

The Princess of Gryffindor

by Aurette

Hermione has been a prisoner since Voldemort won five years ago. Her bleak existence changes one night when someone from her past arrives unexpectedly.

Princess

Chapter 1 of 40

Hermione has been a prisoner since Voldemort won five years ago. Her bleak existence changes one night when someone from her past arrives unexpectedly.

This story is based on characters that are the sole property of JKR and Warner Brothers. I make no money.

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Once Upon a Time, there were three friends who went off to search for Horcruxes. Under the terrible influence of one of these Horcruxes, the young man named Ron decided to abandon the others. The other young man, Harry, made a rash decision to join him, a decision that was influenced by a Dark connection that he never completely understood. Bringing their third friend, Hermione, with them, they returned to Ron's home for just one night of rest and good food. Unfortunately, the Dark Lord had used his connection to once again influence Harry's thoughts, and what they found at the Burrow that night was a trap. Many, many good people died that night. But one lived... if you could call it living.

1.Princess

"Princess! Wake up, you lazy slag!" The thin, ratty blanket ripped away from my naked body to emphasize the command, and I struggled up from the lumpy mattress. I raised a shaking hand to swipe the matted tangle of my hair out of my face and peered blearily up at Peaches, already in her war paint and wearing my red corset. She was holding out a vial of potion to me.

"Hurry up, Ma is in a snit and already noticed you weren't around. You better not show up hung over again, or she'll have you in the Brown Room for the night." The girl tsked when I didn't respond, tossed the vial into my lap, and spun away, her red curls flying off her shoulders.

"You keep trying to drink yourself to death," she said with disgust, "when you know they won't let you. I don't know why I bother anymore." Peaches stomped towards the door but turned back and pointed to the splintered wooden bench at the foot of my camp bed. "I left you some tea and a scone. Eat, Hermione. Please?" Her body language was still stiff with anger, but her eyes were imploring. I didn't care.

"That's my corset," I croaked.

"I'm borrowing it. Mr. M shredded mine last week, and you shouldn't wear it until you gain some weight back; you look like a hat rack in it." With that she turned and left, quietly closing the door behind her.

It occurred to me I should be grateful she didn't slam it, considering the pounding in my head, but again, I couldn't bring myself to care. I gulped down the hangover potion, she had to have swiped it for me, and felt the pain in my temples abate. I sat still, waiting for the potion to completely take over and looking around the room at all the empty beds. One of the pathetic excuses for a house elf had been by already. The room was tidy, if dismal, in the early afternoon light. There were eight mix-matched camp beds, each with a thin, ratty blanket and some form of bench or chair at the end; peeking out from each bed, except mine, was a small, unlockable trunk or box to hold whatever personal possessions considered important enough to treasure, but not valuable enough for the management to confiscate. I didn't have one; there was nothing I cared enough about to try and keep. Looking at the room, I thought again of how it looked like a set from a dystopian fairy tale: Hermione and the Seven Whores. There were two other rooms just like this, each housing eight whores and all that belonged to them. Who in turn belonged to the house, which was run by Ma, who worked for the Ministry.

Feeling human again, I snatched up and ate the scone greedily, annoyed that my body still cared that much, and slurped up the tea as I dragged my sore body out the door and down the hall into the bathroom. I took as much time as needed in the shower, scrubbing my body and my scalp until I felt my skin was raw enough. This was the one thing I still cared about. My morning ritual. Scrubbing off my history. It made no difference if I left bleeding, the charms on the rooms downstairs would ensure I was beautiful to whomever bothered to actually look. I may have dwindled down to a hat rack, but for the money Ma paid for the charms, you can be sure I was a good-looking hat rack. Dragging a large toothed comb through my hair, I trudged across the hall to the wardrobe room. Here was where we kept our clothes, if you could call them that. The walls were full of long mirrors between recessed racks, each area assigned to a girl. I pulled out a few hangers and inspected what I had. It would benefit me to look as polished as possible when Ma did finally lay eyes on me. I had been in the Brown Room many times over the years and still cared enough to try to avoid it. Whips and chains are not my thing. But, then again, none of this was my thing. I had no choice. This had been my life for the past five years. Since Harry and Ron died and I fucked up by not dying with them. Once, I had been somebody. Someone with a future. Now, I was just a whore: The Princess of Gryffindor, as a matter of fact. They paid extra for me.

I stared at myself in the mirror, assessing the ankle-length peignoir in translucent lime-green. It was slightly more opaque over my breasts and then fell away to reveal my flat stomach and the matching thong before stopping just above a pair of silver mules. Rather conservative actually, and by the standards of the other girls, frumpy. But, I was running out of things that fit, and the charms didn't work on Ma. She wouldn't mind; she liked to pretend she owned a classy establishment, so this outfit would go over well.

Anything I could do to disguise the jutting hipbones and protruding ribs would make my night easier and postpone getting dragged to a Ministry Healer, where they would repair my liver and replenish my failing health. Again.

All-in-all, I looked pretty good. Hair, a glossy tumble of curls down to my arse, thanks to the right products. It was actually a dry, sad tatch of brown straw without lotions and potions and the almighty charms. Breasts, smaller but still perky and round. Belly, smooth. A few silvery scars here and there added authenticity to my status as defeated hero. All that was out of place were my eyes. They were dead. I should have been dead. But, they wouldn't let me die. Merlin knows I tried enough in the beginning. I couldn't seem to muster the energy to actively participate in the act anymore. But passively, there's another matter.

I left the attic dormitories and headed down three flights of stairs, past the 'guest' rooms and specialty theme rooms. My body shuddered as it always did when I passed the infamous Brown Room. One more set of stairs brought me to the kitchen where I deposited the tea cup and plate Peaches had brought me. A mangy elf hissed at me and I snarled back. I couldn't believe I ever cared about the damn things. Part of my brain tried to tell me they weren't all like this, but I slammed the door on those thoughts. I didn't think of the past any more. Remembering house-elves that gave their lives for a lost cause was not good for me. Remembering anything was not good for me. But, for some reason, my mind has been wandering into dangerous waters recently. There were sharks in those waters.

I entered the Violet Lounge and slipped over to where Peaches had parked herself on a settee. She is a mudblood from America. She told me her real name once, but I do not remember it. Sometimes I think I do, but then it slips away again.

"Hey, Princess. You look good. Nice job," she said with a critical look at my make up and hair. She licked a finger and adjusted my eyeliner. Before I came here that would have disgusted me. Now I know there are worse things than a friend's spit drying on your face. I sat next to her and tuned everything out. My body arranged itself as trained, displaying itself to advantage, and my mind went away. In the beginning, I listened to the chatter, desperate for some news from the outside. Some tidbit of hope I could build a world around, but there was never any news. No one comes to a brothel to talk about current events. I have no idea what has happened since I came here. All I know is the Dark Lord still rules with an iron fist, the Death Eaters still lord it over everyone, and the social classes have divided up into a structure so ridged that we have to have different accommodations for those too lowly to interact with their betters but wealthy enough to afford to play. I have learned nothing new since I woke up in Azkaban, fevered, injured, and delirious with grief. I remember little of my subsequent torture, and I do not remember when Voldemort passed judgment on me in the Wizengamot. I was there, but was out of my mind. I do remember coming here a few months later; it was the last time I could remember being outside.

I saw movement behind the screen on the wall, which told me the after-work crowd was coming in, the 'faithful' husbands looking for a quickie before taking the rest of their wages home to their lovely wives. Bad tippers. Not that we got to keep our tips; they went to pay for our clothes.

"What's on the agenda tonight?" I whispered to Peaches. All the girls talked in whispers until the room filled up; it reminded me of the nervous speaking formerly reserved for church before the service starts.

"The usually lame daddies early on but Mr. M has reserved the Emerald Room and ten girls from nine o'clock on," she responded quietly. "He better tip; I'm out of corsets," she huffed. Peaches had adapted.

Mr. M is Walden Macnair, which meant that there would be a room full of Death Eaters. Not an uncommon experience; they ran things in the government and liked their 'perks.' Like a reflex, I wondered if Snape would be one of them this time. He never was. I didn't even know if he was still alive. I snapped my mind away from the thoughts that tried to crowd in through the cracks. I couldn't seem to keep the past in its place like I usually did, and I concentrated on the important information. If Death Eaters were coming, then I would be busy. I just hoped they were celebrating and not commiserating. They could be a nasty bunch. Well, nastier than usual.

Movement in the front of the room signaled the entrance of Ma. She floated in like a frigate in full sail, her ample bosom on display and her wide hips hidden beneath yards of rust colored satin with ruffles. She looked ridiculous. A tall man was on her arm, smiling and looking slightly nervous. A mezzo soprano giggle from Ma and a slight gesture towards the settee Peaches and I were perched on were all the conversation necessary. She snapped her fingers and called out, "Peaches, darling! Come and meet this fine gentleman!" I watched as Peaches slapped her Hollywood smile on her face and got up to sashay across the room. I smothered a smirk. Peaches has a way of making all this look even more ludicrous. It's her little rebellion.

With Peaches gone, I zoned out again until Angel came and sat down.

"How are you tonight, Princess?"

"I'm here."

"Aren't we all."

And with that, our conversation was over. I'm not one for small talk. Neither was Angel. We got along just fine. Angel and Peaches were pretty much it as far as friends go. Truly, I didn't give a damn one way or another, but they insisted on paying attention to me, and on my less insulated days, it was good to have someone on the planet who seemed to care you breathed. This day, I didn't seem to be as numb as I usually was.

I didn't know how long I had been sitting there when Ma called to me. I looked up and Angel was gone, as were several other girls in the room. I moved over towards Ma and the balding man at her side. He was average height and portly with beads of sweat already forming on his lip. He looked me up and down and flushed with pleasure until he looked into my eyes. He looked away again quickly. I smiled and took his arm, gesturing towards the stairs and the rooms beyond even as my mind drifted away again.

Poor Dumb Bastard

Chapter 2 of 40

Hermione sees someone she knows who might be in danger...

I adjusted the straps to my negligee as I descended back down to the first floor. Ma intercepted me in the lobby with a tray of drinks and a small frown.

"Princess, you're in the Emerald Room for the rest of the night. The party got here about twenty minutes ago and should be starting to get busy about now."

"Did they request me, Ma'am?" I asked.

"No, not tonight but they have paid for the room for the whole night as usual and there are more in the party than reserved, so I need all the girls that are free to work the room," she answered, handing me the drinks. Ever the saleswoman, that's our madam. I was relieved to know I was not a main attraction.

She looked at me critically.

"You need to work on that smile, girl. You look like a corpse."

"Yes, Ma'am," I answered. I smiled for her, and she nodded.

"A bit better. Keep trying, or I'll take it out of your hide."

Balancing the tray, I made my way into the Emerald Room. Conversation was loud and raucous; there were about ten Death Eaters there and even more girls. I made my way slowly, looking at the floor as I navigated the room offering drinks to the gentlemen and their consorts. The babble of lively conversation washed over me until one person's name ran into me making me stop dead in my tracks.

"Here's to our prodigal boy, Snape!"

The sound of drink glasses clanking on my tray was lost among the huzzahs. I pivoted towards the focus of amusement and spotted my erstwhile professor. There he was. The murderer of Dumbledore. My mind was flooded with images and memories: hasty consultations with a dead man's portrait and a confusing tale of twisted loyalties and even more twisted logic; Harry running forward toward Voldemort after the Dark Lord's ambush at the Burrow; Harry disintegrated in the onslaught; Ron blown apart a moment later. I only fell, two steps behind and caught in the backlash. Apparently no one knew I was still alive for two days.

My mouth felt full of bitter ashes. Snape. Was he a double agent? A spy for Dumbledore? Then how did we not know of the planned attack on the Burrow? Did I even care anymore? It was five years ago. This was my life now. There was no escape. I tried. I stopped caring. I felt the numbness descend down upon me once again, and I welcomed it.

I poured the spilled drinks into the fake ficus plant next to me and arranged the still full drinks on the tray. I studied Snape as I walked among the guests passing out drinks. He looked miserable. Miserable and pathetic. His robes were the cut I remember but shabbier. His hair was a long, greasy curtain spilling down his back well past his shoulder blades. It was still black as night. His skin was even more pale and sallow if possible. His face, a mass of lines that made him look much older than his forty-four years. His nose still a long, thin slash of a hook marring the center of his face. But his eyes...I had seen that look every morning for the last five years. They were like mine; they were dead. Even though I only came up to his shoulders, he seemed smaller, less imposing, less intimidating. Just, less. A skinny, ugly, sad, little man. Lost.

He held himself stiffly, obviously awkward at the attention. The others laughed at his discomfort. Interesting. It would seem the prodigal boy was short on allies in the room. The talk got more bawdy as the drinks flowed and the girls got busy. I watched as Macnair whispered to Peaches and followed her with my gaze as she prowled across the room to Snape, wrapped around him like a cat, and started unbuttoning his robes. I saw two spots of color appear high on his cheeks and admired the effort he put into not looking mortified. He failed.

From the conversation in the room, I gathered that the Potions master had been gone from his compatriots since the end of the war. This was the most news I had ever heard. I also gathered that he did not surface by choice but was chanced upon in an apothecary shop by Rookwood and dragged to this gathering. I also took in the fact that tonight was less a celebration than an ordeal, a trial, a test. It would seem Snape's loyalties were questioned by everyone.

Peaches rubbed against his side and stroked her hand up and down his body from his collar to his crotch in long sinuous movements. I watched his trousers for any response; either there was none or he's hung like a gnat. I tried to decide what my feelings were. I could not. Maybe it was pity.

I placed the tray of drinks on the piano where Angel was playing a pleasing Jazz tune. I smirked at the Mudblood music. Ah, the little rebellions abounded that evening. We exchanged a too-blank look as I took a glass of wine and downed it in one go.

Macnair had been watching the entertainment with a sneer. I heard his muttered opinions on Snape's sexual preferences and the answering sniggers. I listened as he hatched a plot to take Peaches together with Snape and see if he could even perform. I heard a sinister threat: when Snape went off with Macnair and Peaches, one way or another the Professor will be involved in a sexual act. He had no friends here to stand up for him. He was without allies. Poor dumb bastard. I pondered this. I examined my feelings. I should have some. Did I owe him anything? If I interfered, there was a chance he would owe me. That was something. But having a powerless man be indebted to you was less than nothing on the face of it. I grabbed another drink and slammed it back. Replacing it with two more, I moved across the room. I do not know why I decided to act. I surprised myself.

I came up on him from the side beyond my friend. Peaches had been trying all her tricks to spark a fire, and I could tell she was at a loss.

"It's not you, Peaches, honey. He just isn't into redheads." I said this because of something I heard once from Remus. All the old memories had come out to play tonight.

They both twisted around to see me better, and I saw the relief at the rescue on her face and the narrowed eyes of confused familiarity on his. He didn't recognize me.

"Would you like a drink, Sir?" I offered. He looked at the glass of wine with suspicion.

"No." His voice was the same, dark and rich and it made me almost feel something. I flicked the thought away.

"Here, Peaches, for you then."

She laughed and reached to take the wine. Stroking a hand down Snape's unshaven face she turned to me and gestured.

"You're in good hands here; this is the honest to goodness, world-famous, Princess of Gryffindor!"

At her pronouncement he went completely still. Only his eyes snapped towards mine. I was used to people looking quickly away. He did not. I was not sure he was still breathing, he was so still. Peaches gave him a final pat that he ignored and left us in a pool of silence. A rush of thoughts overwhelmed me. Why was I trying to help him? What did I care if he got raped by Macnair? What made him more special than me? Sudden shame caused me to look away first. I took a sip of the wine in my hand and then gently rested my free hand on the inside of his elbow.

"Perhaps we could find somewhere to sit, out of the center of attention, yes?" I said smoothly. I was used to guiding nervous customers, but they were usually not Death Eaters. He didn't respond at first but then followed my lead. My plan was to find a quiet place to tell him what I knew and then leave him to his own devices. I owed him that much for trying to save us from Lupin in third year. That was my plan. Of course, it didn't work. We had not gone two steps before Macnair descended upon us, dragging a bewildered Peaches. He did a bad job of looking jovial, when he was obviously furious that his clever scheme fell apart before it even got off the ground. I wondered at how he seemed to want Snape so badly.

"Severus! Come, my friend! I have found a tasty morsel to share! Let's go upstairs and get this party started for real, old man!"

I moved closer as if to snuggle Snape's arm to hide the fact that I was digging my fingers into his elbow until my knuckles went white.

"Thank you, Walden, but I have found my own for now," he said smoothly. That voice. He moved his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. I relaxed against him. Macnair narrowed his eyes. I could see his thoughts as they formed on his face. He wondered at the dynamic of the untrustworthy Snape choosing the Princess of Gryffindor. I could find no way out of this predicament. It looked suspicious because it was suspicious. How did I get into this? Why? I looked up at Snape with a stupid, simpering smile. I could not tell what he was thinking. His face was a blank mask. I realized I was honestly nervous. I was not happy about this feeling. Snape did a curious thing then. He rubbed his thumb up and down my back as if to calm me. I do not know if that is his intention, but it worked.

"Well grab your doxy and come with me, brother," Macnair said, with forced bonhomie. He reached out and grabbed Snape by the shoulder and pulled him along. I followed along with a gentle hand on my back guiding my way. I was calm all the way up the stairs until we all got to the door of one of the guest rooms and his thumb stilled. Then it hit me: I was about to fuck Professor Snape.

AN: Thanks go to astopperindeath for the final beta and also to Whitehound for her amazing help on the original draft.

I Keep Nothing

Chapter 3 of 40

Hermione takes control of a situation with unexpected results.

AN: A quick thank you to atopperindeath for polishing this to a shine. :)

Peaches had chosen wisely. In our business, being wise to potentially violent undercurrents could save a life. Peaches had obviously caught on to some of the dynamics between the two men and had chosen a dimly lit room that was not too big. It had two large beds that were situated across from each other. Now, it was up to us to keep the two men facing away from each other.

I was furious with myself. I should never have gotten mixed up in this. If I had left well enough alone, I would not have been there. Most of all, I would not be here right now. Usually, my mind has floated free long before I bring a man to the mattress. But, my mind was in the here and now and I was afraid. Afraid of violence, afraid of thinking, afraid of the fact that I was afraid. It never takes much for fear to turn to anger. I looked at Snape standing irresolutely just inside the door of the room and sneer. It was his fault. This skinny, pathetic excuse for a wizard. I wondered if he was gay. He looked like he could be.

Stop it, a voice inside said. There are many reasons to hate him. Stick to the truth. He killed Dumbledore. This is truth. I am a whore. This is truth. He's just another job. Deal with it.

I turned away when a tray of refreshments appeared on the table by the door. I reached for the unopened bottle of wine, turned, and presented it to Snape. He looked at me blankly, again seeming lost and confused and nervous. Peaches switched on the wizarding wireless and twirled in the middle of the room with a flourish. She draped herself across Macnair's lap where he sat on the end of the bed he had chosen. She got down to the business at hand. I turned back toward Snape to see him inspecting the wine. He pulled out his wand and with a flick the cork popped out. I took the bottle from him and filled the glasses. Bringing two glasses over to the other couple, I gave Macnair a toothy smile, stopping short of the saucy wink. I really didn't want to encourage him. I turned back towards Snape and selected two more glasses. Handing one to him, I took his arm and pulled him over to the other bed. I drank my wine in one go and sat the glass on the table by the bed. He just placed his down without even a sip.

He was stiff and uncomfortable. I assumed this was either his first time in a cathouse or his first time with an audience. I did my job and tried to make him more at ease but was lost right from the start. How does one make small talk in this situation? My mind was blank. I pushed him onto the end of the bed, and he sat down as stiffly as if he was facing a tribunal. I kicked off my heels and scrambled around behind him. Running my hands across his shoulders, I tried to draw the unbuttoned robes off. He jumped up and spun around to face me; his face was a mask, but the cords of his neck were standing out, and his Adam's apple was bobbing like mad.

"Problem, Snape?" Macnair drawled from his bed behind us. I saw Snape's eyes widen and slide to the side. I could not understand what was wrong. He knew this was what he agreed to downstairs when he possessively put his arm around me, but now he was acting like a fourteen-year-old being molested by his friend's drunken aunt at a party. I tried to convey the danger he was in with my eyes. He took a deep breath and dropped his head. His hair swung forward like curtains and shut out his face completely. I took this for surrender. All I had to do was prove he could perform. Right? So, I decided to skip the preliminaries and go for the trophy.

I reached out in front of me and grabbed his belt buckle. He flinched. I cleared my mind and got down to business. I could do this on autopilot, I had been for years. I could hear Peaches and Macnair starting to get on with it across the room. I unbuttoned the placket of his trousers, reached in, and pulled out his cock. It was uncut and completely flaccid. He smelled strongly of sweat, and it was obvious he had not bathed that day. It was unpleasant, but I had dealt with worse. I scooted closer to the end of the bed and took him in both hands. Gently, I palmed his cock and ran my fingertips down its length. I felt it stir. Thank Merlin, there was hope for the poor dumb bastard yet. Holding him in one hand, I reached into his trousers with the other and caressed his balls. I heard him draw in breath through his nose as I leaned forward and gulped the whole semi-hard length into my mouth, rolling my tongue around the head. A surge of blood made it harden and fill my mouth, expanding down my throat. I backed off before I gagged and killed the mood. He was breathing heavily now. I got to work setting up a rhythm, one hand juggling his balls gently, the other sliding up and down his length pulling the foreskin down while my mouth slid around the head. The moans and groans from the other couple almost drowned out the softly rasped "ohhhhh" from above. I felt his hand slide into my hair and caress my scalp. After a pause, I saw his other hand come up and take a lock of my hair and feel it. The down side of the

charms is they work visually but do not mask tactile sensations. My hair looked silky but felt like shite. Leave it to Snape to analyze a hair sample while getting a blowjob. Git. I sucked harder on his cock, and his hiss told me his mind was back on task.

I quickened the rhythm, stroking and caressing his length and rolling his balls together as his hips started to flex, and he pumped shallowly into my mouth. Such a gentleman. My head bobbed up and down, and as I relaxed my throat to take more of him, he grabbed my shoulders to pull me up. I let go of his jewels and rose up until I was facing him, still kneeling on the bed. I looked at him with a question in my eyes. His lips were parted, and he was breathing hard. His face was flushed and his eyes, oh, his eyes. They were on fire. Fascinating. I felt a frisson of power. I did that. I made Severus Snape hungry with need. Then, he tried to kiss me. Still holding my shoulders, he pulled me towards his fiery black eyes, and I was caught up in their spell until I felt his thin lips graze mine. I reacted instinctively and turned away. He kissed my ear. I hated being kissed. Do anything else to my mouth but not that. I know the awkwardness is usually a mood killer; I have had this happen before and he is no different. The hands on my shoulders stiffened and released, and he tried to take a step back. I continued my motion as if nothing happened and reached for his hand. I smiled wickedly and started to suck on his fingers while reaching back for his deflating cock and giving it a few business-like strokes. His eyes were still guarded, but they did not go back to the flat, dead look he had before. I shifted back onto my heels and gestured towards the pillows. He nodded his head.

Shrugging out of his robes and kicking off his boots, he climbed onto the bed. He was still in his shirt and trousers and socks. One toe was sticking out. I shifted back onto the pillows while watching him advance on me. He raised up on his knees between my legs and looked down upon my body. A darting look at my hair gave away his thought. If the hair is a lie, what else is? How dare he have an opinion, the greasy bastard! At least I bathed regularly. I watched as his nasty hair swung forward and obscured his face. I thought to myself how nice his hair would be if he just washed it. His hand reached out like a blind man's until he touched my calf. Then both hands grasped it and he started to lightly caress my leg. One hand slid up to my knee while the other slid down toward my ankle. I realized he was visualizing my body without the glammers. I was starting to hate him all over again. His hands gently played up and down my thighs and across my hipbone. One hand spread out to caress the other hip. He was gentle. Always gentle. I tried to close my eyes and envision Snape as a gentle man. I failed. His touch was hesitant and unsure, yet determined. His jutting cock, bobbed with excitement whenever he discovered new territory. His hands stroked upward to my bony ribs, and he leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

"Do they not allow you enough food?" There it was again. His voice. It was the third time he had spoken that night, and it affected me. I felt my body responding. That had never happened before. Then his words sank in and any response my body may have had died.

I did not know what irritated me more, the apparent judgment from this bag of bones or the concern I heard in his voice. I stiffened with indignation. I chose the judgment. Concern smells like hope, and I gave up on that years ago.

"They offer us all we want," I hissed back.

His hand soothed down my flanks as if gentling a horse.

"Ah, then you chose self denial. This I understand," he replied. He pushed back and continued to explore my body. The touches became more soothing, as if apologetic. I relaxed under his touch. In some corner of my brain, this irritated me even more. He reached up and flipped his hair over one shoulder, casually, and I saw his face again. It was so open and full of wonder as he looked down at my body. His hand skimmed across the side of my breast as if unsure of its welcome. I found myself getting caught up in this act of discovery. Not sexually, more intellectually. I watched his wonder, and I felt wonder. I reached up and ran my hand over his shirt and felt his chest underneath. I was surprised. I expected to feel his ribs, but what I felt was solid muscle. Surprised, I ran both hands up to his shoulders and down to his biceps. They were strong. This man was very strong indeed. I found myself wishing we were alone so he would not be so self contained. I would have liked to see his body.

As if my thought called to them, Peaches suddenly cried out loudly, and Macnair started yelling encouragement, laced with vulgarities. I could tell Peaches was going for one of her world-class fake orgasms. The spell I was under popped like a bubble. Back to work.

I reached down and caressed his cock again. Snape sucked in air. I guess a little warning would have been in order. I started to pump him again and reached for his hand and brought it to my breast; he was going to take too long to get there, and we had an audience to appease. His hips started to flex again, and he gave the quietest of groans as his hand clutched at my breast. I reached up and pulled the ribbon holding my top together, and it fell apart, revealing my breasts. I kept myself from smirking as his eyes bugged out and his mouth fell open. Men. I guided him down by lifting my legs and wrapping them around his thighs. He let out a chuff of breath and settled into position. His arms were on either side of my chest as his hips moved up eagerly. I laughed as I reached down and pulled my panties to the side out of the way. Off would have been better but wonder boy was getting impatient. I think that was when the truth started to dawn on me, but I was busy working details and not thinking. He poked and prodded and missed until I captured him in my hand and guided him to the right place. A little spit works wonders and he slid right in. Nice-sized package, I have to say. It was the strangled howl and the crushing pressure as his arms snapped tight around my torso followed by the absolute stillness on top of me that made all the pieces snap together. Oh god. How could this be? The man was a Death Eater for crying out loud! But the signs had been there all along, and I was blind to them. The nervous skittishness, the blushes, the fumbling touches and the absolute self-consciousness. So very un-Snape-like. I had thought before that this was either his first time in a brothel or his first time with an audience. It never crossed my mind that this was his first time, full stop.

I was uncharacteristically touched by this revelation. I craned my head to see his face pressed firmly into the mattress just below my armpit. I stroked his arched back with one hand and the back of his head with the other. He took a shuddering breath, and started to relax, and lifted his head up to look at me. We held each other's gaze long enough to establish that the truth was out. His face was a blank mask. I tried to keep gentle reassurance on mine, but I think it was laced with a strange form of pride of ownership; I do not know. My feelings were a jumble. I was confused to have feelings at all while in bed with a man.

I rocked my hips gently, and his eyes fluttered closed. He took the hint and started to thrust. Again, his mouth dropped open. I tried not to notice his yellowed teeth, but it became harder as he clenched them. His grip was still tight around me, his arms long enough to feel like they wrapped around twice. He set an erratic rhythm that I tried to follow. He hunched over until it looked like his back would break, I swear his forehead touched my navel as his hips snapped back and forth. I was so caught up in the curiosity of the moment, that I did not even notice that Macnair had come along the side of the bed and was watching. It wasn't until he stuck his semi-limp cock in my face and told me to suck it that Snape saw him. His reaction was unbelievably fast. It seemed one moment Snape was pounding away at my body, and the next, I had been pulled up off the bed with my face pressed to his shoulder while Macnair stared wide-eyed at Snape's wand in his face.

"I. Do. Not. Share." Just like that.

Macnair backed away. You could see in his face he was rapidly reassessing his opinion of Snape. He threw his hands up and smiled as if it was all a joke as he looked around to find his trousers. I looked over Snape's shoulder at Peaches who stood there stunned. I was terribly confused. I had thought this man was somehow fragile and in danger. But, quick as lightning, the danger had shifted to a new source. I stayed tucked up into his chest as Snape followed Macnair around the room with both his eyes and his wand. Macnair shrugged on his shirt and looked back at us with a snide expression.

"Easy, Severus. I get it now. You must have been wanting to fuck that little bitch for a long time back at Hogwarts. I won't spoil your fun. Next time, maybe, eh?" He barked a horrid laugh and, grabbing Peaches, swept out of the room. The door closed with a bang. I was still impaled on Snape's cock, and I felt it start to soften immediately at Macnair's words. He spun his face around to look at me, and his expression was ashen.

"That's not true," he whispered, his voice cracking.

"I know," I responded.

He stared at me intently, still clutching me to his chest, as if needing something from me. I didn't know what it was. I just stared back in confusion. Now fully limp, his cock slipped out of me. He dropped his head and closed his eyes. Slowly, he let me back down on the bed, then shifted and stood up, turning quickly away to adjust his clothes.

"You don't have to stop," I said, scrambling to get off the bed. I don't know why, but I felt such a loss.

"You don't have to continue," he replied. He sat on the bed and started to work his feet into his boots. "You did what you set out to do. I thank you."

"But you...but we..." my words trailed off. "But you never got to finish." Oh, yes, that was brilliant. Remind the man that he is still half a virgin. My brain had taken a holiday, for sure.

He looked back at me calmly as he shrugged into his robes and started to button them up.

"I, too, practice self denial," he said quietly.

Oh, merciful fate. Was the man a celibate? Had I corrupted him? Suddenly, I felt like such a dirty whore. I clutched my negligee trying to cover my nakedness. Shame made a noise like a buzzing in my ears.

"I am so sorry," I whispered, my eyes cast down towards the floor.

He came towards me and lifted my chin with a finger.

"Don't be. Don't ever be."

He reached into his robes and pulled out several Galleons, and, taking my hand, he pressed them into the palm.

"This is for you."

"No."

"I insist."

"It's a waste."

"You are not a waste, Hermione."

Oh, Harry, he said my name. Harry?

A sob broke from my throat.

"They take it. They do not allow us to keep our tips. You are throwing your money away."

"What do they allow you to keep?" he asked.

"I keep nothing."

Ron? Where are you?

I heard the door close gently behind him. I remember nothing after that.

I Fell Asleep Confused

Chapter 4 of 40

Hermione struggles with feelings she thought long gone.

A special thank you goes to [astopperindeath](#) for inviting me to come play here and for volunteering to beta!

I wake up confused; my throat is raw. Deeply disoriented, I look around, trying to make sense of my surroundings. The sounds and smells stir memories, but I can't place them. A door opens somewhere behind me, and brisk steps approach.

"How are you feeling?"

I turn my head to see a healer waving her wand over me.

"Madam Pomfrey!" The healer frowns and narrows her eyes. I have made a mistake. How many points off was that? I take a deep breath, waiting for the next question.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hogwarts?" I see I have gotten this question wrong as well. Panic sets in. How many questions are there? How will this effect my final grade?

I see her reach over for several vials of potion. Her movements are brusque and business like.

"Has Harry been here? Or Ron? I thought I heard them just now." I look for cards or get-well sweets but see none. I look back at the healer and see a deep sadness in her eyes. Oh. I remember; they are dead. I remember everything. I start to scream. My throat is raw.

~*~*~

I wake up confused. The light in the room is dim. I look around and see other people in the beds around me, most are quiet, sleeping. Some are murmuring. It is the murmuring that woke me. I have been hearing it over and over in my sleep, and I need to understand what it is. I see someone rocking back and forth. They are muttering something. Is it a spell? I listen intently. No, it is nonsense. They are simply gibbering. The sound is curiously soothing. I fall back to sleep.

~*~*~

I wake up confused. I hear the door to the ward open and footsteps approach. A healer is standing over me waving a wand.

"How do you feel?"

"As if I am underwater," I reply. My mouth seems full of cotton.

The healer reaches for a glass of water and helps me take a sip.

"Where am I?" The healer looks pleased at my question. This means nothing to me.

"You are in St. Mungo's. You have been here for several days. Can you tell me your name?"

"They call me Princess," I whisper back. Again, I am rewarded with a tight smile. I turn my head away.

~*~*~

I woke up cold. The blankets had been pulled off, and the skin of my naked body was pebbled with gooseflesh. I rolled over and saw the source of the snores that had woken me up. The man had cocooned himself in all the blankets. Selfish prick. I gently rolled off the bed and scooped up my belongings. He had paid for the room for the night but he didn't pay enough for me. I dressed and slipped out of the room.

I reached the lobby and saw Ma. I gave her a questioning look, unsure of which lounge she wanted me in, but she waved her hand at me.

"That's it for the night. Not many coming out on such a bitter cold night. Everyone has been seen to. Go, get yourself some food. You don't bring in enough money to pay for another trip to St. Mungo's."

"Alright." I turned away and headed to the kitchens. It was warm in here. Several of the girls were there stuffing themselves with meat rolls and pots of tea. I prepared a small plate and listened to the chatter going on around me. The air was filled with the usual disparaging stories of men's so-called prowess in bed turning into a three minute chafe-fest. Shapes and sizes were the usual gossip at that time of night, but there had been more interesting banter in the weeks since I had returned from the Janus Thickey Ward of St. Mungo's. It seemed there was some disorder amongst the Death Eaters. Nothing major, just power shifts and the accompanying grievances. In the past, I ignored useless gossip, but since I had come back I sifted through even the smallest tidbits. Angel and Peaches dropped down on the bench to either side of me. Peaches piled more food on my plate and Angel poured me more tea. They had decided it was their job to make sure I didn't collapse from exhaustion again. That's what the Healers said was wrong with me. The fact that I spent a week in a mental fugue state and another week raving meant something else to me. It told me I was losing my mind. Thank God. It had taken long enough. I pictured the pathetic soul sitting at all hours in the center of her bed rocking back and forth gibbering, and I was filled with envy.

