

Silent Support

by sunny33

Hermione discovers something which irrevocably alters her beliefs and loyalties.

Chapter One: Noises in the Night

Chapter 1 of 13

Hermione discovers something which irrevocably alters her beliefs and loyalties.

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Chapter One: Noises in the Night

The slight girl with brown curls sits before the mirror, her wedding dress hanging in the wardrobe behind her. Turning to the older witch who is fixing her hair, she asks with a wistful smile, "Will you tell me the story of Hermione and Severus again, Mum?"

"Certainly, sweetheart," her mother replies, caressing her beloved daughter's hair. She closes her eyes and thinks back to events which occurred many years earlier.

"They were dark and fearful times. The evil Lord Voldemort had risen again and was gathering his Death Eaters to take over the wizarding world. Harry Potter was in his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Hermione was one of his best friends, along with Ronald Weasley. She was a very powerful witch, said to be the brightest witch of her age by some. She used to spend most of her spare time in the library studying when she was not helping her two friends with their homework or performing her prefect duties."

"What was she like?" the girl asks, as she always does.

"She had loads of curly, brown hair like you, sometimes unkindly described as bushy. She had cinnamon brown eyes, an expressive face, and she often chewed her lower lip when she was nervous. She was tall and slim, almost boyish in figure. Her bookish nature had earned her the title of know-it-all, and her best friends rarely saw her as a girl, much to her chagrin, as she had fancied Ronald for years."

"I thought Severus described her as the most beautiful woman in the world?"

"She was to him, darling. When a man loves a woman the way Severus loved Hermione, she is beautiful in his eyes."

"How did they first meet?"

"They first met when she was a little, overeager first-year. She used to drive him crazy with her incessant hand waving in Potions class. He tried to avoid asking her any questions, knowing she would have all the books memorised. None of the other children would have bothered to do any work and simply relied on Hermione if he called upon her."

"Didn't that upset her?"

"Of course it did, dear. She would have done anything to gain his approval. All the other professors praised her often, but the one she wanted to impress the most was mostly cold and disdainful. You must remember, she was a Gryffindor, and he was a spy and Head of Slytherin House. He could never be seen to pay any attention to her, especially as she was so close to Harry Potter. So, he ignored her as much as he could, although later he admitted he had never had a more satisfying student to teach, especially when she gave up hand waving as she matured.

"Her early years at Hogwarts passed with several adventures in which she showed herself to be intelligent, resourceful, and courageous. She had set his robes on fire, stolen from his Potions stores, and Stupefied him, but still he admired her silently."

"What changed things?" The bride-to-be always asks the same questions, even though she knows the tale by heart.

"Late one evening in her sixth year at Hogwarts, Hermione was patrolling the deserted corridors when she heard a loud, crashing noise and shouting coming from the Defence Classroom..."

Hermione slowly strolled along the quiet hallways, enjoying the peace as she patrolled for the final time that evening. Despite the still chilly temperatures, it was her favourite time of day. All the younger students were tucked away in their beds, and the rest were quietly studying, playing games, or chatting in the common rooms. The very walls of Hogwarts themselves seemed to heave a sigh of relief at curfew, as if they could relax the vigilant watch they held over their precious charges at last. Even the staff was rarely seen, except Professor Snape or Argus Filch and his scraggly cat. The solitude of her patrol answered her need for a quiet time to think about the day's events and contemplate the problems of Horcruxes, cursed necklaces, and Ronald Weasley.

A sudden racket disturbing the stillness of the empty hallways pulled the emergency cord on her train of thought. Frowning, she followed the sound down the corridor to its source. Someone was in the Defence classroom, shouting and throwing things. Aware it was her duty as a prefect to investigate, she quietly unsheathed her wand and crept to the partially open door.

To her surprise, it was the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Severus Snape, creating the ruckus. The usually repressed, cold man was raging to the unfeeling walls of the classroom.

"I can't do it! I won't do it! Albus, you fucking manipulative bastard, how could you ask it of me? Why? Why?"

As she watched, he crumpled into a heap and slid down the wall. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he sat with his head bowed, shoulders shaking. It took her a moment or two to realise Snape was sobbing. The surly, powerful wizard was breaking down right in front of her eyes. Hermione felt a tear run slowly down her cheek as she watched the disintegration of the man whose intelligence she respected, whose courage she admired, and who had spent years treading the fine line between life and death for people who often hated him. Did no-one care about this man?

Gathering up her considerable courage, she slipped into the room, quietly righted the mess, and sat down on the floor beside him. Unsure how to proceed and fearful he would hex her, she simply sat there. Holding her breath as he leaned into her, still sobbing uncontrollably, she gradually lifted her arm and placed it about his shoulders, stroking the fall of fine, black hair.

Hermione held the broken man for endless hours that night as he wept for reasons she could only imagine, never acknowledging her presence or speaking, and eventually drifted off to a fitful sleep. After casting cushioning and warming charms for both of their sakes, she finally succumbed to slumber herself despite the discomfort of her position on the floor. She woke as the early light of dawn pierced the darkness through the windows to find herself alone, a soft blanket draped over her body.

The young witch quickly returned to her dorm and let herself into her shared room, worried what the rest of the day would bring. Would Snape remember her silent witness to his despair? Further sleep eluded her as she envisaged an enraged professor wiping her memories with a sneer while tears washed his cheeks.

Reluctance slowed her steps as she entered the Great Hall at breakfast, nervously looking up at the staff table and breathing a sigh of relief to see no sign of Snape. However, Defence was her first class, so her breakfast remained untouched. The boisterous noise of the other Gryffindors barely registered as she sat and worried her bottom lip.

She waited until the last minute to enter the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, seating herself quietly and avoiding the gaze of the dark man at the front of the classroom handing out the previous day's homework essays. She took hers with trembling hands, finding only an impassive expression on her professor's face. Unrolling the scroll, she noted the usual E, but underneath in his distinctive handwriting there glowed two faint, green words. *Thank you.* The words faded as she sighed in relief.

Watching her professor during the class, Hermione noticed things which had previously not impinged on her awareness. Snape's face was more drawn and tired looking, the shadows under his eyes darker, and he looked as if he had lost weight. It was the portrait of a man under extreme pressure, not that she needed any more evidence than the night before had revealed. Her heart went out to the dour wizard; no-one should suffer such stress without any support, and from what he had been railing against the previous night the headmaster was not providing any succour.

For a brief moment, their eyes met, and in the depths of his she caught a glimmer of deep despair before he locked it away once more. She smiled at him then, a tentative, almost fearful smile, which encompassed all the compassion and protectiveness she suddenly felt for this solitary man. As expected, he did not return the smile; to do so would be to admit vulnerability, which was something he could ill afford to do. However, he nodded very slightly, acknowledging her concern.

Hermione spent the rest of the day contemplating life, sacrifice, and loyalty. Somehow, she was sure within her heart Severus Snape was working for the light and needed all the help he could get.

Not that any was forthcoming.

Not unless she took a risk or two.

She carefully considered her plan of action, never putting anything into writing as was her wont and keeping her thoughts closely concealed. The direct, Gryffindor approach of asking him what she could do to help was clearly impossible, not to mention ridiculous. There was little she could do to assist him with his spying, and she was sure he would berate her thoroughly for even suggesting it. She needed a more subtle, Slytherin approach.

Her concern over Snape was overtaken by more pressing problems two days later on Ron Weasley's birthday. Harry's quick action with the bezoar had saved his friend's life, but the incontrovertible evidence of another attack at Hogwarts had stunned them all. No longer could they consider Hogwarts a safe haven. There were plans afoot and nasty ones at that.

Hermione remembered Hagrid's revelation of the argument he had overheard between Snape and Dumbledore. It appeared the argument had precipitated Snape's breakdown. Clearly, the headmaster had elicited a promise from Snape to do something he desperately did not want to do. What was so traumatic for him to consider that it would make a wizard such as he sob for hours? More than ever, she knew he needed someone to understand and care.

A week after the evening she had comforted him, Hermione quietly knocked on the door to Snape's office down in the dungeons. At his snarled 'Enter,' she opened the door and walked into the room.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure, Miss Granger? Come to ask for extra homework?" He sneered, pretty much as she had expected he would.

"I was just passing and wanted to check to see if you were OK," she answered, meeting his gaze calmly.

"Oh. Well, as you can see, I am fine. Now, please leave me to get on with my work," he replied, regarding her with a slight frown, as if trying to ascertain her motives.

"Good." Hermione smiled and said, "Good night, Professor," as she slipped out the door.

She did not see the slight softening of his expression as he continued with his marking.

Over the next few weeks, Hermione learned more about her Defence Against the Dark Arts professor than she had over the entire first five years of her magical education. She counted the stress lines on his face in class, watched him push his food around his plate at dinner, and recognised his frequent late night and early morning appearances in the corridors of Hogwarts as evidence of insomnia. It was no wonder the man had a foul temper. She wondered how he remained upright at times. His colleagues conversed with him infrequently, his students avoided him, and Dumbledore seemed to spend most of his time closeted within his office with Harry. She wondered whether the headmaster had even noticed Snape's decline in well-being.

Several times, Hermione stopped by Snape's office in the late evening. Simply knocking and popping her head through the door when he answered, she would smile and wish him a good evening. After the first time or two, the professor simply nodded and lifted a hand in acknowledgment of her greeting. It was enough.

Classes continued, Harry's obsession with Malfoy's activities intensified, and the search for information on Horcruxes became a priority. No-one knew of her concern for Snape. No-one cared enough about him to notice.

Returning from a practice Apparation session in Hogsmeade, Hermione carefully stashed the supply of Honeyduke's finest dark chocolate into a drawer in her room. It was time to put the next stage of her plan into action.

Late that night, the bushy-haired prefect once again arrived at Snape's door. Knocking softly, she opened the door at his barked invitation. A raised eyebrow questioned her presence as she entered the room instead of staying in the doorway as usual.

"Good evening, sir. I was just on patrol, and I..." Her practised explanation faltered at his implacable expression.

"You decided to interrupt me?" he asked, his voice a silver knife.

"Well, no... yes... oh, forget it!" She turned to leave, eyes burning with unshed tears. As she reached the door, a soft sigh behind her stilled her feet.

"No. Don't go." It was almost a whisper.

Raising her eyes, she met the glittering depths of his. Pain, unguarded and boundless, simmered within. He dropped his gaze and rested his head on his hands, as if it were too heavy to remain upright.

Hermione never knew why she did what she did then. It just seemed to be necessary. Walking slowly around behind him, she reached forward and laid her hands on his shoulders. His muscles tensed at her touch, but he did not turn to berate her or shake her off. Silently, she massaged the knots from his shoulders and neck, not daring to speak for fear of breaking the fragile truce. As he slowly relaxed under her gentle touch, his head lowered to his arms upon the desk. After fifteen minutes or so, she noticed he had become very still. Carefully lifting some fallen strands of hair off his face, she found her professor was asleep, a single tear clinging to his long, black eyelashes.

Studying his face, Hermione realised the wizard before her was really much younger than he appeared once the habitual scowl was erased by sleep. She had known for a long time he was the same age as Harry's parents, which put him in his late thirties, relatively young even by Muggle standards. He had always seemed so much older than his years. Compassion grew inside her young heart as she watched Snape sleep. Her thoughts entertained no fanciful notions of romance or intrigue; he was simply a soul in need of someone to care. Leaving a small bar of chocolate on his desk, Hermione quietly left the room and returned to her own.

A/N: This was written for the Hermione Big Bang on LiveJournal, which celebrated Hermione's thirtieth birthday. Many thanks go to my beloved beta, ladyinthecloak.

Chapter Two: Tea and Conversations

Chapter 2 of 13

Hermione gets to know her professor a little better.

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Chapter 2: Tea and Conversations

"What happened after Hermione left him the chocolate? Did he tell her what was happening?"

"No, dear. He was busy trying to find out what Draco Malfoy was up to, much as Hermione and her friends were doing. Things carried on much the same for some weeks until the day of her Apparation test. Many years later, Hermione realised that was the day their relationship really started."

Hermione walked along the corridors, wondering whether Harry was having any luck obtaining the memory from Horace Slughorn. Using the Felix Felicis was the best chance he had. They seemed to be stalled in their search for information, but hoped the memory Dumbledore so desperately wanted would be the key to understand just what Horcruxes were.

Reaching Snape's door at the end of her rounds, she knocked softly.

"Enter," he called.

"Good evening, sir."

Surprisingly, he stood and ushered her into the room. "Good evening, Miss Granger. Please, sit down."

She sat, curious as to the change of routine.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked, as if it were a perfectly normal thing for him to suggest.

"Er... yes, thank you," she replied.

After pouring the tea and passing Hermione a cup, Snape sat back in his chair and studied the girl before him for some time while they sipped. Eventually, he spoke. "So, how did you fare with your Apparation test?"

"I passed first time." She grinned with pride.

"Congratulations. Not that anyone would have expected otherwise."

Hermione's baffled expression at the Defence professor's pleasantries was apparently a source of amusement for the dark wizard. "Miss Granger. You appear surprised. Am I so poorly mannered that I surprise you with a little compliment?"

Her mouth took charge before her brain could override. "Well, sir... Yes, you are usually." Horrified, she clapped her hand over her mouth and awaited the expected points loss and detention for impertinence. To her surprise, his lips merely formed a self-deprecating quirk, and he nodded in agreement.

"I suppose I deserved that. Although, I would appreciate it if you kept that to yourself." He frowned slightly as he finished his tea. "I'm sure you have rounds to finish now, Miss Granger. Good night."

Still bemused, Hermione drained her cup and stood. "Thank you for the tea, sir. Good night." Opening the door, she looked over her shoulder to find Snape with a rare smile on his face as he watched her leave.

The memory of that smile carried her back to Gryffindor tower without any conscious effort. Harry had not yet returned, which was unsurprising he had expected to be out rather late with Hagrid and Slughorn's love of conversation. No doubt he would relate his success, or lack of it, in the morning. Meanwhile, she had the odd behaviour of Snape to contemplate. What was he up to? Why the sudden pleasantness? Had he finally accepted she meant him no ill-will? Was he prepared to see her as a friend, rather than just an annoying student? Thoughts tangled in her brain until, with a sigh, she climbed into bed and bade them goodnight.

In Charms class the next morning, Harry explained all that had happened the night before. The evil nature of Horcruxes came as little surprise to Hermione. It had always been clear Voldemort would stoop to anything, however base, to further his insane ambition. The likelihood of six more Horcruxes being in existence was terrifying, but the knowledge was at least a start.

The news of Ron and Lavender's break-up had amused her, but that was not the only reason for her elevated mood that day. She had decided that with the simple act of offering her tea the night before, Professor Snape had demonstrated his view of her had changed. She finally felt her silent support of his efforts had been noticed and appreciated.

Katie Bell's return from St Mungo's had opened up another Pandora's box of questions without answers, and Harry's unrelenting obsession with Malfoy's activities was concerning. Classes and homework continued, and the extra hours spent in the library reading everything she could find on soul magic had so far been fruitless. She wished she could simply ask Snape for advice but knew she could not.

The soothing rhythm of her footsteps as she patrolled the corridors of Hogwarts on her rounds eased the turmoil of her thoughts. Her final stop at Snape's office became a highlight of the evening with the simple acceptance of his nod and smile as she poked her head around his door a balm to her overstimulated brain. He remained sarcastic and ill-tempered in class, but Hermione noticed as long as she kept her head down and worked quietly, she escaped unscathed.

One night, two weeks after her Apparation test, Snape bade her enter when she called by. Closing and warding the door behind her, he once again offered her tea. After a few minutes of congenial silence, he put down his cup. Watching her curiously, he asked, "Why?"

"Why what, sir?"

"Why do you come? What are you here for?"

Hermione flushed as she tried to explain without causing offence. "I just felt... after that night..."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't need your pity, Miss Granger."

"No, that's not it. You just seemed so alone. I have known what you do since fourth year, and I had never realised how difficult it must be. To be disliked by everyone simply because you are doing such a bloody good job of the role you have to play. It's not fair. You deserve more appreciation and support and someone who gives a damn, and I know I am explaining this badly, but I give a damn, even if you don't want me to!" she cried vehemently.

Professor and student faced one another for long moments, pride warring with compassion, austerity resisting warmth until suddenly, with a gasp, Snape gripped his left arm.

"You must go. Now." Without waiting for her to leave, he turned and left the office by a door behind the desk.

Hermione stared at the door, presumably to his private chambers, long after his hasty exit. She knew the significance of what had just happened. The spy had been summoned to his other master to face the risk of betrayal and death at the slightest slip of his tightly held defences. Having studied a little about Occlumency after Harry's experiences the previous year, she understood how much magical and physical effort Snape would have to employ to maintain his shields around a Legilimens as powerful as Voldemort. With a shake of her head at her own foolhardiness, she poured herself another cup of tea and prepared to await his return. He might not be pleased to find her there on his return, but she was not abandoning him now.

Three hours later, a noise from behind the door stirred her from the light doze she had fallen into while reading one of Snape's Potions journals. Realising her professor had returned, she vanished the contents of the teapot and brewed a fresh pot from the hot water she had prepared and left under a warming charm earlier. As the door opened, she poured a cup and placed it on Snape's desk.

"I thought I told you to leave, Miss Granger," Snape growled, running his hands through his hair wearily.

"So you did. I chose to stay," she replied. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." His curt answer was belied by the way he dropped into his chair and closed his eyes.

"No, you're not. You're exhausted. And you can't sleep there." Without stopping to second-guess herself, she moved to his side and offered an arm. "Come on. Let me help."

"I don't need help, Miss Granger. Just leave!" he ordered.

"Not until I know you are resting properly," she retorted, determined to stand her ground.

"I'm not some errant first-year you have to hustle off to bed!" Despite his fatigue, Snape managed to imbue his protest with some of his usual vitriol.

"And I'm not going to leave until you cooperate, sir. Take points off me or give me detention if you feel the need, but I *am* helping you." As she spoke, Hermione led the protesting wizard through the door to his rooms.

"All right, all right. I'm going. You don't need to tuck me in!"

"I have no intention of doing that. But I will wait here for ten minutes, and then I am going to check you are in bed." She stared at him until he turned and headed for the bedroom just as her adrenaline-fuelled bravado left her trembling at what she had dared say to her professor. True to her word, she knocked on the door and peeked around it ten minutes later to see Snape bootless, but otherwise fully dressed, fast asleep on top of his bed. Smiling, she Transfigured a warm blanket from a cushion in the sitting room, tucked it over him, then extinguished the lights. On the way out, she warded his chambers and his office with the best spells she knew and traipsed off to her own bed, amused she had ended up tucking him in anyway.

Hermione approached the Defence classroom with anxiety gnawing away at her self-confidence. Unsure of Snape's reaction to her once again bearing witness to his vulnerability, she looked to the professor himself for reassurance. The brief flicker of a smile as she entered the room ahead of her classmates lifted her spirits far more than she had expected. Sending the Slytherin Head of House to bed was not a task she had ever envisioned herself attempting and surviving it unscathed was surprisingly gratifying.

As the lesson on avoidance of hexes progressed, Hermione found herself duelling with Neville, who was performing tolerably well despite Snape's constant chiding. Shielding herself effortlessly, she made use of the unoccupied part of her brain to watch the Defence professor. Elegant and understated movements belied his speed and agility as he demonstrated the often forgotten tactic of simply dodging hexes rather than expending valuable magical energy blocking them.

