clean while Hermione was at work. Sirius would... find a hobby or something, and she'd be none the wiser.

For the dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were expected to come, as well as Harry, Ginny, Ron and George. He'd heard about the death of Fred from Hermione, and he wondered how George was coping. He himself knew all too much about loss, and he made a mental note to make sure the boy was all right. *Man*, he mentally corrected himself.

Everyone had gained five years except him.

Harry and Ginny arrived even before Hermione. He poured wine for the three of them, grateful that Kreacher had finished with dinner only moments before. The table was set, and dinner was waiting under warming charms for the rest of the guests to arrive.

"Sirius, you did all this yourself?" Ginny's voice was surprised, though she tried to mask it.

"What, you don't think an old dog can learn new tricks?" Sirius skilfully avoided answering, and Harry looked at him calculatingly before smiling widely.

"If any dog could, it'd be you," Harry joked, and they all laughed. Sirius never failed to be surprised and grateful at how easily he'd moved back into comfort with his godson. He'd expected many angst-ridden weeks of turmoil and uncertainty, but Harry had accepted his return wholeheartedly, and now it was as though no time at all had passed. Sirius was thankful for the normalcy, illusion or not.

The Floo sounded, and Sirius heard numerous voices in the other room. He nervously straightened his clothing before flashing a cocky grin at Harry, who returned it, obviously excited.

"Showtime," Harry smirked, and Sirius couldn't help but feel eager. He did so love to shock people.

Harry and Ginny stepped first into the room that was brimful of Weasleys, greeting everyone and smiling mysteriously. Sirius waited just outside the room for this cue, whatever that might be.

"I have a surprise for you all!" Harry announced, and Sirius almost snorted. His godson had no flare for the dramatic. If it had been him, he would have built it up to near-bursting levels of anticipation and teasing.

Taking his cue, Sirius rounded the corner and entered the living room. All eyes moved from Harry to Sirius, and a veritable hush fell. Molly gasped and immediately began making choking noises, and the boys were all stunned into silence. Ginny and Harry only grinned madly.

Arthur was the first to speak. "Could it be? Sirius Black? Is that really you?"

Sirius grinned, spreading his hands wide, palms up. "In the flesh."

Molly came at him so fast he hardly had time to brace himself for the assault. She hugged him tightly to her, forcing him to bend to meet the hug. Despite the animosity between them, Molly had known Sirius had only wanted the best for Harry, and she must have felt that losing him had hurt the boy more than just about anything else in the world at that point.

"I can't believe it, I just can't! How? Where were...? Who...?"

Sirius laughingly interrupted her jolted questions. "The truth is, even I'm not entirely sure of the details. One day, I was just... back. And I'm in perfect health, it seems." Not the entire truth, but not exactly a lie. He met his godson's eyes and Harry nodded in understanding. He didn't want his friend judged or maybe even arrested for the magic she'd used. That part of the equation would stay a secret until they knew more about the situation. It wasn't that he didn't trust the Weasleys; it was just that it was too big a secret to allow out just yet.

Ron stepped forward next, first shaking his hand and then pulling him into an awkward hug. The boy had grown so much over the years he'd missed. He was so much taller and broader than before. George followed, a solemn but searching look on his face. Sirius immediately knew what he was thinking, but he only shook his head in negation. Wherever Sirius had been, it wasn't the same place as where Fred was. Sometimes, there was no coming back. George nodded imperceptibly, a haunted look coming into his wide eyes.

"Welcome back," George said to him after they'd hugged. Sirius smiled his thanks. He was glad to be back and glad to have a reception such as this. He'd expected to be hexed or have them ask him questions that only the *real* Sirius would know. He suspected that Harry's acceptance precluded all that; if Harry believed it, it must be true.

Arthur gave him a hearty handshake, a wide smile on the man's face. "So, where have you been, then?" he asked quietly, but everyone heard him anyway, and the rest of

the family turned from hugging Harry to hear his answer.

"We don't really know. Somewhere... *else*. Where nothing happens and nothing changes. I'm the exact same age as I was when I went into the Veil. And I didn't even have a day's growth of beard when I came out, five years later. I have no recollection of the time in between."

"We believe he was in stasis, a sort of suspended animation," Hermione's clear voice announced from the doorway.

All eyes turned to her, but Sirius didn't care, since his eyes were the first upon her and the only ones that had *right* to look at her. He was in front of her in two long strides, gathering her into his arms and tilting her backwards into a dip. He saw surprise and possibly a little bit of anger in her face before he leaned in for a long and very thorough kiss. He ignored the gasps and shocked exclamations of the Weasleys as his tongue probed her mouth. She seemed hesitant to admit him, but he was persistent. A part of him heard Harry's simple explanation that they were 'together now,' but mostly he focused all his attentions on the charmingly squirming woman in his embrace. She could struggle all she wanted, but her lips and tongue were responding, and Sirius always believed everything that came out of her mouth.

After what probably felt like an eternity, Sirius pulled Hermione upright and let her go. The glare that greeted him did nothing to subtract from the perfection of the kiss, and Sirius grinned unapologetically.

Hermione was still the focus of a number of stares, but his witch was nothing if not brave. Taking the Weasleys by the horns, she pre-empted what promised to be a very long and irritating discussion.

"Yes, Sirius and I are together. No, it did not begin before his return. No, he has not Confunded or Imperiused me, nor I him. Yes, we are happy together."

Sirius nodded firmly, adding nothing but his support, manifested in a firm grasp on her hand and a light squeeze.

The witnesses to their kiss were all a little shocked. Mrs. Weasley in particular looked disturbed, and Ron looked rather green around the gills himself. They seemed to accept Hermione's declaration, however; or more likely, they were saving their questions for Harry and Ginny, once out of the earshot of Hermione and Sirius.

The Weasleys et al eventually left in a mass exodus, leaving Grimmauld Place rather sedate in their absence. Harry and Ginny left with them, with Harry promising to return the next day for their little outing. Hermione raised an eyebrow at this, but he suspected there was too much for which she was annoyed at him for her to choose only one thing.

He smiled cheekily at her and ran upstairs to get ready for bed. He was thankful, but not entirely surprised, that she soon followed him and all seemed to be forgiven.

Or at least put on hold.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

The next day, the day of the 'outing,' was probably more nerve-racking for Hermione than for Sirius or Harry. The latter two had been bouncing off the walls since Harry had arrived. She was thankful she only had a few more minutes until she could leave for work; otherwise she doubted she'd be able to handle them when they were this excited.

And Sirius was a true instigator, following her around and pestering her, asking her how she would feel when the offers from interested witches began to come in, now that he was exonerated (posthumously, which led to interesting questions), alive and more handsome than ever. His words.

She, of course, told him that any witches with designs on him would have to get through her, first. Their relationship may not be ideal, but ~~it~~*was* one, and she would never settle for anything less than complete monogamy.

He laughed merrily, saying something about her making an honest man out of him. She'd tuned out both of them at that point, packing her lunch and practically jumping into the Floo.

Once at her desk, she got to work without her usual ferocity. Sirius exposing their relationship to the Weasleys had been surprising and alarming. She was usually the type for tact and a slow build-up. She had felt very exposed. But she couldn't deny the part of herself that had thrilled at being claimed in such a public way. Surely Sirius must want her, if he was willing to make their relationship public?

And then he'd told her he planned to take his own advice and go for a stroll down Diagon Alley. She could only imagine the shock he would face, and she hoped he and Harry were both up to it. She was frightened that someone might think he was some sort of impersonator and hex him before asking questions, but Harry had convinced her that he would erect a powerful spell around her lover and himself, just in case.

They'd even booked an interview with *The Daily Prophet*, though she seriously questioned the intelligence of that idea. But it was either feed them the words to misconstrue, or allow them to devise their own. Hopefully, giving them a *base* of truth would be better than an article containing nothing more than second-hand witnesses and conjecture. Either way, the Wizarding World was in for a shock, and many people would not accept Sirius' explanation of "It just happened. I know nothing." She knew she wouldn't have, if she hadn't known the truth; she would have cried foul if anything like that had been printed for her to see, and she was very worried that some intrepid reporter would somehow find out what she'd done.

She would do it again, though. Even if it meant going to Azkaban. She would never have been able to forgive herself if she hadn't at least tried to bring him back.

It was only a little into lunch when she heard her co-workers talking about Sirius. She tried to listen to their conversations, joining them in the break room for the first time in ages.

"Have you heard, Herms? Sirius *Black* is alive!" That was Megan, one of her team members.

She nodded cautiously, saying, "Yes, I just overheard someone saying that." She casually poured herself a cup of coffee, sitting at one of the tables for employees.

"Well, I wonder if he was actually dead to begin with! After all, no one's ever come back from the Veil," Jessica said, a receptionist and their most capable busybody.

"But do we know for sure if he even went through the Veil in the first place? I never heard conclusive proof of that." Megan again, becoming more and more excitable.

"So maybe he was just playing dead until his name was cleared," said Robbie from accounting.

"His name was cleared over a year ago, Robbie," Hermione informed him before clamping her mouth shut.

"Yeah, you're Harry Potter's best friend! You must know *all* the details! Come on, Herms! Spill!" She didn't know who was speaking because she'd closed her eyes against the inevitable.

"All I know is that Sirius really *was* gone, dead or not. But now he's back, alive and well."

Her words set off a flurry of gossip, and more questions were directed at her, but she pretended she saw an owl at her desk and snuck out.

There was no avoiding it...people were going to talk. There had been three crazy theories (or not so crazy, considering what had *actually* happened) in the lunch room alone...who could know what the rest of the Wizarding World was thinking? Sirius was in for a surprise if he thought people were going to accept his bland explanation without question.

Hermione heard a couple reports on the Wireless about *infamous Azkaban escapee Sirius Black*, but nothing conclusive, which of course made sense, because nothing was conclusive. Hell, even she didn't know the whole of what had happened, and Sirius knew less than she! Ignorance was highly frustrating, she decided, stabbing her quill through a parchment.

Hermione tried not to remember the difference between this day and days only recently passed, when her neglect to return home by this time for some serious Sirius-touching would render her incapable of coherent thought. Now she felt barely a twinge, and what she did feel might be attributed to *her* feelings for him, rather than the bond's strictures.

Half of Hermione wanted to maintain the status quo by pretending nothing was wrong, but that had never been her forte. She was usually honest to a fault, and when she wasn't honest, people were almost always able to see right through her. All her new feelings, her fears, her hopes...everything boiled down to the question, *Does Sirius really want me?*

Would he have wanted her if he hadn't been tied to her? In the same vein, if someone else had brought him back from beyond the Veil, would she have noticed him the way she did now? Who was to say her *own* feelings were true?

She didn't want to test the bonds again, not like before. But her brain was telling her she'd never be really happy if she didn't know whether her feelings were real or constructed.

Hermione begged her brain to simmer down and give her a few weeks of happiness before getting all involved and making her doubt herself. For surely she was happy right now, at least with her sex life. Sex was different than she'd thought it would be. When she was younger, she thought it would be all romance and sweet words. When she grew up a little and started noticing couples around her, she'd realized sex was messy, complicated and *funny*. Sex was a joke.

But now, it was some strange, complex meshing of the two. Sex could be sweet, soft, hard, loud, confusing, fascinating, awkward and everything at once. But it was *good*. And she found herself wanting it all the time, which surprised her. Maybe because it was so new; after the novelty wore off, surely her libido would settle. But what if Sirius didn't? After all, he'd been having sex longer than she'd been alive....

Hermione was finding it nearly impossible to focus on her work.

Thankfully, the office was in such a tizzy she really didn't need to. No one was doing their work, so it didn't look quite as bad when Hermione went home at the end of the day with a project not quite finished.

Walking through the door of Grimmauld Place, Hermione was assailed by a number of familiar voices. All loud, all excited.

She removed her coat and hung it on the rack, hearing Sirius' voice as he described in loving detail the astonishment on one Rita Skeeter's face as Harry requested, no, *demanded* a different reporter for their interview.

Hermione entered the sitting room where Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were all sitting, staring in rapt attention at head instigator, Sirius Black, whose back was to her. She smiled wryly at his audience and saw Harry jerk his head toward her, looking at his godfather.

Sirius spun around so quickly Hermione had to take a step back. He was upon her in a flash, picking her up and spinning her in a circle, while trying to kiss her. The kiss was messy and awkward and Hermione laughed before begging to be put down.

"Never!" he declared, his eyes bright and sparkling in a way she was sure hadn't happened before. The man was nearly wild with excitement.

"So I take it you had a good day? The ultimate prank, eh? 'Oh, I'm dead. *No, I'm not!*'" Hermione snarked, giggling at the wide grin on his face.

"Why, 'Mione, I do believe you've sussed it out! Nothing gets me more wound up than exceeding the expectations of society!" he said laughing, before lowering his voice so only she could hear and adding, "Well, almost nothing." Winking at her in that typical Sirius way, he kissed her again before practically tossing her into an armchair and sitting on her lap.

He was way too heavy, but he wouldn't budge. "Sirius, come on! You're crushing me!"

Everyone in the room was smiling and laughing, even more when Sirius rejoined, "Are you calling me fat? You know I'm sensitive!"

Hermione only groaned and resigned herself to be squashed. Thankfully, most of his weight was braced by his arms on the sides of the chair.

"How was work, Hermione?" Molly kindly inquired. She seemed to be eyeing Hermione carefully, but Hermione couldn't decipher why.

"Long and unproductive. Everyone was caught up in the *fascinating* subject of this hyperactive, attention-seeking girlfriend-crusher!"

Harry laughed and sniped, "And nothing frustrates Hermione more than an unproductive work day! Where's your briefcase? I would have thought you'd be working on it already!"

"Actually," Hermione said primly, "I decided not to bring my unfinished work home today."

A chorus of exaggerated gasps followed and she smiled, rolling her eyes and saying, "Yeah, yeah."

"I bet I know why!" Sirius declared. He stood and rapidly pulled Hermione to her feet, snaking her spot on the armchair and promptly yanking her back into his lap. She was sprawled ungracefully before he settled her, pulling her back against his chest.

"Why, Sirius?" Harry and Ginny refrained.

"Because she would rather spend time with her lover, of course!"

Harry and Ginny both laughed, and Arthur let out a guffaw, but Ron and Molly were both silent. Ron looked a little upset, and Hermione remembered what Ginny said to her when she'd first learned about Hermione and Sirius...that Ron still pined for her, despite his being married to Lavender. Hermione wondered about that for a moment, realizing she hadn't heard a thing about the girl in ages. It could be that she'd been so wrapped up in her own personal dramas, but even Harry hadn't mentioned her. Hermione hoped she hadn't been so remiss in her duties as Ron's friend that she didn't even know if they were still together. Their wedding had been small and hasty, and Lavender had never really fit in with the group.

"Or maybe I just wanted an evening to myself?" Hermione said, smiling.

He looked like he was considering her answer. "Nah. Pretty sure I'm right."

She had to laugh. She leaned down for a quick kiss, but like all her quick kisses, Sirius just as quickly turned it into a long one. His tongue only just brushed her lower lip when she whispered, "I think you're right, too."

"Okay, everybody out!" Sirius announced, clapping his hands imperially. Again, everyone laughed, but they were getting up anyway. Ron looked especially upset.

"Sirius!" she admonished, slapping him lightly on his arm.

"What?" he said innocently.

"It's okay, dear. We had best be getting home anyway. Dinner won't cook itself, you know!" Molly said, a soft smile on her face.

"We should also head out as well. I skived off work for you today, Sirius, and now I get to catch up."

Hermione got off Sirius' lap so she could say goodbye to everyone, and Sirius rose to take Harry into a hug.

"I know, Harry," he said. "And I'm so grateful. I couldn't have done it without you... and thank you for..."

"No worries," Harry interrupted, smiling and looking searchingly at his godfather. Hermione watched the exchange while seeing the Weasleys through the Floo, but she had no idea what it was about.

After everyone had left, Hermione went to sit on the sofa. Sirius settled beside her, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her ear softly.

"I wished you were with us today," he told her.

"I do, too. But it was better this way, Sirius. And I think Harry really enjoyed the time with you. I haven't seen him so thrilled in a long time."

Sirius smirked mysteriously. "Oh, yes, we had fun today."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not entirely sure I want to know."

"Then you might not want to read the *Prophet* for the next few weeks."

Hermione gaped. "I thought the interview was to tell the truth, not play jokes!"

He shushed her gently, saying, "The interview was fine, I was very serious...the boring serious, I mean." She rolled her eyes, and he went on, "We just had some fun reintroducing me to society, that's all. We went to Hogsmeade for a bit, too."

Hermione suspected that meant certain people like Ollivander and Rosmerta had had the life scared out of them, and she snickered before containing it.

"When will the article be out?" she asked.

"Well, the reporter said he wanted to do some research on the Veil first, check for precedent and all that. I know he won't find anything if you didn't. So maybe a week?"

She nodded. "He won't find anything because there *isn't* anything. The Veil is annoyingly mysterious." She was still irritated that her research had yielded results so reluctantly.

"I'm sure it is, love," he soothed, kissing her neck and collarbone. But she wouldn't be distracted.

"Sirius, did something else happen today? Something for which you thanked Harry, before he left?"

He paused in his seduction before leaning back against the back of the sofa, head back. "Not much gets by you, eh?" he asked rhetorically.

"I just want to be sure everything is all right," she whispered.

He was quiet for a long time, tracing his fingers over the back of her hand. He sighed and began to speak. "I had a bit of an... episode. It was in the Three Broomsticks, and there were so many people, all talking and getting really close. And suddenly it was like I couldn't get a deep breath, the air smelled so sour and bitter, and the voices turned into this horrible hissing noise. I felt weak and inexplicably scared. Harry noticed right away that something wasn't right, and he took me outside. The fresh air helped, and in a few minutes I was fine, wondering if I'd imagined the whole thing. Stupid, I know."

Hermione was thinking quickly. It sounded like a panic attack, but the hissing? She shook her head. No, he was free of the Veil.

"I think you had a panic attack, Sirius. It makes sense even without you having gone beyond the Veil. Your experiences in Azkaban, and then being cooped up here for so long... it's no wonder you don't like crowds."

"I suppose," he answered, but he sounded sceptical. In a flash, his maudlin mood lifted, and he smiled. "I did have fun with Harry today. And with the Weasleys as well, though I think all is not well with Ron."

Hermione nodded. "I thought so as well. Maybe I should talk to him."

"I mentioned it to Harry, and he said he'd look into it."

Hermione was grateful. Sirius was much more observant than most people gave him credit for, even her at times. Thinking to take his mind off his rather awful experience at the Three Broomsticks, she climbed onto his lap, straddling him.

"Mmm," he murmured. "To what to I owe the pleasure?"

Hermione shivered at hearing Snape's obligatory greeting in Sirius' voice, but distracted herself by kissing his neck, nipping him sharply and feeling heat between her thighs at his groan.

"To whom, you mean. And you owe the pleasure to me, Sirius Black."

His hands trailed down her body to rest on her hips. "And that's a debt I have no problem paying in full."

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Hermione hadn't been so excited about a Saturday in a long time. It seemed as though all she ever did was work, and while she used to enjoy being busy all the time, it was hard when all she really wanted to do was spend time with Sirius.

She realized she was becoming pathetically sappy and made a mental note to do something about that.

But for the time being, she was going to enjoy it. Overanalyzing might be her forte, but she was out to prove to herself that she could take things in stride just as much as the next guy.

The next guy being Sirius, of course.

The man honestly didn't have a care in the world. One would think that spending one's twenties in prison, one's thirties either trapped in a house or floating in oblivion would make one a little cautious, a little wary.

But Sirius acted as though his life was perfectly normal, and it was enough to drive her barmy at times. His total nonchalance, while endearing, grated against her high-strung (his words) nature.

Of course, that didn't mean she could hide her smile when he'd snuck into the shower with her and showed her the exact opposite of nonchalance. But now Hermione was determined to just live a little, take things as they are, relax.

After she figured out what that ripping feeling was, and why the bond seemed to have dissolved, of course. She was only human, after all, and no one would be able to relax without knowing exactly what was happening inside them.

Except, of course, aforementioned "next guy."

Hermione really, really did not like keeping things from Sirius. The way they'd been living completely precluded that. It was impossible to keep a secret from one another because they were so close in proximity, but also because they'd become used to talking everything out in loving detail. Of course, this usually meant Hermione talked and Sirius distracted her, or Sirius talked and Hermione analyzed until Sirius grew bored and distracted her.

But this was something Sirius seemed unwilling to discuss with her. She wanted to know what the hell was going on with the bond. She believed the bond was more than just a connection due to the spells she'd performed. Hermione had the suspicion the Veil was actually behind the bond, that it had orchestrated it. She was beginning to believe the Veil was actually a sentient being, with desires and motivations.

And this made her question what it *wanted* from them.

Because at first, they were compelled to have sex. The compulsion was so strong that Sirius nearly died from it. So why, then, would the bond dissipate after the consummation? If the bond, or the Veil, got what it wanted, *what was it?* What did the Veil gain from their having sex? It didn't make any sense.

Hermione sipped her tea and thought back to what this was really about: keeping things from Sirius. Of course, under normal circumstances, she would never go behind his back, knowing his qualms. Or rather, going directly against his qualms. But she wasn't getting the answers she needed.

So she would go where answers were always somehow found.

Hermione hadn't meant to lie when she told Sirius she was going out. Avoiding the truth would be easier for both of them, and she was so tired of hearing vitriol against her former Potions professor. So she would save Sirius the angst and just leave him in the dark.

She said she was going to see Ginny. Easy enough; she knew Ginny always did her errands and visiting on Saturdays, so if Sirius went to see Harry, she wouldn't be there.

When Hermione Apparated on Hogwarts grounds, she took a few minutes to absorb the true enormity of the school. This building housed and educated nearly every single witch and wizard in England. It was an astonishing feat, something at which to be marvelled.

She decided to walk and marvel at the same time. She was, if nothing else, a multi-tasker.

A gnawing sense of guilt had taken root in her belly, and she could only convince herself to calm down by telling herself that Sirius honestly wouldn't ~~care~~; that he needed answers just as much as she did, and that she was doing them both a favour. What he didn't know couldn't possibly hurt him. And really, he acted like a child sometimes with this age-old animosity with Snape.

The wards admitted her and Headmistress McGonagall met her at the doors, opening one wide for Hermione's entrance.

"Miss Granger, what a surprise I received when the wards informed me of your arrival," said the older woman in her lilting accent. She looked a little older and slightly less pinched. The defeat of Voldemort had, of course, relaxed even the staunchest of dispositions.

"Headmistress, it's so nice to see you! You look well," Hermione said smiling. They were walking together through the hall, students taking notice of Hermione's rather casual Muggle clothing.

"As do you, I should say. Would you care for some tea? I have a meeting soon, but I could..."

"Oh, no, Professor McGonagall," Hermione softly interrupted. "I wouldn't want to hold you. I've actually come to see Professor Snape."

The Headmistress startled a bit, though she hid it well. "Why ever for, Hermione?"

Hermione saw no real danger in telling her the truth, or at least an abbreviated and censored version of it. "You've heard about the return of Sirius Black?"

"My goodness," the Headmistress exclaimed. "Was that true? There were so many witnesses, but I just couldn't believe..."

"It's very true," Hermione informed her seriously. "He is alive and well."

"Oh, Harry must be so thrilled. The poor boy, he'd lost so much." Hermione's eyes didn't linger on the shine in her companion's, but she sympathized.

"Harry is ecstatic to have Sirius back. And Sirius is just as happy to be back. But there are, as always in such situations, complications."

The older witch was quiet for a moment, before saying, "Nothing comes without a price, does it? And Severus will be able to help with these complications?"

Hermione nodded. They were nearing the dungeons, and the cold air wrapped around her like ribbons. "I really hope so."

"So do I, from what you've told me. Well, he is in his office now, but I suspect he'll see you regardless."

"I do hope so, with me showing up so unexpected. I know he dislikes my company still, but he really is brilliant."

"I should not say he dislikes your company, Hermione," McGonagall said with a twinkle to rival that of her predecessor. "In fact, he commends you highly to his students, in his typically roundabout, backhanded way. Your academic achievements are held over the heads of every Slytherin...I assume with the intent to break your record...but the praise speaks for itself."

Hermione absorbed this quietly. The approval of her former, impossible-to-please professor meant more to her than she'd realized. And it certainly made asking for his help easier.

"Well, that's unexpected," she said, carefully casual. "Well, I hope to see you again soon, Headmistress." They'd stopped in front of the dungeon office doors.

"I would like that. Best of luck and please, if you see Mr. Black, tell him to expect an owl from me. I should very much like to catch up."

"I'll be sure to do that."

McGonagall walked away, and Hermione waited until she was out of sight before knocking on the door.

"Enter," called an unmistakable voice.

She did so, seeing Snape seated at his desk as usual.

"Miss Granger, how utterly expected," he deadpanned, rising slightly in his chair in greeting. He gestured to the chair before his desk, seating himself only after she did.

She smiled expectantly, waiting for the familiar greeting. Unfortunately, her grin gave her away, because Snape waved at her impatiently.

"How can I help this time?"

Hermione schooled herself not to goggle at the blatantly helpful words and expectant tone of voice. Deciding those blessings could be counted on her own time, Hermione did what she knew Snape would appreciate and got right to the point.

"I think something has changed in the bond. No, I know something has. But I'm not entirely sure what, and..."

"And it makes you insane not knowing?" he accurately surmised.

She smiled self-deprecatingly and nodded.

"Tell me what has happened and I shall see how I can be of assistance, or more likely, what I can tell you to do to fix whatever it is you've broken now."

"Well, Sirius and I did what you told me last time..." Looking at him to make sure he knew what she was referring to and assured that he did by the dramatic roll of his eyes, she continued, "And afterward, there was a rather terrible and very unexpected *ripping* feeling. We both experienced it. It was painful, but more than that, it was uncomfortable to a very intense degree. As though something was *wrong*. And now, the bond seems to have... dissolved."

"Dissolved, you say?" Snape asked quietly.

"I think so. We don't need one another, though we haven't tested the extent to which that's true. I can spend an entire day at work without even a twinge, and he is unaffected as well."

Snape was silent a long time, first looking at her and then at the wall behind her. She could tell he was thinking, so she endured the quiet. She hadn't realized before coming exactly how much she was relying on him for an answer that was both easy and painless. She didn't exactly know what outcome she hoped for, but she placed an inordinate amount of faith in Snape to uncover it.

"I can only hypothesize that the bond has been satisfied; that your sacrifice was sufficient and the bond needs no more from either of you."

Now it was Hermione's turn to be silent. The bond wanted nothing more? But why did it want them to be together in the first place?

"So, that's just it? It's done? Why all the dramatics? What was the point?"

"I can not begin to guess at the intricate workings of an artefact older than wizardry itself. I can only assume that the forces at work have intentions we know not." Snape looked a little uncertain of his own words, and Hermione guessed that he disliked being in the dark as much as she did.

"Well, I suppose it's best this way, really. Being bound to another person for life could have been quite... difficult." She tried not to think about all the words she wanted to use instead of *difficult*.

"To be perfectly honest, I see no reason for the bond to have disappeared. Do you recall the main ingredient of the potion...the essence of pure azure?" At her nod, he continued. "It is a bonding agent. It should be a *permanent* bonding agent. Although the spell you performed was Dark Magic, I had seen similar bonding spells in the past. Most were used as a way to tie slave to master or army to leader, but they were bindings nonetheless. And those can *never* be broken except through death... or a horribly painful and nearly impossible ritual that causes ruptures in one's soul and kills as often as it cures."

"Have I bound Sirius to me like a slave?" Hermione quietly asked, aghast.

"I don't think so, though it might have been a good idea, Merlin knows the man needs a collar and leash." Hermione waved her hand at him to show him she was

unaffected by his spiteful commentary and to just get on with it. "I think your bond is mutual for a reason, though I confess to be ignorant as to what that reason might be."

Hermione sighed. For once she would leave Snape with no answers.

The Daily Prophet

Azkaban Escapee and Exonerated War Hero Back from the Dead!

Article by Jimothy Frankenhodge

This reporter was both honoured and thrilled to have been granted an interview by the notorious former prisoner Sirius Black and his godson, none other than Harry Potter.

Black wished to use the conduit to the people, our humble paper, to announce his return to the living and discuss his part in the Second Wizarding War.

...

Black claims to have almost no knowledge of where he has been these past five years, nor how he came back. In his words, "I expect my flavour wasn't enjoyed, so I was spat back. Good thing, too, because a couple people owed me money, and with interest, it was quite a good day."

In good humour and seemingly ecstatic to have his only living relative back, Harry Potter was the picture of poise. He regaled this reporter with stories of Black's reintroduction to society, which included sneaking up on people and attempting to induce heart attacks, and jokingly denying Black's existence, saying that people were imagining things and there was no one there. The two share a charming rapport, mischievous though they may be. Owls and missives flooded our offices with sightings and accounts of their first day in public, with many people outraged and many more amused at the antics of our hero and his godfather.

As I am sure our readers are aware, Sirius Black had appeared in public nearly a week ago. The reason for this belated report is the research that I have done in order to learn more about this phenomenon.

The more interesting thing I learned was that Sirius Black is, in fact, not the first person to return from the Veil. A witch by the name of Sofie Alensky went through the Veil five hundred and twenty two years ago, an accident that happened in the transporting of the Veil from its previous, unknown location, to its current home in the Ministry. She was gone nearly seventeen years before brought back by her husband Rolpho Alensky. She had not aged a day, like Sirius Black, and she, too, recalled nothing of her days in the Veil. If these names sound familiar, it is because three years after Sofie was returned, she and her husband became parents to Josef Alensky, the founder of the Magical Medicine Society and the Healer of more than eleven hundred strains of Wizarding viruses. His work in the medicinal field cured innumerable diseases and because of him, the Wizarding population has increased exponentially. He kept a meticulous journal, and it is through the surviving member of the Alensky family that this reporter was able to provide such extensive details.

Further research uncovered that the spell that was performed to bring back both Sofie Alensky and Sirius Black was Dark Magic. A bonding between Sofie and Rolpho was performed, with the help of a third party, their physician and family friend Dr. Jessop Manilla. Dr. Manilla played the part of what is called a Bonder, performing the rites and grounding the magic.

This information brings many questions to the fore. Who brought Sirius Black back? Why would he lie about having no idea of his return? Who was their Bonder? And who has gotten away with Dark Magic right under the nose of the Ministry?

Hermione folded the paper back into squares, calm exterior belied by trembling hands. Not only did someone have more information than she, they had more information about her than she had.

Why did the *Prophet* have to finally hire a reporter who could actually research?

Snape was going to be very displeased to learn that he was the Bonder for a relationship he wanted absolutely nothing to do with. And he must be the Bonder...no one else knew anything about her work until after Sirius had been brought back. But what exactly was the role of the Bonder?

And how could she find out what happened with the Alenskys?

And how long would it be until her role was exposed and she was tried by the Ministry?

And what was Sirius going to say about all this?

When the Floo sounded, Hermione suspected she would know the answer to her last question soon enough.

"Mione, love? Are you here?"

"In the kitchen!" she called, hating the shaky tenor of her voice. Sirius came through the doorway, smiling widely and looking much too innocent.

"Were you with Harry again?" she guessed. No one else could put that type of grin of his face.

"I was, indeed, I was. I won nearly twenty Galleons off the scamp, despite his attempts to cheat, the little bugger."

Hermione laughed, pushing the *Prophet* away. She knew Sirius would read it eventually, but she needed a few minutes...possibly days...to gather her thoughts on what she wanted to say.

A tapping was heard and Sirius left the room to deal with the owl making the racket. Hermione made tea for them both, hoping the day would bring no more strife until she was ready to deal with it.

When Sirius returned, he casually asked, "How was Ginny? Harry hadn't known you two were getting together today."

"Oh," Hermione answered not quite as casually. "It was rather last minute."

"And what did you ladies do today?" He poured himself a cup of tea, sweetening it lightly and smiling softly at her.

"Oh, you know. Girl stuff." Pouring her own tea, Hermione ordered herself to stop acting so guilty and meet Sirius' eyes.

"I never did take Snape for the type to enjoy girl stuff."

Oh, Shi...

"Snape?" she asked weakly, caught and too stubborn to admit it.

"McGonagall did say, in her owl, you were at Hogwarts to see him. Was he the whole purpose of your trip, or just one of the errands?" Sirius' voice was deceptively calm, and Hermione had the vision of a trailer park all too idyllic in the eye of a storm.

"Listen, I didn't tell you because I know you don't like him and I didn't feel like listening to you go on about how horrible he is." She was immediately defensive, all the while knowing that she wasn't handling things very well.

"How I feel about the prick is irrelevant. You didn't just *not tell* me, you *lied*. Why, Hermione? Why lie unless there is more going on than you're telling me?"

"What exactly are you saying? I was only there to get more information on the bond!"

"I'm saying, Hermione, that I think you're fucking Snape. I'm saying, *Hermione*, that I think you need to *leave*."

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

"Leave?"

Hermione was looking at Sirius aghast, which pissed him off to no end because ~~she~~ *he* was the one who should be aghast. She had no right to look so hurt when she *died* to him.