It happened after Snape. They told me they found me standing alone in the middle of the room chattering away to myself. It wasn't the first time they found me like that. I have a tendency towards little mental holidays. I was just surprised that my encounter with my former professor would have impacted me so much. I was usually much more adept at burying my soul, hiding my emotions. Somehow, he got past my barriers; he opened up my memories and feelings, and they swamped me and I almost drowned. After my near escape to the Janus Thickey ward, I realized that perhaps the key to my final mental escape would be to stop trying to numb myself, to open myself up to my pain and humiliation. I had been trying to access my feelings again since, trying to break the dam, but I couldn't. I wanted to drown in my emotions and be swept away again. I was trying to feel, but it only worked in fits and starts. I wondered if I broke myself.

Ruby mentioned something about Rookwood having trouble performing. The other girls sniggered as I swallowed quickly and leaned closer.

"He blamed it on work. But I can tell the after-shocks of a Crucio. The Dark Lord hasn't been happy lately."

"Aye," said Stella. "I have seen the same. Seems he has been especially nasty to the Elders lately. The young ones don't have such problems, and a few of them are even randier. Crabbe Jr. has been bragging about big things coming his way with the return of his mentor, whoever that may be."

I felt my heart pounding. I knew who his mentor would be. He had not been back since that night, but he had been here in stories. From what Peaches told me, he presented himself to the Dark Lord the next day, and it didn't go well for Macnair at all. The Elders, the original Death Eaters, each hold their little fiefdom of power with a tight grip. The return of the prodigal had caused a stir. Alliances had been forming amongst those trying to hold onto all their responsibilities and the fresh and young who were waiting for a share. The return of an Elder means a shift that could bring down a man not prepared for a fight. Macnair hasn't been here much. Gossip had it that Snape said firmly that he wasn't interested in power or responsibility. No one believed him.

As the talk swung back to clothes and shoes and who needed a new what, I finished my tea and left the table. Peaches followed, yawning hugely behind me on the stairs. I pondered the enigma that was Snape; I didn't know who or what he was. Was he a small, powerless man? Slightly pathetic looking and terribly ugly? Yes. That was what stood in the center of the lounge that night, humiliated at the derision heaped on him by his brethren. But, then, how was it he had the ability to stir up the hornet's nest just by seeking an audience with the Dark Lord? No small man would have been capable of that. I remembered the fish-out-of-water standing in the lounge helpless to prevent the abuse descending on him. I still didn't understand what had motivated me to act on his behalf. I just felt I should. And feeling anything but anger and resentment was so novel an experience for me. Perhaps it was just that. But, the man who was so helpless, who was so inept in bed, the middle-aged virgin who I'd had to push onto the bed changed in the blink of an eye. I felt something then, and I savored the memory of it as I pulled down the thin blanket on my camp bed in the attic. I knew that feeling was the key to my release. When he clutched me to his chest and turned on Macnair, I felt protected. In that one moment, I was small and fragile and protected. As I slid down into the bed. I let my mind revisit the feeling of being held like something of value.

I fell asleep confused.

I Didn't Know

Chapter 5 of 40

Hermione confronts Snape when he returns to the house and discovers some painful facts.

AN: Thanks go to astopperindeath for her excellent beta skills!

Sunday mornings were for cleaning. The house filled with chatter, not the forced gaiety of the evenings when the house was filled with men looking for an endless party, but the regular chatter of women. Grumbles about moving furniture to get the rugs up to beat, and complaints about chapped hands from washing windows and mirrors. Ma only has three house-elves, and she gave them Sunday mornings off. The elves spent the week cooking and tidying, but the bulk of the scrubbing was done by us. We were not employees; we were slaves. Sundays were to remind us of that fact, as if we needed it.

I had just finished folding sheets when the bell chimed. This was the signal for some of us to go get ready for the evening. Business was always slow on a Sunday evening, so only one group of eight was ever on duty. Since I had returned from my 'vacation,' I was always on duty. I handed the basket of sheets to Angel, and she smiled at me sadly. I ignored her and headed upstairs.

Draping myself over a divan, I listened to Ruby play the harpsichord. We were in the Rose Lounge tonight, since the other rooms were still being put to rights. The names of the rooms corresponded to the décor. Ma had decorated them herself. The effect would have been ghastly anywhere else but a whorehouse. The over-abundance of gilt frames and flocked wallpaper created a chaos that made it hard for the mind to settle. I hated this room. A murmur drew my attention to the doorway. Ma was standing with a gentleman at his side doing her giggling sales pitch. The man was utterly non-descript. Indeed, I could describe nothing about him except I felt his stare. I couldn't tell you the color of his eyes, nor his clothes. He seemed absolutely banal. But, I clearly remember he was staring a hole through me. It made me shudder.

"Princess! Come and meet this fine gentleman!"

I rose and took a moment to arrange my filmy negligee. I had chosen a black peignoir tonight. My curves had returned with the Healers' help, but I had kept with the longer, more flowing pieces. I could still feel his eyes boring into me. I hoped he was not a fan of mine. They usually liked the Brown Room. Subjugating Harry Potter's friend was a regular item on the menu. As I came closer, plastic smile in place, I saw the slight shimmer that signaled the man was wearing a glamour, not an unusual occurrence. I wondered who he really was. He nodded stiffly, and I curtsied slightly, looking towards Ma for instructions. "What's it to be?" I said with my eyes.

"Chose yourself a pleasant guestroom and give the gentleman a night to remember." So, it was to be a straightforward transaction, and he booked me for the whole night. I would have thought from the intensity of his gaze that it would surely have been one of the theme rooms.

I placed my hand inside his elbow and gestured to the stairs. We ascended in silence and my mind started to drift away.

My feet automatically led to the room over the kitchen. It was warmer and the décor was close to subtle. The fire crackled in the hearth, and the assorted lamps around the room made it bright and cheery. A tray of refreshments appeared, and I noticed there seemed to be a lot of food and no alcohol. Interesting. A whispered spell from behind me made most of the lights in the room go out. There was only the firelight and two candles near the bed left burning. Obviously, he preferred the dark.

I gestured mechanically towards the food on the low table near the loveseat facing the fire.

"Would you like me to prepare you a plate?" He nodded and followed me over to sit. He perched on the edge of the cushion with a stiff grace. His action sent a frisson of awareness down my spine and the hair on my arms stood up. My mind started to spin, and I wrestled for calm. I grabbed up a plate and perused the offerings on the tray. There were cheeses and breads and an assortment of meats as well as some small cakes. Ma always saves the good food for the guests, and this gentleman had spared no expense.

"What would please you to start?" I asked in my carefully modulated tone, my practiced smile firmly in place again.

"Whatever you like best," he answered. The voice. That voice. Oh, gods. It was him. I fumbled the plate, and he reached out to take it from me and started to pile food on it. He placed the plate in my hands and softly said, "Eat."

I clutched the plate but couldn't focus on it. I couldn't see anything but his legs from the knees down. Legs that had gotten longer. Robes that had turned from tan to black. I did not hear the whispered spell that removed the glamour. I could barely hear anything over the roaring in my ears. I could feel. It was a strange panic, like a relieved terror, but I could feel it with my whole being.

I turned my head to the left and saw his black robes. His long hair. Strange how I noticed it was clean and shining. I lifted my eyes to his face. It was a blank mask. His eyes were hooded. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Why are you here?" I blurted out. A hand came up and covered my lips. It was mine. I was disconnected from myself. Was I going mad again?

His expression didn't change except for a tightening around his eyes.

"I had heard you were in hospital," he answered.

"And? So? Why do you care?" I snapped back. Anger overwhelmed me. "I have been in to St. Mungo's many times in the last five years why come 'round now? *Professor!*" He flinched. I knew he would. I always stored facts away to use as ammunition, and I knew our former relationship was a sore point with him, now that he'd got his cock in me. He seemed to collapse in on himself. Before my eyes, he became small and pathetic again. This fool couldn't ever have protected me. He can't even protect himself from a two-bob tart. My anger felt good in my veins. I became a shark that smelled blood. My frenzy propelled me up off the couch. I towered over him and he shrank further into himself.

"I didn't know," he choked out.

"What? Your Death Eater buddies leave you out of the loop? How can you not have known? I'm famous! I've had them all, repeatedly. In many, many, many ways!" I said this last while jabbing his chest with my finger, leering down into his face. He had gone bloodless, and his eyes were completely dead.

"This was a mistake," he rasped out as he scrambled to his feet and backed toward the door.

I was beyond rationality. If he left now, I would be punished for losing the house money, but nothing seemed to stop the venom spilling from my mouth.

"I always wondered when I would add you to my collection, Snape. Now, the only one missing is Malfoy and I'll have the whole set!"

He stopped and tilted his head, looking at me in confusion, I could see anger spark in his eyes. "He's dead."

For some reason that brought me up short.

"He's been dead these five years."

"How?"

"The Dark Lord killed him." As he spoke, he walked back towards the center of the room, his voice getting louder. "The morning of the ambush, and his wife and son joined him later the same day. It seems he was a spy." He spit this word out like poison. "When he heard of the plan to trap Potter, he sent an owl so his accomplice could warn the Weasleys, but it was intercepted by Bellatrix. When he was confronted with the evidence of his duplicity, he provoked the Dark Lord into a rage and was killed instantly. Narcissa and Draco took a lot longer." By the time he was finished speaking, he was looming over me in anger. "So, it would appear you got yourself the whole set after all," he sneered.

"Who was his accomplice?" I demanded to know.

"No one ever found out," he snapped. This Snape was much more familiar.

"Was it you?" I whispered.

"If it was, why would I blurt that out to a whore?" he hissed back at me.

I dropped down onto the loveseat as if my strings were cut. I still had the plate of food in my hand. I placed it on the table and fumbled with my attire, trying in vain to cover myself.

"That's just it, isn't it? I am just a whore. I've never been told anything." I stared into the fire and saw the Burrow burn. "All I know is what I saw. Harry and Ron..." I choked back a sob. "I saw them die. And then, I knew nothing else. I do not know who survived. I never knew what went wrong. All I have is a mind full of half truths and

incomplete facts." I looked up at him. "You must think I am so foolish. I have always secretly hoped that you were one of us. I would never have thought Malfoy..." I took up a napkin and blotted my eyes, trying to save my cosmetics. "Please, Professor, can you not tell me at least who else survived?"

He sat next to me and took my hand.

"No one. There is no one left. The Dark Lord executed all his enemies. Even the other teachers at the school. Hogwarts has been empty for these last years. You are the last. Only the Dark Lord's perverse whimsy kept you from meeting their fate. He had all but forgotten you existed until the events of last month came to his attention."

The feelings I had been looking forward to came rushing at me with knives. Gone. All of them. I had heard as much, but thought it was the petty bragging. Surely they wouldn't have known all of the players? Surely someone had escaped? But, hearing it from Snape seemed like a final pronouncement, and the weight of the truth left me feeling bloody. I felt his warm fingers stroke my hand, and that small act of decency broke me.

"I wish I died with them!" I cried and threw myself into his arms. He fumbled me close until I was tucked in to his chest and rocked me.

"I thought you had," he whispered hoarsely.

What Do You Feel?

Chapter 6 of 40

The Potion master's tale.

Thanks go to astopperindeath for the final coat of varnish

I don't know how long I clung to him, nor how long he held me like something precious, crooning soothing words and gently rocking me. He rubbed my back with one hand while his other stroked my hair. I know I felt safe. For the first time in a long time, I felt safe. I thought about how strange life is, that the dreaded Potions master would end up gently calming a whore who used to be the star pupil of his rival house. No one would ever have believed such a thing in the days before all this. Now, it had probably become a common tale in some version or another.

"Tell me what happened to you?" I asked. "I have been here for five long years. Where have you been?"

He set me back onto the cushions and leaned over to pour tea.

"Eat something while I tell you." He fixed my tea silently, only a raised eyebrow to ask if I took milk or sugar. I took a little cake and began nibbling on it to please him.

"I was not told of the battle beforehand," he began. "As Headmaster of the school, I had too many responsibilities to be fully kept in the loop. I knew nothing until my Dark Mark activated, and even then I had to placate a group of the Board of Governors who were unhappy with the way things were merrily skipping to hell. I arrived a good twenty minutes after the Carrows to utter pandemonium. By the time I arrived, all was chaos. The screams of the dying filled the air as more and more members of the Order arrived in answer to someone's Patronus. There had been no coordination. They arrived in ones and twos and were cut down in their tracks. I saw the remains of Potter and Weasley and I saw your still form twisted in the grass nearby. The Dark Lord's victory was swift, decisive and completely successful, and I had no idea it was coming. It was short. The whole epic battle was really just thirty minutes of swift, little agonies.

"In the aftermath, I was ordered back to Malfoy Manor, along with Bellatrix and Rabastan Lestrage to start the inquiry into who the other spy might be. That was why when the school was attacked next and the entire staff was slaughtered I was not there. I was busy torturing my godson to death. I had to make it slow; I had an audience. And he never knew anything. I knew he was innocent!" I looked into his dead eyes and fully understood the meaning of that last sentence. My heart started to bang around in my chest.

"The weeks that followed were an endless parade of vanquished marching to their execution. The subsequent power grabs by the Dark Lord's followers were a nasty business. More of them died in the weeks that followed at the hand of their own brethren than at the battle itself. The Dark Lord was content to let the herd cull itself. He had more loyal followers than he could trust. I had too many enemies. I relegated myself to the background, only giving council when I was called. And with the closing of the school, my council was outdated and redundant. I paid my respects to the Dark Lord and told him I was returning to research and that I would be at his command whenever he needed me. And then I locked myself up in my home and drank myself into oblivion. He has never called for me these long years. I stopped reading the papers and simply turned my back on the world. That is how I was unaware of your trial and sentencing; while you were rotting in Azkaban, I was vomiting up fire whiskey onto the tattered carpet of my bedroom, trying to think of a single person left alive that I would be happy to see."

I reached out and stroked his back.

"Why didn't you leave? Run away?"

He grunted.

"I had obligations. Besides, where was I to go? The Dark Lord holds dominion in some form or another throughout the wizarding world. And for good or ill, I am well known. They could track me down using the Dark Mark at any time they wanted."

"Why did they shut down the school?"

"Purebloods educate their own children. No one else deserves an education."

He picked up my plate of food again and handed it to me.

"Enough, you know my story now; the rest is just grim detail. You need to eat."

I frowned but took the plate. I had no appetite but I started to eat anyway. He poured more tea and we made a bizarrely domestic scene.

"How did you end up in the hospital?" he asked finally after I set my plate down.

"How did you hear about that?"

"The doings in this house appear to be regular gossip among bored Death Eaters at the Ministry. I overheard a comment," he replied.

"The doings at the Ministry have become gossip at this house. I also have heard some things."

He frowned and, with his head tilted to the side and his one eyebrow raised, it was easy to remember the Professor who had so little patience.

"Right, well... I seem to have had a nervous episode. I am better now." The tilt of his head became more pronounced. "Alright, I had a bit of a breakdown," I snapped. His eyebrows rose in both question and concern. "I spent two weeks in the Janus Thickey Ward barking at the moon. They were glorious." I huffed and sank back into the cushions. Even with the fire, I shivered. He rose from the seat and went and stripped the duvet from the bed. He draped it around me and went to stand before the fire. His hands were clasped loosely behind his back, but his shoulders were slightly hunched and tense.

"Did your nervous episode have anything to do with my appearance at this establishment?" he asked softly. I considered lying; this new found intimacy between us was both confusing and raw and I was not sure I could take much more. The fact that I took too long to answer was answer enough. I watched as his shoulders slumped and his head bowed in defeat.

"I have had no feelings for so long..." I tried to explain what I could, but it didn't make sense to me. How could I get him to understand? "It is how I have survived. I never let the past in, I never let an emotion out. Yes, it was because of your coming here that my defenses seemed to fail, but they were stretched so thin already." He turned fully towards me, but silhouetted by the fire I could not see his expression. "When I first saw you standing there, I felt a tremendous anger. When I overheard Macnair's plans for you that evening, my first reaction was 'so what?' But then I was already moving towards you to interfere with his petty revenge without making a conscious decision. I have been so numb these past years. The feelings that night caused overwhelmed me. It was not actively your fault; it was just a result of my own survival mechanisms falling apart." I burrowed down into the duvet. I had said all that would make any sense.

He came round the low table and got down on one knee in front of me. He took my hand and held it tightly between both of his.

"And now? How are you coping now?" he asked. His stark gaze was intense, his thin body held taut. I watched the firelight dance on the glossy strands of his hair. *So clean*, I thought. Without my bidding my other hand reached out to touch his hair. This close I could smell his soap. He smelled of fresh rain and lemongrass; I smiled. He let out a quiet chuff of breath.

"I feel. I do not know if this is good or bad. But it has been too long since I felt this way."

"What do you feel?" His voice was so intense I reacted to it physically. My heart was pounding, but I was not afraid. Curious. "What do you feel right now?" I wound the lock of hair through my fingers, watching the silky strands slither. I looked into his eyes. They were so severe.

"Safe. Right now I feel safe." I watched his black eyes ignite. The burn was almost too much. I felt an answering ember of my own; it was very small, but it had never been there before. I cherished it.

Down on one knee and holding my small hand tightly in his trembling ones, he said, "I swear to you, Hermione, I will find a way to keep you safe from the Dark Lord forever. I do not know how long it will take, but do not doubt that I will, or die trying. I swear this on the souls of all our fallen companions." At first I was too entranced by the sound of my name rolling off his tongue to pay heed to the rest of the words. Only when the light flared and magic swirled around our joined hands to seal the vow did I see the wand gripped in his hand and realize what he had done.

I screamed and everything went black.

I Am Only Human

Chapter 7 of 40

Severus and Hermione come to an understanding and Hermione explores the concept of being in control.

Thanks go to astopperindeath for patiently helping me make this more enjoyable for you all!

I woke in semi-darkness. The fire had burned low in the hearth, and only one candle was lit by the bed I was lying on. I was tightly swaddled in the duvet. For an instant, a terror gripped me: Am I alone?

"Snape?"

"I'm here."

I turned and found him sitting up against the headboard. He had given me all of the pillows. He could not have been comfortable. He reached back and grabbed a glass of water from the side table, and as I struggled to sit up, he scooped an arm around me and helped.

After I drank my fill, I narrowed my eyes at him.

"What have you done, you stupid, stupid man!"

He smirked and turned away to replace the glass.

"All that I can," he replied. When he faced me again I could tell he was deadly serious.

"Why? Why would you bind yourself to such a foolish vow? There's no hope for me; I'm beyond saving."

He scowled at me and answered my question with a question of his own.

"Why did you try to protect me that night?"

"I have no idea. I think I thought it might have been the right thing to do, but it has been so long since I had such thoughts, I don't really know."

"And yet, knowing me as you did, knowing how despicable and pathetic a human being I am, you could not but do what was in your nature, could you?"

I nodded, suddenly wondering if he had read all my thoughts that night. His eyes lit up with amusement but his expression didn't change.

"I can do no less. You are the last of all that was bright and good in our world, Hermione. How could I not try to change your circumstances?" His words angered me; I wasn't that girl anymore. He remembered a dead girl.

"Because you *can't!* There is nothing for you to do but try to give me false hope that will destroy me in the end!" I struggled out of the duvet and threw it off me. "Who the hell are you to ride to my rescue? I see no shining armor; no prancing steed! All I saw that night was a has-been, washed up Potions master! As pathetic as all these Death Eaters are in my eyes, you managed to make them all look like cultured nobility! You don't have the power to save me!"

"Perhaps I needed a cause," he said quietly while picking lint off his sleeve.

"And what if you succeed? What if you save the fair maiden? What happens when you realize all you have won is a worn-out prostitute?"

"Don't call yourself that." I swear he looked like he wanted to stamp his foot.

"It is what I *am*, Snape!"

He hissed like an angry cat and leaned in, nose to nose with my face.

"If that is what you are, after I rescue you, it will be because that is what you choose to be! I will see you safe enough to make your own choices."

"You cannot! And now, you have bound yourself to a foolish vow that might cost you your life!"

He stilled and his eyes searched mine.

"That would bother you?" he asked softly.

Tears sprang from my eyes, and I could barely speak for the trembling of my mouth.

"Yes. Because you are the last person that remembers when I was bright and good, and I only just found you."

He sighed and a hand came up to my face. He brushed away a strand of hair that had caught in my eyelashes and then let his hand fall away. He leaned forward until our foreheads touched; his massive nose crowded out my small one.

"Let me try?" he asked.

I reached up and pulled him closer, my face pressed into his neck. I nodded my head, and then let out a sob of a laugh. "You have no choice now, you foolish man." His chest rumbled with his own wry laugh. He patted my back awkwardly and pulled away. He grabbed the duvet and snapped it out to cover me.

"You should sleep."

My face must have reflected my confusion because he drew back suddenly and frowned.

"I did not take up your entire evening to make you work. I would not ask that of you, you silly girl!" he hissed.

"Then why..."

"I needed to see if you were alright. I felt we needed to speak. This was the only way I could arrange it."

"Oh."

For some reason, I felt disappointed. As if he heard my thought and it confused him, he tilted his head to the side. A scowl swept across his features like a storm, and he pushed back off the bed and started searching through the pockets of his robes.

"I brought some Dreamless Sleep and Calming Draughts if you would like them. I also brewed you a Strengthening Solution and a Vitamin Infusion, but you should take those in the morning." He was babbling. I smiled and pushed two of the pillows back over to the empty side of the bed.

"No, thank you. I do not want anything tonight. But if I am to sleep, then I insist you do as well."

He turned to look at the loveseat, and I snorted.

"Oh, please, Snape, there isn't enough muscle relaxant or pain reliever on the planet to cure you of a night on that. I know, I have slept on it, and I am half your size. Now get in bed."

He nodded and turned away from me to unbutton his robes, and I suddenly remembered how lost he had looked when I first saw him a few weeks before. My savior was just a shy little boy with a nasty temper. Hurrah for me.

He draped his robes over the back of the loveseat and came and sat on the bed and worked off his boots. I noticed that the quality of his clothes had improved a bit since that first night. His long ropey muscles were offset by his sharp shoulder blades under his fine linen shirt. He shifted to get under the blankets, but I stopped him with a gesture.

"Belt. If it snags my peignoir it will cost me three weeks' worth of tips to replace."

He hopped back up and unbuckled his belt and slid it out of his trousers. Lifting up the blankets he stopped at another gesture from me.

"Socks. No man is allowed in my bed still wearing socks. Not even saviors."

"You are pushing your luck, woman," he growled as he turned and pulled off his socks.

"Be nice, or I might just choose to be a shrew after you save me."

"Who's to say I won't dump you somewhere safe and then run like hell," he muttered, finally pulling half of the duvet over himself.

"I'll just keep wandering out into traffic so you have to keep coming back to save me. You'll have no choice but to stay."

"There's no traffic in Antarctica," he threatened lightly.

"Ah, but the Dark Lord holds vast influence over penguins, don't you know. You would be stuck freezing with me even there." I giggled at my own humor, lame as it was. It had been a long time since I had bantered around like this. Of course, he had to ruin it.

"You would still want me near after you are safe?" The pleading undercurrent in his voice was not lost on me. Whoever had broken this man deserved to burn in hell.

"Since we are playing pretend, let's pretend we won't drive each other 'round the twist while we live happily ever after. Yes, I will still want you around. People that know who I was before are a bit thin on the ground these days. I have no intension of squandering resources." I leaned up and blew out the candle. I heard him take a shuddering breath in the darkness.

"Good night... Severus." It was the first time I had ever said his name. It made me feel rather like a grown up.

"Dream well, Hermione," his voice floated up out of the darkness, deep and rich.

I had trouble falling asleep. My mind could not seem to wrap around the fact that I had gone to bed with a man and not had sex. It was a gift, another gift, from him, but one that left me feeling slightly empty. Maybe I did not know how to have a relationship with a man outside of a sexual context anymore. Did I want to sleep with him? I never had a choice before. I didn't know the answer. He wasn't attractive physically, but I found after examining my thoughts that I had stopped thinking of him as ugly at some point in the evening. I thought back to our previous encounter and remembered the fire in his eyes, the way he seemed to burn for me. Severus Snape, the same man that stormed throughout a castle and terrified students, had been lost in a haze of lust. For me. Only me. I was his first. These thoughts were heady stuff. I found he wasn't repulsive physically anymore either.

I listened to his breathing even out and then turned on my side to watch him sleep. The embers from the fire were enough to see by now that my eyes had adjusted to the light. I reached out and carefully picked up a lock of his hair. It was so fine and had no body at all but it felt incredibly silky to the touch. I lifted it up to my nose. It smelled clean, but it also smelled like him. A personal scent that I rather liked.

I'm smelling Professor Snape's hair!

Life was so strange. I wished there was someone I could share this moment with, but the last person on the planet that really knew me was the one whose hair I was molesting. I bent my arm under me and laid my head down on it and contemplated his profile. It was... prodigious. Noble, in its way. His face looked younger in his sleep. I guess everyone's does. The harsh lines of strain were gone and his eyes had a gentleness to them that I liked. I liked. I found I was liking a lot about this man. I reached a hand over and laid it on his shoulder under the blankets. My eyes were glued to his face to see if I disturbed him. When no reaction was apparent I slid my hand across his chest and felt the muscles there. I was again surprised by how defined they were. His chest was sharply angled, his shoulders were broad and his waist was narrow so his long torso formed a pronounced triangle. My hands roamed across this new territory, and I found I had to breathe through my mouth to stay silent. I felt his lower ribs and then skimmed my hand down his taut, flat belly. His hand grabbed mine so fast I squeaked.

"Hermione, don't. Please, I am only human." His voice was strained.

"I know. I just found that out recently and I find it remarkable."

"Sleep. You do not want to do this... you are just confused by the circumstances." He pushed my hand back towards me. I wriggled it out of his grasp and leaned up to look down on him. His eyes were hooded; I couldn't see them well in the darkness.

"You said it would be my choice." I was suddenly full of doubts. "Unless you do not want... unless you don't find me... I'm..." I was mortified. I started to back away; maybe the loveseat wouldn't be so bad for me, when his hand grabbed mine again.

"No. Don't think that," he said. He brought my hand back to his body and together, his hand and mine, we skimmed down his taut, flat belly and down to the iron hard erection below.

"I have been like this since I saw you downstairs. Gods, I have been like this for weeks since we last met. Do not think that I do not desire you." He took my hand away and, bringing it up to his mouth, placed a kiss on my open palm. "But do not think that you are under any obligation. I would not ask it of you. Ever. Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

"Yes. Yes I do, and I am profoundly grateful for your gesture, but I find that I want to." I looked into his eyes to stress what I was trying to say. "I have never wanted to before." His breath came out in a deep sigh. He swallowed several times and finally just gave me a short, sharp nod of his head. He was so tense, and his whole body was shaking.

I ran my hand back down his body and cupped his length through his trousers.

"Ohhh," he groaned. I could tell he had tried to hold it back but couldn't and the sound turned my belly to liquid. It felt like my brain was on fire. I undid his trousers quickly and reached inside. When I clutched him, he spasmed and gave voice to a ragged howl that made me feel so incredible. Three strokes and then his cock pulsed in my hand as he came, screaming *'fuck!'* repeatedly. I'm sure he was mortified, but me? It made me feel so desired.

I See You

Chapter 8 of 40

Severus learns, Hermione discovers.

Expertly beta'd by astopperindeath!

Thank you so much to those that have left reviews; I just want to assure a few of you that this story is complete in forty chapters and will not be abandoned! :)

"I want more," I said. My voice sounded so different, huskier. He made a strangled noise and threw his arm up over his face.

"I'm so sorry--" he started to say, but I hushed him with my hand on his lips.

"Don't be. I am pleased. We have all night." I tried to be reassuring, but he just made a disgusted sound and rolled away from me, his shoulders hunched up as if expecting a blow to fall.

"I am too old," he said. His voice was resigned. I could tell he just wanted this night to be over so he could go lick the wounds of his injured pride. Men in general weren't a mystery to me.

"I have skills... and there are potions..." Even I could hear the pleading tone in my voice. "If you want, that is." I took his hand away from his face and brought it up to mine,

nuzzling my cheek into his palm.

He rolled back and sat up. He caressed my cheek and ran his hand up into my hair.

"Hermione," he said sadly, "I am not good enough for you."

"You said the choices would be mine," I said. "I chose how you make me feel."

"How do I make you feel?"

"Alive."

His hand curled around my neck and pulled me in to his chest. His other arm curled up around my back, and he started to pull me into his lap but stopped. He scowled and reached for his wand on the side table and cleaned up the mess in his lap before shifting up against the headboard and finally settling me against his chest. He rubbed my back and shoulders with one hand, stroking my hair with the other. In the dim light, I concentrated on his breathing and his scent. His warm body surrounded me, and I felt safe. Cherished. I looked up to see him staring at me with wonder in his eyes.

"You are so beautiful."

I felt like a fraud. I struggled up out of his grip until I was straddling his thighs so I could look straight into his bewildered face.

"No. I'm not. There are charms on these rooms..." my voice trailed off as he started to chuckle.

"I would be a poor wizard indeed if I couldn't cancel out a localized atmospheric charm, Hermione. I see you. You are beautiful." My hand flew up to my hair. "Yes, even that bushy mess. It is charming in its own way." He reached up and pulled a lock straight and let go, watching as it sprang back up. I watched his eyes as he stared at me. I saw bemusement as he looked at my hair. Yearning, when his glance skimmed my cheeks. And when his eyes settled on my lips, I saw desire. His gaze lifted up to mine, and when our eyes met, I saw his burst into flame. I felt an answering fire deep in my belly.

"What do you need, woman? Teach me how to please you." His voice was husky.

"Take off your shirt," I answered, shifting farther back on his legs.

He smirked and set to unbuttoning his cuffs. He only unbuttoned a few of the buttons in the front before reaching back and pulling his shirt over his head. I took it from him and buried my face in the soft cloth to capture his smell. I liked the way he smelled when he was clean. I looked up to see him still smirking. His chest was pale with few hairs scattered between his pectoral muscles and around his nipples which stood out either from the chill of nakedness or from me. I wanted it to be from me. I leaned in and placed soft kisses across his chest until I reached a nipple and then teased it with my tongue. His hand came up and clutched at the back of my head. His grip was strong, fierce, but he made no sound. I ran my hands down his chest; even rippled with scars, his skin was unbelievably soft.

I shifted back and up so I was on my knees over him. I kept my eyes on his as I reached up and pushed the straps of my negligee off my shoulders, the robe of the peignoir falling with it. I watched as he licked his lips, and his mouth dropped open. As I slowly revealed my breasts to him, a part of me smirked. Again, I thrilled to the fact that the loathsome Potions master was an ordinary man undone by the chance to get close to some tits. And undone he was, his eyes were glassy and his face was flushed. His hands clenched rhythmically on the backs of my thighs. When fully revealed, his eyes darted back and forth across them as if trying to memorize them. His breathing was very shallow. Finally his eyes darted up to mine, either seeking permission or asking for instruction.

"Kiss them."

As if my words released a spell he sprang into action. His hands raced up my body and around to take hold while his mouth plunged in. He kissed and licked and nibbled while his hands kneaded and thumbs flicked. Only a few times did it become apparent that he had never done this before, but I was gentle with my admonishments and encouragements, and he was a very fast learner. His arms circled my waist and pulled me closer as he started to emit little growls that turned me on even more; I had never enjoyed this so much. His hands slid down my back until he cupped my arse and squeezed. I felt his legs shift under me, and then he was lifting me up and back until I was laying on my back with him looming over me, mouth still fastened to my right breast. My legs were sprawled on either side of his hips while his hands pulled me up along his thighs, until I felt his hard length pressing into my center. I throbbed.

As if coming up from deep waters he lifted his body up and looked down on me. I have never seen a sexier sight than Severus on fire. Although he was the same man he as before, the fog of my own lust made him wondrous to look at, his white marble skin contrasted with his long black hair, open trousers settled low on his hips. His face was fierce and glorious, and yet his eyes were still unsure and questioning as he grabbed a handful of my garments and started to tug them farther down. I nodded my permission and he pulled everything off, lifting my legs up together and resting my calves on his shoulder when he was done. I was completely naked and open to his view. I felt the shudder run through his entire frame as he wrapped both arms around my legs and rested his cheek against them.

"So beautiful," he rasped out.

I pulled my legs apart and dropped them on either side of his hips.

"I want you, Severus."

He groaned long and loud as he lifted up onto his knees and shoved down his trousers and pants. His engorged cock bobbed up and down, weeping fluid. I smirked at the sight.

"Old man, indeed," I said. He just grunted in response as he settled over me. He kissed my belly and then up to my breasts, skimming little kisses over my collarbone. He lifted up and gave me a measured look before passing my lips to kiss my cheek and ear. I could feel his hands fumbling to find my opening with his cock and angled my pelvis to help. He found it and slid in.

"Ahhh, gods!" he cried and then went still on top of me. He was so hard. Even the slight discomfort of his sharp hipbones digging into me couldn't take the focus away from how complete I felt. When he started to pump into me, I felt a rush of fluid. I had never been so wet. The loud groans he seemed helpless to prevent turned me on until I was practically screaming in counterpoint.