After the practical part of the lesson was over and the class was industriously taking notes on the techniques they had practised, Hermione startled to hear a smooth, masculine voice in her ear.

"Exactly what was fascinating enough to make you ignore Longbottom's attempts to breach your shields, Miss Granger?"

Smiling infinitesimally, she turned to Snape. "I was simply admiring your technique. But don't tell anyone I'd hate to ruin my reputation."

A soft snort was the only reply as he moved away, no doubt to torment poor Neville again. The realisation he had forgiven her for peremptorily ordering him to bed and was prepared to continue their odd, undefined relationship left her pondering its nature once again. Not friends by any means, yet more than teacher and student. Could she become friends with this acerbic, careworn wizard? Would he accept her as an equal outside the classroom? Did she want him to, or did she feel more comfortable with him as an authority figure? His role in the war had never been more vital with Voldemort building up his forces and Dumbledore needing all the information he could obtain, and hers as Harry Potter's best friend and research expert was equally demanding. Could two such disparate people develop enough trust to become true friends?

The previous night had shown he had some faith in her, falling asleep while she was still present and trusting her to ward his rooms securely. Hermione felt the warmth of his belief in her goodwill toward him as she wondered just how many other people he would have accorded the same privilege.

After dinner, she spent several hours studying, completing essays for both Charms and Transfiguration, and, of course, helping Harry and Ron create something coherent from their inky ramblings. Setting them the task of re-reading a chapter or two to get their facts straight, she put away her books and set off on her rounds. No-one ever asked why she was putting in extra time patrolling the castle. Hermione, the perpetual over-achiever, was simply expected to do these things. For once, her reputation worked in her favour.

A few desultory rounds of the most likely spots to find miscreants later, she headed for Snape's office and knocked quietly.

"Come in, Mother Granger," the professor called with a smirk.

"Mother Granger?"

"Well, if you must insist on mothering me, what do you expect?" he replied as he poured her tea and added milk and sugar just the way she liked it.

Hermione laughed outright at the preposterous notion of Snape being mothered. "Someone has to make sure you look after yourself, because *you* are doing such a bloody awful job of it!" she retorted.

"Yes, Mother." He sighed and rolled his eyes.

His mocking expression stirred Hermione's indignation. "In that case, I'll tell you what I really think." A raised eyebrow invited her to continue. "You don't eat enough, you drink far too much coffee in the mornings, and you need to relax more," she ordered.

"Relax? Fine chance of *that* in this job," he scoffed.

She knew he was not referring to his teaching duties. Placing her cup on the side table, she rounded the desk and positioned herself behind him. Reaching forward, she began to massage his neck and shoulders once again. "Maybe the job is not conducive to relaxation, but there is no need to be as tense as you are all the time," she soothed as he leaned back into her touch.

"Mmm. Yes, right there," he moaned as she found a knot in the muscle. "Where did a chit of a girl like you learn how to use your hands like that?" he asked.

"My dad gets a sore neck and shoulders from bending over his dentist's chair all day. Before I came to Hogwarts it was always my job after dinner to massage him. He loved it, but I guess the last few years he's had to make do with Mum."

"I can see why. You really have a talent for this." Straightening, Snape turned to meet Hermione's gaze. "Thank you, Hermione. You didn't have to do that."

"My pleasure, sir." Her eyes widened as she realised he had addressed her by her first name.

He appeared to realise his slip and apologised. "Forgive me, Miss Granger."

"No. It's OK. I don't mind you calling me by my name. I never did understand why professors here call the students Miss This and Mr That. It's so old-fashioned."

"We are an old-fashioned society, Miss... Hermione. Using the honorific maintains a distance between professor and student, which is considered desirable."

"Remus Lupin used our first names, and Hagrid does too." She looked at him curiously. "Would you rather keep that distance, sir?"

He studied her, one finger pressed to his cheek. "No. I don't believe I do. And you can drop the 'sir' when you are here. Professor, or simply Snape will suffice. I don't think it would be appropriate for you to address me by my first name."

"Good heavens, no, Professor. I wouldn't dream of it." Hermione was horrified at the thought of speaking to Snape so familiarly. It was one thing to offer comfort and even a neck massage, just like she had done for her father, but entirely another to be addressing a teacher by his first name.

"Well, I'm pleased that is sorted out," he declared. "Now, the other problem. Whatever shall I do with you?"

"Do with me?"

"Have you swallowed some of those Weasley twins' Parroting Pastilles, Hermione? Never mind." He waved aside her protests. "I meant I am at a loss as to what to do about your apparent need to act as my nursemaid."

"First, I was your mother; now, I'm your nurse? Can't I just be your friend?" She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, wishing only for the floor to swallow her

whole. "Sorry... that was presumptuous of me. I'll just leave."

Snape looked startled at her admission. "No... Wait." Eyes peculiarly bright, he watched her intently. "A friend? Why would a student want to befriend me, of all people? Don't you know what that would do to that reputation you mentioned earlier today? Not to mention raising eyebrows amongst the staff and the Board of Governors and quite possibly causing Dumbledore to lose his only spy in the Death Eater camp?"

She met his gaze squarely, brown eyes meeting glittering black. "Firstly, why do you see yourself as not deserving friendship? Everyone needs someone who cares. Secondly, I would not suggest openly chatting in the hallways or meeting for sandwiches on the lawn. I'm neither stupid nor do I have a death wish. Associating openly with you would, I suspect, be as dangerous for me as it would be for you if certain factions found out. I have no wish for your true loyalties to be discovered, for both our sakes and the rest of the wizarding world. Why do you think I only ever come here late at night when everyone else is in bed and check the dungeon corridors thoroughly before even considering knocking at that door?" She sat back in her chair awaiting his reply.

"Hermione," he said, voice uncharacteristically quiet, "you aren't harbouring any... feelings... towards me? Because, if that is the case, I must insist you leave and not return. It would be most... inappropriate."

The laughter bubbled out of her before she could control it. "Feelings? You think I have a crush on you? Oh, dear. I'm half your age, Professor, and tall, dark, and striking you may be, but I fancy Ron. Unfortunately, he is an insensitive prat, but one day..." She sobered instantly at his slight frown. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to come out that way. It just hadn't occurred to me to think of you like that. I do care, but not... you know. Can't we be friends? Merlin knows I could do with *someone* with an attention span longer than a gnat's to talk to."

Snape's relief lifted the corners of his mouth in a genuine smile. "I think I would like that. But absolute discretion is necessary. No-one, even your two idiot friends, must ever suspect you and I no longer hold each other in disdain."

"I think I can live with that," Hermione replied with a grin, handing him a piece of chocolate.

A/N: This was written for the Hermione Big Bang on LiveJournal, which celebrated Hermione's thirtieth birthday. Many thanks go to my friend and colleague, quaffswinegaily, who helped along the way, my beloved beta, ladyinthecloak, and my cheerleader, Michelle.

Chapter Three: Chocolate Solves Most Problems

Chapter 3 of 13

Hermione discovers something which irrevocably alters her beliefs and loyalties.

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Chapter Three: Chocolate Solves Most Problems

The young woman sighs as she watches her mother's still beautiful face in the mirror. Now in her mid-forties, the older witch is in fine physical health with not a single grey hair and smooth, youthful skin.

"How do you stay so young looking, Mum?"

"Love, my darling. Love keeps us all young."

"Tell me what happened next in the story, please," she pleads. Her mother frowns; the next part of the story is always difficult to relate, but the girl always wants to hear the full story.

"Severus and Hermione met often over the following two weeks. Sometimes they just shared tea or chocolate in silence, and sometimes they talked about all manner of topics, but the dreadful night when she had found him breaking down was never mentioned. Hermione did not mention the hunt for Horcruxes, and Severus did not discuss his activities as a spy. They were content to simply keep one another company, living those all too brief moments as if the war didn't exist. They did not explore the meaning of their relationship; there was never any intent other than friendship and mutual support, but as the nights passed they grew more attuned to the other's moods. In the middle of May, 1998, everything changed."

Hermione silently left the common room shortly after her argument with Harry and Ginny, pleased to have the excuse of rounds to escape the tense atmosphere. She could not believe Harry's cavalier attitude toward nearly killing Draco Malfoy. Whilst the blond was an obnoxious, arrogant prat, who might well be plotting mayhem for the Dark side, he was still a teenage boy and did not deserve what had happened.

No-one seemed to understand why she was so concerned about the damned Half-Blood Prince's Potions book. Harry could not see past his improved grades and the bezoar incident, but the idea of a student inventing a spell such as *Sectumsempra* sent a chill down her spine.

She arrived at Snape's office as usual and let herself in after a light tap on the door. Finding her professor slumped at his desk with his head in his hands tightened her chest, leaving her breath short. She knew he had been furious over the incident earlier in the day and would have been anxious about Malfoy's well-being, but she had not expected this.

"Professor? Professor?"

No response.

Kneeling beside him, she gently brushed a lock of hair from his face. "Professor?" Hermione could see he was breathing regularly, and his eyes were opened, but unfocussed, expression as bleak as she had ever seen. Silently cursing whoever had brought him to this state, she gathered him into her arms and crooned, "What's wrong? Please answer me... *Severus?*"

At the last, he slowly lifted his head. His voice was a rough whisper, so quiet she had to strain to hear his words. "I don't want to die, Hermione. I don't want anyone to die. I

thought I was ready; I thought I could bear the price for my sins, but today..." He broke down and sobbed, as distraught as he had been on that first night.

"Whatever are you talking about, Professor? What has happened? Malfoy is fine; you healed him yourself," she soothed, awkwardly stroking his hair as he wept into her robes.

After a short time, Snape visibly hauled his composure back into place and sat back in his chair. Head bowed, he spoke without meeting her gaze. "He could have died. Potter used that curse in anger without knowing the consequences. The boy is an arrogant fool who knows not what he risks... or whom," he whispered.

"Believe me, I told him as much myself," Hermione murmured, still holding Snape's hand. The man should still be fuming; she'd half expected to have been tossed out unceremoniously when she had arrived. Why was he so distressed? "Tell me about it. Why has this upset you so?"

"You don't understand anything, girl. My life would have been forfeit as well as Malfoy's. And then where would the old man be without his faithful servant to do his bidding and carry information." His bitterness was palpable.

"Your life?" Hermione's thoughts spun as she pulled together threads of information and wove them into a frightening, inescapable conclusion. "Your life would have been forfeit if Draco had died. An Unbreakable Vow, then... but why? Why would you do such a thing?"

His despair permeated her very soul, causing her to shudder at the chilling reality of his existence.

"I had no choice. Once again, my actions were dictated by others; my life is worthless to them to anyone."

"Not to me, Professor. Never to me."

Her unwavering faith bathed him in fickle hope, but he resolutely turned away from the temptation. She knew not the task he had to fulfil. Much as he wanted to believe she would remain steadfast in her support, he was certain her trust would burn into bitter ashes of hatred once the deed was done.

"Maybe not now, but soon you will regret that assertion. Soon you will view me with the same contempt as everyone else, and I will deserve it. No-one will be left to absolve me. No-one!"

Hermione studied the man before her, a tear trailing down her cheek. "Professor Snape... Severus. Look at me." She took his face in her hands and compelled him to meet her gaze. "I believe in you. Whatever you have to do, however terrible, has to be done. Do you think I haven't noticed the headmaster's decline in health? Did I not witness your reaction to whatever he has tasked you with? You have vowed to keep Draco safe. He appears to be planning something something so serious you have been compelled to Vow to protect him, presumably even if you need to complete the deed yourself. I assume you will need to make some grand gesture to establish your place in You-Know-Who's confidence at some stage before..." She could not continue, the expression on Snape's face confirming her deepest fears. "I don't want to know exactly what you have to do, but know this I will never stop believing in you. If I have to single-handedly fight the entire Order to redeem your reputation, I will," she continued fiercely.

"You may not need to, my dear. When all this is over I suspect my motivations will be a moot point." Resignation dulled the rich timbre of his voice, leaving it flat and lifeless.

Hermione's confidence deserted her briefly in the face of his fatalistic attitude. Throwing herself at the surprised wizard, she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Do not even *think* that! If you try and die on me, Severus Snape, I shall hunt you down and mother you back to life. And that's not a threat it's a promise!"

His hands stole around her, awkwardly patting her shoulders as she held fast to his robes. "If anyone could do that, Hermione, it would be you. But you have more important things to worry about, like ensuring your hot-headed friend survives long enough to fulfil the cursed prophecy and get rid of that maniac I have to bow down to whenever I am summoned. If I die knowing he has been defeated, I will die a satisfied man." He sighed, resting his chin in her curls for a long moment as they drew strength from one another.

The young witch drew back from her professor's embrace, flushing slightly as she realised she had been hugging him unashamedly. "S-sorry about that. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Shh. I believe friends are allowed to comfort each other. You have done your fair share over the last few weeks. Are you feeling better now?" he asked.

"A little. And you?" She looked up and was blessed with a rare smile.

"Nothing a little tea and chocolate wouldn't help." His attempt to lighten the mood succeeded, and soon they had shunted their fear and anxiety to the darkest corners of their minds as they heatedly discussed the prospects for the upcoming Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, carefully avoiding the topic of Harry's detention.

Over the next few days, Hermione spent most of her time avoiding the accusation in her friends' eyes. Harry and Ron still hadn't forgiven her, and Ginny was fierce in her support of Harry's point of view. Her excitement at being chosen as substitute Seeker was tempered by the reason she was needed at all. Snape was berated by every Gryffindor bar one as spiteful and unfair, wanting only to ruin Gryffindor's chances at the House Cup. She had given up trying to explain she was not supporting Draco Malfoy just because she was appalled at Harry's actions in using an unknown curse on a fellow student.

Rounds and Snape's company became her sanctuary from terse greetings and stilted conversations. He never asked why she had taken to arriving every evening with a cloud above her head and a frown on her brow. Tea and intelligent conversation inevitably lifted her gloom and left her smiling in gratitude as she reluctantly returned to Gryffindor tower.

Ginny's success on Saturday and her subsequent claiming by Harry seemed to be the watershed. All was forgiven in the joy of the moment, and for once Hermione set off on her rounds with a smile on her lips and a light heart.

"You realise giving Harry detention today was the best thing that could have happened to him, don't you, Professor?" she teased.

"My intention was to punish, not reward him," he replied with a scowl over his cup.

"I'm sure it was, but if he hadn't been in detention, Ginny would never have played Seeker, and if she had not played Seeker and caught the Snitch, she would never have had the courage to just up and..."

"And what?" Now he was intrigued, if not a little nauseated at the thought he had somehow enhanced Potter's pathetic love life.

"Let's just say they are together, thanks to you." She grinned and raised her cup in a toast.

"Excellent. Just what I have always aspired to matchmaking Gryffindors. My life is complete," he replied drily.

"Oh, don't sulk. It's not attractive on a grown man."

"Impertinent child. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't take points off for that remark," he demanded with a fierce look, so transparently fake she laughed out loud.

"Because I'm the only person in this damned castle who cares enough to call you out when you are being a git," she explained, compassion softening the words.

"Unfortunate, but true. I suppose I shall refrain this time then. But I really don't know why you bother, young lady. I'm too old and bitter to change my ways now." He sighed and gazed at the fire, wrestling with his impossible future.

"Don't be daft," she exclaimed, rising to move to his side. Cupping his cheek in her hand, she turned his face to meet her eyes. "You are not bloody old and only as bitter as you choose to be. Raise your expectations of life and reach out to people, Severus. You may be surprised at what you find." With that, she leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead, before turning and leaving the room before he had a chance to recover his power of speech.

Hermione reached her room deep in thought. Snape was so convinced he was alone. She knew she had to try and reach him soon; the headmaster, although keeping up appearances, was discernibly paler than usual and moved more slowly. Her professor her friend needed something tangible to remind him someone was on his side, no matter what happened in the future. Determined to prove her faith in him, she lay awake for hours pondering the problem and making plans.

The first weeks of June passed in a haze of sunshine and study. The clear summer skies and soft breezes had lightened hearts and blown forgiveness in Hermione's direction. Basking in the glow of Ginny's fierce attachment had allowed Harry to forget his friend's lack of support, although she supposed his sudden awareness of the imminent end of year tests had helped. Despite not sitting important external examinations, there were still the usual final assessments for the year to come, and with all his obsessing over Draco Malfoy, Harry had fallen a little behind. Ron was right there with him, pestering her for help with this or that overdue assignment and, despite breaking up with Lavender, still oblivious of her feelings.

Hermione sighed. Best friends they might be, but the minds of males remained an enigma. The most puzzling of all at times was Snape. Their unexpected friendship had strengthened over the weeks, despite secrecy meting out their time together into small, discrete parcels of tea and conversation. She had finally relaxed enough in the Defence professor's presence to be herself, confident now of his trust.

"You seem disgruntled, Hermione. What has upset you?" Snape asked as he poured the tea.

"Not what... who."

"Who, then?"

"Just Ronald, as usual. He never sees me, you know?" She sighed again and took her cup.

"No. I don't know. How can he not see you? You are with him most of the day." Sometimes Snape took things a little too literally.

She blushed. "I mean he doesn't see me as a girl. To him, I'm just his best friend someone to help him with his homework and get him out of trouble."

"And why do you want Mr Weasley to see you as a girl? Surely, if he is that oblivious, he doesn't deserve your interest?"

Hermione's face fell. "But everyone else is paired up. I suppose I just feel... left out. Is there something wrong with me, Professor?"

"Hermione, my dear, even an antisocial curmudgeon like me can see you are a vibrant, beautiful young woman, and if I can see it, boys of your age would be blind to miss it."

"You do? Really?" she asked, staring at his face in wonder.

"I do. Really." At the sudden flash of anxiety in her eyes he added, "But don't worry, I don't think of you in *that* way. Good heavens, girl, I'm old enough to be your father! But I'm not blind, and I *am* a man." He smirked. "Well, I was last time I looked."

Hermione giggled and slapped his arm, just as she would the boys for that sort of comment. As she had suspected, the males of the species *were* all the same deep down. "You realise that was just what the boys would have said?"

"Merlin save me. They are infectious, and you are a carrier. Leave, woman, before you ruin me completely with your Gryffindor ways!"

"Oh, give over. If it wasn't for my Gryffindor ways I wouldn't be sitting here in the first place, and you know it."

Severus Snape contemplated the source of the strength he had needed to carry on after the night Dumbledore assigned his final, impossible task. "Indeed I do," he replied. "And I thank you for your courage and persistence."

"Severus Snape, it has been, and still is, an honour to know you." She raised her cup for an impromptu toast, challenge burning in her eyes. "To a future without Tom Riddle."

His cup met hers. "To a future..."

A/N: This was written for the Hermione Big Bang on LiveJournal, which celebrated Hermione's thirtieth birthday. Many thanks go to my friend and colleague, quaffswinegaily, who helped along the way, my beloved beta, ladyinthecloak, and my cheerleader, Michelle.

Chapter Four: Precious Metal

Chapter 4 of 13

The day of reckoning has finally arrived.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter Four: Precious Metal

The face in the mirror is so like her own at that age; large, brown eyes so often occupied devouring the words from the books she adores; pert, little nose wrinkling when

she disapproved; soft, rose petal lips, frequently plump from kissing her beloved fiancé. Her hair is a cascade of curls, flying every which way when she tosses her head in laughter; her figure slender and lithe, only now developing into the woman she would become. The older witch sighs for her lost youth, but smiles as she remembers the love and passion she found herself at that age.