If there was anything that mad Sirius boil over with rage it was liars. Something he'd never thought he'd accuse Hermione Granger of being. As far as he'd known, she was the quintessential Gryffindor, honest to the point of stupidity. Rather like him.

"Yes. You need to leave." He wanted to tell her how he could barely look at her right now, how he felt she'd betrayed him in more ways than he could really recognize.

And with *Snape*. The one man who Sirius had such an innate dislike for it felt as though it was ingrained in his very bones. The one who was always right, the one who got away with everything. With killing Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake! And exonerated by Sirius' own godson. It was unbelievable!

Severus Snape. The man who was a match for Hermione in so many ways.

Hermione took a deep breath in front of him, and he nearly exploded. She needed to stop her deep breathing and get away before he did something really stupid. He felt out of control. His blood was hot and sluggish, there was ringing in his ears, his sight was greyed and fraying.

He just needed to be alone.

Sirius fixed Hermione with a glare, hoping she would get the point and just get out. He would leave, if he could. Well, he could. Maybe he should leave. After all, she really was here first.

But this was *his* home!

"Argh!" he screamed, running his hands brutally through his hair, feeling strands tug and give at his insistent yanking. Hermione was standing still, looking at him with those huge fucking eyes, looking as though he'd eviscerated her rather than having politely asked her to leave.

He stormed past her, careful not to touch her, careful not even to breathe the air around her. He closed himself in his old room, the room he hadn't stayed in since he'd begun sleeping with Hermione. It felt familiar.

He still didn't hear her moving.

"Leave!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, a fierce shriek that sounded nothing like his normal self. Finally footsteps sounded, and he heard her walk to her room. Their room. Her room.

He could hear her packing; she was making no effort to be quiet. He thought he might have heard a sob or two, but that didn't make any sense since she was the disloyal one. He was the one who had a right to be hurt, to be sad, to be destroyed. Not her.

A few moments later, the front door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place slammed, and Sirius exhaled sharply. Nothing made any sense.

He had honestly believed she'd loved him.

When Hermione finally found Godric's Hollow, she was completely dehydrated. She had no more tears, only a deep burning anger and an even deeper sorrow.

She'd only been to Harry's home a few times, and it was almost always by Floo. But she'd needed the time to calm down, so she'd walked a while before Apparating. She'd wanted to think things through but she found that she became quickly worked up and unable to rationally analyze the situation. So instead, she just wandered aimlessly, her mind strangely blank. She wasn't able to stop the tears, but at least she didn't have to think about what caused them.

She knocked on the door of the completely renovated home.

Ginny answered, looking surprised that anyone was there, let alone a very dishevelled and obviously distraught Hermione.

"What's wrong?" she immediately demanded.

Hermione only entered the house, sitting gracelessly on the sofa and sighing. She found it difficult to look at Ginny, and she found herself thankful that Harry didn't appear

to be home, because that soft, searching look he did would have been her undoing.

Ginny took the seat beside her, immediately folding her into a hug.

"Tell me what's happening, please," Ginny whispered, obviously worried.

"We had a fight," Hermione said softly. She snorted a little. "Just a fight, nothing big."

"I've never seen you cry over something that wasn't big, Hermione! You don't have to be strong all the time, you know."

Hermione smiled. "I do know that. It really isn't anything. I lied to Sirius when I should have told the truth, and he got angry when he should have heard me out. It was a silly fight."

Ginny was rubbing Hermione's back, but the contact only irritated her skin, so she sat away from the embrace. "Could I have some tea, Ginny?"

The redhead nodded slowly, eyes probing Hermione's. "Of course. I'll be right back."

Once Hermione was alone, she found it difficult to breathe. Her lungs felt empty even after she'd taken a huge breath, as though the air was doing nothing to satisfy her most basic need. She tried not to panic, tried not to swallow air in her desperate attempt to bring oxygen into her body.

When Ginny entered the room again, Hermione gasped, gulping air as if she'd been underwater. She could breathe again, but she felt lightheaded. And suddenly, she was crying again.

"I just want to go home," she whispered as Ginny bit her lip and tried to make Hermione's tea the way she liked it. But Ginny didn't know that Hermione's taste had changed, that now she took her tea more like Sirius did, a little sweeter but with less milk.

She drank the old Hermione's tea anyway, forcing a smile for her friend. The tea tasted bitter and just wrong, just like everything she'd wanted to leave behind, like an old life that no longer fit her. Sirius made her tea perfectly. It hadn't started out perfect, but she hadn't bothered correcting his technique until eventually, she grew to enjoy the new, foreign taste until it wasn't foreign at all, but familiar and desired.

But now Sirius wasn't there.

Three days.

Three long, empty, ugly days had passed since Sirius had told her to leave. Harry had, of course, been furious with his godfather, but she suspected he was almost as angry with her. He'd told her he didn't believe she should have kept the truth from Sirius. He was of the opinion that lying only makes the actions seem worse than they really are.

Obviously he was right, since Sirius thought she'd *slept* with Snape when all she'd really done was ask for his help. Again. And the accusation hurt all the more because Sirius was the *only* man she'd ever been with. That he could accuse her of something like that made her blood boil and her heart break.

Despite being metaphorically kicked out on her arse, Hermione spent most of the time thinking about that damn *Daily Prophet* article. Had Sirius read it by now? What would he think about not being the first person to come back from beyond the Veil? Or about Snape being the Bonder?

Hermione wondered if Sofie and Rolpho Alensky had any living descendents. It might be helpful to speak to them and find out exactly what had happened. Had Sofie and her husband experienced the bond? The ripping feeling? The dreams?

She'd shown the *Prophet* article to Harry and Ginny, and they'd been just as shocked as she had, offering nothing but support. When she'd asked Harry if Sirius had mentioned it, she'd been surprised to learn that Sirius had not allowed Harry to come over the past few days. And when Harry had tried to barge through the Floo, Sirius had barricaded himself in his old bedroom immediately, not even answering his godson's pleas to talk.

Hermione needed to do *something* since it was becoming obvious that Sirius didn't want her back and wasn't planning on hearing her out. But that didn't negate the responsibility she had to him. After all, she'd brought him back. He was hers now.

Maybe... maybe instead of doing all the research herself, she could just go to the person who obviously had some answers.

A certain Jimothy Frankenhodge.

"Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Frankenhodge."

Hermione shook the young reporter's hand before taking a seat across from him. His home was humble but very tidy, and Hermione sat in a well-loved armchair, smiling gently in that new forced way of hers. She couldn't make her muscles move as they'd used to, and every smile was a concentrated effort of pulling here and loosing there. She felt like a puppet.

"No, thank *you*, Ms. Granger. And please, call me Jim." His smile was winsome, not forced at all. He was younger than she'd expected, not much older than herself. His sandy blond hair might have given Harry's a run for its money, it was so messy and wild. But he was continually flattening it with his hand or tugging it with ink stained fingertips until it was clear that his hair sported blackened strands from the actions. His light brown eyes were warm but highly intelligent, and Hermione knew from their brief owl exchange that the man was articulate and clever.

Hermione did not offer him the informality of referring to her by her first name, and the lack of cordiality was not lost on Frankenhodge.

"As I said in my owl, I was hoping you could provide me with some information on the Alenskys."

Frankenhodge nodded slowly, tapping a black fingertip against his chin and anointing it with a smudge of ink. "Why do you want to know?"

Hermione grimaced, though she meant it to be a smile. "I was the one who brought Sirius Black back from the Veil."

She watched with detached amusement as the reporter's eyes widened almost comically. He took a noisy breath through his nose and eyed her unabashedly. "Is that so," he said, phrasing it so it wasn't a question. "And can you prove this?"

Hermione shrugged. "Do I need to? No one else will come forward and admit to doing it. You'll have the whole story, an exclusive. But the longer you wait, the less interested the public will be. Fascination with Sirius is at a peak right now, but I'm sure you know how fickle the public can be. In a few weeks, no one will remember your article if you don't keep the story fresh in their minds."

He seemed to consider her words. "You are right about that, Ms. Granger. You might have made a good reporter, you know."

"So I've been told," she rejoined. "However, I have a healthy disregard for the profession. Here is my offer: you tell me everything you know...everything you *didn't* write up in your article...about the Veil and the Alenskys, and I'll give you your exclusive. My only condition is that I read the article before it gets published, and that you not disturb

Sirius Black. I am the only one you can talk to about this."

"What makes you think I know more than I printed?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Everyone keeps a couple of cards close to their chest. Especially reporters."

"Hmm," he murmured, leaning back and eyeing her intently. Suddenly, his face fairly exploded into a smile. "You have a deal, Ms. Granger. But I have conditions of my own."

She bristled. "And they are?"

"First, I want two exclusives. The first, and then a follow-up interview. Just you, unless Mr. Black would like to join you, of course. Secondly, if you use this information for anything, I want full credit. If you intend to write a book or anything like that, you will annotate me. Lastly, I want to come with you to meet the Alensky heir. Do I presume, or am I correct in guessing your intention?"

"I agree to your first two conditions. But why would you want to come with me? It is simply for my own interest, nothing more."

He smiled a shark's smile, but his eyes were still soft. "I know who you are, Hermione Granger. Your story is not unknown. I also know that you and Sirius Black live together. I'd guessed that you were the one to bring him back, and I'm pleased to see I was correct. You were right about reporters keeping information to themselves. We are both lucky that I withheld that morsel, or we would have less to bargain about. I'll be coming with you because I want to know what you know."

Hermione was quiet for a long time. Frankenhodge was obviously an intelligent man, unfortunately for her. She wouldn't be able to convince him to drop his last condition. But she needed to know that he wouldn't print the more... intimate parts of the bond.

"I agree to your final stipulation with one more of my own." When he gestured for her to continue, she said, "There are aspects of the story you know nothing about. I am not willing to expose every part of my life or Sirius'. I need veto power over your final article draft. I won't restrict anything other than the parts that are unnecessary to the larger picture, or are personally intimate and could be embarrassing to our families. And you can't blackmail me with this information."

Frankenhodge thought for a long time. "Okay, Ms. Granger. I trust you. Maybe I'm a fool for doing so, but I do. I don't think you'll go back on your word to allow to me to print the important parts of the story. But I will need a Wizard's Oath from you. It's just good business."

Hermione agreed and asked for one in return. The soft swirl of magic surrounded her with cool tendrils, and the deal was done.

"Excellent," said Frankenhodge. "When shall we go?"

"When are you available?" Hermione knew she could ask for the next day off from work. She'd been rather useless over the past couple days anyway, and she knew her team would be relieved to hear she'd taken some time to herself.

"To do my job? Always." He smiled at her, and she had the feeling he truly enjoyed his work. Good for him.

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow."

Sirius had taken to pacing from room to room. There was little else to do, though he knew what he *wanted* to do.

Kill Severus Snape.

But as angry and hurt as he was, he maintained rationality. Mostly. If he could *guarantee* he wouldn't be caught, he might actually do it. But not even the pleasure of seeing Snape devoid of life and snark was worth going back to Azkaban.

Not to mention if he killed the bastard, Hermione would hate him forever.

Growling, Sirius stomped out of the kitchen. Obviously it was one of the rooms that made him miss the chit. The sitting room and upstairs bathroom also had that effect. It was highly annoying. He shouldn't care if Hermione hated him, because she obviously didn't care about him as he did her.

And the funny part? She'd actually had the gall to tell him she didn't stand for cheaters. That day he'd teased her about the witches who would want him after he'd "come back from the dead." What nerve. And now she was gallivanting about with another man? Hypocrite.

Sirius felt like his entire body was on fire. He'd never felt so conflicted. He was usually easygoing to an absurd degree. Like with this whole bond. He'd obeyed it pretty much without compunction. It was easy because what it wanted him to do was something he also wanted to do. Be with Hermione? It was not exactly a brainteaser. She was beautiful, smart, witty, sexy....

"Ugh!" he cried out. Apparently the dining room was also unsafe.

Sirius went to bed.

Hermione had allowed Harry to put her to bed. He'd sat by the bedside and spoken softly to her in that Harry voice that made her feel so safe. Ginny had sat on the other side of the bed, tracing her hair and telling her everything was going to be okay. It felt so nice to be taken care of. And yet, it felt all wrong.

She'd wanted to pace from room to room, but they'd stopped her. When they'd forced her to sit, she'd felt restless, and she hadn't been able to stop her legs from bouncing. Finally, she'd become unaccountably tired and allowed Harry to practically carry her up the stairs.

Now she was pretending to be asleep as Harry and Ginny whispered over her still form. They were worried about her. They were angry at Sirius. They didn't understand.

Neither did she.

Finally, the pair left her, Ginny pressing a soft kiss to her brow before leaving, shutting the door softly. Hermione pressed her face into the pillow to stifle a sob, and she wished she was with Sirius. She'd rather be fighting and together than sad and alone. At least if she was there, she could explain....

But the proper thing to do would be to go back when she had a reason. That way, he couldn't kick her out; he'd have to hear what she had to say first.

So she'd go see the Alensky heir and gather as much knowledge as possible. Armed with that, she would go to Sirius and force him to listen to her. She would explain about Snape, what little there was to explain, and everything would be fine.

As Hermione's overworked and overwrought brain finally began to shut down for the night, she had the final thought that she was grateful that at least the bond between them was gone, because being away from Sirius was torture enough on its own.

Everything was black.

She hated the darkness. It always felt like it was eating her alive. She couldn't see her hands in front of her face, making her wonder if she had hands at all. Maybe she wasn't even human. Maybe she was nothing.

There was nothing in the darkness. Nothing for years. She closed her eyes. They were useless anyway.

A slight change in the atmosphere brought her attention to her surroundings. A shift in energy. Another form. Another non-form. Something like her. Whatever it was, she could see herself in it. It was beautiful. It wanted it, it needed her. They were meant to be together. If they were together... something... if they....

It was gone.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

The days and nights were blending together so that the only differentiation he had for the passing of time was exactly how tired he was. He didn't sleep at night; he didn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time, and what little sleep he succumbed to was listless and disturbed.

He felt sick. Ah, if only it were that simple. He felt *bloody horrible*. His joints felt swollen and jammed so that every movement was an exercise in brutal force. His body didn't want to do what he told it to. His head was more than aching...it was *exploding*. The simplest of thoughts sent him into a confused frenzy, so much that making food to satisfy his hunger was a near-futile feat.

But that was nothing compared to his *other* hunger.

Sirius' body burned, *yearned*, for touch. It was unlike anything the bond had ever forced upon him. It was worse, but also better in a way. The intensity of it, the sheer demand, was much stronger right now. But the *object* of it was less specific.

In other words, he needed to get laid. But he *didn't* need Hermione.

Before, when the bond had forced its will upon him, Sirius' hunger had burned in an effigy of Hermione. His need was Hermione-shaped. Now, it was more general, if still all-encompassing.

Which was good, really. Because there was no way he could ask Hermione to get him off right now. Not that she'd entertain the notion for even a moment, after the way he'd treated her. He didn't really regret what he'd said, more the manner in which he'd said it. He did really care for the girl. After all, she'd saved his life, made it possible to be with his godson again. She'd sacrificed a lot for him, probably more than he'd ever know. He knew that.

But when he thought about that smarmy, greasy, *fucking arsehole* touching his love... his lover... it just made him so furious. Whenever his thoughts landed on Snape, it was as though his brain short-circuited. A rage unlike any he'd ever known roiled within him, turning thoughts of caring and respect toward Hermione into disgust and betrayal.

It was strange. He could think back to only days before their fight and remember her sweet laugh, her soft eyes, her enticing curves, and feel no anger. But the very second he thought about that owl from McGonagall mentioning Hermione's visit to Hogwarts and their resident Potions prick, his veins pounded with hate.

It was hideous. He felt like two different people.

He needed to get fucking *drunk*.

Hermione was having the nicest dream.

Sirius... on his knees in front of her. That was always a good thing. But he was apologizing. And he was really ~~sorry~~ *sorry*. She could feel it through some connection between the two, allowing her to absorb his emotions as though they were her own, but somehow separate.

And she forgave him, after a proper period of grovelling had passed. She was hurt by his actions, but so was he. And she really cared about him.

And then they were kissing. It was hard, at first, because she didn't want to submit too quickly, to give in, to surrender. But when she parted her lips to admit his tongue, she was flooded with the irrefutable knowledge that he loved her.

Suddenly, dream-Hermione was gasping as real-Hermione fought for breath.

Panting, she yanked the covers off of her sweat-slicked form, planting her feet firmly on the ground beside the bed and dropping her face into her hands.

Why, she despaired, why would her dream tease her so? It had felt so nice to be loved for that nanosecond, and now she was resigned to the heart-rending knowledge that Sirius didn't respect her, thought her a whore and a cheat. Even though she'd given him *everything* of herself. She'd never even *thought* about being with another man since she'd brought Sirius back, and certainly not Snape. The man was acrimonious at the best of times, and though she was finally able to see past his barriers, he was only a professor to her. She respected him and his opinion, but she couldn't even call him a friend. The best way to describe it would be colleagues. Even thinking of Snape like that made her feel awkward.

Sirius was a real jerk.

As Hermione angrily dressed after a quick and thankless shower, she wished she knew better words to describe his total *jerkiness*.

After preparing her list of questions for the last remaining Alensky, Hermione Apparated to the *Daily Prophet* office to meet Frankenhodge.

He was waiting for her, all business. She noticed that his hair was a little more in control today, but his unfortunate habit of tugging on the strands with inky fingers had caused what looked to be a permanent dyeing of the tips.

"Mr. Frankenhodge," Hermione cordially greeted him, shaking his hand. She thought him to be very shrewd, an interesting character with a job unworthy of him. He would do better as a researcher for some benevolent company or school, rather than a starfish in a shark's cage.

His eyes narrowed as if he'd heard her analogy, but he said, "Please, Mr. Frankenhodge was my father. Call me Jimothy."

She nodded, walking with him to the nearest Apparition point. She had no intention on being on a first name basis with a reporter, especially for the *Prophet*, and she likewise did not intend to offer him the casual use of her first name.

"Side-along?" he suggested, offering his arm. She didn't know the location, so she accepted, bracing herself against the squeezing disorientation.

They appeared in front of a Victorian style house, obviously well tended and loved. It was a fresh white with dark blue shutters and door. It was obviously a Wizarding home, judging by the tingling of the wards as the unlikely pair passed through.

Frankenhodge had asked Renworth Alensky if he would mind their stopping by, so the man was waiting on the front porch. He was rather tall, towering over Frankenhodge who was a few inches taller than herself. He was quite slender with long, light brown hair tied back with a simple black ribbon. He was dressed in casual robes of a dark, rich brown that set off his deep chocolate eyes. Hermione had the impression that he was a very down to earth man, and his tanned skin and colouring reinforced that idea.

Renworth Alensky smiled broadly, extending his hand to Hermione as they approached. "You must be Miss Granger! I've read so much about you, mostly from the likes of this one," he said, nodding with slight deprecation toward Frankenhodge.

"Don't believe everything you read," Hermione murmured, smiling before casting a pointed look at the reporter.

"Hey," he cried, holding up his hands in mock supplication. "I'm not all that bad!"

"Of course not," Hermione said patronizingly, sharing a smile with the owner of the house they were being ushered into. She softened her retort with a genuine smile for Frankenhodge as well, since he was, after all, helping her. And he wasn't the Skeeter type at all, from what she could tell. Though his article was slightly inflammatory and not *completely* fact-based, she suspected that was more the preferences of the current editor than an indication of his own journalistic integrity.

"Tea?" Renworth offered once they were all sitting around a deceptively comfortable parlour. Hermione and Frankenhodge both nodded, and a rather spry house elf served them. Schooling her features of disdain, Hermione thanked the elf graciously and tried not to sneer at Renworth.

"So," said the slave owner, "shall we get right to it? I hear you have some questions regarding my ancestor, Rolpho."

Hermione placed her tea on the table, taking up her purse and withdrawing her notebook with the questions. "Actually, it's Sofie I'm mostly interested in. Or rather, their marriage."

"Go on," said Renworth congenially. He looked amused at Hermione's notebook, as did Frankenhodge, who had a Quick Notes Quill poised for action...after he'd asked permission, of course.

"What can you tell me about Sofie's return from beyond the Veil?"

"What do you want to know, exactly? I don't have very many details, mostly from what I learned from her son's journals. Josef was a meticulous note taker, most likely thanks to his profession."

"Do you still have his journals?" Hermione asked excitedly. That would be much more helpful than asking questions to which Renworth might not have the answers. And it would provide impressions from the time, which might have been lost from so many years between tellings.

"I do," Renworth said slowly. "But I'd rather not just hand them out. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Hermione said. "But if I made copies? Or perhaps if I read them in your company? I know this is asking a lot, Mr. Alensky, but I hope you can appreciate my position. You see, my... friend, Sirius Black, has returned from beyond the Veil, and we are experiencing a number of... difficulties."

She had no problem divulging the problems to Renworth, who seemed genuine and trustworthy, despite having a house elf, but she just didn't trust Frankenhodge to not run the article without her express consent and with more details than she felt comfortable with.

"I read about Black's return," Renworth mused, looking at her carefully before fixing a scrutinizing eye on Frankenhodge. "However, I am not comfortable with anyone knowing the exact contents of the journal."

Hermione sighed softly. She understood that it was Renworth's decision, but she felt at a loss. "Well, do you mind if I still ask a couple questions?" she asked hopefully.

"Not at all," Renworth said, gesturing for her to continue.

"Thank you." She thought about her first question. "How did Rolpho know how to bring Sofie back? I found the spell in an old book, but it could not have been more than a couple hundred years old and therefore didn't exist for him to have seen."

"True," Renworth agreed, eyes on the Quick Notes Quill jotting down every word while Frankenhodge sat transfixed. "But it might not have been the first transcription of the spell. That information is not known to me."

Hermione nodded. That had been mostly for her own curiosity. "How did Sofie react to being brought back? Do you know if they faced any major problems? Um, maybe regarding their Bonder?"

Renworth shook his head. "From what I know, Dr. Manilla, their Bonder, was an old family friend. He'd been very close with my relatives for nearly their entire lives. There were no documented comments on whether there were issues with their Bonder. Most of the knowledge we have on the concept of a Bonder comes from their very case. It's rather an invented term for Dr. Manilla's invaluable position in bringing Sofie back and his further relationship with Sofie and Rolpho. I don't know if you and Sirius would have had a Bonder, or if you'd needed one."

"When you say 'relationship'..."

"Platonic," Renworth assured. "They are remained very good friends until they died. Manilla helped Rolpho deal with his fears of suddenly being too old for Sofie...after all, seventeen years had passed. And he also helped Sofie cope with coming back into a world that had changed so drastically, and into a life that had moved on without her. I remember reading that she had a lot of difficulty with that: forgetting that certain people had died, or that family members were adults instead of children. She would become confused and angry, even, when she realized everyone had moved on except her. I imagine it must have been very difficult to come back into a relationship where the other person had grieved and moved on from your loss. I do remember hearing, however, that once they had Josef, her episodes dwindled and disappeared. I think it's possible that having a child centred her and gave her something to anchor herself to."

Hermione was quiet for a long time. There was a lot of information here, and she didn't want to overlook something that might be of importance. She scribbled notes quickly, thinking all the while that it would be so nice to believe that Sirius was being influenced by his frustration over his return, rather than a genuine belief that she was unfaithful to him. Either way, she was still devastated by his accusations. Even if the Veil was to blame, he'd struck her in the place she was most vulnerable to him.

Hermione suddenly felt an aching sadness. She missed Sirius. She wanted to be home with him, in their bed, in his arms. She would kick his arse first, of course. She only wished she knew how he felt.

She was suddenly very weary. She could always come back if she had more questions, after all. "Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Alensky. You've been a great help."

Frankenhodge looked shocked that she planned on leaving so early, but Renworth only smiled sympathetically at her. The man seemed to be very intuitive and empathetic, for which she was grateful.

"I'd love to do an article on the longstanding results of the work of Josef Alensky, if you'd allow me to interview you on another occasion," Frankenhodge suggested, standing and packing up his quill and papers. Hermione did the same.

"Ah, the miracle child. Of course. I follow your work, Mr. Frankenhodge. I know you are an intrepid and veracious reporter. I would be happy to give you your interview."

Frankenhodge absolutely beamed, and Hermione had to smile. "Miracle child?" she queried.

"Yes," Renworth said, walking them slowly to the front door. "From what I read, Dr. Manilla had been absolutely certain that Sofie was infertile. She and Rolpho had been married for years with no results, and Manilla had given her every treatment under the sun, many of which he had invented. But a few years after her return, she got pregnant and had Josef. It baffled Manilla, especially since she could have had many more children, had they wanted to. Her infertility had seemingly cured itself."

"Interesting," Hermione murmured, thinking hard but finding no underlying importance to this very curious fact. It was a long time ago; it was possible their capabilities for diagnosing such issues were merely faulty or insufficient.

"Very," Renworth agreed, imbuing the word with more meaning than Hermione felt capable to decipher.

She shook his hand warmly before Apparating directly to Godric's Hollow without a word to Frankenhodge.

When Hermione approached Harry's front door, she could hear, even through the barrier, the low, vibrato tones of her former Potions professor. She sighed wearily before reaching for the knob. She was not in the mood to deal with Snape's brutal mannerisms.

She was surprised to see him and Harry in deep conversation on the sofa. It hadn't occurred to her that the two would actually be in touch, but it made sense. It wouldn't be the first time she'd recognized the changes war made in people.

"Hermione," Harry said softly, "have a seat."

She entered the room guardedly, unable to shake the sensation that some sort of intervention was about to begin.

"Potter has told me that Black..." Snape trailed off, looking, for once, at a loss. He continued, stiltedly, "...has acted uncouthly. I am not surprised. I am also not certain how I am supposed to be of assistance, but your friend insisted I speak with him."

"Harry," she said lowly, "you don't actually believe Sirius' accusation, do you? I swear to Merlin..."

"No!" Harry exclaimed. "Listen, I know Sirius has been a little out of it since his return. I first saw it quite some time ago with his episode at the Three Broomsticks where he nearly fainted, and now this... I don't think everything's as back to normal as he'd like us to think. And then I saw the article in the *Prophet*, and while I still think they are utter trash, I've heard good things about that reporter. Anyway, I knew Snape was the Bonder because I know he's been helping you. And I... I just didn't know what else to do, 'Mione. I want to help. I want you both to be happy."

"I really don't see how I fit into this lover's spat," Snape intoned, looking bored and possibly a little angry.

"Neither do I," Hermione agreed. "Harry?"

Harry slumped against the sofa, looking defeated. "I don't know, either. I thought one of you might have some ideas."

Hermione sighed with the weariness of a lone traveller. "Thank you for trying, Harry. I think this is something Sirius will need to work out on his own. Whether the Veil made him do it, or his comments were the result of jealous male idiocy, I don't see myself forgetting them anytime soon. I want him back, I won't lie about that. But he has to want it first." She drew a fortifying breath before continuing. "I'm going to bed. I've had a trying day and I'm just not up to dealing with anything right now. And I have to work in the morning."

Snape nodded curtly at her, rising as well. "If you intend to demand my company again, Potter, I suggest that you have at least an inkling of an idea of what I'm to do."

Harry looked properly chagrined. He saw Snape to the Floo before returning to walk with Hermione up the stairs. He stayed in the doorway, looking away while she undressed and crawled beneath the sheets.

"I was just trying to help," he said softly, closing his eyes and looking incredibly tired.

"I'm not upset with you, Harry. Not at all. I'm grateful for your help, yours and Ginny's. I know it hurts you when you aren't able to do anything. But I really do think this is something Sirius will have to face before we can think about moving on."

"He really cares about you, you know. I think he's just confused, or scared, or something."

"I don't doubt that you're right," Hermione said, yawning and clutching a pillow against her chest, unconsciously moulding it into a Sirius-shaped mound. "But he needs to learn to be rational when he's confused and scared, and not lash out at those who...those who want to help."

"When's the last time Sirius ever did anything rationally?" Harry tried to joke, wincing after the words left his mouth.

"Well, now would be a good time to start, wouldn't it?"

Harry agreed. Hermione succumbed to sleep, feeling so dizzy and nauseous it was as though she'd drunk an entire bottle of Ogden's.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

"Go away," Sirius moaned, pushing at the obnoxiously warm body currently attempting to crawl up him like a ladder.

"Aw, honey, I told you I could show you a good time. You don't really want me to go, do you?"

Everything was blurry and fading in and out of focus. Sirius thought he was *probably* at number twelve, he was *probably* the drunkest he'd ever been, and he was *definitely* being accosted by a small, aggressive brunette with hair too perfectly coiffed to belong to the one he really wanted.

"I really, really want you to go," Sirius slurred, pushing again at the leeching form.

"But Siri," the woman whined, trying to place a kiss on his lips, which he thankfully avoided with a rather skilled swivel of his head. "You *asked* me to come home with you!"

"No," he said, trying to get to his feet from what seemed to be the couch. "No, I wanted her to come home, not you! I don't even know you! Why aren't you leaving?"

"Fine! I will leave, and you'll be sorry, you prat. You'd have been lucky to fuck me, and now you can just fuck yourself!"

He'd never been so grateful to hear a door slam in his entire life.

Sirius allowed himself to fall back onto the sofa, now that he was no longer in danger from cloying barflies. Hermione was going to be *spissed*. Even though he suspected the woman had more followed him home than he'd brought her there, he knew Hermione would not appreciate that at all.

Not after everything else he'd done.

And there he was, accusing *her* of sleeping around...Hermione, the perfect Gryffindor, the perfect girlfriend. The perfect woman. And he'd done so *wrong* by her. Twice, now.

It had been nearly a week since she'd left. *Since you kicked her out, you mean*, chimed in his very unhelpful brain.

"I only wanted her to myself! What's wrong with that?" he asked the room at large. "Nothing, that's what! A man should be allowed to be selfish once in a while! And haven't I spent seventeen years of my life locked away one way or another? Shouldn't I get just one thing that's supposed to be all mine?"

Sirius was pleased that he sounded so entirely reasonable, even when drunk beyond all comprehension. He certainly didn't think it was too much to ask to have Hermione to himself. Snape didn't deserve her. Hell, Sirius knew *he* didn't deserve her, but that didn't stop him from wanting her.

He groaned piteously as Ogden's finest threatened to reintroduce itself. When he suddenly heard the front door open, he pretended it was Hermione coming in from work. She'd be wearing silk, because she always Apparated when she wore silk. The Floo ruined too many of her good shirts, she'd said, and she had so few nice things.

Sirius wanted to give Hermione nice things.

"I thought I told you to get *out*, you bloody harpy!" he cried, realizing it was far more likely to be that annoying brunette than Hermione.

"Honestly, Black. Can't you behave like a normal human for two days in a row? You're absolutely disgraceful."

Ah, just the voice he wanted to make shriek in pain and beg for mercy.

"Shut your stupid mouth, Snape." Yes, that was very cutting.

"You are going to listen to what I have to say, and then we are going to pretend this discussion never happened. I do not want any contact with you after this day. And do not believe for a moment that I am here for any reason other than Miss Granger."

"Well, she's not here! But you already knew that, didn't you?" Sirius accused.

"Of course I knew that, you great fool. I came to speak to you, not her. But I came here *for* her. I can't expect you to understand the nuances of that sentence, so let's just get this over with, shall we?"

Snape strode into the room as if he owned it and took a seat in an armchair by the fire. Sirius remained reclining on the sofa, half out of comfort, half because sitting up straight was a feat of which he was currently incapable.

"What on Earth are you doing here?" Sirius belatedly demanded.

"I'm here to tell you you've been a complete and utter ass, and if you want to keep the only good thing that's ever happened to you, you'll do as I say."

Sirius groaned. Even the harpy was better than this. "And what pearls of wisdom do you have to bestow upon me this evening, Snape?"

Rolling his eyes, the Potions master stared at Sirius as though a simple glare could convey his lecture. *If only*, Sirius wished.

"Potter told me that you believe Hermione and I are having some sort of illicit affair. Do you honestly think that?"

Sirius shrugged. He didn't, not anymore. But either way, he looked like a fool, which, of course, he knew himself to be. "I didn't know what to think. I was confused, okay?"

"No, Black, it's not 'okay' to accuse the woman you love of cheating on you. Especially, you cur, when that woman has *only ever* been intimate with *you*. How disgusting can you be without turning in a maggot before my very eyes?"

"Couldn't you, oh, I don't know, continue this fascinating lecture with less sarcasm? I'm finding it hard to keep up," Sirius drawled. His brain ignored the fact Snape knew he loved Hermione. He wasn't ready to deal with that.

"That does not surprise me in the least. Hermione has come to me on several occasions for my *help*. Nothing more. She has never given me the impression that she was unhappy with you, though Merlin knows that concept is incomprehensible to me. She has never breached the professional barrier between us, and believe me, Black, I

have been looking for it." Snape looked away for a moment, and Sirius believed he'd never seen the man look anything akin to vulnerable before this moment. He wanted to jump on it and couldn't tell why he didn't.

"I wanted to be the one to help her," Sirius confessed, hoping to Merlin it was the Ogden's talking and not some deep-seated need to expose himself to barbs from Snape.