"Ohhh, gods, Hermione, you feel so good!" He was pounding into me with abandon now, and I felt myself starting to fly apart. Sweat dripped off him and rolled down my side. I reached down and started to rub myself with fast little strokes, and at one loud, strained groan from him, I felt my soul launch itself into space. I keened as my orgasm took me and it doubled in intensity when I heard him scream.

"Yes! Oh... shite... yesss... AhhhUNGH!" I could feel the pulsing throb deep inside me as he came. His weight crashed down onto me, and I rolled us to the side slightly. That was all I had the energy to do. We were both asleep within moments.

At some point in the night, we stirred enough for me to shove him off my numb leg, and for him to kick his trousers and pants off his ankles. We turned around so our heads were back on the pillows, and I nestled back into his belly as he pulled the duvet over both of us. He grabbed a possessive handful of breast and kissed the top of my head before we both slid back into dreams. Neither of us had spoken a word.

A Man of Some Means

Chapter 9 of 40

Severus makes a few reasonable demands, and Hermione collects her thoughts.

Thanks to astopperindeath, for her fabulous beta work!

A soft chime sounded at first light, and I stirred. When I opened my eyes, it was to find Severus dressed and perched on the bed watching me. I gave him a sleepy smile and watched his black eyes soften just a little. They seemed to have lost their dead look, and I wondered if mine had too.

"Good morning."

"Good morning to you too. You're an early riser, aren't you? We still have an hour before Ma comes banging on the door."

"We have a few more things to discuss."

He stood up from the bed, and I heard the sounds of tea things. I rolled out of bed and slipped into the loo. After a quick wash, I joined him, tugging at my attire in an attempt to feel less undressed. He noticed my actions, and with his wand he transfigured what I was wearing into a plain set of robes. I gave a happy cry and threw my arms around him. When I stepped back, he looked like he couldn't decide between proud or mortified. Two bright spots of color high on his cheeks offset the little smile barely seen at the corners of his mouth. He bought some time to get himself in order by reaching down and grabbing a bowl of porridge and shoving it into my hands.

"First off, it will take some time for me to be in a position to fulfill my vow. So in the meantime, I expect you to take better care of yourself. I cannot save you if you believe you are beyond saving. You will eat, and you will watch how much you drink." A part of me wanted to tell him to go stuff himself, but I was mostly bemused by the return of Professor Snape. As he strode back and forth in front of the fire, admonishing me to take care what I say and do, my mind cast back to watching him stride across the floor of his classroom. My thoughts scattered when I heard him mention Macnair's name.

"Pardon? What about Macnair?" He actually glared at me for that. I couldn't help my smile.

"I said: Be on your guard against Macnair. He might try to see if I am vulnerable by getting at you. You should do your best not to call attention to yourself, or better yet disparage me, if the opportunity comes up."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you vulnerable through me?"

He stopped pacing and dropped his gaze down to the floor, his fists clenched at his side. "Yes," he said quietly, then raised his eyes to me in anguish, "but I cannot show it."

"I understand," I answered, and then, to let him understand my part, I said, "Terrible things have happened to me here, Severus. I will survive what comes. I found out years ago I am not allowed to die." His face contorted as if in pain, but he got command of it again.

"Hermione, it could be a very long time."

I nodded, and then a light went on.

"But you have a plan. "

He looked at me like I was daft.

"Of course I have a bloody plan!" Of course he did. He was Slytherin. He never would have taken that vow without a plan.

"Yes, well, be careful with it. My experience is plans go terribly wrong."

"Only when there are too many Gryffindors involved," he quipped, and then looked instantly contrite. I smiled sadly, as tears filled my eyes.

"Just one left."

He came around the table and wrapped his arms around me. We stayed like that until the next chime tolled for checkout. He pulled out his wand and, with a muttered incantation, changed back into the nondescript man from the night before. He pulled out some galleons and handed them to me. When I started to protest he told me it would look suspicious if a man booked me for the entire night and didn't tip. After making me gag down his Vitamin Infusion and Strengthening Solutions, despite my protests that I did not need them, and then returning my robes to their previous state at my insistence, we were at the door and it was time to say our good byes.

"How will we be able talk? When will I see you again?" I asked, clutching at his arm. He peeled my fingers off and gave me a long suffering sigh.

"The same way we did last night," he said, as if I was dimwitted.

"But Severus, the cost alone--" The money last night had cost him had been considerable.

"I am a man of some means, Hermione," he said with pride. My face must have reflected my utter rejection of this idea because he scowled, clearly insulted. "Just see to yourself, eat, stay out of trouble and be patient." With that he pecked me on the top of my head and swirled out the door.

A man of some means, indeed. Why would someone of measure let themselves dress and look so dreadful? He did look somewhat better last evening, but when he first turned up he looked only one step above a Knockturn Alley tramp. Standing on the landing, I listened to the fluttering voice of Ma settling up accounts and then heard the firm snap of the front door.

As I made my way up to the attic to get some more sleep, I contemplated the events of the night. Severus Snape had returned because he had heard a rumor I was ill. He brewed me potions he thought I might need to get better. The same man then made an Unbreakable Vow to find a way to make me safe. And lest I forget, he all but admitted what side he was on during the war, as much as a Slytherin admits anything, anyway. He had basically handed me his life in an incredibly Gryffindor manner. Any of these facts would have sealed his doom with the Ministry, and he never even asked for my silence or discretion. He trusted me. He trusted me with his life. There was no question that I would make myself worthy of that trust. Even if he could find no way to take me away from here, he had already freed me. For that, I would be eternally

grateful.

I dropped the tips he had given me into the collection box marked "Princess." I was tempted to hold back one of the coins just to keep as evidence the night was real, but I knew it would be discovered, and I would get a in trouble. He had told me to take care of myself, and so I would. I would do anything he asked.

I tried to reconcile the man that swirled out of the bedroom in a billow of tan robes with the hunched over, broken man from a few weeks ago as I peeled off my clothes and tossed them into the hamper. There was such a marked difference. After his story of what happened to him during and after the war and the between the lines revelations, I started to understand what he was when he appeared in the lounge that night. He was just as broken as I had thought. I could well imagine what it would have done to a proud man like Snape to have the cause he had worked so hard for, that he had sacrificed so much for, be completely and utterly destroyed in what he called 'thirty minutes of swift, little agonies.' To not have any one person left alive on the planet that he would be happy to see. To have lived with the guilt of what he had done for a lost cause. I could well imagine the depths of pain he must have suffered to play out the role thrust upon him, to destroy his own godson, thinking his cover might still serve to protect those that were left, only to find they were all dead already.

One thing that confused me was the fact that he was still alive. Even my incomplete knowledge of my suffering caused me to repeatedly try to end my life throughout that first year of hell. The fact that I am still here is due to the determination that I be made to suffer as long as humanly possible. I was not allowed to die. Unable to take my own life, I was also unable to provoke a patron of the Brown Room into a killing rage. It took me several attempts to realize there were charms on the room to alert the house when the violence was close to becoming fatal. I thought of the lengths of deranged creativity I had gone to, trying to find death, and could not understand why Snape, Potions master and Death Eater, free man, could not have accomplished the same. It would have been fast and easy for a man of his accomplishments. He had lost everything, his honor, his dignity, his soul, his friends and companions, his purpose and any prestige he may have once had amongst the sick cabal he had joined as an angry teenager. What made him survive? The man that had been dragged out into the light to stand in the center of a whorehouse lounge and be laughed at was all that had been left of a once bright warrior.

Something had changed within him since that night. The broken warrior had come back, slightly less seedy, slightly more powerful, but still intensely vulnerable. And this same broken warrior had pledged himself to me. I remember his words from earlier in the night, said so quietly they were almost missed. *'Perhaps I needed a cause.'*

The enormity of that statement became overwhelming, and I crashed down onto my hard, little bed. This man, who had survived years in duplicitous service to the Dark Lord, who had languished but lived through the five long years after the defeat of everything and everyone he held dear, had made me his cause. He would secure my safety or die trying. Why? Why would he do such a stupid thing? Why bother surviving at all just to pledge your probable death for a whore?

Well, it was obvious he trusted me. Somehow, I had done something to earn that. I would just have to trust him. After all, he had a plan, didn't he?

What an amazing, stupid man. An amazing, stupid man who was an amazing, earnest lover. As I lay under my thin blanket in the early morning light, I contemplated the absurdities of life that would make such a broken man the best lover a whore had ever had. I rolled over and closed my eyes. Lulled by the soft snores of the other girls around me, I started to drift away, my mind filled with the fire in his eyes when he held me.

To Be Worthy

Chapter 10 of 40

Hermione ponders what form her rescue will take, only to discover it will be infinitely more complicated than she had hoped for.

Thanks, again, to the wonderful Astopperindeath, for her patience with commas.

"...eat, stay out of trouble and be patient."

These words became my mantra over the next few weeks. Peaches and Angel were pleasantly surprised, if a little confused, by my changed demeanor. I won't lie and say I was suddenly chipper, but I had this shiny, new and fragile thing called hope that I held tightly to my chest. I mean physically. I actually found myself walking around with my hands cradled to my heart. So, I ate, did my best to not get in trouble, and tried to be patient.

The last was of course the hardest. Every time the door opened, I looked up to see who was coming into the lounge on Ma's arm, waiting to feel eyes staring a hole through my soul from a disguised face. He hadn't returned since, but he would. He had taken a vow. I passed my days and my nights in flights of fancy. I made up many scenarios in my head. The most common was: He came and swept me off my feet and whirled us away to some far-off place with a beach and drinks with paper umbrellas in them. Other times, he slipped me a Portkey, to be activated at a certain time or a certain phase of the moon. In my fantasies, he was better looking. He had somehow fixed his teeth and trimmed his hair, not too much. I kind of liked the gypsy look, and he had gotten some sun, or had his liver fixed, whatever was the cause of his ghastly pallor. He would take me out into the world, and people would look upon me with envy to see me on his arm. Fantasizing about having sex with him, while being with other men, wasn't a good idea though. I found that out the next day. It just made the mechanics of the act all the more irritating. Besides, it just felt wrong. What he and I had done had been so different from all the other acts, that to bring it into this other place was somehow demeaning or blasphemous. So, I saved that for when I showered. I spent a lot of time in the shower. I didn't even bother to scrub myself raw anymore.

Things were as close to happy as I got, if not for this one niggling cloud that always hung over even my brightest thoughts: What if he failed? I was so far out on an emotional limb, that failure would destroy me utterly. I knew this as I knew my own name. If he failed in his vow, I would be trapped here forever; a few months ago I was reconciled to that, but not anymore. It would kill what was left of my soul. But what was worse, what I couldn't face down, was the idea that if he failed it was because he was dead. And if he died, it was because I killed him. Something I did made that man latch onto me as his cause, and I was responsible for his life now.

Powerless to do a thing toward my own salvation that would help, I struggled, instead, to be worthy of him. However, besides the ordinary biographical data one knows about one's teacher, and the small added information that comes from fellow soldiers in a war, I really didn't know a damned thing about him. So I put my considerable mind towards coming up with behavioral plans for whatever type of woman he preferred. Basically, it worked like this: If on Monday it occurred to me he might like his woman to be meek, I spent the rest of the day being meek just so I could work any potential kinks out. Tuesdays, I would be take charge and assertive. Wednesdays, I would be bookish and proper, which was admittedly difficult without a book and wearing little more than a corset and a thong, but so it went. I can tell you that I drove Peaches especially batty on Saturdays when I would practice being a jolly sort.

It goes without saying that while I had my head up my arse trying to prepare for my savior's oh-so-very-Gryffindor-ish rescue, I was completely oblivious to the utterly Slytherin maneuvers that had already been put in motion.

I am embarrassed to say that it was several more weeks before I started to get wind of patterns in the events being gossiped about in the kitchen at the end of a night. I do

know that when I did put the pieces together, my little fantasies and games blew apart and never returned. There was no more childish foolishness, only fear and sick worry because if my growing suspicions were correct, then my savior was not going to rush in here and free me by scooping me up and whisking me away. Oh no, nothing as utilitarian and relatively easy as that. Severus Snape was going to ensure my freedom and safety by destroying the Death Eaters and their Dark Lord with them. And that stupid, stupid, git of a man was trying to do it alone.

I didn't know if he even knew about the Horcruxes.

I had no proof of my suspicions. Of course I didn't, he was Slytherin to the core. The gossip about him was rather mundane and not at all interesting to anyone other than myself. He had enjoyed a brief bit of attention when he had first resurfaced. Macnair felt the Dark Lord's displeasure at his less than welcoming behavior towards Snape that first night. But interesting news faded when it became apparent that he really was nothing more than an old trusted friend of the Dark Lord, with no interest in power. In fact, his utter neutrality in the various disputes and factions within the government structure, and disinterest in such, made him seem quite boring. The Dark Lord let him return to his more than humble home, by all accounts, but called on him from time to time, happy to have a bit of advice from someone with no agenda. He even asked him to oversee some new trade possibilities with the wizarding population in the Andes, and Snape dutifully went, but returned after each trip to report his findings and then quietly slipped back into research, grumbling politely about having to leave his labs at important moments in his neverending research into the Dark Arts. All this was relayed in dribs and drabs by the younger men, many of whom seemed to be frustrated that their revered former Head of house wasn't swooping in to raise them up to glory. Especially Theo Nott, who thought his impression of Snape was spot on. It wasn't.

It was a singularly spectacular event that galvanized my attention and caused me to reexamine everything I had heard but not paid attention to: The deaths of Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange.

The younger men were all abuzz with the news, and their excitement bled over into openly bragging about the facts and suppositions they knew even to us girls. They tripped over each other in their need to have the best tidbit, the juiciest detail. Apparently, no one else had the type of access or influence with the Dark Lord that Bellatrix did, and the open lack of sympathy for her demise spoke volumes. It helped that the story was incredibly sordid as well.

It seemed that Rodolphus, a fairly regular patron of our fine establishment, had a sad little secret. He apparently was rather fond of a young half-blood man from Indonesia. Gossip had it he had set him up in some splendor and thought him rather well hidden. Absenting himself away to tryst with his young lover on his lunch hour, he found said boy dead. Poisoned. Returning to the Ministry in terrible grief, he was confronted by a cackling Bellatrix. Witnesses said the confrontation was loud, swift and quickly over. He made a fool of himself demanding to know how she had found out about him, and she screamed back in a sing-song voice about little birdies telling her things. Rodolphus was described as foaming at the mouth as he accused his wife of destroying his secret young lover, and while she screamed her derision on his pathetic nature and blurted out his secrets to all and sundry, he aimed a killing curse at her from behind, killing her dead in front of the entire department of Magical Imports and Exports. Then, by all accounts completely raving, he tried to fly out a window on the fifth floor of the Ministry, forgetting the small fact that the Ministry is located underground. He pulped himself against the wall.

The next few days were even more frantic as we heard how the Dark Lord had called Snape back from La Paz to examine the bodies. All were astir as the Potions master confirmed that Rodolphus had been poisoned as well. The Dark Lord was very angry indeed.

The deaths of the Lestranges left two vacuums to be filled. One, the incredibly lucrative department that Rodolphus had been in charge of, and, even more important, the job of top advisor to the Dark Lord himself. Those who were too eager to step into those positions were under suspicion of having orchestrated their demise. Those who shied away from the positions risked having someone else gain greater power and influence over policy. One thing was clear: the Death Eaters were in a panic.

I set my mind to how to best exploit this.

The Game

Chapter 11 of 40

Hermione, and the other girls at the house, indulge in a little exploitation of their own, before realising the consequences of playing with fire.

Thank you to Astopperindeath, for her brave beta work. Also, a special thank you to Whitehound for her hard work on my original story idea.

The atmosphere at Ma's was a mixture of tension you could cut with a knife, offset by high spirits of equal intensity. The tension was, of course, from the men, who came and tried to lose themselves in the pleasures of the flesh. The Death Eaters were on edge of course, but even those customers not part of our illustrious government showed the effects of the unease brought on by instability. It was the girls who were in high spirits from watching the unfolding drama and telling the sordid tidbits they had gleaned from the evening's work. They vied against each other for the most dramatic bit of news while unwinding around the kitchen table at the end of the night. I soaked up everything I heard.

Discipline had broken down amongst the brethren, and information poured into the ears of the delighted whores they mistakenly turned to for comfort. Names were banded about as replacements for the dead Lestranges, with Dolohov being the most frequently mentioned and even Macnair seeming a possibility. One name was never brought up. It would seem Severus Snape didn't factor into anyone's gossip anymore. They were so blind.

All of the girls were darkly amused at these events. Peaches and Angel were particularly vicious in their glee. Peaches had a good thing with Macnair; he was a possessive regular and didn't like when she was with another man, so it was always less work for her on nights he was there. But he would be more of a fool than even I thought if he assumed she felt any loyalty. After all, none of us would have been here if we weren't filthy Mudbloods good for nothing else. It took no work at all to get her on board with sowing doubt and fueling insecurities. Indeed, she was the one who started what became known as 'the game'.

'The game' was easy to play and fun for everyone, if you were one of us whores. It was simple: pick a Death Eater at random and try to cause them some trouble. Points were scored by how many things another Death Eater would say about them behind their back. A whispered word here, an innocent, but untrue, statement there and the fools were off and running, chasing their tails trying to discover who had said what about them. It gave us a sense of power that was heady stuff for most of us. The only problem was trying to keep twenty-four women from slipping up and giving it all away. I had little control over that, but was fairly secure in the knowledge that this need to use what little we had to tear them down couldn't be directly traced back as my idea. I just fanned the flames a little and watched it consume them all.

Mistrust now coiled around the entire corrupt government, like a miasma, and the shifting alliances and factions were becoming obvious and easy to exploit.

On one side fell those Elders that had gotten fat and complacent in their own power, formerly vicious Death Eaters from the Dark Lord's first rise to power that no longer had their killer instinct. You could almost smell their fear. This group belonged to Macnair and Rookwood and the others in it followed where those two led.

The second group was comprised of well-known but less secure Elders, like Carrow, Crabbe and Goyle and the younger men that had come of age almost too late to make an impression, such as the younger Crabbe and Goyle. This group didn't seem to have as much cohesion, just a seething discontent and greed.

In some cases, fathers and sons fell on different sides; such was the case with Theo Nott and his father. Mercy and Ruby played the game well with those two: the girls had them at each other's throats. Their confrontation happened elsewhere; but we all heard about it afterwards and Nott Senior had not returned since.

It was a girl named Dusty that decided to see if we could expand the game outside of the house. There was another group of Elders that did not frequent our house of ill repute, Death Eaters who were more concerned with the power shifts and politics than in petty debauchery, among them Mulciber and my old nemesis Dolohov. Targeting Death Eaters who didn't fall under our direct influence was a greater challenge. Higher points would be scored if you picked a target and that person's name was on everyone's lips within the week. Whoever had the most points by Sunday morning would get out of chores as much as possible without incurring Ma's curiosity.

The game wasn't without its price. Frustrated men, especially those already at peace with violence, weren't well-known for their restraint. Many of our number sported an injury or two as a result of the toll malicious gossip took. Myself included, that last living symbol of the vanquished was an especially obvious target. Macnair took a fierce enjoyment out of the sudden backhand across my face when I chanced to get too close on a bad day. However, for the most part, we wore our bruises with pride around the huge table in the kitchen.

Things settled into a routine of sorts; having the game to look forward to became the focus for almost all the women. I think several almost became convinced that we, alone, were the cause of all the Death Eaters' problems. It wasn't until one particular Saturday night that proof another source was chafing away finally came.

It was a busy night; the Death Eaters had booked two lounges and eighteen rooms. The two factions were studiously avoiding each other, and it was the girls swinging through both rooms who were racking up the most points. Angel had scored a minor rush of points by coming into the room of younger men still giggling about the 'very funny thing that she overheard someone say about some bint named Alecto.' Of course, she couldn't remember who had said it, she had only been passing through. No, she had no idea who they were talking about, for goodness sake. Of course, it might not have even been true, her apologies; she didn't mean to offend. Would the gentleman care for a drink to soothe his nerves? Surely, Mr. Rookwood was only having them on, or maybe it was Macnair; they were standing so very close together, after all... She was marvelous.

We were mingling, slowly being paired off with our designated partner or partners as the case may be, when the room filled with a collective hiss, as if we were suddenly surrounded by dozens of snakes. It took me a minute to catch on to what was going on, and then I had to look to the other girls to see when they did. I didn't want to show I understood before they did and single myself out.

As of one body, all the men all started to file out of the room, heading for the door with their arms clutched tightly to their bodies. Doors banged open upstairs, and men came thrashing down the stairs holding their arms. Grudge matches that had been full blown earlier were set aside as the Death Eaters headed out the door to the Apparition site.

Ma's voice could be heard floating in the hallway and got louder as she came into the Rose Lounge.

"What was all that? What in Merlin's name was all that?"

"I know," called a girl from the other room. "It was the Summons, that's what that was alright." Maisy came in with her arms crossed across her chest. "I heard tell that's how he used to call his faithful in the days before the inglorious revolution." Done speaking, she leaned over and spat into a potted plant.

"Aye, I heard the same. Never seen it done before tonight, though," said Ruby.

"Well then," replied a still perplexed Ma. "Well then." She turned a critical eye on us and started clapping her hands. "The evening is still young; you lot tidy up the rooms and freshen up. You're not off the clock yet. Get moving." She started to shoo at us, and we broke up and started to drift away.

Peaches slid up along side of me as I was plumping up cushions.

"So, the Dark Lord has summoned his minions."

"So it would seem."

"Do you think this means anything for us?"

"In what way?"

"Only that he has no need to summon them through the Mark anymore; they have regular business meetings and the like now. I'm just saying that it seems a mite suspicious that he cleared out the whole place of Death Eaters, and here we've been making a lark out of playing with their brains, haven't we?" That said she punched a pillow viciously and dropped it onto a couch.

"Hold those thoughts. There's no use panicking when we don't have enough information." I tried to sound reassuring, but her words had struck home. As I looked at the faces of the other women in the room, I saw the same fear reflected in them as well.

We sat around in dread for two hours. The women not engaged upstairs were all crowded into the Lilac lounge as if to be alone was bad luck. Even Ma kept circling back into the room in an excess of nervous energy. We all knew something big was going down, but there was no telling what it meant for us.

A crack of Apparition outside sent Ma back to her foyer shouting, "Someone turn the blasted radio on and stop looking like you are all at a funeral parlor!" The bell chimed to signal someone's entry, and I saw Angel clutch her belly as if she was going to be sick. I walked over and sat next to her. I wrapped my arms around her elbow, and she sagged slightly against me. More Apparitions sounded, and soon the door opened to emit a loud, boisterous group all calling for wine, women and song. Angel and I collapsed together, and there was a thud as Dusty knocked against an end table in her relief and sent a lamp onto the sofa. Nervous smiles flew around the room until the party of young Death Eaters came barreling into the room, voices raised in triumph.

AN: My sincere apologies for the delay in getting this chapter out, and also, for the delay in review responses. All I can say in my defense is: It's not good when it snows in Georgia...

Slytherin, Ascendant

Chapter 12 of 40

The younger Death Eaters are deeply affected by dramatic events taking place at the Ministry, and start to see things in

a new light.

Thank you, again, to astopperindeath for her patience with my utter lack of comma sense.

It was a larger group of the younger men than I ever remembered seeing together at once. There were none of the Elders in the group. There were very boisterous and free with the information they let flow.

"Oi, Greg! I am so jealous you got to wear one!"

"Did you see the snake coil back? I almost wet myself I tell you!"

"I tell you it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw!"

"I was there, I was there! And did you see their faces when they saw who was behind the mask? I tell you, it was a grand moment, it was!"

Peaches slid into the lap of Caddoc Warrington with two glasses of champagne.

"So what are we celebrating tonight, boys?"

It was Crabbe who jumped up and waved his glass.

"We drink to a changing of the guards!"

There was much shouting at that and some mutterings of 'about time' before he continued.

"We drink to the new future!"

"Sounds like a lovely story!" laughed one of the girls.

"I want to hear a story!" shouted another. This began a chorus of 'Tell us!' and the foolish men were too full of themselves to realize they were being played.

It was Theo Nott who was voted to tell the story, and I must say he did an impressive job. Hearing him tell it was almost as good as being there.

This was the story he told:

The Dark Lord was displeased; each man had felt his recent discontent through the mark. *Why* had been the cause of much speculation but there was no information coming from any channels, just rumor and innuendo. No one was expecting or in any way prepared for the pain of the mark burning with the energy of an undeniable Summons. Over a hundred men and a few dozen women clambered to get to the hall of the Wizengamot first in a panicked show of loyalty. Nott saw his father take his seat along with the other Elders. The were ranged about in a half circle closer to the floor across from the solitary throne, empty now but for the great snake coiling about it. The rest of them settled into the rows flowing upward in a semi circle. When they were all settled in the dimly lit chamber, lights flared and Lord Voldemort entered into the room, closely followed by a tall, masked Death Eater. This caused a stir. Since the rise of the Dark Lord, much of the ritual and ceremony of the group had fallen to the wayside. The tradition of wearing the mask was one of them. They all had one, but it usually hung on a wall or in a curio cabinet as a symbol of prestige. There was no use for it in day-to-day affairs anymore. Nott had never gotten the chance to wear his into battle. To see one being worn brought to mind darker days, when they were all hungry for the power they grew fat on later. Young Nott noticed some of the Elders reacted strongly to the sight and started to mutter in anger.

"Silence!" hissed the Dark Lord. Nott was struck by his appearance. It had been some time since his last audience, and he found himself again intensely ill at ease with how inhuman he looked. Papery skin that stretched too thin over his boney scalp looked almost green. Red reptilian eyes flamed angrily out of the slit-nosed face. Everyone was silent and completely focused on him as he walked to his throne but did not sit. He paced in front of it as his escort took a place of honor to the right and just behind. Even Nott gasped at this. Only Bellatrix ever stood there. So, one void had been filled. Nott looked down on the front row trying to see who wasn't seated. Only two chairs empty, one had been empty since the death of Rodolphus Lestrange and the other was Dolohov's. 'So, that's the way of it,' he thought. The light in the room dimmed until only the Dark Lord himself and his lone sentinel were fully visible.

"Treachery!" cried Lord Voldemort. The room fell as silent as a tomb. Nott himself stopped breathing. *Ah, there is so much treachery in this room tonight; it's only a matter of which one, he marveled.*

"You jackals and dogs who claim to have given me your allegiance!" he continued. "You are a disgrace, with your petty plots trying to hold onto your petty little powers! Have I raised you up to become a laughingstock? So word of your incompetence and treachery can be spoken about openly among shopkeepers and witches in the market?" Around him quiet noise resumed as people shifted nervously in their seats.

"I will not have it! I will purge this room of any who have raised the feel of gold over their fealty! Mark my words. It is done, and so it begins." With that he spun on his heel and, gesturing toward the wide doors in the back, he shouted, "Bring in the traitor!" Nott's gut clenched in fear.

The doors swung wide and in walked two masked Death Eaters, shorter and stockier than the tall elegant one by the throne. Between them they dragged another man. It was apparent he could not walk, from the broken angle of his legs. As they approached the center, Lord Voldemort gestured to the throne.

"Put him there; that is where he hoped his schemes would get him!" As they came around, they worked together to shift their prisoner into position and then flung him into the seat. Nagini hissed and coiled back but did not strike. The Death Eater beside the throne didn't react at all. He kept his face on the Dark Lord at all times, and Nott belatedly realized that was what he should have done as well. He looked now. It was out of the corner of his eye he saw the other Death Eaters step back and retreat off to the side of the room.

"Present the would-be-Lord to his court," hissed Voldemort.

Quick as a viper, the first Death Eater shot his hand forward and, grabbing a fistful of hair, snapped the head of the prisoner up and back against the throne, revealing him to all. A ragged moan escaped the prisoner's lips but was soon drowned out by the roar of shock that filled the room.

Dolohov! Nott was electrified as shock and awe shot through him but it was soon replaced by a seething pleasure *Another one falls, even more for us now.*

"Behold the traitor! Behold a man, not content with what I have bestowed upon him, but who hungered for this very seat of power itself!"

Voldemort turned and swept the room with his contemptuous gaze.

"You ask yourselves now, how can this be? I hear your shallow little thoughts. I tell you now, you do not need to know! You need only concern yourself with the fact that I found out! I always find out! Look to yourselves, you dogs! Know that before he broke he confessed all!" He whipped his gaze back to the Death Eater behind the throne. "Did he not?" The man remained silent but nodded his head slowly. Who was he? If not Dolohov, then who was missing? Nott tried in vain to think of who it could be as he looked down on the Elders ranged below. *No one else is missing.* And then a notion gripped him. *But one was never there.* One had never sat in this chamber. There was one who had only lived to serve and then disappeared into obscurity, only recently making fleeting appearances. Nott looked back at the Death Eater beside the throne and took his measure. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. His robes were of a much, much finer cut than seen on him or any others lately, and the mask and hood obscured his head, but

there was no mistaking the regal bearing or the stiff spine. Or the way, by his very attentiveness to every word or gesture of the Dark Lord, he seemed to show the room how it was done. It had to be Severus Snape, the last of the true Death Eaters. One who never could be corrupted by the power and greed around him. At that moment Nott felt his loyalties fixate on this man and rejoiced to see this symbol of all things Slytherin, ascendant once again. Nott was going to ascend with him. He looked around at his fellows seated near and wondered if they had caught on yet.

"Behold the fate of traitors!" cried Lord Voldemort. "*CRUCIO!*"

Nott watched in fascination that slowly turned to horror as Dolohov spasmed and crumpled off of the throne. As he thrashed, Nagini, coiled on the floor near him, struck again and again apparently immune to the effects of the curse. Still the Dark Lord poured his anger into torturing his prisoner. It seemed to go on forever until with a shriek filled with madness, a madness that curdled in Nott's belly, he shouted out the killing curse and Dolohov fell still in a blaze of vile green light. Nott had to strain to keep his bowels from letting go.

Into the tomb-like quiet of the room, the Dark Lord quietly spoke his last words of the evening, "You will be purged. You will be reforged. And you will be renewed. Or you will be destroyed." And with that he spun on his heel and left the chamber.

His attending Death Eater did not follow, and nobody moved. He raised an elegant, long fingered hand and snapped, and the masked Death Eaters against the wall came up and made a fairly good show of not being terrified while wrestling the body away from the snake. When they had it they dragged it out of the chamber. The lone masked Death Eater looked up at his audience and then took one deliberate step until he was directly behind the throne and then slowly reached up and took off his mask.

No one made a sound as Snape perused the gathering, and then with the slightest sideways bow of his head, he replaced his mask and left the chamber with his robes flaring out after him.

The room erupted into pandemonium when he left. Nott looked down at the thunderous expression on his own father's face and smugly thought, *Your time is over, old man.*

Oh, it's getting yummy now...

In the Eyes

Chapter 13 of 40

The next generation of Death Eaters confront some harsh truths.

Thank you to astopperindeath for the beta.

The second generation of Death Eaters had been electrified by the events of that night. It showed in their almost reluctance to leave the room. Those that did take a girl and go off often came back in record time to rejoin the never-ending conversation. None of them sprang for the extra Galleons to purchase the Princess for a tryst, so I was relegated to serving drinks. The conversation never diverted from the events of the evening.

Frustrated, these five years, with being left out of important matters and with being relegated to an existence only one step above the lackeys that swarmed the Ministry, they were ripe for change. That change came in the form of a figure that was both an outsider and an insider at the same time, who was tailor made for their restlessness.

I had no idea that Severus had become such a romantic figure to them in the weeks since he had appeared. It would seem they were eager to gloss over the reality of the utterly diminished Snape, angry, confused, and helpless, while surrounded by the smiling hatred of his fellow Elders. They chose to interpret his actions as simply another case of just how above it all he was, that he had not deigned to respond. They discounted the truth that Rookwood had chanced upon him in an apothecary shop and literally had not allow him to decline the invitation to that night's events. The idea that he had been dragged, unwillingly, back into the fold didn't mesh with what they needed, and so they decided instead to believe he had just chosen his timing for dramatic effect, waiting for the time to be right.

Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle were especially feted that night as the lucky dogs who got to wear their masks and participate in the floor show. They were repeatedly asked for more behind-the-scenes details and insider information, and they lapped up the attention.

"He asked for us; I got word around noon to appear at the Ministry atrium immediately and to bring my mask. When I got there, Greg was already there."

"Aye. I got the same message," said Goyle.

"So we were standing there, not knowing what was up, when suddenly Snape was there."

"Vin called him Headmaster, and he got this queer look on his face and came over all angry suddenly."

"Yeah, call him Snape, if you know what's good for ya. He don't seem to like his old titles at all."

"Anyway he just made us follow him," continued Crabbe. "When we got to the corridor leading to the Dark Lord's chambers, he stopped and made us put on our masks. His mask is really cool, much better than the ones they gave us."

"Ain't that the truth. I wonder if we can ask him for better ones?"

There were excited nods. It seemed the boys just wanted shinier toys and missed the symbolism completely.

"So, we follow him up to the door, and he tells us to mind our manners and do whatever we're told without question," Crabbe said.

"I felt a bit like a first-year. Kind of resented that for a bit, but it turned out to be good advice didn't it?" Goyle said.

"Yeah, so, we all go in and, well, there's the Dark Lord himself. We fell to our knees, but he just waved us up and then ignored us. He was pretty worked up, so when Snape told us to go stand against the wall, I was pretty pleased to go be a part of the wall."

"Yeah."

"The Dark Lord didn't even pay us no mind. He just continued to pace, and Snape stood to the side still as a post. When the hour struck one, he just waved his hand, and Snape went over to another door and opened it. In walks Antonin Dolohov and four of his Junior Ministers all business-like and holding all these reports. Dolohov made a quick bow and started talking about something, you remember what he said, Greg?"

"No."

"Anyway, our Lord just lost it. He just flew into a rage and hexed Dolohov. Just like that. His lackeys just fell to the floor bowing and scraping but Dolohov did something really stupid."