"Mother? Mother!"

The girl's sweet voice interrupts her visit with the past.

"That was their last night together, wasn't it? It's so sad the way they were torn apart just when they needed each other the most."

"Yes, darling. But it was necessary. Severus had a task to do and could not safely stay after the events of the following night. He needed to place himself deeply into his Dark master's favour in order to fulfil his obligations to Dumbledore. He had known all along the day would come when he would betray Hermione's faith, and when the time arrived, he was all the more devastated having enjoyed a brief taste of acceptance and caring."

Hermione sat in the hospital wing, hands covering her face, tears reforming even as they dried on her cheeks. Amidst the grief for Dumbledore's death and the worry for Bill Weasley, no-one was aware the young woman cried not just for the late headmaster but also for the infinite depths of anguish she knew her friend was suffering. Finally, she knew the impossible task he had been ordered to perform. Finally, she understood the intensity of his pain. Having borne witness to his reaction to Dumbledore's plan, she knew without any doubt in her heart Severus Snape was no traitor. She was also aware she could not share that knowledge with anyone, just as he had foreseen. Hatred and bitterness lay heavily in the room, and it was all directed at one man. Her only hope for his salvation lay in a small piece of foil in her pocket.

"Luna, stay here and watch for any activity back down the corridors. We don't want to be taken by surprise. Whistle if anything happens, but don't show yourself unless I say your name," she suggested as they approached Snape's office.

Standing in the shadows just outside the door, Hermione hoped desperately that Harry had been wrong. If tonight was indeed the night Malfoy was to make his move, it might well be the last time she saw Snape... ever. She had never even said goodbye. A tear crawled down her cheek as she remembered all the times she had spent in the office before her, and her eyes blurred as she thought of the hard road ahead.

In her cloud of despair, Hermione nearly allowed Professor Flitwick to spot her as he raced past and burst into Snape's office. The next moment, the Defence professor appeared, distraught and as pale as she had ever seen him. Immediately spotting her, his eyes widened, and he ducked back into the office. Before she had the chance to follow he had re-emerged and pressed something onto her hand.

"I'm sorry... I have to do this..." he whispered. With head bowed, he turned to leave.

Knowing Luna was just around the corner, Hermione caught his sleeve. Reaching up, she placed a gentle hand on his cheek and met his eyes. Eyes filled with moisture, pain, and fear. His hand briefly covered hers as those black eyes closed in supplication.

"I believe in you, Severus. Please, please, believe in yourself," she murmured; then her lips lightly brushed his cheek with her faith.

The next moment, he was gone, leaving her clutching an empty chocolate bar wrapper in her hand. Stowing it in her pocket, she called Luna to help her with the Charms professor.

She had not had time to examine the wrapper, but if it was important enough for Snape to stop to retrieve and give to her, she was not about to discard it. If nothing else it was a reminder of all the chocolate they had shared over the past two months. Reaching into her pocket for the hundredth time to touch the small symbol of Snape's trust in her, she watched Harry leave with Professor McGonagall.

Over the next few days, Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Ginny discovered the strength within their bonds of friendship. Often just sitting outside by the lake, the cloudless sky and warm breeze taunting them with reminders of how things should have been, they simply watched the giant squid frolicking aimlessly in the water and yearned for the normality of classes and homework.

Hermione closed her eyes against the mocking sun, pondering the whereabouts of the wizarding world's currently most wanted man. She hoped and prayed to whatever gods would listen that he was safe, at least physically. His mental state was without doubt fragile guilt, grief, and fear for the future clouding his judgement just when he needed his full ability as a spy to stay alive. The dramatic gesture of killing Albus Dumbledore or at least hastening his demise would have been wasted if he was unveiled as a spy due to the emotional fall-out of the deed.

"Are you OK, Hermione?" Harry had noticed her withdrawal from the conversation and worried frown.

"What? Sorry, my mind was elsewhere." She swiftly brushed off his concern as she stood and stretched. "Must be time for lunch. Coming?"

After lunch, Hermione headed for the library once again to search for any information about the mysterious R.A.B. She also had a rather more personal interest to pursue. After beating the dust off a hundred or more old *Daily Prophets*, she finally found what she was looking for the birth notice of one Severus Tobias Snape, son of Tobias Snape and Eileen Prince, a Half-Blood Prince indeed. "Oh, Professor," she whispered into the stillness of the empty library. "Are you safe?"

She had not realised how much her friendship with the dour man had meant to her over the preceding few months. His dry sense of humour and understanding of her intellectual nature had far surpassed that of her peers, much as she loved the latter. Harry and Ron would always be her best friends, but Severus Snape was in many ways a kindred spirit. His loneliness as an adolescent, to which he had only hinted, had reminded her of a childhood spent avoiding taunts from her classmates at primary school. He had not been the first to call her a know-it-all. The boys had never really understood the nature of the only child who had spent much of her time in her room reading, but Snape had been there himself. The professor and the sixth-year shared a bond of commonality of experience that transcended their difference in age and status. Her compassion for his parlous situation at Voldemort and Dumbledore's hands served only to provide the courage she had needed to push past the barriers of his rigidly controlled persona and discover the man within.

Tightly locking down her emotions regarding the now ex-professor, she returned to the common room to await the right moment to talk with Harry. As she had half-expected, Harry could not talk of Snape without hatred and revenge oozing from every pore. It was hopeless. She eventually retired, defeated and saddened at the bitterness her friend had immersed himself within.

As the incandescence of the flames and the wispy smoke disappeared, leaving the stark, white tomb proclaiming the grim truth of Albus Dumbledore's death, Hermione lifted her head from Ron's shoulder. Sharp, crystal tears had fallen unheeded upon their laps, their grief as entwined as their fingers. The passing of such a powerful yet beloved wizard as Dumbledore had wrenched apart the hearts of those present, allowing fears for their future to paralyse their hopes and dreams.

The Order of the Phoenix was now a headless entity, lost without its leader and strategist. Who now would take up the mantle of responsibility and make the cold, hard decisions for the greater good? But thoughts of the Order were far from the minds of most as they wept under the relentless, blue sky. The weight of their sorrow was too overwhelming; surviving the day and supporting one another the only task to bear.

Harry's descent into calm determination disturbed Hermione greatly. She had watched as he had reluctantly turned his back on Ginny's love and despatched the Minister of Magic with a few brief words, but when he had advised them of his plans to visit Godric's Hollow and begin the hunt for the remaining Horcruxes alone, she and Ron had disabused him of that notion. They had started their journey towards defeating Voldemort together back in first year, and no amount of self-sacrificing nobility of Harry's was

going to sunder that alliance.

Slipping up to her dormitory to finish packing, Hermione was suddenly blessed with inspiration. A simple *Accio* worked like the charm it was and provided her with the books on Horcruxes direct from Dumbledore's library. After adding one or two on memory charms she had smuggled out of the library from under Madam Pince's nose, she was ready to leave the comforting embrace of Hogwarts' stone walls.

A heavy silence hovered over the Hogwarts Express as it devoured the miles back to London. No laughter or excited chatter resounded through the carriages; no cheerful faces anticipating the long summer holidays were to be found. Staring sightlessly out of the window at the passing countryside, Hermione's thoughts once more turned to Snape. She wondered where he might be, whether he had been hurt during his flight from the castle or, worse still, tortured by the vile corruption that was Voldemort for taking over what had been presumably Draco Malfoy's mission. As she sat and brooded, the hand in her pocket felt the smooth, cool surface of the chocolate wrapper. She had studied it in private over the preceding few days, and it appeared to be nothing more than a small piece of gold foil. There was no message on its surface, but it was not magically inert. Snape had done *something* with it; she just did not know what.

King's Cross station signified a temporary separation of the three friends. Harry was to return to the Dursleys until he was seventeen and no longer protected by the powerful magic residing there. His respect for Dumbledore's wishes had overridden his need for action. They had to wait until after Bill and Fleur's wedding in any case, so he swallowed his frustration and went quietly while Ron returned to the Burrow and Hermione to her parents' home.

Immersed in the warmth of her childhood home, Hermione's anxiety abated a little. Her parents were only aware Dumbledore had died, but as she had never fully explained the nature of Voldemort and his Death Eaters for fear of being withdrawn from Hogwarts, they had no idea of the true evil of Voldemort and his followers. Her vague explanation of a little political unrest in the wizarding community sufficed to explain the situation.

Well fed, rested, and having spent a few hours reading of the chilling nature of Horcruxes, Hermione took the wrapper from her pocket and studied it once more.

Suddenly, the foil warmed under her fingers. The feeling reminded her of something she had experienced before... something important... something recent. Taking her wand in hand, she cautiously touched it to the wrapper. Writing slowly became evident on the surface of the foil - writing in Snape's distinctive hand.

Now you know.

Three words. A Protean charm, just as she had used in fifth year, only this time cast on the gold foil, not on a coin.

He was alive!

She caught herself in time as the giddy relief almost had her whooping with triumph. Alive and able to communicate. However, she was not so foolish as to assume anything. Thinking for a moment, she tapped the foil with her wand.

Severus, my love, how could you leave me?

Hoping desperately he would understand the underlying message, she awaited his reply.

Mother Granger, I am alone and under no duress. Do I dare to hope I still have your trust?

Hermione sighed thankfully. He had realised her ploy and responded by using a name no-one else would have ever heard. Did she trust him? She realised her faith in the raven-haired wizard had never wavered - it had never been in question.

Professor, I believe in you. Always.

There was no response for several long moments. Getting into her pyjamas while constantly watching the wrapper, Hermione wondered if he had been interrupted.

Thank you.

As the words faded, the foil cooled, signalling the end of the communication. That night, Hermione had her most restful sleep since the events on the Astronomy tower.

Severus Snape was alive.

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Chapter Five: Thank You For the Memories

Chapter 5 of 13

Hermione enlists Severus's help to ensure her parents' safety.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter Five: Thank You For the Memories

The young bride sighs as she watches the faraway expression on her mother's face.

"It must have been a huge relief to discover he was alive and able to contact her."

"Yes, it was." The older witch smiled. "Hermione went to sleep that night much relieved. She hadn't realised how much Snape had meant to her until she was at risk of losing him."

"That is so often what happens, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, that is the case, my dear. Over the next few days, Hermione had to make some very important and difficult decisions."

As the final strains of her favourite Strauss waltz faded away, Hermione studied her parents from the armchair nearest the unused fireplace. Their safety was paramount, but the plan she had conceived over the last few weeks could prove the end of their relationship. The books removed from Hogwarts had given her some information, but she needed expert assistance to modify their memories and convince them to move to Australia.

"What is the matter, darling?" Jean Granger asked from the sofa she shared with her husband, a slight frown balanced on her brow as she noticed her daughter's sad expression.

"Oh, nothing, Mum. I was just thinking of... things," she replied, flashing a quick smile at her mother.

"You do know you can talk to us about anything that worries you, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, thanks, Mum. I know that." Hermione stood and moved over to sit between her mother and father. Reaching out to each side, she wrapped her arms around her surprised parents and whispered, "I love you, Mama and Pops."

Jean and Richard smiled at the childhood names they hadn't heard for years. "We love you too, chickadee."

For many minutes they sat together, listening to the CD playing their beloved classical music, allowing the harmony of the instruments swirling around the room to take their imaginations away from the simple living room. The young witch tucked that memory away deep into her heart, in case it was the last she ever had.

Later that night, once her parents had long since succumbed to sleep, Hermione took out her charmed chocolate wrapper. It was now the time to put into practice the faith she had in Severus Snape. Careful to avoid identifying herself, she tapped the foil with her wand.

Whitby's Chocolate. Suppliers to wizards and witches in Britain for over 300 years.

She hoped if anyone else had possession of Snape's wrapper, the legend would simply appear to be time-released advertising.

I'm here. Do you need something?

Sighing with relief, Hermione gathered her courage to reply.

I need help with something important. Can you meet me somewhere? Please?

Half an hour. Shrieking Shack. Disillusion yourself in case I am followed.

Thank you. I'll be there.

After making a few last minute notes, Hermione dressed in dark, nondescript clothing and silently left the house. With a swift turn she Disapparated, appearing in the tunnel before the door into the Shack. A tap on her head provided concealment, then she slowly opened the door, wand in hand. Allowing her eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, she crept along the hall to the large room at the end. Snape was standing quietly before the window, black eyes glittering in the near dark. She listened carefully but could sense no other human presence.

As she ended the concealing charm, she noted Snape's almost invisible start.

"I see you have learned a little stealth, Hermione," he drawled, watching her closely. "Am I to expect a cadre of Aurors now?"

Huffing her impatience, she threw herself into his unsuspecting arms and wrapped hers around his waist. Tears flowed as she squeezed him tightly. "No, you foolish man! How could you think that of me? I told you I trusted you." She pulled back and studied his drawn, stressed face. "Why did you come if you thought that?" she asked, brows knitted.

Head bowed forward, he replied in a whisper, "Hope, Hermione. Pure hope."

She looked at him through tear-glazed eyes and reached up to touch his own slightly moist cheek. "Are you okay? Has he hurt you?"

"The only person who has hurt me is standing before you." The bitterness in his voice cut through the air like a surgeon's blade.

"You did what was necessary. Did it succeed?"

"Oh, yes. You are now looking at the Dark Lord's number one minion. I only have to bow and scrape and kiss his hem in the presence of others now. It hasn't diminished his fondness for the odd *Crucio*, however." His short bark of laughter belied the pain held deep in his eyes.

"Oh, Professor!" the young witch cried as she embraced him yet again.

"You do realise I am no longer your professor, don't you, Hermione? I think I lost the privilege of that title along with my self-respect. You may as well call me Severus. It's not like you haven't done so before."

Hermione flushed. "Well, that was when I was extremely worried about you. You know I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Be that as it may, I would prefer you addressed me by my first name now."

"If you wish, Severus. There, is that better?"

The tiny smile warmed his soul briefly. "Thank you. Now, what did you need? I do not have much longer before I need to return, or someone will become suspicious."

"How experienced are you with memory charms, Severus?"

"Memory charms?"

"Yes. Removing large parts of someone's memory and replacing them with false memories. Solid enough memories that they can live perfectly normally as if their past, and their family, did not exist," she explained, tears again leaking unbidden from her eyes.

"Your parents," he breathed, shaking his head at the depth of the girl's protectiveness. "You want them to forget you?"

"Of course I don't *want* them to forget me, but I need them to forget all about the Wizarding world and to have an overwhelming urge to leave the country for somewhere far away from all of this." She pleaded with him silently to understand her fear.

"What if you cannot reverse the enchantment?" His voice soft, Snape cupped her cheek with his long, slender fingers. "Can you live with that possibility?"

"I would rather take that risk than lose them," she asserted, lip quivering just a little.

Snape gathered her into his arms, resting his chin on her mass of curls. "You never fail to amaze me, Hermione. Your courage and loyalty and love surpass everything I have ever experienced. I regret never having had a daughter like you."

"You are still talking as if you have no future, Severus. What did I warn you about that? You are only thirty-seven, plenty of time to find someone you want to share your life with and have children," she chided.

"I know, I know. You will come and mother me into submission." He raised his hands in defeat. "I must go now, but I will discreetly look into the matter and let you know within a few days." He kissed her tenderly on the top of her head and turned to go. "Leave the way you came and stay Disillusioned."

"Thank you, Severus. Be careful, you are important to me too," Hermione murmured as he left without looking back.

Two weeks later, Hermione was reading in bed when she felt the foil, now always tucked close to her skin, heat again.

Meet me outside your house in two minutes we don't have long.

Stunned by the urgency of the message, she stopped only to throw a light wrap over the brief slip she wore to bed in the summer. Grabbing her wand and casting a Silencing charm at her parents' bedroom door, she slipped out of the house to meet Snape.

"Over here," came the urgent whisper from under the tree by the front gate.

She ran to meet him, anxiety churning at his sudden appearance.

"Good grief, girl, what are you wearing?"

She looked down and flushed at the skimpieness of her attire, but as she was about to use her wand to Transfigure something more appropriate, Snape interrupted.

"Not now! We have no time."

"No time for what?" she asked, fear raising her voice an octave.

"The Dark Lord has ordered a team to come and take your parents in the early hours of the morning. We must perform the memory charms now and get them out of the house, then come back and remove all evidence of your presence, so it appears you no longer live here. This is what we need to do..."

Two frantic hours later, Hermione's parents were ensconced in an airport hotel with enough clothing and essentials for three weeks and tickets for Australia for the next day in their possession. It had taken some very skilful memory manipulation on Snape's part after waking them with the story of an emergency at Hogwarts, and a brief, spell-enforced nap while Snape and Hermione magically packed their belongings and conjured appropriate documentation and passports in the names of Monica and Wendell Wilkins, but eventually they had been Apparated to the hotel and left, luggage in hand, to check in as if they always arrived at hotels at one o'clock in the morning.

A quick trip back to the house to strip Hermione's room, leaving it looking like an unused guest room, and remove all photographs and other mementoes of the Grangers from the house, and it looked as if the unknown inhabitants were simply away on holiday.

"But what about the phone book, electoral roll, and council records?" Hermione asked, frowning as they stood in the sitting room and surveyed their handiwork.

"They do not get updated immediately, and it is unlikely those tasked with finding your parents will even know about such Muggle records. They are all purebloods, remember. I will visit your parents' lawyer as soon as I am able and, with a little *Confundus*, leave him with instructions to manage the Wilkins' property as needed while they are out of the country."

Hermione trailed her hand over the back of the couch where she had spent many happy evenings cuddled up to one or other parent. "What will they do for money?"

"I have dealt with that already. I transferred enough money from my Gringotts account to a Muggle bank account in their new name I opened yesterday to support them comfortably for about six months. They have the appropriate credit cards and such in their wallets. By the time that is running low, they should have found somewhere to work over there."

"You knew yesterday?" she gasped.

"I had decided on their identities yesterday. I only found out tonight's plans a few hours ago," he replied.

"But the money? How can I ever repay you?" The size of the sum to support two adults for six months was far more than she had ever possessed.

Snape took her face in his hands and looked her in the eye. "Hermione. Your faith in me is all I need. You have helped me survive this cursed existence. Without you..." His head dropped as his voice stilled in the dark quiet of the night.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. "I will find a way to repay you, Severus Snape. I will."

"Just continue to believe in me, whatever you hear. That will be reward enough." Noticing the old clock in the hall striking two, he disengaged himself from her embrace. "Fuck! I must go. I want you out of here immediately, young lady. Things are about to heat up." He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Albus Dumbledore's cottage is on the east shore of Loch Na Creitheach, Isle of Skye. Go there and wait for me. I'll explain later." With a soft crack, he Disapparated.

Looking around the familiar surroundings, Hermione was filled with an immeasurable sense of loss. Would she ever see this house again? What if the Death Eaters destroyed it when they could not find her parents? Despite Snape's order, she was determined to witness the invasion of her home. A quick tap of her wand and she was Disillusioned. She ascended the stairs and found the spot she used to use as a child when she pretended to be a spy. Climbing over the banister, she carefully lowered herself onto the wide ledge above the hall cupboard. From there she had a clear view down the length of the hall into the kitchen and living room and part of the stairs. Unless anyone thought to climb up there, she was completely undetectable.

Three loud cracks startled her out of a light doze some time later. The time had come. Hand on wand, Hermione watched as three masked and cloaked figures entered her home. The desire to hex them all on sight simmered close to boiling point as the three men swiftly searched the house.