"And, in your way, I suppose you have. But that is not the relationship you share with her. *She* seems to be the one helping *you*, while I seem to be the one helping *her*. Trust me, Black; the revelation in the *Prophet* was just as shocking to me as it must have been to you."

Sirius' addled mind was, indeed, having trouble keeping up and not just thanks to Snape's condescending tone.

"What article?"

Snape looked incredulous, but Sirius didn't think it would make sense to gloat at having finally shocked the man into a reaction.

"I suggest you try to find the paper from about eight days ago. You may find it enlightening. In the meantime, I suggest you put your insignificant grey matter to good use and figure out how to deserve Hermione's forgiveness. She cares deeply for you, whether you see it or not."

"I care about her, too. I just... get scared sometimes. I don't know why I'm telling you this," Sirius grouched, looking put out.

"I don't either, but I suspect you need someone to talk to. You have, admittedly, been through a great ordeal, both with Azkaban and now with the Veil. You cannot expect to have recovered immediately from such a physical and mental shock. As much as it may seem impossible, you have pushed yourself too hard. I also suggest you refrain from inviting any more... unsavoury characters in what has been Hermione's home for years. She may be an understanding woman, but her forgiveness knows bounds."

"I didn't want that woman here!"

Snape smirked, making Sirius feel more at ease than the other man's calm suggestions had. "I know. She took great pleasure in telling me and everyone on the street who cared to hear exactly how... unable... you were to keep her company."

Sirius groaned, but none of that mattered. His world was turning upside down. He was turning down sexual advances and putting stock in Snape's advice. But even the shock of those developments was nothing compared to his raging regret and sorrow over losing Hermione.

But for the first time since she'd left, Sirius knew something for certain. He'd be getting her back.

Snape seemed to see the determination on his features, because he nodded curtly and stood up. On his way to the door, he paused and turned.

"You may be in the habit of having people risk their lives to save yours, but for the rest of us, that is very rare. You should cherish it as she obviously cherishes you."

Sirius closed his eyes, hating that he had fucked things up so tremendously.

The more familiar Snape re-emerged for a moment as he added, "For no reason discernable to me."

And when Sirius was alone, unfortunately sober, he was glad Hermione was not here to see the utter wreck he'd become in her absence.

"Hermione, someone is here to see you," Harry announced.

She looked up from the pile of books she'd been staring at for the past several hours. Research now yielded less than it had before she'd begun to look into bringing Sirius back. There was simply no information to be found, and her *desire* for more information didn't automatically equate to an *appearance* of information.

"Who?" she asked. It would be difficult enough to unbury herself from the mess of books she found herself in. If it was someone she didn't want to see, she wouldn't bother. Of course, there was only one person she wanted to see, and she equally *didn't* want to see him, so that was a dilemma in itself.

"He said his name was Alensky. That you'd met the other day? Should I tell him you're not available?"

"No, no," Hermione said quickly, dumping the tomes unceremoniously to the floor. "I'll see him. Do you mind if we talk in the sitting room?"

"Of course not. You're family, Hermione. Stop acting like an unwelcome guest."

Giving Harry a quick hug in thanks for his endless patience with her, Hermione greeted Renworth, once again garbed in head-to-toe earth tones.

"Please, come in," she offered. He followed her to the sitting room, talking an armchair across from the sofa upon which she sat.

"Thank you for seeing me. I realize our meeting the other day might have created more questions than answers, and I thought I'd check in on you to see how you're doing."

Hermione was surprised. It was very sweet of him to be concerned, especially since they hardly knew one another. But one could never be too careful, so she asked, "How did you know where to find me?"

"I didn't," he answered easily, his casual smile putting her at ease. "I had to contact that Frankenhodge, and he did some sleuthing. Didn't take him too long at all; the man's a genius at what he does."

"He certainly is," she agreed, making note to ask him exactly how he'd found the extremely elusive Godric's Hollow, and how he'd known she would be there at all. "Well, I'm fine. My friend, Sirius, and I, well... we had a fight. I did something I shouldn't have, he said something he shouldn't have, and now we're sort of at an impasse. I know I want to see him, but I don't know if he understands how I feel." Hermione took a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this! I'm so sorry. Things have just been... strange."

He nodded sympathetically. "Listen, Miss Granger, there's something I didn't tell you in our last meeting. I hope you understand, but I just didn't want all my family's sordid history becoming gossip fodder for the masses. We are a very private family. We've had to be, with the fame that Josef Alensky brought to our name."

Hermione could easily understand that. She'd had more than her share of time in the limelight, and after her relationship with Sirius and her role in his return became public knowledge, she knew she would be under the harsh glare of the spotlight once again. She didn't relish it, but she'd accepted it as part of her life.

"Of course, Mr. Alensky. I didn't and I still don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable or puts you in an awkward position."

He nodded graciously. "I know. You are a benevolent young woman. You know, I couldn't have met Sofie Alensky, but from Josef's diaries, I feel like I know her. And you remind me a lot of her. You are both very strong women. And it was that similarity that actually brought me here today."

Renworth lifted a briefcase onto the coffee table opened it. His hands hesitated only for a moment over the latch before he opened it. Hermione was shocked to see him take out a number of worn and weathered journals. She gasped when she realized they must be the diaries of Sofie's and Rolpho's son.

"Mr. Alensky, I couldn't...." But Hermione could. And wanted to, very much. Those could contain all the answers she'd been searching for.

Or they could contain nothing simple impressions and memories, nothing of use.

That was true. There was no reason to believe they held some important answers, either for the bond or Sirius' reaction to her from a week ago.

And that was when Hermione realized she was hoping his comments had been a side effect of the bond or the Veil and not just... the way he was.

"They are replicas, Miss Granger. I have the originals in my safekeeping. I have also changed all the names of the people mentioned, including Sofie, Rolpho, and Jessop Manilla, who are, respectively, referred to as Samantha, Ryan, and Jackson. Just a precaution in case they fall into the wrong hands. Nothing personal, of course."

"Of course," she murmured agreeably, caressing the surprisingly supple leather cover of one of the journals. It only looked cracked and torn, but was, in fact, in perfect condition.

"Now, I wish I could help you more directly, but I think you'll find more answers if you read them yourself. And even if I did try to help, I have the feeling you'd read the journals anyway. This, at least, saves me the trouble." He laughed, and Hermione did as well, out of instinct only, because she hadn't really heard anything he'd said. She was too busy reeling both from her belated discovery about her hopes that Sirius was influenced by the Veil and not just inherently cruel, and the fact that she now had the only documented information about the only other person who'd ever returned from beyond the Veil.

It was enough to make her vow to write as much on the subject as she possibly could, so that the next person, for inevitably there would be a next person, would not have to suffer and struggle as much as she had to learn the truth.

"I really must be going. I hope the journals are of some help to you. And I also hope things work out with you and your friend. It is a complicated situation, as you know, and it's likely that he is suffering as much as you are."

She nodded absently, rising to show him to the door. Renworth reached out to shake her hand, saying, "I hope you will let me know what happens."

"If you like," she offered, knowing that she probably wouldn't unless he specifically sought her out to ask. She didn't like airing her dirty laundry in public, let alone in front of strangers, and she felt, between Renworth and Frankenhodge, not to mention Harry and Ginny, she'd done that entirely too often these days.

When he was gone, Hermione immediately set to work on the journals, deciding to read them chronologically. Since the author was Sofie's son, the information would mostly be regarding things that happened before he was born, but she hoped their family was close and Sofie had shared her experiences with him.

She absently waved to Harry when he announced he was going out for a bit, but she didn't look up from reading for many hours.

"Sirius," someone was shouting, shaking the bed and altogether being a nuisance and pain in his arse.

"What!?" he cried, desperately regretting it when the pounding in his head multiplied exponentially.

"It's Harry," the voice announced, as if that excused its loudness.

Except that it did.

Sirius pushed the blankets back, looking bleakly at those familiar green eyes, eyes that looked very concerned and possibly a little pissed off.

"Hey, Harry. How are you today?" he managed weakly, sitting up and wincing as he waited for the inevitable explosion. He'd been treating Harry very poorly this past week and a bit, ignoring his owls and Floos, ignoring *him*. His godson didn't deserve that treatment, but Sirius felt so out of sorts, so strangely not himself lately.

"I'm fine. You're not, though," Harry announced, as though Sirius didn't already know that.

"No," he agreed. "I'm not."

"And why is that?" demanded Harry, whose skills at interrogation could use some work, but which gained points for sheer bravado and indignation.

"Because I hurt the woman I love," he said simply, closing his eyes and taking a moment to hate himself.

"Oh," Harry said, voice blissfully softer. "You...you love her, then?" Sirius felt the bed dip a little and surmised that Harry had taken a seat.

"I do. I love her. I really hope it's me and not just the bond, but one way or another, I love that woman."

Harry was quiet for a while, and Sirius wondered what the young man thought about his godfather falling for his best friend. It must be very odd, but Sirius found himself not caring. Harry was adaptable. And he seemed okay with them *being* together. Now it would just be a little more permanent, official.

If she forgave him, that was.

"How is she?" Sirius asked softly. He'd been dying to ask every time Harry had come over, but couldn't bear to hear she was doing fine without him, even though he hoped she was. He'd even almost asked Snape the night before, but he did still have some pride, after all.

"She's... well... she's okay. She's been doing a lot of reading. Research, I think. And she goes to bed really early. She says she's dizzy a lot around bedtime, which worries me a little. But she seems... fine."

Sirius took in this information. He was dizzy a lot around bedtime, too, though he doubted Hermione's was due to the fact that she'd indulged in bottle after bottle of rotgut Firewhisky like he had.

"I want her back," he whispered, mostly to himself.

"She never really left, Sirius," Harry said, patting the older man's shin. "You just have to bring her home, that's all."

Yes, Sirius thought, hope rising for the first time since he'd shouted those ugly words.

Bring her home.

Chapter 23

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

After Sirius took the time to read the nine-day-old *Daily Prophet* the next morning, things were becoming a little clearer in his muddled mind.

He was quite displeased to recollect that he'd poured his heart out to *Snape*, of all people, but the paper somewhat allayed his displeasure at this realization. After all, *Snape* was the Bonded. Whatever that was. So Sirius had obviously been compelled by forces beyond his control to confide in his worst enemy.

Through no fault of his own, whatsoever.

Sirius only had one thing to do before he went to see Hermione. He'd been putting this off for far too long, and he wanted to do it for himself, but also to show Hermione that he could be responsible.

Plus, he really wanted to see how much of Remus' little Teddy Lupin had in him. Sirius hoped it was a lot, because he missed his old friend more than he could put into words.

After showering and shaving what had turned into quite the beard, Sirius sent an owl to Andromeda, asking if he could come over. He knew she wouldn't really be surprised by his communiqué; she would have read the papers and heard the rumours already. He'd always felt an affinity with her...they were both Black sheep after all. But he didn't know her as well as he suspected he should. After he'd left home, he never really spoke to or saw any of his relatives, and by the time Andromeda had married Ted and thereby severed all bonds to her heritage, Sirius had already been completely disowned and forgotten by his barney family.

Sirius enlisted the help of Kreacher in cleaning up his home. He'd done nothing to take care of it himself this past week, preferring to wallow in his own filth and order take-away, the leftovers of which were happily growing friends in his kitchen. Kreacher appeared somewhat discontent, to put it lightly, at being at the beck and call of the notorious Gryffindor Black, but Sirius happily ignored him in favour of thinking of all the debauched things he would do to his little bondmate once he got her in his arms again.

After a few hours of cleaning and listening to Kreacher plot his demise, Sirius finally heard the owl return with an answer from his cousin.

It simply read, *It's about time*. Beneath that delightful message were Apparition coordinates.

Sirius took that to mean he was welcome to come over whenever he was available, and since he was thus at that very moment, he decided now was the very best time to go meet Teddy. And deal with his pissed-off relative.

"Hello?" Sirius called. The front door had been open, but no one came when he'd knocked.

"In here, Sirius," an imperial voice called, somehow dignified despite its volume.

Following it, he came into a formal sitting room. His cousin, dressed in dark purple robes, sat a little stiffly in a chintz chair. A formal tea service sat on an antique table.

"Cousin," Andromeda greeted him stiffly. Sirius was beginning to wonder if his cousin was anything like him after all.

He walked over to her, ready to give her a hug, but she extended her hand and he took that instead.

"How are you?" he asked warmly before sitting on the sofa by the tea. He gestured toward it, and she nodded, indicating he should pour some for both.

"I'm quite well, thank you. And yourself?"

"I'm fine," Sirius said, adding copious amounts of sugar to his tea and inwardly grinning at the slight displeasure on Andromeda's face. Oh, how he did love to torment his relatives, any way he could.

"Where is Teddy? I really want to meet him," Sirius added, looking around the formal room and wondering if Teddy was being raised in the same strict and proper manner in which he, himself, had been raised and found intolerable.

"He is in his room. I thought it would be best to bring him in after we've had a chance to speak."

Sirius nodded. A part of him felt like he didn't deserve to meet Teddy, like he would be a bad influence on the child. A larger part of him was scared to meet him. Teddy was like Harry...both orphaned, both children of Marauders. And Harry had turned out fine with much more obstacles in his way. Teddy would be a fine wizard. But did Sirius deserve a place in his life?

"Sirius, I'm sure you can imagine how strange it was to hear about your return from a notably unreliable news source. I would have been much more appreciative to have been informed in person."

That was probably the closest thing to, "Welcome back," he was going to get, so Sirius took it. "I am sorry I didn't come see you and Teddy first. It has all happened so fast, and one day Harry and I just got the idea to... go public, as it were. Probably not the best idea, in hindsight, but that's how it happened. I'm sorry."

Andromeda nodded solemnly. "I thought it might have gone like that. You always did treat Harry just like one of your friends. I shouldn't have expected you to change."

"Well, I was basically put on hold for five years. Not exactly an environment conducive to growing up," he joked, feeling a little uncomfortable under her scrutiny. She was family, and he didn't have much of that left, but he felt he did okay by Harry. They had fun together.

"Indeed, not," she agreed, eyeing him seriously. "As you know, Harry is Teddy's godfather."

Sirius smiled proudly.

"And he takes his role very seriously. He comes by here nearly every day, you know. Sometimes to tuck Teddy in, and sometimes to make him breakfast. Other days, he spends the entire day here with the child. Ginny, too, but mostly Harry. He has proved himself very reliable and worthy of the role. Remus and my daughter made an excellent choice in choosing him to be a father-figure for their son."

Sirius was listening carefully. Blacks rarely said anything without the intention of saying something else at the same time. Himself excluded, of course; but then, he'd always been told he quite enjoyed the sound of his own voice.

"That said," she continued. "I think Harry could benefit from the same type of guidance he strives to provide for Teddy. As his godfather, it appears that role has, once

again, fallen upon you. I do not expect you to take up the mantle, but I do think you should know that... well, Harry has a lot of friends, Sirius. But he's never had a father."

Sirius was running to keep up. "You think Harry wants me to be all paternal and role model-y for him? I don't think so. He's never said anything..."

"Ah," she interrupted. "And when has Harry ever let on that he needed anything? No, Sirius, this was for you to infer. I only want you to think about it. He loves you so much...anyone can see that. Even before the papers revealed your return, I knew something important had happened in Harry's life. He was more excited, happier, and he came to see Teddy even more than usual. It is obvious that he is giving Teddy the type of relationship that he, himself, desires."

Sirius was quiet for a long time. He knew he'd never been the typical godfather, that he acted more friend than parent. But Harry was so smart; he'd grown up so fast... Sirius wanted to be useful and needed in the boy's life. But maybe he hadn't quite gone about that the right way. The way James had wanted. The way Harry needed.

Andromeda seemed to notice his thought process, for she said, "I know you did the best you knew how. Merlin knows you didn't have the best example of a father-figure, either. But you have the chance to change all that for Harry." She took a sip of her tea and finally smiled, a true smile that reached her eyes and made her seem like a different person. "Would you like to meet Teddy now?"

Hermione was in the middle of reading one of Josef Alensky's journals when she inexplicably smiled. It was strange, having your facial muscles move and shift as though not your own. She shook the silly expression off her face and went back to reading.

The journals hadn't given her any new information. There was a small section where Josef briefly spoke of "Jessica's" depression, but it was in vague and ambiguous terms like, "Mother said when that before I was born, she felt not like herself. When asked her meaning, she simply shrugged and touched my hair, saying that it mattered not, now that I was there."

It was sweet, but it didn't help Hermione.

She didn't even know what she was looking for, really. She wanted to know if the bond still existed, if that piece of her soul that she'd so graciously donated had been returned, or if Sirius had it inside him. Or had the Veil taken it? What was the purpose of the Veil, really? Where had Sirius been all those years?

But there was no way Josef's journals would tell her anything like that. Renworth had already told Hermione that there was no substantially helpful information within the pages.

But despite her frustration and aimlessness, Hermione had the strangest feeling of elation. Moving to get more comfortable in her chair, Hermione didn't bother erasing the grin from her face as she read on.

Meeting Teddy had been one of the highlights of Sirius' life. There were so few pure, unspoiled moments for him to remember, and this was one of them. It only compared to seeing Harry for the first time, holding him in his arms the day he'd been born.

Teddy looked exactly like Remus.

Sirius had expected it to be painful, seeing this child without parents, a living dedication of Remus' legacy. But it just felt slightly bittersweet, and only because Sirius wished Remus was showing off his son's amazing Metamorphmagus abilities instead of Andromeda.

When his cousin had gone to bring Teddy out, it was as though she'd returned a different person. She was soft and patient and kind, holding Teddy's hands as he walked bravely to meet Sirius. His hair was a deep purple, and Sirius saw that the little dragon plushie he was holding was the same colour.

But his eyes... his eyes were the same light gold as Remus' had been, and they were beautiful. Teddy was very reserved, shy, but his eyes were wise. It was almost enough to make him forget that Teddy was just a child and not Remus himself, and Sirius began to understand what Andromeda meant when she'd said Sirius acted like Harry was James.

But Harry wasn't James. And Teddy wasn't Remus. And Sirius was alone.

But he had Hermione. And *he'd* still have her. Maybe he was a little worried about his reception, but he loved her, and maybe she loved him. And it was about time he grew up and started acting like the man he saw in the mirror instead of the man he saw in his head. He wasn't twenty years old anymore, and Hermione deserved a man who knew his age and acted it.

So he'd lost five years. It didn't matter. Before that, he'd lost twelve and still managed to come out sane. Or at least a passable facsimile of sane.

Sirius didn't cry when Teddy climbed into his lap, the child's hair shifting to long, black and wavy, and his eyes changing to a slate grey. But it was a close call.

Sirius sent an owl to Hermione at Harry's. It only asked if he could see her. He would save everything else for when he could hold her and show her his sincerity. He felt as though, more than his words had hurt her, his betrayal of her feelings had been the true crime.

And if it had taken ten days to learn that lesson, so be it. At least he'd learned it, and maybe the next time he fucked up (for surely he would), it would take less and less time until he stopped acting like a prat altogether. But no matter how he messed up in the future, he would never diminish Hermione's sacrifice to him again.

He must have nodded off, for he startled awake when he heard an owl tapping incessantly at the window. He let the little thing in, taking the missive and watching the owl fly off quickly. It obviously had not been told to expect a reply.

Sirius,

You can come by Harry's anytime. I'll be here.

He traced his fingers over his name, liking the way she'd made the S all curvy and interlocking with the other letters. She had put thought into writing his name. That meant something, didn't it?

Sirius had never loved someone without knowing for certain that they loved him back.

He walked quickly to the fireplace, knowing that he wouldn't be able to delay even a moment before seeing her again. And if that made him desperate, then at least he was honest.

Calling out, "Godric's Hollow!" Sirius whisked away in a swirl of green flames.

Hermione heard the Floo activate and cautiously moved toward it. She was excited and nervous to see Sirius again, as though they'd been parted for longer than a week and a half.

She was more than ready to forgive him. She just hoped he was ready to earn it.

But when he came out of the fire, looking worried and anxious, with a smudge of soot on his cheekbone, Hermione was inexorably drawn to him, and every memory of

anguish and frustration dissipated into the air between him.

When his eyes finally met hers, it was as though an invisible string was drawn taut between them, so she stepped closer to relieve the tension. His eyes grew wide, and his lips parted slightly as though air wasn't coming as freely as it should have been.

She knew the feeling.

And then her hands were on him, relishing his solidity. She was angry, she remembered. She was hurt. But he was here, and he ~~was~~ *was*.

Their lips met in an impatient crash, Sirius grabbing her and pulling her tightly against him. Their bodies met from knees to lips, and his hands gripped her so tightly that she knew he was feeling the same half-crazed desire she was.

He pulled her robe away, and she quickly disposed of his as well.

"Harry?" he murmured against her skin, licking and then biting the exposed flesh.

"Gone," she whispered, pressing her hips against his in the hopes that somehow they could be making love already.

"Ginny?" Nibbles along her collar bone and impatient tug of her hair.

"Gone," she repeated, letting her head fall back to reveal more of her neck, as he obviously desired.

"Bedroom?"

Hermione hoped that was his final question, because his talking took away from his lips travelling over her skin, burning marks into her heart. Instead of answering, she tore herself away to lead him up the stairs, into the little guest room where she'd been staying.

"Hermione," he moaned, pulling her back into his arms and undressing her in an impassioned frenzy. "I'm sorry."

"Later," she gasped, her hands working until he was as bare as she.

He nodded gratefully and pushed her onto the bed, following her in a leonine stalk. She immediately parted her legs for him, allowing him to crawl between them. His kisses on her throat and chest scorched her, especially the gentle ones he placed on the scars over her heart.

His hands were everywhere and nowhere long enough. When his fingers finally slipped inside her, she cried out, hands clenching his upper arms. Her body moved eagerly, fucking herself on his fingers, even though they were not nearly enough.

She quickly moved to take hold of his straining erection, tracing it first as if to remind herself what it was like to touch. His moan showed her that her memory was sound. She gripped him tightly, moving her hand quickly in the hope that he'd want to be inside her soon.

His lips were fierce on hers, his fingers playing her like his favourite game. She whimpered into his mouth, trying to show him with her tongue and teeth and lips just how much she needed him. Thankfully, he seemed to speak her language, because he settled in the cradle of her hips, and she could feel the rounded head of him press against her slickness.

"Please," she begged, uncaring about past wrongs or future worries. Nothing was more important, nothing was more perfect than him inside her.

"Yes," he answered, sinking deep into her with one vital thrust. They both gasped, staring into the other's eyes. This had been missing, she realized. This ~~was~~ *needed*... not just nice, not just *good*, but wholly necessary.

Sirius began to move, his body rocking into her with the power of a thousand memories between them. His lips never left hers as he pumped harder and harder into her, neither asking for quarter, nor giving it.

Hermione felt her orgasm form as though outside herself, the magic building and gathering until reaching an impossible peak and exploding with a desperate cry. She barely acknowledged that Sirius groaned at the same time, thrusting impossibly deeper and making her feel slick and sated.

He panted softly against her ear, his body pressing down on her with a weight that was comforting and sure. She felt her heart do a funny little skip before slowing down slightly. She realized with dazed comprehension that their hearts were beating in tandem, the way they had so long ago when she'd first brought him back, before he'd regained consciousness. That was important, she told herself.

Remember that.

But Sirius was moving his weight to side, pulling her against his sweat-slicked body, seemingly loath to let her go. The kisses he placed on her lips and neck now were reassuring, apologetic, and Hermione knew she should be thinking about what exactly had happened between them, or about the Veil, or the bond, or even Sirius' arsehole attitude, but instead... instead, all she could think about was the way his hand was skimming over her skin, not putting any pressure on her at all, just touching, making sure she was there, that she was okay, that she was happy.

And she was. The rest would come in time.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

"...And I *know* I've been a total arse, and I know you didn't deserve what I said. And you certainly didn't deserve me kicking you out of your own home. That was...

reprehensible of me. Gods, I...I don't even know why I said or did those things. I felt out of control. I know you didn't do anything with Snape. I'm so... fuck, it's so inadequate. I'm so sorry."

Hermione pursed her lips and looked away. They'd been talking for what felt like hours. After they'd made love, they'd drifted off to sleep, both experiencing a light and gentle sense of peace that diminished rather quickly when Hermione had told Sirius she didn't know if she was ready to come home.

She *wanted* to. She wanted to be with Sirius. There was no sense in denying it. But she didn't want to be taken advantage of, and she wasn't willing to risk having him accuse her so baselessly whenever he felt insecure.

But he was apologizing so prettily, and she was so ready to move on.

"Sirius, things are going to be hard for us. Not everyone will understand what we've done. What've done. If you're going to take cheap shots and lose your temper every time you're hurt or scared, well, that's not fair. I need someone who can be strong. And I know you *are* strong, which is why I'm so confused."

Sirius nodded solemnly. Hermione couldn't recall the last time she'd seen him so very... serious. And he looked nervous, and she was damned if she didn't find that somehow endearing. Part of her wanted to stay angry, to stand up for herself and her feelings, but she could see when she looked into his lost grey eyes that he was truly remorseful. She'd seen the look often enough in Ron's eyes when he'd said something horrifyingly stupid...which he did often enough.

But saying sorry meant you don't do it again. Not like Ron, who would hurt her, apologize, and promptly repeat his transgression. This had to be different.

"I wish I could say the right thing to make you realize how sorry I am. I've never been good with words, or apologies, for that matter. But I regret what I said. I didn't mean it. I know you're a good person, an honest one, and I know that, even if our relationship is strange and not quite typical, you would never betray someone you care about. And even though I know these things, I still hurt you. I want you to come home. It's *your* home, really. You've lived there for years, and I had no right to tell you to leave. If you want me to go, I'll understand. Hell, I expect it. But you should be there."

Sighing, Hermione let her body fall backward onto the bed. She felt an unwarranted sense of panic and couldn't put her finger on why she would feel that way.

"I forgive you," she said simply, and it was true. He was sorry. She still wanted him. It was really that simple, and making him grovel and beg made no sense when she didn't even want it anymore.

"Oh, 'Mione. Thank you. I won't let you down like that again," Sirius vowed, lying down beside her and taking her into his arms. Hermione smiled a little at the kisses he was pressing over her hair and face, giggling when he rubbed their noses together.

"Will you come home?" he asked cautiously, looking into her eyes. When she looked back, she saw only desire and earnestness. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He wouldn't do it again. She felt the knowledge of that sweep over her like a cool wind, reassuring her softly.

"Yes," she answered. "I've missed it. I've missed you. I hated fighting, and I don't want to do it anymore. I'm not good at that sort of thing. I can't hold grudges, and I don't understand why people fight all the time. I just want to have peace with you."

"That sounds perfect," Sirius said, smiling into her neck, where he kissed her lightly.

"But if you do anything like that again, Harry will kick your arse," she warned, only half joking.

"I know," Sirius replied gravely. "He almost did this time. Not to mention Snape getting in on the action as well."

Hermione was shocked to hear him say that name without any semblance of animosity. "What did Snape do?"

Sirius shrugged in feigned casualness. "He told me to smarten up...made me see things a little differently. He's pretty clever, that one."

Hermione gaped at Sirius, disbelieving her own ears.

He laughed a little, saying, "Well, maybe not clever. Quick, perhaps. Coldly intelligent. Ugly as hell and about as personable as a Jarvey, but not stupid."

Hermione badly wanted to make a joke about Snape being a new-found friend, but she didn't want to disturb the peace between them. At least now maybe Sirius would see that she did appreciate Snape for his intelligence and that there were no ulterior motives to her seeking out his guidance.

"Sirius," she whispered a few moments later.

"Yes, love?"

"Take me home."

Sirius was up in a heartbeat, getting dressed in record time before opening up her trunk and shouting, "Pack!" He looked at her expectantly while she got dressed, and before the last button on her blouse was done up, he grabbed her hand and hauled her down the stairs.

"My things!" she cried, stumbling a little and letting Sirius correct her footing.

"I'll come back for the trunk," he declared. "Right now, I just need to get you home, to know you're really there."

He pulled her all the way to the sitting room, where Harry was sitting at his desk. He looked up, only slightly surprised to see Sirius there.

"It's about time," he drawled, giving Hermione a wide smile. But she could sense him searching her face for signs of certainty, and she smiled reassuringly. She was ready to go.

"We're leaving," Sirius announced, as though it wasn't obvious. "But I'll be back tomorrow, Harry. We'll do something together."

"What?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"I don't know! Go fishing or camping or something ridiculous like that. How's that sound?" His voice was so jovial that Hermione had to laugh. She felt like she was missing something, but she knew she'd be caught up sooner or later.

"That sounds... good," Harry said, looking baffled. "I get off work at six, and I have to work tomorrow."

"Oh," Sirius said, and Hermione could tell he'd forgotten for a moment that his godson had a job. "Maybe this weekend would be better," he suggested hopefully.

"This weekend would be fine." Harry was smiling widely, and Hermione felt her eyes get a little scratchy.

"Good, then," Sirius said, grinning back. Then he quickly tossed some Floo powder, called out, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," and pushed Hermione unceremoniously through when the flames turned green.

She stumbled out of fireplace a little ungracefully, not having expected to be shoved. When Sirius came through behind her, she said, "I didn't even get to say goodbye or

thank-you to Harry!"

Sirius laughed. "Sorry, I was a little eager to get you home. And we have to go back for your things anyway...you left everything behind, you know."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond to that unfounded accusation, but she saw Sirius' eyes glint mischievously, even as his smile was innocent. Sighing in her best, long-suffering way, Hermione walked up to Sirius and embraced him.

His arms curled around her slowly, holding her so firmly and strongly against his body that Hermione knew he was a safe place for her to be.

Raising her face for a kiss felt so natural and right that it was hard for her to believe that they'd spent any time apart at all. His lips were soft and slow against hers, an exploration, a relearning. Her face was cradled in his slightly calloused hands, her cheek and jaw held so gently she felt like a fragile thing. He broke the kiss to sigh against her lips, his breath sending shivers along her skin.

"Hermione... there was another woman here," Sirius said.

She took a step backward, eyes wide with hurt and disbelief. "What?"

"I went to the bar... I was completely pissed. I didn't know what I was doing. She practically followed me. I made her leave; nothing happened. But she was here, and I wanted you to know." He was biting his lip and forcing himself to look her in the eye.

Hermione stepped out of the embrace. "Oh, Sirius. What am I supposed to say to that?"

"I'm not sure. I promise that nothing happened. I've never even seen her before. I don't know her name. She was only here for a minute. And Snape came right after. He saw her leave. You can ask him, if you want. She apparently had some choice words about my manhood for anyone who cared to listen."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Did you only tell me because you thought Snape would if you didn't?"

"No!" he exclaimed, stepping forward but not touching her as he seemed to want to. "I told you because I don't ever want to lie to you or hurt you."

"Wait," Hermione said, something clicking in her brain. "What night was this?"

"Last night."

"And you were drunk?"

"Well, it wasn't the only night I was drunk, but yeah. I was pretty out of it."

"I felt so sick," she whispered. "I felt dizzy and nauseous and... I almost thought... but it must have been the bond." Her mind was telling her things, and she was racing to keep up. "Sirius, the bond is still intact! I felt it when you were drunk. I *felt* drunk. And.... What were you doing earlier today? Before you came to see me?"

Sirius was looking a little lost, but he answered quickly. "I went to see Teddy today. He's beautiful, 'Mione. Looks just like Remus, but you can see Tonks in him as well."

"You were happy," she said, smiling. "You were happy, and I felt happy, too! Oh, I feel so stupid. I thought the bond was broken, but it's not."

"What do you mean, you felt it, too? Why don't I feel your emotions?"

"I don't know. I don't know, but there's more. When we touch sometimes, my heart rate slows down to match yours. And my temper has been worse than ever, and I think it's because of you! Sirius, the bond connected us in more ways than just this need between us that has dwindled. We're... we're a part of each other. I can feel it, sense it. I know it's true! I thought it was broken, but it's just taken a different form."

Sirius took her hand and pulled her onto the couch with him. He sat slightly away from her, and she realized he was worried about her reaction regarding the woman he'd had over. But she trusted him to tell her the truth, and she wasn't really upset about that. She was a little worried about his drinking habits, remembering how he often overindulged while in hiding during the war. But she had more pressing matters to think about at the moment.

"I rather liked having the compulsion part of the bond," Sirius confessed. Laughing in a way she easily recognized as self-deprecating, Sirius continued, "I liked having you want me all the time. Having you need me. It... felt good to be necessary." He looked away, and Hermione took his hands in hers.

"I still need you," she assured him. "I still want you. But you have to admit that it's better for me to want you and need you of my own volition than from a compulsion."

He nodded, finally meeting her eyes. "You're right. I guess I just got used to it. But why are all the changes happening to you? Your heartbeat adapts to mine, your temper changes, you experience my alcohol intake? Why have I not changed as well?"

Hermione thought she knew. She was also pretty sure Sirius was not going to be happy with her confession.

"I think.... When I performed the spell, a part of my soul went into the Veil. It was the first sacrifice. I felt it... I felt it leave. And I always thought that it was necessary to placate the Veil, like an offering, but now.... Sirius, I think the piece of soul went to *you*."