"What?" asked Nott.

"He tried to shield himself," answered Goyle. There were gasps all around the room.

"Maybe it was instinct?" asked Vaisey.

"Doesn't make a difference, does it?" Nott said. "If our Lord wants you hexed, you want to be hexed, don't you?" He turned back to Goyle. "So, then what happened?"

"Well, Snape was right behind him. I don't think Dolohov even saw him when he came in, but Snape had been right behind him the whole time and so he *wainside* Dolohov's shield spell. He dropped him with a stunner and disarmed him."

"Fast work, too. I didn't really see it happen."

"Then what happened?"

"Well," Goyle looked to Crabbe who looked at the floor. "Well, our Lord went a little mad after that." He hesitated and looked to Crabbe again but no help was forthcoming. "He killed the others. Just went mad and started butchering them; I never seen nothing like it. He's a lot more powerful than anything I ever laid eyes on."

"Anyone we knew?" asked someone from the back of the room. You could see they were disturbed by this news. None of them had seen any violence since the war, and most in this room never had.

"Pansy," said Crabbe quietly. "Didn't know the other three; they were all older than us."

"What did Snape do?" rasped out Nott.

"Nothing. After he trussed up Dolohov, he just stood back and watched the Dark Lord tear the others to pieces. When it was over, he snapped his fingers and told us to take the bodies down to the morgue and come right back."

"When we got back, they had Dolohov stuck against the wall, arms and legs spread out and hovering about a foot up. His wand was on the ground, broken. Snape pointed to the wall on the other side of the room, and we went and took up position there."

"Yeah, not much more to say after that; Snape put up a silencing spell. Couldn't hear nothing."

"But we did see it. Our Lord did the physical damage; he was raving at him and torturing him. Dolohov was answering, but I don't know what. Our Lord broke both of his legs and cut off his fingers with a slicing spell and hit him with *Crucio* every three minutes."

"I think somehow Snape was even more disturbing though." Crabbe said. "It was when Snape would walk up and look into his eyes that Dolohov really lost it. He started to cry and thrash about even in the pain he was in. It was horrible."

"What do you mean, looked at him?" asked Warrington.

"Just looked at him. Right in the eyes."

"Well did he say something?"

"I already said we couldn't hear, didn't I?" Crabbe shouted.

"Well did you see his lips move? Did he wave his wand?" Warrington shouted back.

"I don't remember. I think so."

"Yeah, I think he waved his wand, I don't know, it was all so confusing."

"Well," said Nott, "that just proves it doesn't it?"

"Proves what?" asked Warrington.

"Proves that Dolohov was guilty. Snape wouldn't have done whatever he did if he wasn't, would he have?"

I watched as this thought bounced around the room. You could see these young men were desperate for a justification of the violence and wanted a way to separate their new-found hero from the apparent madness. Strange, that a bunch of bullies, so eager to take their place in a world conquered through terror and violence, seemed to shy away from the thought.

"I think you're right, Nott," said Warrington. The others agreed, and the tone of the room lightened as they fell to wondering who would be the next Minister of Magical Law Enforcement.

I continued my rounds with my ever present tray of drinks, until Maisy came up and lightly touched my arm.

"You have been requested," she murmured and took the tray from me. I nodded and, with a quick glance to make sure my corset was adjusted and the seams of my silk stockings were straight, I headed out to the lobby to see who wanted the Princess next.

Say It Again

Hermione tries to assimilate the many sides of Severus Snape.

Thanks to Astopperindeath for the final beta. :)

I stepped gracefully into the lobby, the heels of my boots clicking on the tile. Ma and a short, stocky man, by his robes a fairly successful businessman, had their backs to me as they discussed fees and additional charges. When they heard me they both turned. I looked toward Ma, plastic smile in place as she spoke.

"Ah, here's the Princess! Come and meet this fine gentleman! Show him upstairs and give him a night to remember, Dear." I nodded to her and looked to the 'fine' gentleman himself, and my steps faltered. Of course he was completely nondescript, but the burning gaze from eyes I couldn't quite distinguish, belonged to only one man. I almost flew to his side.

I reached out and took his elbow and speared my arm jerkily towards the stairs, and we set off in silence, up the stairs and down the hall, toward the same room over the kitchen. When I entered the room, he whirled around behind me and closed the door. Taking out his wand he waved a complicated series of wards on the room that I thought unnecessary, due to the privacy and silencing charms already woven into the walls, and followed this by pulling objects from his robes and setting them on the table by the door. I saw a Sneakoscope and a Foe-Glass and another object I had never seen before that seemed to rock side-to-side for no reason. I grew very fearful and backed away across the room.

Silently, he removed the charm that changed his appearance and looked at me. He still hadn't said a word and made no move closer to me. We stared at each other in silence as I took in his changed appearance. His face was a blank mask. His eyes were fierce, but I did not understand the expression. He looked harder, sterner and more dreadful than I had seen him before. His skin was as sallow as ever, and I scolded myself for a fool for making him so dashing in my stupid, schoolgirl fantasies; he was not so. Oh, he was dressed in rich, dark robes of a very fine cut and cloth, purest black with subtle black embroidery, the edges of a snow white fine linen peeked through at collar and over-long sleeves. He wore them well. But his face was still the one that God gave him and, although it was mesmerizing, and indeed pleasing to me, it could never pass for handsome.

I wondered, as he stared back at me, if he also found me lacking, lesser somehow in flesh, than the memory. My fingers twisted themselves together, and I bit my lip as I looked down at the floor. I felt like I had in my first year, so desperate for approval that time had shown me would not come. I scrunched my eyes closed to stop my tears.

A light touch brought my chin up, and I was again looking up into his eyes. I had not heard him close the distance.

"You are well?" he asked, and I admit I sighed at the sound of his voice. What God passed over in his face, He made up for in his voice.

I saw his eyes soften ever so slightly at this and the hint of another expression, just there, for a fleeting instant. Hope. I realized in a flash that the element of fear caused by his entrance had given us the wrong dynamic. This dread lord, this man that had single-handedly taken control of the entire Ministry in a few *months*, had been so still because he was unsure of his welcome. God strike me for a fool; Severus Snape wasn't sure if he was wanted, and I had backed away in fear.

"Oh, Severus," I whispered. His face changed little, but there were traces of concern and fear still evident, and I knew I only saw them because he allowed it. I leaned up on my toes and kissed him. I wanted to kiss him properly he deserved it, but I choked at the last second, and my sad little kiss landed mostly on his cheek.

His arms came around me in a rush, and he pulled me up against his body, lifting me off my feet. His face was buried in my hair, and I wrapped my arms around him. I tried to make it feel welcoming, but it was more to keep myself from falling and taking him with me, so violent and awkward was the hug. He held me for a long time while I felt his shuddering breaths through the thick layers of his robes. He smelled so good. Eventually, he set me back on my feet but neither of us let go. My hands rubbed his back, and his kneaded at mine like a cat. I kept my cheek pressed to his shoulder, and he rubbed his in my hair. I felt a tentative, almost shy kiss on the top of my head and dug my hands into his back in response. He kissed my temple, and I ran my hands down his sides. He bent his head down and kissed my neck fiercely; I burst into flames and moaned. He leaned back to look into my eyes. He was panting like he had just run from Marathon, and his eyes burned me with their need. He looked possessed. I knew he would not ask. I knew if I backed away, he would shut it off completely as if it never was. He never would ask this of me. Even with his physical and emotional needs upon him so completely as to leave him looking almost demented, this man would never beg. So I did for him.

"I need you, Severus," I rasped. His eyes rolled up, and he growled as he bent down and swept me off my feet.

He carried me over to the bed as if I was no burden at all and laid me down upon it and then fell on me like a sudden storm, enveloping me completely. His lips were at my cheek, my temple, my eyes and my ear, while his hands, needy but gentle, raced along my body. I wriggled my legs to either side and cradled him between while my own hands flew up his back and threaded into his long hair. As he shifted down to plant wet kisses on my breasts, freed from my corset by tearing the laces apart, I pulled his hair up with both hands and scrubbed my face with it. I ground myself against his hardness, amazed at my own frenzy, and with a guttural growl, he reached down and cupped me. I cried out and started to twist against his palm.. He lifted up and looked down between my legs, pulling at my thong until it ripped off, resulting in some pain, which was easily ignored when his hands returned, caressing and probing.

"Where?" he asked. "Show me." His voice was husky, and I felt myself get even more wet.

My hands joined his, and I took his fingers and used them to circle my nub. I took his other hand and pushed two of his fingers inside. He groaned and pressed his erection against my boot-covered knee through his robes. I bent at the side to come closer and pushed his robes away to get at the fastenings of his trousers. I reached in and grabbed his length, so hot, so silky, and I began to stroke it until he cried out and reached up to still my hand. I held him tightly as he returned to his task, circling and rubbing while pumping his other hand in long smooth strokes. His cock slid out of my grip as he shifted back and dove down. His mouth made contact with my clit, and I screamed at the intensity of my feelings. This particular act had never brought me pleasure before, but I was completely undone now. He hummed his own pleasure, and the vibration made me squirm. His fingers slid out of me as his tongue took their place. He greedily lapped at my folds as his fingers returned to my clit. He was a very, very, quick study. The rhythm built up until I was mindless, chanting *'yes! almost!'* over and over. He groaned long and loud, and I blew apart screaming his name. He continued to circle and stroke through my orgasm until it became rather uncomfortable. When I shifted away from his fingers, he scrambled up my body, stopping to try and suck an entire breast into his mouth before reaching down and placing his cock at my entrance and sliding in. He made me feel so complete, I think I started to weep.

"Oh, Hermione..." he gasped. His face fell forward until it was next to mine, cheek pressed against cheek as he pumped into me. Each thrust brought us to further heights and brought his nose closer to mine. As he pounded into me, seeking his release, his head turned seeking something else. Finally, I turned my head just the slightest and found his mouth, and our lips met for the first time. He keened, a desperate mewling sound of happiness as he gently pressed his lips to mine, and his arms wrapped around me. I pressed back and was so very pleased with myself that I did it right. His hips slowed down as his attention was taken up by the kisses he had wanted for so long. I opened my eyes to see his were closed, and I noticed for the first time how long and thick his lashes were. He reveled in the kisses, emotion was writ bold across his face. Feeling strong in myself, I opened my lips slightly and captured one of his and sucked on it gently. He whimpered. I ran my tongue across my captive, and his eyes flew open. Seeing the look of absolute need on his face, I opened my mouth fully, and his eyes fluttered shut as his tongue slid in. I felt his cock surge inside of me. This kiss was not a disgusting act to me, and I again felt my soul sing at the joy I could find with only this man. As our tongues danced, I thrust my hips up, and he renewed our pace. Our mouths broke apart as he started to grunt and growl. I could feel his impending release in the sudden increase in his size. He opened his eyes and looked straight into mine as his breathing became ragged, and I was consumed with one thought: *'Mine.'* His eyes flew open even wider, and then his face crumpled into what looked so close to pain as he screamed out his final pleasure. He collapsed, shuddering, on top of me, but quickly lifted himself back up and loomed over me, his long hair falling to either side of our faces like a privacy curtain.

"Say it again," came his deep, hoarse voice, out of breath.

At first I didn't understand, and my face reflected as much.

"You said I was yours. Say it again, Hermione. I need to be yours, so very much." His face looked so earnest, a little boy asking for a gift.

I smiled; I hadn't realized I had said it out loud.

"Mine," I told him. "You are mine now, Severus Snape."

He leaned forward and gave me the sweetest of kisses before shifting to the side and gathering me up in his robes.

It was as I laid there, surrounded and protected by the warmth of this enigmatic man, that it hit me. I didn't say it aloud. Sneaky bastard. Harry had told me you needed your wand to perform Legilimens. I listened to the sounds of his quiet snoring and smiled.

Don't Doubt Me

Chapter 15 of 40

Hermione gets a much clearer picture of the toll Severus's life has taken on his psyche, and explains what happened that night in the tent...

Thank you to Astopperindeath for her beta skills.

I'm not sure how long I slept before I felt a warm, calloused finger stroke my cheek. I came awake with a start.

"Easy, nothing to be frightened of," said Severus. I struggled to sit up, and my ruined corset gaped open. After a quick survey, I realized everything but my garters was ruined. I gave my bed partner an irritated look that made him flush to the roots of his hair.

"My apologies," he said and jumped up and took off his outer robes and handed them to me. I smiled and got up and shrugged out of what was left of my garments and struggled out of my boots and stockings before I slipped into his robes. They were huge on me, and I was just reveling in the feel of being covered in so much thick cloth when he waved his wand and shrank them down to my size. I huffed and he smirked.

"I needed to see your head," he said and walked over to the loveseat and poured tea. "What can I get you?" he asked.

"Occlumency lessons?" I shot back.

He didn't even look contrite. He just smirked and turned back to the table, confirming my suspicion. He had wanted me to figure that out. Slytherin.

After ogling him in his fitted trousers and linen shirt for a few moments, I slipped into the loo to freshen up. When I came out, it was to see Severus sitting on the loveseat mending my torn thong with his wand; the repaired corset was lying on the back of the seat. On the table in front of him was a plate he had made up for me from the refreshment tray we had never gotten near earlier. As I walked up, he pointed to the plate.

"Eat."

"You're not going to make me drink more potions are you?"

"I reserve the right, but not just now, no." He glanced at the clock over the mantle, and I could see it was just nearing two in the morning. We hadn't slept long. "I thought we needed to talk more than sleep."

"Yes, I agree we have much to talk about. Such as how you came to be the new power behind the throne." I took the plate and sat down and leaned against his arm. He grunted and waved his wand towards me, my thong hanging off the tip. I took it and tossed it on top of the corset.

"Yes, well, that among other things. How have you been faring?"

"I have been fine. I've missed you. I wished you could have come sooner, but after all that the younger men revealed tonight, I understand you were a bit busy." He reached an arm around my shoulders and squeezed gently.

"Quite."

"So was Dolohov guilty of treason?" I asked, deciding to dive right in.

"I'm sure he was guilty of something," came the too casual response, as his hand reached out to caress where the scar Dolohov gave me was under the robe.

"And the Lestranges?"

"One had to be removed; it was best the other do it."

I reached up and took his hand in mine.

"And Pansy Parkinson?" His hand clenched mine, and I looked up to see his eyes close.

"That was... most unfortunate," he said.

"Yes." I replied and rubbed my cheek against our joined hands. "What is your plan, Severus?"

"To set you free," he answered.

"All by yourself? All alone?"

He pulled me close and kissed my head and whispered into my hair.

"There is no one else, Hermione. Only you."

"But what if someone connects all the chaos to your return? I mean, isn't it all a bit obvious?"

"They are narrow-minded, simple fools. The organization is full of rot and ripe for destruction. Only the Dark Lord himself would be observant and paranoid enough to question the timing."

"But won't he?"

"He already did."

"I do not understand."

"It was why I presented myself at court the next day, after that night. I could have scuttled back into the dark like a cockroach, and the waters would have smoothed back over. But I knew my chance had arrived. So instead, I appeared at court. There is no one on the planet more paranoid than the Dark Lord." At this, I gave a significant look at the assortment of instruments he had left by the door. He smirked and ignored me to continue his tale. "So, what was a joyous reunion in front of the crowds became an invasive interrogation behind closed doors." When I got his meaning, I sat up and turned around to look at him.

"He tortured you?"

"Of course, and he discovered all my secrets. Well, the ones I let him see."

My hands flew to my mouth as I tried to stop my tears by blinking rapidly.

"Hush now, it had to be done." He gathered me back into his arms. "After he was thoroughly convinced of my never ending loyalty and my recent shame, he was enraged at my treatment. You see, the Dark Lord was well aware of my celibacy."

I started to struggle up again, but he clamped his arms down.

"Sit still, woman! As I was saying, to avoid the types of enjoyment I found distasteful early on in my days as a Death Eater, I came up with the clever idea of persuading the Dark Lord that I found celibacy to strengthen the will. So, to cover up for the fact that I didn't want to rape anyone, I had to perpetuate a state of 'purity'. The Dark Lord found this admirable and began to do the same, however I suspect it was also show, but to cover up an inability rather than an aversion, if you get my meaning. The only fly in the ointment was that the Dark Lord was aware of my affection for a certain young woman. He was suspicious and disapproving because of her blood status. I told him it was important for me to have an object of desire to reject. I spun a long thread of nonsense, and he seemed to accept it. But I know it bothered him." Here, he hung his head, and I waited patiently to hear what he had to say. "I believe this was a factor in his disregarding my plea to spare her life. I believe he intended to help me be strong. To find a more worthy object to focus on." So, Remus had been right when he said Snape had feelings for Harry's mum.

"So why did you remain celibate through the years between?"

"Guilt. I was the one who brought him the prophecy. I was the one responsible for making her a target in the first place. The years when the Dark Lord was brought low were no respite for me. Albus knew he would return, and I had my duty."

"I see."

We stared into the flames in silence until he brought his mind back to his topic.

"To get back to the point, the Dark Lord was enraged that Rookwood and Macnair would conspire to pressure me into sacrificing my purity. When asked why I did not immediately defend myself, I told the complete truth. I had been far from the center of things too long, I did not know where he stood in the Dark Lord's favor and did not wish to incur further penalties, had I gelded the man, if he was an important asset to his Lordship.

"Rookwood got off relatively easily; all he did was refuse to allow me to go my own way when we met. Macnair broke under questioning and admitted to the planned rape. He has fallen far out of favor.

"Thankfully, you came across as nothing more than a pawn. I managed to explain my reactions under the guise of being carried away by my newfound carnal knowledge. It wouldn't have done for the Dark Lord to have looked too closely at that particular dynamic. He agreed with Macnair's assumptions.

"Thus was I found to be free from suspicion or taint and free to go about my business."

"And what was your business? What did he think you had been doing these last five years?"

"The Dark Lord believes I am trying to make my own Philosopher's Stone and cannot wait to demand I turn it over to him when I am done."

"Severus," I asked, "what have you been doing for the last five years?"

He turned and looked at me and his eyes were full of death.

"Reading children's stories and indulging in egg hunts. Sharpening my blade and waiting for the right moment."

I drew back a little from the intensity of his gaze; there was a glitter in his eyes that I found disturbing.

"So, was I just a catalyst to finally set your plan in motion?"

His eyes lost focus and when they came back they looked confused, then, he pulled me closer and buried his face in my hair.

"No. You were a sign. You were the answer to all my black prayers! You are the reason I lived, I just did not know. I curse that I did not know! You were the spark my soul needed so that I could live again to fulfill my vow." His voice was harsh with emotion.

"What vow?"

"My vow of vengeance; my vow to destroy them utterly. My vow to make Draco's death have some meaning. So that I didn't just live because I was a coward, but because there was still a use for me left before I met my judgment." I shuddered in his arms, frightened at his words. He didn't sound completely sane. He held me tighter and started to rock me back and forth, breathing raggedly.

"Severus, how many vows have you taken?"

"A man is defined by his vows," he spat. "Promises are meaningless. *I promised* I would protect Lily. *I promised* I would protect Potter. *I promised* to protect my students. It's the vows that work. I took a vow to kill Dumbledore. I vowed to protect Draco while he tried to find a way to kill him, and then to kill Albus myself if he failed." His words filled me with horror, and I thrashed in his arms. I put both hands on his chest and tried to push away but he held me tighter rocking madly back and forth.

"No! Don't doubt me now, Hermione!" His voice rose higher and was filled with pain. "Heknew! That bastard knew about my vow and he *made me* live! I told Albus! I told him as soon as I got away from that black-hearted bitch Lestrangle! He knew! He made me kill him!" He spit out a bitter laugh. "He wanted Draco to be unblemished. He wanted me to *live!*" A strangled sound escaped his throat. I was stunned. He just kept moaning "*he made me promise to live*" over and over. My heart broke for him, and I twisted around until I had a hold of his neck, and I wrapped my arms around it and pulled his face into my chest.

"It's alright now, Severus!"

An anguished sob broke from him and he started to cry. Great, hiccupping sobs were wrenched from his chest. I was terrified that I had said the wrong thing and hated myself for not knowing how to help.

Up on my knees on the seat, I clasped him to my bosom and slowed his frenzied rocking down to a soothing pace. I cried. It hurt so, to hear his sobs and to feel my own pain and know what he had lived through, and lived with. I murmured words that I didn't understand until I finally heard myself.

"Mine, it's okay, you're mine now. It's all better now, because you're mine now. Easy, Severus, I have you now." Between each phrase, I kissed the top of his head. I have no idea what I was trying to say, but those were the words that I used to say it.

He clung to me and slowly his sobs subsided. I continued to rock him, crooning my mantra. His head came up, and I loosened my arms as he lifted his hands and cupped my face. I looked at him, with his running nose and swollen eyes and broken heart, and gave him a broken smile.

"Don't doubt me." he pleaded.

"Never," I answered. We kissed, but the mingled snot made it less than pleasant.

I leaned back and looked around, and when I found a box of tissue on the end table, I grabbed it and we both set about tidying up our faces, both of us suddenly uncomfortable with so much emotion. I reached for the tea, but it was cold. Severus pulled out his wand and tapped it, and a new pot appeared. The rituals of making tea calmed us, and we sat back and drank our tea in a silence potent with feelings of both comfort and awkwardness. As we sat, each with our own thoughts the comfort won. His hand crept into the crook of my elbow and stroked it, and I settled mine on his thigh and squeezed.

Just then, I remembered what I had wanted to tell him for weeks. I set my tea down and turned to him.

"Severus, do you know about the Dark Lord's Horcruxes?"

His eyes narrowed, and he looked at me oddly.

"You might be surprised. What do you know about them?" His voice was hoarse.

"They were what the Headmaster had us looking for that last year. He told Harry about them. We had found one and were looking for the others when Ron made us go back to the Burrow that day."

"Damn Albus for playing his cards so close to his chest! He didn't think that maybe his portraits would be destroyed before he had a chance to give us all the facts! I should have known you had the last! Tell me everything you know, Hermione."

"There were six. Harry destroyed Riddle's diary, Dumbledore destroyed the ring. We had found the locket, that's another long story, we knew the others were probably items that the founders owned but hadn't narrowed it down much farther. I am sorry I do not know much more, but I can tell you two have been destroyed."

"There were seven. Five have been destroyed. Potter was one as well... his scar. I am sorry." He rubbed the back of my hand with his thumb as he watched me wrestle with this revelation. "The ring and the diary, as you said, and I personally destroyed Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem, which took me three years of crawling all over Hogwarts, plagued by vengeful ghosts, to find. I recently destroyed Helga Hufflepuff's cup. The Dark Lord gifted me with all the worldly possessions of Bellatrix and Rodolphus and lo and behold, what should I find in their Gringotts vault."

"How? How did you destroy them?" I was thrilled at the news, but I knew what it was like to be exposed to the malevolent power of these items, and I knew destroying them was most difficult. He just raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Each time I found one, I made a copy, imbued the copy with as much dark magic as I could, and then stabbed the original with the Sword of Gryffindor."

"But the Sword can only be wielded by a Gryffindor, or the Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Hermione, I *am* the Headmaster of Hogwarts." I seemed to be getting stupider as the night wore on.

"I'm sorry; I must be getting tired. Tell me, wasn't it dangerous? How did you keep the Dark Lord from knowing what you had done?"

"I assure you, I took every precaution. The diadem was in the Room of Requirement when I finally found it. I was very careful when I told the castle I needed a room to destroy a piece of the Dark Lord's soul and live to tell the tale. With the cup, I took it and the sword with me and Portkeyed to the Andes. I stabbed it through in a very remote location. As far as the Dark Lord is concerned, the cup is in the vault; if he finds it was tampered with, it could have happened at anytime the Lestranges had it, and the diadem is propped on an ugly statue in a room full of junk in Hogwarts which could have been invaded by anyone in the five years it has stood empty. There is nothing to link them back to me. All that are left are the locket and that damnable snake, Nagini."

"I am so proud of you! That was so clever!" And then my words hit me and I was horribly embarrassed. Who was I to tell this great man I was proud of him as if I was his mother? I squirmed and then busied myself pouring more tea. When I turned back to give him a fresh cup, he reached out and caressed my face with one finger.

"I am glad I make you proud, Hermione."

I blushed and gave him a small smile.

"Tell me, where is the locket?"

My smile withered and died on my face.

"Ron had it when he died. It was in his pocket when he was blown apart. I do not know if it was destroyed. If not, it could be lying on the ground, or picked up by anyone. I do not know what happened to his remains." I choked back my words, too painful to say.

"Tell me," I heard him say. I looked a question. "Tell me what happened to you that day." My eyes spilled over, and my tea sloshed over the rim as my hands shook. He took it from me.

"The locket. It ate at our minds, made us doubt each other, invaded our dreams. It whispered to us. We took turns holding it. None of us could do so for long. Eventually, it wasn't much better when it wasn't our turn either. Ron was the worst. Harry had fears and I had doubts, but Ron, Ron got angry and suspicious. Eventually, we fell out. He flew into a rage and threatened to leave. I was fine with it, and Harry seemed like he was going to let him go, but at the last minute he changed his mind. He decided that all we needed was a good meal and a change of clothes. Ron was instantly better, more at ease. We agreed we would return to the Burrow for just one night to sleep, shower and gather more supplies. We gathered up our things and Apparated to the Burrow. They were on us as soon as we got there. I called to Harry that we had to leave, but he took off when he saw one of the Death Eaters go after Ginny. Ron ran after him and screamed at him that it was a trap, but he never turned back. Ron was right behind him when the Dark Lord appeared. I pulled out my wand and took off after them. I was only a little way back. Just a small distance. Only two steps really..." My face crumpled, and he pulled me into his arms.

I didn't cry hard; I had cried about this so much for so many years, but I think the entire night just got to be too much. Snape must have agreed. He pulled me up and carried me to the bed. He stood me on my own feet and slowly undressed me. After he had tucked me into bed, he undressed himself and crawled in behind me. He gathered me into his arms and together we slept until the morning.

Dare I Ask?

Chapter 16 of 40

Severus finds out about the game.

Thank you to Astopperindeath for the final polish!

When the chime sounded at first light, I woke. I felt the heavy weight of a man's arm around me and a long leg tucked between mine, pressed against my bum. I stiffened. Then I remembered who it was, and I relaxed and pushed myself farther in to his chest, feeling his morning erection throb against my lower back. I hadn't actually woken up with Severus before. It felt rather nice. I was enveloped by a man who knew who I was, who I had been and what I could have been and thought these things were *good*. It was an amazing feeling to be held by someone who seemed to like me rather a lot. I didn't want to examine his possible motivations too deeply. I was afraid that analysis would show it to be just some kind of survivors' bond that seemed to be more than it was. He was obviously an emotionally devastated man and would cling to whomever showed him the slightest affection. If circumstances had been different, I doubt if he would ever have given even the slightest attention to me at all. But here and now he had demanded I take custody of his soul, and I intended to hold onto it with both hands and never let go. If we won our way out of this maze of intrigue, it was most likely that he would eventually realize what he had saddled himself with and want to leave. He could replace me in a heartbeat. I could never replace him. He had never been with another woman and didn't realize there were better to be had. I had been with hundreds of men and knew he was unique. I realized then that I loved him beyond measure and set my mind to thinking of ways I could trap him into staying with me always. I could think of none that didn't involve him eventually hating me. Very well, I would take what he gave until he woke from his delusions. I sent a small prayer for it to not happen soon.

Full of melancholy, I shifted, reached down between my legs and brought his hardness back between my legs and rubbed myself on it. I heard his breathing change and then his hands started to move. I moved him to my entrance and he pushed in. We didn't speak, we hardly made any sound, just soft little noises escaped as we rocked together slowly on our sides. He felt so good. After about five minutes of bliss, he stopped and his deep, rich voice spoke into my ear.

"I cannot do this with my bladder screaming at me. My apologies."

I giggled, and he left the bed. I watched as he stalked across the room to the loo. His body was long and thin; there was no extra flesh on him. And yet, slender as he was, he somehow still radiated a masculine power. This was not a body of an academic. His muscles, though not bulky, were defined from constant, physical demands. I found this to be aesthetically pleasing. His long arms, his long legs, his long hair swinging halfway down his back. I liked it. Even walking starkers with a hard on, he managed to look graceful and dignified.

Realizing he was going to have to get ready to leave soon, I left the bed as well and found my things. When the toilet flushed and he finally came out, I had donned my attire and was struggling into my boots, one hand on the back of the loveseat for balance.

"Were we done?" he asked.

"We are running out of time; I thought it was prudent," I said, looking back over my shoulder. I saw the look in his eyes and realized we weren't done at all as he came up behind me.

"If you are sure," he said as he caressed the curve of my hip.

"I am sure of nothing around you," I said with a small smile. He pushed gently on my back until I was bent over the back of the couch. His fingers softly played with me, reigniting my desire, and he raised an eyebrow in question.

I smiled coyly back over my shoulder. "You might have to make it quick, do you think you can?"

He just growled and pulled my thong to the side. I noticed he was more careful with it.

It didn't take that long, but it wasn't that quick either, and it never would have worked if I wasn't wearing the boots.

After he had cleaned us up with his wand, he set about dressing. My heart gave a dull thud. I didn't want him to leave.

"You realize you are forming quite an army among the younger men? They consider you a rather dashing figure who will lead them to greater glory."

He looked up and said, "Good. I can work with that."

"Be careful, they seem to be uniformly stupid and inept with the exception of Nott and Vaisey."

He gave me a hard look and sat on the bed to put his boots on.

"You seem to be rather well informed"

I bit my lip.

"It's the game, you see..."

His head snapped up.

"What. Game. Hermione." Oh, dear that wasn't good.

"The girls started a game. We find out as much information as we can and try to exploit it."

"The girls?"

"Peaches started it. Okay, I nudged her in the right direction, but I couldn't be connected to the original idea if we were discovered, could I?"

He looked like he was going to explode, but instead he let out a sharp bark of a laugh. It wasn't particularly mirthful. His words were clipped as he strode back across the room.

"Why would I have assumed you would be safe here while I worked towards your freedom? Why didn't I take into account the possibility of the last little Gryffindor trying to overthrow the government while trapped in a warehouse by cobbling together an intelligence network of well-placed spies? I have been a bit of a fool, haven't I?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to figure out which direction his words were going in.

"Does that mean you are pleased?"

"Indeed. What have you gathered?"

"Well, Rookwood was jealous of Macnair, but is now rather full of himself. Carrow hates his sister, but cannot abide anyone speaking badly about her. Avery likes to be dressed up in nappies and spanked when he's naughty, yes, I thought you might like that. Jugson was raped by Greyback once and has nightmares about it still, even knowing Greyback was killed by Remus. He is intensely homophobic, and that's why he always stands against a wall. Selwyn dreams of running away to South America and taking Yaxley's wife with him. Rabastan Lestrangle has large gambling debts and hasn't purchased new robes like he used to, I think his brother used to cover his losses but obviously cannot anymore. Gibbon thinks the younger Death Eaters need to be culled before they start trouble. What he doesn't know is most of them have slept with his daughter. The younger Death Eaters are almost uniform in their belief that it's time for a change, their belief they could handle everything better, their utter inability to see the big picture, and their surprising squeamishness at the actions of the Dark Lord. They fear him, but more to the point they are uncomfortable with the fact that they just might be following a violent nutcase. All of them think you are the answer to their prayers and are only waiting for your signal. Oh, and they want better masks. That's just off the top of my head."

"What else have you been doing besides gathering information?"

"Well, exploiting it, of course."

"Of course. Dare I ask?"

"Well, we had the Notts, father and son, at each other's throats for a minute. The father still hasn't returned, and Theo won't speak of him with anything other than disgust. Amycus thinks Rookwood has been telling lewd tales about his sister, and we were hoping that would blow up soon. Yaxley and Avery fell out over a lie about percentages of revenue each one was receiving, so those former best friends are now trying to find ways to cheat each other out of a knut. Macnair has been played up as a rapist of lower level Death Eaters to the point no one will ever use the lav if he's in there. Jugson is close to hexing him when he breathes wrong. Dusty aimed high and made up a story about a high level Death Eater that was seen by another coming out of an unauthorized meeting with several of the old members of the former Wizengamot. She just floated it out there to see who she could catch, but as much as everyone repeated it, it wouldn't stick to anyone. Or if it did we never heard back."

"Dolohov. That was the rumor I used to take him down. It was getting rather widespread, and I brought it to the Dark Lord's attention with some minor alterations and a bit of fabricated proof." I was speechless, and he nodded at my reaction. "Your game has brought down some large prey. Leave off the Death Eaters, leave them to me. Minor rumors to spread suspicion and petty rivalries are fine, but I want you to concentrate on the other clients now. The Dark Lord is meeting next week with Ministers from France and Bulgaria to talk about how they might raise taxes on imported goods. Mulciber is going to take over Rodolphus' department. That will give him more power than anyone else and send the Death Eaters into a frenzy, so stay low. Work on the citizenry. We want them as disgruntled as possible."

The second chime sounded, and he froze. He looked at me quickly and then reached out and grabbed me by the shoulders. His lips met mine in a gentle kiss.

"Be careful, work from behind. Do not get caught and stay far away from Macnair."

"I will. Can you come back soon?"

"I will try." With a final, demanding kiss, he whirled away and started dismantling his wards. He disguised himself and, secreting away his objects by the door, left with a last long look.

He's Your Man

Chapter 17 of 40

Peaches finds a new possible ally and discovers the identity of Hermione's 'insider'.

Thank you to Astopperindeath for the quick beta. My apologies for the delay, I had to make an emergency run out of town. Chapters will be posted more regularly in the future!