"Dammit, Snape. There's no-one here. You told the Dark Lord they would be here and unprotected," complained the short, thickset wizard.

Snape's voice appeared disembodied as he drawled through his mask. "My source was reliable; however, the information was gathered several months ago. Check the kitchen for food. If there are fresh supplies, they may only be away for the night."

"Nothing," reported the third man. "The cupboards have only dry supplies and canned food." Tall and thin, his voice was high-pitched and reedy, fear colouring his words.

"Look!" Short and stout was brandishing a sheaf of letters, gathered from behind the open front door. "They are all addressed to Philip and Nancy Perkins. This must be the wrong house. I don't want to be in your shoes when we tell him of *your* mistake, Snape," he sneered.

"There was no mistake. The Mudblood's parents did live here some months ago." He picked up the phone book and flicked the pages to the G's. "Look Granger, Richard and Jean. This address." Tossing the book aside, he cursed. "The bloody Muggles have moved."

"Maybe those wretched followers of the old coot have hidden them," suggested tall and thin.

"Not that I am aware of. But then, my contacts with the Order have been irretrievably damaged recently." Snape's bitter laugh was joined by the sycophantic cackles of his two associates. "Nevertheless, we must leave everything as it was and return to report our failure. There is no point in alerting the Order to our mission."

Hermione held her breath as the three men made one final round of the house before carefully closing the front door behind them. Snape's performance had been magnificent. Not only had he prevented any wanton destruction of her home, he had seemingly led them right up the garden path. Now she understood why he had insisted on Transfiguring an old newspaper into fake mail. The man was a consummate spy.

Her next problem was to find the cottage, obviously Secret-Kept, that Snape had described. She remembered the tourist book her parents had used to plan family holidays over the years. It was one of the many, unidentifiable books they had left undisturbed. Turning to the section on the Isle of Skye, she found a small photograph of the tiny loch. The area was supposedly uninhabited, which of course made it the perfect location for a wizard's hideaway. Concentrating carefully on the area in the photo, she crossed her fingers and Apparated.

A/N: This was written for the Hermione Big Bang on LiveJournal, which celebrated Hermione's thirtieth birthday. Many thanks go to my friend and colleague, quaffswinegaily, who helped along the way, my beloved beta, ladyinthecloak, and my cheerleader, Michelle.

Chapter Six: The Price of Failure

Chapter 6 of 13

Snape suffers the consequences of his actions.

Chapter Six: The Price of Failure

Running her hands through her daughter's curls for the final time, the older witch smiles and decides she is happy with the result. Tiny white flowers adorn the girl's crown where her hair is caught into two jewelled clips. Below this, caramel-coloured curls entwined with white, silk ribbons fall to her waist. Her face, only lightly made up with a little mascara and lip-gloss, glows with good health. She is clad only in a simple shift over the delicate underwear chosen to delight her husband-to-be.

"It must have been so hard for Hermione to just remove herself from her parents' memories like that. What if she was not able to reverse the process? What if her parents never forgave her for making that decision for them?"

"She knew she was taking a risk, but she had no time left to weigh the pros and cons. She could have simply Apparated them away, but there was no way of ensuring their ongoing safety, and she knew Voldemort would not give up unless they had left the country. They could not afford to waste time discussing the problem. For many nights after that she lay awake wondering if she had done the right thing, but it was too late by then."

The mother sighs and turns to the wardrobe to fetch the wedding gown. Beautiful in its simplicity, the simple, white, silk sheath is overlaid with delicate organza, which floats out from the high waist in flower-encrusted layers to skim the floor. The sheer material forms the sleeves, fitted above the elbow and flaring to full medieval style at the wrists. Memories of her own wedding in this very dress bring a soft smile to her face and light her eyes with love.

"It's so gorgeous, Mum. He must have fallen in love with you all over again when he saw you wear that dress."

"That's what he always told me, dear."

"Before I put in on, tell me about the cottage," the bride prompted.

The cottage was a simple, two-storied cob structure with small, intimate windows and an impeccably kept garden of summer flowers. It faced west over the small loch and the surrounding hills. No other dwelling or evidence of human presence was within sight.

Hermione felt the wards as she passed through unharmed, assuming Snape had keyed them to her magical signature already. As she hesitated for a few seconds before the quaint, red-painted front door, it swung open to reveal a beaming house-elf clad in a purple spangled pillowcase.

"Missie Hermione. Motty is being expecting you," she stated proudly as she ushered Hermione into the cottage. "Welcome to the Haven."

"Er. Thank you, Motty," the witch replied, then gaped at the cosy, indubitably *floral* interior. The image of the dour professor relaxing on the overstuffed sofa, complete with frilly cushions, taking tea from the delicate, porcelain teacups was disturbing to say the least. Then she remembered it was Albus Dumbledore's cottage, and suddenly the décor seemed appropriate. Who but the eccentric, late headmaster would dress his house-elves in such a garish fashion?

A small tug on her sleeve roused her from her reverie.

"Is Missie Hermione hungry?" asked the eager house-elf.

"I am rather, Motty," Hermione replied.

"Sit, Missie, and Motty will bring you a meal fit for a queen."

"No, no, just a snack will be fine."

Motty's idea of a snack consisted of copious quantities of tea, a large stack of delicate sandwiches, scones with jam and cream, and a generous wedge of chocolate cake. After eating far more than she should at that time of the night, Hermione groaned and yawned.

"Would Missie like to be shown to her room?"

"No, thank you. I would prefer to wait for Professor Snape to return."

Motty's little face clouded over and her ears quivered. "Poor Professor. Poor, poor Professor," she wailed.

Hermione sat up, immediately wide awake. "What? What is the matter? Has something happened to the professor?"

"Motty doesn't know. Motty has seen the professor hurting and worries about him when he is away with the bad, bad wizards." The house-elf wrung her thin hands and sniffed loudly.

Hermione considered the facts. Snape had been sent on a mission for which he had provided the intelligence. The mission had failed. Making a decision, she gently took Motty's hands and soothed the anxious creature.

"Motty, do you want to help the professor?" she asked.

The elf nodded, looking up with her big, bright eyes glistening with tears. "Motty will do anything to help the professor. He is kind to Motty."

"Can you go to Hogwarts and fetch some things from Professor Snape's quarters? You would have to be very, very careful not to be seen."

"Motty is very discreet, Missie," the elf said, ears stiff with pride.

"Okay. Now, I will need you to go and find some special potions in case the professor is hurt when he returns." She wrote a list of everything she could think of that Snape may have had in his rooms: Pain relieving potion, muscle relaxant, wound healing paste, Blood Replenisher, essence of dittany, and sleeping draughts, with descriptions and possible locations. Suddenly, her heart sank as she realised Snape would never have left his quarters unwarded. "Can you get past wards, Motty?"

"Motty is a Hogwarts elf, Missie. We can enter any room in the castle."

"Good. Now, be as quick as you can, please."

With a soft pop Motty disappeared, bearing the precious list. Twenty minutes later, she reappeared, carrying all the requested items.

"Oh, well done, Motty!" Hermione was very impressed with the elf's achievement in so short a time. Her wide grin had the little creature dancing with excitement.

"Missie is pleased with Motty?"

"Very pleased. Thank you."

The sunshine of Motty's smile lit the room as she disappeared back to her usual duties.

Hermione checked through all the vials once again, Transfigured a towel into a pile of clean cloths, and prepared a bowl of charm-heated water, unsure of what else she could do. If Snape arrived injured, she wasn't sure she had the skills to heal him adequately. Noticing the extensive book collection in the adjoining room, she quickly perused the shelves and found a text on basic healing spells. Over the next two hours, she went over the spells to heal cuts and bruises, simple broken bones and dislocations, and burns. Anything more and she would need help. And she was not sure if there was anyone who would be prepared to offer assistance to the supposed murderer of Albus Dumbledore.

Just as dawn was chasing away the shadows on the hill behind the lake, a rattle at the door woke the girl curled up sound asleep on the sofa. She jumped to her feet as Snape staggered in the door and promptly passed out at her feet.

"Oh, Severus. What has he done to you?" she whispered as she knelt by the fallen wizard. Blood coated the left side of his otherwise ashen face, running into the sticky mess that was his hair. His robes and coat were missing, leaving a half torn off shirt, also partially soaked with the bright red of his life force. His trousers were muddy, as if he had been dragged across the ground, and his precious dragon-hide boots were missing. Tremors racked his battered body as he laid half-curved up on the cold stone floor, his breathing laboured.

"Motty!"

"Yes, Missie."

"Quickly. We must get the professor upstairs. Can you do that without hurting him?"

Motty nodded, fear and anxiety in her great, green eyes. With a snap of her fingers, she levitated Snape up the stairs and into the bedroom. Leaving him hovering over the bed, she flicked back the covers and lowered him to rest on the soft, cotton sheets.

"We must remove these soiled clothes," Hermione directed. Before she had a chance to unbutton Snape's shirt, Motty had snapped her fingers again and left the man bare except for a pair of black boxers. The bruising over his ribs and thighs, evidence of a rather more Muggle style of attack, as well as the long, deep laceration across his abdomen, served to distract the young witch from any unwieldy embarrassment.

Hermione paused and thought back to her First Aid classes back in primary school. Muttering to herself, she recited, "ABC. Airway seems okay. Breathing not so good." Waving her wand the way the book had described, she used a charm over Snape's bruised chest to find and mend two broken ribs. His breathing settled back into a more normal pattern once this was achieved, and his colour improved.

"Right. That's breathing sorted, now Circulation." His pulse was rapid and thready, which she remembered could be caused by blood loss. She hoped it was the cause, as she had a potion for that, but if it was anything more complicated she and Snape were in trouble. Summoning the cloths and water from downstairs, Hermione and Motty worked as a team, carefully cleaning the cuts on his left cheek and abdomen and washing off the remaining mud from his sickly, pale skin. Sprinkling dittany on the wounds and murmuring an incantation she had only learned two hours earlier, Hermione was relieved to see them slowly fuse, leaving neat, white lines where the flesh had been gaping and bloody. Next, she used another charm to ascertain whether he had any internal injuries. Thankfully, none were evident.

As his wounds were closed, Snape started groaning and struggling.

"No, no, no! My Lord, I didn't know..." Arms raised to protect his head, Snape fought imaginary attackers.

His voice changed quiet, pleading. "Albus, don't make me do it, I beg of you... Don't go, Albus, don't leave me alone..."

Suddenly, tears made silvery tracks down his cheeks as the delirious wizard entreated desperately, "Hermione, sweet Hermione... forgive me... please forgive me!"

Hermione captured his thrashing hand in hers and spoke soft words of reassurance. "Hush, Severus. You're safe now. We will take care of you." The sound of her voice appeared to anchor him back to reality as his eyes slowly opened, pain etched in their depths.

"Hermione?"

"I'm here, Severus. Now drink these," she ordered as she dripped pain relieving potion and Blood Replenisher into his mouth.

Complying with some difficulty, he sighed and sank back onto the pillows. Eyes closed, he winced as her fingertips found bruises he had not realised existed.

Hermione opened the jar of bruise salve and began lightly applying it to the varying sized, ugly welts on Snape's chest and arms.

"Motty, can you please roll him over so I can check his back?" she requested.

A gasp escaped her control as she discovered more extensive bruising around his kidneys and lower spine. It was hard to believe he had managed to Apparate to the cottage without splinching. Rubbing the paste into the damaged skin of his back, she noted the old scars she found there and wondered how often he had suffered at the hand of his evil master. As the bruises slowly faded, she could feel the tension draining from him.

After Motty had returned him onto his back, Hermione tackled the purpled skin on his thighs. As she applied the salve, she suddenly became aware of the pattern of small bruises she was treating. Amidst the larger bruises, on each inner thigh were two sets of five small marks.

Fingerprints.

A wave of nausea threatened to overcome her as she realised the significance. Swallowing hard, she lifted her head to meet two intense, black eyes pleading for redemption.

With a voice barely more than a whisper, she asked, "Is there anywhere else?"

Shaking his head, at first in denial, then in despair, the broken man held out his hand. "I'll do it."

As he reached into his boxers to treat the remaining areas of injury with the salve, she turned her head, tears falling unheeded.

"Thank you," he rasped, handing back the jar.

Hermione could not think of anything to say, so simply sat on the bed beside the wizard who had suffered so much to save her parents and held him as they both silently sobbed.

"Did they use *Crucio*?" she asked tentatively after some time had passed and Snape was lying, staring at the ceiling.

"Only enough to subdue me while they employed more... physical methods of punishment."

"It's all my fault. I should have dealt with my parents sooner." The guilt weighed impossibly heavy on her slender shoulders.

His hand found hers and squeezed. "They need few, if any, excuses for brutality, Hermione. That is why we are fighting this war, so men like those cannot prevail."

"But they beat you and hexed you and..."

"Don't say it... please! I don't want to think about it," he demanded, bitterness sharpening his tone.

Silently, they watched the sunrise through the small dormer window, each enveloped in their own thoughts and anxieties, never letting go of the other's hand.

A/N: Thank you to ladyinthecloak for her wonderful beta skills.

Chapter Seven: Soul Searching

Chapter 7 of 13

Hermione and the boys continue with their mission while Severus has a difficult time.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter Seven: Soul Searching

"The poor man. How he suffered for his bravery."

"He did, and few realised it until after the war was over. Severus Snape worked alone his only hope lay in the young girl he had entrusted with his good name. Now, put your dress on, then I will tell you some more."

After a few days resting, Snape was physically recovered. He never spoke of the night he had been beaten, and Hermione respected his silence. She would often catch him staring into space, expression blank, eyes alone revealing the depth of his misery. She could not find the words to help lift his depression at those times and simply enveloped the suffering man in her warmth and compassion, holding him close until he relaxed and returned to himself.

Over the next week, his episodes of depression were less frequent as his iron control reasserted itself. The two spent the days reading and researching, each respecting the other's need for secrecy, and sharing simple but delicious meals cooked by Motty, whose obvious delight at having someone to serve finally shattered Hermione's notions of unwanted slavery. Their conversations continued as if they were still at Hogwarts, and their friendship deepened into an abiding sense of belonging. In some strange way Severus Snape and Hermione Granger had become family.

The day eventually arrived when Snape came downstairs dressed in his coat and Death Eater robes.

"Do you really have to go back?" Hermione watched as he fastened the heavy, silk robes.

"I must. If I do not return as expected he will suspect duplicity. It is essential I maintain the appearance of his devoted minion." He spat the last word with a sneer for all its implications.

"Even after what happened?" She saw the flicker of apprehension before he controlled his features.

"Especially after what happened. A good Death Eater returns after such, kisses his hem, and says thank you," he muttered. "I will be expected to act as if nothing had occurred."

"Can you, Severus?"

"I have no choice."

Suddenly, realising she may not see him again for some time, if ever, Hermione threw herself into his arms. "Oh, please be careful, Severus. I don't want to lose you!"

Long arms enfolded her in the fullness of his cloak. "Hush, little one. I will come back. You still have the chocolate wrapper?" At her silent nod he continued. "Try not to contact me unless it is urgent. I'll be in touch. You may stay here as long as you wish and return whenever you need to. I've reset the wards to allow you free entry. Now, be a brave girl and let me go do my job, hmm?"

Hermione took a deep breath and stiffened her spine. "Yes. I understand. You have your task to perform, as I have mine. The sooner we get on with them, the sooner this damned war will be over." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "Take care."

Her ex-teacher smiled as his hand brushed his cheek. "I shall, my dear."

For the next few days, Hermione moped around the cottage, but despite Motty's cheerful attentions it just was not the same. Making a decision, she went up to her room and stowed the books and other items she had brought with her into the small, beaded purse she had enchanted with an Undetectable Extension Charm. It was time to join the Weasleys at the Burrow. Harry was turning seventeen soon, and she needed to find out what had been happening while she had been away.

The events of the next few weeks drove all thoughts of the cottage from Hermione's mind. Harry's dramatic escape from Privet Drive, Mad-Eye Moody's death, and George's near miss at Snape's hand had brought home to the three young people how important their task was. Privately, Hermione did not believe for a moment Snape was deliberately trying to kill George, but she kept that opinion strictly to herself.

Molly's obvious strategy to keep them apart over the next few days did not stop Hermione making plans of her own. Her beaded bag was fully packed with clothing, books, and other necessary items, even a tent, and never left her side. Harry's increasing awareness of Voldemort's activities concerned her greatly, especially as he appeared to be playing down the impact the mental intrusions were having. Dumbledore's bequests of the old Snitch, the Deluminator, and the book were typically obscure, but Hermione was confident their meanings would be revealed eventually.

Her joy at Ron's open admiration of her appearance at the wedding was rapidly quenched by the arrival of the Death Eaters and their subsequent rapid flight. Luck was with her as she Obliviated their pursuers in the dingy café; neither Harry nor Ron had thought to question why she was unsure about the spell when she had supposedly successfully performed a far more complex memory modification on her parents.

Arriving at Grimmauld Place and finding the entrapments set for Snape brought a chill to her heart as once again she was faced with his isolation from all those who may have cared or at least been remotely interested in his well-being. Harry's threats of what he would do to the dark wizard should he come across him saddened her further, knowing she could not defend her friend. Even the discovery of who R.A.B was failed to lift the cloud of anxiety that kept her awake until the early hours of the morning. She had not had any messages from Snape and had no way of knowing whether he was safe. The risk of betraying him to his fellow Death Eaters by way of the chocolate wrapper was too great to use it as a means of alleviating her own concern.

Harry took to sneaking out under the Invisibility Cloak after they had been at Grimmauld Place for some weeks. His restlessness could not be confined, despite the watchers outside. Trips to replenish their supplies and steal newspapers were a sop to his need to do *something*.

The *Daily Prophet* Harry brought back after one such trip on the first of September may have astounded the boys, but under the cover of a completely out of character rant, Hermione managed to run off to another room before the grin took over her face entirely. Snape was safe and, if the newspaper was correct, would be ensconced at Hogwarts as headmaster where he could do the most good protecting the children there. Once she had reined in her jubilation, she returned to the kitchen with the painting of Phineas Nigellus she had taken off the wall, which provided a reason for her sudden disappearance.

Are you safe? Finally, the long awaited message warmed her heart as the foil heated her hand. She had not long retired to her bedroom after a long discussion with the boys about the news of the day.

Yes. And you?

I could not be any safer at the moment. As long as I am at Hogwarts as headmaster, there are powerful enchantments in place to protect me.

Thank Merlin. I was so worried until I saw the article in the newspaper.

As was I until I was able to contact you. I have to go; someone is coming up to my office. Be safe.

The wrapper grew cold in her hand, but her smile lingered far into the night.

The mission to the Ministry of Magic to retrieve the locket-Horcrux had been a partial success.

Leading Yaxley back to Grimmauld Place had left them without a base of operations, and they still had no idea how to destroy the Horcrux itself. Hours spent poring over books brought Hermione no closer to the answer. The food situation was dire; mushrooms and berries were hardly adequate nutrition for three teenagers as autumn marched on. Once or twice Hermione managed to have some time alone to forage for food. A quick visit to the cottage provided her with supplies she could pass off as bought at a local farm as long as she was careful to only take bread and eggs or other simple food items. To her disappointment, she did not see Snape at the cottage, but she left him a note each time she visited to let him know she was well.