Sirius looked a mix between angry and devastated, his eyes wide as he took in her words. "Remember when we first made love?" A soft smile graced his lips, and Hermione blushed, but nodded. "That ripping feeling? What was that? Why did we both feel it, if it was only your soul that was fractured?"

Hermione let her head fall back onto the couch. "I have no idea. Maybe... maybe that was the piece of soul permanently leaving me and cementing itself in you? Gods... I just don't know. And there's no *answers!*" she finished with a cry. The worst part about all this was that there was nowhere to look for additional information. She was making it up as she went. Or rather, that was what the Alenskys did. She was just the second in a line of people doing whatever they could for the one they loved.

"Does it matter?" Sirius asked, searching Hermione's eyes. She stared at him a moment before she realized he wasn't joking.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged and pulled her into a loose embrace. "Does it really matter? The whys and the hows and the definitions and the reasons.... Does any of it matter? I'm *happy*, Hermione. Really happy for the first time in *decades*. I'm with the woman I... want, and everything is fine. Does it matter why or how?"

Hermione curled into the embrace, kissing him lightly before sighing. "Yes. I wish I could say I didn't care and let everything go on without wanting to know everything I possibly can. But a part of me needs to know. I don't know if I can simply forget about it. I'll always wonder... what if our feelings for one another are constructed? Forced?"

But even as she said it, Hermione doubted her own words. After all, Sofie Alensky and her husband had loved one another before the Veil had put Sofie on hold. Maybe Hermione hadn't loved Sirius before, not like she did now, but if the Alenskys loved one another before, it stood to reason that their love was real. And Hermione was just desperate enough to believe that it also applied to Sirius and herself. Whether or not she actually *said* those words didn't matter, not right now. It was enough that she felt them.

"I don't believe that. And I don't think you do, either. What I feel for you is real. No half-sentient piece of drapery can dictate my feelings."

"I don't want to believe it," she admitted, crawling into Sirius' lap and wondering how on Earth she'd managed to go so long without his touch. "I want to be with you. I want to believe it's real."

"It's real," Sirius said in a voice that belied no uncertainty. His fingers trailed along her throat and rested over her heart. Pressing lightly, he said, "This is real. What we feel...here...is real."

Sirius took her lips in a wrenchingly soft kiss, and Hermione wondered if he'd intended the double meaning behind his words as his fingers pressed into the still-unhealed scars on her chest. But whether he'd meant that or not, Hermione knew it was true. She'd willingly given a part of her soul, and she would do it again without question. Despite all the uncertainty, despite the pain, the strangeness, the heartache, and one randomly clicking finger, it was all more than worth it to have Sirius in her life.

They divested of their clothes slowly, taking time to explore one another in a way that had been missing from their frenzied rendezvous earlier that day. Sirius' hands branded her with every inch of skin caressed, and his kisses scorched her, inside and out. It seemed as though he was trying to memorize every movement, and Hermione tried not to feel the strange sense of impermanence in his lips.

Touching his cock made her shiver, his moans drawing lines through her veins right to her core. Straddling Sirius, Hermione lowered herself onto him, taking him into her and making them one in yet another way. With a part of herself in him, and a part of him in her, nothing could ever be so right. When they began to move together, slowly at first, she swore she could sense the part of her soul sighing in contentedness. He moved within her, and she was moved within him.

It was only fitting that, after so long apart, Hermione and Sirius found release at the same moment, her cries drowning his groans, and his clenching fingers overpowering her clenching pussy. Everything about them felt balanced and equal, and Hermione was taken to a place that was beyond afterglow. She felt light and at peace, and she never wanted to leave.

Sirius eventually laid her down on the couch and stretched out beside her, Summoning a light blanket and covering her nudity both with the blanket and himself. She wasn't quite asleep, but neither was she fully conscious. Entwining her limbs with Sirius' was the most natural thing in the world, and as she wrapped her legs around him, he responded in kind with his arms. They were completely whole, two people made one, not just by the sharing of their bodies, but by the soul split between them.

Hermione's sleep was dreamless.

Sirius was awake for some time after Hermione had drifted off with a sinfully blissful look on her delicate features. He loved watching her sleep. She always looked so untouchable, so untouched. It made him a little frightened for her, as though any moment her innocence and frailty could be stolen away from her...from both of them.

It felt good to be forgiven. It was a gift rarely given to him, perhaps a gift he'd rarely deserved. He hadn't been truly nervous until he'd confessed about that silly harpy who'd come home with him. He still felt ill when he thought about that. Sirius had, more times than he'd care to admit, been pissed to the point of blacking out. Had that night been one of those times, he had no doubt that Hermione would not have forgiven him. But he'd told the truth *before* he'd been caught, something he'd never seen himself doing. And it felt so good to do the right thing. Even though he was only doing what Hermione deserved.

Sirius pressed his faced into Hermione's slender neck, uncaring of the hair that curled and tangled in his face. This was perfect, he thought. This was home.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Sirius had asked Hermione to check out a book on Muggle camping from the library. She'd tried to tell him that she knew a bit about it, having gone camping in her youth, but he would have none of it. Whether it was because he doubted her assertion, or because he wanted to do everything his own way, Hermione couldn't be sure.

While at the library, she picked up a book on ancient magical artefacts, a book she remembered seeing when she'd been doing the preliminary research for her attempts to bring Sirius back. She'd flipped through it, but the section on the Veil was full of speculation and had not proved helpful at all. But as it did have a rather large forward on wizarding artefacts in general, it bore investigating.

Knowing the bond was still intact made Hermione's life simultaneously easier and more difficult. She so desperately wanted to believe that her feelings for Sirius were real that she planned to go on as they had so far. It seemed unlikely that the bond would sever now, after all this time, so even if her feelings *were* fabricated, they were nevertheless going to be with her for the rest of her life. It made no sense to abandon their relationship when it felt so real.

She loved Sirius. It was a good love, a sweet, wholesome, *true* love, bracketed by a fiery, rather unwholesome, *true* passion.

All her life, Hermione had seen two types of romantic love. Kind, enduring love, which was calm and non-threatening, and wild, all-consuming love that burned out quickly with the force of emotion behind it.

Hermione, somehow, had both, and she only hoped that it was lasting. If she compared herself to the Alenksy couple as she had been wont to do lately, she could see a pattern that told her that their love would last as well. But, her usually helpful mind reminded her, two dots make a line, not a pattern.

For the first time in her life, Hermione had no qualms in telling her brain to shut the hell up.

By the time the weekend finally arrived, Sirius knew he was practically bouncing off the walls, driving Hermione to distraction. But he couldn't seem to contain himself. He finally had something to *do*, something important to contribute.

Being with Hermione was great, it was perfect, it was more than he deserved, and more than he'd ever expected. But seeing Teddy made him realize that he'd been woefully remiss in his godfatherly duties. And who had shown him that? His own godson, the perfect example of godparenting. It was inexcusable.

He'd gleaned as much as possible from the book on camping, but the basics seemed to be escaping him. Why would one choose to sleep outside, where any manner of Dark creature could stop by for a meal? And what on Earth was Sirius supposed to do with a fish if he did manage to catch one? Surely not eat it raw? Were there spells for

cooking fish in the middle of nowhere?

Hermione was decidedly no help, except that she kept trying to reassure him by telling him, "It's fun!" which didn't convince him in the slightest. He was afraid that Harry would be bored, would think it was stupid, and then the whole thing would blow up in Sirius' face.

Harry wasn't a child anymore. He'd known the boy a total of three years, one as an infant and two as a teenager. He wasn't sure he was needed at all. Harry had obviously turned out just fine without him.

"Sirius, it's going to be fine. I don't know why you're so nervous! Harry will have fun no matter what you boys decide to do. Now, have you packed?"

Despite being technically twenty and physically fifteen years her senior, when placed in conjunction with Harry, Sirius was always one of the boys. He found it endearing, the way she nagged at him, though Merlin knew he'd never dare say such a thing to her face. Hermione would make an amazing mother one day.

"I've packed," he assured her, walking up to her and taking her into his arms. She always folded against him so accommodatingly; it made him feel strong and capable, even when he knew he was lacking. "I'm not nervous, not really. Just... Harry and I haven't really done anything like this. I hope he doesn't think I'm trying to be James."

Hermione shook her head, leaning back to look up into Sirius' eyes. He could let her go to make the angle less awkward, but that would mean not feeling her warmth and softness against his body, and he needed that as surely as he needed to breathe his next breath.

"He knows you're only trying to be his godfather. Sirius, I know that you know this... but Harry isn't a little kid anymore. He doesn't need... a guardian. Or... a role model. Not really. He needs a friend...he needs *you*. Not Order member Sirius, not James' best friend Sirius, not even godfather Sirius. He just needs *you*."

Thinking about it, Sirius realized that, without all the titles, he didn't even know who he was. He'd been labelled so many times in his life that he'd almost believed the hype. What was he if not a Marauder, an Order member, a prisoner, a Veil reject? *Who* was he? And what good was he to Harry when he was often no good to himself?

"So, who am I supposed to be, Hermione?" he asked lightly, but he knew she saw right through him.

"Maybe this trip will help you figure that out. But I know who you are *to me*, Sirius. Do you want to hear?"

Sirius tilted his head, looking as though he was considering. She slapped him lightly on the arm, laughing, before curling up more tightly in his embrace.

"Tell me," he whispered.

"You're *everything*. Just... everything."

His arms tightened around his seemingly frail witch, so light he sometimes wondered if her bones were hollow, like a bird's. Would she ever fly away? She was free to, he told himself. But he wondered if that was even true.

"I..." Sirius began, trying to agree with her sentiment in a more formal way, but finding himself incapable still. "I think so, too. About you." That wasn't quite what he'd wanted to say.

Hermione lifted her face again, her eyes shining with sincerity. Sirius thought it a shame that she'd known so little affection from a lover in her life. She was certainly pretty enough to warrant it and brilliant enough to deserve much more. But, selfish though it might be, he was grateful that she had little to compare him to. It might make him look a little less like a fuck-up in her eyes.

Lowering his lips to hers, Sirius lost himself in their kiss. He moved his mouth slowly, treating her like the bird he'd found himself comparing her to. Best not to startle her. Her lips parted in permission, and Sirius took it, sliding his tongue in to stroke against hers in a motion that was meant to convey gratitude, but really ended up taking reassurance.

Her soft moan demolished the last of his coherent thought, save for wondering how much time he had before he'd told Harry to meet him.

A sharp crack of Apparition told him not much time at all.

Hermione broke the kiss first. Sirius would have been perfectly content to carry on, audience or not. Maybe thoughts like that were what made him such a lousy father-figure, he mused dejectedly.

"Hermione, Sirius, how are you?" Harry asked a little awkwardly, looking at the sofa until Hermione hugged him in greeting, proving that Sirius could no longer be attached to his best female friend.

"Fine, Harry. And thank you for bringing my things back!" Hermione exclaimed, taking a shrunken trunk from Harry's outstretched hand.

"No problem. It's all in there," Harry said, turning to Sirius. "So, you got yourself sorted out, then? No more making Hermione run to her oldest friend instead of manning up and apologizing?" Harry was grinning, but Sirius took his words to heart.

"Never was a man more repentant than I," he said, in a jovial tone that did nothing to hide his true meaning. "Won't happen again," he swore.

Harry looked at Sirius in that pensive way of his, and Sirius knew he was being weighed. Finally, Harry nodded, a grin breaking across his face. "I knew you'd come around. So, what's the plan?"

"Well," Sirius said apprehensively. "I thought we could go... camping."

Harry laughed, looking incredulous. Then he abruptly stopped when Sirius knew his disappointment was painted on his features.

"Sirius has been researching, Harry," Hermione said, winking at Harry when she probably thought Sirius wasn't looking.

"Really?" Harry asked, sounding more surprised than sarcastic.

Sirius nodded, feeling like a total failure. Of course Harry wouldn't want to go camping. He was an adult with adult responsibilities and hobbies. He wasn't thirteen anymore.

But Sirius sometimes had a hard time seeing Harry as anything but thirteen. The mental imprint of the first time he'd seen Harry after his imprisonment was indelibly marked upon his mind, and Sirius had to continually remind himself that his godson wasn't a child.

But it seemed that he had even less to offer Harry the adult than he'd had to Harry the teenager.

"Well, that sounds fantastic, Sirius. Where are we going?"

Sirius managed a small smile. "There was a forest out near where your parents used to live. James, Remus, Peter, and I used to camp out there at times, although we didn't have tents or anything like that. We'd just go with a bunch of blankets. But I bought a tent for us, a proper wizarding tent."

"When do we leave?" Harry asked, his smile wide enough to alleviate the worst of Sirius' misgivings.

"Now, if you're ready. Am I ready, love?" he asked Hermione, who was watching the exchange with something of a sad smile.

"I don't know; are you?" she rejoined. But she put his bag in his hand, gestured to the tent, which was housed in an impossibly small canvas bag. But Sirius knew it was massive on the inside, having opened it the night before when Hermione had been sleeping. It'd been hell getting it back into the bag without help, but worth it. The thing was a marvel.

"Yeah, I'm ready," he decided. "Let's go!"

Harry nodded, turning to give Hermione a hug. "I want you to be careful, all right? We've had reports about a couple of Death Eaters making things personal with Muggle-borns. Mostly threats and intimidation, but you never know, okay?"

"Of course, Harry. Now, have fun, you two!"

Sirius turned to give Hermione a kiss, smirking at the groan Harry gave before he went to wait by the front door.

The kiss was slow and languid, a promise of things to come. He didn't like leaving her so soon when he'd only just gotten her back, but it was only for the weekend, and then he'd have her in his arms, and his bed, once again.

"Be safe," she told him, and he nodded.

"I'll see you on Sunday. I left Apparition coordinates on the kitchen table in case of emergency. Don't hesitate to use them if you need me."

He made her promise, and he rewarded her with another slow kiss.

"Sirius!" Harry called, a laugh in his voice.

"Coming!" he answered, leaning down for one more peck before leaving with Harry.

They Apparated straight into the small clearing in the forest. It looked exactly as it had in Sirius' youth, and he wondered if anyone took care of it, or if it was magically tended.

"Wow, Sirius, this is really cool. You and my dad really came here?"

Sirius nodded, wrapping his arms around himself as he looked around. He hadn't really thought about how hard it would be to return here. The clearing was a little like him, Sirius thought; unchanged despite years passing.

"Yeah, we did. I think we were wondering through the woods when we first saw Godric's Hollow. And your dad always said he'd like to live in a nice, quiet place like that."

"How near is their house to where we are right now?"

Sirius looked around as if he could measure distance with a glance. "Not too sure. But we can easily Apparate if you want to see it. Or... them."

Harry nodded slowly. Sirius watched a range of emotions pass over Harry's face. The boy was so brave, so strong; he'd gone on so long without even a moment's reassurance or comfort. It was a wonder, truly a wonder, that he was as well-adjusted as he appeared to be.

"When we leave, I'd like to stop by their graves," Harry said quietly, fiddling with the sleeve of his robe.

"Sure," Sirius said, closing the distance between them and pulling Harry into a one-armed hug.

Harry's delight at the tent made Sirius feel like a million Galleons, even though he knew Harry had seen and been inside wizarding tents before. Everything about the experience was new to Sirius, whose family would never have deigned to set foot inside a tent, let alone with the intention of eating and sleeping within.

Fishing was a particular disaster. Neither was able to transfigure fishing rods, Sirius having only seen a photograph of one, and Harry having only a memory of one of his cousin's. An aborted attempt to *Accio* a fish had left Sirius under *Silencio*, leaving Harry to explain that Sirius might have found a lake full of fish atop him and instructing him to be more specific next time. Sirius wasn't sure that saying, "*Accio that fish*," would work, so they gave up fishing to the professionals.

Luckily, Hermione had foreseen said disaster and packed enough food to last them a week. Or so he thought, until he saw how much Harry could eat before proclaiming himself stuffed.

They were lying on an old quilt beneath the night sky when Sirius asked about Teddy.

Like a proud father would have, Harry had plenty to say about his precocious godson.

"He acts just like Tonks must have, without the clumsiness, thank Merlin. But he looks just like Remus. And he sometimes says the smartest things. I mean, I know he's really young, but you should hear him when he gets going."

"He was very shy when I saw him," Sirius said, smiling fondly.

"Yeah, he is, at first. Around new people. But he'll get used to you very quickly, I reckon. Hey, you could come with me when I go to see him on Sunday evening, if you like! I was thinking of going straight there from here, but we could go to number twelve first, drop your things off, and head over. I'm sure he'd be so excited to see you again. I miss him already; I haven't gone a whole weekend without seeing him in a long time."

Sirius felt ready to burst with pride. The only thing dampening his happiness was the fact that he'd really had nothing to do with the amazing man Harry had become.

"I'd really like that," Sirius said truthfully.

"We'll do that then." Harry was quiet for a moment, and then he laughed. "The first time I took Teddy overnight, I put him to bed looking just like his father. When I went to get him the next morning, he had black hair, bright green eyes, much brighter than mine, and a big lightning bolt scar. It... was shocking, at first. I didn't like seeing the scar there. I covered my own up with my hair, and a minute later, his was gone. I felt like... like how my father must have felt, looking at me. I felt like a dad. It was such a good feeling."

Sirius thought about that. He hadn't really wondered what it would be like to be a parent. Like many things with Purebloods, it was something expected of him, something he'd always expected for himself. But he'd never really pictured himself in that role. Harry's words gave him a lot to think about.

"Are you and Ginny planning on having children any time soon?" he asked.

Harry gave a little half-shrug that Sirius recognized to mean that he was trying to hide whether something was bothering him. James had done the same thing.

"We talk about it all the time. We both really want to. I'm not sure what's stopping us now."

"Now?" Sirius asked. "Was there something stopping you before."

Harry winced a little, and Sirius only noticed because he'd looked over at exactly that moment.

"I'm not saying this to make you feel bad or anything, Sirius. I want you to know that. But when you... left, I felt so... alone. So useless. Everyone I loved, everyone who trusted me, needed me... ended up hurt, one way or another. My entire life, people have died because of me. I couldn't bring a child into a world where I couldn't be sure I could protect them."

Sirius wanted to interrupt, to deny Harry's involvement in his falling through the Veil. Only Bellatrix was to blame, and Sirius himself. But Harry waved him off, and Sirius knew that, deep down, Harry knew it wasn't technically his fault. But Sirius' reassurance wouldn't change the young man's mind.

"And at first it was Teddy that made me begin to feel whole again, like I could give him something important. I can protect him, I know I can. And then you came back... and I know I had nothing to do with it, really. Hermione didn't tell me a word of what she was doing. But now that you're back, that part of me that always insisted that I... that I killed you, is quiet. And that makes me feel like maybe it's time to really start my life."

Sirius pulled his godson into his arms. James had been a good friend, but Harry was a good man. And even if Sirius couldn't take credit for it, he certainly felt proud.

"Your parents would have been so proud of you, Harry. And I am, too. So, so proud," he murmured, kissing the crown of Harry's head before pulling away. He felt a little embarrassed...he didn't like to get sappy, but he knew what he'd said had needed saying.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, blushing and grinning like a madman. "Thank you, Sirius. I...you can't know.... Thank you."

It was a long time into the night before Harry began to talk about Snape. First, it was tentative, as if he was gauging Sirius' reaction. Sirius didn't react...his opinions of the man had changed pretty dramatically. Knowing that Snape had given Hermione the key ingredient in getting him back among the land of the living kind of made any childhood (or adulthood) animosity a moot point.

But Hermione had made it a point, especially over the last few days, to outline Snape's dramatic and imperative role in the culmination of the war. Hearing that Snape had killed Dumbledore had nearly set Sirius off on a rampage, but for the sake of Hermione, he'd tamped it down long enough to hear the truth.

And he felt well and truly chagrined.

Sirius wouldn't go so far as to call the man a *hero*, as Harry was currently insisting. Sirius had no doubt that if Harry hadn't been as powerful as he was, Snape would have made a different choice. The man was opportunistic, first and foremost.

But with things as they were, it was obvious that both Hermione and Harry had a great deal of respect for the slimy Slytherin, and if the two most important people in his life saw redeeming qualities in the git, well, maybe Sirius ought to rethink some things.

Never say them aloud, mind. But rethink all the same.

Harry fell asleep in the midst of that particular conversation, and for that, Sirius was rather thankful. It was one thing to have a paradigm shift about someone he'd been absolutely certain was evil. It was quite another to hear his virtues extolled by his godson.

Looking over at Harry, Sirius felt a near-overwhelming protectiveness. In repose, Harry seemed so small, so fragile. It would always be difficult to believe that Harry Potter had saved them all.

After tucking Harry in, more for Sirius' comfort than the young man's, Sirius lay on his back, thinking about what his love was doing at this moment. Probably sleeping, he surmised, thinking it would be wise to follow her unseen example.

There were some things he wanted to talk about with Hermione when he returned home. Important things. Things possibly involving little black-haired, brown-eyed people. Or brown-haired, grey-eyed people...Sirius wasn't picky.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

By the time Sirius came back on Sunday night to tell Hermione he'd be going to see Teddy with Harry, Hermione had nearly finished the last Alensky journal.

And found nothing.

The anecdotes about Josef's mother and father were general at best and gave no insight into what had actually happened. Josef, despite these journals being private, was a man who did not write his secrets down. Even toward the end of the journals, by which time Josef would have been quite famous for his contributions to medical magic, he remained humble and modest, recounting wryly incidents of his success without giving any specific details.

It was a fascinating read, to be sure, but it did not give Hermione the answers she desperately needed.

When she'd read the final line, she lay back in her bed. She'd spent most of the weekend there because it reminded her of Sirius. Being in the sitting room had made her miss him too much; it felt so empty without his large presence.

She would never have believed she could come to miss something so badly when she'd only really had it such a short time.

Hermione traced her fingers over the ugly wound on her chest. It had occurred to her that a Healer might have been able to reduce the scarring there, since it had remained open for so long, and was, in fact, not even quite healed yet. It didn't hurt anymore, and the ugly red lines that used to emanate from it had nearly disappeared. They'd begun to concern her when Sirius had kicked her out. It was hard to remember, because that entire week passed in a sad, angry haze, but she seemed to remember they'd been quite bad then.

Once back in Grimmauld Place, they'd given her no cause for concern.

"I miss you," Hermione whispered to Sirius' pillow, laughing at her silliness. His pillow didn't answer.

The book beneath her fingers shifted, still opened to the last page, and Hermione went to move it. As she did, a surge of power went through her body, ending above her heart, making it skip a beat.

The surge had begun in her fingertips.

Gasping, Hermione grabbed up the journal and held it to her face. There was nothing different about it except a nearly indefinable aura of something hidden.

But this was only a *copy*, she reminded herself. Even if there had been spells on the original, they wouldn't have transferred over. A magical copy was just like a Muggle photocopy...only the strictest reproduction, nothing more of the original than appearance.

Unless... it *wasn't* just a magical copy. Unless Renworth had made this copy *a clone*... or had even given her the original in new binding.

But why would he do that? Why hide that he'd given her more than he'd said, with no clue as to how to use it or that there was anything besides the basest replication?

Answers later, she told herself sternly. Time to figure this book out and get answers once and for all!

A number of spells did nothing to force the book to release its secrets. Since the surge had happened after she'd finished it, she read the last page again, and then aloud. Nothing.

Sighing resignedly, Hermione used her wand to open a small cut on her index finger. Blood magic hadn't had the stigma when this journal had been created that it had today. Josef may have used it, but that wouldn't have made him a Dark wizard.

Smearing the blood across the first empty page after the writing stopped, Hermione waited. Nothing happened except a decidedly unattractive rust-coloured stain on the page, which she hoped Renworth would not notice when he took the journals back.

Retrace your steps, whispered a decidedly Dumbledoric voice in her head.

But I have! she responded fervently. She'd reread the page, she'd offered it blood.

The voice was pointedly silent.

Hermione got back into her reading position. She read the last page again. She left the book open on her stomach, her fingers atop it. She gazed around the bedroom and thought about Sirius. She turned to the pillow beside her and said, "I miss you," once again. She...

Another surge. She looked quickly to the journal. Words were appearing under the stain of her blood! But just as quickly, they faded back to nothing.

Hermione broke out into a smile. She was getting very good at making books reveal their secrets, she mused, wondering if there was a job in the Ministry for such a talent.

"I miss you, Sirius!" she cried, laughing as words came back faster than before, staying a few moments longer before fading into the page.

Despite her glee, Hermione was beginning to realize that she'd never been able to read that fast. An attempt at saying those secret words as fast as possible, again and again, resulted in a quick and unsatisfactory resurfacing of the words for only a second, as if the book was admonishing her.

A declaration, she thought. A declaration made the words appear. "I miss you," was a strong declaration. Performative language had a power all its own. Vows, promises, oaths all were words that signified more than just language, they were *intent*. The power was not in the magic or the wands; the power was in the *words*.

"I love you, Sirius Black," Hermione whispered aloud for the first time.

And like a dam unstopped, words rushed to the fore. They were faded, some obscured by her ill-advised smear of blood, but they were there.

The handwriting was not Josef's. It was tighter, smaller, feminine. Sofie's.

Hermione conjured a scroll and quill, determined to copy this out in case the words faded, though they still remained strong and clear.

"The blood is the key... connected for eternity... the Veil has a plan for us all... when the plan comes not to fruition... will intervene."

Hermione kept scribbling, passing over words that were unclear or obscured.

"His soul and mine, intertwined, irreversible... so afraid, but he makes it better. At first... public, but it is better now, with him, my Rol... the emotion, the passion..."

This word was underlined, so Hermione underlined it in her copy, brain working furiously.

"...the passion was frightening, alarming... could not be sure it was real...*was* real, I see that now. Part of the plan... cured me. Never thought I would be a mother... even Jessop said it was not possible... *cured me*..."

Hermione tried to remember how to breathe.

"Why, I wondered for so many years, *why*..."

Almost there, Hermione thought. *Almost*...

"But now I know... now we know with certainty..."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"Josef. Josef. *Josef*."

And then there was nothing. The words faded back into the page until only an unsightly smear remained. So simple, the answers. There all along, really.

But how to tell Sirius?

Sirius bounded up the stairs. Two and a half days was much too long to go without the woman he loved. Much too long by half.

Not that he regretted spending time with Teddy and Harry. He hadn't thought he'd ever see such a natural father as James had been with Harry, but today put those thoughts to rest for the final time. Harry with Teddy was like watching the waves, the moonrise, the rain. The most natural thing in the world.

And when Sirius was there, when Teddy had waddled over to see him, with Harry's help, Sirius only had one wish in the entire world, and that was for Hermione to be there. Then his family would be whole.

For he truly felt as though Teddy was his family. They were related, but by more than blood. Through Remus, and through Harry.

In his long life, Sirius had been in many places he didn't belong. His ancestral home, where he'd been an outcast. Azkaban, where he'd been imprisoned under false pretences. His ancestral home again, as a voluntary captive this time, and then the Veil.

But for the first time since Hogwarts, Sirius felt at home. And it wasn't a place; it wasn't walls and a floor, not even close. It was Hermione. It was Harry. It was Teddy. Andromeda could visit, of course.

And it felt so *good* to be home.

In fact, Sirius was in such a good mood, he'd decided that owling Draco Malfoy deserved a place on his list of things to do. The boy really had no one now, and Sirius had so much. He could afford the olive branch, especially after hearing how the boy's wand had wavered in the key, determining moment.

Harry thought that Draco deserved a second chance. Sirius had *never* been in the position to offer such a thing, but now that he was, he decided it was the right thing to do. No one should be so alone.

Sirius pushed lightly on the door to his bedroom. Moonlight filtered in, but the soft glow came from a gently flickering candle on the bedside table. Hermione was fast asleep, a book in her lap, unsurprisingly.

Undressing quietly, watching his sleeping love's face for signs of awakening, Sirius crawled under the covers. He took the book from her fingers and placed it beside the candle. There was a quill and some parchment settled on her lap, and Sirius went to move those as well, when the odd, scrawling handwriting caught his eye. It was like Hermione's, only much too rushed.

He scanned the words, making little sense of them. It was obviously about the Veil, that he knew. The woman he'd read about in the *Daily Prophet* article, Sofie something.

Sirius read on. *Cured?* What did that mean? She'd been infertile? Sirius knew enough about that. Infertility ran in pure-blood families like his. Narcissa and Andromeda had managed a child each, though not for lack of trying for more, especially on Andromeda's part...everyone had known she'd been desperate for a large family. Even Narcissa had mentioned wanting siblings for her son, with Lucius casually mentioning "an heir and a spare." But Draco had put Narcissa on strict bed rest, and toward the end, it had seemed neither would make it.

Bellatrix hadn't been able to have children at all, having suffered miscarriages in the early years of her marriage.

For the first time in his life, Sirius wondered if he'd been affected as well. There were *no more Blacks*. He couldn't believe he'd never thought of it before. His line would die with him, and it had never occurred to him that he might not be able to father children.

But the Veil had cured Sofie... did that mean he was cured as well, if anything had, indeed, been wrong?

And what did the last words on the paper mean? Josef was the answer? Of course, it was all well and good that Sofie and her husband went on to have a happy family, and very lucky, too, for if the Veil had not....

Oh, gods.

Sirius' thoughts began again, very slowly. If the Veil had not cured Sofie, Josef Alensky would not have been born. The wizarding world would have been in danger of dying out. *Josef was the answer*. Not just to Sofie's happy family, but to the *world* as they knew it.

The Veil had taken Sofie, cured her infertility, given her a child who went on to be a *saviour*.

The Veil has a plan for us all....

Hermione awoke with her customary bone-rattling stretch. She could sense Sirius beside her. She was glad he was home; she had so much to tell him. She'd been smiling like the loon throughout the entire weekend, which meant, of course, that Sirius had been having fun with Harry and Teddy. She couldn't be more thrilled.

Turning over slowly, Hermione gazed upon her lover. She never thought she'd be the type to caress a man in his sleep, but Sirius' wavy hair warranted such attention. She pushed it away from his face, pacing a soft kiss on his temple.

Sirius.

Hermione pushed the sheet down his chest, baring him as much as she felt comfortable with without him awake.

He had changed a lot since she'd first seen him in the Shrieking Shack. He'd been gaunt, starved, brutalized, his eyes hollow and desperate. It was hard to believe this was the same man.

Hermione ran her fingers lightly over his collarbone. He could still stand to put on a few pounds, but other than that, the difference was night and day. He'd gotten a lot of sun from wherever he'd gone during her fourth year, and it was strange to think that tan remained, even though, to her, it was years later.

She lightly brushed over a nipple, scratching softly and watching it pebble and tighten. Smiling, she repeated her actions on the other nipple, and Sirius shifted a little, raising one arm up over his head.

Continuing her exploration, Hermione smoothed her fingertips down his ribs and over his abdomen, delighting in the muscles there. She propped herself up on her elbow, watching his face as her finger slipped below the bed sheet, grazing his hair. In repose, he could almost be her age.

Hermione trailed one finger over his cock, surprised to find him half hard and growing. She took him in her hand, only barely circling him, creating an easy ring to stroke him with.

A low moan drew her attention back to his face. Sirius' eyes were open, and he was watching her intently. She was struck by the storminess of his eyes, even as neither of them said a word. It looked as though there were a thousand things he was desperate to say, but all were better said by silence.

His cock was growing in her sure grip, and Sirius bit his lip but gave no other indication of his appreciation. He turned onto his side, facing her, and drew her face down for a kiss. It was so intense that her hand stilled, her entire being focused on what he was telling her with his mouth.

Sirius' hand slid over her side, dipping sharply at her waist and rising to her hip. He drew her thigh up so that it rested on his own hip. Her fingers were reminded of their duty when she felt his cock pulse in her hand.

Still silent, Sirius' hand found its way between her thighs, caressing her lightly, almost teasingly.

She was the first to break the mutual quiet, whispering, "Sirius," as his hand surely manipulated her.

"I want you," he responded, to which she could only nod. The weekend had felt like an eternity without him. Now that she was sure her feelings were real and not

manufactured by the bond, Hermione felt more available to give herself freely. Sofie's notes had reassured her, if only by allowing Hermione to realize that her feelings had been real all along.

Sirius moved to sit back against the headboard, pulling her into his lap so that she straddled him. When she lifted to sink onto him, he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Hermione, you're on the potion, right?"

"Of course," she answered automatically. They'd already had this discussion early in their relationship, but she had to wonder why he was bringing it up now. She didn't want to be the one to tell him she had reason to believe he'd been sterile before, nor was she exactly relishing telling him that it seemed as though they were supposed to have a child together.

"Do you think... I mean... you'd be a great mum, and I... well..." he trailed off, looking lost. Hermione was sure the expression was echoed on her own face.

"You want me to go off the potion?" she whispered, searching his eyes.

"Not right now! I mean, not that you could right now. But I want... to talk about it?" He was biting his lip as if afraid of her answer, which Hermione wasn't entirely sure she felt steady enough to give.

"We can... talk about it. Of course. You... you want kids, then?"

He nodded solemnly, running his hands up and down her arms, causing her to shiver. "You?"

"Yes," she said, leaning forward to kiss him a little.

"With me?" he clarified.