I had used Peaches before to start the rumor mill going, so I thought it would be best to nudge the game in a new direction from another source. Seeing that Dusty was already interested in aiming high, I had no trouble getting her to 'come up with' the idea to see if we could play the Ministry as a whole and not just individual Death Eaters. However, it was another girl, Jasmine, who had the idea to destabilize the markets. Her Muggle parents had been immersed in the stock markets, and so she had a working knowledge of how rumor could destroy a company's stock value. She applied the same principles to the Ministry and soon had us chugging out rumors targeted at causing financial mayhem. The fundamentals were a lot different from the Muggle world, but the result was the same. People started to pull their Galleons out of Gringotts, and the goblins were not pleased. Neither was Voldemort.

This I heard from Severus. He showed up more frequently, always in disguise and usually on a Sunday, but rarely could stay longer than a couple of hours at most and many times less than that. There was so much information we needed to exchange that lovemaking became a fast and furious business that was either gotten out of the way quickly or launched into desperately when we realized we had run out of time. He stuck to his promise never to demand it of me, but his eyes did. Many times, we didn't even make it to the bed but clutched each other tightly as soon as he had set his complicated wards. He was like a drug I couldn't get enough of, and even a few frantic moments with him gave me the strength I needed to get through another week.

The dissemination of information called for more people than just me to spread without becoming too linked as the source, and after a long consultation with Severus, he agreed with my decision. I told Peaches and Angel that I had a sympathetic Ministry official that was giving me information. They were not pleased at first, questioning my source, my sanity and my judgment. But after weeks went by without any fallout to show our game had been discovered and some proof that the information I got was valid, they trusted me enough to help me spread what I knew among the other girls. At that point, the chaos escalated.

Severus was masterful in using his abilities to ferret out the secrets and petty motivations of those working in the Ministry. The power bases of all the Elder Death Eaters crumbled as various cogs were removed from the engine of government. More and more of the Elders were dragged before the Dark Lord, some escorted by their own sons to face judgment. In some cases, Snape placed himself in the way to argue for leniency and felt his Master's displeasure. This only increased his reputation in the

eyes of the young men.

He cultivated his position amongst the younger Death Eaters by giving them responsibilities and rewarding a job well done. By turning them into an honor guard, he exposed them to the Dark Lord's madness while protecting them in plain sight. They took turns standing against the wall and watching as their Dark Lord became more unstable as the foundation was knocked out from under his rotting house stone by stone. Most importantly, he listened to their growing unease in private, like their Head of House would, making them feel understood while he looked deep into their eyes. He would give me a list of who needed to be worked on and who needed to be culled later.

It was very late one Friday night, while I was coming out of the bathroom, that Peaches came up and pushed me back into the room. She held her finger up to her lips and then closed the door and turned on the shower. Taking my shoulder she leaned in close to my ear.

"I think something has happened you should know. I think it changes everything and I am frightened."

"Tell me."

"Nott booked me for the night, he's sleeping now, but oh! Princess, he cried. His father was killed tonight, by You-Know-Who. He sobbed like a baby in my arms, and as I tried to calm him down he said, and I quote: 'I will see him dead!'"

I reared back and looked at her.

"That's what I thought! Prin-, ugh, Hermione, I told him not to be a fool! But he said there were others who felt that way and that this Snape character just might listen to them! Hermione, I am frightened! What have we done? These blokes are just silly little boys, some are bullies but they are not killers at heart! They can't take on the Dark Lord!"

"What did you tell him? Did you tell him anything about us? It could have been a set up. Maybe they just want to see how we will react."

She shook her head.

"Honestly, that was my first reaction. But you didn't see him. He's broken. What should I do? I feel like I have this power, but I am afraid to use it. I know I could whip him up to go try and take on the Dark Lord, but I really don't want to see him die! And suddenly, I feel like maybe our game just might help change things. Like it's bigger than I thought, and maybe we could rumor our way to freedom. I know it's stupid, but I feel like we could do this!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders.

"It's not so far fetched after all, Peaches. But we can't do it if we overreact. I want you to go back in there and stay with him. Be gentle, be sympathetic. Let him feel like you are the only one who understands. And then tell him about your parents."

She reeled back as if I had slapped her, and her eyes went dead. None of us talked about our families much, but I knew Peaches had seen her parents killed in Diagon Alley while buying souvenirs. I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't turn on me for my presumption, but then I saw a light of understanding.

"Yes. Yes, I see where you are going. Just a bit at first, and maybe he will see."

"Keep him from doing anything stupid, and make him believe you are the only one who understands. And if he brings up Snape again, tell him that might be a good idea."

"Really? But isn't he the Number Two man? That skinny guy that Macnair..." Her words cut off as her brain started to work too fast for my comfort. *Oh, Merlin's hairy nuts, he's your man, isn't he!* I have no idea what my face did, but she took it for confirmation. "Oh, Circe with a strap-on, Hermione, what have you gotten us into! *He's* your source? The goddamned Number Two man behind the goddamned throne? What the *hell* have you gotten us into!" Her American accent became more pronounced as she got more agitated.

"You said you felt it yourself. Freedom. Don't lose it on me now, Peaches, I need you. You have to go back in there and deliver. We are so close, but we need to keep low and stay calm. And, Peaches, you cannot tell anyone, not even Angel."

She pulled herself together and gave me a hard look. Then she threw her arms around me.

"You know I will kill you if this doesn't work, right?" she said. I could hear all the overtones in her voice, her attempt to sound lighthearted while sounding exactly like someone who, forced to hope for the first time in a long time, was already planning vengeance on whoever failed to deliver.

"I'll hold you to that." From the look she gave me, she heard all the overtones in mine as well.

She scuttled out of the bathroom, and I reached over and shut off the water.

The next night, Nott came early and booked Peaches for the night again. He usually didn't spend that kind of money. I stayed in the Emerald Lounge near the younger men, hoping to hear something, but Angel came in and got me.

"Macnair's here. He requested Peaches, but she's taken. Careful, Princess, he looks stressed."

I nodded to her and walked into the other lounge with my practiced smile on my face. When he looked up and saw me, he came and grabbed me by my elbow and walked past Ma who hadn't been able to say her spiel. She looked miffed and then threw a worried look after me.

He never said a word as we walked up the stairs together. My heart started to beat too fast when I saw what hallway he headed towards. I desperately tried to free my trapped mind...tried to go away to that place that I always went to before when my heart was stone. I couldn't and found a whimper escaped my lips as he dragged me into the Brown Room.

No worries, the next chapter is safe for the squeamish!

Not Lost

Chapter 18 of 40

Severus sees another side to the life Hermione has led and makes a startling confession.

"Princess?"

I opened my one good eye and saw Ma hovering.

"There's a gentleman downstairs. He's requesting you. I told him you were not available, but he said he would pay an enormous amount of money, er, just to watch you sleep." Severus. "It's daft, I know; I told him you weren't much to look at, at the moment, but he just got more insistent and, well, it is a lot of money, and well, I was thinking you might have a need for St Mungo's if the healing potions don't work and the money would help. You know the Ministry takes all our profit. He said he knows some healing charms if you looked too bad for his taste." She wrung her hands as she looked at me and actually reached out and tucked the sheet tighter. "Never mind, this is foolish." She turned to go, but I stopped her.

"Nuh," I croaked. "S'okay." The potions Ma had given me kept me pain-free for the most part; I wasn't looking forward to them wearing off.

"Are you sure, Dear?"

I nodded, because talking made the cut on my lip reopen.

"Can you make it to the nearest room?"

I nodded and started to get out of bed. Ma came and helped me, and I stumbled to the guestroom down the hall from the infirmary. Once in the bed, there I lay down near the edge and closed my eyes.

I don't remember hearing Ma leave, but I do remember hearing him come in. I heard the door close and felt the magic swirl around me as wards were set. I heard the clunk of items being set down on a table, and then I heard him walk near.

He came into my line of sight, and his face was ashen. He slowly grabbed the sheet and pulled it down, revealing the injuries and abuse that Macnair had inflicted in his frenzied rage.

He howled. His face was infused with rage, and he let out a bellow like a dying bear and fell to his knees. There was murder in his tone. He buried his face into the bed by my hip and bunched up the sheets in his hands, and I watched with a drugged fascination as his body shook. I could feel it through the mattress. He pulled his head up and, staring at the wall, took a series of shuddering breaths. I watched as his face cleared of all emotion. He shifted back and closed his eyes briefly, then reached into his robes and took out a small bag. A wave of his wand enlarged it. He opened the bag and started to pull out bottles and vials of potions.

"What have they given you?" he said in a dry voice.

"Heali', ske'gro, someth' wi' ofium, heali' ou' o' date, tas' off." It was the best I could manage, I just hoped he understood.

He nodded and reached up and closed my eyes with a gentle hand.

I felt him cut my clothes off; they were ruined anyway. Then I felt the warmth of his magic wash over me and heard him sing quietly in a low melodic voice. I drifted off.

I woke several times when a strong arm lifted me up, and I felt a potion at my lips. I drank easier each time.

I woke the final time when I heard the chime for first light. I felt sore and strained but not much worse than that. I rubbed at my face; my mouth itched terribly, and when I lifted my hand to rub at it, I saw the long flannel sleeve of the nightgown I was wearing. I pulled at the fabric of the nightgown with bemusement and then looked over to find an utterly spent Severus watching me like a hawk. He sat in a hard wooden chair next to the bed, and as I tried to sit up, he reached out swiftly and helped; he held me until he adjusted the pillows and then laid me back down. He brought a glass of water to my lips, and I took a long drink. When I was done, he put it down and resumed just watching me.

"You healed me too much," I said. "Ma will be suspicious."

"I told her I had some small healing skills."

I nodded. I reached out and took his hand; he turned it and entwined his fingers through mine. I squeezed.

"Thank you," I said.

He just nodded and remained silent. I sensed his restrained anger and was concerned it might have been at me.

"I had no choice. I wasn't careless; I just don't get to choose."

His eyes flared a little, and he gently squeezed my hand.

"I know." And then his words flew out as if he was in a rush to explain why he hadn't saved me from something he couldn't stop. "I have been watching him, when I would see the mood come upon him, I would misdirect him, give him an assignment. But this week I have been away; it was most important, Hermione, and I am so very sorry. If I had been there..."

"Stop," I said. "We knew the risks. I told you I would live."

He gave me a fowl look.

"How did you know to come?" I made a gesture at all the empty bottles and jars of salve scattered about the bed.

"I returned last night. I stopped at the Ministry and overheard some talk. I came as soon as I heard.

"Hermione... you understand I can do nothing," he said, looking stricken.

"Yes, you cannot be seen to care; I understand completely." His gaze fell, and he bowed his head; his hair slid down and hid him from me.

"I do care, Hermione," he whispered, "very much."

And there it was, what we never mentioned. I wanted to shy away from it, as if it was too bright for my pained eyes. He was fragile and apt to bind himself even further to me. I knew this would be so wrong to do to him. He had been bound too many times. I wanted to be strong enough to reject his words. Stop this foolishness before it was too late, so that he would be free to walk away, his own man, if we won. But I was weak. I didn't.

"Me too, Severus." There, that would have to do until we were both stronger and could make better decisions. He squeezed my hand tightly.

I decided to change the subject; we had business to discuss.

"What took you away? Where have you been?"

He reacted almost gratefully to the change of topic, no more comfortable with where our words could take us than I was.

He dropped my hand and reached into his robes, and when he pulled his hand back out, a gold chain came with it and dangling from it was a misshapen lump. My heart slammed into my ribs as I recognized the locket. I reached for it, but he snatched it back. A million questions flooded through my head as he replaced it back into his robes.

"Where...?"

"The Burrow. A series of locator spells helped me to find where it had fallen when..." He took my hand as I flinched from the images in my mind. Slamming down the barriers between my mind and my emotions, I drew a breath.

"I don't understand how the Dark Lord missed it. How could he not know it was there at that last battle?"

"He is not like you or me anymore, Hermione. His soul has been shattered for too long. He is not aware of himself in the same way. There is nothing left between his intelligence and his need. To have felt this small blackened bit of soul, he would have had to have empathy and intuition. He does not." He stood up in a smooth motion that belied the strain and fatigue I knew he must have felt. He walked over to the tea service that had appeared at first light and poured. When he had returned, I took the cup from him and he briskly started to put away the vials and jars scattered around.

"The Dark Lord has been at a loss these five years. He has achieved his dream, and yet he has lost his drive. Even his all-consuming search for the Elder Wand was curtailed by his sudden victory."

"The Elder Wand?" I asked. Something made it familiar sounding but I could not place it.

"The Elder Wand, or the Death Stick, or any number of foolish titles given it by history; it was one of the Deathly Hallows." He looked at me, and I could tell I was supposed to know what his words meant. "Did you never read the book left to you by Dumbledore?"

"You mean the fairy tales? The Tales of Beedle the Bard? I don't understand; I never figured out why he gave me that book. It's lost now..." My voice trailed off as my confusion grew.

"Not lost," he murmured quietly.

"I'm sorry?"

"The book is not lost. After I pulled myself together, I went searching for Potter's last campsite. I should have known you were still alive because the wards were still functional. I eventually found it. I have all your things. Potter's and Weasley's too."

I was glad he found them. It made me feel better to know our lonely campsite wasn't still lying there as a silent reminder of all that was lost.

"But what does that have to do with the Dark Lord?"

"He had been obsessed with finding a way to gain mastery of a legendary wand that would grant him obscene power over his foes. Before he found them, he won it all suddenly in a gamble. He used his connection with Potter to get him to go to the Burrow and vanquished him there. The boy never could close his mind." Severus closed the black bag with a violent snap. "Once the Dark Lord won, he put his mind towards consolidating his power and lost interest in the Deathly Hallows."

"What are these Deathly Hallows?"

"That's a conversation for another day."

"If they are important, won't he eventually look for them again?"

"I'm sure he thinks he has all the time in the world. But his time is running out in more ways than one."

I could not stop the nasty smirk that spread across my face. He answered with his own trademark sneer.

"Firstly, he is going mad. The Dark Lord has not noticed the death of his soul in small increments, but *he* has noticed. He has become more unstable. Sliding into insanity.

"Secondly, he does not see how his followers are turning from him. The most loyal are being removed, and he doesn't have the ability to understand the motives of those to whom he has given doubt.

"Finally, even if he does decide to go looking for the three Deathly Hallows, he is too late."

"Why?"

"I have them all."

To Live

Chapter 19 of 40

Hermione gets a good long look at the demons that drive Severus, and offers him rest.

Many thanks go to *astopperindeath* for her excellent beta skills.

"You have them all? What does that mean?"

"We are out of time. I need you to rest more and make sure you eat plenty of food. Your body is terribly drained."

The second chime rang out, and we both found ourselves by the door. Severus took me gently in his arms and kissed the top of my head.

"I will be back."

"But I have more questions!" I blurted out.

The corners of his mouth quirked up, and his eyes seemed to be filled with amusement.

"Of course you do. But now is not the time."

I was too tired to argue and reached up to catch his face to kiss.

"Thank you, Severus. However, you cannot keep running to my rescue. It would look too suspicious if it were to happen again. If I get hurt, I will live."

He pulled back from me, and his face was flushed with anger. He clenched his jaw and gave me a nod.

"You are right, of course. But do try to stay out of trouble; that is all I ask."

"Of course, Severus."

I felt him shiver when I said his name, just a quick shudder that raced across his shoulders and chased away down his body.

He pulled me in and gave me a searing kiss on the lips. He said no more as he changed his appearance to a dumpy, squat, older man. He dropped his wards and left.

I didn't have to wait long to get answers to my questions.

I slept most of the day, still sore and slow to move. When I got up, I had to fend off concerned questions from the other girls and even Ma. They were suspicious of my quick recovery, having heard how the house-elf had popped in and whisked me, battered and bloody, out of the Brown Room.

"I'm fine. Ma's potions fixed me right up."

"But what about your client?" asked Angel. "He didn't..."

"No, he was just a strange little man with a fetish for the Princess. He didn't do much, though he did clean me up a bit."

Peaches, bless her, steered the conversation away from me, and I was left in peace until I was called to the foyer early that evening.

This time, Severus's appearance was that of a tall, broad shouldered young man. I noticed he didn't have that faint glimmer that came with a charm, but the intensity of his watery blue gaze was the same.

Together, we ascended the stairs to 'our room.'

Once inside, I waited for him to set his wards, set out his magical talismans and change his appearance. I had a fleeting moment of worry when he did not change and took an involuntary step back when he approached me.

"Polyjuice," he explained. "I didn't want to risk coming again so soon in a glamour. It will wear off in about forty minutes." He flicked his wand and changed my attire to a soft, oversized robe.

"Ah, you needn't worry about that. Most of the men who come here, besides the Death Eaters, wear a glamour."

"Better to be safe. Have you eaten well today?" he asked. I looked down at the carpeting when I realized that I really hadn't. He scowled at me and flicked an impatient hand at the food on the table. I went over and made up a plate but stopped when I heard his irritated growl. He stomped over and plucked the small cakes I had put on the plate away and started to pile up thick, roast beef sandwiches.

"Eat." I ate.

He pulled out his little black bag of potions and enlarged it and started to arrange various vials on the table in front of me. He poured a large glass of water and handed it to me and then started to dose me with some of the most foul potions I had ever tasted.

"Guh!" I dropped the Vitamin Infusion vial back on the table and gulped the water. "You made these especially vile just to get back at me, didn't you?"

"Don't be thick, woman, I made them especially potent for you."

"Oh." I gave his words a moment's thought. "You brewed these today?"

"Of course."

"Did you ever sleep?"

It was his turn to look at the carpeting.

"I don't sleep much anymore, Hermione."

I took his hand and stroked the back of it with my thumb. It was a large, clumsy looking hand, not my Severus's hand at all. I stood up and pulled him up with me.

"Come to bed, Severus."

He balked, but I tugged him hard, and he followed. The man needed sleep. His hand started to squirm in mine, and I huffed and tugged his hand again to let him know I wasn't giving him a choice in the matter. I heard a sharp gasp and looked quickly back at him to see his features shift, his face looked like there were small animals scurrying about under his skin. I shuddered and looked away until I felt his long, strong, graceful hand in mine again. I looked up into his fathomless, black eyes and felt my heart thump painfully in my chest.

"You have questions," he said.

"I know." I reached the bed and pushed him gently down to sit on the edge. "Tell me what you need to." I settled down on the floor and started to work off his boots and socks. "Tell me again of the five years, Severus. Tell me of the Deathly Hallows. Tell me everything." I came up and started to work through the buttons on his robes. There was nothing erotic in the act. I simply needed to make him comfortable, and he was strangely compliant under my hands. As I removed layers of clothing, he told me his tale.

He spoke of the desperate days when he was the Headmaster. His colleagues were suspicious and hateful towards him and did everything they could to make sure little things, like class schedules, were fouled to the point that he had to rewrite them all himself. Even the house-elves, ever faithful to the school, made sure his tea was always cold or the milk spoiled. His loneliness was unrelenting; the only people who sought out his company were the sadistic Carrow siblings. The only faces that looked at him with respect were the Slytherin students, proud of his status. Only the portrait of Dumbledore, hanging behind his desk, kept him from utter despair.

There was no warning, no accompanying build-up before that final summons. The Carrows had rushed off to answer the summons, telling Snape they would explain his own delay. That he was being called to the final act of the greatest tragedy of their age was so far out of his mind that he almost missed the entire battle because he was

meeting with the School Board. He had no idea that Malfoy was dead. No idea that an unsuspecting Potter had been lured to his doom by the false thoughts that Voldemort had planted in his head. No idea that his two friends, usually so adept at herding him away from foolish notions, had been so compromised by their own exposure to the tainted soul captured in the Horcrux.

"I must go now, Albus," he had said to the portrait.

"Very well, my boy. Keep your head, keep your cover. I'll let you know how to deal with Umbridge's suggestions after I have given them some thought."

"That would be appreciated."

"Off you go, mustn't keep Tom waiting."

Tom hadn't bothered waiting.

Finally answering the Dark Lord's call, Severus had Apparated into Hell.

He had grabbed Selwyn by the arm and received a hurried explanation of events and then turned in time to see Lupin and new wife Apparate into the chaos. Greyback took out Nymphadora by ripping her throat out only to be cut to pieces by Lupin, in a last act of futile rage. Severus clung to his sanity as he tried in vain to shield whomever he could, but the members of the Order arrived either alone or in pairs and were too quickly overwhelmed. He tried to conjure a Patronus of his own to warn off any others, but his shocked mind could not muster a happy thought, and so he failed.

Before he barely had a chance to process what was happening, it was over. Potter was dead, his body scattered in gruesome pieces on the ground. The bodies of various Weasleys were scattered everywhere, but the remains of the youngest boy were right behind Potter, and like Potter, he looked as if he had been blown apart. Just beyond him, covered in gore, lay the body of the Granger girl, whole, but still as death. Severus doubled over and retched on the ground.

"I knew you never had the heart for it, Snape. You always were weak."

"Don't be stupid, Macnair; it was just a reaction to a hex, I assure you."

"Funny, no one else seems to be affected. But then, you were never very strong; perhaps we all got hit with it, but it only affects the pathetic."

"Leave off, Macnair," said Rabastan Lestrage. "Our Lord wants Snape for a special mission. You are to regroup with the others."

"As you say, Lestrage."

Severus Snape clung to one thought as he Apparated to Malfoy Manor: *Keep your head, keep your cover.* It was something Dumbledore used to say before his every meeting with the Dark Lord. A ritual between the two that reminded Severus of his duty and that expressed the Headmaster's concern for his spy's wellbeing at the same time.

"I want you to live," he heard his mentor say in his mind. Severus measured his options and knew he needed to keep his cover and survive long enough to get back to the school and organize the faculty so they could evacuate. He had to save who he could; if he showed his hand now, there would be no one to protect the others. Dumbledore had drilled him for years on what his ultimate priorities were. To stay as deep undercover as possible until either the Light triumphed or all hope was lost.

His face was a mask of honest fury as he approached the two guards outside the library with Bellatrix and Rabastan on his tail. Watching them shrink away from the sight of him was no balm.

"They are inside?"

"Yes, not a peep out of them."

"They have been disarmed?"

The unsure glances were all he needed as he threw open the doors.

"Godfather? What's going on?" *Keep your head, keep your cover.*

"Severus! Why are we here? We were told to stay in this room hours ago and have not even heard from Lucius. *I want you to live.*

"Accio wands!" he thundered. *Keep your head, keep your cover.*

"What's the meaning of this? I demand to see my husband! Bella! I demand..."

"You are in no position to make any demands, sister. Your pretty husband cannot protect you anymore. Now, tell us what we want to know, Cissy, and I am sure our Lord will be merciful."

The Dark Lord wasn't merciful. Draco and Narcissa Malfoy died screaming, and a part of Severus Snape did as well. *I want you to live.*

It was hours before Snape had a chance to leave the Manor and get back to the school. The loud pops of Apparition alerted him to the arrival of several dozen Death Eaters into the foyer of Malfoy Manor.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the coward. Too bad you missed the show, Snape. Again."

"What are you talking about, Macnair? I have no time for your foolishness; I have things to see to."

"Why, I speak of the utter destruction of the Ministry and your precious school! We have utterly vanquished our foes! We rule it all, and anyone who opposed us is dead or soon to be! Once again, we do all the work and you hide. Always was your sty---"

Macnair didn't get to finish his hateful words as Snape unleashed his churning emotions in an act of fury that Macnair only survived due to the arrival and timely intervention of the Dark Lord himself. Snape's act was excused as justified since he was defending himself from slander.

As Severus told of his return to Hogwarts, he started to rock slightly in short jerky spasms. I pulled the duvet down and slid into the bed, pulling his unresisting body along with me until he was in my arms, his body cradled between my legs. I adjusted the pillows until I was almost sitting up, my smaller body surrounding his larger one as best as I could. I stroked his hair and planted soft kisses on his head as I crooned meaningless words and rocked him gently.

His voice was rough with emotion as he described the destruction. The pyres of bodies were still smoking. The hallways were silent but not peaceful. Everywhere he looked, there was destruction; the floors were littered with debris. Statues were destroyed, armor lay in scattered pieces and the burnt remains of portraits were scattered everywhere. He broke into a run as he made his way to the Headmaster's office. The gargoyle was pitched over on the floor and he leaped over broken pieces of pedestal and sprinted up the stairs. There he found total destruction. The portraits had all been incinerated. The instruments left behind by Dumbledore were scattered in pieces around the room. Books and scrolls were so much ash. A quick check of his own quarters showed that only the landscape painting had been ruined, but his personal belongings had been rifled through and lay scattered about.

He repeatedly called for a house-elf and eventually an inebriated Winky appeared. He tried to reassure the belligerently drunk elf and eventually got enough information to confirm his sad conclusions. There were no survivors, except those Pureblood students who had a Death Eater to vouch for them.

The faculty had fought bravely, trying to lower the anti-Apparition charms, but without the Headmaster, they failed. The teachers had staged a violent last stand trying to distract the Death Eaters, while the students made a break for the forest. The elf didn't know if any made it, but every last teacher died to protect them.

Winky told him that the ghosts were hiding and those portraits that had anywhere else to go had fled; those that did not were gone forever.

Snape suddenly turned on the elf.

"You are still beholden to this school. Do not forget that! Repair what you can!"

He turned on his heel and ran back down the stairs.

It was a frantic Snape that raced into an empty courtroom down in the bowels of the Ministry. He pulled out his wand and, with a violent jerk, a large chair slid up against the wall under the portrait of a past Supreme Mugwump. He vaulted the rail and scrambled up onto the chair and reached up to snatch the portrait off the wall.

"Severus! I am so glad you are still alive! Oh, my boy! Well done!"

He let go of the frame and pulled a small painting out of his robes. Tapping it with his wand, he enlarged the framed portrait of a gaunt woman with dark hair and a long face. He slapped it against the wall next to the other painting. Dust flew up when it impacted the wall.

"Headmaster! Come into my frame! Quickly!" cried the portrait of Eileen Prince Snape.

"I cannot; they hexed the portraits to confine them to their frames."

Severus let out a string of oaths while he shrank his mother's portrait and shoved it back into his pocket.

"So you couldn't get away."

With a feral growl, he attacked Dumbledore's frame again.

"Severus, listen, I have things to tell you," Dumbledore said.

"Tell me!" Severus listened but still tugged at the portrait, bracing one foot against the wall and committing all his weight to the pull.

"Stop, my boy! It won't come off!"

"No! They are coming to destroy you as we speak! Do you have another portrait anywhere?"

"No, Severus. This is my last."

Severus pulled out a sharp knife and tried to score the picture around the edges of the frame. Try as he might, he couldn't cut the painting out of the frame.

"Then I must save you! I need you! I need your counsel!"

"Then you must listen!"

"I failed, Albus! I failed them all! I have to save you!" Backing away, he started to shoot every spell he could think of to release the painting from the wall.

"Severus, I failed, do not blame yourself! But you can still redeem my failures! Listen to me!"

Severus listened with tears streaming down his face as the portrait of Albus Dumbledore explained about the Deathly Hallows and the Horcruxes and how to defeat Tom Riddle.

"You will have to search long and hard, Severus. The locations have been lost for many of these items, and, in the end, I did not think that was the real locket after all. It did not have the taint. For some reason, someone went to a lot of trouble to switch the Horcrux, but I did not have enough time to investigate further, and we don't know if Harry found anything more about it before the end. You must start there; you must pick up the trail where Harry left off."

"I don't think I can do this Albus. I am all alone."

"You are never alone, Severus. Help will come when you are ready, my son."

"Lily's son is dead," he said softly, his voice full of agony and despair.

"I know."

"Everyone is dead."

"Hope never dies, Severus." The stamping of boots outside made Severus lunge toward the portrait again. His fingers frantically scrabbling at the frame.

"Stop Severus! Keep your head! Keep your cover!"

Severus's agony and frustration came out in a muted gurgle as he looked daggers at the portrait. He raised his wand, disillusioned himself and hid under the bench just as the doors to the courtroom flew open.

"There he is," came the voice of Dolohov. "Any last words, old man?"

"Go find a nice campsite and when you run out of hope, hope."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dunno."

"Who cares. *Incendio!*"

Hiding under the desk, arms locked around his knees, Severus watched until the portrait fell to ashes and drifted onto the carpet.

The next five years were spent hunting. Day in and day out, Snape searched for the pieces necessary to ensure his final revenge. He found the campsite after an exhaustive search in the countryside. He had needed to find a personal possession of one of them first for the locator spell to get their scent. He had used Granger's essays from when she had been his student. When he found their tent, he packed it all and took it with him back to Spinner's End. He found Potter's invisibility cloak and hid it in the wall of his cellar along with the wand he had retrieved from Albus's tomb. Searching Hermione's beaded bag reunited him with the portrait of Phineas Black. The two were almost pathetically happy to find each other. It was from Phineas that he found out that Potter wore the snitch around his neck. He returned to the Burrow and sifted

through the charred remains that had been left behind until he found the burnt mokeskin bag, now devoid of its magic. Opening it revealed the snitch -- open now, since Potter had met his end -- and the ring nestled inside. He placed them in hiding as well.

He searched for the Horcruxes as well, during that time. Months of research would result in wild goose chases, only to run into dead ends. I rocked him again as he told of being confronted by the vengeful ghost of Minerva McGonagall at Hogwarts the first time he went looking for the diadem. How even though she could not harm him physically, she chased him through the castle screaming the names of all the students slain, never pausing to hear his words. It had taken him three years to find it. Three years of being harassed and tormented by the ghost of a woman he had considered a friend.

Finally, he was out of options. His research had run dry, he was out of clues and out of ideas. He had done all he could do, but no research would reveal the location of the Locket or the Cup. He was at the end of his tether, physically, mentally and emotionally spent, when his hope and his luck ran out. He ran into Rookwood in the Apothecary. His search had kept him out of the loop, and he had no clue about internal Death Eater politics anymore. Rookwood was surprised at his appearance and suddenly curious about his long absence. His offer to come along for some drinks and relaxation contained too much suspicion for Severus' comfort. Severus perceived a threat to his mission's safety if he was to incur too much scrutiny, so he decided a few drinks would do no harm. He was not prepared to be thrown into the lion's den to become the subject of everyone's curiosity.

"Hermione, I do not know if I can ever convey the feelings I had when you appeared at my side that night."

He turned around in my arms and curled his own around my waist.

"I think I have an idea, Severus," I said quietly.

"I am so close now. Just a few more details to be seen to, a few more pieces to put into play, and vengeance will be ours. It seems such a short span of time since I despaired of even the slightest success."

"I understand. That same short span of time ago, I was dead inside. My heart was a dark, diseased place, and hope was a lie not even to be entertained." Shifting so that I could meet his eyes, I continued. "Severus, I didn't intervene in your defense out of any Gryffindor nobility. I wondered if perhaps I could gain something if you owed me a debt."

"As a Slytherin, I find nothing wrong with that sentiment." He smirked, and it brought a chuckle to my throat.

"I think it is time for sleep now." I shifted until I was out from behind him and curled my body along his side and draped my arm over his chest.

"Sleep now, my Severus."

He pulled me tight to his body, and I felt his deep shuddering breath and watched over him as he slowly relaxed. I listened to him breath throughout that night as I replayed the story of his life in my head. Each time his arm would spasm and clutch me tight, I would stroke him and place little kisses along his chest until he returned to a more peaceful sleep.

In my own selfish despair, I thought only the other inhabitants of this house could understand the pain and suffering I had been through since the Battle of the Burrow. But here, sleeping in my arms was yet another victim. Whereas I had become resigned to my fate, a passive participant in only vicarious self-destruction, he had been chained to his, lashed ever onward by the demons of honor and duty.

For the first time, I felt justified in claiming him as my own. Surely there were women of better caliber out there in his future, but how many of them would understand the depths he had gone to, the vigil he had held all alone, to preserve even the tiniest flicker of light in our dark world. I pillowed my head in the hollow between his shoulder and chest, and, as I closed my own eyes, I made my own quiet vow. If we won our freedom and vanquished that darkness, I would spend my life finding ways to bring him peace and contentment.

Spread the Word

Chapter 20 of 40

A surprising defence leads to an even more surprising conversation.

Many thanks to Astopperindeath for her wonderful beta work!

Monday morning, after I sent Severus on his way with a full night's rest, I threw myself into the job of weakening his opponents. The other women responded to my enthusiasm, and over the next few days we invested heavily in rumors that spread insecurity and fear amongst the average population, and it paid dividends in the form of a rather explosive atmosphere at the house. The Elder Death Eaters were impotent with rage, and the younger men became more bitter and restless.

On Severus' council, we started to separate out the younger Death Eaters that could not be trusted by the simple expedient of spreading poison in the form of half-truths. He had been explicit in his belief that Crabbe was too loyal and not to be trusted, but that Goyle was close to a turning point. It gave us little satisfaction to watch the two childhood friends withdraw from each other because of us, but no one lost any sleep over it either.

Thursday evening Macnair came back. He swept into the room usually reserved by the younger men. He spied me refilling wine glasses and came over and wrenched me to his side by my arm. I was almost overcome with panic and barely heard his words because of the blood rushing in my ears. Another arm reached out and grabbed his wrist, and I could see the fingertips pressed white.

"She is with me for the evening."

I looked up, startled, to see Nott narrow his eyes in challenge.

Macnair's face was a mask of fury, but he let go. He turned towards Peaches, but Vaisey reached out and pulled her into his lap possessively. Around the room, each young man grabbed a woman and held them close until there were none left free in this room.

Macnair struggled to regain his composure. He looked around the room and only hostile eyes looked back. Without a word, he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

We all remained still as we listened to the startled cry from another lounge. Ma's voice could be heard in the foyer beseeching Macnair to leave and come back when he

was 'in a better mood.' The pounding of feet up the stairs and the receding whimpers from whichever young woman he had grabbed were the only reply. We listened as Ma let out a stream of invective and called for a house-elf and hurried away from the foyer.

Tears filled my eyes. I was overcome by my sudden rescue and overwhelmed with guilt that it meant injury to another. I felt Nott's arm sweep around me, and his voice spoke quietly into my ear.