Ron had left. The stupid, ever-hungry, red-headed prat had left. Their lack of progress in finding any further Horcruxes and the negative impact of the one they carried had taken a harsh toll on the boy. His final outburst before his sudden departure had saddened and disheartened both Hermione and Harry. The bindings holding their friendship together were unravelling before their eyes, and there was little they could do to prevent it. Any hope she had had of a relationship with Ron had departed that day with the young man himself.

Phineas Nigellus's portrait kept them up to date with the silent rebellion led by Ginny, Neville, and Luna at Hogwarts. Hermione smiled as she read Severus's updates on the havoc her friends were creating, even as she worried over his ability to protect them, and his cover, from the Carrows. He had been contacting her twice weekly, usually at night. Often only brief comments, but they were welcomed by the young witch as a sign he was well and safe.

They've done it again. Painted ridiculous caricatures of the Carrows on the corridor walls. I managed to surreptitiously cast an Impervious Charm over the wall so the vicious bastards couldn't remove it, but it will only last a few days. Pity.

Sent the troublemakers off to Hagrid for detention. I'm sure he can find something useful for them to do. Alecto and Amycus are both terrified of the Forbidden Forest; perhaps I should have made them help supervise?

Hermione giggled as the words faded. Snape had a wicked sense of humour hidden under all that glowering. No doubt he needed a little light relief occasionally to ease the stress of the dual role he continued to play in the unfolding drama of the war.

And you, Severus? Are you eating properly? Getting enough sleep?

Yes, Mother Granger. Although the company at the Head table is not terribly convivial lately. Between the Carrows making sadistic plans to torment the children, Minerva's tight-lipped disapproval, and the other staff blatantly avoiding eye contact, I find meals somewhat disagreeable.

She sniffed a little as she imagined the lonely man shunned by those he was protecting and harassed by those he despised.

Just remember, I believe in you, Severus. Don't give up hope.

I know. The foil cooled, then warmed again some minutes later when Hermione was almost asleep.

It's just so hard. So fucking hard.

The desperation in his words cut her heart to ribbons. Calculating dates swiftly in her head, she touched her wand to the wrapper.

Tomorrow is Saturday. Meet me at the cottage. Nine am.

The foil remained cold and inert. Holding it close to her chest, sleep eventually claimed Hermione, fitful and disturbed with dreams of a dark-haired man standing alone in a crowd, reaching out fruitlessly for any human contact.

The next day dawned clear and cold, a little snow lying on the ground outside the tent as Hermione peeked out to check the weather. Her companion was still wrapped up in his blankets, reluctant to face the day.

"It's not too bad out, Harry. How about you stay here and keep warm while I take a walk down to that village we saw and find a shop to buy food? I have plenty of money, and we are rarely close enough to buy proper food," she offered.

"Why don't you just Apparate?" asked the boy in the cocoon of bedclothes.

"Because I feel like some decent exercise for a change. The weather has been so bad lately we have hardly been outside for days. I'll probably be a couple of hours or so by the time I get down there, check out the shops, and walk back. Go back to sleep for a while."

"Are you sure it's safe?" Harry asked, ever protective.

"I'll be fine. No-one will know we are here as long as we don't mention You-Know-Who's name, and there are unlikely to be any Death Eaters in a small Muggle village. Look, I'll use a glamour to change my appearance." She demonstrated, turning her hair dirty blonde and short and her eyes blue.

"Cool! Can you teach me to do that?"

"When I get back. Any requests?" she asked.

"Potatoes. I would kill for potatoes," Harry murmured as he rolled over into his customary face down, sprawled sleeping position.

"Potatoes. Got it. See you soon." Hermione chuckled as she walked away from the tent. All the possible foods he could request, and Harry Potter wanted bloody potatoes. Feeling a little guilty, she Apparated to the cottage as soon as she was out of sight of the small clearing where they had camped.

"Severus! Are you here?" she called as she entered the cottage. Silence hung in the air, oppressive and expectant. Even Motty was nowhere to be seen. Spirits drooping, Hermione traipsed into the kitchen to find some fresh vegetables, fruit, and bread to take back to the tent. Adding a hunk of cheese and two loaves of freshly baked bread to her stash, she found two bottles of milk and a container of juice in the permanently cold-spelled perishables cupboard.

The creak of the front door opening sent an unexpected shiver shooting down her spine. Despite knowing only she, Snape, and Motty were privy to the cottage's location, her hand grasped her wand as she eased the kitchen door open. The welcome sight of the black-clad wizard standing in the open door sent her fears packing as she rushed over to greet him with a tight, concerned hug.

"I take it you are pleased to see me, young lady?" the man in her arms drawled.

"I... I... missed you, dammit! I've been so worried about you." She looked up at his face, searching his expression for clues to his emotional well-being. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," he replied briefly, face carefully smooth.

Hermione stood back, hands on hips. "Bollocks. I know that look, Severus Snape. You only get that when you are hiding something. Now, I will ask again. How are you... *really?*"

He sighed and took her small hands in his. Leading her over to the sofa, he sat and pulled her close beside him, one arm around her shoulders. She could not see his face and realised it was intended.

"Physically, I'm fine. I haven't been summoned for weeks."

"And mentally? Emotionally?" she prompted, unsure whether he would reply.

"Mentally? Exhausted. Trying to run a school where the staff either hate the sight of me or seek only to ingratiate themselves by devising more hell for the students is... impossible. I can barely think straight some of the time. If Minerva hadn't taken over most of the day-to-day organisation purely to protect the students, not to alleviate my load the whole place would have disintegrated into a shambles. I spend all my day stage-managing suitable *detentions* with safe staff in order to prevent the blasted Carrows killing all of my students in fits of pique and patrolling the corridors to catch the little miscreants before they do." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, drawing upon the strength of the girl beside him.

"Do they know? The students, I mean?" Hermione wondered. Ginny and Neville were usually fairly smart. They must have noticed their detentions were not as harsh as they could have been. And Luna was a Ravenclaw for good reason, despite her odd ways.

"I bloody well hope not. The last thing I need is for Neville Longbottom to start seeing me as the upholder of the light. I'd be dead faster than he could botch a potion if he so much as looked at me gratefully. However, I'm sure the Lovegood girl suspects. She's uncannily perceptive at times. I'd swear she smiled at me the other day when no-one else was around."

"She probably did. Luna was always good at understanding people. But she won't give you away." Hermione leaned into Snape's warm body and rested her head on his shoulder as she squeezed the hand still in hers. She could feel the tension bleeding away at her gentle touch. A salty drop escaped his control and ran down his face, splashing unremarked on her curls.

After a few moments of silence, Snape continued. "Emotionally... I'm a wreck. Sometimes, I just long for it all to be over and for death to claim its final retribution. I have nothing left to give. I've spent so long playing a part, I'm not sure I even know who I am any more. I'm so damned tired, Hermione." Bitterness and regret painted his voice grey and dull, a cracked parody of the rich, velvet baritone which had held an eleven year old in thrall so many years before.

His despair only served to bolster Hermione's courage as she reached up and turned his face down to meet her concerned gaze. Holding his cheek against the palm of her hand, she kissed his tears away. "I know you, Severus Snape. You are the man who protected me and my friends for years, even though you didn't like us. You are the

man who held to the side of love and hope against the ravages of hate and prejudice. You are the man who faces torture and beatings in order to help those you care about. That man is a good man and a brave man and a true friend. I've never told you this for fear you would misunderstand, but I love you, Severus. I love you as my friend, my mentor, my protector. It may not be much, being loved by a silly, little schoolgirl, but always know you are loved and needed. Don't give up on me and, more importantly, don't give up on yourself." She watched his eyes widen as he searched her face for confirmation of her words.

"You... love... *me*?" he rasped.

"Of course I do, you silly man. Do you think I would be here if I didn't? I love Harry and Ron and Ginny as well, so I guess you will have to put up with sharing my heart with them, but... you are special. I'm not sure why." She chanced a little humour. "You just sneaked in when I wasn't looking. Typical Slytherin."

His mood lightened as he smirked. "I imagine that must have been a shock to your Gryffindor sensibilities."

"Finding you in the classroom that night was a shock, but I'm pleased I did," she replied, smiling as she kissed his cheek again and made to stand.

His gentle tug kept her at his side. "Hermione, you have no idea what that night meant to me. Knowing you believe in me has kept me sane all these months. Having a friend after all these years has been a revelation to me. And when I have times where I can't see any future, I will try to remember I have you on my side, come what may. You are no longer just a schoolgirl to me. You are hope." He kissed the top of her head, sealing his promise to her and watched as she gathered her provisions into her beaded bag.

The next hour was spent cocooned in the warmth of each other's regard, the world outside the cottage temporarily forgotten as the two within shared as much of the previous months as was safe.

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Chapter Eight: Love and Danger

Chapter 8 of 13

The hunt for the Horcruxes causes concern for both Hermione and Severus.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter Eight: Love and Danger

She twirls around the room; the dress shimmering as strands of iridescent thread catch the beams of sunlight peeking through the window. Her bare feet slide across the floor as she imagines dancing later with her beloved wizard.

"Mother?" She notices the woman standing, gazing out of the window at the water below. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm just remembering how Hermione and Harry escaped the great snake, Nagini, in Godric's Hollow by jumping from a window and Apparating in mid-air," she replies with a smile.

"How did they learn to do that?" the bride asks, unable to imagine how one would learn such a feat.

"Oh, no-one taught them. Hermione just did what had to be done to escape the snake. Luckily, it worked, and neither of the two were splinched."

"And lucky they didn't just fall to the ground. Tell me about the Sword."

Anxiety taunted Hermione with its cruel suggestions as she waited in the tent after Harry had left to follow Severus's Patronus. He had forewarned her with a message on the chocolate wrapper to allow Harry to take the overnight shift and not interfere when she saw the silver doe. She knew he had something important to achieve, but his plan was a mystery.

Suddenly, a soft rustle beyond her wards alerted her to an intruder. Harry had her wand, so she could not safely leave the tent to investigate. A glimmer of light appeared at the entrance to the tent, and all at once a muttering Severus Snape materialised before her.

"Merlin, woman, could you have made it any more difficult?" he complained.

"Protective enchantments and wards are not supposed to be broken by just anybody, you git. What did you expect, a gold-plated welcome sign?" She laughed as she hugged the git in question. "What's going on? Where did Harry go?"

"I would hope he has acquired the Sword of Gryffindor by now, after all the trouble I went to luring him to its location. We only have a few minutes; then I will need to disappear. Are you well?" He studied her carefully, looking for any injuries. "I thought I had nearly lost you after your foolish escapade at Godric's Hollow, girl!"

Hermione flushed as she remembered the scathing comments he had made by way of the charmed foil a few days earlier when he had found out about their narrow escape. She had been surprised he hadn't tried to dock House points.

"I'm sorry it upset you, Severus. We made an error of judgement. I'll be more careful in future," she promised.

He folded her into his arms and held her close. "Just be safe. I don't know what you're trying to find, but whatever it is has driven *him* to a frenzy. He is determined to find Potter and end his quest once and for all." Snape reached into his pocket and drew out a small bar of their favourite chocolate. "I have to go now. Take this."

One final hug and he was gone, dissolving into the night as swiftly as he had arrived.

Soon after, Harry returned, bearing the Sword of Gryffindor, an empty locket, and a very subdued Ronald Weasley. Seeing the redhead, an apologetic smile upon his face, made her see red. How dare he come back as if nothing had happened and expect her to welcome him with open arms? Any burgeoning romantic feelings she had been

fostering for him had died the day he'd left them starving and miserable in the tent. She could understand how scared and frustrated he had been feeling, but seeing Severus Snape returning to the Death Eaters after the beating he had received in July with no more than a stoic expression and a rock-hard sense of duty had left her with little sympathy for the teenage wizard's moment of weakness. Ron would always be her friend, and she would forgive him eventually but now she realised she needed more than he could offer.

Punching and berating Ron proved extremely therapeutic, although he would still have to earn his way back into her good graces. Pretending she was surprised about the doe Patronus was not difficult; after all, she had been expecting something somewhat more masculine when Severus had contacted her.

Apparating mid-air was beginning to lose its novelty. Once again, they had barely escaped capture and had obtained some information that defied belief. Hermione's fiercely logical mind could not assimilate the possibility of the Deathly Hallows, and Harry's preoccupation with them was not helping the search for the Horcruxes. As if they needed yet another mystery to solve.

Lying in bed that night, she felt the chocolate wrapper warm. Knowing she was in for another lecture, she almost pretended she hadn't noticed. But her conscience asserted itself. Severus needed to know she was safe. Touching the foil with her wand, she read the message.

What the hell do you think you were doing?

Our job. She replied tersely.

I wasn't aware destroying Lovegood's home and nearly getting yourselves captured was in the job description, young lady.

She almost giggled at that. He always reverted to calling her "girl" or "young lady" whenever he was worried. He might be a grouchy bastard at times, but he was a protective, grouchy bastard.

I'm sure the job description will include more mayhem as time goes on. It involves Harry, after all.

Don't remind me. Potter is not exactly my preferred choice of companion for someone I care about.

Hermione smiled to herself. He was obviously concerned to have put that in writing.

Thank you for caring. Love you, Sev. She smirked as she added the last part to lighten him up.

Love you too, minx. Take care. That's an order! And don't call me Sev... Or else.

She stared at the wrapper for long moments after the words had faded. Severus loved her. He had never told her before. Under no illusions as to the platonic nature of his love, nevertheless, something in her chest broke free and took wing. Hermione had simply accepted her friendship with Severus as something special and not examined her feelings in any depth. Now was not the time for intense self-analysis, but soon she would need to address the issue.

Waking in an unfamiliar bedroom, neck bandaged and limbs aching, Hermione gasped as she recalled the terrifying events at Malfoy Manor. Harry's obsession with the Deathly Hallows and use of Voldemort's name had brought the Snatchers upon them, and her subsequent torture by Bellatrix Lestrange had been ended by Dobby's timely arrival.

"Harry?" she croaked, mouth parched and throat sore.

"Here. Drink this. You'll feel much better." Luna Lovegood's soft, dreamy voice was a balm to her anxiety.

Drinking long, soothing swallows of the cool liquid alleviated Hermione's discomfort. "Where are Harry and Ron? What happened? Why is my neck bandaged?"

Luna quickly explained all that had happened while Hermione had been unconscious. Harry was outside digging Dobby's grave with Ron and Dean.

"Dobby's dead? To save Harry?" Hermione sobbed at the little elf's boundless courage and devotion. "Please, can I see Harry?"

"Come. We will go down to the grave."

Luna escorted her to where Harry was placing Dobby into his final resting place. Ron's hug was warm, but not the one she desperately needed. Weak and still in pain, she allowed him to lead her back into the house afterwards and settle her on the couch in front of the fire.

Their conversations with Griphook and Ollivander took several hours, and by then exhaustion had taken hold of her body and mind. It was only the next morning when she dressed in her usual, now clean clothes, she realised the chocolate wrapper was missing.

"Fleur, did you take an old chocolate wrapper from my pocket before washing these clothes?" she asked the blonde witch.

"Oui. I threw it in the fire with the rest of the rubbish." Fleur frowned. "Was it important?"

Hermione's heart plummeted as her face maintained an indifference she was far from feeling. "Oh, no. It was just one I had collected. No worries."

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Sorry about the brevity of the chapter, but it needed to stop where it did! :)

Chapter Nine: Return to Hogwarts

The final battle looms. What will happen to Severus?

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter Nine: Return to Hogwarts

The girl's face drops, as it always does at this part of the tale.

"Poor Severus, he must have been out of his mind with worry. He must have heard about her capture and torture and to then not have any way of contacting her..."

"And she could not leave Shell Cottage. There were too many others watching and no need for her to leave the Secret-Kept location. She could not even Apparate to Dumbledore's cottage with a message to allay Severus's concern. Calling Motty was unsuccessful the restriction included house-elves as well."

A tear leaks from the girl's eye as she contemplates the hearts torn by Fleur's simple act of burning an old chocolate wrapper.

Hermione resolutely put aside her anxiety about the dark wizard she had come to depend upon and threw herself into the planning of the break-in to Gringotts to retrieve the Hufflepuff cup from Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. The sooner they accomplished that task, the sooner she could find a way to reach Severus. Only late at night did she allow thoughts of him to torment her mind, imagining his despair matching her own in their inability to communicate and reassure one another of their safety.

"Oh, Severus, don't give up. I'm still here," she sobbed into the dark night as she remembered the times he had needed her comfort.

Over the next few weeks, Ron tried to further the fledgling relationship he had abandoned before Christmas. His attempts to catch her alone became more comical as he became more frustrated. Hermione developed an uncanny ability to hear others calling for her or remember chores that needed to be done, leaving the redhead to stare after her with the long face of thwarted masculine hopes. She did not know how to explain her change of heart; how could she tell Ron she constantly compared his behaviour with the man he viewed as a traitorous murderer, and he came up lacking? None of those at the cottage would understand her feelings for Severus. How could they when her own mind was a confused tangle of warm recollections, cold anxiety, and a deep longing she had never experienced previously?

As the spring days lengthened and new life burst forth all around, Hermione yearned only for the smell of wool and potions, the sound of a deep, velvety voice, and the feeling of strong arms protecting her from the world. The train of her consciousness circled around in ever-decreasing spirals as she tried to sort out why she needed the dour man so intensely. She had been separated from Harry and Ron many times over the years, for months at a time in summer, and had missed them dreadfully, but had never felt as bereft. She knew the risk of exposure and death at the merest slip left him on a knife-edge most of the time and often wondered if it was simply the knowledge she might never speak to him again that had upset her usually logical thought processes.

The weeks passed, and eventually the day of the break-in dawned. It was exciting and stressful and scary and, hours later, thankfully over.

Helga Hufflepuff's cup had been found, which left two more. One they knew was Nagini, Voldemort's giant snake, and the other was somewhere at Hogwarts. Once they had rested a little and treated the burns from the cursed coins, they prepared to Apparate into Hogsmeade, knowing from Harry's visions the war was about to come to a crashing climax.

Hermione stared across the unknown lake, not seeing the densely forested hills beyond, but imagining a distant castle with a lonely wizard somewhere within. Her imagination briefly transported her to a time and place beyond the oncoming battle where all her loved ones were safe, and she and Severus could...

"Oi! What's so funny?" Ron demanded.

"What?"

"You had a goofy grin on your face for a minute there. I was just wondering what was so funny about blowing up banks and riding on dragons? Not to mention racing evil, power-crazed wizards to find sick pieces of soul?" He shook his head, nonplussed as to her dreamy expression.

"Oh. I was just thinking of all the good times we had at Hogwarts." She shook her head to clear the illusion as she swiftly improvised.

"I bet she was remembering all those lovely books in the library and the smell of ink and parchment, mate. Probably mentally knitting more hats for the house-elves," Harry suggested as they watched the dragon fly off to parts unknown.

"Yeah. Nutters, that one." Ron grinned, all too happy to have an excuse not to think about the looming confrontation.

"Thanks, boys. I'll just pretend I'm not here then, shall I? Talk about me all you like."

"Beats thinking about the next twenty-four hours," Harry muttered.

"Oh, Harry. I'm sorry." Guilt washed over her as she realised just what her best friend would be facing soon. "Come here." She opened her arms for a hug.

The two boys enveloped her in their embrace and squeezed her tight. All thoughts of romance put aside, they were simply three best friends about to embark on a potentially world changing battle. They needed all the positive thoughts they could muster. As one, they threw on the Invisibility cloak and Disapparated.