"Yes! And... you want them with me, right?"

"Very much, Hermione."

"So... what does that mean, exactly? I mean, I know people have kids without getting married all the time, but I always thought...."

"Oh! Did I forget to tell you? I want to marry you." Sirius grinned as Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Was that a proposal?" she asked, shocked.

"No! I mean, yes. I propose that we get married. But that wasn't *the* proposal. I don't think. Did you... want it to be, or...?"

Hermione had the fleeting thought that if they were going to get married and have kids, they'd have to eventually learn to say what was on their minds.

"That was fine," she said, feeling almost numb. "We're getting married?"

He nodded firmly. "We're getting married," he confirmed.

"Wow," she whispered, leaning against his shoulder, burying her face in his neck. He smelled amazing, and she knew she would never forget that scent for as long as she lived. It would always remind her of the day Sirius had proposed.

"Hermione, I want to tell you something. Now, just listen and don't say anything. And you don't have to answer me, or feel pressure, or anything. You don't have to say it back. But I've known... for a really long time, actually, that I've wanted to be with you forever. And not just because of the bond, though that certainly helped to make me see things clearly. But I love you. I love you so much."

Hermione remembered that breathing was necessary for life, and without life, there would be no marrying, so she took a deep breath. Sirius loved her.

"I love you, too," she said simply, as if nothing was ever easier. And maybe nothing had been.

Sirius' lips met hers in a kiss that was soft and sweet, full of promises and words finally spoken. Her lips parted immediately; she would never deny him. When his tongue touched hers, Hermione smiled into the kiss. Everything about this moment was perfect.

Maybe it had taken too much sacrifice and too much suffering to get to this point. But everything they'd gone through had brought them here, and Hermione wouldn't take that away if she could. And though Sirius had suffered infinitely more than she, she somehow knew he felt the same way.

The kiss lasted forever, their lips touching in a vow to never hurt the other, never lose the other. When Hermione finally settled on top of Sirius, he filled her in a way that was more than a perfect fit. It was a perfect *match*. Everything about Sirius was made to complete Hermione. Her soul was in him. They were more connected than ever in this moment.

"So hard not to tell you," Sirius confessed, his hands on her hips, guiding her slowly. "Not to tell you that I love you."

Hermione's arms were around Sirius' neck, their lips never far apart, so when she answered, she breathed it into him. "I wanted to say it, too. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know..."

He shushed her with a hard kiss, his hips moving beneath her in a rhythm that fell perfectly in line with her own. "I said it, sometimes. Not... when you could hear me," he said, sounding a little sheepish, but he was too close for her to actually see, beyond the overwhelming grey of his eyes.

"I feel like I heard you," she responded, her hips moving more quickly, as though her words had released something. And it was true. When he'd said the words only moments before, it hadn't felt like he was saying them for the first time. It seemed like she'd been hearing them for an eternity.

Then words were no longer possible, though they spoke to one another in a different way. Hermione's hand through his hair told him she would keep him safe. Sirius' hand clenching on her hips told her he'd never let her go. Her whimper when he licked her lower lip revealed that she found him irresistible, and his lick said he loved the way she tasted.

In the way that only seems right for two lovers who have just revealed their truest feelings, Hermione and Sirius came together, crying out in unison, hands grabbing, fingers tightening, eyes flashing.

Sirius rocked them both when Hermione's body didn't seem to want to answer her mind's directions. His gentle thrusts into her made her feel completely loved.

And then she realized. She *was* loved.

Curled on top of him, Hermione knew there was still a lot to say, but she didn't care. She let Sirius draw the blankets over them, tucking it around her lovingly.

"I read your parchment," he whispered.

"So, you know?"

"Maybe not as much as you know, but I think so. I wouldn't have been able to have kids if I hadn't gone through the Veil, would I?"

Hermione hugged him. "I don't think so, Sirius."

He was quiet for a long moment. "Then I'm glad. I'm glad it happened. I think I would have fallen for you either way, Hermione, but I'm glad it happened this way, because now we can have a family." His words were decisive and had the quality of an oath.

"We already have a family, love. You, me, Harry, and Teddy. Now we're just going to expand it a little."

"Or a lot."

Hermione considered. Growing up an only child had been lonely at times. Maybe she wouldn't have thought so if she'd had more friends, but she'd often wished for siblings. "Or a lot," she agreed, smiling.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

The next few weeks seemed to flit past Hermione and Sirius in a maelstrom of discovery.

No longer attempting to make sense of what the Veil had in store for them, the pair simply enjoyed one another's company, relaxed and secure in the way that only those whose futures were predestined could truly experience.

And for Sirius, especially, the lack of true free will didn't feel like a trap anymore. In fact, it gave him a renewed sense of freedom. It didn't matter what he did, because everything would turn out as it was meant to. But that didn't take any of the excitement out of it, not at all. Hermione was still a mission in discovering everything he could, from the freckle on the back of her knee, to the perfect ringlet that formed in the hair on the nape of her neck when she was just out of the shower.

It wasn't as though his life was *planned*; it was just going exactly as it was supposed to.

And now he had a meeting with his godson to explain exactly that and more. Sirius didn't think Harry would be upset that Sirius and Hermione were planning on getting married, but Sirius wanted to reassure him that he was not losing a godfather.

Sirius knew that family was the most important thing in the world to Harry, and as much as Sirius was related to him, now Hermione would be, as well. Through over a decade of friendship, each member of the Trio would finally be official family. Harry would be thrilled, Sirius was sure.

But just in case, he brought out his best bottle of Ogden's Old, placing it rather obviously beside two glasses on the kitchen table. Hermione had been called into work, a more and more frequent occurrence these days, despite the late hour. She'd planned on letting Sirius handle telling Harry anyway; she'd said it was because Sirius would know what to say, but he had the impression that it was more because she was afraid Harry would be hurt. Though she wasn't one to back down in the face of a friend's pre-emptive upset, something about this was certainly different, for both of them.

Harry's approval might not change their minds about what they wanted, but it could alter the course of what they chose to do. Neither was comfortable getting married without Harry's blessing.

When the Floo announced the younger man's arrival, Sirius wiped suspiciously damp palms on the front of his denims and went to offer his support for Harry's haphazard entrance.

"Sirius!" Harry laughed, gratefully accepting the steadying arm he offered. "I was just at Andromeda's with Teddy. I think he misses you; his hair was long and black."

Sirius felt that place inside him effuse warmth and took heart from that sensation.

"I miss him, too. But I hope to see him tomorrow, if you're... if you're up to it."

"Sure," Harry said agreeably, waving a hand to get his clothing back in order. "Why wouldn't I be up for it? I usually see him for at least an hour after work."

"Well, I'm not exactly sure how you're going to take what I brought you here to say," Sirius hedged, wondering where his previous approach of just coming right out and saying it had gone.

"Is everything okay? Is Hermione all right? Is this about the Veil?" Harry took a seat, his hands tight over his knees.

"Everything is fine, I promise. It isn't that. It's good news, really," Sirius assured him, patting his shoulder a little awkwardly.

"It doesn't sound like everything's all right," Harry said, unconvinced.

"It's just that... well, you know how much I've come to care for Hermione, and she for me. We love each other, Harry."

Harry didn't exactly look surprised, but his face was still scrunched in concern. "That's great, Sirius. I mean, really. I never would have thought it, but seeing you two together, it just somehow works, doesn't it? And you're both happy, I can see that much. So, I mean, if you need my blessing or whatever, you've got it in spades."

Sirius smiled. "That means a lot to me, Harry. More than you know. But it's more than that. Well, we want to get married. That's what I brought you here to say. Not right away, mind, but soon."

Harry's eyes widened fractionally, but he gave no other indication that he'd even heard. "You're going to get married? Wow, that's... soon, isn't it? And Hermione'll be... like my stepmum?"

Harry's consternation caused Sirius to laugh out loud. Harry looked a little shell-shocked, but there was a smile playing on the corners of his mouth.

"Well, we don't think it's too soon. And we know that our feelings are true, but more than that, those feelings are going to be there forever. So there's really no difference between doing it now and waiting five years when the outcome is going to be the same, regardless. We mostly just want you to be on board with this. Your opinion really matters, Harry, especially to me. And if you want to think of Hermione as your stepmum, well, that's up to you, though if you tell her that, be assured that she will take advantage of the position. You get enough mothering from her without the title!"

Harry laughed, and the mesh cage that had been tightening over Sirius' heart eased a little.

"Too right," Harry agreed, chuckling. "Well, I suppose congratulations are in order?" Harry grinned that easy, wide grin and poured them both a generous dose of Ogden's.

"Thank you," Sirius said softly, letting his gratitude, for so much more than Harry's easy acceptance, shine through to his godson.

"No problem, Sirius. Just... take good care of her. And... and let her take care of you, okay?"

Sirius clinked their glasses together and downed his hearty drink. "You got it, son," Sirius vowed.

Harry looked surprised for a moment, but he seemed to understand that Sirius meant his words honestly, not as a usurpation of James' rightful role, but as an honorary title that Sirius would have been only too proud to have been literal.

After Harry left, Sirius wrote an owl to Draco Malfoy. He hadn't known him very well, having only seen him a few times in the young man's youth, but from what he'd heard, Draco had made good in the wizarding world, though almost too late.

When asked, Harry hadn't had many positive things to say about the young Malfoy, but neither had his opinions been negative. Draco been kept out of the thick of the war by Snape, but his neutrality still rubbed Sirius the wrong way. If he'd really realized the errors of his ways, he should have gone to the Order, to Harry, for help.

Sirius knew he had a problem with seeing things in shades of grey.

But despite all that, he was intent to at least make the offer to mend the broken fence. Draco was a part of his family, and Sirius himself had found forgiveness and as such, felt more easily prepared to offer it in turn.

Though rather tersely worded, the Black crest on the owl missive was enough to show Draco that some bonds were worth keeping, even if they were tenuous.

After opening the window for the owl to deliver the message, Sirius walked toward the front door. Hermione was home. For some reason, like with many things these days, Sirius didn't know how or why, but he just *knew*.

As expected, the front door opened instead of the Floo sounding. Sirius saw why a moment later; Hermione was wearing the blue silk shift dress with a white cardigan. She always Apparated when wearing fine materials. Sirius smiled, proud to know such a simple but intrinsic detail.

"Hey, love," he said softly, taking her into his arms. She let herself be folded, obviously weary from a very long day.

"How did it go with Harry?" she asked, trying for casualness, but the tension in her shoulders belied her nervousness.

"Fine, just as you must have known it would be. He's thrilled for us. He only had one caveat, and that was for us to take care of one another."

Hermione snuggled deeper into his embrace. "I was planning on doing that anyway, so I supposed it's a simple enough sacrifice," she whispered into his chest.

"Me, too," he confessed, smiling into her hair.

Breaking the embrace, Hermione walked into the kitchen. "What did you have for dinner?" she asked, opening the larder.

"Oh, just something Kr...something I whipped up," Sirius said easily. Kreacher's 'help' was still a secret, though probably not one for very long, after a near-slip like that. Though Sirius knew he should tell Hermione the truth about who really did the cooking and cleaning around Grimmauld Place these days, he chose to stay mute for the sake of peace.

"Mmm," she said distractedly, putting together a basic sandwich. She munched thoughtfully, and Sirius watched her, feeling as much a voyeur observing her eat as he did watching her get dressed in the mornings; though he had absolutely no plans of discontinuing either activity. She took small bites, chewed slowly, and swallowed gently, if such a thing could be said about swallowing. After a sip of water, Sirius had to kiss away the beads that rested on her lower lip.

"I owed Draco today," Sirius said, pulling out of the kiss and allowing her to finish eating in peace. She raised her eyebrows questioningly, obviously hesitant to speak with a mouth full of food.

He pretended he didn't understand her, shaking his head and furrowing his brows. Hermione huffed through her nose, raising her hand to cover her mouth delicately. "And?" she prompted.

Sirius chose not to tease her further. "And nothing, I only did it five minutes ago," he reported.

"I really think this is a good thing, Sirius. Draco has nobody, you know. And no one ever sees him out. I see Blaise Zabini all the time...his boss is my boss's boss...and even he never sees Draco, not even during the holidays."

"Blaise is Draco's friend?" Sirius guessed, not recognizing the given name, but knowing the last name well enough.

"He was, anyway," Hermione said, throwing the last bite of crust into the rubbish bin. Sirius grinned at her predictability. Just like she always covered her mouth to speak when eating, she always threw out the last bite of her sandwich, and she'd looked at him aghast when he'd offered to eat it for her, as though that last bite contained undiluted bubotuber pus, even though the rest had been perfectly serviceable. Sirius wondered if love was comprised of knowing all these little details about a person and decided that it was at least a small but important part of it.

"Well, I hope that he comes back with a positive response," Hermione continued, rinsing her dish before spelling it clean and back into the cupboard. "It might even do him good to meet Teddy. They are, what, second cousins, after all, right?"

"Something like that," Sirius said agreeably, pushing Hermione back against the counter and holding her there with his body. "I missed you today."

Hermione hummed, her arms coming up to encircle his neck. She lifted her face for a kiss, and he obliged. "I missed you, too," she said once the kiss ended.

"I thought about you today, you know." Sirius grabbed her hips and hefted her onto the counter, smiling as her legs automatically came around his waist, pulling him against her core, her silk dress riding high around her thighs.

"When did you think of me?" she whispered, kissing his neck.

"In the shower," he admitted, though he hoped she wouldn't ask more details. Sirius felt it almost a betrayal to his playboy youth to wank while thinking about his steady girlfriend, but there was nothing torrid about the way his hands had gripped his cock, imagining they were hers instead.

"I thought about you, too."

"When?" he countered.

"Not telling," she evaded, and Sirius forgot about it when she pulled his head down for a kiss.

Sirius' cock was already straining against the confines of his snug denims when Hermione's searching hand opened them, pulling him from his pants and stroking him in a way that was simultaneously gentle and incendiary.

Sirius rucked her dress even higher, until it pooled around her hips, bearing her to his gaze. "Beautiful," he whispered, moaning as her hand tightened around him.

"Oh, gods, Sirius," Hermione said, rocking against him on the countertop. "Want you."

Sure he would never tire of hearing those sweet words fall from her lips, Sirius pushed her panties to one side, unable to wait even the scant seconds it would take to get rid of them. He pulled her to the very edge of the counter and wrapped her legs higher up around his waist.

"Ready?" he asked, lining himself up to her glistening entrance. She was so responsive, Sirius marvelled.

She only twitched her hips forward in response, and that was more than enough for him. He slid into her impossible tightness, sinking his teeth into her neck to avoid crying out. No matter how many times he did this, he was always amazed that he *could*, that he was allowed to, welcomed to.

Her head fell back a little, and Sirius took her up on her subconscious offering, feasting on the sweet flesh of her neck as he filled her. He remained still within her, unable to move for fear of embarrassing himself.

"Touch yourself," he commanded softly, not that he needed the visual stimulation. But there was something so deliciously forbidden about watching that private part of her, that part that knew instinctively what would please her.

After a brief moment's hesitation, Hermione's hand moved into the space between them, two fingers tentatively spreading her folds and lightly pressing against her clit. She whimpered, and Sirius took this as his cue to move.

He slowly withdrew, evoking that sweet sound from her again, but plunged back in immediately, deeper than before. She was so wet, so tight, and Sirius found himself telling her that, interspersed with confessions of devotion and long-known love. A part of him recognized that he was saying things he hadn't meant to say, not this soon, anyway, but the resultant whispers from his love were more than worth his secrets.

"Harder, finger yourself harder," Sirius directed, holding her hips as he thrust into her, shaking them both with the force of his movements. Her fingers stopped teasing and immediately began a frenzied pace on her clit, circling and smoothing over the swollen nub.

"Yes," he hissed, alternately watching her fingers and her face, which was screwed up in concentration, a furious blush spreading at being watched, her lower lip swollen and whitened from her teeth's merciless grip on it. Her eyes were hooded, dark and expressive with lust as she met his gaze.

"Beautiful," he repeated, for if anything bore repetition, it was that.

"Sirius," she said through gritted teeth, bringing him back to himself. He could feel his orgasm building as though outside himself, her body such a welcoming place for him to be, so safe and warm and pure.

"Come, love, you have to come," he told her, hips moving jerkily as his balls drew up, ready to release the moment he knew she was going over her edge.

When she cried out, her fingers stilled, pressing into herself as her body clenched around him, from pussy, to thighs, to soul.

Sirius gave into the rhythmic pulsing of her body, his body going rigid as his veins turned to ice, and his entire being seemed to empty inside her. He panted as the rolling tide of his climax ebbed, and the room was silent but for the shaky breaths of its occupants.

He slowly pulled from her, hypnotized as a string of come followed his movement and escaped her body. Hermione leaned limply against the cupboard, legs spread, dress straps trapping her arms from when they'd slipped down in their passion. Never was such an angel so wanton as his.

"Wow," she said, laughing as she readjusted her dress, blowing her messy hair from her eyes.

"You said it," he rejoined, helping her with a tangle of hair that had woven itself around an earring.

"I should work late more often," she mused, hopping down from the counter. It seemed as though her legs were unwilling to support her, but Sirius offered an arm, and she soon steadied. He couldn't help but lean on her a little in return, as his own legs regained power.

"I think we would have done that even if you'd stayed home all day," Sirius said truthfully, pouring them both a much-needed glass of water.

"You're probably right," she conceded, taking a long draught. "But it is nice to think that you just couldn't contain yourself after such a long absence."

He shook his head, chuckling softly. "If only you knew... I can't contain myself ever*now*, when I should be spent and satisfied."

Despite the weariness that had graced her features after she walked in the door from a trying day, Hermione's eyebrow quirked in a way that was undeniably an indication of interest. However, Sirius was not as young as his words made him out to be, though his cock did valiantly twitch at her suddenly sultry gaze.

But just a moment later, her eyes lightened back into their normal whiskey brown, and she smiled ruefully. "I'm ready to call it a night, love."

He only nodded. He shoed her up to bed, and she obediently trudged up the stairs as Sirius washed and put away the water glasses, after filling his once more.

A tapping on the window brought his attention away from imagining Hermione undressing one floor up, and he opened it to admit an unremarkable brown owl bearing a sealed letter. He took it, and the bird flew off without pestering for payment or even treats. Shrugging, Sirius went to crack the seal before he'd realized it wasn't the Malfoy insignia.

Looking at the front of the envelope, he saw it was for Hermione, but there was no indication of the sender. He was curious enough to bring it up to bed with him, and a very sleepy Hermione opened and read it while he performed his nightly ablutions.

"Well?" he asked upon his return to the bedroom, climbing into the sinfully comfortable bed.

"That reporter, Frankenhodge," she mumbled. "Wants his interview."

Sirius only vaguely recognized the name, and then he realized it was the man who'd helped Hermione find Renworth Alensky during the week Hermione and Sirius had been apart. That felt like so long ago now. Sirius was almost surprised that the reporter hadn't owled before today; Hermione had painted him as the insistent type.

But any and all musings were eradicated by the steady, shallow breathing of the woman who shared his bed. Before succumbing to sleep himself, Sirius turned over to face her. As always, her hair was taking over more than its fair share of the pillow, and he shifted it out of her face. Her nose wrinkled, but a small smile settled as she snuffled lightly.

Sirius kissed her sleep-warmed lips before settling onto his back. There was a time when number twelve Grimmauld Place had felt more like mausoleum than a home, and another time when it had been a prison cell. But now, simply by virtue of one woman's presence, for the first time in his life, the house felt like home.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked, pouring them both a fortifying cup of tea. She made Sirius' the way he liked it, and he took the cup with an absentminded smile.

Draco had taken his time getting back to Sirius about a visit. Though it was possible he'd been out of town, Sirius was taking it rather personally and almost got rid of the missive before reading it. Hermione had stayed his quick wand, however, and now she wondered if she'd done the right thing.

"It sounds as though he'd willing to meet," Sirius said, a little grudgingly. "But it so filled with doublespeak that I could be totally wrong." He handed her the letter, and she perused it quickly.

He was right; the language was not that of a man entirely willing to mend fences, but it was possible that that was just the way Draco Malfoy was these days. He seemed to be something of a recluse, and from what she'd heard from Blaise...who spoke in a doublespeak all his own...it seemed that Draco wasn't the same person she'd known in her school days, and thank Merlin for that, for she doubted Sirius would want to meet with him more than once if Draco was the little brat she'd known.

"It's a little presumptuous of him," she admitted, "to invite you over today, with so little warning, after putting you off all week."

Sirius grunted in agreement, eyes narrowed on the letter once more, as if he could literally read between the lines and decipher what Draco really meant.

Sipping her tea, Hermione contemplated her own owl. Jimothy Frankenhodge had been increasingly insistent about his interview, but for some reason, Hermione couldn't feel comfortable giving it to him.

Perhaps it was from years of being lambasted by the media, or perhaps it was just a desire for her own privacy, but she was hesitant to let reveal the entire story to the public. She felt as though she'd only just begun her life, and now, already, people were bargaining for bits and pieces of it. Perhaps it was irrational, and she *had* made a deal, but she wanted to have just a little more time to herself before the entire truth got out.

She was afraid, of course, that she would be arrested for her use of Dark Magic *inside* the Ministry itself. Dark wizards and witches were fewer after the defeat of Voldemort, but those that were caught faced the full extent of the law. Despite her past and her connections, she knew she would be no exception. The Ministry might even make an example of her. It wasn't as though she'd done anything with herself since the end of the war, except bring Sirius back.

A few more days, she told herself, sending Frankenhodge's strongly worded letter to her desk. A few more days of peace and sanity, a few more days for Sirius to reach out to his family and put his life back together.

Then she would worried about hers falling apart.

Getting up, she went to the larder to see what had to be purchased for groceries. She liked to go on Saturdays when it was a little easier to blend into the crowd.

"Did you want anything from the grocery store, Sirius?" she asked absently, making up her list.

"No, love. Do you want company?"

She smiled, making sure to write down a few of his favourite snacks. He knew she preferred to go on her own, especially as the one time she'd had him tag along ended up with them spending twice as much as she normally did and with paper bags full of food she'd never have purchased on her own. The man was impossible to control when it came to impulse items.

"No, thanks." List finished, she bent over to give him a quick kiss, only giving a token protest when he hauled her into his lap.

"Mmm," he whispered against her lips. "Think I can just have you for breakfast?"

Hermione sighed softly. She was about to make a smart remark when her stomach growled, answering for her.

She blushed, but Sirius only laughed and pushed her back to her feet.

"Can't seduce a starving woman," he declared with an air as though that fact was truly regrettable.

"I'll be back in under an hour," she said. Sirius seemed to take that as a promise of further affections, for he leered at her.

But he couldn't hold the look and smiled instead. "I'll have a little breakfast waiting for when you get back. There's some eggs left, and bread, as well."

"Thanks, Sirius," she said gratefully. He was a great cook, especially lately, and she was glad that that was one responsibility neither of them objected to him taking on.

Another kiss saw her out the door. It was strange, she thought as she walked down the street to the Apparition point, how much nicer it was to go grocery shopping when you weren't only thinking of yourself. It was still a chore, nothing could offset that, but knowing that Sirius preferred his pumpkin juice pulp-free or that buying a Chocolate Frog at the counter would ensure gratitude wholly unequal to the effort of the purchase, made shopping a tad more enjoyable.

Hermione suddenly groaned, realising she'd left her pocketbook. She turned on her heel and started back, grateful that she'd remembered before getting too far.

She opened up the front door and went down to the kitchen, the reason for her return on her lips.

Sirius looked at her with wide eyes, and Hermione slowed, confused.

His eyes flickered over to the sink beside her, and her gaze automatically followed.

She shrieked in surprise at the little body diligently whisking eggs.

"Kreacher?" she gasped, swinging her gaze back to Sirius. "What is he doing here, Sirius?"

Sirius stood slowly, not quite meeting her eyes. "He belongs to the house, love. I couldn't just..."

"Just what? Do you even know what he...and how *could* you... I just...Kreacher, here, take this!" Hermione pulled off her light scarf and tried to hand it to the house-elf, who had been watching the interaction from the corner of his enormous eye. When he saw what she was trying to do, he made an awful hissing noise and disappeared.

Hermione and Sirius stared at one another.

"You know what he did, don't you? The secrets he told about the Order? And how he made Harry think... Merlin, Sirius, he played a huge role in *your death!*"

"Harry told me all that. I know. But there's no one left for him to betray us to, is there? Unless Draco cares how I like my tea or how stiff I prefer my collars!"

Hermione giggled. She couldn't imagine even *allowing* that foul thing to touch her food... but then, he surely had, hadn't he?"

"He could be poisoning us...you. Every day! Oh, my gods..."

Sirius shook his head. "He can't. I ordered him not to." A small smile played on his lips, but Hermione only shook her head. Loyalty could not be ordered.

"And even so! You *know* how I feel about slavery!" She wasn't sure she knew what upset her more, but she did know that Kreacher would *not* be making food for her any longer. He could go back to Hogwarts. Or really, he could *die*, for all she cared. She might not agree with house-elf enslavement, but that just meant that she knew there was no excuse for his betrayal, and she hated him just as she would hate anyone who had contributed to the death of her friend...and for five years, that's what she'd believed.

"It was just a little help in the kitchen, love. Not something to get so upset over," Sirius said glibly.

"You're kidding me, right? Wow. You have *no* idea," Hermione said, amazed that he could be so nonchalant.

"I have an idea, Hermione! I just don't really *care*. He's a little shit, yeah. But he's *bound*, and he belongs to this house and my family, and honestly, Hogwarts was a vacation for him!"

"I'm not comfortable having him here, Sirius. I mean, you must understand that. Not only because of what he did, but because I don't believe in binding slaves to wizards." She tried to keep her voice calm, but she was more affected than she was even letting on. Sirius had *lied* to her, had done something he'd *known* she would hate... for why else would he have hidden it from her?

"Honestly, you're making a huge deal out of nothing. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but he's just a house-elf. He wants to serve, and I want him to. Everyone wins." Sirius crossed his arms over his chest as though that signified the end, and his victory, of the discussion.

Ha.

"Everyone except me! I hate that he's here! I hate what he did, and I hate what he represents! *And really* hate that you lied to me. How could you do that? You let me praise your cooking and thank you for being so thoughtful by taking care of this place! I feel so *stupid*..."

"No, I don't want you to feel stupid, 'Mione. Really. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be upset, but I'm shite at taking care of a house. And I really can't cook. I thought that if you... if you knew that, you wouldn't want..."

"Oh, Sirius," Hermione said, wanting to take his hand, but not wanting to back down just yet. "I don't care if you can cook or clean. Those are the sorts of things people learn as they go."

"You act like I'm some twenty year old bachelor straight out of his parents' house! I'm twice your age and can't do half the fucking household or cooking charms and spells you can! It's embarrassing."

"So, rather than feel embarrassed, you decided to let a vicious little traitor into my home and *lie* to me about it?"

Sirius looked as though there were a great many things he'd like to say, but what he finally settled upon was said in a low, stiff voice. "This is *stuffy* house, Hermione. You might live here, but it's *mine*, and I'll do as I please."

Hermione nodded slowly. "So you've shown. Continually."

Immediately, Sirius' face changed, shifting from cool and aloof to apologetic and sincere. The change was so sudden that Hermione blinked to keep up.

"I didn't mean that how it sounded. I mean, yes, it's my house, but it's also *your home*. And I'm grateful for the care you took of it while I was... gone."

She was quiet for what felt like a long time. This conversation wasn't going anything like she felt it should. They'd fought before...they'd had some pretty impressive arguments from anything from pure-blood politics to Order policies to proper usage of the word "whom," but most of the time, they agreed on *something* and were able to create common ground from that mutual understanding.

And now, they both agreed that Kreacher was a traitor, but that was it. And while, to Hermione, that meant that he didn't deserve to work in this house, and especially not for Sirius, to Sirius, it meant that serving him was like penance for the house-elf.

She also knew from past discussions that Sirius did not agree with her regarding house-elf rights. He might have been a Gryffindor, and a black sheep in his family, but he had been raised a pure-blood, and he believed that elves *wanted* bondage. And while ludicrous to her, she knew that belief was common, and she hadn't commented on it beyond a few choice words here and there, equally matched by his own annoyingly thoughtful arguments. But it had never come between them before.

"I was happy to maintain Grimmauld Place, Sirius, and not just as a favour to Harry, but for you, as well. I know you hated it here, but it always reminded me of you. And to see Kreacher here feels so wrong."

"Can we just drop it? Neither of us is going to change our minds."

Hermione huffed. She hated it when he avoided things like this. They both knew if the subject were abandoned now, it wouldn't be brought back up.

"Fine, but I don't want him cooking my food or cleaning up after me or touching my laundry or *anything*. I mean that. I don't care about the extra work. I won't contribute to slavery, and I won't reward him for betraying you."

Sirius nodded solemnly. "I'll let him know. So, did you forget something?"

Hermione glared at him. He really was unbelievable sometimes. One minute he was fighting tooth and nail, and the next he was perfectly agreeable. She found it much more trying to switch her own emotions on and off...something that was evidenced by her snatching her pocketbook off the counter and storming out of the house without another word.

The door slamming spoke well enough for her.

Sirius supposed he was going to have to learn how to cook.

He truly hadn't expected such an ardent reaction from Hermione, though he probably should have. She was passionate about a great many things; not the least of which being Sirius, himself, but he would admit that he hadn't quite expected her to raise such holy hell over the simple matter of a house-elf.

And Harry had told him all about Kreacher's disloyalty, but Sirius was certain he'd taken care of that with a few well-detailed threats and some explicit instructions. The elf wasn't permitted to leave the house except to go back to Hogwarts.

But despite all that, the most important thing was that Hermione was happy. But Merlin, did she know how to get him riled up, or what? When they were in the midst of the fight, Sirius found himself almost incapable of letting it go, even when he agreed with her. Usually it let to some decent (or rather, indecent) make-up sex, but he could tell he'd pushed her too far for that, this time.

"Kreacher!" he called. The mangy elf popped into the kitchen, looking as displeased as ever, probably at being interrupted at making Sirius' breakfast and at being called back, both.

"Yes, master?"

"We won't be needing your... services around Grimmauld Place any longer," Sirius said, the note of apology in his voice not for the elf, but for the work he'd be doing from here on out.

"Is master freeing Kreacher?" The house-elf looked almost greedy, and Sirius wondered exactly what sort of carnage the old thing would get up to, if freed.

"Absolutely not. You are to remain at Hogwarts and do the Headmistress' bidding, as before. You're not to return here unless called, which you won't be."

Kreacher didn't even bother sticking around long enough to reply; he just popped out of existence, and Sirius knew that was the last he'd see of the dreaded elf. And good riddance, too.

He wondered exactly how much grovelling was in store for him once Hermione returned.

Deciding to postpone the inevitable, like the Gryffindor he was, Sirius decided he'd leave early to go to Malfoy Manor. Hermione would get back, have enough time to cool down, and Sirius would return with an idea of how to handle their latest fight.

Sirius made the short walk to the Apparition point, a loud crack signalling his departure. He arrived across the lawn at Draco's family home. It was just as ostentatious and absolutely unnecessary as he remembered from his youth. Narcissa's marriage had been a coup for his family, but Sirius had other ideas about the match, ideas that had apparently proved true during the war.

Draco was opening the absurdly large front door before Sirius had even reached it.

"Hello," he said softly in a voice that Sirius would never had imagined him capable of. It sounded... nervous. And humble. Almost timid.

"Draco," he greeted, stepping into the Manor as Draco moved aside for him.

"Nice place you got here," he quipped, feeling unaccountably nervous.

Draco laughed quietly. "Tea?" he suggested. Upon Sirius' nod, he led them into a large and completely uncomfortable parlour.

It was obvious that nothing had changed in the house since it had fallen to Draco to head it. The furniture and finishings put Grimmauld Place to shame, even in her glory days, which had, of course, been before Sirius had left home. Sirius felt just as uncomfortable here as he had in his own home; the only consolation was that Draco looked nearly as uncomfortable, shifting awkwardly and not quite meeting Sirius' eyes.

He tried to make small talk, but it was evident that Draco was, for whatever reason, incapable.

"Is everything okay, Draco?" he finally asked, frustrated that his attempt to reach out had seemingly hit a wall.

"Sure," Draco answered, a poor attempt at casualness. "Listen, Mr. Black, if there's something I can do for you, you need only ask. I may not be able to help, but I can try."

Sirius froze. He wondered if Draco thought he was here to ask for money or something ridiculous like that. He had to admit, he'd thought the young man would be more... surprised, maybe, to see him. He *had*, after all, disappeared through a mysterious magical artefact for five years, only to be brought back by one of Draco's schoolday rivals.

And he *really* didn't like to be called Mr. Black.

"Draco, honestly. We're family, and from what I hear, you haven't got a lot left. Make that *any*. So you might as well stretch out that pale, manicured hand and grab hold of the olive branch while it's still in the offing."

Draco smiled thinly. He looked a little at a loss as to what to do. "I do appreciate you coming by..."