"We need to talk." I froze, and he had to nudge me to get me to move. I looked around the room until I met Peaches' eyes. She blinked back, her face immobile.

We made it up the stairs and into the first guestroom available. I walked over to the tray of refreshments that appeared as he closed and locked the door. I felt his wards go up, and the part of me that could still respond instinctively to magic knew they were poorly set.

"Would you like some wine, sir?" I asked, struggling to form my plastic smile.

"No, just sit down, Granger." My face whipped up in shock. I had not been called that since Hogwarts. I sat down. Hard.

My hands knotted up in my lap as I watched him pace back and forth locked in some inner struggle.

"Tell me, Granger. If you could have your wand back right now, what would you do with it?"

The question was so unexpected that I gave the first answer that popped into my head.

"Conjure myself some decent clothes."

His bark of a laugh made me flinch.

"Okay, I can imagine I would do the same." He scrubbed his hair with his hand. "What I am asking is would you hex me? Curse me?" He frowned at his own awkwardness. "This is all wrong. I want to know if there is a chance you and I could talk without..." He waved his hand back and forth between us, and then swept it out around the room. A muscle in his jaw clenched repeatedly.

I could see where he was trying to go, but my brain was urging me towards caution. True, he had protected me from Macnair, but he was who he was, and I would not risk Severus's life by showing my hand.

"Just say what you want to say, Nott."

"How can I trust you?" His face was full of anguish.

"Why do you need to?" I asked quietly.

"I need to... I just need to."

"Then speak."

"Granger..."

We were at an impasse. I took a small gamble, nothing that couldn't be attributed to the gossip of whores.

"Don't trust Crabbe with anything you wouldn't say directly to your Lord." I bit my lip and watched him. He stared into my eyes, but I dropped mine to my lap.

"Granger, I want this to end. I want you to know I want this to end." He flinched at his own words. I could see from his expression that he was wondering if he had gone too far.

"Why? Isn't this what you wanted?" I allowed some truth to slip through. "You rule the wizarding world, you pure-bloods have achieved your superiority. My kind has been put in its place. It is only a matter of time before your Dark Lord stretches out his hand and grabs the Muggle world. Think of all those helpless men, women and children you could crush under your boots. I do not understand, Theodore Nott, why would you want this to end?" My voice was steady, not loud or accusatory, but I watched him react as if from blows.

"I don't want that!" he shouted and stormed across the room until he was looking right in my face. I slid my eyes to his ear.

"Granger, I was wrong! All that pure-blood ideology was fed to me from childhood! But the reality... oh, gods." He sagged and spun around to sit on the couch next to me and dropped his head into his hands. "He's crazy. They are all crazy, but the Dark Lord is truly insane. He killed my father," he whispered.

I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently.

"I know. I am sorry for your loss." I meant my words. I wasn't sorry Nott senior was dead, but I was sorry this young man lost a father he'd obviously had such a difficult relationship with.

"No, I am sorry for *your* loss. You have lost everything. I just lost an overbearing fanatic that I could never please. Caroline told me of how most of you have lost your whole families." My face reflected my confusion.

"Peaches. Didn't you know her real name?" I blushed at my ignorance.

"They took everything away from us, Theo, our families, our magic, our identities. I don't know anyone's name. Mine is known because I was famous. Peaches gave you a gift by telling you her name. She told me once, years ago, but I am too damaged to even remember." He bowed his head and nodded.

"You were better than most of us, Granger. We hated you for that."

"I understand. I wanted to fit into your world so badly that threw myself into learning everything I could. I didn't want to be seen as different." I laughed harshly. "I didn't realize I shouldn't have bothered. I should have known I would never be allowed to join your world. All that time in the library looks pretty stupid when I think of how I earn my food, doesn't it?"

He had the grace to look ashamed.

"We all were gifted, Theo. All the girls here are bright and intelligent. Peaches came here from America to study spell damage at St Mungo's. Angel was an assistant for the Ministry specializing in Arithmancy. Now we are just so many warm bodies to slap or grab, whatever takes your fancy."

"I want that to change," he rasped.

"How?"

"It's not just me; there are others. Most of us are done with this life. We have no freedom either. Sure, we live much better than you and have more freedoms, but we are not free. There is no leaving; we cannot choose our own wives. Our wealth is dependent on where we are in the pecking order and only the whim of a madman will change that. Like Caroline, I once dreamed of being a healer. Now, I am just a petty thug. I intimidate shopkeepers for tax payments. I think you're right about Crabbe; he likes that

part and is too stupid to see he has already climbed as high as he can go. He can seem easy going, but he has a mean streak."

"Theo, if you could change things, what would you do?"

"I would free you all; I would give you all wands and then together we could storm the Ministry!" I sighed. He was so earnest and so childish.

"No, Theo." He looked at me, and his fierce expression fell. "How long do you think a couple of dozen women who have not handled a wand in over five years could hold out against Death Eaters, or the Dark Lord himself? You need better allies."

"But who? Who else is left alive that would stand up to the Dark Lord?"

"That is your next step. I would start with seeing who else is unhappy. I would look to your shopkeepers, crushed under the weight of your taxes. Look at the society that has been created and see who lost the most. You will find the seeds of your revolution there. But, Theo, you must use caution. Right now, you think to march to a glorious battle, but it would only be an ignominious death. You must move from a position of strength, not emotion. You need to look beyond the disgruntled Death Eaters; if you are to truly be free, you must create something new."

I could see his thoughts whirl behind his eyes.

"Have you spoken to your former Headmaster?" I asked. I struggled to keep my expression neutral. "I remember you were all so happy he was back."

"No, Caroline thought I should. But he is high up in power, now. You said yourself, being a Death Eater is not the way to go, and Snape is the ultimate Death Eater. I wanted to speak with him; he is good to us, but I no longer trust him. I wish I could." Damn. I flailed around in my head, desperate for what to say.

"Theo, you will have to decide for yourself whom to trust." I put my hand on his arm. "All we can provide is refuge and a whole house full of rooms to go to for quiet advice.

"As for Snape, I remember a man that was protective of his Slytherins. He was a nasty bastard to us, but he was loyal to his house. Try to take his measure. The next time you are alone with him, search his eyes. If you do not see what you are searching for, hold your peace."

He nodded and made towards the door, stopping to press a few coins into my hand.

"I will think on what you said. I will let you know." He stopped with a hand on the knob. "Granger, I will find a way to get you all out of here. I promise."

He left, and as I rose to exit the room myself, I heard Severus's angry voice in my mind: *Promises are meaningless... It's the vows that work.*

I headed back down stairs deep in thought. Back in the Emerald Lounge, I sauntered over to where Angel sat.

"Do we know who is with Macnair yet?" I asked quietly.

She smiled at something someone said to her left. The same smile was stuck on her face as she turned to me with dead eyes.

"*Dusty.*" she mouthed and turned back.

I shuddered, thinking of her at the mercy of that sadist. A few months ago, I was incapable of thinking of these women as my friends. I was not able to feel enough to be empathetic towards another's plight. I thought of what Severus had said about Voldemort and how by chipping away at his own soul he had left himself unable to feel, and I grew enraged. How close had I come to losing my own soul? Severus had returned to me the ability to feel, to worry and to hope. Precious gifts, indeed.

"Meeting after work in the first dorm. Spread the word," I whispered in her ear.

She nodded without ever turning to face me. I moved off to another lounge to repeat my message and saw her get up and stroll about the room.

Have Strength

Chapter 21 of 40

Severus sends Hermione hope.

Thanks go to Astopperindeath for double-beta duty when this chapter locked itself up and refused to play.

The first dorm was crammed with twenty-four women sitting on eight small beds in almost total darkness. Only the moonlight filtering in through the small, dirty attic window by the ceiling kept us from stumbling over each other.

Dusty had been the last to arrive, and, though she moved slowly, she wasn't as hurt as we all feared.

"The house-elf popped in and popped me out of there before he really got going," she said. "I heard him arguing with Ma outside the infirmary. She had smothered me in so many bandages, I looked like a mummy. Didn't need hardly any of them. Then, I heard her say that he had done damage internally and that the elves wouldn't respond to the Brown Room if a life wasn't in danger. I tell you, she lied, right to his face! Then, she berated him for his lack of restraint and how he was misusing a valuable commodity. "When he was gone, she came back in and vanished the bandages but told me not to leave the infirmary until she said so. She just came in a little while ago and told me to go to bed. She looked dog tired. Depressed.

"What do you think will happen to her if they find out she was protecting me?"

"I think she was just protecting an investment; we're just money to Ma," replied Nadia from across the room.

"I don't know," I said, "She did something similar to me when I was in the infirmary. She looked really upset that I was hurt. I think she does have a conscience, but I'm not sure where she keeps it most times."

"Someone should cultivate her," said Peaches. "Give her a bit of understanding and see how she responds."

"I'll do it," I replied. "I'll work on my gratitude," I added drolly. The others laughed.

"Now let's talk about this little revolution we accidentally started and what we should do about it," I continued. "Our little game has been played for higher stakes than we considered at first. We've not only split the Death Eaters into factions, but now it seems that some of them would like to see an end to the tyranny."

My statement was received with a few gasps but mostly nods of agreement.

"I see some of you have already encountered some comments. Let's share what we know."

I made no mention of my inside source, and Peaches didn't remark on its absence. We spoke for another hour, and when we all shuffled off to our beds, we had a sketchy plan to work with. We had mapped out who we thought was a good candidate for Nott to recruit and who we thought was a liability. The ladies who had been in the Emerald Lounge and had witnessed the spontaneous act of protection of all of us by the younger Death Eaters from Macnair were most vocal in supporting the burgeoning revolt. The others were more cautious and skeptical, and I told them I thought that was a good thing: we needed rational minds and ours were likely to get clouded as the prospect of freedom loomed. It was Maisy who decided we needed to split the team, with some of the girls acting as if they were loyal to the Elders. If we looked like we were forming separate allegiances, perhaps they might be lulled into a false sense of security. Amber, Maisy, Ruby and Nadia volunteered. The meeting broke up, and the ladies drifted off to bed.

Peaches leaned over and spoke in a low voice, "I hope you understand what's happening."

I tilted my head in question.

"You are trying to make it a committee. It's not. They already look to you as a leader, Hermione. You cannot run a revolution by committee. Take command. We need it."

"Why not you?" I snapped back quietly. I wanted freedom, not responsibility.

"I'm not the Princess of Gryffindor, my friend. You are a symbol. Being the last one standing has brought you nothing but pain, I get that. But you are the last living friend of Harry Potter. Own it. There will be time to crawl away and just be a broken doll after we win. For all of us. Right now, they need you to be what you once were."

"A bossy know-it-all?" I groused.

"A threat," she replied.

I gave her a sour look, and she lightly punched me in the arm and crawled into the bed next to mine.

Before we both settled, I turned back to Peaches.

"Tell Nott to cultivate Ma. If the younger ones can suck up to her, maybe she could prove useful to their cause."

"Will do, Boss," she replied.

I huffed out a breath and closed my eyes.

I would have thought that my sleep would be disturbed, that anxiety at all the things that could go wrong would keep me tossing and turning, but that night I slept like the dead.

~*~

The rest of the week went smoothly. The girls gave me regular updates on anything they thought was important, and I gave them praise or advice as if I had some right. My fingers itched for parchment; I needed to chart out our information and graph the developing effects, but of course that idea was foolish.

Gossip had it that Macnair's department had suffered a sudden loss of employees and the Dark Lord was unhappy. Rumor had Rookwood in line to take over from him if his revenue didn't improve. Maisy made sure he heard the rumor. She had taken over from Peaches as his favorite, and so far his anger was kept in check. The air in the lounge seethed with tension around Rookwood and Macnair.

I did my best to be more polite to Ma, thanking her for seeing to my care the week before, and obliquely acknowledging her rescue of Dusty. She was surprisingly touched by my gratitude and looked like she wanted to say more, but then shut down and told me sternly to go on about my business. However, after that I noticed a more pleasant manner as she introduced me to whichever new man had bought my time, and during the day she would often smile and cluck as she pulled imaginary lint from my shoulder in a strangely mothering way. I soon had all the girls treating her with more respect, and she responded in kind. Odd that after five years in her service, we only found out now that Ma was actually a decent sort, either that or Stockholm syndrome worked in reverse as well.

On Friday night, Nott again claimed my services.

We made our way up the stairs to a little-used room in the east wing. The bed had bad springs, but it had comfortable chairs. I was guessing he wasn't interested in the bed.

Once we were in and seated, I poured the tea, letting Nott gather his thoughts. He looked excited but also surer of himself, more confident than when we had last spoken.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bit of black cloth. He enlarged it with a wave of his wand, and I saw it was a formal Death Eater robe. He handed it to me and gestured at my garments.

"Thank you," I said as I stood and shrugged on the robes. As I surrounded myself in the voluminous cloak, I recognized the smell that was wafting up from the fabric. *Severus*. I buried my nose in the folds before I had a chance to think about what I was doing and then froze. Too late. I looked up to see Nott's look of smug satisfaction.

"He told me not to shrink them down to size. That you liked them that way."

I'm afraid I just stood there staring at him like a frightened rabbit with bunched up cloth in my fists.

"Thank you, Granger. For urging me to see him. Very clever bit of work that, 'look in his eyes'. Well played."

I sighed and sat back down.

"You needed a leader. You had the right attitude, but no plan. I figured he would be able to judge best how much you should know."

"Well, he's let me in on a good bit of it. Enough anyway. We're to protect you from Macnair without drawing attention to you unnecessarily. And we are to listen to any news or advice you have."

He reached into his pocket again and pulled out a quill and some ink, and a flick of his wand enlarged some parchment.

"He also wanted you to write some letters."

"Why? To whom?"

"He said that there were two people that he tried to contact with new developments in the last few months, but they suspect him and won't bite. He wanted you to write something that would convince them you are really Hermione Granger, something only they would know. He will see that they are delivered so that we could try to gain their trust. Ask them to cooperate without writing something that will get us all disemboweled if the letter falls into the wrong hands."

My mouth went dry, and I had to drink some tea before I could ask my burning question. Two, there were two people alive that would want to help if they knew Snape was really trying to save me. I didn't know who I wanted them to be the most. Another sip of tea and I let my curiosity have its way.

"Who?"

"I don't know." He held a hand up to forestall my onslaught of questions. "He said you would know, that it was better if I didn't yet. One, he called the Romanian Dragon Boy," *Charlie!* "and the other, he called your Broom Artist."

"My broom artist?"

"Yeah, he said it just like that. Kind of bitter."

The penny dropped. *Viktor Krum*. I couldn't remember anything Viktor ever did to incur the dislike of Severus. Perhaps something else happened during that long ago tournament that I was not privy to.

"Do you know who he means?" I nodded. "I'll leave you to it, then. I'm going to rest. It's been a long day."

With that he walked over and stretched out on the bed, which gave with a metallic groan. I should have picked a better room after all.

I leaned over and rolled the parchment out on the table. *Charlie Weasley was alive and Severus knew how to contact both him and Viktor* I sat and remembered the last time I had seen both of them. It was Bill and Fleur's wedding feast. I had to mentally shove the memories away, because the faces of all the guests started to pile up in my mind and my psyche started to rebel at the pain. I was sure both of them would help if I asked; I just had to find the correct words.

I was unsure what to write, or rather, how to write it. I picked up the quill several times and dropped it just as often. Finally, I sat back from the table and pulled myself into the folds of Severus' cloak until not even my toes peeked out. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine he was right here with me. On a whim, I started to rifle through his pockets, searching for something else of his I could hold. I found a scrap of parchment and pulled it out. I unfolded it and looked at the words.

"H.- *'Until the day when God shall deign to reveal the future to man, all human wisdom is summed up in these two words,--'Wait and hope!'* -Alexandre Dumas. *Have Strength,-S.*"

I pressed a hand to my lips, silenced the half laugh, half sob that tried to escape. He knew I would search his pockets. Of course he did. I turned his missive over and, after a moment's thought, scribbled my own reply.

S.- *'It is necessary to have wished for death in order to know how good it is to live.'* -A. Dumas, *I do not doubt.* -H.

Stuffing the note back into his pocket, I leaned forward and wrote my letters. It wasn't that difficult after all; I just needed a reminder that it was not foolish to hope anymore. Fate had dealt us all a harsh blow, to be sure, but I strongly believed that now, with this man at my back, fate could be forced to her knees.

I woke Nott when I was done, and he soon left with my notes. All three of them.

It was the next night that I saw Severus, but not in the way I would have expected.

Wasteful

Chapter 22 of 40

The Death Eaters start to buckle under the pressure. Hermione watches a true Slytherin at work.

Many thanks to Astopperindeath for her patience and hard work.

It was early Saturday night, a full week since my beating at the hands of Macnair. I had managed to avoid him with the help of the younger Death Eaters. But not many of them were on hand this night, so I was doing my best to fade into the background while serving drinks. Ma had sent me upstairs twice with ordinary businessmen, and I was sure she was trying to keep me out of trouble. But both only wanted a quick tumble, and each time I was back downstairs too soon. Macnair was drinking hard. Maisy was doing her best to get him to go upstairs with her, but he was more concerned with trying to show up his fellow Death Eaters in a pathetic bid to hold onto his power. Only the two Crabbes and Carrow seemed to be buying his act. They had only recently started to spend time in here and were only too happy to ingratiate themselves with whoever seemed the most powerful.

The door opened, and Ma's voice fluttered into the foyer in welcome. Hoping it would get me out of this room, I turned to see who was there. A tramp of boots announced the arrival of eight Death Eaters in full regalia, black robes and masks in place. They entered the Lilac Lounge amidst startled cries and gasps from the girls. They spread out into two columns of four and the room fell quiet. This was a sight none of us women would ever be at peace with; for all of us, it preceded the loss of everything we loved.

One of the masked figures surveyed the room and barked out a name.

"Rookwood."

"He's upstairs," Yaxley called back.

"Get him." I tried to recognize the voice, but couldn't be sure with the mask muffling the sound. I thought it might be Vaisey.

Movement at the door caught my eye, and I turned to see another Death Eater stride into the room. Tall and incredibly imposing, he moved with grace and power. I knew it was Severus as soon as I saw him, but at the same time I barely recognized him. This man had presence; he positively dripped gravitas. All eyes were on him as he made his entrance. He stopped in the middle of the room and removed his mask in a careless gesture with his long slender hands.

"Now, now, show a bit of respect. These gentlemen are our brothers," he said. He turned to Yaxley and said politely, "Would you be so kind as to let Augustus know he has business with Lord Voldemort this night? I am sure he will be pleased."

Yaxley gave a sharp nod and left the room after a quick consultation with a very frightened Ma.

I stood riveted to the floor, watching as the room relaxed just a bit and conversation returned. It was because my full attention was on Severus that I was not prepared for Macnair.

He had come alongside as the scene unfolded, and when it looked like everyone's attention had started to drift, he made his move. Reaching out a hand, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and snatched me off my feet. The tray of drinks crashed to the ground and everyone turned to look as he dragged me through the broken glass up onto my knees by my hair and started to grind my face into his crotch.

"What say you and me have another little go, eh, Princess?"

I turned my face away in disgust and saw Severus's bored expression just before he turned his back on me and resumed a quiet conversation with Selwyn.

Seeing that his ploy to get a rise out of Snape had failed, he threw me away with a vicious tug on my hair. I slammed up against the wall, knocking over a vase. Two of the masked Death Eaters took a step in my direction but stopped. Ma shrieked and came running; she kept up a steady stream of complaints about the broken vase and how it would come out of my earnings, but she vanished the shards of glass digging into my knees and gently helped me to my feet. She pushed me towards the door firmly, yelling about how I was a disgrace and needed to get out of her sight. I took her offered escape and tried to make my way out of the room. I backpedaled quickly when Yaxley entered with Rookwood hard on his heels. Macnair came up behind me again, but the four masked Death Eaters nearest stepped in and surrounded me. Macnair swung past them and grabbed Snape by the shoulder to spin him around. Snape's shoulder gave only an inch. Slowly, in his own time, Snape turned to face Macnair. He glared him with a quizzical look.

"Just what the hell do you think you're about Snape, coming in here all high and mighty?"

Snape brushed at the shoulder Macnair had grabbed and replied, "I am on our Lord's business, as I have said. It is of no concern to you." He sneered as he turned his attention back to Rookwood.

"Come, Augustus. Lord Voldemort wishes to speak to you about your new responsibilities." At that, he swung around and took a step to the door. The masked Death Eaters fell into line, prepared to precede Rookwood and Snape out.

"No!" shouted Macnair. He was shaking in fury as he drew his wand. "Rookwood! You will get nothing of mine!" Snape and Rookwood stopped and turned back toward Macnair. Severus wore an expression of irritated impatience, but Rookwood laughed smugly at the enraged man.

"The Dark lord giveth," intoned a gloating Rookwood, "and the Dark Lord taketh... away." This pushed Macnair over the edge, and with a snap of his wrist and a yell of "*Avada Kedavra!*" Rookwood fell dead to the floor. I screamed as I watched the jet of green light streak past Severus. Thankfully, I was not the only one.

"*Expelliarmus! Petrificus totalus!*" The room broke out in chaos as people yelled or screamed and scrambled for cover, but Severus never lost focus. The power of his spell sent Macnair flying into the wall with enough force to crack the plaster behind him from floor to ceiling. In a misguided bid to support Macnair, Carrow threw a curse at Snape but was cut down by Yaxley as three of the masked Death Eaters cast Shielding spells; there was a sickening crack as his head hit a table on the way down. Meanwhile, Snape had levitated the petrified Macnair and watched him slowly spin in the air while he held the man's wand in his fingers.

He twitched his head towards Carrow's still form, and one of his men bent down to feel for a pulse. The Death Eater looked up and shook his head.

"Wasteful," he said with disgust. "Take them; take the three of them out of here."

We all stood frozen as Macnair and the bodies of the two Elder Death Eaters were levitated out of the room.

Snape turned towards Ma, who had her arms wrapped around a sobbing Maisy.

"Agatha, I am terribly sorry for the damage to your premises." He reached into his robes, pulled out a small sack and laid it on the table nearest him. "I do hope this covers the costs."

"Yaxley, I would ask you to come with me to report tonight's events to our Lord."

"I shall."

"Very good." With a final sweep of the room with his eyes, eyes that never even looked at me, Severus left the house in a swirl of robes.

The room was full of quiet sobs and the leave-taking of the remaining Death Eaters, as they settled up their bills with Ma and fled the scene.

Ma sent us all to the kitchen to get some tea and pull ourselves together. I quietly apologized for breaking her vase, and she chuffed a breath.

"I got that thing for three knuts in a secondhand shop in Diagon Alley. Don't you pay my words any heed; I was just trying to get you out of the room."

I gave her an impulsive hug and thanked her. She stiffened but then patted me on the back and sent me on my way to the kitchen.

The room was noisy as the women retold the events of the night to rid themselves of the memory.

Peaches handed me the cup of tea she had made me; both of our hands were still trembling.

"Tidy bit of business there," she said quietly. "Three down in barely twenty minutes."

I nodded and gratefully drank down the tea.

"He hardly looked like the same man from that one night, did he? I had it in my mind that he was all boney and scruffy, and well, kind of a wimp." She shuddered. "I'm glad he's on your side, Princess, because the man that walked in tonight? That man scared the shit out of me."

"He was impressive, wasn't he?" I replied. "I can tell you he wasn't any less terrifying as a teacher." A shrill giggle bubbled up in my throat.

"Lord, I would have blown up my cauldron every time he came near if that was the case."

"Some of us did." I said. My mind drifted to Neville, and I wondered if he could have made it to the forest. Could he be alive out there? But then, I remembered his fear had always been tempered by his implacable determination. Neville would have done whatever he could to see that others got away. He would not have thought of himself first. Unless there had been a large group that made it to the forest, and Winky made it seem that wasn't the case, Neville would have stayed to fight until the end.

Eventually, we drifted out of the kitchen. Some of us went back to the Lilac Lounge to tidy up, the rest scattered to other rooms. I could hear the sound of music as Angel played a quiet tune on the piano. The house was quiet for another hour or so, but then gentlemen started to arrive and work resumed.

At around eleven that evening, the front door opened and in walked Mulciber, followed by four masked Death Eaters. The women backed away quickly, and a couple of businessmen reassessed what constituted an enjoyable night and bolted out the door as soon as it was clear of black robes.

Mulciber spoke to Ma quietly, and I could see she was nervous. He never came to our establishment anymore, so a feeling of dread settle deep in my gut. Ma turned and pointed at me and then at Maisy where we stood in the doorway of the Emerald Lounge, and then signaled for us to come over.

"We have questions to ask about the events that happened tonight. You will come with us," Mulciber ordered. He turned and gestured toward Ma to lead the way.

We all trooped into the Rose Lounge. He waved at the doors, and two Death Eaters closed them and stood guard. Mulciber gestured towards the couch, and another Death Eater pushed us over to sit and then took up a position right behind us. I noticed Ma was grouped in with us. The final Death Eater in the group pulled out a glass and filled it with water from his wand. Placing it on the table in front of us, he pulled a vial from his robes, and I watched in horror as three drops fell into the glass. Veritaserum. Replacing the vial in his robes, he stood back, but when Mulciber waved his arm again he lifted the glass and brought it to Ma to sip. Then, he handed the glass to Maisy, who took the glass with a little gasp and took a bold swallow. Finally, he turned to me. As I reached for the glass, I looked up and into the masked eyes of Theodore Nott. It took great control not to react. I took a swallow and tasted a hint of opium. Odd: Veritaserum had no taste. I looked again at the masked face in front of me and saw Nott wink.

Mulciber was content to sit and stare at us, and I soon started to feel myself become relaxed and my head felt a bit muzzy. However, I felt no accompanying need to tell any deep truths.

I let my eyes go unfocused and relaxed my face while gently stepping on Maisy's foot under the table. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ma's head droop, and then Maisy relaxed and her head tilted slightly to the side. I felt an answering nudge on my foot.

"Finally. Starting with you, Agatha. I want to know the events of this evening."

I didn't know if it was intentional subterfuge or the power of suggestion, but Ma proceeded to give an incredibly detailed account of the entire evening. Mulciber had to stop her at several points when she started in on such minutiae as what she had the house-elves serve to which room. He started in on Maisy, and she repeated the process in a dull monotone that lulled the mind with its cadence. I let my mind drift free, listening and not listening, a trick any woman used to a man's bragging has learned.

Then it was my turn, but rather than repeat the events of the night as well, Mulciber's questions got very specific very fast.

"Tell me what kind of relationship you have with Severus Snape." I saw four masked heads snap towards my direction.

"He taught me Potions in school. He hated me."

"Not then, damn it! Have you had any kind of sexual relationship with your Potions master recently?"

"Yes. Months ago, he had sex with me."

"Is that it? Just that one time?"

"Yes. We went upstairs with Macnair and Peaches."

"Has Severus Snape ever spoken to you or communicated with you by any means since then?"

"No." I replied. I saw the other Death Eaters in the room relax. They needed to work on that.

"Have you, or anyone in your knowledge, ever tried to make contact with anyone outside of this house?"

"No."

"Have you, or anyone you know of, ever spread malicious rumors with intent to harm a member of the Ministry?"

"Yes. When I was in sixth year, I maliciously spread a rumor about Umbridge having to do with the fur trim on her cloak and missing kittens."

"Oh, leave off." He turned away in disgust and addressed the others in the room. "I guess Macnair was lying to save his arse after all. See to them and meet me back at the Ministry. This was a foul waste of my time." With that, he stomped out of the room and out of the house. When we all heard the crack of his angry Apparition outside, the four Death Eaters relaxed and took off their masks.

Before us were Nott, Vaisey, Warrington and Urquhart. Nott waved the other three out and then came over and offered his hand to help Ma up from the couch.

"You should get to your beds. The potion will make you sleepy," he said.

She gave him a tremulous smile and then looked back at Maisy and me as if she wanted to speak. Instead, she gave a quick glance to Nott and pressed her lips firmly together. She took a few steps across the room but stopped and turned back again.

"Head to bed, girls," was all she said, and she left the room, clutching the arm of Theo Nott.

Maisy expelled a breath loudly.

"Do you think she knew the potion was a fraud?" she hissed.

"I don't know. How many people have ever had Veritaserum before? Or paid much attention in Potions class?"

"I hadn't, but I knew Theo was up to something, so I just went with it."

"But Ma, she reacted just as if the stuff worked," I said.

"Maybe it was the power of suggestion?"

"Maybe. But I think not. I think we need to figure out exactly where Ma's loyalties lie and soon. She's either an asset, or she's a major liability."

"Agreed," said Maisy as we left the room.

Don't Mention It

Thanks to Astopperindeath for her beta work.

The mood of the house shifted as the girls, who now referred to themselves as 'my troops,' started to understand the scope of what we were trying to do. The solidarity was complete. Those that might have sniped at each other before, not unusual with so many women thrown together, left it by the wayside as our mission became clearer and as our successes became more obvious.

Two days after 'the incident', as we called it, we had another success. The house had been curiously empty of Death Eaters since Saturday night, so it was a surprise when Ma called me into the foyer to take the Elder Goyle upstairs.

He was never much for the house; he came whenever there was a celebration and usually stayed in a lounge laughing and talking. He mostly stuck to drinking, with the occasional grope. According to Greg, he was satisfied with his marriage and so only went through the motions due to the type of peer pressure that a Death Eater would be foolish to ignore.

Taking me upstairs was an event the impact of which was not lost on the curious women I left behind.

Entering the room, he shut the door and warded it; he then walked slowly over to the bed and pulled the blanket off. With a wave of his wand he transformed it into, well, a blanket with mismatched sleeves. He muttered an oath and then threw it at me.

"Snape said to make you decent. Put that on."

I kept my face schooled into a mask of polite confusion. If I had been nervous when Nott and I danced this dance, I was terrified now.

Shrugging into the attempted robes, I let my arms fall to my sides and smiled politely at him.

He sat on the bed with a groan and scrubbed at his hair with stubby fingers.

I just stood there with my plastic smile on my face.

Finally, he fixed me with a bloodshot eye and jabbed a finger at a chair.

"Sit, girl, you make me nervous." I made *him* nervous? I sat, taking a moment to cover every inch of my skin with fabric.

"Macnair's dead."

I knew this was a probability, so I kept my composure.

"The Dark Lord executed him in front of everyone. Pulled his heart right out of his chest." He shook his head. "I think we were supposed to be impressed. He made an impression on me, though, didn't he?"

I listened as he told me how in an excess of rage, Voldemort had lashed out at the nearest person. Standing guard near the throne, Gregory Goyle Jr. had only been spared the dark hex flung at him because Severus had cast a shield at the same time. Goyle Sr. had rushed over and stood in front of his son. The Elder Goyle had never offered a threat, just put himself in his son's place, and Snape had immediately dropped to his knees and sought forgiveness. They had paid for their intervention, but the Dark Lord eventually forgave them for their rash actions.

"Are you still hurt?" I asked, rising and coming over to him, the very picture of concern. He was not the one I really wanted to ask about.

He waved a hand at me.

"A dark hex here or there comes with the territory, girl. Nothing new. I'll live, Snape will as well. Although we're both getting too old for this shite." He fumbled around in his robes and pulled out a book. He tapped it with his wand, and it returned to its original size. That done, he handed it to me. "Snape wanted you to read this, and here's some parchment and ink, quill's inside the book. You can't keep them; I will have to take it all back in the morning."

I looked at the book; it was a manual of defensive spells.

"Why?"

"He said you might need to brush up. Been a few years since you girls used a wand."

"No. Why are you doing this?"

He stretched his legs out on the bed and adjusted the pillows behind his head.

"Because I am tired, girl. I am bloody tired of it all. Snape understands; a man can't go through his life always wondering when the axe will find his neck. I need peace, and if life would be more peaceful with you mudbloods in charge, then I'm ready for it. Just be sure there's a place for my son in your new world."

With that, he closed his eyes.

I spent that night practicing spells by swishing my quill in the air and taking furious notes. When the first light chime sounded, my fingers were discolored from the ink. Goyle vanished the stains right before he left, and I wanted to cry.

Balling my hands into fists and summoning my resolve, I raced up the stairs to the attic and woke all the girls and called a meeting in the wardrobe room.

"What the hell are you wearing?" asked Peaches when she stumbled sleepily into the room. I looked and saw I was still wearing the hideous blanket with sleeves. I rolled my eyes and cursed and then tossed it off.

"Pay attention, ladies, I have some news. The Elder Goyle has joined our ranks, and he gave me a book of defensive spells to read." I waited for the excited exclamations to die down. "I think we should all practice some of the hand movements and incantations. I don't see why he would have given me the book if there wasn't the possibility of wands in our future."

The room erupted in noise as the women reacted to the news with an expected amount of emotion. I held out my hand as if holding an imaginary wand and slowly went through the movements for *Protego*. Soon, all twenty-four women were scattered about, firmly gripping their future wands and muttering the spell.

It was almost an hour, and five spells later, that a startled gasp made us all turn towards the door. Ma was standing there with one hand on her bosom and the other covering her mouth. Her face was locked in an expression of surprise and fear. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nadia start to slowly angle her way along the wall. When

she was almost behind her, Ma spun to the side and whipped out her wand.

"No!" she yelled, and then in a quieter voice: "No, you don't want to do that." Backing up to one of the shelves along the wall, she kept her wand trained on us as she dug a hand into one of the baskets of hair accessories. None of us moved. I'm not sure if any of us were even breathing. Eventually, she pulled out one of the long thin hair ornaments that looked like a stick with a tassel hanging off the end; she pulled the tassel off. With an appraising look at us, she tossed the stick down. We all backed away. She shouted a quick series of spells and jabbed her wand at the stick on the floor. With a frightened squeal, Ma turned on her heel and fled the room. We looked at each other in confusion and then looked down to see twenty-four sticks lying in a pile.