Some hours later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were facing the ragged remnants of Dumbledore's Army. Neville had obviously taken charge, much to Hermione's astonishment. Gone was the diffident, slightly chubby boy of their early years, replaced by a confident, charismatic young man who demanded an explanation of their quest. After telling him as much as they were able, Harry left with Luna Lovegood, bound for Ravenclaw Tower to look at the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw and her diadem.

Amidst the low murmur of voices in the Room of Requirement, Ron pulled Hermione aside.

"Come with me," he breathed in her ear.

"Ron, it's not the time..." Hermione hissed, mentally rolling her eyes at his timing.

"No. No, not that. I have an idea." Quietly, the pair slipped out of the room while the others were listening to a rousing speech from Neville.

"What is it?" asked Hermione, curiosity piqued.

"We need something to destroy this." He indicated the cup he held. "And if Harry can find the diadem, we will need to deal with that as well."

"But we no longer have the Sword of Gryffindor." It seemed hopeless.

"Hermione, why was the Sword able to kill the Horcrux?"

She thought a moment. "Because... it had absorbed Basilisk blood?"

"And what else comes from a Basilisk and has already been used to kill a Horcrux?" Ron smirked, proud of his own logic.

"A fang... a *fang!* Ron! We have to get into the Chamber of Secrets!" she cried, hope lightening her features in the dim hallway.

"Exactly."

Ron grabbed her arm and started running for the bathroom hiding the entrance to the Chamber.

"But how? Harry isn't here to open the entrance." Hermione frowned as she realised they could not open the secret passage.

"Just wait and see," he replied with confidence.

After a few tries and a lot of hissing and spitting, Ron finally hit the right combination of sounds, and with groan the sink shifted, leaving the dark entrance to the Chamber exposed.

"Ronald Weasley. Did I ever tell you, you are AMAZING!" Hermione turned to him, bathing him briefly in the warmth of her approval.

"Nowhere near often enough," he muttered as he dropped down into the tunnel, carrying the broom the Room of Requirement had provided.

After summarily despatching the Horcrux in the Hufflepuff cup, the pair gathered the Basilisk fangs into a bundle and headed off on the broom. As she rode behind Ron, Hermione re-evaluated her companion. Over the last twenty-four hours, he had demonstrated courage, intelligence, and insight, but he was still just Ron. Shrugging away the irrelevancies of her thoughts, she followed him down the corridor once they had exited the Chamber's tunnel, to find Harry waiting anxiously.

Ron's final moment of greatness in her eyes came when he remembered to warn the house-elves, and the surprisingly intense kiss they shared lingered at the back of her mind for hours.

Vincent Crabbe's contribution to their quest by summoning the Fiendfyre, thus destroying the Horcrux in the diadem, was his final action. Draco Malfoy and Gregory Goyle were wandless and dispirited after their brush with death and were left where they fell as Hermione and the two boys joined the fray. Fred's death distracted them momentarily, but battle spared no time for grieving and they fought on.

The revelation that Voldemort had sent for Severus wrapped ribbons of icy fear around Hermione's chest. Harry had already described the duel between Snape and McGonagall and Snape's literal flight out of the castle. Amid the screams and crashes of the ongoing battle and the flashes of red and green light, part of her mind was pleading with any gods that would listen to keep Severus Snape safe.

Racing with Harry and Ron under the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione ducked and dodged rubble and the occasional body she did not have time to identify. The Dementors outside the castle set her thinking again of Severus and lost opportunities until Luna, Ernie, and Seamus added their support and their Patronuses to chase them off. Avoiding the giants, the trio ran across the grounds to the Whomping Willow, finally reaching the narrow tunnel beneath.

Time slowed to a crawl; the darkness and musty smell of the passage intensifying Hermione's fears for Severus, shortening her breath and tightening her throat as they neared their goal. As they silently crept to the opening into the Shrieking Shack, she felt a deathly certainty descend upon her with the sound of Voldemort's cold, ruthless voice. Physical pain tore through her chest when she heard the tyrant explain to his right-hand man why he must die, and a soft sob escaped her as the snake's cage enclosed her dear friend's head.

He screamed.

"Take... it... Take... it..."

Tears were pouring down Hermione's cheeks as Severus desperately tried to convey something to Harry. Memories! They were memories! Conjuring a flask, she helped gather the silvery strands of the dying man's past into it.

"Look... at... me..."

As she watched, the light in Severus's eyes failed, taking her heart and squeezing it into a tiny ball of silent, bitter grief, to be held tight inside her until she was free to rage against the unfairness of it all.

Voldemort's ultimatum shattered the silence. They had one hour to plan their next move. One hour of hope remained. As they were rushing out of the shack back into the tunnel, urgency in their stride, Hermione suddenly felt an almost tangible tug, which stopped her in her tracks. She could not leave without saying goodbye to the man she had befriended all those months ago.

The two boys stopped a few yards ahead, realising she was not with them. "Come on, Hermione!"

"I've dropped my bag. I have to go back and get it. You two go ahead!"

"Leave it!" ordered Harry, impatient to fulfil his destiny.

"No. It has all the healing potions. We may need them before this day is over. I'll catch up with you shortly. Just go!"

"Okay. But be careful. Don't let any Death Eaters see you!" Ron wavered, unsure whether to continue on with Harry or turn back with Hermione.

"Ron, you know I can Disillusion myself better than you boys. *You* be careful," Hermione growled, desperate to be alone with Severus, even for a short time.

She turned without a backward glance and ran back the way they had come, re-entering the room quietly, wand in hand. It was as they had left it; Severus's body lay in a dark pool of the blood dripping relentlessly from his neck, motes of dust still floated in the air, stirred up from the recent activity in the disused room, and the smell of death hung heavily in the air. Kneeling beside his body, she wept as she brushed the hair off his face with a trembling finger.

"Oh, Severus. What did you think you were doing, allowing him to kill you? You know I said you weren't allowed to die, dammit!"

She sat for long moments watching his dear, still face. Suddenly, she frowned as she noticed a flutter of his eyelids and heard a tiny gasp of breath. Severus Snape was not yet dead.

Frantically searching through her beaded purse, Hermione retrieved her essence of dittany with shaking hands, poured a small amount onto his neck, and watched the gaping wound slowly close as the blood flow trickled to a stop. Finding Blood Replenisher and forcing his mouth open, she dripped it in, little by little, until she had administered an entire vial.

Now, all she could do was watch. And hope. He was too unstable to move, and she had no-one she could trust to summon for help. Then she remembered her promise... or was it a threat?"

If you try and die on me, Severus Snape, I shall hunt you down and mother you back to life.

Hands on hips, Hermione Granger stood in front of the dying man and lectured, in her best Molly Weasley voice, "Severus Tobias Snape, you are not allowed to die on me. You are a brave and good man. Giving up is not what you do. You have fought for the light, you have fought for your fellow witches and wizards, and you have fought for the right to freedom. Don't you dare run out on me now after all we have been through! Fight, Severus! Fight for your life!"

Tears fell anew as he showed no sign of improving. Life was flickering in and out as if undecided whether to stay.

"Damn you, Severus. Wake up, you cantankerous old bastard!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor for insulting a teacher." The whisper was barely audible, but the accompanying smirk was pure Snape.

"Severus!" Losing points had never made her so happy. As she knelt beside him and caressed his cheek, Hermione managed a weak smile and murmured, "And twenty points from Slytherin for scaring me silly."

"You will never be silly, my dear." He closed his eyes again as he leaned into her touch, turning his head slightly to kiss her palm.

Five minutes later, Hermione had him tucked up into bed at the cottage, further doses of Blood Replenisher and a mild sleeping draught on hand, and Motty charged with cleaning him up and feeding him as required until she was able to return.

A final hug and a kiss on his weary forehead, then she Disapparated to join the boys at Hogwarts. He had tried to keep her with him, having spent the previous few weeks not knowing whether she was alive or dead, but knew in his heart she needed to be present for the final showdown. His faith in her skill and courage was his only succour as he drifted off into a sleep haunted by giant snakes and pools of his own blood.

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Asterisks signify words quoted from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

Chapter Ten: Death is an Illusion

Chapter 10 of 13

In the aftermath of the final battle, Hermione and Severus discuss the past.

Chapter 10: Death is an Illusion

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

"I'm ready. How do I look?" She twirls, finally dressed and ready to marry the wizard she adores.

"You look beautiful, dear. He will be enchanted."

"We have another thirty minutes before Father returns to collect us. Tell me about the final confrontation with Voldemort." She turns eagerly to await her favourite part of the story.

"Found it!" Hermione called softly, catching up with Ron and Harry just outside the castle. She had been able to Apparate directly to the castle as the wards had been dropped.

"What took you so long?" demanded Ron, breathless from their long trek through the tunnel and up to the castle.

"It was dark, and my purse had fallen down behind that crate. It took a while to find it." She improvised again. Now was not the time to let them know Severus was alive.

The emeralds scattered across the floor of the Entrance Hall brought a quirk to her lips as she recalled Severus's first words on returning to consciousness, but the scene in the Great Hall effectively banished that small tendril of positive thought. Injured witches and wizards, some of them children... *children...* were lying everywhere, a bustle of motion surrounding them as those still able-bodied did their best to alleviate pain and heal wounds. The bodies of Remus Lupin and Tonks, lying cold and forlorn, sent shards of pain for poor, orphaned Teddy straight to her heart. And then there was the Weasley family, grouped together in a distraught huddle around one cold and still twin, the other sitting stunned and unnaturally quiet, tears running unheeded down his face as he realised for the first time in his life he was truly alone.

Ron ran over to his family, his tall, lanky form swallowed in a sea of redheaded, swollen-eyed faces. Harry had taken one look at the fallen, muttered something about the memories he had clutched in his hand, and disappeared. For want of anything better to do, Hermione hovered near the Weasleys, supportive but not supported; they had closed ranks in their grief, and she remained outside.

As the hour's grace drew to a close, Harry's absence became evident. Hermione glanced around the Great Hall, but the dark-haired young wizard was nowhere to be found.

"Ron... Ron! Harry has disappeared!" she whispered urgently.

"What?" He looked up, bleary-eyed and mind sluggish. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. But the hour is up. Where do you think the bloody foolhardy idiot is?" Stress and worry had stripped her of any tact.

"Oh, fuck! He's gone out there alone, hasn't he?"

She nodded, suddenly sure.

"Mum, Dad, I have to go." Ron extricated himself from his family's embrace and ran with Hermione to the main entrance doors.

Too late.

An unearthly laugh threaded through the cool dawn air from the Forbidden Forest.

Something had happened.

Something bad.

Suddenly, Voldemort's voice rang out, declaring victory.

Harry was dead.

A crowd gathered at the door as someone came stumbling from the edge of the forest. It was Hagrid, wailing and carrying a limp bundle. Voldemort, with Nagini riding on his shoulders and his Death Eaters alongside, strutted out to the front of the castle.

Minerva McGonagall's scream shattered the air as she recognised Harry's body. Hermione and Ron were joined by Ginny in their horrified denial of the evidence before them. A cacophony of voices swelled until it was cut short by the apparent victor's cry for silence.

Lowering Harry gently to the ground, Hagrid stood aside as Voldemort paced and threatened and postured. Neville's spirited attempt to get to Voldemort roused a cheer from the crowd for Dumbledore's Army.

The arrival of the centaurs broke the tableau. Turning, Hermione caught the sweep of the blade as Neville Longbottom, in a fit of Gryffindor courage, fished the Sword of Gryffindor from the much abused Sorting Hat and beheaded the massive snake. As a pitched battle broke out between the Giants allied with Voldemort and Grawp, the Thestrals, and Buckbeak, the wizard combatants entered the Entrance Hall. House-elves led by Kreacher entered the fray, and it appeared the Death Eaters had finally been outnumbered.

Hermione panted as she desperately fought Bellatrix Lestrange with Ginny and Luna. No amount of secret duelling practice could have prepared them for the vicious, relentless force that was the deranged woman before them. She moved with preternatural speed, and her ability to cast multiple, simultaneous hexes was as terrifying as it was awe-inspiring. Only their years of practice at Shielding Charms had prevented them joining those already fallen. Suddenly, another equally ferocious witch entered the fray.

"*NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!*" cried Molly Weasley. The three girls watched, astounded as the vengeful Weasley matriarch ignored the madwoman's jeers and finally felled her evil opponent in a show of skill and pure fury they had never thought possible of the ultimate earth mother.

"That was my *mother!*" gasped Ginny, eyes popping in disbelief.

All at once, the Hall became silent as Harry materialised out of thin air and challenged Bellatrix's screaming master.

Not a wand was lifted as Harry Potter taunted Voldemort with his return from the dead and Snape's betrayal due to his love for Lily Potter. The knowledge of the true mastery of the Elder Wand was revealed as the sun lit the room in a brilliant display. The final confrontation was as brief as it was dramatic, and with a harsh thud the wizard who had been responsible for years of torture and torment fell to the floor, stone dead.

Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was no more.

Amidst the cheers sent up for Harry, Hermione raised a silent one of her own to the man whose courage, strength, and skill had played an enormous, if unrecognised, part of the triumph. Severus Snape.

After the initial cheers and jubilation had faded, the morning wore on with news coming in from up and down the country. Hermione spent some time catching up with Ginny, Luna, Neville, and their mini-revolution; then Harry took Hermione and Ron aside to fill them in on Snape's memories and what had happened in the Forest. Eventually, all the talking was done, Harry had disappeared with Ginny, and Ron had rejoined the bosom of his family. Hermione quietly watched her friends, pleading fatigue and the need to be alone. Hastening outside, she Apparated to the cottage where her own comfort and healing were to be found. Despite that one desperate kiss with Ron, she knew at that moment she had no-one to call her own but Severus Snape her ex-teacher, confidant, and friend.

"It's over then?" a gravelly voice asked as she entered the upstairs bedroom.

"It is. How did you know?" Hermione sat on the bed beside Snape and automatically checked his temperature.

He pulled up the sleeve of the loose, purple nightshirt Motty had provided and displayed the unmarked skin of his left forearm. "It suddenly burned, then slowly faded some hours ago. What happened?"

Her flat monotone belied the emotions roiling in her mind. "Harry died, had a bit of a chat with Dumbledore in some weird in-between place, then used the three Hallows and came back to life. Neville killed Nagini..."

"Longbottom?"

"Yes, *Neville*. Harry and Voldemort faced off. By the way, Harry got in a few jibes about how you were loyal to Dumbledore."

"Bet that went down well," he murmured.

"It had the desired effect. He also advised him that *you* had not been the master of the Elder Wand."

"Oh, great. You mean I went through all *this* for no reason!" Snape snarled.

"Draco had already disarmed Dumbledore when you killed him," she explained patiently. "He was the master of the Elder Wand, at least until Harry took it off him at Malfoy Manor."

"You mean, *Potter* was the master of the wand. I would have loved to have seen the look on the bastard's face when he found *that* out."

"It was somewhat gratifying, especially when Harry defeated him with a simple *Expelliarmus*." She allowed herself a little smirk at that.

"Have I taught that *boynothing*? He faces the most powerful wizard in the British Isles and resorts to *Expelliarmus*?" He shook his head in disbelief. "He is lucky you are not all tiny pieces of ash now."

"Don't be such a grouch. The destruction of the Horcruxes had already weakened Voldemort, and his wand was not under his control. Harry knew what he was doing."

"A grouch? I thought it was... now let me think... that's it, 'a cantankerous old bastard'?" Snape chuckled at the mortified expression on the young witch's face.

"That, too. Now, it's time you rested." She studied him closely. "You look a better colour now, and the wound is healing well. But what on earth are you wearing?"

Snape sneered at the delightful, purple nightshirt, complete with twinkling, silver stars around the collar. "Motty found it. I presume it was Albus's. That man torments me even after his death!"

Taking her wand, Hermione transformed the nightshirt to a simple, black garment with a casual flick. "Not that I don't think you looked stunning in purple, but you do have an image to maintain." She grinned at the scowl she received in thanks, then yawned widely. "I'm knackered, and I'm sure they will be sending out search parties if I don't return this evening. I'll just go downstairs and have a quick nap..."

Snape chuckled as her eyes closed and she slumped back on the pillows, sound asleep. Stealing her wand, he charmed the blankets over her and summoned Motty to wake them at seven. Lying back himself, he sighed and settled into a blissful, snake-free sleep.

Hermione drifted awake, feeling cosy and comfortable for the first time in months. And safe. Snuggling into the warm, lean body beside her, she slowly became aware of just whose body she was attached to. Sitting up with a start, she blushed.

"And good evening to you, miss," drawled the man beside her.

"I'm sorry. I must have dropped off. I'll just..." She reached for the blankets to push them aside, but a firm hand restrained hers.

"Hush, Hermione. Don't worry about it. We were both exhausted, and this bed is plenty big enough for two."

"But... but... I was..."

"Clinging to me like a climbing vine?" he finished for her.

"Um... Yes. Sorry about that."

"Do you know how many people have willingly been that close to me... ever?" he asked, smile fading a little.

She shook her head.

"None." His response was etched with bitterness.

"Oh, Severus." With that, she laid down again and wrapped her arms around his narrow waist, resting her head on his chest. "Do you know just how comforting it was to wake in your care?"

He slowly allowed himself to relax into her embrace. Playing with a soft curl, he chuckled. "Probably as comforting as it was for me. At least I am good as a teddy bear, but that is *not* something you should share!"

She smacked his chest. "I don't know anyone less like a teddy bear than you, Severus Snape, so don't kid yourself. A prickly hedgehog maybe. Or a porcupine. Or a..."

"All right, all right, I get the message. I'm not about to get re-Sorted into Hufflepuff House, thank Merlin. I think I would rather have that damned snake as a pet than that!"

Awkwardness averted, they held each other for long moments as they each contemplated the events of the previous twenty-four hours. After some prevarication, Hermione finally asked the question lying heavily on her mind.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me about Lily."

He tensed slightly, but relaxed again as she gently stroked his back.

"As you no doubt know by now, I grew up in the same neighbourhood as Lily Evans. We were best friends for years before we started at Hogwarts, spending all our time playing and making plans for our future the brilliant magic we would perform, and how we would outshine all our peers. Then the Sorting Hat destroyed all my dreams.

"Did you hate Gryffindors even back then?"

"It started on the train. For boys like Black and Potter, a skinny, poorly dressed boy was an easy mark. When I was Sorted into Slytherin and those two into Gryffindor with my Lily, I thought my world had ended. She was the only light in my otherwise dismal life, my only hope, and I could see it fading before my eyes.

"It wasn't long before the bullying began the sneaky hexes, the name-calling, and the nasty pranks. Oh, I rapidly learned a few hexes myself and even started a few fights over the years, for which I am not proud, but gradually the fighting caused a rift between Lily and me. She did not approve of my friends, and I hated hers. It was inevitable. I'm sure Potter told you of the incident that occurred just after we sat our O.W.L.s..."

"No. He mentioned something from the memories you gave him, but he wouldn't go into details."

Snape looked startled. "Perhaps the boy has some scruples, after all."

He went on to describe how Sirius Black and James Potter had used his own spell against him, displaying his disreputable underwear and more to the critical gaze of his peers.

"She only tried to help, but I was so mortified, I snapped. I called her a... Mudblood." A tear crept from his eye and splashed on the pillow.