"Oh, no," Sirius interrupted rudely. "You can't get rid of me that easily! Listen, son, things got pretty fucked up for you, and I regret that. I regret that I wasn't able to be in your life growing up, because Merlin knows you could have used a different sort of influence. But that's all in the past now. Near as I can tell, we're both on the same page, now. Right? The war's over, kid. Why are you still fighting?"

Draco's response was completely unexpected. He dropped his head into his hands, shoulders shaking. Sirius was stunned. He didn't think the young man was crying, but he obviously wasn't far from it.

He thought of how he'd want someone to comfort Harry in this situation and moved to sit beside his cousin.

Draping an arm over the slender, shuddering form, Sirius cooed. He didn't know what else to do. He made nonsensical noises and promised about how he was here, things were different now, Sirius could help. He didn't know if any of it was heard, but a few moments later, like magic, Draco raised his head. His swollen eyes were the only evidence of any sort of breakdown.

That, and a rather indelicate sniff.

"I'll take that olive branch, now," Draco said, voice not wavering in the least.

Sirius grinned and hugged him. He tried not to look shocked when Draco hugged back.

Hermione felt like she'd been grumbling under her breath for hours. The shopping had been hell, her previous thoughts about it being more fun when the needs and desires of another person were taken into account completely obliterated.

A house-elf, she scoffed to herself. And *Kreacher!* Madness. All of it, madness.

But it *was* Sirius' house, and it *was* Sirius' elf. She could make her opinion known, oh, yes. But she couldn't force action.

After Disapparating from the market, Hermione walked the short distance to the house. She saw someone standing on the stoop and almost groaned aloud when she saw who it was.

"Mr. Frankenhodge," she said coolly, her hopes of having a few more days without the world knowing her secrets dashed.

He turned to her, blond hair streaked with black ink, even more so than when she'd last seen him. His eyes were bloodshot, his face gaunt. It was a massive change from the warm but somewhat pushy young man she'd been familiar with.

"Ms. Granger. I really need that interview, if you please," he said lowly, looking around.

Hermione followed his gaze, but couldn't tell what he was looking at.

"Now really isn't a good time," she said, trying to step past him. She just wanted to see Sirius and sort out their fight.

"Now is the *only* time," he snapped, yanking her arm, causing her to drop her bags.

The last thing she saw before the sickening tug of a Side-Along Disapparition was that the lovingly purchased Chocolate Frog had broken free of its confinement and was merrily hopping away.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Sirius returned to Grimmauld Place in much better spirits than he'd been when he'd left.

Seeing Draco had been shocking, to say the least. The young man was obviously pained, in more ways than Sirius really knew how to handle. But the important thing was that Draco had him now, and wasn't that a riot? Him, Sirius Black, finding himself able to actually help someone, to actually be of use?

The annoyed anguish he'd felt when trapped in this house, when all he'd wanted to do was join the war effort, make a difference, help the Order, was now nothing but a memory. Someone needed him, and despite having no real experience in matters like that, he would do his level best to help.

And through him, Draco and Harry were related, in a way. Maybe they could find it in themselves to move beyond their animosity and actually become friends. Or, at least, not enemies. Draco had asked about Harry, and he'd seemed curious, not malicious, to learn that Harry was happy, healthy, and godfather to Draco's cousin Teddy.

They were all linked in so many ways.

The only thing missing was the one person who'd really made all the difference. Hermione. Grimmauld Place was stark and austere without her, her presence like a balm to the wounds the hated house had left on his soul. When she was here, it didn't feel ugly or lonely.

Sirius had fucked up before, but he was learning. He never wanted Hermione to leave again. So Kreacher was gone for good, and Sirius planned to make use of his extensive library to see if he could find some manuals on household spells. He'd make her proud. It might take a little time and a lot of ingenuity, but thankfully, he had both.

He waited at the kitchen table for her for to return. He'd been there almost an hour, slipping into a sort of daydream-y trance, thinking on all the things he would say...and do...to her when she returned. He'd apologise, of course. She needed to know he was sorry for lying. That he understood why he shouldn't have done that. Lying about what he'd done was worse than his actions, he realised. His actions could be construed as selfish and lazy, but lying... that was deliberate. So, he'd apologise. And she'd forgive him, because she was good like that. She had a heart big enough to see past his mistakes. And then... he'd make love to her. He'd show her with his body what he felt inadequate saying with words.

He'd make *love* to her.

And she'd be happy that he understood why she'd been hurt, and she'd promise never to storm out in anger again, even if it was just to finish the shopping.

Which made him realise she'd been gone an awful long time, just to do shopping.

So, she's left me, Sirius thought a little blankly. Well, no matter. This was one time he wasn't going to take her decision to heart. Once, he'd forced her out. Now, he'd force her back.

Well, he'd at least make her want to come back.

Sirius was certain he knew where she'd go if she were distressed. She and Ginny had been spending a lot of time together, now that there was a wedding to be planned.

He would just go to Harry's and make sure Hermione was okay, and maybe speak with her a little. If nothing else, he'd tell Harry how he felt, and Harry would give her the message.

Sirius called out, "Godric's Hollow!" after the Floo powder sparked in the hearth. A moment later, Harry's head appeared.

"Sirius! It's good to see you!" Harry's head looked very pleased. Maybe Hermione wasn't as angry as he'd thought.

"You, too, Harry. Can you ask Hermione to come to the Floo? I really need to speak with her."

Harry look confused. "Hermione's not here... I don't think. One moment."

As Harry called out for Ginny, Sirius heart started a beat a little unevenly. Where else would she go? She did have a few friends, none as close as Harry and Ginny, though. They would have been the first people she'd have gone to. Unless she wanted to be alone, in which case, Sirius might never find her. But she really wasn't the type to do that. If nothing else, she'd have let *someone* know where she was, especially after Harry's warning about those Death Eaters taking revenge.

When Harry returned to the Floo, Sirius had a very sick feeling in his stomach.

"I'm coming through," Harry announced, and Sirius had only enough time to shift to the side before Harry and Ginny both strode in.

"Did Hermione leave? Why? What's happening?" Ginny's questions were rapid-fire, but Sirius kept up.

"We had a fight. She left, I thought to finish the shopping. She should have been back hours ago."

Harry drew a deep breath. "It's going to be fine. I'm sure she just needed some time to think. Nonetheless, I'll call it in to the Corps, and we'll start looking."

Sirius nodded numbly. He desperately hoped that they would find her at the grocery store, angrily avoiding buying his favourite items.

But when the three of them opened the front door to start the search and saw the groceries strewn as if dropped across the stoop, Sirius fell to his knees.

"Frankenhodge... *Jimothy*... you can't do this. You know Harry Potter is my best friend. You'll be sent to Azkaban."

The man laughed a little desperately. "I don't care about all that. After I have what I need, they can do whatever they like to me."

Hermione breathed deeply to remain calm. She did have experience in these sorts of situations, and hyperventilating to the point of passing out would be dangerous on a number of levels. The man was obviously disturbed, and this was clearly about more than a silly little article.

"What exactly do you want from me?"

"I want you to be quiet for a few minutes," he ordered.

Frankenhodge was walking them both down some sort of walkway. Hermione had a covering on her head and could see nothing. Frankenhodge's grip on her arm was insistent, and she stumbled, trying to keep up with him.

"We're here," he announced as if that could possibly mean anything to her.

Suddenly, the head covering was whipped off. Hermione squinted, trying to focus. She drew a sharp breath, realising where they were.

Renworth Alensky's house.

"Your fucking wards ended my Apparition more than thirty metres away! You could have warned me," Frankenhodge snapped.

Hermione turned to see whom he was addressing. Renworth was sitting in an armchair, seemingly casual, but when he shifted, Hermione could tell he was magically bound. His clothing was bunched in a manner that indicated ropes, though they were invisible. He looked very sorry to see her.

"I had a lot on my mind," Renworth said dryly.

Frankenhodge tossed Hermione onto the sofa, cast *Incarcerous* on her, and sat heavily in another armchair. She struggled against the bonds, but they held fast, as she knew they would.

The reporter dropped his head into his hands, wand held tight in one. She thought he was foolish to take his eyes off his hostages, but he didn't seem to think them any great threat. And likely, they weren't. He had Hermione's wand in his pocket, and she doubted Renworth had retained his.

"What's going on?" she asked quietly, addressing either man.

Renworth only shook his head slowly.

"Okay," Frankenhodge said in the manner of someone gathering great strength. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Granger, you're going to brew the potion and cast the spell. Alensky had told me everything he can; he's of no real further use, but I will let him go free *if* you co-operate."

Hermione tried to keep up. "What potion? What spell?"

"And it's actually good that Alensky is still here. I'll need someone to help me carry... carry... the... the body. And I don't want to use magic on... it. Her. On her."

Body.

Hermione was beginning to feel more than a little ill. "What... what have you done?"

Frankenhodge looked at Hermione as if for the first time. "I know it can be done, so don't say it can't, okay? ~~He~~ *He* said it can't, but I don't believe him! It worked for you. You got him back. And now you're happy, right? Everything's okay?"

"You have to tell me what's going on!" Hermione shouted. Panic was definitely setting in. There was already a body, and Frankenhodge had intimated that he'd have no compunction killing Renworth if she didn't go along with whatever mad plan was afoot. Sirius had *no* idea where she was, and no reason to think she'd be back any time soon. She'd left before, after all. And he hadn't come looking for her, then.

"May I?" Renworth said in a low, soothing voice. Frankenhodge stood up and left the room, waving his hand at them as if to say, 'Whatever you want.'

Hermione quickly turned to face Renworth. "What the *fuck* is going on? He's not... not a Death Eater or something, is he?" Hermione was all too aware of Harry reminding her about constant vigilance.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. Sighing deeply, he continued, "To be honest, I haven't got a very good idea of what's going on. He came here this morning, carrying

something in a large cloth bag. I'm assuming it was the body he was referring to. I haven't seen it since. He immediately stunned me and bound me. He wanted to know all about you, the Veil, everything. Very detailed questions. I told him what I could. He tried to use Cruciatus, but I don't think he has it in him. It was very weak."

"Why would he be asking about the Veil? I got owls from him, but they didn't seem so urgent as to cause this..."

Renworth shifted in his seat, but comfort was obviously not to be had. "At first, he would ask about Sofie and Rolpho, how Rolpho brought her back, specifics like the incantation and the potion. But I couldn't remember *exact* details, only generalities."

Hermione nodded. "And then he came to get me. He knew I'd have more details."

Renworth looked ashamed. "Actually, I told him to find you. I'm so sorry. I thought maybe we could help him... but as the day went on, he was clearly beyond help. I have no idea what he wants, but it's bigger than his article."

"So what do we do?" Hermione asked. All the while her mind was chanting Sirius. She just wanted to tell him he could keep his stupid house-elf if it meant that if something happened to her... he wouldn't think she was angry with him.

She opened her mouth to tell Renworth that, figuring that if she died and he lived, he could tell Sirius, but Frankenhodge re-entered the room.

"What are the ingredients?" he demanded hoarsely. If possible, he looked even worse than before. His eyes were sunken, his skin drawn tight.

"Listen to me, Jimothy. I don't know what's going on, but even if I knew all the ingredients and their amounts, which I don't, I wouldn't be able to get them tonight, and possibly not at all! The most important ingredient for the retrieval potion was essence of pure azure! And the most accomplished Potions master in Britain gave me *the last of it!*"

"No," Frankenhodge said simply. "We'll find more. Or we'll substitute. We can find this Potions master, and he'll tell us what would work just as well."

Hermione bit off a sob. Essence of pure azure had been the bonding agent. Without it, Sirius' soul would have left his body entirely, and she would have been left with a walking body, alive, but not there. Substituting it would be disastrous.

But maybe Snape will get us out of this, she thought. Snape would have Frankenhodge on his knees *inseconds*.

But Frankenhodge was speaking again. "No, the less people involved, the better."

At least that hope had been short-lived and hadn't had a chance to build up.

"Now, what are the ingredients? I have to go get them, and I need to do it as soon as possible."

He hurriedly pulled out a notebook, flipping the cover and posing a self-filing quill over the page expectantly.

Hermione haltingly recited the ingredients she remembered. She knew she'd missed quite a few, and only three or four of the quantities she noted were correct. Her brewing of the potion was ages ago, and she'd been in a strange state the entire time: determined to the point of single-mindedness. There was no way a potion made with her directions was going to have the desired effect.

She didn't mention the virgin's blood. Merlin only knew what Frankenhodge would do to obtain it; everyone knew ingredients like that were most effective when fresh.

But none of that mattered. Even if she'd told him every correct ingredient and measurement, without the soul bonding addition, there was no chance.

When she couldn't remember another thing, Frankenhodge smiled. It looked grotesque on his tight features.

"Okay, I'll be back shortly. *Petrificus Totalus!*"

Hermione only had a split second to gasp before the spell was cast a second time on her.

Sirius had sent owls to nearly everyone he knew with a handy replication spell. His owl would have a hell of an evening, but no worse than Sirius'. Even Andromeda and Draco had been dispatched for assistance in the search for Hermione.

Andromeda had volunteered to stay at Grimmauld Place in case Hermione returned. Anyone with information was to report there. Harry's Auror friends and those on duty were combing the area diligently.

Sirius wasn't even sure where to look.

The grocery store had yielded one employee who remembered Hermione because she'd looked almost in tears as she'd picked up a Chocolate Frog and added it to her purchases. It had been odd enough to notice. Sirius tried not to fall to his knees yet again.

She's not angry, he told himself. That treat had been for him, he knew. Wherever she was, she wasn't spending her time hating him. And that somehow made it easier to bear.

His second stop had been Hogwarts. Harry had accompanied him on that trip, because Sirius had said he wouldn't be able to bear it if she'd gone to see Snape.

She hadn't. But they had two more to add to the search party, as McGonagall and Snape both demanded to join.

Harry then went to Hermione's old Muggle house, as well as where her parents lived in Australia. Sirius visited all the places they'd liked to go together. The restaurant by Grimmauld Place that sold the best falafel in history (so he swore), and the Muggle music store she liked to visit, even though her music players wouldn't work in Grimmauld Place.

He checked in with Andromeda, having opened Grimmauld Place up to any Apparition. He didn't care who came in, as long as they had her. The kidnapper, if there had been such a beast, was free to return her. And she was free to Apparate right in, though he doubted she'd attempt to do so, knowing the wards Harry had set for her and having no way of knowing they were down.

Andromeda had no news from any of the searchers.

Sirius went through the groceries for the third time, hoping for some sort of clue. The search had been going on for nearly four hours, and no one had any information as to her whereabouts.

The pulp-free pumpkin juice brought tears to his eyes. She always made sure to buy it, even though she preferred the pulpy kind. It had been the source of one silly fight, which had led to some lovely kitchen-table-sex. He didn't dare pour himself a glass now.

He vowed to tell her he had changed his mind...that he preferred the pulpy kind. She deserved to have everything she wanted, and he would never stand in the way of that again.

"Take this," came a low voice from beside Sirius. If he'd had the energy, he would have started to see Snape so close. The man was a fucking vampire, moving silently like that.

"What is it?"

"Poison, of course."

That earned Snape a baleful glare, but the annoying prick didn't even acknowledge it. "It's a very mild calming draught, combined with a stomach tonic. It will calm your mind without muddling it and settle your anxiety."

Sirius drank it. It was horrible, but then again, had it tasted good, it surely would have been poison. He didn't chase it with anything. It was sorry penance, but it would have to do.

"I've put together a list of libraries in the vicinity, both Muggle and wizard. I was planning on checking them myself, but it seems you could use a distraction. There are only so many times a man can read the ingredients on pumpkin juice," Snape continued, almost kindly, which made Sirius nauseous.

"I wasn't reading it, you git." But he didn't offer up what he had been doing, which was vowing to allow Hermione her way until the end of time.

"So shall I leave you to your... non-reading, or would you prefer to actually help in this search?"

After Sirius snatched the list from Snape's outstretched hand and Disapparated to the first location, he realised he'd been goaded into action.

And worse, he didn't even mind.

Hermione had no idea how much time passed before Frankenhodge returned with a paper bag, ostensibly full of useless ingredients.

He cancelled the Body-Bind on both Hermione and Renworth, but left them tied. He went to the adjoining dining room and began to set up a cauldron, a grill with a fire, and the ingredients.

He might as well have been brewing chicken noodle soup, for all the good it would do.

Frankenhodge eventually came back into the living room and cast *Finite* on Hermione's bonds. She stretched slowly, watching the harried reporter carefully.

"It's time to brew the potion," he said, gesturing to the dining room table. Hermione stood, not taking her eyes off him.

Renworth remained perfectly still, but she gained strength from his presence. As long as he was here, Hermione had a goal in mind. Keep him safe, get them both out. Had it been just her, she might have felt a little more hopeless.

Hermione went through the motions, brewing a potion that had no hope of success, creating a base with no key ingredients, tossing in items that were completely useless. She only hoped that the combination wouldn't trigger an explosion.

"Very good," Frankenhodge would encourage, watching her very carefully.

After the 'potion' was complete, Hermione turned the fire down and told Frankenhodge it needed to simmer for an hour. She wanted to buy them some time, though she had no reason to believe anyone would be able to find her here, even if Sirius did suspect she was missing and not just sulking somewhere.

"Now, the incantation."

Despite her protestations that she couldn't remember the entire thing, Hermione wrote down the spell to the best of her ability. It had been in another language, and she remembered a few words phonetically, but like with the potion, it just wouldn't be enough.

Writing the words brought Hermione back to when she'd been in the Department of Mysteries, in front of the Veil, bleeding out and floating above her own body, watching her blood flow toward the Veil, hearing those horrible hissing noises. But more than that, she remembered when Sirius had fallen through her door a week later, shaking and unconscious. How she'd nursed him as best she could. How she'd tried to help. The look in Harry's eyes when he saw Sirius for the first time. How Hermione had felt so accomplished, so proud. How she'd been so grateful.

"Very, very good," said Frankenhodge, reading over the spell. "Come with me."

Hermione followed him into the kitchen, dread filling her as she laid eyes on the cloth bag Renworth had mentioned. It was just the right shape and size to contain a body.

Frankenhodge drew the bag back, uncovering the face of a young woman. She was obviously dead. Tears sprang to Hermione's eyes.

"I'd like you to meet Stacia," Frankenhodge said quietly, pushing the hair away from the pale face of the young woman. "My sister. We're going to bring her back."

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

By the time Sirius had Apparated, under cover of Disillusionment, at least five times, he was beginning to give up on Snape's idea of libraries.

It just didn't fit. The groceries on the stoop indicated that Hermione had been taken against her will. Harry had tried to reason with him and say that maybe Hermione had just left them there...possibly because she was too angry to come back inside.

But Sirius wasn't convinced. She wasn't the type to waste food. She wasn't the type to run away. And whoever had taken her, for that was what Sirius truly believed...and truly feared...certainly wouldn't be taking her to a library.

But where *would* they take her?

Going from building to building had given Sirius something *todo*. Harry and his Aurors were paying visits to all the remaining Death Eaters and supporters of Voldemort's cause.

Snape and Draco were checking all the empty, abandoned, and otherwise derelict buildings in the area.

Everyone had a fucking mission. A goal.

But nothing about all that felt *right* to him. There was something he was overlooking, he was certain of it.

And he felt sick knowing that somewhere, Hermione was scared, maybe alone, wondering how to get out of her straits, thinking about what an arse he was for causing a fight before something like this happened.

If they didn't find her... if she didn't come back... he would never forgive himself. Without her, life looked so bleak. And he hated thinking like that, hated that he could feel himself giving up, not on her, never on her, but on *hope*. It had teased him and tormented him, and it had given him something worth really trying for, and without that stabilization, he was adrift.

Without Harry, Teddy, and even Draco, he surely would have nothing left.

But he pushed away his dark thoughts as unhelpful and simply morbid. Hermione was going to be okay because he ~~needed~~ *needed* her to be. She may have had only a part of his soul, but she had *all* of his heart.

Disapparating to Grimmauld Place to check in, Sirius nearly stumbled as he came out of the pull. He suddenly felt horribly ill, like he was going to vomit. Horrified.

But *why*?

He'd had an underlying sense of sickness through the search, but this was sudden and overwhelming.

Something was happening.

Sirius ran inside. "Andromeda!" he cried, though he knew she would be by the Floo.

"No news, Sirius," she called back in a soft voice that still managed to reach him.

"None? No clues, no one's come back, nothing?"

She shook her head slowly. Sirius suddenly noticed Teddy asleep on a tiny cot beside the wall, out of the way. How he'd managed to sleep through the noise and tension, Sirius had no idea.

Crossing the floor, Sirius knelt beside the child. So like Remus. He even had Remus' hair right now, a soft golden that reminded Sirius of Hogwarts and mischief and laughter. Carding his fingers through it, Sirius wondered what Remus would do.

Research.

Sirius chuckled softly, his breath stirring the dandelion fluff of Teddy's hair. That was Hermione's call to arms, as well. She'd want to be out, fighting, but she knew her talents were better used in the intellectual pursuit of victory.

But who was doing that now, Sirius wondered. Without Hermione, there was no one to hit the books and make obscure discoveries that would lead to triumph.

Though he knew he had more talent as the fool rushing in, he decided, for her, he would put in some time researching.

Exactly *what* he would research, he had absolutely no idea.

"Isn't she pretty?" Frankenhodge was asking, thumb smudging away a streak of Hermione didn't want *tknow* what.

"Very," Hermione agreed blankly.

Very dead.

"So, you can do it, right?"

Hermione's knees suddenly felt completely inadequate to support her trembling weight. She sank to her knees on the kitchen floor, the body mercifully out of her sight on the table above.

With no warning at all, Hermione's stomach clenched, and she was vomiting before she'd even had time to take a breath.

Over and over her muscles contracted and forced her to expel, until she was a pile of dry heaves and bile.

She heard her name from somewhere far away and blinked back tears. Her ears were ringing, but she could hear that it was Renworth, calling for her from his bound position in the living room.

"I-I'm fine," she called shakily, though she knew he must have realised she was anything but.

Frankenhodge hauled her to her feet, brushing away her tears with his thumbs. He held her face in his hands as he searched her face. She couldn't look at him.

"I cried when it happened, too. Don't worry."

The words were so incongruous that Hermione almost laughed incredulously. "What... what can you possibly expect me to do?" she asked desperately.

Frankenhodge sighed heavily. "I know things are a little different this time, but the logistics are the same, really. From what I've researched, the Veil is a midway point, a holding station, if you will. It's literally an archway between the worlds."

Hermione knew all this from her own research, of course. He wasn't telling her anything helpful. She weakly gestured for him to go on, and he took her elbow and let her away from the body.

Stacia.

He directed her toward the simmering potion, and she pretended to tend to it, stirring it as she waited for him to speak.

"But if it is a halfway place, then the souls on the *other* side, the... the *dead* side, they would be able to come back to the midway point. That just makes sense."

Hermione really wanted to deny that, but she remained silent, mentally calling for Sirius, as if the bond worked that way. She knew it didn't, but it made her feel better.

"So," Hermione said softly, "you think that you can get Stacia to come back to the midway point? How?"

"Well, by giving her something to anchor herself to. Giving her something familiar to bring her back within the Veil. From there, once we know she's actually in the Veil, waiting, we'll perform the spell and the incantation and bring her all the way through."

"What will anchor her? You're not talking about yourself, are you? Because I can't bring *her* back, let alone both of you! Jimothy, if you go through, you're gone for good!" Though she was sickened and horrified by what was happening, Hermione still didn't want Frankenhodge to actually die.

"No, no," he denied. "Not me. *Her*. We'll push her body through the Veil. She'll recognise it and come back through! Don't you see? It's perfect! She'll reattach to her body, and the spell will bring her home, just like you did Sirius."

Which reminded Hermione of another salient point. "Um, Jimothy, this isn't something we talked about, but Sirius and I... we weren't together before the Veil, okay?"

"So? Granger, this is about Sta..."

"No!" she interjected quickly. "Listen. When I brought him back, a part of my soul went into him, and, we think, vice versa. That connection created a very strong bond between us. Do you understand? A very strong, *intimate* bond."

Frankenhodge looked at her bemusedly. "Stacia and I were always close..."

Renworth shouted from across the room, "She's saying that she and Black are fucking because of what the Veil did to them! Damn you, Frankenhodge, if you somehow, beyond all comprehension and possibility, manage to bring your sister back, you'll have to have sex with her! *All the time!* It was the same for my ancestors!"

A hush fell so quickly Hermione wondered if she'd gone deaf. Then she could hear the light panting of Renworth, who looked nearly frantic at this point, and the raspy inhalations of Frankenhodge beside her. Her own breath was shallow, but she wouldn't let herself become lightheaded.

"What...is that true?" he finally asked, eyes wide and glimmering.

She nodded. "We don't know how it happened, exactly, and maybe we never will, but yes. A sexual bond was forged and it becomes very punishing if not obeyed."

Frankenhodge seemed to rally himself. "It doesn't matter. I mean, gods *Fuck*. But it doesn't matter, see? Because she'll be *back*. It's okay. She'll understand."

Hermione felt that wave of sickness returning. Renworth let out an unearthly howl of frustration, and that brought her out of it. He wasn't a man to lose control easily, she knew. In the short time she'd known him, he'd never lost his cool. To see him become unravelled meant that she had to remain in control for both of them. They were going to find a way out of this. Sirius would find her.

Sirius would save her.

"You can't do it," she said, her voice hard. "You absolutely cannot. The Veil has a plan for everyone. The Veil has a plan! This isn't part of the plan, Jimothy. If you do this, I just know something horrible will happen. You'll damage *fate*."

Releasing a piteous moan, Frankenhodge dug his fingers into his hair, yanking on strands with ink stained fingers. "And what was the plan for Stacia, hmm?" he cried.

"What sort of entity or deity or *whatever* kills a twenty year old witch? She'd done nothing wrong! She was so sweet and good. It was such a stupid accident! ~~to~~*d* her not to wear those damn slippers, but our mother had given them to her before she passed away, and Stacia wore them every day! Every single day! But they didn't fit, and she was always tripping, and she laughed when she tripped, you know? It never embarrassed her. 'Just one of those things,' she would say. 'Keeps me on my toes!' But the stairs were polished and the slippers had no soles left, and she just fell. And she fell and fell, but she wasn't laughing. She didn't laugh anymore, not after she fell, and I waited, and I took the slippers off and I asked if it was just one of those things, but she didn't answer me, not again, not ever again."

Tears were staining Hermione's cheeks as she listened to Frankenhodge in his despair. He was crying noisily now, snuffling and batting at his tears as if they offended him. He suddenly turned on his heel and went back into the kitchen, and Hermione could hear him whispering to his sister's body in a broken voice.

Her wand was still in his pocket. She could see it from here. He was occupied. She wouldn't get another chance.

But the door was even more tempting. She could get help. If she went for her wand, Frankenhodge would pull his. She was the better duellist, she was certain, but he only needed one spell to put her down, and then Renworth would be alone.

Hermione jerked into a run, bolting for the front door. Renworth didn't say a word as she passed him, and she was grateful that he didn't give away her move. She silently promised she would come back for him.

Her hand was on the doorknob. She twisted it. It stuck, but she yanked, and it gave.

The night air was slightly damp as Hermione ran across the lawn. She could feel the tingle of Renworth's wards as she slid through them. They were powerful, but they wouldn't harm anyone leaving.

She ignored the cries of Frankenhodge inside the house. When they moved outside, she ignored them still. She was running faster than she had in years. There weren't many houses, none at all, really, but soon there would be, she was sure.

Soon she would see Sirius.

"*Stupefy!*"

And Hermione saw black.

Sirius decided he *really* didn't like fighting from this angle. If he thought he'd felt useless while actually *doing* something, it was nothing compared to sitting in a huge room full of judgemental books and pretending he knew where to begin.

He grabbed one book on illegal location charms, but quickly discovered they almost all needed fresh blood. The ones that didn't asked for even more questionable fluids, which Sirius could only get if Hermione were *here*, and if she were here, he wouldn't need a fucking charm, now, would he?

Another book on revealing enemies would have been very helpful, again, if Hermione were around to cast the spell, because it couldn't be cast vicariously or by proxy.

Sirius dropped his head onto the desk. *Her desk*. It even smelled like her, which was strange. But then again, maybe not, because she always spelled a little like fresh parchment. Not something Sirius would have ever thought of as an arousing smell, but he couldn't even write an owl these days without getting hard.

Thinking of fucking Hermione made it less likely for Sirius to think about living without her.

Lifting his head back up, Sirius reached for another book, knocking a small pile onto the floor. Sirius wearily picked them up. He immediately recognised them as the Alensky journals. Hermione had been meaning to return them, but she'd gotten caught up in Josef Alensky's writing. Apparently the man had a penchant for the dramatic, despite his being of the medical profession, and she hadn't wanted to give them back until she'd read them through again.

Sirius wondered if the man who'd lent them to her was looking for them. If he'd miss them. Because when Hermione came back, he was sure she'd want to read them, and he wasn't going to return them until she was finished.

Remembering Alensky made Sirius think of that nasty reporter who'd been hounding Hermione for a story. Sirius wasn't relishing having his name in the papers again, but he knew Hermione was a woman of her word, though she'd put the prick off longer than he'd expected. That had probably him riled but good.

Sirius lifted his head.

How good?

How far would a reporter go for a story?

Having heard all about the exploits of Rita Skeeter during Hermione's fourth and fifth years, especially, Sirius knew exactly how far.

He leapt up from his chair and raced down the stairs. His noise prompted a cry from Teddy, and he called out an apology to Andromeda before he ran out the front door, forgetting that his own wards were down.

Not even bothering to Disillusion himself this time, Sirius Apparated to the *Daily Prophet* offices. Dark and closed, of course. He hadn't expected the little worm to actually be there.

And he had no idea where he lived, either.

But Harry could find out.

And by a very happy coincidence, Harry was at Grimmauld Place when Sirius Apparated back.

"No sign of her anywhere," Harry was saying, his face tight.

"Harry!" Sirius cried, approaching his godson. "I need to know where someone lives. A reporter."

"You think you have something?" Harry asked eagerly, obviously desperate for some news.

"Fuck, I hope so," Sirius replied. "Can you get me an address?"

"Of course. What's the name?"

Sirius thought hard. "Fuck! I don't fucking remember... something completely stupid and memorable, of course!"

And then Sirius remembered that Hermione had sent the reporter's owl message to her desk on the main level. He ran for it, Harry following. Under ~~the~~ *Daily Prophet* and a perfectly filled crossword puzzle, he found the owl.

"J. Frankenhodge," he shouted victoriously, thrusting the paper into Harry's hand.

Harry immediately began casting spells, waving his wand, his brows furrowing in concentration.

"There," Harry whispered, looking at the map that had materialised above their heads. "In Diagon Alley, above the haberdashery. Come on!"

Sirius' heart was pounding as Harry grabbed his arm and Disapparated them both.

Once outside, Harry blasted the door to the shop open and ran inside. Another door led to a hallway, which led upstairs. Sirius followed Harry's lead, unsure of how his godson knew exactly where to go, but trusting that he did. Harry had excellent instincts.

When they'd thoroughly destroyed Frankenhodge's front door, they entered, wands drawn.

The place was nice enough, well taken care of and tidy. But it was empty. Harry went around casting spells and murmuring. He got to the bedroom, and Sirius heard him whisper, "No!"

Sirius immediately ran after him, but there was nothing there. No Hermione.

"What's wrong?" he asked frantically.

"Oh, gods," Harry said, over and over.

"Harry!" Sirius cried, shaking the young man, who was staring at the bed as if seeing a ghost.

"The spell shows dead energy... dead energy, Sirius."

"No," he said, shaking his head. Dead energy meant there had recently been a dead body in this room. Magic left traces behind, even when a person passed away. It clung to the body for sometimes weeks after death, and it could be sensed by certain Auror spells.

"A woman... in her twenties... that's all I can tell." Harry's voice cracked.

"No! No, Harry, it's wrong. The spell is wrong. Maybe... maybe he just knocked her out hard enough to blast some of her magic off, or..." But Sirius knew that wasn't possible. That type of energy wouldn't have been picked up by the spell.

It didn't matter.

"If she'd not here, I need another address."

"Sirius," Harry began, tears on his cheeks. But he couldn't seem to go on.

"Harry," he said softly. "No. I won't let you believe this. I just won't. Give me the address and go back to Grimmauld Place. Don't tell ~~anyone~~ what you think you know. I don't want them to stop searching!"

"Sirius..." Harry said again, face ashen.

"No!" he roared. "Give me the address, Harry James Potter!*She is not dead!*"

Harry didn't seem to know what to do. He couldn't stop looking at the bed, and Sirius wanted to burn it. Burn the whole building down, hats be damned.

"Name?" Harry said quietly, not meeting Sirius' eyes.

"Alensky. I don't know the first name."

Harry cast the spell. Sirius memorised the coordinates.

"Don't say anything," he insisted again, hugging his godson. Harry was still and unyielding, but Sirius held the embrace. "She's not gone," he reiterated softly. "Not gone."

Sirius Disapparated, coming out quite far from where he felt he should have landed. But there was only one house in the distance, and Sirius began to run toward it. He felt the wards immediately, but they were only protective, not preventative. They would alert the owner of his presence and disallow direct Apparition, but they wouldn't stop Sirius from moving through.