"Well," said Maisy, "I guess we know what side of the fence she stands on now."

"I think you're right," said Nadia. She scooped up the sticks and held them out to me. I took one. It was now about ten inches long and much thicker than it had been but still had the garish pink varnish with gold decoration.

"Grab your wands, ladies, it's time to swish and flick," I said.

We spent the entire morning reviewing. Tea and scones appeared on a table by the door, and we all smiled at each other, excited to have added yet another member of our seditious group. We practiced the wand movements for every spell we could remember. Defensive spells were all well and good, but if Severus thought I would be satisfied with just that, he had another thing coming.

When we were dressed for the day, we headed downstairs. Ma stood in the foyer looking pale and a bit sickly. The women went about their business as if nothing had happened, as if this was any other day, and I could see Ma relax a bit until I walked up to her.

"Thank you... Agatha," I said quietly.

She shot a quick darting glance at me and then looked back at the stairs.

"Don't mention it, Hermione." Then she chirped a small hysterical titter. "Please, Merlin, don't ever mention it."

"A time will come, maybe soon, when things done might be better mentioned." I told her.

She turned suddenly and grabbed my hand lightly. She pulled me towards her office and once inside, she grabbed a bottle of firewhisky and poured two glasses. Handing me one, she collapsed into her chair and pointed at the other one.

"I only wanted to live, Princess. I am not a fighter; I am not strong. When the world went to hell, I did the only thing I knew how to do, I survived." She gulped her drink and went on; I sat and listened to her disjointed explanation of her motivations. "I never was particularly brave. I was the only bloody Hufflepuff in a family of Slytherins; you can bet I learned to survive. And I was good at it too, right up until I wasn't." Her eyes got sad. "You know my first name now, but do you know the rest of it?"

I shook my head.

"Rosier. I am Agatha Rosier. Ah, I see you've heard of my family, yes, those Rosiers. I was the runt of the litter. In many ways. Proud family they are, or were, only uncles and maiden aunts left now.

"Getting dragged into the whole Death Eater mess wasn't a choice for me. But it was at one of their silly functions all those years ago that I met a boy. No, I won't tell you who. But it is enough for you to know I loved him, and he loved me. He seemed just as lost among those wolves as I was, and we always dreamed of a chance to run away, to strike out on our own and leave the fear behind." She blinked back tears and gulped the rest of her drink.

"Anyway, I slept with him--several times, as a matter of fact--enough times for the usual outcome when the young and stupid pretend they're grown up." She poured another drink.

"You got pregnant," I said quietly.

"Right in one."

"What happened to your boy?"

"Well he's dead, isn't he? Oh, the scandal when they found out I was up the duff! My boy asked me to marry him, and I was proud to say yes. He was my life, and now there would be three of us. We made plans, and I clung to his words throughout all the arguments and punishments from my family, the unending lectures on the shame I had brought upon the House of Rosier. I was going to show them; I was going to be respectable despite what they said. I told them all off. I told them what they could do with their stupid Dark Lord and their stupid movement. For once in my life, I tried to do more than just survive, I spat in their face!

"Soon after that, my boy went off on the Dark Lord's business and never came back. His brother sent word of his death. No one had any details."

"So there I was, a few months later, the blackest sheep in the family with my little black lamb."

She grabbed the bottle and poured another drink. Seeing mine untouched, she tsked.

"That's uncharitable of you, Princess. Drink to my tragic tale."

I lifted my glass to her and drank.

"What happened to your little lamb, Agatha?"

"She was packed off to France to live with my mother's people. I saw her a few times growing up, and before you ask, no, she doesn't know who I am. I'm sad to admit that she turned out to be a rather spoilt and mean girl. She would have made a fine Slytherin. I stopped going to see her years ago; it was too hard to look at my lover's eyes staring out at me from a face frozen in constant disdain. She would be just a bit older than you now."

"Tell me, what became of Agatha Rosier?"

"Agatha didn't survive. It started with little visits from other Death Eaters, visits that were supposed to be full of sympathy for my elder brother's death but were really about trying to get with the girl who puts it about. Eventually, I gave up defending myself.

"I was disowned. My 'loose' connection with the Death Eaters was all I had, and at that point His Darkness had been put out of the game by your little friend with the scar. I ended up in Knockturn Alley. Long story short, I became Ma. I still am Ma."

"When it all went tits up five years ago, I was approached about this job. I was old and tired of being on your side of things and thought this a step up, so I took the job. And a thankless job it is, too. No day off, no pay. Just room and board and a clothing allowance. And you surly lot trying to drink yourselves to death, thank you very much. As if I wouldn't be fined if that was to happen."

"Well, I don't drink much anymore, if that helps."

She gave me an appraising look.

"No you don't; as a matter of fact, you don't do a lot of things you used to, and at the same time now you do more than you ever did. Don't think I haven't seen which way the wind blows, Princess. I know Veritaserum has no taste." She sighed heavily and sat back in her chair.

"I don't know how much help I can be; I am weak and easily frightened, but I'll help however I can. Lying to Mulciber was the most exhilarating thing I've done since I was just a foolish girl. May I ask, how many of the Death Eaters in that room were yours?"

"Apart from Mulciber? All of them."

"Oh, very well done, Princess."

I placed my glass on the desk and leaned in towards her.

"Drop the wards on the house that keep us from doing magic."

"Oh, dive right into the thick of it, why don't you? I can't. It's Dark magic, Blood magic. You need one of your pet Death Eaters to do it, preferable one of the more powerful ones. Unless you want everyone to know you are up to something, leave them up. The Death Eaters can feel the wards; it's how they know they're safe. They'll know as soon as you drop them. Once down, leave them down; trust me, you would not want to do what was needed to raise them again, and it will be hard enough finding someone to drop them."

"Right then, I'll get back to you on that."

"What else do you need? What about privacy? We can designate certain rooms in the house as meeting rooms, redecorate so they are more conducive to the business at hand. Mind you, it can't cost much. I have to requisition the funds from the Ministry, so no major expenses if you don't want to attract notice."

"Who in the Ministry? Who gets the revenue from the house?"

Ma looked up at me suddenly with a gleam in her eye.

"Macnair did."

We both smiled; it wasn't very pretty.

"I wonder who will be in charge now?" she asked.

"We'll soon find out." I answered.

Very sorry for the delay. A family emergency came up.

A Selfish Mind

Chapter 24 of 40

The Ministry closes the house for inspection.

Chapter 24: A Selfish Mind

The next morning found all of us back upstairs in the wardrobe room practicing with our makeshift wands. We knew it wasn't the same, but it felt like we were doing something, so we put our hearts into it.

We were interrupted by the sound of feet running up the stairs. We all hid our sticks and made to look as if we were dressing. I have to say, I was pleased that our attempt at subterfuge looked almost natural.

Ma came running in waving a letter; she looked frightened to death.

"Closed for the day! Princess, what should I do? They're coming!"

I ran over quickly and snatched the letter out of her hands. Peaches came over and started to pat Ma on the back.

"It's all right! We knew this was coming. The Ministry has reassigned managerial rights to the house, and the new manager is coming with a party for an inspection at noon. We'll be fine!" I said.

"But, they've never closed us for an inspection before! It's highly suspicious!"

"I agree; therefore, it is imperative that we not look suspicious. They'll want to see your books; is everything in order there?"

Ma straightened her shoulders.

"Of course they are," she snapped indignantly.

"Well, then, there you are? Nothing to be afraid of. It's not as if we're hiding anything; we don't have anything, well except these."

I pulled my stick out of my hair.

Ma made a squeak and pulled out her wand.

"Here, girls, toss them in a pile."

We did, and she vanished them.

"We'll come up with something better later. Right now, I need all of you downstairs to help get the house in order. Pray one of your pet Death Eaters inherited this place, my dears. Now, off you go!"

We all trooped downstairs, and after a hurried breakfast of tea and toast, we set to work tidying up.

At the stroke of noon, we were all lined up in rows three deep in the foyer awaiting inspection. Ma wrung her much-abused hands together and chattered to herself in a quiet voice. The rest of us just looked honestly nervous, Ma looked like she was guilty as sin. I was about to try and talk some calm into her when we heard the crack of multiple apparitions outside. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

Ma took a deep breath, set her shoulders and lifted her chin just as the front door opened.

Theo Nott was the first in the door, followed by Vaisey. After him came Severus and Goyle Sr. Last in the door were two masked Death Eaters who closed the door and took up positions on either side. Ma looked over her shoulder at me, and I returned a smug smile. A quick look of relief flashed across her face but was gone when she faced the party again.

"Welcome, Gentlemen."

"Hello, Agatha," said Goyle. "We apologize for any inconvenience."

"It's of no matter," she replied, calmly.

At a signal from Severus, Theo moved to the center of the room to address us.

"I'm going to ask you all to step forward one at a time and present yourselves. After that, you will be asked to either remain here or move into the Lilac Lounge until called upon further."

He pointed to the front of the line.

"Peaches, come forward please."

We watched as Peaches stepped forward to the place on the floor that Theo had indicated. Severus stepped forward and lifted her chin and looked into her eyes for just a fleeting moment and then gestured to the lounge. After an uncertain look towards Theo, who nodded encouragingly, she left the foyer. This was repeated, one girl after another with almost all of them being sent to the lounge. When it had been my turn and I had stepped up, Severus had gently pinched my chin and gazed warmly at my lips before a gesture sent me to stand along the wall. Eventually, only Ma was left. Ruby, Angel and I watched from along the wall where we had been asked to stand as Severus gestured for Ma to come forward. She did so with a quiet bravery I was very proud of. After only a moment of eye contact, he sent her to the lounge as well. He sent Vaisey and Goyle to go close the doors to the lounge and keep them company.

At his gesture, the two Death Eaters by the door came and flanked him. Nott looked unhappy.

Severus turned towards me and gestured at Angel.

"This one occludes; I cannot tell without some unpleasantness. Tell me what you want me to do with her, Hermione."

I looked at Angel in a panic. She looked back at me in confusion.

"Angel, this is my contact at the Ministry."

Her face blossomed with understanding, and she stepped in front of Severus again and looked him in the eye.

"Forgive me, I was only trying to protect."

"Understandable."

He lifted her chin and looked his fill and then sent her to the lounge as well.

We all turned to Ruby.

"This one is has a selfish mind."

Ruby sputtered, and I put my hand on her arm.

"What do you mean?"

"Her motives are of the basest selfishness; she has no loyalty to you or any of the others."

I looked at Ruby and saw her eyes had gone dead. Her shoulders drooped, and her arm fell away from mine.

"Severus, we are what we are. We are what we have been made to be. If Ruby is only in it for herself, that's not unexpected given what little hope we've had these long years." Ruby looked over at me, and I saw pain and sadness in her eyes. "Being in it for herself is different from being against us."

"Look again, Severus," I asked.

She turned to face him and lifted her chin bravely.

He looked into her eyes, but this time he pulled out his wand and muttered *Legilimens*. I watched as Ruby struggled not to pull away; her hands came up as if to shove him off but they didn't touch him. Finally, with a cry, she broke contact and turned and threw herself into my arms and sobbed.

"Very well. My apologies." And with a flick of his hand he ordered Nott to take her into the Lilac Lounge. The doors closed behind them, and I was alone with Severus and the two masked Death Eaters.

"Come," he said, and he strode off into the Emerald Lounge, and I followed, flanked by the masked men.

Not sure of our audience, I simply walked over to Severus and stood waiting for him to speak. He pulled a cloth from his pocket and tapped it, and it enlarged into soft robes of a bright red. I smiled at his choice of colors and shrugged into the garment. A wave of his wand buttoned me up, and I found myself in yards of soft material. Long sleeved and high necked. I wanted to wrap my arms around him, but the stiffness of his posture warned me that that might not have been a good idea. I jerked my head at the two behind me and gave him a questioning look. He returned a look of such sadness that I started to fear the worst. He reached up and turned me away from him by my shoulder until I was facing the other two.

"Are you satisfied?"

The taller one nodded and removed his mask.

"Charlie!" I screamed and ran to him. He caught me up and spun me around while hugging all the breath out of my body. When he set me down, I turned to see Viktor Krum standing as duck-footed as ever with his arms out. I threw my arms around him and hugged him as hard as I could.

"Vee thought you vere in Azkaban all these years," he said. He didn't let go of me and stared at me like I wasn't real.

"The papers said you were sentenced to life. And then, we heard nothing ever again," said Charlie. "I am so sorry you were left here. We would have tried to get you out sooner."

"And you would have died," snapped Severus. At his angry tone, I turned quickly to look at him. His face was bitter. I couldn't understand. He had just reunited me with two wonderful people, and now we had more than ever on our side. Was he angry? I stepped out of Viktor's arms and walked over to him.

"Severus? Is everything alright? Is something wrong?"

He lifted a hand up but then dropped it back to his side.

"No. Nothing is wrong." He schooled his features back into a blank mask. Turning to Charlie he said, "The house is secure."

I turned back to Charlie to see him nod and pull a small mirror out of his pocket.

"Aberforth," he said to the mirror. After a pause, he simply said: "Send them."

A few moments later, we heard the sound a several Apparitions, followed by even more...

Thank you for your support during the last few weeks. I hope to be back to more regular updates. -Aurette

Your Army, Milady

Chapter 25 of 40

The rest of the survivors rally to the cause.

Several doors opened at once, and the first voice I heard was Ma moving swiftly out of the lounge.

"We are closed, gentlemen! Closed for inspection!"

As we hurried out to the foyer, I heard Goyle Sr.'s voice.

"It's alright, Agatha, let them in! In quickly now!"

I reached the foyer and saw all of the young Death Eaters piling in the door, yet still more people came. I gave a shout when I saw another ginger head that turned out to be Percy Weasley. He hurried over to me and pulled me into a fierce hug. He looked so different with a full beard and long straggly hair, but I would have recognized him in the dark. My head was swimming, and I was babbling as the foyer filled with people coming in the front door and piling on top of each other. Many of the newcomers looked quite shabby, and the sudden smell of body odor was cloying. I turned to look for Severus, but there were too many people around me, and I could no longer see him.

"The Ballroom, Agatha! Open the Ballroom!" cried Goyle Sr.

The seldom used doors to the ballroom flung open, and the crowd surged forward, taking me with it. I felt a moment of panic until I was pulled by strong arms out of the crowd. I turned around expecting to see Severus and found myself looking into the round face of an almost unrecognizable Neville Longbottom.

"Neville!" I cried. "I thought you were dead!"

"We all thought you were in Azkaban," he replied and hugged me tight. It was too much. I fell apart. I started to sob uncontrollably, and he pulled me back into the foyer and held me gently as we cried together. Eventually, having my face pressed against his shoulder became unpleasant, and I pushed back a little.

"Heavens, Neville, you stink! You smell like horses!"

He laughed.

"Centaur, actually. We've been living in the forest these last five years."

"Oh, God, you did make it to the forest. Severus didn't know if any survived. Winky was too drunk to make any sense, and all these years he thought he was alone! How many made it?"

"Severus, is it? On a first name basis with him now? Alright, don't give me that Hermione look, Miss Bossy Boots."

"About forty of us made it out of the school alive. Hardly anyone showed up to help us, just a few people from Hogsmeade, but the teachers created a diversion, and the younger ones all took off. Percy showed up, and together we covered their retreat. Percy had fled the Ministry when he heard about his family and ran to the school to get Ginny. He didn't know she had gone home that weekend. He fought like a madman and helped to clear the path to the forest."

"We wouldn't have made it; we were cut off from the other students, but Grawp came out of nowhere and took out all the Death Eaters between us and the forest, so Percy and I just took off running. We made it, but it was rough on the youngest ones; we lost four that first winter. Some were cursed beyond our ability to heal them, and the Centaurs couldn't help them either. Percy was the one that snuck back into the school and brought back owls. We sent messages to everyone we could think of for help. Most of our messages came back undelivered, but some people got the word. Charlie showed up pretty fast; he brought all kinds of stuff back with him from Romania, and that helped a lot. People started to drift in from the outside world as they heard. More came every year as things got worse for the average folks. Hannah showed up that first summer."

"Hannah Abbot?"

"Hannah Longbottom, now," he said and puffed up with pride.

"Hannah's alive! And you're married! That's wonderful, Neville!"

"Yeah, her father pulled her out of school in her sixth year, you remember? Anyway, as things got bleaker under You-Know-Who's rule, she made her way back to the school as a sort of pilgrimage to commemorate those that died. Our scouts saw her, and eventually she came back with her father, and they've been with us ever since. That's how we've got most of our recruits."

"So how many of you are there now?"

"All told, we number about one hundred and sixty. There are children and elderly as well, so I would make us about ninety able-bodied fighters. Unfortunately, not all of us have wands."

"So, you've been living in the wild all this time? How have you been eating?"

"The house-elves from Hogwarts. We've been sneaking back into the school for years and gathering food. The Ministry never noticed that the school was still receiving supplies all these years. Percy snuck in and fixed the paperwork. Merlin be praised for bureaucracy. The only dodgy moments were when Snape would show up. He would spend days there picking through the place. Minerva," he stopped and looked at me, "she's a ghost now, did you know?" I nodded. "Minerva took it upon herself to drive him off. Stubborn bastard." He laughed at a memory, and I cringed. "He would always come back. None of us had the nerve to get rid of him permanent-like. Seems like it was a good thing we didn't, now."

"Oh, Neville. If you only knew what you've done." I couldn't help but pull away from him. "Severus..."

I stopped speaking before I said something stupid. I couldn't reveal everything Severus had done these last five years without jeopardizing his position with the Death Eaters that had only recently turned their backs on their own beliefs. They didn't know he had always been on the other side. They thought he turned to protect them and it could be disastrous if the truth were to be discovered.

"We're on the same side now," I said.

"Yeah, well, we didn't know that then, did we? But we know now." He stepped back and sketched a courtly bow. "Come inside and meet your army, Milady, and a motley army it is; we've got woodsmen, Death Eaters, runaway bureaucrats, shopkeepers with no shops and er, ladies of the night."

He turned away and walked inside expecting me to follow.

"You mean whores," I said quietly to myself.

"No, fellow survivors," said a deep, velvet voice. I turned my head and saw Severus step out of the shadows.

I opened my arms like a tired child seeking a parent's arms. He gently swept me into his embrace and stepped back into the shadows.

"Are you not happy, Hermione?" he asked. His voice was full of concern.

"Yes, of course I am. I'm just overwhelmed. It's almost too much." I pushed back and looked deep into his shadowed eyes. "You did so very well, Severus. It's almost more than I could have dreamed of. Thank you." His eyes glittered under my praise.

"I vowed I would see you free, Hermione," he said.

"I do not doubt, Severus. I know you will."

He pulled me into a tight embrace, and I felt bruises on my back from all the hugs I had received. I lifted up my head and kissed him, and he made a small noise in his throat as he kissed me back passionately. His kiss was intense and filled with longing, and I answered in kind. We broke our kiss when a surge of noise from the ballroom sounded too much like anger to be ignored.

"Let's go keep the peace," I said and we entered the ballroom.

The tables had been pushed back to the walls, and there were platters of food and pitchers of pumpkin juice as well as pots of tea and trays of biscuits covering them. It seemed like everyone had had a chance to eat, and now they were looking for all the world like they were squared off against each other. The Death Eaters were along the eastern wall, and Charlie and Neville, surrounded by their people, faced off against them along the western wall. Ma and the ladies were against the southern wall looking daggers at Neville's group. I noticed all of the ladies were wearing transfigured robes in varying stages of competence. Professor McGonagall would not have been impressed. I went over to my girls and asked Peaches what was going on.

"They act like they're too good for us, Princess." The use of my nickname wasn't lost on me. She needed me to be one of them. "They act like they don't need a bunch of tarts at their party. And they're none too welcoming of our boys either."

I turned and looked over at Neville, and he flushed and looked at Charlie.

"No one said we weren't grateful for their help, and we meant no insult to your friends. I only said I didn't know how helpful they would be in a fight. And as for your pet Death Eaters, well, some of us feel that your 'boys' can't all be trusted. Surely you can understand. Most of us have been running from them for years."

I looked over at Theo, and he nodded at me and stepped forward.

"We can understand that, but things are different now. The Dark Lord's ways are not our ways any longer," he said.

"That's all fine and good," said Percy, "but it's a lot to bet our families' lives on isn't it?"

I stepped forward. "Yes, yes it is. But you have no choice; you have already bet your lives on it. We all have. They know where your families are hiding, now. You've seen their faces and word of this gathering dropped anywhere near the Ministry will bring all of them a painfully slow death. You can each destroy the other with an angry or careless word. There's simply no time for this, don't you see? We have to work together now. We've no choice." I looked at all of them as my words sank in. Severus was standing in front of his Death Eaters, and he gave me a small nod of praise.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to trust *him*. You can't expect me to do that. He killed Dumbledore!" I turned to see that those words were spoken by Charlie. "Now that we've got you free, Hermione, we don't need Snape anymore, and I think we'd all be safer if he was out of the picture. We've no reason to believe his word. First a Death Eater, then a member of the Order, then Dumbledore's murderer, and now he's trying to start a revolution. How many times can a man change sides in his lifetime? I'm sorry. If you want him to join our little parade, then you will have to give me a better assurance than his *word*."

The tension in the room increased until it was thick with poorly restrained violence. One wrong word, and I lose one group in the room. Divided we fall indeed. I couldn't defend Severus with the whole truth. We could lose our Death Eaters if they found out Severus had only come back to bring them down.

I looked back at Peaches, who didn't even know all the secrets but understood the problem. She just twisted her head on her neck as if the weight of her thoughts was more than she could take. I walked across the room and stood in front of Severus. The sound of many feet echoed in the large room, and I turned to see all my girls threading themselves amongst the Death Eaters. Ma came and stood at my side, but I moved up a pace.

"If you want him dead, kill me." I heard Severus growl and move towards me, but I flung a hand back and up to stop him. He stopped.

"Have you gone mental, Hermione?" This from Neville.

"No. You refuse to put the lives of your families on the line because you cannot trust him. I understand that. In the end, is his life really worth ruining a chance to destroy this evil? If not, then mine isn't either. What are two lives compared to the thousands living under tyranny right this moment? Nothing, just a small price to pay. These Death Eaters behind me are past the point of no return. Kill Severus and me, and they will still fight for you. So will these women. But may the Good Lord have mercy on your souls when you have won. So kill me." I took another step forward. "Kill me, and Severus dies as well. Two for the price of one. Two as your price for revolution."

"I don't understand," said Neville.

"I am thinking it is a vow," I heard Viktor's voice before the crowd parted to reveal him. He moved out of the crowd and stepped onto the dance floor. "I haff guessed rightly, yes?" He moved across the floor until he was at my side. "I did not come for them, though I could haff had they called. I came for you. He called in your name. Your vord is good enough for me." He passed me and went and stood shoulder to shoulder with Snape.

Neville, bless him, broke ranks and joined me as well.

"Do what you must, but do it quickly, because this day is getting shorter and we are running out of time to plan," I said.

"Who the hell put you in charge? Who do you think you are to be talking like that?" I saw the speaker, but didn't recognize him. I saw an echo of his sentiment on many of the faces across the room.

"I'm Hermione Granger; I'm the Muggle-born friend of Harry Potter, and I'm the Princess of Gryffindor. I may not be in charge now, but I will be by the end of the night, because you can't run a revolution by committee, so I'm not even going to bother."

"You're damn skippy," said Peaches behind me.

"I do need advisors, though, so if anyone over there has an idea of how this can be done you are more than welcome." Percy elbowed Charlie out of the way to cross the floor, and I saw Charlie look down at his shoes, rather than see his last living brother walk away. Many people started across the floor and rather than shame him in defeat, I crossed the floor to him. I put my hand on his cheek, and his head came up.

"Did he really take a vow to you?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, Charlie," I whispered. "There is so much more you need to know, but I can't say it in front of all these people. Please believe you are not making the wrong decision." He opened his mouth to answer me but then his eyes widened. I looked behind me to see Severus looming over me, his face all mottled fury.

"Stupid little Gryffindor!" he spat, "you will *not* do anything like that again! Any of these cretins could have taken you up on your foolish challenge, and then all my work would have been worth fuck all, wouldn't it?"

"It would still have been worth it, Severus, but I couldn't just let them kill you. It was my only option."

"I am not important here!" he hissed, "*You* are! I arranged this little party for *you*, and you try and get yourself killed at the first opportunity!"

"Has it occurred to you that maybe I wouldn't want to be at a party if you weren't there?" I snapped back. I faced him down. "Deal with it, Severus." I was just as fed up with his stupid Slytherin tendencies toward silent suffering as he was of my Gryffindor penchant for dramatic action. He looked at my hands planted firmly on my hips and just for a split second his lips quirked. It would not have been considered a smile by anyone else, but I saw it for what it was and huffed. He snapped his head toward Charlie.

"Do not make her risk her life again," he hissed.

"We're talking about an attack on the Ministry, Snape. I can make no guarantees. But I do promise to try."

"Promises are meaningless," he said, in a low voice.

Charlie, to his credit, was not cowed, he just put his hand out in a gesture of peace.

"To an uneasy alliance until things are explained better."

Severus looked at Charlie's hand like he would rather use it for a potion ingredient, but shook it anyway.

Gilding the Lily

Chapter 26 of 40

Situations are assessed. Plans are made. Feelings are tested.

After designating representatives for each group, most of the crowd settled comfortably in the ballroom while the rest of us moved back into the Emerald Lounge for a conference. Warrington and Urquhart stationed themselves at the front entrance to the house, and Dusty decided to keep them company. The planning committee consisted of Peaches, Angel and Ma from the house, Goyle Sr., Nott and Vaisey from the Death Eaters, and Charlie, Percy and Neville from the Forest, and, of course, Viktor, Severus and me.

"The school is at your disposal, Longbottom. If you can stay discreetly living in the forest for five years without the Ministry getting suspicious, I don't see that it would be a problem for you to make use of the school in a similarly discreet manner. There are no plans for the facility, and I assure you this affair will be done with, one way or another, too soon for him to make any." Severus addressed Neville as leader of that group, and the others seemed content with that. Neville set his shoulders and just nodded acceptance of the offer. It was odd to see them interact as equals.

"Do try to take a bath, Longbottom; it would do no good for the Dark Lord to smell you coming." Alright, maybe not equals.

"I am sorry we've offended your nose, sir. We will be very grateful to move most of us into the school without fear. However, some of us must stay in the forest. The

Centaurs are our allies. We'll split the group between the forest and the castle, but it wouldn't be a good idea to just up and leave them *en masse* after they have granted us asylum. They have protocols and traditions that boggle the mind, but we know enough to wait for them to ask us to leave or risk insulting them terribly. They won't fight with us unless the Dark Lord comes to the forest, but they will grant us refuge if we fail again." A shadow fell across Neville's face as he said this last.

"You did not fail the first time," Severus reprimanded him in a clipped voice. "Firstly, you were mere students. Secondly, there was no way for you to have known. I didn't even know and neither did any of the other principal players besides the Dark Lord's inner circle. It was a risky surprise attack on an overwrought adolescent given too much responsibility, too young. The subsequent destruction of every scrap of viable resistance was due to an absolute failure in planning, a mistake we are here to ensure is not repeated."

Neville did not reply, but he did take a deep breath and his shoulders relaxed as if a weight had lifted off at Severus's words. Percy lifted a hand and gripped Neville's shoulder silently.

"Vat is the most pressing matter before we turn our mind to attacking?" asked Viktor as he handed me a cup of tea.

"Well, the way I see it, there's a major shortage of wands. None of us in the house have any, besides Ma, and Neville tells me that some of the people in the Forest have lost theirs as well."

"We have that problem already nearly solved," said Theo. He looked at Severus and received a nod. "We've been cultivating Ollivander. It was Granger's idea to speak with the shopkeepers and others disaffected by the Dark Lord's regime. Ollivander spent some time as a guest of the Dark Lord and has been in servitude ever since. He's back running his shop, but the Death Eaters have been taking wands from him with no payment for the last five years. He is rather sympathetic. However, I think it would be good to find some method of payment. He's been living rough."

"He can have this bloody house. We can sell it and give him the money after we win," said Ma. Angel patted her on the back, while Peaches elbowed her in the ribs, lightly.

"We're gonna need this house for a while yet, *Agatha*," Peaches said, obviously relishing the chance to use Ma's real name for the first time. "Where do you think we're all gonna suddenly go when we win? The forest? Hell to the no."

"The castle has plenty of room," said Percy but was almost drowned out by Theo who blurted, "You can stay with me," and then blushed to the roots of his hair. Peaches fell silent but spent the rest of the meeting with a dazed expression on her face.

"Goyle, go and see if Mr. Ollivander has a moment to spare this afternoon," said Severus. "Take this one with you with you as a character reference." He flicked a disgusted finger at a still red-faced Nott. The two headed towards the door followed by Ma, who after speaking quietly with Viktor and then nodding, scurried out of the room. She returned quickly with a stack of parchment, ink and quills.

Viktor transformed the end table next to me into a small desk and pushed it in front of me: taking the supplies from Ma, he placed them on the table.

"I am thinking you need to make notes, yes?" he said, and I beamed at him. He clicked his heels and gave me a short bow and then sat down next to me.

"Our Herm-own-ninny needs paper to plan," he told the room by way of explanation. Still grinning like a nine year old at her birthday party, I grabbed up a quill and opened the ink bottle.

"Right then, do we have an idea of how many wands we need? The members of this house need twenty-four in all." I started to write a list of names.

"We've been sharing what we have and some of them are not a good fit," answered Percy. "We grabbed what we could after the battle, but a lot were burned along with their owners. Many of the ones we have belonged to the Death Eaters Grawp took out when he lost it. He saw Hagrid go down and just went crazy. Of those planning on fighting, we are short four, but that leaves those left behind with none."

"We need a place to practice," said Angel. "We have been brushing up on incantations and wand movements with sticks, but have had no practical use of magic in well over five years. To keep our end up, we need practice."

Ma turned towards Severus. "The charms on the house are keyed by the girls' blood. If you drop them completely, the next Death Eater through the door will know. Is there any way to close the house for the duration? A quarantine?"

"No," he answered. "The house is closed until tomorrow at noon; any longer would look suspicious. However, we might be able to isolate certain rooms and deactivate the wards in those rooms if you think you could keep your clientele away from those areas."

"You can have the entire east wing; it connects to the attic dormitories, so it would be easy for the girls to move about without having to go through the rest of the house."

"Show me, *Agatha*. I will see what needs to be done so we can reset the wards later."

"Certainly, right this way, Severus."

The two left the room, and I heard their tread on the stairs. For some reason my stomach dropped. People only moved up those stairs for one reason, and even though my brain was firmly in control, or so I told myself, I couldn't help the feeling that I just didn't like the way *Agatha* had said his name. It was familiar. I remembered her story and realized that they had known each other when they were younger. Had they been friends? They were of an age, after all. I suddenly felt sick and dizzy, and no amount of chiding my foolishness had any effect.

"Herm-own-ninny? Are you alright?" Viktor put his hand on my shoulder. "Here, haff some more tea." He placed a fresh cup into my hands, and I nodded gratefully. I sipped at my tea and listened to the conversation in the room as the various factions knitted together over small talk and biscuits. Viktor rubbed slow, reassuring circles across my back and shoulder until I set the cup aside and gave him a grateful smile.

"You look vunderful, Herm-own-ninny," he said. I felt the same old clench in my gut I always did when someone said that to me.

"It's the house; there are charms on it to make all the ladies look beautiful," I answered.

"These charms, they cannot put that clever look in your eyes, I am thinking. But I did vunder about the hair. Tell me, is it still a bush?" He reached up and took a lock and rubbed it through his fingers. "Yes, I am thinking you are still a pretty girl with wild hair. These charms cannot affect you. They are, how you say? *Gilding the lily*." I laughed and batted his hand away.

"What else is a priority?" I asked the room in general, thankful to Viktor for bringing my mood back up.

"Clothing for the ladies and medical supplies," answered Angel.

"Do you have any healers in your group, Charlie?"

As we started to thrash out resources and needs, I noticed a movement out of the corner of my eye and turned my head. It was Severus. I hadn't seen him return. I smiled at him, but his face looked carved in stone as he turned away to respond to something Percy had said about potions. The challenge of changing the wards must have been more complicated than he originally thought for him to look so severe.

An hour later and my hands were cramped. It had been forever since I had done this much writing, and I waved my hand to try and work the cramp out.

"Okay, we have groups worked out to their best strength. Nadia and Peaches will be in charge of organizing medical groups. Neville, you and Charlie will be in charge of working out your fighting units. Vaisey, you and Nott will organize the Death Eaters."

"We really need to come up with another name." he muttered.

"Whatever you decide to call yourselves, report to Severus." I was interrupted at this point by the door opening. We all froze until Urquhart called an all clear. Goyle Sr. and Nott entered the room, followed by Mr. Ollivander who was smiling broadly.

It was almost two hours later that Mr. Ollivander was escorted back to the door. All the ladies in the house, and those people from the forest without wands, had all gathered in the Lilac Lounge. He had measured up some people, but had many of us already in his head. It was rather eerie to hear him spit out the attributes of a wand I had lost five years ago. My reaction was mirrored by most of the people in the room.

I escorted him to the foyer with Severus and so was the only other person to see him hand Mr. Ollivander a card.

"Bill them to this Gringotts account."

"As you wish."

"And I don't think I need remind you of the price you will pay if word of this gets out."

"Really, Severus! I hardly think that's necessary!" I said in indignation.

"Don't you mind, miss. He is better off cautious. I will be back tomorrow as planned, sir. And you may rest assured, none will be the wiser." He turned and left, escorted by Nott and Greg Goyle. When the door had closed behind him and Warrington and Urquhart had returned to their stations, I spun around and tugged at Severus's sleeve as he tried to walk away.