"I'm sure she forgave you, considering the circumstances," Hermione soothed.

"That's the problem. Lily refused to forgive me. I apologised time after time. I even camped outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, but she would not bend. I had blown it and in the process driven her straight into James bloody Potter's arms."

"But you still loved her?"

"Desperately. Bitterly. Eventually, I turned to the only people who had ever shown an interest in me. And you know how badly *that* turned out." Her gentle caress demonstrated her ability to forgive.

"You were lonely, tormented, and had no self-esteem. It's no wonder the thought of all that power and prestige turned your head. You were what, seventeen? Just a child," she admonished.

He shook his head, denying her excuses for him. "How old were you, Hermione, when you decided I was worth saving? When you made a life changing decision? Life changing for me, that is."

"Seventeen."

"Exactly. Are you saying I was foolish because I was only seventeen? Were you foolish?" he asked.

She lifted her head and studied his face. "No. I suppose not. But I still understand why you made the decisions you did at the time."

"I wish I did. I wish *you* were around back then. I could have done with someone like you in my corner." He smiled ruefully. "But here you are, my student and a mere girl."

"Ex-student, thank you, Professor. So, what happened after you left school?"

"I made the most stupid decision of my life and took the Dark Mark. I trained under Voldemort's pet Potions Master and eventually became his primary brewer. Tales of glory and riches inspired me. It was only when he revealed his plans to kill the Potters that I finally realised how far down the slippery slope I had fallen. It was not my most auspicious moment." He sighed, the memories still as sharp and unforgiving as they had ever been.

"So, you went to Dumbledore?"

"And begged forgiveness. It was not given lightly. I had to promise complete obedience..."

Hermione had a flash of comprehension. "You took an Unbreakable Vow, didn't you?"

"To do anything he ordered. Even killing the manipulative old sod."

Tears trickled down both faces as Snape bared his soul to the young witch who had become his saviour.

"I tried to save Lily. He had promised to spare her, but she stepped in front of her son at the last moment. I didn't even care what happened to James or the baby, that's how selfish I was," he muttered bitterly.

Hermione held him tightly as he sobbed out the painful guilt and grief he had kept locked away for years.

"Do you still love her, Severus?"

"Part of me will always love Lily. For years I held her close in my heart as my anchor my reason to defeat Tom Riddle. Eventually, I accepted her death, although it took a long time. I even accepted she had not loved me as anything other than a friend. But she will always be a part of my past, and I am not ashamed to have her there," he said fiercely.

"And so she should be. She was important to you, part of what makes you who you are today. We can't deny our pasts, Severus, but we can welcome the future with open arms. Thank you for sharing her with me. You don't know how much that means to me."

Snape stared at the young girl beside him. Every time he believed he had said or done something to lose her faith she proved him wrong. "Thank you for listening and understanding. You are a very special person, Hermione. One day, some lucky wizard is going to sweep you up and carry you off. I just hope you and I will remain friends."

"Of course, you daft man!" With that, Hermione brushed her lips over his damp cheek and sat up. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Do you think Motty could rustle up some food before I have to return to Hogwarts? I can't stay much longer, or they will be sending out search parties. And I have a certain wizard's name to clear."

"Always a witch with a cause, aren't you?" Snape stood up and automatically stripped off his nightshirt. It was testament to how comfortable he felt in her company that he didn't realise what he had done until he heard a soft gasp from behind him. Turning around, he immediately realised his faux pas as he stood naked before a furiously blushing witch. "Oh, Merlin, sorry!" He snatched up a pillow to cover his exposed genitals. Cheeks as red as hers, he met her eyes to find them sparkling with mischief.

"What?"

Hermione collapsed in a fit of giggles at his affronted expression. "It was the look on your face when you realised you had stripped in front of me. Honestly. Everything else was fine. More than fine, actually. Any witch would be pleased to see it." She raised an eyebrow lasciviously and grinned. "Okay, I'll just leave and let you get dressed then. That is, unless you want a more detailed opinion?" Ducking the pillow, she skipped to the door. "I guess not. Pity."

"That's what I get for allowing impertinent teenage witches into my bed. Go on. Organise us some food, woman, while I have a shower. Make yourself useful!"

"You need your back scrubbed?" she called as she left the room.

He groaned. "Don't tempt me," he growled under his breath.

The pair shared the delicious meal provided by Motty, who was overjoyed to have someone to serve once again. However, the wafer-thin façade of normality was unsustainable for long in the face of all that had happened.

"Goodness, I had no idea I was so hungry!" Hermione leaned back in her chair and patted her full stomach. Her face fell as the reason why escaped the temporary shield her battered mind had erected. "I just couldn't eat anything earlier today. It was all too much..." Tears started falling anew as she remembered all who had perished. "Remus... Tonks... Fred... Colin..." she whispered.

Snape's head shot up. "Lupin? And Nymphadora?" Something akin to regret passed over his face. "Dead... both of them?"

She nodded, mute with grief.

"Why? Why am I alive when good people..." His despair threaded between them, a plea for forgiveness for the sin of surviving.

"Hush. You deserved to live as much as anyone, Severus. You have a fresh start now; don't spoil it by second-guessing your existence. Now, I have to return to Hogwarts, much as I would rather stay here with you. Promise me you will be here when I return," she pleaded, suddenly terrified he would leave her. Meeting his eyes, she added, "I need my friend."

"You have Potter and Weasley, my dear. I'm sure they will require your presence far more than I do." He sighed and turned to stare out of the window, watching the sun drop behind the hills across the water.

"Harry has Ginny, and Ron's family needs him right now. Here, I feel warm and protected. You make me feel safe, Severus. I haven't felt this way for so long." She walked over to the window and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Promise me, please?"

Snape turned in the circle of her affection and embraced her in return. Dropping a light kiss on the top of her head, he acquiesced. "I'll be here, waiting for you. Take as long as you need."

"Thank you."

"No. Thank you. For believing in me when all others would have had me thrown in Azkaban or worse. For caring. For saving my life. For seeing the man behind the mask. Thank you, Hermione, for being my friend."

Neither mentioned love.

A/N: Asterisks indicate words borrowed from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. This story was written for the Hermione Big Bang on Live Journal to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. Many thanks to ladyinthecloak, my beta. Thanks also to quaffswinegaily, who gave this a preliminary reading, and Michelle, my cheerleader.

Chapter Eleven: A Letter From the Grave

Chapter 11 of 13

Hermione persuades Harry to try to clear Severus's name. Unexpected help arrives.

Chapter Eleven: A Letter from the Grave

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

"Did they really not know, Mother?"

"Oh, I think deep down they both knew but were afraid to admit it, even to themselves." She smiles as she looks out of the window to see her beloved husband walking up the garden path. The dark hair tied back in an elegant queue and the deep green, silk dress robes do not detract from the raw power her wizard always exudes, as if a wellspring of magic flows from his very core.

The Great Hall was somewhat quieter when Hermione returned. Those who had been seriously injured had been shipped off to St Mungo's when the Healers had finally arrived. Some were under Poppy Pomfrey's care in the hospital wing, and some had been sent home to recover with their loved ones. The bodies of the slain had been laid reverently on a platform created at the far end of the hall. Red-eyed and serious, the Weasleys were barely recognisable as the jolly family they had been, the loss of one of their number a cruel reminder of their collective mortality.

Harry remained curiously detached, his interactions with Ginny bringing the only semblance of humanity to his bearing. Hermione wondered whether her friend had lost more than the fragment of Tom Riddle's soul during his brief dalliance on the other side. Ron was barely communicating, a single word here and there the sum of his conversation.

After answering innumerable questions from Ministry officials regarding her participation in the Gringotts Incident, the final battle, and just where she had disappeared to that afternoon, she was finally left to her own devices. They had accepted her vague description of a family holiday home to which she had retreated to sleep in peace.

"Harry, what are you going to do about Professor Snape?" she asked when she finally had a chance to speak to him alone in a quiet corner of the Great Hall.

"What? What about Snape?" he asked, confusion creasing his newly smooth forehead.

"About clearing his name, Harry. You *have* to clear his name. It's all very well everyone here hearing what you said to Riddle, but you must make the Wizengamot see he was on our side," she insisted.

"What's the rush? He's dead. They can't even find his damned body, you know. The Aurors think the Death Eaters took it before the end." His bald statement cut her to the quick. She could not afford to reveal Severus had lived until his name was cleared, and Harry's cold assessment appalled her sense of justice.

"That's not the point, Harry. His memories proved he was working for the Order all along. He was doing it for the love of your mother, for Merlin's sake. Do you think *she* would have wanted him to have died branded as a traitor and a killer? Is that all his life was worth?"

Harry watched her passionate plea with a curious frown. "Why are you so concerned, Hermione? What was he to you, apart from a rotten teacher and a spy?"

"If you must know, he is, I mean was, a friend."

"A *friend*? Since when did Snape have friends? And just how long was this going on?" he spluttered.

"Since sixth year. I discovered something about him, which led me to believe he was more than he seemed, and gradually I managed to gain his trust. Do you realise how difficult that year was for him, knowing what he had been ordered to do? Knowing he could only avoid that task by *dying*, only to have Dumbledore die anyway from the curse? Has it occurred to you how lonely the man was, playing the role of the hated professor, the Death Eater spy, knowing no-one trusted or even liked him?" The ever-present tears were falling yet again, this time from frustration.

"Whoa, Hermione. You knew? And you never said anything? All that time in the blasted tent, and you never told us?"

"What, you would have calmly placed aside your intense desire for revenge and welcomed him with open arms? I don't think so, Harry. You were so blindsided by hatred, you would never have believed me. No-one would have believed me." She looked down, reluctant to meet his gaze.

Harry awkwardly placed a hand on his friend's arm. "How were you so sure? He could have been feeding you false information all along to get you to confide in him."

"You didn't see him, Harry. You didn't see him breaking down in front of you, crying out for help, sobbing as if his heart was breaking. He didn't know I was there at first, but I saw him. I spent the night sitting there on the floor, holding him like I would a child. I never knew what Dumbledore's orders had been, but I knew it was something he desperately did not want to do. Harry, if you had seen him that night, you would have known too. He was a man who had been pushed past breaking point, but he had to carry on as if nothing was changed.

"All I ever did was believe. I spent time with him after rounds, just talking. Oh, it didn't happen overnight, but eventually he allowed me to see the real Severus Snape. We would have tea and talk about all sorts of things, usually avoiding anything to do with the war. I knew he couldn't tell me his task, and likewise he knew there were things I couldn't tell him. I was aware he was hurting inside, and sometimes he could not hold it in. After you hexed Draco Malfoy he was particularly depressed, knowing he could have been dead as well..."

"If he hadn't arrived in time to save him," Harry completed. "Bloody hell, Hermione, I didn't realise. How could you have known all this and kept it quiet?" He suddenly frowned and asked, "You and Snape. You didn't...?"

"No! Nothing like that. We were friends. That's all. I did give him a neck and shoulder massage once or twice when he was very tense, but I was used to doing that for Dad, nothing more than that." Hermione suddenly blushed as she remembered she had spent the night in Severus's bed and had seen him naked only a few hours earlier.

"But?" Harry hadn't missed the blush.

"Nothing." Changing the subject, she continued, "Now you see why it is important to me his name is cleared. Please, can you speak to Kingsley? With yours and Dumbledore's portrait's statements on his behalf and his memories, surely he will be exonerated?"

Harry gave Hermione an unfamiliar, knowing look. "I'll do my best, 'Mione. And you were right Mum would have wanted it that way too."

A tearful hug nearly swept him off his feet.

"Thank you, Harry. One day you'll realise how important this is," she said cryptically, then left him to his reflections on life, death, and faith.

Late the following afternoon, Hermione paced the small anteroom, trying to not think about what was going on within Kingsley Shacklebolt's office. Could Harry persuade him of Severus's innocence? Would he care, now they assumed the spy was dead? Or would it be politically expedient to sweep the matter under the carpet? She hadn't gone in with Harry for fear she would somehow give away the fact that the man in question was still alive.

Kicking the edges of a frayed spot on the dingy carpet, her mind circled and fruitlessly tried to avoid the obvious. Her feelings for Severus Snape. Waking beside him the previous evening had felt so right, as if they belonged together. Despite her flippant comments, seeing him naked had woken parts of her body that had previously ignored the call of her hormones and leaving him again that morning had been like leaving part of herself behind. There was no escaping it. She loved him. She was *in love* with him. And he saw her as a friend, a confidante, but still a girl half his age.

"One day, some lucky wizard is going to sweep you up and carry you off. I just hope you and I will remain friends."

"I don't want some other wizard, Severus. I want *you*," she whispered to herself, finally acknowledging it out loud as the weight of denial lifted from her shoulders.

Jolted from her ruminations by the sound of the door opening, Hermione looked up, hope soaring at the huge grin on her friend's face.

"You did it?"

"No. Dumbledore did."

"What? I don't understand."

"Kingsley had an emergency meeting with the Wizengamot last night. Dumbledore had personally handed him a time-spelled letter the night before he died, enchanted to reveal the contents only after Voldemort was defeated. He had tried all he knew after Dumbledore's death to break the charm, but it remained a mystery."

"What did it say?" Hermione asked, eager to hear the details.

"He basically took responsibility for all of Snape's actions, including his own death, by way of an Unbreakable Vow he had insisted Snape agree to when he first turned from Voldemort. He described how he was dying from the curse on the ring Horcrux and was planning to drink the poison protecting the locket. He knew he would not survive the night, and yet he made me promise to force him to drink it. If anything, /killed him, Hermione!" Harry's voice trembled with the memory as he paused to collect his thoughts. "He wrote of his hope that Snape would fulfil his Vow to Narcissa Malfoy and kill him before the likes of Greyback arrived on the scene and in the process avoid Draco Malfoy's soul being tainted. He had even planned on Snape gaining mastery of the Elder wand, just as Voldemort had suspected, but Malfoy disarming him ruined that."

"He thought of everything, except how it would affect Severus to kill his only protector," Hermione muttered, bitterness etching her words.

Harry continued. "Dumbledore also admitted he had not informed Snape about all of this. With the letter and Snape's own memories, the Wizengamot not only dropped all charges against Snape, but awarded him a posthumous Order of Merlin, First Class. He's officially a hero!"

Hermione sank back onto a chair. "Oh, Harry! That's wonderful. He will be so relieved..." Flushing, she looked up to find Harry's eyes narrowed as his mind processed what he had heard.

"He *will* be relieved, Hermione?"

She glanced around the room, wary of uninvited ears. "Not *here*, Harry!" she hissed.

"Grimmauld Place, then? No-one will be there."

"Now, you were saying?" Harry demanded as soon as they had dealt with the traps still lingering in the hall.

Hermione closed her eyes in relief at finally losing the burden of the secret she had been concealing over the last twenty-four hours. "You remember when I went back to the Shrieking Shack to find my purse?"

Harry nodded.

"I had to go back to say goodbye. I couldn't just leave him lying there alone. But when I got there, he was still alive. Barely. I used the dittany and Blood Replenisher from my bag to treat the wound and hoped he had been taking anti-venin. He stopped bleeding but was still unconscious, so I basically... well... er... naggged him back to life." She blushed.

"*Naggged* him back to life? Oh, never mind, I'm not sure I want to know. Then, where is he?"

"I took him to Dumbledore's cottage on the Isle of Skye. It's a Secret-Kept location."

"You had been there before." Harry's suspicions were confirmed when she gave a slight nod.

"He first told me the Secret after he had helped me modify my parents' memories and get them out of the house before a squad of Death Eaters came to kill them," she admitted.

"Hermione! You were with him over last summer, weren't you?"

"Most of it. We spent weeks at the cottage, some of it while he was recovering from nearly being beaten to death, and worse, due to the failure of the raid on my parents' house."

"And worse?"

"He wouldn't talk about it, but I think he was sexually assaulted as well. Oh, Harry! It was awful. The dead look in his eyes, as if he had nothing left to live for. I think it nearly destroyed him. And it was all my fault. If I hadn't been his friend, he would have never..." She broke down as the horror of those few days returned.

"Shh. From what I have learned in the last day or so, he would have done something to save them anyway. Don't blame yourself; just be thankful you were there when he needed you. But how did you communicate all this time?"

Hermione went on to explain the chocolate wrapper and how she had obtained extra food from time to time without identifying the source. His shock at discovering Snape had actually been in the tent while he and Ron had been recovering the Sword of Gryffindor was almost comical.

"Wow, Hermione. You really know how to keep a secret." To his credit, Harry never once berated her for trusting Snape. He knew she had had good reasons, and the subsequent revelations had more than convinced him she was justified in her belief in the man.

"So, what exactly is your relationship with him?" Harry had to ask.

"Just friends. Very close friends. He still sees me as a schoolgirl, someone who listens and cares for him, but only as a friend," she replied, resignation clouding her features.

"But you want more?" For once, Harry was tuned in to his friend's emotional state.

"I love him, Harry. Really, really love him. He says he loves me, but it's not in the way I want."

"How do you know? Have you asked him? It sounds like he has shared more with you than he has with anyone else. Ever. Don't you think that means something?"

"Maybe." She pondered his words.

"Go. Go to him and talk. You need to go and see your parents anyway, and you will need his help to undo the memory modification. Use that as an opportunity to find out how he really feels. I'll tell the others you have gone to fetch your parents."

"Oh, Harry. What would I do without you? I love you."

"I love you too... as a friend, let's be quite clear about that," he joked.

"Prat!"

A/N: This story was written for the Hermione Big Bang on Live Journal to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. Many thanks to ladyinthecloak, my beta. Thanks also to quaffswinegaily, who gave this a preliminary reading, and Michelle, my cheerleader.

Chapter Twelve: The Spy Comes in From the Cold

Chapter 12 of 13

Hermione announces the truth about Severus to the Order.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings within belong to J.K.Rowling. I am just giving them a little outing.

Chapter 12: The Spy Comes in From the Cold

A soft knock on the door interrupts the story.

"Father!" the girl cries delightedly. "Look at me!"

"I see, sweetheart. My baby is all grown up and ready to leave the nest." He gathers her into his arms and hugs her tight. "You look so pretty; I wish I could lock you up and keep you."

"Oh, Daddy! You're crazy!" Father and daughter have always been close, teasing each other incessantly.

"Crazy about you, sweetie, and your gorgeous mother," he replies, reaching out to enfold his wife in their embrace. "Are you ready to let our little one go, my love?"

"As ready as I will ever be," she responds, "but we have a story to finish."

He rolls his eyes. "She knows that story so well now, she will be telling it to our grandchildren!"

But he settles down to listen anyway.

"I'm *what*?" Snape stood dumbfounded at her words.

"You're a hero. Cleared of all charges, Order of Merlin, and all. Posthumous, of course, unless you want to step forward and announce yourself. That's up to you, but personally I'd prefer to have a friend who is alive rather than technically dead." She laughed at his still bemused expression.

Suddenly, she found herself picked up and whirled around in a circle by an exuberant wizard.

"I'm cleared! I'm free! You perfect, adorable, magnificent girl!"

"Enough with the compliments and the spinning. I'm getting dizzy," she complained, grinning despite herself. "So, I take it you will come out of hiding?"

"Not just yet. First, I need a wand. Then we go to Australia to find your parents. *Then* I will reveal I am still alive."

Hermione sobered instantly. "Oh, Severus. Do you think they will forgive me? I'm so worried they will hate me for doing it."

"I cannot say, but you have to give them the opportunity to return to their old life," he replied.