The front door was open, and Sirius ran up the steps and inside.

It was empty.

When Hermione came to, she knew exactly where she was. And not because she could see; her eyesight was blurred even as she rapidly blinked.

No, she could hear the hissing. Just as she had in her dreams. Just as she had the last time she'd been here.

The Death Chamber.

Hermione, Renworth, and the body of Frankenhodge's sister were all in the pit of the room, on the ground just before the stone dais. The black curtain of Veil fluttered ominously as if disturbed by invisible wind.

Looking around, Hermione saw the makeshift potion in a cauldron to her left.

"How did we get here?" she hurriedly asked Renworth. Frankenhodge was nowhere to be seen.

"He Confunded a guard into letting us in. Then he Stupefied him."

"Just a Confundus?" Hermione asked. Usually the Department of Mysteries was better protected than that, though she, of course, had had little problem getting in when she'd needed to.

"Everyone else's gone home," Renworth whispered. His eyes darted to the side, and Hermione knew Frankenhodge was back.

"Okay," Frankenhodge said in a way that would have been cheery if it weren't so obviously forced. "Alensky, help me bring Stacia up here. We have to push her through now."

Hermione watched, horrified, as Renworth and Frankenhodge took Stacia by the ankles and wrists and brought her to the Veil. Frankenhodge got down on his knees and kissed her softly on the cheek. Renworth looked away, but Hermione wouldn't. He picked his sister up under the arms, struggling to lift her limp weight.

"I'm sorry," Renworth said, very quietly. Hermione repeated his words. This wasn't right, wasn't fair to Stacia, who deserved a proper burial.

"I'll see you soon, okay?" Frankenhodge said. He gave Stacia's body a push, momentum carrying her weight through the Veil. Hermione clenched her eyes, waiting for the sound of the body hitting the stone floor, but it never came.

Stacia was gone.

Frankenhodge stared at the Veil for a long time. Renworth came back to sit with Hermione, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as she shivered. She couldn't lean into the embrace. She felt empty.

A loud sniff startled her. Frankenhodge was standing before them. "The potion," he said in a flat voice. Hermione ladled some into a cup that was sitting beside the cauldron. There was absolutely no hope that Stacia was coming back, but Hermione really hoped the random combination of ingredients wasn't going to kill Frankenhodge.

And she also hoped she wouldn't regret thinking that.

Frankenhodge quickly downed the potion, trails of the vile fluid dripping down his chin. He gasped as he finished it, looking nauseous.

"Are you... are you all right, then?" she asked, watching him carefully.

"The incantation," he rasped.

Renworth calmly handed him the sheet Frankenhodge had had Hermione dictate to him. He slowly moved to stand before the Veil, falling to his knees.

When he began to speak, the sibilance around them grew louder. A glance to Renworth revealed he heard it as well. Shaking, Hermione forced herself to watch.

Frankenhodge's words were eerily familiar, though slightly off, as if he were speaking with the wrong accent.

The muted sounds of voices seemed to swirl and dance, but they didn't sound malicious. They almost sounded confused.

When Frankenhodge's voice finally died down, Hermione watched in detachment as he withdrew a blade from his robes. A decisive slice to his wrist made both members of his audience gasp. Hermione's hand flew in sympathy to the half-healed wounds over her heart.

Blood dripped and pumped from the deep wound, staining the floor and draining toward the Veil as if the dais was on a bias.

The blood touched the Veil, and the roar was deafening.

A sharp crack behind him in Alensky's house told Sirius he wasn't alone. He whipped around, wand drawn.

When he saw it was Snape, he almost didn't lower his arm. But this wasn't Snape's fault, much as Sirius wished otherwise.

"What did Harry tell you?" Sirius asked dully. Harry was the only person who knew of Sirius' destination.

"That he found dead energy, and you refuse to accept it."

"It wasn't hers," Sirius said, almost calmly but with an underlying sense of urgency. "I would have known, Snape. Her soul is in me. I would have ~~known~~." "

Snape walked up to the dining room table, perusing a jumbled mess of spills and stains.

"I agree."

"You...you agree? With me? You think I'm right?"

Snape chuckled darkly, and Sirius scowled. "It is truly a day for the scrapbook, no? I do agree with you, Black. You would have felt her leave this plane if she had done so. I imagine it would have hurt very much, and as much as *that* might have pleased me, Hermione Granger's death is certainly not the way I hope it comes about. Be that as it may, yes, she is still alive."

"You know this for certain?"

Snape wet his finger and dipped it into something on the table. Sirius grimaced as the man licked his finger and nodded slowly.

"Well?" he prompted, desperate for confirmation.

"As certain as one can know anything, I imagine."

"Where do we look now?" Sirius practically begged.

"I suspect our kidnapper has taken Hermione to the Veil."

"What? Why? And how can you know that?"

Snape briskly walked back to where Sirius was standing. "I believe I know these ingredients from when Hermione came to me with a list of them. From when she brought *you* back. And where would one go with a potion of these ingredients but the source of all this trouble?"

Sirius was about to spin on his heel and Disapparate once more, but Snape snarled.

"You might encounter less trouble at the Ministry, Black, if you enlist Auror Potter to attend you."

Sirius wanted to expound against being 'attended,' but he also didn't want to deal with explaining to inept guards that Hermione was in trouble in the Department of Mysteries. Nodding his thanks, Sirius Disapparated to Grimmauld Place, instead.

And Harry was there. Ginny had her arms around him, and they were both in tears. Draco Malfoy was there as well, sitting beside Harry and looking very uncomfortable.

"Harry," Sirius said urgently, beckoning him over. Harry got up reluctantly and followed his godfather into the hallway.

"Snape thinks she's alive, too. We think she's in the Death Chamber at the Ministry. I need you to come with me and get me in," Sirius said in a rush, desperate to leave.

Harry's eyes widened. Snape Apparated beside them, and Harry immediately turned to him. "She's not dead?"

Snape shook his head.

"Why would she be in the Death Chamber?"

"We think whoever kidnapped her wanted to bring someone back from the Veil, like I was. We have ~~too~~go, Harry! Another minute could mean the difference, here!"

Harry nodded quickly, taking Sirius' arm. As the sharp tug took them away, Sirius heard Snape call for Draco.

In the Ministry atrium, Snape and Draco both appeared a moment after Sirius and Harry. Harry quickly got them passed the guards and into the lift.

The wait was torture, and the four men were utterly silent the entire ride. Harry was nearly bouncing with tension, Snape was as still as a statue and half as emotive, Sirius was beside himself with anxiety.

As they neared the floor they needed, Draco whispered, "I'm sure she's all right."

And they all took heart in those quiet words.

The lift door finally opened, and they rushed out, just as a roar sounded, like waves crashing directly overhead, stopping them all momentarily in their tracks.

Sirius was the first to regain himself. The noise was growing louder, but he didn't care. He could feel Hermione's presence, sense her soul as surely as if she were right next to him.

He threw himself through the door to the Death Chamber, immediately laying eyes on the frantically waving Veil. Someone was lying prone in front of it, a pool of blood beneath him.

Then he saw her.

Hermione.

Sirius crossed the distance like his life depended on it...and really, it did...and fell to his knees in front of the woman he loved. The man beside her he spared no glance.

"My love," he whispered, so grateful, so thankful.

"Sirius?" she said, red-rimmed eyes wide. She smiled shakily. "I knew you would find me."

"I found you, you're okay. You're safe, love. Come here." Sirius held out his arms, and she fell into the embrace, body trembling. Her sobs could be heard throughout the room, but he only rocked her, shushing her gently.

He saw the man beside Hermione stand and walk over to where Harry and Draco were standing. Snape was attending the young man in front of the Veil. Sirius could see his back rising with his breaths. Everyone was alive.

All the better for him to fucking *murder* Frankenhodge.

But that would be later. Now he had the woman he loved, she was safe, and he'd never let her be hurt again.

"I sent Kreacher away," he whispered.

Hermione laughed through her tears and clutched Sirius ever tighter. He didn't mind, though.

She was safe.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Once back at Grimmauld Place, Hermione was curled up in Sirius' arms as they waited for the rest of the search crew to return.

Harry had contacted Ron, and as a result, many of Weasleys had been involved in trying to bring Hermione home. Ginny and George were still out looking, but Ron's Patronus had been sent to bring them back. Ron and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were sitting a little uneasily in the dining room chairs that had been brought in so everyone had somewhere to sit. Mrs. Weasley was constantly on the verge of offering food and drink to everyone, having never quite gotten over the fact that she was no longer queen of this particular castle.

But Hermione was grateful for her help, as she couldn't bring herself to leave the warm safety of Sirius' arms.

Draco Malfoy and Renworth Alensky were sitting in the corner talking quietly. Sirius nudged her ribs and gestured to them, but Hermione couldn't hear what they were saying. When Draco gave a quiet chuckle and a soft smile at something Renworth had said, Hermione felt warm inside. It was hard not to forgive Draco when he seemed so desperately unhappy, and it was nice to see him smile.

Snape and Harry had stayed with Frankenhodge at the Ministry of Magic so the latter could be processed. After a few choice words from Snape after the Potions master had used his skill to bring the young man back to consciousness, Frankenhodge had confessed everything, not that Hermione had doubted he would. He was a seriously disturbed person, but she didn't believe his intentions to be malicious, just misguided.

Harry was now talking with Snape about the punishments and possible treatment Frankenhodge would receive. Snape seemed appalled that Frankenhodge wouldn't be Kissed, but Harry seemed to know to let him rant it out instead of reasoning with him.

Hermione and Renworth had given statements to the Aurors under Harry's supervision, and thanks to him, they wouldn't have to go to the Ministry tonight, though they would have to testify when the time came.

Andromeda had placed Teddy in one of the guest rooms. He'd had a trying night, with all the Apparitions and Disapparitions, some of which hadn't been silenced. The wards were back up on Grimmauld Place, and for that, Hermione was glad; she felt much safer knowing that not just anyone could get in.

Sirius was being very quiet. Every now and then his hands would tighten on her as if to make sure she was truly in his arms. How he could forget, she didn't know, because she was sitting on his lap with her arms around his neck, her face resting in the crook of his shoulder.

He tilted her face up to meet his with a gentle finger. He seemed to be taking stock of her; he'd done this more than once in the time since they'd returned. Sirius placed a soft kiss on the corner of her mouth, and Hermione closed her eyes at the gentle treatment.

And then like a dam had burst, Sirius' mouth was moving over hers nearly frantically, his kisses demanding and life affirming. His tongue stroked hers forcefully, as if daring her to back down from a challenge. Hermione let him ravage her mouth because it did as much good for her as it did for him.

"You can't ever leave," he whispered urgently after he'd broken the kiss.

"I didn't leave," she said softly, caressing the side of his face with her hand, her heart warming at the way he leaned into the touch and closed his eyes.

"You can't let anything bad happen to you," he amended, his grey eyes searching hers.

Hermione kissed him again, a slower kiss to show him things hadn't changed. "I'll try my best," she promised.

He looked as though he wanted to say that wasn't good enough, but he just nodded slowly and gathered her more tightly in his grip.

They both heard the front door open, and a moment later, George and Ginny came in, both looking thankful to see her safe. Hermione reluctantly left Sirius' lap and stood to hug Ginny.

The petite redhead was crying unabashedly into Hermione's neck. "I'm glad you're okay, Hermione! I can't believe this happened, and so close to your wedding!" she wailed, snuffling loudly.

A predictable hush fell over the room as Ginny's words reached each and every ear. Only Ginny and Harry had known about their plans to marry.

"Um, Gin, this wasn't really the best time for that news," Hermione chided softly. Though if it became too much to handle, she could just pretend to feel faint and Sirius would whisk her away and force everyone to leave.

"Wedding?" repeated Mrs. Weasley. But she didn't look appalled or even upset. She looked resigned, and very, very tired. Mr. Weasley was smiling softly at Hermione, and then he went to shake Sirius' hand.

After that, the subdued crowd took Mr. Weasley's cue. Everyone congratulated them. Even Snape nodded at Sirius before softly saying congratulations to Hermione. He left immediately after, without saying goodbye.

As Ron approached her, Hermione looked to Sirius. He and Draco were talking with their heads close together, Draco nodding quickly and smiling that small smile again. Sirius met her gaze and nodded, and she knew that he'd be watching her interaction with Ron.

After Ron's breakup with Lavender Brown, he'd retreated somewhat from his group of friends, and he and Hermione had drifted even farther apart than they'd been before.

Ron stuck out his hand stiffly, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Ron," she said quietly, taking his hand. "We're still friends, aren't we?"

He looked as though he didn't quite know what to say, so, as she had so many times over the course of their friendship, Hermione answered for him.

"Of course we are. At least, I want us to be. Can we do that?"

Exhaling sharply in relief, Ron grinned. "Yeah, we can do that." He pulled her into one of those full-body hugs, practically lifting her off the ground. "I'm really glad you're okay, Hermione. We were really worried." He pulled back from the hug, and she could see in his honest blue eyes that he really meant *he* had been worried.

"Everything's fine now," Hermione said reassuringly. She hadn't realised how much she'd missed having his friendship, but she was sure glad it was back. And it would certainly make things easier on Harry and Ginny, who'd always been rather in the middle of their complicated relationship.

"All right, love?" Sirius asked, coming up beside her and slipping an arm around her waist. She nodded. He raised a question eyebrow at Ron, but the redhead only mumbled his congratulations and walked back to his parents and George. Mrs. Weasley was tearfully talking with Ginny, and Hermione could see that Ginny was trying to talk her out of a scene.

Draco had come over with Sirius, and Renworth was with him as well.

"Congratulations, Granger," Draco said quietly, making Hermione laugh. It felt strange to talk to Draco without feelings of resentment or anger, but it was hard to hate someone who had no one. Sirius was his only family, and that made Hermione family as well.

"Thanks, Draco. You can call me Hermione if you want," she offered. He shrugged, but nodded a little.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," Renworth said jovially. Even after being kidnapped, Body-Bound, and forced to help push a dead body through the Veil, Renworth's disposition hadn't suffered a bit. Hermione noticed he was standing rather close to Draco. Sirius seemed to notice as well and narrowed his eyes at Renworth.

"Thanks, Renworth. Is there anything I can get you? Food, tea? Or maybe you'd like to stay the night? I can't imagine you'd want to go back to your place right now."

Oddly enough, Draco blushed at her words. Sirius' eyes narrowed further. Renworth cleared his throat, saying, "Actually, Mr. Malfoy has been kind enough to offer his abode while the Aurors deal with the evidence at my house."

"Ah," Hermione said, a slow smile spreading across her face.

"In fact, I'd like to leave now, if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Alensky," said Draco, former haughtiness showing itself a little.

Renworth and Draco said their goodbyes, and she could hear Renworth tell Draco to call him by his given name.

Hermione turned to Sirius and whispered, "Did you know?"

Sirius shook his head. "I don't know anything about him." He sounded almost angry with himself, and Hermione drew him into a hug.

"But you will," she said firmly. "You will."

"Hermione, dear?" Mrs. Weasley left her small group and stood before Hermione and Sirius. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Mr. Weasley were all watching carefully. So was Andromeda from across the room. George was staring into the fire.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley?" Hermione smiled, trying not to cringe as she thought of what the Weasley matriarch might have to say.

"Well, a wedding! That's lovely. Will it be here?"

Hermione looked to Sirius, who shrugged. Hermione hadn't really spared much thought about the wedding since the proposal. She didn't care much for weddings, despite all of Ginny's admittedly infectious enthusiasm.

"We haven't decided the details, yet," she admitted.

Mrs. Weasley finally smiled. "I'd be happy to help, if you find yourself in need of it. I think it would be lovely to have a wedding here, don't you, Sirius?" But she didn't wait for him to answer as she went on. "And it is rather where you fell in love, isn't it? It's romantic, really, when you think about it. He came back from the dead for you!"

Hermione didn't bother correcting her, as she'd brought him back for *him*, but Mrs. Weasley was talking about decorations anyway.

Eventually Ginny sidled in and flawlessly directed the conversation to herself so that Hermione and Sirius could slip away. They sat on the couch beside Harry, who looked very tired.

He hugged Hermione for what must have been the eighth time. After kissing her softly on the cheek, Harry closed his eyes.

"You and Ginny are welcome to stay here tonight, Harry," Hermione offered, not sure her friend could handle the Floo at his level of exhaustion. "And Teddy's here, so you'd get to see him in the morning."

"Thanks, 'Mione," Harry said gratefully, sinking back into the cushions. "I think we will. I'm just dead exhausted." Harry clenched his eyes closed and sniffed. When he opened them, they were bright with tears. "I thought you were dead, you know. I was sure of it. We found dead energy at Frankenhodge's house. But Sirius didn't give up. He made me swear not to tell, but I thought he was mad, ignoring the obvious. I told Snape. Hermione, I gave up!"

Sirius reached around Hermione and pulled them both into an awkward hug. Laughing, Hermione embraced Harry. "Harry, you're trained to acknowledge evidence! You didn't give up; you just faced facts as you saw them. I would have done the same. Please, everything is fine. Don't worry!"

Harry nodded and pulled away after a moment. He must have been waiting to get that off his chest, because he immediately looked more alert, though he still had a bit of a haunted look in his eye. As long as it wasn't guilt, Hermione knew they could easily work through it.

Andromeda went up to bed, followed shortly by Harry and Ginny. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and George stayed for a while, but eventually even Mrs. Weasley couldn't think up any more excuses to stay and pat Hermione on the cheek, head, and shoulders. After promising to owl first thing in the morning, the Weasleys all left.

"Finally," Sirius drawled, drawing Hermione into his arms again.

Hermione wholeheartedly agreed. She was eternally grateful to her friends for searching for her, but she was exhausted. "Bed?" she suggested softly, meeting Sirius' tired eyes.

"Bed," he confirmed, taking her hand and leading her up the stairs.

He undressed her slowly, making every moment count, brushing his fingers against her skin whenever he unbuttoned something or slid something off. When she was naked and shivering before him, Hermione waited for him to take her into his arms and make her burn. She needed this, needed this confirmation, this proof of life. He would show her that no one could hurt her, no one would ever take her away again.

"Into bed, love," he directed, taking off his own clothing. He quickly cast silencing spells for the first time in ages, the house having more guests than either were used to.

When he crawled into bed with her and pulled her into his arms, Hermione snuggled as close as humanly possible. If she could, she'd become part of him, and allow him to become part of her.

"So looks like Molly'll be taking over the wedding plans, hmm?" he murmured against her skin, his heated lips making fiery brands on her throat.

"More fool her," she quipped, grateful to no longer have to worry about those details that seemed to plague every bride-to-be.

"Just make sure she confirms with one of us before she makes major decisions. I don't want to end up with an orange and brown colour scheme or anything like that."

"I'm not entirely convinced you'd notice," Hermione said, pushing his long hair away from his face. What she wouldn't do to have lovely straight hair like his.

"Not when I have you walking toward me," he agreed, taking on a seriousness he hadn't had before.

Hermione kissed his lips softly, holding him. She sensed that there was something he needed to say, and like Harry, he'd feel better once he got it out of his system.

"I almost lost you," he began slowly, and Hermione could tell he was working out his words as he said them, putting form to something he'd obviously hoped to keep inside. "I was so scared, Hermione, so angry and so scared. I never want to fight with you again. What if... gods, what if something really bad, you know, had happened to you? I'd never be able to forgive myself. It was my fault your guard was down, my fault that reporter got to you..."

Hermione had heard enough. Guilt like that would fester and ruin. "It wasn't anyone's fault but Frankenhodge's. You're smart enough to know that you can't control other people. My guard *wasn't* down, Sirius. I was alert, as always. He took me by surprise and Disapparated with me before I could even blink. And that wasn't my fault, that I trusted him when maybe I shouldn't have. We can't live our lives in the fear that someone will hurt us, because that *will* hurt us. We have to trust and love and *learn*. I don't want to hear you say you're to blame. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I just want to move on, you and me. The way it should be."

Luckily, Sirius' guilt was assuaged almost as easily as Harry's, but Hermione could already tell this conversation would be repeated in the near future. She didn't mind. Sirius' happiness was imperative to hers, and if she had to reassure him every single day for the rest of her life, she'd gladly do it, just to be his and have him be hers.

"My little bride," Sirius whispered against her skin, his mouth moving sensually.

"My groom," she countered, laughing as he tickled her ribs in retaliation.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

Hermione snorted. "That wasn't very subtle, Mr. Black. You want to ravish me, don't you?"

Sirius' eyes twinkled, but he very seriously said, "No."

Hermione pouted and went to turn away, but he held fast.

"I want to make love you," he said, brushing the hair away from her eyes and kissing her protruding lower lip before nipping it soundly.

"I want that, too," she whispered.

Sirius kissed her softly, but he couldn't seem to manage to keep the fire between them burning at a manageable level. It soon grew out of control, and neither wanted to douse the flames.

He quickly moved on top of her, and she eagerly parted her legs, desperate to feel him inside her again. After their fight, and everything that had followed, it was easy to understand why she needed him so badly. And she could tell that he needed her just as much.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and guided him into her. The feeling of fullness was so intense she knew she could never really be whole without him. And even if she didn't fill him in the same way, she knew, both instinctively, and from the many times he told her, that he felt the same way.

"Love the way you feel around me, love your body, love you," Sirius chanted, thrusting into her. He wasn't being gentle, and she was grateful. As much as he'd wanted to make love, she wanted it hard so she would always remember that when anyone hurt her, Sirius would put her back together again.

"Love you, Sirius," she responded, happily giving herself up to the way his body owned and knew hers. His pelvic bone ground against her clit and brought her to the edge so quickly it made her dizzy.

"Come, love, I need to see you come," he demanded. And even if Hermione wouldn't do everything Sirius asked, like keep a house-elf, for starters, coming when he told her to was something she'd always strive to obey.

She cried out as her body clamped down around him, making it impossible for him to thrust as quickly.

Sirius came a minute later, shouting her name almost triumphantly, flooding her with warmth and satisfaction and safety, inside her all the way to her heart.

After a few moments, thought obviously reluctant to part, Sirius rolled off Hermione and gathered her into his arms. He gently kissed her hair, looking into her eyes in a way that made her feel vulnerable but completely secure.

"Hermione," he whispered as his fingers tried to brush through her curls.

"Yes?"

"Remember in the journals? 'The Veil has a plan for us all'?"

"Of course," she said, covering her mouth to yawn.

"What do you think its plan for us is?"

Hermione paused. "I have no idea. For Sofie and Rolpho it was to have a brilliant baby, a child who grew up to save thousands of lives and change the world."

"That's a lot to live up to," Sirius said.

"But if the plan is for our child, it could be that he or she is just supposed to save one person. That's just as worthwhile, isn't it? Or it could be something else entirely. Any number of events have been set in motion from our getting together. We really have no way of knowing. Is a child growing up to create a vaccine to cure a disease more valuable than Draco Malfoy having his only family back, or Harry Potter having his godfather back, or Teddy Lupin having the connection to his father? Or me having the man I love in my life? They're all special and important in different ways."

"It's hard to believe that something good could come of my being around," Sirius said lightly, but Hermione could hear, as she always could with him, the underlying tones of disbelief that he deserved to be here.

"It's not hard for me to believe. Only good things have come for me."

"Except tonight," he added darkly.

"Well, yes, but even some good came of that," Hermione mused. Sirius looked disbelieving, so she went on. "Well, we were both afraid that the dark magic I did would be revealed to the world, that I'd be exposed, perhaps even charged. Now the only person who knows the story is Frankenhodge, and no one will believe anything he's written, once the story of what happened tonight gets out. Though I might have to tell the truth to the Wizengamot at Frankenhodge's hearing. But then again, having Harry Potter on my side will probably help with that." Hermione very rarely asked Harry to use his name for anything for her, but this was something she suspected he wouldn't have a problem with. "And if I do tell the Wizengamot, it's not as though they will leak it to the press. The secret will be safe and buried, and no one will think I've the ability to bring people back from the dead. Nothing like this will ever happen again."

Suddenly, Hermione was more tired than she'd been all night. Or rather, all morning, as midnight had come and gone ages ago.

"Let's talk about something else," Hermione suggested tiredly, wanting to end the evening on a light note, knowing she'd always remember it.

"Well, I did have a point, but we got sidetracked," he said, laughing softly. He leaned down to kiss her throat, little confirmations of love.

"What was your point?" she said as if she doubted very much that he'd had one.

"Well, it's our responsibility, really, to do as the Veil commands."

Hermione shrugged, unwilling to agree until she knew what he was on about.

"So, in light of that, maybe you should cast the counter-spell to your contraceptive charm..." He bit his lip, stilling all movement, and pulled back to watch her face.

"What... you want to... now? Right now?" she stuttered, shaking her head as if to help his words sink in more quickly. Cancelling the charm now meant that the semen inside her would have a chance to get to an egg and make her pregnant. She wasn't exactly sure where she was on her cycle, but it seemed possible that it was a viable time.

"Hermione, I want to have babies with you. I want to have so many babies that we save the world six times over and then some. We don't have to do it now...it might not even take right away, but..."

"Yes."

"...If it does, I just know our children will be beautiful, and..."

"Yes!"

"...I promise you'd never even know I was raised in the most fucked up house ever, so..."

"Sirius! Shut up! I'm saying yes. I want to have babies with you. Maybe not six, though. But yes!"

"Oh," Sirius said, looking momentarily stunned. "You do? With me?"

"Well, that's what we're talking about, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I just thought..."

"What, that you'd have to convince me? Gods, Sirius, I love you more than anything else in this world. Nothing would make me happier than having children with you. Even if they don't save the world and only invent some new type of cheese or something."

"Cheese?" Sirius looked as though he was having a hard time keeping track of the conversation, but the dopy, endearing smile on his face made it all too easy to forgive him.

"I love you, Sirius Black," she whispered, pulling him in for a deep kiss.

"I love you, too," he said against her lips. "Always. For good."

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Three months later...

"You are joking, right?" Hermione snarled at the wedding co-ordinator, who trembled a little before drawing himself up bravely.

"You have my sincerest apologies, Miss Granger. Nothing like this has ever happened before! However, the reception area is prepared and looks stunning!"

"Oh, ho," Hermione laughed mirthlessly. "I'm sure it is. And where do you suggest we actually get married, as the location I scouted and *ell in love withis* undergoing *pest control*!"

"W-well," stammered Tristan Forthall, Hermione's highly recommended planner. "We could rearrange the reception area. It will be a snug fit, but..."

"So you think that I should marry the love of my life in the house in which he was both an outcast and a prisoner? You..." Hermione pointed a perfectly manicured finger

right in the small man's face. "...Are testing my patience!"

Forthall squeaked and took a step back.

"What seems to be the difficulty?" came the vibrato tones of Severus Snape.

"I'm not getting married!" she cried, waving her hand at the twitching wedding planner, who fairly ran out the library door. Hermione had visited the library to get some peace and quiet, but Forthall had found her, and now it appeared there wouldn't be a wedding. The perfect little grove she'd found in her painstaking research was being treated for infestations of woodlice, which had brought the bowtruckles out in full force, and the little creatures wouldn't be convinced to allow chairs to be set up, or even a runner placed.

"And why not?"

"Because I wanted to do it in the forest, amid nature and all that! It was supposed to be perfect. I had it all planned... stupid fucking bowtruckles." Hermione burst into tears and fell back onto the loveseat.

Snape took a step toward her as if he would sit, but he seemed to think better of it. "Ms. Granger, stop this melodrama at once! You cannot honestly expect me to believe that life with *Black* will be better for you having married him in some enchanted copse! If this is a charade to get out of your nuptials, I am not the one to whom you need make excuses! I wouldn't blame you if you ran out of this house right now, never to be seen again."

Hermione sniffed wetly and sighed. "I thought we agreed you weren't going to talk about my future husband like that. *Do* want to marry him... more than anything."

"Then," Snape said challengingly, "you shall. Here."

"Here?" Hermione looked around in disbelief. There was nowhere in Grimmauld Place she could imagine getting married. Even though it was long since improved from its state of disrepair, it was still dreary and dull, the memories leaving more lasting marks than the Doxies.

In fact, the only room in the entire house that was even remotely cheery was this one, the library. The large windows were glittering happily, streaks of light dancing over dust motes and giving the air a fairytale shimmer. Hermione had only good memories of this room.

"Oh, my gods," Hermione said slowly, looking around. "*Here*."

"It seems only fitting, for the bluestocking to marry her lover in the library in which she found the book to bring him back to her. It's almost..." Snape sneered. "Romantic."

"But I don't know if Sirius would want to get married in Grimmauld Place," she said, fingers tugging on a perfectly spiralling curl. Her hair and make-up had been done an hour before by Ginny; she had only to put on the dress. She could hear the guests downstairs, having apparently been rerouted from the grove the invitations had indicated.

"Black would marry you in Azkaban if it meant keeping you by his side, and he'd be a fool to make any sort of complaint." Snape seemed to consider something. "Actually, yes, he likely will complain."

Hermione laughed. "All right, Professor Snape, you've got a mission. Go find my fiancé and see what he thinks. He'll be honest with you. Then get back to your lady friend. You shouldn't leave her alone too long with the Weasleys."

Snape snorted. "*Any lady friend* of mine would be remiss if she found herself unable to handle a few rampaging redheads. However, I do find myself desirous of her company." He gave a genuine smile, which Hermione returned. The witch Snape was seeing was a lovely woman, biting sarcasm but in a way that left people laughing instead of shrinking in fear. Snape had begun seeing her shortly after Hermione's ordeal with Frankenhodge and Ginny's blurring announcement of Hermione's impending marriage. He seemed happy, for which Hermione was grateful...and Hermione had had to appeal to his witch to even get Snape to come to the wedding, so obviously she had some pull with the cool man.

Ginny and her mum burst in through the door, and Snape left with the promise to see what Sirius thought about getting married in the library.

"Oh, dear, Mr. Forthall just told me what's happened!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, wringing her hands. "What will we do?"

Ginny quickly came over and fixed the curl that Hermione had pulled nearly straight.

"I think we're going to get married here," Hermione said, the idea growing on her more and more.

"Here?" Mrs. Weasley said sceptically, looking around with a forced smile. "That'll be... lovely."

"I think it's perfect!" Ginny said, unloading a bundle onto the loveseat beside Hermione.

A few moments later, Snape returned but didn't enter the room. "Black predictably stated that the library suits his needs perfectly. He followed that declaration with a number of trite and inappropriate comments which I will not repeat." And with that, he turned and left, leaving Hermione giggling and Mrs. Weasley shaking her head.

"How is Sirius?" Hermione asked Ginny quietly, knowing she would be in contact with Harry, who was helping Sirius get ready.

Ginny smiled a soft, knowing smile. "I've never seen him so excited. Even Harry was nervous before our wedding, but Sirius isn't. He's just like a little kid. I never would have thought he could be so... carefree."

Mrs. Weasley hummed a little, as if to suggest that Sirius had never been anything *but* carefree, but Hermione knew that wasn't true. Their entire fifth year he'd been completely miserable, but ever since she'd brought him back, it was as though he had a new lease on life, and really, he did.

Hermione smiled wistfully when she imagined the look on his face when she walked down the aisle. She wondered if he'd tear up. He rarely did, but she thought this might be one of those special occasions.

Ginny was unwrapping her bundle and pulled a long, shimmering white gown from the bag.

Running her fingers over the feather-light material, Hermione sighed. It was beautiful. Formfitting and flowing at the same time, the gown was exquisite. And it would hide a certain little bulge, even though Sirius insisted it wasn't visible just yet. Hermione could tell her body's shape was changing.

"Hermione, we'd better get dressed in your bedroom if the ceremony's to take place here," Ginny advised, and Hermione nodded, bringing her thoughts back to the wedding.

"Mum, can you go find that Forthall and tell him to get the room ready? The ceremony time will be the same, he just needs to set up the room and make sure the officiant will be here."

Mrs. Weasley nodded and patted Hermione's cheek softly before leaving the room. A suspicious snuffle followed her exit, and Hermione and Ginny laughed. Mrs. Weasley had been crying off and on for days.

"Does anyone else know?" Ginny whispered, touching Hermione's belly lightly with her fingertips. She could barely contain her excitement, and Hermione smiled softly,

gathering up their things.

"Only you and Harry," Hermione said, just as quietly. "And Sirius, of course. In fact, he knew before I did." Hermione laughed, thinking about how Sirius had accused her a few weeks ago of having lost her temper one too many times, and even before he'd finished dressing her down, his eyes had widened and his mouth had fallen open. And then he was picking her up and spinning her around, but Hermione had still been upset over the misplaced pack of chewing gum, so she slapped at him until he'd put her down, falling to his knees in front of her.

"Our little saviour," he'd whispered, placing a hand on Hermione's belly.

"What?" she'd snapped, backing away.

"Hermione, love, I think... I think you might be expecting!"

She'd frozen in place, realisations assailing her. Her mood swings (all right, she could admit it), her sore breasts, the fact that her period had been more like spotting... it was true.

"Don't call him that," she'd whispered, falling to her knees beside Sirius, who was grinning madly and looked to be having trouble breathing. "I don't want him to have a complex like Harry did."

"He?" Sirius had repeated, smile sliding into a look of awe and wonder.

She'd shrugged. "I think so. Feels right, doesn't it?"

"Nothing could be more so," Sirius had responded, gathering her into his arms. His kiss was deep and steady, the kind of kiss that she could imagine them sharing fifty, a hundred years down the road. It was a promise.

"Come on," Ginny said, and Hermione startled out of her reverie. "I'll check the hallway first. I don't want you accosted by guests." Ginny poked her head through the door and nodded back at Hermione. The two girls ran down the hall to the spare bedroom. Ginny had convinced her to spend the night before the wedding away from Sirius, and she'd done so. It didn't really count if the two of them had happened to meet in the kitchen in the middle of the night, apparently hungry for a snack before the big day. It definitely didn't count that Hermione had pushed Sirius to the floor and straddled him, taking them both to climax in record time.

It didn't count because they'd both bolted back to their bedrooms before they'd been caught.

The room was actually Sirius' old room, the one she'd trashed in a fit of pique, before she'd discovered that the spell to bring Sirius back had caused a bit of a personality transfer, causing a reaction much more Sirius-esque in nature. The room reminded her of how she'd broken her finger and shoddily healed it. It still made the most irritating clicking noise now and then.

Ginny laid the dress out on the bed, beside her own pale yellow bridesmaid dress. "We should be getting you into this," Ginny said, voice a little thick.

Hermione looked at her, surprised. Ginny had given no indication that she would cry today, but here she was, tears sparkling in her huge brown eyes. "Don't," Hermione chided, smiling. "You'll wreck your make-up."

Ginny seemed to pull herself together at that soft admonishment and quickly disrobed. She stepped into the dress, and Hermione stepped in to zip her up. Hermione had thought the colour would wash her friend out, but she was radiant. Her freckles were highlighted, but they made her look youthful and sweet. Her auburn hair shimmered in its pile atop her head.

"Your turn," she said cheerfully, taking item after item out of the bag she'd brought. Hermione watched, dismayed, as the bed was fairly overtaken with various instruments of concealment and enticement.

"I'm not wearing the corset," she said lowly. Pregnant or not, there was no way she'd don that menace.

Ginny sighed. "Fine. The garter?"

Hermione eyed it. It seemed harmless enough, and her stockings would have to stay up one way or another. "Okay."

There was no time to be embarrassed as Hermione let Ginny dress her. The strapless bra was snug thanks to her slightly fuller breasts, causing them to spill almost indecently over the top of it. The knickers were white lace, and Hermione just *knew* Sirius would be ripping them off. Next came the garter belt, which clipped the white stockings in place. Hermione ran a hand over her belly, wishing it were just a little bigger. She felt sexier than she ever had, and the life growing inside her made her feel even more so.

"Dress time!" Ginny sang, gently setting the dress on the floor so Hermione could easily step into it.

She did, and the dress was shimmied up her body. She smoothed her hands over the silk, revelling in the luxury of the fabric and the intensity of the moment.

"Whew," Ginny said from behind Hermione. "Good thing this is a corset-back, or I don't think it would have done up! You're growing, Mum!"

Hermione gasped at the honorific, hands flying to her belly. She couldn't seem to stop touching the area, it seemed so profound and unique to be growing a child, and yet most women did it. She wondered if they all felt this way.

"Ginny..." Hermione said softly, turning as her friend secured the bow. "I'm going to be a mother... Sirius is going to be a dad. Are we mad?"

Ginny laughed and hugged Hermione, who fell into the embrace gracelessly. "Of course not, Hermione! You're in love. You're beautiful and perfect and pregnant and in love. Everything is going to be fine!"

Hermione stepped in front of the full-length mirror. She was glad that she still looked like herself. But she was glowing, she could tell. Sirius had mentioned it, but she'd never believed him until today. The scars over her heart had faded to silvery-white, but they were badges of honour, and she wore them proudly as they signified would she would do for love.

"I *am* beautiful," she said in wonderment.

Suddenly there was a bouquet in her hands, white lilies tied with a blue ribbon. "This ribbon was tied around my bridal flowers," Ginny said, fingers tracing the silken length. "So your bouquet has something old, borrowed, and blue, all at the same time."

"And something new?" she asked, having completely forgotten about the tradition.

"Well," Ginny said, smiling and reaching in her purse. "This counts, I believe." Ginny handed her a small black velvet box. "From Sirius."

Perching on the end of the bed, Hermione opened the small card. *"A piece of you is with me, always. Now you can say the same. I love you."*

With shaking fingers, Hermione opened the box. A stunning white gold locket rested in stark relief against the velvet. She gasped softly, pulling the necklace free. The locket was encrusted with glittering diamonds, blinding Hermione...or maybe that was the tears. She opened the locket with reverent fingers. A tiny locket of black hair was

tied and rested within. Sirius' hair. She touched it with a fingertip, laughing.

Ginny was reading the card and had tears on her cheeks. She reached for the locket, and Hermione let her settle it around her neck; it rested in the hollow of her throat, cool against her flushed skin.

"It's perfect," Ginny said, tucking her handkerchief back into her purse.

"He's perfect," Hermione said.

And then it was time.

*

The library was like an entirely new room. Flowing swathes of cloth, ribbon and flowers, all white, were hung everywhere. The books were the only really colour in the room.

The aisle had been set up to traverse the main aisle between stacks. Hermione couldn't see all the way down the aisle from the secondary door in the library, but she knew Sirius was waiting at the end for her.

Ginny gave her one final hug, which lasted until Hermione had to shoo her down the aisle. The redhead made the traditional lilting steps until Hermione could no longer see her. A moment later, Hermione's music was cued, and the wedding planner gave her a surreptitious nod from the side.

Hermione tried to slow her pace like Ginny's, but the steps felt unnatural, so she just walked. When Sirius' face came into view, everything else fell away.

He was wearing traditional wedding robes, black and lined with satin. His long hair was tied back with a black cord, a single strand having escaped and now kissed his cheek. She knew the moment he saw her because his entire face changed from anxious anticipation to pure satisfied happiness.

She laughed a little when he bit his lip, and so eager was he to meet her, he took a few steps forward and held out his hand. She took it and immediately felt a wave of joy wash over her, mingling with her own.

"Hey, love," he whispered, smiling that Sirius smile and making her blush.

"Hey," she said back, stepping into place across from him. A part of her noted the Weasleys, Harry, Ginny behind her, Draco sitting with Renworth Alensky, Andromeda, Teddy, Snape and his new lady friend, her friends from school, Sirius' friends from the Order and from goodness knew where, but her eyes really only had room for Sirius.

Then the officiant was talking, and the man had a soothing voice, and she tried to pay attention, but Sirius' mirthful grey eyes seemed to be teasing her. His thumb brushed over the back of her hand, and she smiled, unable to break his gaze.

Everyone seemed to be waiting for something, but Hermione knew she was to speak after Sirius. The officiant cleared his throat, but it took Harry stepping forward to nudge Sirius for him to realise what needed to be done.

"He's distracted by shiny things," Harry quipped in explanation, making everyone laugh. Hermione's grin widened at Sirius' blush.

He cleared his throat and began to speak the vows they'd been practising for weeks. "Hermione, I take you to be my lawfully wedded wife. Before these witnesses I vow to love you and care for you as long as we both shall live." Sirius stopped to take a deep breath. He looked at the ground for a moment, but he squeezed her hand to reassure her. When he looked up, his face was a serious as she'd ever seen it. "I take you, with all your faults and strengths, as I offer myself to you with all my faults and strengths. I will help you when you need help, and turn to you when I need help. I choose you as the person with whom I will spend my life. I... love you... so much."

Hermione's heart was racing throughout his words. Hearing them now was so different than practising them in the kitchen or before bed.

Sirius leaned forward and kissed Hermione softly. Maybe it wasn't part of the ceremony, but she offered herself up to the kiss eagerly, taking solace in his passion.

When the kiss broke, Hermione was ready. "Sirius, I take you to be my lawfully wedded husband. Before these witnesses I vow to love you and care for you as long as we both shall live. I take you, with all your faults and strengths, as I offer myself to you with all my faults and strengths. I will help you when you need help, and turn to you when I need help. I choose you as the person with whom I will spend my life. I love you, Sirius."

Someone sniffed loudly, and Teddy gave a short cry, but Hermione heard nothing.

"Sirius Black, do you take Hermione Granger to be your wife?" came the official words.

"I do," he said solemnly, eyes sparkling.

"Hermione Granger, do you take Sirius Black to be your husband?"

"I do," she answered easily. Sirius barked a laugh, pride and joy written across his features, even as a solitary tear slid down his cheek. Hermione wiped it away, and he grabbed it hand, kissing her palm before letting it go.

"By the power vested in me by the Ministry of Magic, I know pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss!"

And they did. Sirius gathered Hermione close and tilted her back into a half-dip. His lips were soft and careful, but the message was one of passion and desire. Hermione eagerly returned the kiss, her hands working to loose his hair from the tie.

When he pulled her back up, Hermione heard clapping, laughter, and even a few whoops. She blushed furiously, smacking Sirius lightly on the arm, but the truth was, she was thrilled.

They quickly signed a parchment that popped out of existence once the quills were lifted from the page. They were married.

"Husband," she said teasingly as they walked down the aisle together.

"Wife," he rejoined, unsbtly leading them to their shared bedroom. "Love."

Once in the room, Sirius closed the door behind him and advanced on Hermione like a predator. But Hermione was no prey. She stood her ground with a sultry smile on her face.

"Is this how you would consummate our marriage?" she scolded in mock outrage. "Ten minutes after the fact in a room not twenty feet from our guests?"

"I would have done it one minute after, not four feet from our guests, but I thought your little wedding planner might have objected."

Hermione laughed. "I can't think why."

"Nor I," Sirius said, snorting. Then his face became serious again. "I almost didn't think you'd come," he said quietly, reaching for her.

Hermione folded herself into his arms. "Why would you doubt me? You know how I feel."

"Sometimes I feel so old, so... broken," he murmured in her hair.

She suspected he was referring to the way he still got a little nervous and tense in public places. That was to be expected, though, from everything he'd been through in his eventful life.

"Sirius, I meant my vows. Faults and all."

He kissed her softly. "Faults and all," he agreed, sighing. "You're perfect, you know."

"Oh?" she said, chuckling. "Tell me more."

"Little tart," he said, leading her very slowly to the bed. Robes were strewn all over it; it appeared Sirius had had a hard time deciding what to wear, though she couldn't fathom why, as he'd picked out his own robes. But with a quick spell they were neatly hung and out of sight. He turned her so he could untie her dress, pulling on the laces until it was loose enough to slip out of.

"I never knew," Sirius began, and then he coughed suspiciously and cleared his throat. "I never knew that I could be happy like this, happy with another person and happy with myself."

He helped her out of the dress, but froze when his eyes fell on her. She fought the urge to cover herself, his scrutiny was so intense. She knew she looked lovely in her white undergarments, and a thrill coursed through her.

"I didn't know, either," she admitted, unbuttoning his robes. "I thought that you could have passion or friendship, and I always saw myself as the girl who gets friendship. And I was okay with that for a long time. But you've shown me so much about myself, and about love. Now I know that I can have both, and to never settle for anything less than everything. And that's what you've given me. Between yourself, this wedding, your love, your home, and now..." Hermione paused to take his hand and place on it her belly. Flat or not, it was still more firm than usual, and that was proof enough for her. "...Now this baby. A *baby*, Sirius!" She shook her head. It was almost too much to believe.

"A baby," he confirmed, taking her face in his hands. "Our baby, our perfect little world-changing baby. Even if he only does invent cheese, I'd love him the same."

Hermione laughed wetly. Her life certainly hadn't turned out the way she might have expected even a year before, but it was everything she could hope for. A family. A baby. Sirius.

"Make love to me," she said, getting on to the bed and leaning back, arms over her head.

"Every day," he vowed. "One way or another, every day for the rest of our lives."

Sirius crawled onto the bed and leaned over her, caressing her from her fingertips all the way down to her arches of her stockinged feet.

"Even when I'm so big I can hardly move?"

Her husband nodded, placing a sweet kiss on her belly for emphasis.

"Even when I'm so *old* I can barely move?"

Sirius laughed. "I'll be older."

"Maybe, but somehow I suspect you'll keep your youthful ways."

He nodded mock-soberly. "If it means I get to keep you, I'll never grow up."

Hermione laughed and pushed his robes off his shoulders. He wore only snug black pants beneath, and she liked the way his darkness looked against her lightness. "I'm not sure that's what I had in mind," she said, trailing a finger down his chest to wriggle into his shorts.

"I'll be good to you," Sirius swore, still with that near-grave look in his eyes.

"I've never doubted that," she said truthfully. "Enough talking."

Sirius took her words to heart as he unclipped her bra. His hands cupped her breasts softly, seemingly weighing them. She hadn't thought they were noticeably larger, but the considering look on his face told her otherwise.

He kissed and sucked on her nipples until she spread her legs wantonly, encouraging him to settle between them. When he did, she reached down to gently stroke his cock. His hardness was as familiar to her now as her own wetness was, and she played him expertly, amazed at the way his body responded to hers.

When Sirius realised her panties were beneath the garter suspenders, he did as she'd foreseen he would, and ripped them twice, one tear for each leg, and threw them aside.

He made no move to unclip her garter belt, and she had to laugh at his predictability. He was obviously entranced by the undergarments, as he continually ran his fingertips over the silky length of her covered legs.

He moved off of her to quickly divest of his shorts, and she noticed that they landed right on top of her demolished panties, halfway across the room.

"How is this even possible?" he whispered into her neck, nipping her softly and laving each little bite with a lick and a kiss. "A man like me... with you."

"Sirius," Hermione said, almost exasperated. "I love you more than anything, but you need to learn your own worth. You're an amazing wizard, an amazing husband, you'll be an amazing father, and I don't care about anything else!"

"Love you, too," he said, but she could tell he'd taken her words to heart. If he were insecure, she would secure him.

And then he was inside her, and any thoughts of future problems were stolen away with her breath.

It was as though the bond was back in full force, the way it was for those first intense weeks where every separation was torment, every parting anguish. She had to touch him everywhere in order to quell the burning in her soul. She felt complete when he filled her, and when he withdrew, she was lost. The utter violence of her emotions shocked her, and before she could halt them, the tears that had kept their distance during her vows were rising to the surface.

"Gods!" she cried, rocking her hips to take more of him, encouraging him to move faster, harder. He seemed intent on taking his time, but her orgasm was rushing forth, and she almost didn't know how to contain it.

"Love, going to come," Sirius rasped, his mouth crashing onto her as he thrust just the way she wanted, deep and hard but still so slow.

Her cry matched his for volume and intensity as they came together, holding one another tightly as matching waves flooded them both.

"That felt... different," Sirius said, once they caught their breath. He rolled gently off of her, placing a hand on her belly as if to make sure her precious cargo was all right.

"Intense," she agreed, still feeling the climax in her fingertips and toes.

"The Veil?" Sirius suggested, looking sceptical but uncertain.

"I don't think so," she mused. "Just us, this time. And from here out, I think."

"I like the sound of that," Sirius said, letting go of her reluctantly as she got out of bed and donned her bra. The panties were a write-off, but Sirius would just have to suffer knowing her body was filled with his seed and there was nothing to stop it from trickling down.

Sirius had to help her with her dress, and she guessed from his confused movements and the sheer amount of time he took that he had no idea what he was doing with the corset ties, but she didn't care. Once they were presentable, they returned to the party, which was going in full swing the floor below.

"Hermione!" Ginny cried, and a veritable melee followed. Hermione was congratulated, hugged, and advised by every single person in attendance. Sirius went through a similar ordeal, though not as elaborate, mostly claps on the back and exclamations of, "You old dog, you!" which had Hermione snickering to herself.

The reception was very casual, despite Mrs. Weasleys pleas for formal speeches and dancing. Hermione didn't want that kind of fuss, and Sirius was uncomfortable with a lot of attention. They sat together at a sweetheart table for two, eating food from each other's hands, making moony eyes, and generally being sickeningly romantic.

Ginny efficiently fixed the back of Hermione's dress, which had been, as expected, made a disaster by Sirius, who looked on sheepishly, shrugging.

Finally, the night wound to a close, full stomachs and aching feet across the board. Sirius held his hand out for Hermione to join him for the final dance of the night.

Soft, soothing woodwinds led them onto the floor, and Sirius spun Hermione right into his arms.

"Couldn't have asked for a better night," he whispered, lips lingering against her ear.

Hermione shivered. "It's been the best day of my life," she said, smiling.

"I hope to beat that record every day," Sirius said, his face so full of love that Hermione's heart pounded.

He folded her into his arms, fancy dance steps forgotten in favour of their soft swaying.

Eventually Mrs. and Mr. Weasley joined them on the dance floor, smiling at the younger couple. Ginny and Harry were next, and Harry had cake smeared on his cheek from the cake-war they'd all participated in. Then Ron followed with Lavender, who Hermione wasn't really surprised to see back with her husband. Hermione tried not to stare as Snape and his witch joined the last dance. Snape was shockingly light on his feet, and Hermione even saw him smile when his pretty witch made a quiet observance. And then Renworth Alensky was dragging Draco Malfoy onto the dance floor, wrapping his arms around the blond's waist. Draco looked around cautiously, but no one was paying them any mind. Hermione smiled encouragingly, and Draco's cheeks tinged pink. He visibly drew himself up and fell into step with his dance partner.

One by one, the guests left, giving final congratulations to the newlyweds before they made their exits. Only Harry and Ginny were left on the dance floor, and they were just as involved with one another as Sirius and Hermione. But soon, even they left with parting kisses and promises of dinner parties the next week.

Hermione and Sirius saw them to the front door, closing it after them. Alone.

Sirius held out his hand again, and Hermione slipped hers into it. A perfect fit. The dance continued in the foyer of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, in the exact same place where Sirius had fallen through the front door after returning from beyond the Veil a lifetime ago.

And the dance would never really stop.

Epilogue

Chapter 33 of 33

Hermione risks a part of her soul to bring Sirius back from the Veil. Will her sacrifice be for nothing? And what exactly has she given up, as Sirius finds himself amongst the living once more?

This story is beta-ed by kazfeist.

Hermione clenched Sirius' hand in hers as she watched their daughter take the steps onto the dais and stand in front of the podium.

As always when Vela was in front of an audience, nary a voice could be heard. People even stilled their shuffling, and an errant cough was treated to a resounding backlash of hushes.

"Thank you all for being here today," Vela began in a clear, light voice. Her speaking voice was perfect for this sort of gathering, but in closer quarters, there was always a little lilting sarcasm in her tones, most likely thanks to the amount of time she'd spent with Severus Snape over the years as his best pupil.

"As you know, Harry Potter has stepped down from his position as Head Auror. We in the Corps miss him already." She gave a heartfelt smile to Harry, who was sitting on Hermione's other side. He smiled back and nodded at her.

"Mr. Potter has done so much good for the wizarding community over the years, and that is a lot to live up to. However, he has also left the world a better place, which made the decision to accept his offer of Head Auror an easy one."

The gathered crowd burst into applause, reporters already firing questions. Sirius glared at them and they quieted down, though they were still quite obviously chomping at the bit.

"As Head Auror, there are many changes I want to implement, all, I believe, for the betterment of our lives. Many changes will take years; some are already underway, thanks to the work Mr. Potter has done during his tenure in office. One of the easiest changes will be increasing of the Unspeakable team, which will help our understanding of our world.

"I also intend to dismantle the Hit Wizard team. As it has been nearly thirty years since the fall of Voldemort, I believe that this team is no longer necessary. The team will be merged with the Obliviators, and they will work together from there.

"Now, I don't want to bore you with my political platform...all that is easily available on the Ministry website, as well as in the pamphlets you can find by the buffet. I do want to say thank you for electing me. I will do this job to the best of my ability; I will make you all proud." Her eyes lingered on her parents as she said this, and Hermione couldn't quell the pride that always flooded her when her daughter spoke.

The applause was predictably deafening, and Hermione jumped to her feet as she clapped wildly. Vela grinned at her and hopped off the dais, crossing the floor to embrace her mother.

"We're so proud of you," Hermione whispered, holding her tightly.

Sirius stood and smiled that almost-wild grin he got around his children. "You're amazing," he told her simply, joining in the hug.

Harry shook her hand and flashbulbs went off immediately, blinding Hermione for a moment.

She saw Teddy make his way through the crowd, his hair a respectable light brown, looking very dashing in his black Muggle suit. Vela saw him coming and blushed. Sirius followed her gaze and narrowed his eyes a moment before plastering a false smile at Hermione's ungentle nudge.

"Congratulations, Vel," Teddy said in a quiet voice.

"Thank you, Teddy," she said. Neither seemed to notice that their hands were still clasped together until Sirius cleared his throat.

"Has anyone seen the others?" he asked, looking over all their heads. "I haven't seen Leo or Altair since we sat down. And Lacerta said she'd be here, but I didn't see her come in."

"Don't worry," Hermione said in a placating voice, wrapping her arm around Sirius' waist and leaning into him as he encircled her. "They'll be here."

And of course she was right. Just as she gave Sirius a reassuring kiss, Leo and Altair ran up to them and grabbed Vela in a group hug of tangled limbs and energy.

"You did great, sis!"

"I just knew you'd be perfect!"

"Mum, we'll be at the buffet, yeah?"

And just like that, Hermione and Sirius' sons bounded away, leaving amused and exasperated parents behind.

"At least that means we won't have to feed them," Hermione quipped. Her cupboards were always positively emptied when the boys came home. Only a year apart, people tended to forget they weren't twins, especially with the way they looked. Both had sleek black hair; Altair preferred to wear his long, like his father, but Leo kept his neatly trimmed. Tall and lanky with Hermione's eyes, the boys were adventurous to the extreme, having spent the last year with Charlie Weasley in Romania, with the intentions of spending this year in Egypt with Bill. Neither had decided what they actually wanted to do with their lives, so long as they did it together. They liked to tell their parents that they were exploring the world so they could find the perfect job, but Sirius, especially, was not fooled. Nor did he begrudge them their wandering.

"Mum, Dad, Teddy's going to take me out for a celebratory drink after we mingle for a bit," Vela said softly, her grey eyes warm and almost pleading. Though Vela was twenty-four years old, she still looked to her parents for approval in almost anything. Of course, she didn't have to look hard. Her life was a veritable smorgasbord of charities and fundraising and general attempts (and successes) at making the world a better place.

"That sounds great," Sirius said, putting an arm around his daughter's shoulder. "Shall we?" He looked to Hermione, Harry, and Ginny, who had just joined them.

"Actually, Sirius, I think we should wait for Lacerta," Hermione said as Harry and Ginny tried not to laugh at Sirius' over-protectiveness. Vela shot her mother a thankful glance from under her glossy black fringe. Hermione's heart swelled. Vela was the perfect image of her father, tall and slender with high cheekbones and all the confidence with none of the bluster (to Snape's immense relief).

"Fine," Sirius said, looking hard at Teddy, who looked back evenly. Teddy was more than used to Sirius' warnings and instructions, and he bore them with the quiet grace of his father, and only the occasional exasperation of his mother. "But you're both to be back for the dinner at Grimmauld Place at seven, yeah?"

Vela jumped up to give her father a kiss on the cheek and had to bend a little at the waist to do the same to her shorter mother.

Teddy nodded his goodbyes and the pair left together. Hermione saw that they until they were very nearly out of sight before Teddy took Vela's hand.

The two had been dancing circles around one another for years. Hermione knew Vela had been a little concerned that they were distantly related, but that was just the way pure-bloods were, and the wizarding world certainly wouldn't make anything of it. It was likely a bias that Vela had noticed in her research of her heritage on Hermione's side.

Sirius had latched on to the insecurity at first to try to keep the two apart, but Hermione had reminded him that, of all the wizards out there who would vie for Vela's hand, Teddy was probably the best for her. Studious, clever, and witty, Teddy had always been well-suited to Vela, but his shyness and her uncertainty had kept them from making a move for years.

"You're all coming to dinner, right?" Hermione asked Harry and Ginny.

"Wouldn't miss it," Ginny swore. "The kids'll all be there as well."

"Full house," Sirius said, raising his eyebrows.

"Mum, can I talk to you?" came a small voice at her side. All the adults turned and gave eighteen-year-old Lacerta soft smiles. She was very much doted on by everyone who met her.

Hermione broke away from the group and let Lacerta walk her outside. Lacerta was the only child that looked like Hermione. All four children had Sirius' black hair, but only Lacerta's was curly like her mother's. They had the same heart-shaped face and the same whiskey-coloured eyes. Lacerta was also more petite and tended toward curves, whereas her sister was very svelte.

"What is it, baby?" she asked, inwardly smiling at the wince the nickname evoked.

"You're an Unspeakable, aren't you?"

Hermione's insides felt splashed with cold as she regarded her youngest child carefully.

"If you are, just don't say anything, 'kay?"

Biting her lip, Hermione said nothing. Her other children had also guessed at her and Sirius' occupation, but more out of process of elimination than actually coming out and asking her.

"That's what I'm going to be," Lacerta said proudly, eyes shining brightly.

"They recruited you?" Hermione asked, too astounded to tell her daughter that she couldn't go around telling people that, even before the Unbreakable Vow was in place.

Lacerta slyly said nothing, only quirked an eyebrow, making Hermione laugh. They obviously had.

Taking Lacerta into a tight embrace, Hermione almost wanted to cry. She would have been so lonely in her work if it weren't for Sirius. She didn't really want that life for Lacerta, but Unspeakables were allowed to talk to one another about their work, very generally, and openly if they were in the same department, which she and Sirius were. Lacerta would have her parents to talk to.

"I'm part of the new initiative Vela was talking about."

"Oh, Lacerta, I'm so proud of you. And your father will be, as well. Can I tell him?"

"Of course," Lacerta said, grinning widely. She was usually very quiet and reserved, and it was nice to see her so confident in herself. "I want to work with the Veil so I can figure out how Daddy came back, but they said that department was full."

Hermione knew all too well that her department was full. She'd been privately recruiting for it for almost four years now, ever since they'd made a breakthrough with communication. The susurrations that Hermione had always heard in her dreams, and that Sirius had heard when he'd had panic attacks in public...those were the voices of the people on the other side. If recorded with Muggle equipment, they could be slowed down and isolated, which meant Hermione's team had actually been in contact with the dead.

It was life altering, but nothing could ever be made public of the knowledge. There were too many people like Jimothy Frankenhodge, who just didn't understand the enormity of the consequences. Frankenhodge was still in St. Mungo's, but he'd responded favourably to new treatment. Hermione knew that if he'd had any family, he would have been released some time ago. As it was, he would have to stay in treatment. Hermione made sure to keep abreast of his wellbeing, though he still had bad days often.

"Oh, baby, your Daddy will be so pleased to hear you say that. Come on, let's go tell him."

As Hermione and Sirius were putting the finishing touches on the huge meal they'd prepared, Hermione was thinking about her children.

When Vela had been born, she and Sirius had made a promise to never tell her about the mysterious plan the Veil had. Making her feel like her life was predestined would pressure her in all the wrong ways, and Hermione and Sirius wanted their daughter to have a childhood free of anxiety and obligation, unlike what Harry had gone through.

But for the first time in her life, Hermione actually questioned that it would be Vela who was destined to change the world. She'd always been the outgoing, brave, hardworking one. Her brothers reminded Hermione of Fred and George Weasley... or Sirius, of course. They were full of mischief, though keenly intelligent, with wanderlust to rival anything else she'd seen.

But Lacerta... Lacerta might be the one to make a difference. Of course Vela would as well; but which child had been the one the Veil had chosen? Would they ever really know? Lacerta was ambitious and driven, with a deep intelligence that surpassed that of her siblings' at her age. Perhaps like most things in Lacerta's life, the changes she would make would be quieter and less obvious.

Or maybe it was all four. Maybe Leo and Altair also had significant things in their futures, if they'd ever settle down long enough to do something about it.

A heavy knock on the door startled her, even though they were expecting company.

"I'll get it," she said quickly, wiping her hands on a dishtowel and giving Sirius a quick kiss. Which turned into a long kiss. Which elicited another knock on the door, more persistent this time.

Hermione ran and threw it open. "Draco! And Renworth! We weren't expecting to see you," she said, addressing Renworth. As another Unspeakable, he found it nearly impossible to get away from his current project, of which Hermione knew almost nothing.

She embraced them both, though Draco, as always, felt a little stiff, like he was still not used to the affection. With Sirius, he'd gained an entire family...a huge one. When his family before had only been his parents, it still shocked him to have so many people count him as important.

"I was able to tear him away," Draco said smugly, handing Hermione his cloak, then Renworth's. After putting those away, Hermione told the men to settle themselves in the sitting room. She didn't bother closing the front door because she could see Harry, Ginny and their three, James, Lily, and Albus Severus walking from the Apparition point.

Waiting, Hermione also saw Teddy and Vela pop up, followed by Lacerta, Altair, and Leo. Lacerta was being jostled good-naturedly by her brothers, who were using their height advantages to annoy their sister. But it seemed nothing would irritate Lacerta today. Hermione caught her eye and smiled proudly as the Potters arrived on the stoop.

Albus Severus turned and saw Lacerta, and he hung back to wait for her. The two were very close, being near in age and temperament. When Albus Severus had been Sorted into Slytherin, Lacerta had been the only one of her Gryffindor cohorts to extend her hand in congratulations. The children had all grown up together, but Albus Severus' Sorting had caused something of a drift until Lacerta repeatedly insisted otherwise, and with the immovability of a brick wall, Lacerta had forced the change she'd wanted to see.

"Aunt Hermione, you look beautiful!" Lily exclaimed.

"Doesn't she?" asked Sirius, coming up behind his wife and wrapping his arms around her.

"Oh, gods," James said, groaning loudly but still smiling. "They'll be at this all night!"

"James!" Ginny said in a whip crack voice, making her son jump. "Enough of that. Go make sure everything's set for dinner. Lily, you, too."

Harry laughed as Ginny settled back into her non-mum role after the kids were all inside. "They're exhausting," he said, shaking his head and smiling like a man who'd won the lottery.

When everyone was finally in and settled, Hermione served the dinner. There wasn't room at the table for everyone, so people sat wherever there was a flat surface. Teddy and Vela, of course, sat close together on a settee, which made Sirius sit across from them on the sofa. Hermione sat with him, smiling softly as Albus Severus and Lacerta sat on the floor near the hearth, talking quietly with their heads together.

James, Lily, Altair, and Leo sat at the far end of the table, laughing loudly and then hushing each other, looking around to see if anyone'd heard them. Hermione did not want to know what they were planning. Lily was giving Altair doe eyes, but he was clueless. She'd have to resort to more obvious measures with Hermione's younger son.

Draco, of course, and Renworth sat at the table. Harry and Ginny joined them, engaging in quiet conversation.

"You leave your front door open?" came a low voice imbued with disgust. "Heathens."

"Severus!" Vela cried, launching herself up from her seat and spilling Teddy's drink. She apologised profusely before running to the door, leaving an amused Teddy to tidy

the mess.

"We assumed his Highness wouldn't take to opening his own door," Sirius said as Snape entered the room with Vela chattering at him.

"Dad, stop! Severus is our friend," Vela said sternly. She was very protective of her former professor, to Sirius' chagrin and Snape's horror.

At this proclamation, Sirius and Snape looked at each other with raised eyebrows. A silence fell over the room. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Go grab some food, Severus," Hermione said softly. He nodded at her and left the room. Vela looked as though she wanted to follow, but then she saw Teddy again, and she went to sit with him instead.

When Snape returned, he took the seat on the sofa next to Sirius. Even if the men didn't call one another 'friend,' they were as good as. It had happened when Snape had begun seriously seeing the witch he'd brought to their wedding. Sirius no longer saw him as a threat and began to make overtures (subtle ones, of course, but ones that were apparently tolerated, after a token period of resistance). When Snape and the witch had split up, nothing had changed.

Snape claimed to enjoy his bachelor life, but that didn't stop everyone from trying to match-make for him, Hermione included.

"Severus, there's this lovely young woman in Payroll, who I just think you'd..."

"No."

"Oh, but she's quite..."

"I'm sure she is. No."

Hermione mock-glared at him, but as always, he won.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger-Black, on being the youngest Head Auror in history. Even Potter was twenty-five," Snape said, with pride abounding in his voice. Vela blushed and took the opportunity to talk about her plans, which Snape listened to with unfeigned interest.

A burst of laughter from the table had everyone looking, and even Draco was smiling as Leo retold a story of debauchery and intrigue from their time in Romania.

"Never thought I'd have all this," Sirius said in her ear. She put their plates on the floor and turned into him, kissing him slowly for a moment.

"I did," she admitted. "But I never thought it's be with someone as amazing as you. I never thought it'd be like this."

In a private moment between them, Sirius and Hermione held each other as they listened to multiple conversations at once, each voice as familiar as their own, each person happy and healthy. It was almost too much to hope for, too good to be true, but it was.

"Wife," Sirius said affectionately, pressing a soft kiss to the tip of her nose.

"Husband," she whispered, moving his kiss to her mouth, instead.

The Veil could have its plan. Their world was already perfect.

Fin.