A fortnight later, the Grangers had had their memories restored and were none the worse for it. After the initial shock at re-discovering their daughter, and that she was a witch, they had sat down for a long conversation and agreed she'd had no choice. They had been enjoying the more relaxed lifestyle in Australia so much they had decided to stay, even keeping their new identities, so as not to disrupt their life there. With many tearful hugs and kisses, even for a slightly overwhelmed Severus, they'd said their goodbyes and promised to visit regularly.

Despite Harry's suggestion, Hermione had been too stressed to talk to Severus about their relationship. The funerals of the fallen followed by the trip to Australia had left her clinging to him as her source of strength. Fearful of scaring him away and losing him completely kept her quiet on the topic of her feelings. She had simply enjoyed his company while they were in Australia, a brief holiday of sorts far from the fear and anxiety of war. They had walked on the beach, read books, and spent hours talking with her parents on every topic imaginable, except magic. Muscles that had been tense for months had relaxed, frown lines had diminished, and unhealthy pallor had fled to make way for a light golden glow from the Southern hemisphere sunshine.

But now they were back, and she and Harry had to find a way to reveal Severus's survival.

"He won't want a big public announcement. You do that, and he will hide away in that cottage forever!" Hermione was adamant.

"But he can't just appear out of the blue; it would cause far more publicity." Harry thought a moment, then suggested, "How about we call an Order meeting to announce he is still alive and has been exonerated. Then, the Order members can gradually disseminate the information amongst their friends and colleagues. Soon enough, it will get to the *Daily Prophet*, but by then it will be old news."

The idea was sound. Severus would not even need to be present initially, but perhaps waiting upstairs until the initial reaction was over. "Okay. I'll see what he thinks. Thanks, Harry, you're the best!"

Harry followed her out to the hall and caught her arm as she was about to leave. "What about... you know... you and him? Have you talked?" Genuine concern radiated from his green eyes and worried frown.

"No. Not yet." She shrugged.

"Don't leave it too long," he advised.

"I won't. I promise."

After sharing a hug, Hermione turned to leave.

"Hang on there, Hermione." A quiet voice issued from the shadows. Ron stepped forward, a frown darkening his features. "Who is it, Hermione?"

"Who is what?" She prevaricated.

"Who was Harry referring to? I know it wasn't me. You've been different lately. Your mind is elsewhere. I know I was a prat leaving you and Harry alone out there, but after I returned things had changed. You used to look at me as if..." He sighed at lost opportunities. "But not now, even after that kiss back at Hogwarts. There's someone else, isn't there?" His blue eyes were moist as he soundlessly pleaded with her not to confirm his fears.

"I'm sorry, Ron. You and I it wasn't meant to be. Yes, there is someone else, but at the moment he just seems to see me as a friend." Her sigh was as heartfelt as his had been.

"Know the feeling," he replied, a rueful quirk to his lips. "I don't know about you, but I need a hug." He held out his arms.

Hugging him back ferociously, Hermione kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for understanding, Ron. I just hope you feel as generous when you find out who it is."

"Who?" he frowned. "Not... Malfoy?"

She laughed. "No. Not Malfoy. I can't tell you yet. But soon," she promised.

"It can't be that bad, then," he replied.

As she opened the front door, she turned with a wistful smile. "I hope not."

Harry stood and cleared his throat. The hum of voices in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place gradually settled as curious faces turned to the young man standing before them. A month had passed since the final battle, and although those left behind were still at times tearful, they had begun the long, slow healing process. Relationships had returned to near normal, and plans had begun for the future.

"I have asked you all here tonight to announce some very important news," he started.

"About time," jeered Ron.

George joined in. "Time he stopped her moping around the place..."

"... looking like her favourite toy was missing," finished Fred's portrait, which had been brought into the kitchen for the occasion.

"Now, now, boys. Ginny is far too young to be considering..."

Harry's upraised hands interrupted Molly as she was about to get into full mother hen mode. "Did I say it was about me? Or Ginny?" He looked around the room, meeting each person's eyes briefly. Molly Weasley, feathers still a little ruffled. George, sitting alone beside his brother's portrait, both sets of eyes still sparkling with mischief. Ron, who had so much to lose. Ginny, his dear, sweet Ginny, waiting patiently to hear what he had to say.

"Firstly, Kingsley has something to say. Kingsley?" He stepped aside as the tall, dark Minister of Magic stood.

"Good evening, everyone. I would like to start by thanking you all personally for your valiant efforts during the war. We lost many good witches and wizards," he nodded his acknowledgement to Arthur and Molly, "but their sacrifice was not in vain. The wizarding world is once again safe. And it is no small thanks to one man, whose courage and determination under extreme duress over many years set an example to us all. He suffered social isolation, physical torture, and severe emotional distress to bring us to where we are today. The burden of his solitude was born without complaint, right to the bitter end. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like you to stand and offer a moment's silence for Severus Snape, one of the unsung heroes of the war."

After a little confused murmuring, those in the room shuffled to their feet, casting curious glances at the Minister, who then went on to explain the contents of the letter from Albus Dumbledore.

"Dammit, Fred, you owe me ten Galleons! I knew he was on our side!" George shouted across the room.

"Come and get it, then!" his late twin replied with a grin. After the initial shock of his death, Fred had returned as cheeky as ever in his portrait form, much to his twin's

delight.

A loud cough interrupted their hijinks.

"There's more," Harry said quietly. "Hermione?"

She stood and swallowed her apprehension. Fixing her gaze on the rear wall of the room, she started speaking.

"I have known Severus Snape as a teacher since I was eleven and as an Order member for the last few years, but today I stand here as his friend."

"Friend. I didn't think the old git had any friends," George joked. Hermione's glare silenced his laughter.

"Through circumstances I don't need to go into here, he and I became friends when I was a sixth year. *Friends*, George! By necessity, we did not broadcast the fact; his position as spy for the Order was too precarious to allow any hint of an alliance with a Muggle-born Gryffindor to become commonly known. I had good reason to believe in his loyalty then, and even after Albus Dumbledore's death I did not doubt him. As Kingsley has explained, my faith was justified. I have remained in contact with him since. Yes, Ronald, even while we were hunting for Horcruxes."

"But..." The redhead's expression was mutinous.

"We were not foolish enough to discuss our missions with each other, Ron. Too much was at stake. He berated me often enough after he had found out we had put ourselves in danger. It was Severus who helped me get my parents to safety and who suffered the consequences. The damned madman almost killed him when they could not find my parents. It was he who provided provisions on those few occasions I managed to sneak away. Did you really think local farmers had just given me their food? It was Severus who brought the Sword of Gryffindor, or don't you remember Harry telling you that?"

"Severus? You called him Severus, and he didn't hex you?" Arthur chuckled at the thought.

"Don't be daft. I said we were friends. But I never called him that while I was still at school. He was my professor, for goodness sake!" Hermione scowled at Harry's amused snort.

"You must have had some way of communicating, then." Bill Weasley was thinking aloud.

"Yes. We used a charmed chocolate wrapper," Hermione replied.

"Merde! Zat was the one I burned?" Fleur paled as she realised what she had done.

"Yes, Fleur, you weren't to know. Severus had heard we had been captured and held at Malfoy Manor. He was worried sick without means to contact me," she explained.

"Hang on. How did you know he was worried? You can't have seen him after that; I know you never left Shell Cottage until we went to Gringotts, and we were together until the time he..." Ron's voice faded to silence as he started putting two and two together. "You've talked to him since. *That's* why you went back to the Shack. Snape's alive, isn't he? And that's where you keep disappearing to." Four finally reached Ron's calculation. "It's *him! He's...*"

"Not now, Ron," Harry hissed, elbowing the irate Weasley in the ribs.

Hermione continued. "Yes. Severus is alive. I treated him in the Shrieking Shack and took him to a Secret-Kept location. I have been staying there since we returned from Australia where we restored my parents' memories."

"Two weeks, Harry. It took *two weeks*," Ron whispered, five having reared its unwelcome head.

"And she has been staying with him for a month," Harry murmured in reply. "Nothing has happened... yet." He couldn't resist smirking at his friend's discomfort.

"She *wants* something to happen?"

"I strongly suspect so. So far, he has only treated her as a cherished friend, but..."

"She loves him?" Ron stated, hope finally having expired as five was discarded and cruel, hard four returned.

"She does, mate. She does."

While the two young men were quietly conversing in the corner, Hermione had slipped out of the room. Order members were congregating in small clusters, discussing the astounding news they had been given. Kingsley was circulating the room, his calm presence allaying any residual disbelief regarding Snape's motives.

Suddenly, voices stilled across the room as all eyes turned to the door. There stood Severus Snape, looking healthier than he had for years hair tied back off his previously gaunt face, skin no longer dungeon pale, expression curiously diffident. At his side stood a fierce young witch, clasping his hand and daring anyone to comment.

"Severus, good to see you looking so well," boomed the Minister of Magic from across the room, breaking the awkward silence. The room burst into life as those present sought to greet the returning hero.

"Oh, dear, come in and have something to eat," fussed Molly Weasley, ever the mother figure.

"Hey, look, George, perhaps he has your ear in his pocket," quipped Fred from his frame.

Ron stared sullenly at his shoes as Harry moved to shake hands with the bemused ex-spy.

"Congratulations on your Order of Merlin, sir." Harry's respectful tone rendered Snape speechless for a moment.

"Er... Thank you, Potter." He clasped the younger wizard's hand and discovered a pleasantly firm grip. Hermione's glow of pleasure inspired him to add, "And I believe thanks are in order for your support."

"Oh, I didn't really do anything, Professor. The letter from Dumbledore and your own memories convinced the Wizengamot of your real role in the war." He paused briefly, then went on. "I'm sorry I was such a prat all those years when you were only trying to protect us. I guess we all owe you a huge apology."

"You discharged any debt when you killed that madman who ruled my life," Snape replied, gratitude softening his expression into something almost pleasant.

"Well, perhaps we're even then." Harry noticed Ron leaving the room, carrying a shroud of dejection heavily upon his shoulders. "Excuse me; there is something I need to attend to."

With Harry's departure, Snape was surrounded by enthusiastic well-wishers for the rest of the evening. Noticing his strained features, Hermione took his hand and gradually eased him towards the door.

"Come on. Let's get you back to the cottage. All that friendliness and goodwill must be very wearying." She chuckled at his patented professorial glare. "You know that hasn't worked on me for over a year, Sev, so save it for those for whom it does." With a quick twist, she Disapparated.

"You're no fun anymore, girl," he growled as he followed. "And don't call me Sev!"

A/N: This story was written for the Hermione Big Bang on Live Journal to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. Many thanks to ladyinthecloak, my beta. Thanks also to quaffswinegaily, who gave this a preliminary reading, and Michelle, my cheerleader.

Chapter Thirteen: At Last

Chapter 13 of 13

Hermione finally gets up enough courage to talk to Severus.

Disclaimer: They all belong to JKR. I'm just playing with them for a while.

Chapter Thirteen: At Last

The dark wizard smirks as his wife continues the tale. This was always his favourite part of the story.

The next morning, Hermione arrived on the doorstep of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, braced for the upcoming confrontation. Harry had disappeared after Ron last night, and neither had been seen since.

"Harry? Ron?" The house was quiet, even the dreadful portrait of Mrs Black had been silenced. "Where is everyone?" she called.

A rattle of a door handle and a shuffle of footsteps announced the presence of someone. A half dressed, dishevelled young wizard ran his hands through unruly, black hair and peered at her with bloodshot eyes.

"Shhhh! Shtop shouting, Hermi... Hermy... Herm... you," he managed to croak as he held his head.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione stalked into the kitchen and retrieved the hangover potion kept in the cupboard. Regular bouts of drinking larger quantities of alcohol than they were used to, either in celebration or commiseration, had rendered a supply of the potion essential for the two inhabitants of the house.

"Here, drink this," she ordered.

"Oh, yeah. Good thinking." Harry obediently complied, wincing as the effects of the previous night's overindulgence suddenly left his system. "Ahh. That's better," he sighed.

"Yes, well, I should think so." Hermione eyed the bare chest of her best friend. As well put together as he was, he just didn't compare to a certain pale, lean, older wizard. "So, what happened?"

"Last night?"

"No, last week. Honestly, Harry, did you leave your brain somewhere with your shirt?"

"Okay, okay. No need to get touchy." He pulled out a chair for her at the kitchen table and seated himself opposite. "Ron ran off. I followed him. He was pretty upset, but by the time we'd had a few Firewhiskys and talked I think he came around. Not that I remember everything. After that, he decided I needed to join him in drowning his sorrows." His crooked grin would have been endearing if it weren't accompanied by a less than savoury aroma.

"At least he knows now. Whew." She wrinkled her nose. "How about you go and have a shower while I cook some breakfast. I'm sure even if Ronald is no longer speaking to me, he will want food once he has had some of the potion."

"Why would Ronald not be speaking to you?" asked the young man himself as he entered the room, looking considerably less worse for wear than his drinking companion.

"You tell me, Ron," she replied, meeting his eyes for the first time since she had announced Snape's survival.

"I won't lie and tell you I am happy about it, but you did give me fair warning. I suppose Snape deserves to be happy as much as anyone else," he reluctantly admitted.

"I wish he would realise that," she muttered.

"Have you *still* not talked to him?" Harry shook his head in disbelief.

"No. I am planning to tonight. Now go. Shower!"

"Talked to him about what?" Ron asked, feeling left out of the conversation.

"About our relationship. What it is. What he wants."

"Oh. *The* talk." Ron grinned, suddenly sympathetic towards the older wizard. "So, what's for breakfast?"

"Severus?" Hermione asked as they were reading companionably on the sofa later that evening. "Do you think you will look for a woman you would like to spend your life with, now you are free to do as you choose? Or a man, if that is your preference," she added, grinning at his scowl.

He considered her question carefully for several long moments, then replied with a satisfied smile, "You know, I rather suspect I have already found her."

"You... you have?" Eyes wide, confidence shaken, Hermione stared at the man beside her. She couldn't remember seeing him with any women recently. As far as she knew, he had not left the cottage except for their trip to Australia and the meeting the previous night.

"What is she like?" she asked, turning the knife in her own, self-induced wound.

"You would like her," he replied. "She's intelligent, attractive, witty, and sexy. She's inquisitive and bossy and drives me to distraction at times. But I love her with all my heart and hope she will one day see me as worthy of hers." He watched as she took a deep breath and slumped a little.

"Oh. That's lovely. Well, I must go; I have some things to do."

Hermione leapt off the couch and rushed out of the door before tears could betray her, not seeing the smirk on Snape's face as she left.

"How could he? Right under my nose! *She is intelligent, attractive, witty, and sexy. She is inquisitive and bossy and drives me to distraction at times,*" she muttered to herself as she fumed on the doorstep. The realisation that she was about to step aside and let another witch take her man stopped her short as she was about to Disapparate. *Wait a minute. Am I going to accept that? Am I some pathetic wimp who won't fight for her wizard? Dammit, I want an explanation, and I want it now!*

Turning back to the door, the angry young woman threw it open with all the dramatic force the man himself was known for. She barely had time to notice his grin and the fingers he had held up as if counting before she launched her tirade.

"What am I, Severus Snape, chopped liver? *I'm intelligent. I'm witty. I'm bossy, and I'm sure I drive you to distraction often enough.*" She stood, arms akimbo, glaring at Snape, who was now standing immediately in front of her sporting a curiously tender expression.

"You forgot attractive, inquisitive, and sexy," he added as their eyes met and a startling comprehension dawned.

"Oh."

"Indeed." Drawing her into his arms, Severus Snape did something he had longed to do for months.

He kissed her.

Properly.

With tongue and lips and soft, growling noises.

"Wow! I never knew... All this time hoping and wishing and wondering," Hermione whispered.

"So much time wasted because I was too afraid to risk what we had in my greed for more," he replied.

"I was too, Severus. Our friendship means so much to me; I was terrified you would regret letting me become so close if you knew how I felt."

"How could I regret the best thing that has ever happened to me?" He took her hand in his and placed it over the centre of his chest. "Do you feel it?"

"Feel what?" She wrinkled her forehead in confusion.

"My heart. It belongs to you. Only you." His finger trailed along the back of her hand as he leaned forward to claim another heated kiss. "I'm yours, Hermione. I think I have been since the moment I discovered you still believed in me after..." He sighed. "But I knew you wanted Ronald Weasley. I could not tell you how I felt. It is only recently I have seen something in your eyes reflecting my own feelings and dared to hope."

"Severus, I admit I wanted Ron to notice me. All through sixth year. Heaven knows, you teased me enough about it. But all the time we were in that damned tent I could only ever think of you. I worried so much about what Voldemort would do to you if he ever discovered our friendship. Oh, we had our moments, but I spent more time thinking about you than our own safety."

"If Voldemort had broken me sufficiently to discover our friendship, my dear, he would have already known enough to send me to the darkest pits of hell. You were never a risk for my safety, only my heart." He grinned ruefully.

"Your heart was never at risk, Severus. Mine apparently made its decision long before my mind caught up. You know, Ron and I shared a kiss in the heat of the final battle, and later I could never understand why after all those years mooning around after him I only wanted him as a friend. Now I understand. You were already embedded in my heart, and there was no room for anyone else. I love you, Severus Snape. I love you, and I want you with every fibre of my being." Hands reached up and drew his lips back to hers to pour all her unquenched desire into the kiss.

He groaned, helpless in the face of her need. "Gods, I have waited so long to hear you say that."

Taking her hand, he brushed the palm with his mouth.

"I love you, Hermione Granger."

Winding his arms around her waist, he once again tasted her lips.

"I need you."

Gathering her into his embrace and carrying her upstairs, fierce, black eyes met molten amber.

"I want you."

"Take me then," she replied as he laid her on the soft, inviting bed; a precious gift waiting to be unwrapped.

"I shall."

And he did.

"Oh, Daddy, you were such a romantic under all those sneers and frowns. It's no wonder Mum loves you so much." She snuggles closer to her beloved parents. "But I have one question. Why do you always tell the story as if they were someone else?"

Her mother replies. "It was a different time back then, with the war and all. It's easier to think of it as someone different and pretend all the bad things didn't happen to us. Especially to your father." She looks sadly at him, remembering the hurt and pain he had so often suffered.

The girl watches her father and asks the question she has always wondered about but has been too afraid to hear the answer. "Did they really... you know?"

He closes his eyes and fights back a tear or two, still unable to think of that day without emotion. "Yes, darling, they did. And if I hadn't had your mother to hold me and comfort me in the days after it happened, I don't think I would have survived it. She healed me, body and soul. I still don't think she appreciates the wonder of the gift she bestowed upon me when she told me she loved me."

Hermione Snape kisses her husband's tears away, as she has done for the last twenty-five years whenever he revisits those dreadful few hours. "You know the gift was mutual, my love. I could not imagine having lived without you in my life. Now, enough dwelling on the past. Let's get this girl married. You do realise now she is leaving home we will have the freedom of the cottage to do anything we like, whenever we want?"

Severus's eyes darken as his lips claim his wife's in a kiss full of promise. "Oh, I'm counting on it."

"You two! Cut it out I haven't left yet!" chides the bride, blushing at her parents' behaviour.

Then together, arm in arm, the three leave the cottage to face the future.

The End

A/N: This was written for the Hermione Big Bang, which posted on LiveJournal on September 9th 2009 to celebrate Hermione's 30th birthday.

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