"What do you think you're doing? You can't pay for all those wands!" I hissed.

He snatched his sleeve out of my grip.

"I'm not. The Lestranges are. And I've told you before, woman, I am not destitute!" He spun on his heel and stormed out of the foyer. I stood there watching his robes fan out behind him as he left me. This sniping at each other had been going on since Ollivander arrived. He would either ignore me completely or skewer me with short sharp stabs of bitterness. I didn't know what had made his mood so sour, but as the evening came on, I was rapidly losing my patience with him.

Peaches came out of the ballroom with a tray of sandwiches and drinks for our guards at the door. She waved the tray towards me.

"And what about you, o captain, my captain?"

"Oh, do shut up, Peaches," I snapped before turning to follow Severus back into the ballroom.

"Well, hell. Looks like the Princess is back," I heard her mutter as she turned back to the men. "Can't say I missed her."

Like a Weasley

Chapter 27 of 40

Hermione explains to Charlie why Severus is so important, while Severus prepares a place for the girls to practice magic.

Most of our people had left by seven that evening. The long leave taking in the foyer was a loud, joyous chaos as people reveled in the feeling of a hope that was so shiny and new. I took up my assumed role of Leader of the Movement and wished them all goodnight. I found myself curiously removed from the situation, aloof. But no one seemed to mind as they hugged me or grabbed my hand in farewell. Finally, the door closed for the last time, and the house fell into relative silence. Besides the inhabitants of the house, Severus, Viktor, Charlie, Percy and five of the younger Death Eaters remained. Theo had Greg Goyle and Caddoc Warrington stay downstairs to keep guard and posted the other two outside.

The women scattered, most to help the overwrought house-elves tidy up the ballroom with Ma. Percy and I had sat down with my notes and drew up charts and time tables while the others went upstairs to work on the wards. I left Percy with Peaches to work on what medical supplies might be needed and made my way up the stairs to the east wing of the house with a stack of notes in my hand. The men were in the middle of a conversation about load-bearing walls when I saw an error in my notes and stopped in the doorway to scratch a notation.

"There you are; haff you eaten? Vut is so interesting on that parchment, there?" said Viktor, suddenly standing right in front of me.

"I just realized that we'll need more portkeys than I thought. There'll be fewer people on the medical team, but they might have to make repeated jumps," I answered and then looked up because the conversation in the room had stopped. Severus was standing next to Charlie. I wondered if they'd been arguing, because he was in full sneer mode and his fists were clenched at his side.

"I'm sorry, did I interrupt? I just wanted to see how it was coming along and if you needed anything." Seeing no change in Severus's face, I took a step back. "I'll just go then."

"Don't be silly, Hermione," said Charlie. "We were just about to start the fun part. Come on in." I looked around the room and saw Ma and Nott smiling and Viktor beaming proudly, but all my nerves were attuned to Severus's scowl as he backed away and turned to the wall.

"Weasley, over there. Krum, over here. Agatha, I want you over in that corner, and, Nott, stand just behind her and at my word cast your shield on that wall." They all moved to take their places where Severus had pointed and when they were set he raised his arms like a conductor.

"Shield." I watched Theo as he cast a shield charm on a wall.

"Now!" In perfect synchronicity, the other four cast an unfamiliar spell and two of the walls on either side of the room vanished with a loud pop. All that remained were the support beams standing in rows around the open area. Suddenly, the room was three times as large and almost rivaled the ballroom downstairs.

"These will need to be reinforced," said Charlie, inspecting the nearest support beam.

"I know some spells for that." Viktor said.

"I'll leave you two to supervise that; I must get started preparing for the wards," responded Severus. He turned and came towards me.

"That was marvelous!" I blurted out when he came near. His eyes glittered, and he smirked. Suddenly I felt like I did as a first-year, impressed by every mundane spell I saw. I looked down at my feet, embarrassed at my outburst.

"Could you show me the way to your infirmary?" he asked politely. I was about to take his arm and lead him, when Ma stepped into my path.

"That's in the other wing; I'll take you there: I'm heading downstairs anyway. Princess can stay and watch Mr. Krum finish up the room." She smiled at me without guile and then took his arm to show him the way. Severus's face lost all expression as he left the room with her on his arm. It had been a while since I truly hated Ma, but the feeling was rapidly returning. I stared down at the papers in my hand. I knew I was being stupid; there was no malice in her face. I could tell she thought I would honestly be interested in watching the room change. I knew this. But at that moment, I hated her. She had my man. Would he respond to her? She was more his age. But if he was going to leave me for another, why not trade up? If he wanted to be with a tart, why not me? Why did I feel like the closer we came to our goal, the closer I was to losing him forever?

"Hey, are you alright?" I looked up at Charlie and realized I was crying.

"I... I have no idea what's wrong with me," I answered.

"Hey, it's been an eventful day. I'm emotional. Why don't you and I go somewhere and talk quietly." I nodded, and he led me out of the room. We went down the hall and entered one of the bedrooms. He ushered me over to the couch and sat me down and then flopped down next to me and pulled me into a hug. I noticed he had left the door open and was thankful for his tact.

"So... this is where you, uh, worked?" So much for tact. He suddenly sounded so much like a Weasley. Nervous and awkward but too full of curiosity to guard his mouth. I laughed.

"Um, yeah."

"I've never been in a place like this. Even in Romania, I was always afraid that somehow Mum would find out and that a howler would suddenly show up. Bit of a party pooper, really." I pictured Molly Weasley doing exactly that and laughed even harder. I think that was the first time I had thought of any of them without pain in five years. I hugged him.

"So why don't you start by telling me about Snape. Why would you risk your own life for that greasy git, eh?"

"Alright, but you'd better close the door, and you must promise to keep this to yourself."

He pulled out his wand and flicked the door closed. Still holding his wand he looked at me.

"Would you like me to take an oath?" he asked, holding up his wand.

"I think I just might, yes," I answered.

When he had taken an oath not to repeat anything I revealed him, I started to talk. I spoke about Severus and all he had been forced to do and everything he had forced himself to do because of the vow he had imposed upon me. I explained about his role with the younger Death Eaters and how if the truth came out, it would knock one of the legs out from under this motley tripod we called our army. And when I was done with that, I told Charlie about how much I loved him. I couldn't shut off the words; they just came pouring out. I told him how afraid I was that he would leave me when this was all over, and how I couldn't stop myself from feeling petty and spiteful towards Ma, who had done nothing to deserve it.

"If it helps, Hermione, I think he's fairly smitten with you as well. I thought at first he was so furious in the ballroom because your little stunt almost got him killed. But when I rethink it, in light of what I know, I think he was definitely more upset that you almost got yourself killed. In fact, it's pretty obvious if you know to look."

"I know," I said and started to cry.

"Well, call me thick, but if you love him and you know he loves you, then what exactly is the problem?"

"He only cares for me because I'm the first person since Dumbledore who's ever been nice to him. He's like a whipped dog that you decide to feed! Of course he has feelings for me. But he could do better! Once he is free of all of this and can restart his life on his own terms, he'll see I was just a rash decision made in the heat of the moment. I know if I gave him even the slightest encouragement in that direction, he would vow his undying love and bind his foolish arse to me for life! You haven't seen him, Charlie, the man takes a vow at the drop of a hat! He's fanatical about them!"

"You do realize you're starting to sound mental, don't you?"

I huffed and flopped back against the couch.

"Just a bit, yes."

"First of all, I won't even go into how stupid the whole 'he can do better' thing is. I suspect you have issues that will take more than one conversation to work out. Second of all, and, Hermione, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but who else would have him? You obviously feel strongly that he's all that and a side order of chips, but well, he's rather off putting to the rest of the world. I can't imagine any other woman even looking twice, never mind giving you a run for your money."

"Well, you haven't seen him at his best. Today has been an off day, but if you had seen him the night he swept in here and caused the death of three Death Eaters without even batting an eyelid, well, let's just say there was major swoon factor. It's all the girls could talk about. Well, once we got over the whole "Dead Bodies in the Lounge" thing. No, trust me. He's a major catch."

"You women are weird."

"Just copped on to that, did you?"

"Well, here's my take on it, and I leave things like swoon factors to you. It sounds like he's a man of intense but narrow focus. If he has decided he wants you, I don't see where you're going to succeed in shaking him off. I somehow doubt Severus Snape is the type who's going to suddenly decide he wants a blonde after the war is over. Maybe you should start thinking about whether or not you will still want him."

"Don't be stupid. He's the only man I'll ever love."

"There, see? Proof that you are completely mental." He stood up and reached down and hauled me up as well. Heading to the door, he opened it and then turned to me.

"So you have no room in your heart to love me?"

I laughed.

"Idiot, man. Of course I will always love you."

We left the room and out in the hall we ran into Peaches, Nott and Severus.

"Ready for the wards then?" Charlie asked.

"Almost," answered Peaches. "We were just coming to find Hermione. We need a drop of your blood for the wards."

"Oh, of course! Where do you want me?" I asked, turning towards Severus.

"Right here is fine," he growled. He seized my hand and waved his wand at it. I tried not to squirm in his crushing grip as he pulled out a lancet and stabbed my thumb.

"OW!" I screamed. He pressed my thumb to a vial that already contained blood. And when he was done, he muttered a quick healing spell and the wound on my thumb was gone. He spun away and stalked down the hall to the newly enlarged room; even his robes looked angry as they flapped with disdain in his wake. Peaches and Nott gave me and Charlie an odd look and took off after him. Charlie turned to me with an incredulous look on his face.

"You *are* completely mental."

"He's just under a lot of strain."

"Oh, well then. Let me tell you just how thrilled I am to have you sound just like a battered wife." He turned and stomped off down the hall, and I followed behind. His words had struck a chord of truth and I didn't like it at all.

So sorry for the long delay. Thanks to Astopperindeath for the beta.

Let Me Fly Away

Chapter 28 of 40

Severus conducts a ritual to seal off an area for the girl to practice in. Hermione is unprepared for the effects of Blood magic.

Thanks to Astopperindeath for the final beta

I entered the room and found everyone in there. Chairs had been brought in from other rooms, and everyone had a place to sit. Only Severus was standing near a table set up by the door. He didn't look at me when I came in, but I saw a blush of color spread across his cheeks as I stopped and gave him an appraising stare. He tinkered with the implements he had set out and set the vial of blood off to one side. I kept up my stare, and he ducked his head down, allowing his hair to slide forward over his shoulders and obscure his face. All that I could see was his nose peeking out. I clicked my tongue and walked away.

Viktor had a seat open for me, and I nodded to him as I sat down next to him.

"Are you alright?" he asked, looking at my face intently.

"Yes, just been a long day."

He took my hand and gave it a squeeze and then let go. I gave him a weak smile and then looked up at Severus who had turned around. His face was ashen, but at the moment, I didn't have the energy to care. He had been nasty to me off and on all day, and I couldn't think why. Was this really what I had signed up for?

Severus raised his arms to the room and started a long low incantation. I couldn't make out the words, but I could feel the magic pulsing around the large open space.

"He is powerful, that one," whispered Viktor in my ear. "This is a Dark spell, but one can feel his control. An admirable ally you have there."

I looked hard at my admirable ally. He had done so much for me. He had given me so much. He had made me feel so much. He was ready to throw his life away in a wild bid for my freedom. So why was he being so nasty to me? Had I done something wrong? I thought back to when it all had gone pear-shaped. Our last good moment was in the foyer before the meeting. I thought about our kiss and realized something had been off then too. His kiss had been needy, almost demanding. I thought back to the moment just before the kiss and remembered thinking he needed reassurance. Could that be it? I hadn't given him enough? Perhaps he needed to hear more? But if that was true, then would it be in his personality to be nasty for the rest of the day? To stab my thumb like that? Good grief. If he was going to stab me for a lack of praise, what would he do in the future if I ruined the roast? I found I was starting to panic. My breath was coming in short gasps, and I felt a scream clawing its way up my throat.

"Easy, Herm-own-ninny. It is Dark magic, your blood is tied to it. You are safe." Viktor started to rub my back and croon soft words in Bulgarian.

I darted my eyes to him, and his words sounded reassuring, but I found I didn't believe them. I looked at Snape, and he looked suddenly demonic to me. His head was thrown back, and his hands moved with an almost sickly grace, while he whirled his wand through the correct motions and clutched the vial of blood in the other.

Finding it hard to turn my head, I forced myself to look around the room. Ruby was cradled in Charlie's arms sobbing, and Nott was holding Peaches while rubbing furious circles on Dusty's back. Ma had her arms around Nadia and Angel, and as I looked around, I saw that the other men in the room were also trying to console as many women as they could get their arms around. A small analytical portion of my brain realized I might have missed a few preparatory comments while having my talk with Charlie, but it was soon overwhelmed by the fear clutching at my throat.

Severus's voice climbed higher, and now I felt the room pressing on me in waves of crippling sadness. I was overwhelmed with the sudden memories of everything that I had lost. I whimpered, and Viktor pulled me into an embrace. I flung myself into his arms and wrapped myself around him like a vine but could find no comfort. I twisted my head to look at Severus, my one true source of comfort in all these years of pain. Our eyes met, and he looked at me with such devastation as he shouted out the finale of his Dark spell. Viktor pulled me back tightly into his embrace, and Severus's eyes filled with pain as he shouted out a final word and spun. With a sudden violence, he smashed his hand holding the vial against the lintel of the door. I saw blood splatter and knew it was more than what had been in the vial. The room was flooded with a red light that seemed to become a part of the walls. Wind kicked up as the red light raced across the walls of the room, condensing as it shrank towards the door, towards Severus, towards where he still held his bleeding hand pressed against the top of the doorframe. I screamed.

Severus turned and looked back at me with a frantic look on his face, and Viktor clamped his arms around me even tighter. The last of the red light seemed to detonate and explode outward across the walls again. It was more of a pressure building up in my ears than a sound, and Severus turned back and raised his wand and started to chant again. The bleeding light halted its progress and shrank back until it was all contained under his hand. I felt my ears pop, and then the room was calm. It seemed lighter, almost as if gravity had been affected. I watched as Severus lowered his hand and saw blood. I struggled to get out of Viktor's arms, and when he released me, I jumped up off the couch. Everyone was crowding in towards the doorway, and I realized I could not get to him in time. I would not be the first one to see to his safety and comfort. For some reason, this broke me, and I fled. Running to the rear of the room, I raced up the back stairs to the attic.

I ran to my little bed and flung myself down on it and cried. It was all too much. Whatever spell that was had grabbed a hold of my emotions and raced around my world until I was at the mercy of every dark thought and feeling I had ever had, and then with that pop, it had left me feeling deeply disoriented and unimaginably confused.

The sound of boots alerted me, and I pushed myself up, hoping it would be Severus. It wasn't. Viktor came over and sat down beside me. The little bed groaned under his weight.

He reached out and took my hand.

"Are you alright?"

"No. No, I am really not alright."

"I am here for you; you do not have to be alright yet. We can take some time to sit here and not be alright together, yes?"

I smiled.

"Are the other girls alright?"

"No, they do not want to be alright yet either, I am thinking. It has been a very emotional day, and no one was in the best shape for Dark arts or Blood magic. Not even your Snape. He was very powerful, very impressive, but he lost control there at the end, no? I think he will be feeling the taint for a few hours yet. But he will be fine once the backlash dissipates."

He smiled warmly, as if with his whole soul.

"So now you have a room you ladies can work magic in, yes? This is a good thing." I nodded, and he nodded back as if encouraging me to give him a bigger nod. I smiled again and squeezed his hand. He pulled at a lock of my hair.

"So here is your bushy head. These rooms, they do not have the charms on them. Is this where you sleep?" I nodded. "Foolish, all those rooms and they made you sleep in these little beds like camping. And is this your blanket?"

"We were not employees, Viktor; we were prisoners. This room was a reminder of that."

"Well, you will not be sleeping here anymore. I am hearing Agatha say that you can take any rooms in this east wing. So you will leave this place." He stood up and lifted me up by my hand. "Are there things that you want in here? I will bring them."

I looked back at my little bed that had been the only place I had all to myself for five years.

"No, I kept nothing."

He gently wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in.

"If you let me, *Her-my-ownnee*, I will give you things to keep. I will take you from this place and give you a home, and I will make sure that after you have von, you will never have a fear again."

Tears filled my eyes. It sounded so wonderful, and it was everything I wanted, but with someone else. I opened my mouth to answer but stopped when I heard something at the door. Both of us turned to look but there was nothing there.

"That is a beautiful thing to hear, Viktor..."

"But?" he said tilting his head. I nodded sadly.

"But." I replied.

"Can he keep you safe?"

"He has taken a vow to do so."

"Ah. I see." He hugged me gently. "He is strong, that you. You will be safe. But if not, you will call me, yes?"

"I can't really answer that."

"That's okay. Maybe you will answer that another day, yes?"

"Viktor?"

"Yes?"

"How long have you been able to say my name correctly?"

"I am not understanding you, *Herm-own-ninny*," he said with a perfectly straight face. I laughed quietly just as Dusty came into the room.

"Hey, what did you say to Snape, Princess?" she asked while pulling things out from under her bed. "He almost knocked me down the stairs just now."

It only took me a second to replay what part of the conversation was interrupted by a noise out in the hallway.

"Oh!" I cried as Viktor opened his arms and let me fly away.

Backlash

Chapter 29 of 40

After a long, grueling day, Severus and Hermione confront each other when they are both at their lowest ebb.

My feet barely touched the stairs as I flew down them. I ran into our newly expanded room and saw Nadia first.

"Have you seen Severus?"

"Snape? He went that way after he cleaned up his stuff at the table. Better hurry, he was moving fast."

I flew out of the room and down the hall. I ran down two flights of stairs until I was in the foyer but didn't see him there either. Angel gave me a questioning look.

"Have you seen Severus?"

"No, he didn't come down this way." So, he hadn't left yet. I turned and raced back up the stairs towards the infirmary but it was empty. My mind was blank; where would he have gone to? He hadn't made it to the first floor, but he had left the east wing. He wasn't in the infirmary which was the only other room I had heard him enquire about. A sudden thought hit me, and I raced back out into the hall and down one more flight of stairs to our room over the kitchen. The door was locked. I knocked. I couldn't hear anything, but all the rooms were soundproofed so that meant nothing. I knocked again. It didn't take me long to start pounding desperately. Eventually, the door flew open.

"What?" he hissed. I stepped back, suddenly afraid of the expression on his face, and looked down at my feet.

"We need to talk."

He stuck his head out into the hall and looked around.

"Where is your duck-footed friend?"

"Severus, let me in."

He turned and stormed back into the room. I closed the door behind me. The room was wrecked. Tables were splintered, and the chairs had been knocked over and broken, stuffing from cushions spilled out as if they had been disemboweled. Only the loveseat and the bed were intact. The fire was out, and the room was dark and cold, illuminated only by one sad taper set on the mantle. I thought he might have come to this room with the idea of it being a refuge, but it looked more like he came here in order to exact a sort of vengeance by proxy.

"I think I need to explain..." I started to speak but my mouth suddenly dried up. He was standing across the room leaning his back against the wall, one foot propped up and his bent knee sticking out from his robes. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his hair was hanging down in his face, making him the poster child for belligerent surliness.

I thought about Viktor, whom I had just rejected and left standing in the attic, and heard Charlie's voice in my head *you are mental!* It set my teeth on edge.

"Look, we need to talk. I have some things I need to say to you. I think you need to come over and sit on the couch so we can speak like civilized adults."

He didn't respond, he just pulled his arms tighter, and I watched as his knee started to bounce up and down.

"We need to talk, Severus. I can't just stand here and not get a response from you! I need to know what you are thinking! I'm not the damned mind reader in this room." It occurred to me that with his hair pulled over his face like that he wasn't being much of a mind reader either.

"I don't see where we have anything more to speak about tonight. In fact, *Princess*, I am not sure if we need to be having many more conversations at all. With luck and a bit more planning, you will be free of all this soon, and my vow will be fulfilled. Now why don't you just go trot along and find one of your new boyfriends and fucking-well leave. me. alone!" Anger and hurt washed over me. The feelings were so intense and so sudden that I gasped and stepped back. Mixed in with these feelings was a sudden deep insecurity and an almost crippling panic. I couldn't concentrate with so much emotion swirling around me, so I grabbed one and stuck with it.

I chose anger. I hadn't missed the nasty way he had spat out *Princess*, and it made me both furious and a bit ill. I started to think that perhaps Charlie had been right. To accept this behavior was to condone it.

"Just who the *fuck* do you think you are, Snape! I came down here in good faith needing to talk to you about something important, and after everything we've been through, you can't even show me the decency of *looking* at me! No! You just stand there acting like a damned child!"

He came off the wall so fast that I blinked.

"I may be a child in some ways, but at least I'm not a fucking *whore!*" he shouted into my face.

We both froze. I shut my eyes as I felt all the blood drain from my face and felt my body go dead inside.

"Well," I said, with surprising calm, as I turned and walked back to the door. "So the truth comes out at last. Yes, Severus, good boy, I'm a whore. Ten points to Slytherin for cunningly figuring out the blindingly obvious."

I heard a strangled sound behind me but was beyond caring. I never even slowed down as I reached the door and opened it.

"*Nooo!*" he cried.

The door pulled out of my hand and slammed shut. I reached to open it again, but it wouldn't budge.

"Open the fucking door, Snape," I said without turning around.

"I'm sorry Hermione, I didn't mean it."

"I don't care; open the fucking door, now!"

A weight fell against me, and I had to reach a hand out to the door to keep from falling. I looked down to see Severus on the floor, with his arms wrapped around my legs and his face buried in my knees. His robes were pooled on the floor like so much spilled ink. I could hear his choked sobbing as he repeated *'not again... didn't mean it'* over and over.

"Let go of me, Severus."

"Please, Hermione, I take it back! I never meant to hurt you! I didn't mean it! I'll share! I swear I will, and you'll never hear me say another bad thing again! I'll take a vow!" I slapped his wand out of his hand before he could do any such thing. He cried out but threw himself at my legs again. "I'll share! I'm sorry! Please don't leave me! We can just be friends! I'll never--you don't ever have to sleep with me again! Please don't leave me!"

"Look at us, Severus, is this a friendship? You lock me in here and hold me against my will. You call me names that you know will hurt me. For fuck's sake, you stabbed me, you shitting cunt!" I screamed at him, and it wasn't until I felt the sting of my hand that I realized I had slapped him. I didn't mean to; it just happened. His head rocked back on his neck, and he looked at me with utter surprise and shock. I wondered if he was more surprised by my words or actions.

"No," he said quietly.

"No what?" I snapped. He had let go of my legs, and I stepped back from him, and with panic realized I was cornered. I looked at him in fear. He stared back up at me, and then his eyes widened and he came up off the floor in one fluid motion and backed away across the room.

"I didn't stab you. I mean I did. But not because I was angry, well I was, but not like that. Damn it all, Hermione, I had just heard you tell Weasley you loved him! But I would never... it was the blood."

"Back up, you're not making any sense."

"It was Blood magic, Hermione. It required blood taken by force; the best I could do was blood taken by unpleasantness. I thought you knew..."

"No, I didn't know a damned thing about your little ritual. I was busy explaining to Charlie Weasley in private why your life was so bloody important!"

"Talking? Then you didn't... But I heard you say you loved him." His voice sounded so much like a confused child.

"Severus, were you jealous?"

He looked at me, and I saw it all in his face.

"Severus, how can you have been jealous? You know what I am, what I've had to do even after you and I... well, even after! It never even occurred to me you were jealous! God above, Severus, I've been with half the wizards in Britain! Why the hell would you take a prostitute as a lover if you were the possessive type?"

"I don't know what damned type I am, Hermione; I do know that those other men meant nothing to you."

"Then why the--oh! but Charlie and Viktor do? It that it? You think they are some kind of a threat, don't you? How could I have missed it? This has been eating at you all day hasn't it? This is why you have been so nasty to me? And you never said anything, never asked for assurance? You just let it fester until, well, until this." I waved my hand feebly around the room.

"Hermione, please believe me that I would never physically hurt you in anger."

"It sure as hell seemed like it."

"I am so sorry."

"I get that now."

I waved a hand as if that would clear my thoughts.

"So you went through the ritual with no warning?" he asked. His voice was full of worry.

"None."

"That's why you screamed. Oh, gods, I wanted to run to you, to be the one to hold you, but that damned Bulgarian was all over you and I... I lost my concentration. I almost let the spell go before it was complete. And I..."

"And you're suffering from a backlash? Viktor said you might suffer from a taint. Is that why this has got so insane so fast just now?" He stood there and looked at me with his eyes as big as saucers and nodded.

I remembered how the spell had affected me, subjecting me to those horrible dark feelings.

"You have no control over your emotions right now, do you?"

He shook his head back and forth quickly.

"And I just slapped the hell out of you." I started to cry. "And now I feel like a monster."

"Please don't hit me anymore, Hermione." It came out in a small voice, one that made him sound just like the abused child I now was convinced he had been.

"I'm so sorry I hit you, Severus. I'll never do that again, I swear." I felt like I wanted to vomit: my gut clenched and spasmed, but the heaving subsided, and I just cried harder.

He flew over to me with his arms out but stopped and then backed away. I could see he was almost insane trying to gain control of his need to comfort and his need not to make me feel trapped. I ran into his arms, and they snapped closed around me.

"I am so very, very sorry, Hermione. I despise this. I cannot stand being out of control."

"It's alright, Severus. Let's just go carefully and try not to make this worse, shall we?"

"You don't have to, Hermione. I can share; I understand. Just be my friend, that's all I ask. I don't want to lose you completely."

"Shhhh, hush Severus. There's no sharing: I'm with you, and only you."

He went very still, and then I could feel the weight of him as he sagged onto me.

"Let's sit down," I suggested, looking to see which was closer, the bed or the loveseat. The bed it was.

We sat down next to each other, and he summoned his wand from off the floor, and with a wave, lit all the candles in the room. He tucked his wand back into his sleeve, then curled his arms around me like he was afraid to let go, and I ended up mostly in his lap.

I took his hand, the one that had been injured, and looked at the small pink freshly healed scars. I gently rubbed them, and he shuddered.

"You are not going to leave me for Krum?" he asked.

"No. I told him no."

"And Weasley?"

"Like a brother, Severus, I will always love him as a brother, just as I will always love Viktor as a friend."

There was a long moment of silence as he gulped in breath trying to master his emotions.

"And me, Hermione?"

I didn't know how to deal with this Severus. His feelings were so raw, and it terrified me to see him so frightened. I decided to go with truth.

"As God is my witness, Severus, I do love you." He closed his eyes as his face lifted up to the ceiling, and his hands clutched at me. "Wait! Hear me out! I do love you, Severus, but you can do better than me. I have been so very afraid of you trapping yourself into being stuck with me. When we win, and we will because you made a vow to me that I do not doubt, then you will be free, Severus. You will be free to make your own choices and to be your own man. You are a wonderful man, Severus, and you have a chance to live a respectable life with a respectable wife and you must not bind yourself to me before you have a chance to see that. I don't want you to think I trapped you while you were vulnerable. I couldn't bear it. I will always be your friend, even if you don't chose to stay with me. I will always be there for you. But I do not want... I couldn't bear to be another claim on your soul." I fell silent before I started to babble. A selfish part of me wanted to claim him, bind him to me forever, but I couldn't do that to this man. No one should ever have done that to this man. I closed my eyes and waited for him to think it through and see what I was saying was right. Thank Merlin, he didn't.

"Have you lost your bloody mind, woman?" His voice was the most rational it had sounded since I came into the room, and I scrambled around in his arms until I was looking at his face.

"No! I am being deadly serious, Severus."

"You're being a bloody idiot, is what you are. Do you seriously think that I would move on from you because the world became *mean* again? Or that I would suddenly chuck you over for a chance at polite society? Do you even *know* me? Gods, woman, I count every minute we are together as a blessing, every look you give me as a gift, and I cherish every memory of every moment you have held me naked in your arms as my personal answer to the question of whether or not there is a *God*. Let's just get one thing straight right now: I love you, Hermione. I will never stop. And once I have my frenzied emotions back under control, if you want to leave me tomorrow for someone else, I *will* let you go. But I will mourn my loss for the rest of my life."

"But you're not thinking clearly! You've been trapped!"

"I don't want to be free."

"But you've never been allowed to make your own choices!"

"Oh, I've made my own choices, Hermione. I think I am much better off with someone I trust making the choices for me."

"But I'm just a---"

"No!" He clapped his hand over my face. "Don't say that to me. Not ever again. We all did what we had to do to survive: it doesn't define who we are, it just adds more depth. You are a glorious woman, Hermione. Had you had a chance to live out your life in peace, you would have come into your own with that belief in yourself intact And despite all the pain, I cannot say I regret everything because if all this had never happened, I would never have had the chance to love you, and my life would have been less for it. Even if it would have spared you all these years of pain, Merlin help me for being a selfish creature, but I am glad you are here in my arms right now."

I hugged him tight.

"I love you, Severus."

"You have no idea how long I have waited for someone to tell me that. But in the spirit of clearing the air, let me just explain to you just who you have trapped yourself with." He pushed me back until he could see my face.

"I am a nasty man, Hermione. I can be a petty, jealous, spiteful man. *I am* possessive. I've fallen asleep with my teeth clenched thinking of what you were doing and who you were with, and then in my nightmares you were there, being abused, and I was powerless to stop it. I have done many terrible things, Hermione, and have caused the deaths of innocent people because of my own pain and paranoia. I have only loved once before, and I killed her. I am terrified to lose you and terrified to keep you. If you chose to keep me, I can't even promise that I can make you happy. I'm not sure how. But I will devote my life to learning, and I will spend everyday trying. I do not see you as a whore. I only said that because I was hurt and wanted you to be too, but it backfired, didn't it? I almost pushed you away forever. I will learn how to not do that anymore, but you'll have to be patient with me. I am always at my worst when I am afraid, and I am terrified of losing you."

I nodded solemnly in an understanding of not just his words, but how uncomfortable he was saying them. I do not think he would ever have been as honest if he was more in control of his feelings.

"So in the future, if we have difficulties, it won't turn into this?" I asked, waving my hand at the wreckage thrown about the room. "This was just because of this backlash of Dark magic?"

"Most of this damage was because I lost control of my magic. The backlash from the Blood magic is fading a bit now, but immediately after, when I saw you with Krum... I won't say I don't have a temper, Hermione. But I do like to think, in most cases, I conduct myself with a bit more restraint, yes."

"I haven't been at my best, either, Severus. I've been overwrought most of today. It has been rather overwhelming, even without your little ritual."

His hands rubbed up and down my arms, and his chin rested on my head.

"I am sorry for that. I needed to isolate the wards and stop them at the door. They were keyed to you and the other women in the house. Now you will be free to use that room to practice magic without setting off an alarm at the Ministry."

"That'll be good. And Ollivander is coming tomorrow with our wands. That will be so wonderful."

I let out a jaw cracking yawn. It really had been a long day.

"Come, let's get you some sleep." He lifted me off his lap and set me standing back on the floor. He reached up and started to undo the buttons of my robes at the collar, and I undid the sleeves. In a moment, he stood and pulled my robes over my head. Our intentions were good. He was trying to repeat my actions from the night I had put him to bed. However, his movements became more clumsy as he started to roll my stocking down my legs. When he stood up to begin on the little hooks of my corset his hands were shaking. Even dissipating as it seemed to be, I could tell the emotional turmoil from the backlash must have been playing havoc with his usual restraint.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember promising me you would never ask it of me?"

His hands snatched away from me and balled into fists at his sides, but his answer came in an even, pleasant tone.

"Of course I remember, Hermione."

I waited until he looked at me and then held his eyes in my gaze.

"I don't want that. I *want* you to ask it of me. I want to feel you desire me enough to touch me when you want. I want to know whenever you feel a need for me. I trust you. I know you would respect my wishes if I ever say no."

"Gods, Hermione. I want you so much right now it hurts. I want to strip you naked and touch you and bury myself in you. It's all I've wanted this whole long day. It's all I want every time you come near me. But you're tired. It has been a long day, and you need your rest. You are more to me than just an object of lust; I want to take care of you as well, and you need rest."

"What if I asked you?"

He growled and leaned towards me but still kept his hands at his sides.

"Hermione, I am not completely in control of my--"

His words choked off as I cupped him through his trousers.

"I'm not afraid, Severus."

He answered by using his wand to undo the buttons on his robes, flinging layers of clothing off while I removed what was left of mine. Once we were both naked and facing each other next to the bed, I reached out and ran my hand across his scarred, porcelain chest, lightly dusted with fine black hairs.

He threw his head back and hissed out a breath through clenched teeth.

"Oh, Hermione... yes... please touch me."

"I like to touch you, Severus. I like the way you feel, the way you look, the way the light plays on the planes of your body."

He groaned, and his long hands came up and took hold of my little one and rubbed it against his chest and neck and along his jaw until he turned and kissed my palm and started to lick my fingers, sucking them into his mouth.

I moaned and was captivated by how his cock bobbed in response

I slipped my other hand down and stroked him. His balls were heavy and tight, and I knew he would not last very long if I continued to tease him like this.

I released him and moved to pull down the duvet. He stepped behind me and grabbed my arse and started kneading as he dropped to his knees behind me and started to kiss my thighs. A hand pressed down on my back until he had me bent over, hands down, on the bed. Licking and kissing, he made his way slowly to my folds. I was even more undone because it was so unexpected; I thought he would've been more hesitant, waiting for me to lead the dance. I moaned and writhed under his ministrations as he guided me gently forwards onto the bed. I ended up climbing onto the bed in a sort of slow motion dance. Once I was on my hands and knees, he climbed on behind me and pushed himself in.

Neither of us made a sound, except for our panting breaths. He started to stroke his cock back out and in again in slow deliberate movements, and I clenched my muscles around him. His breath exploded out of him, and he started to pump faster.

"So beautiful, so lovely... ungh... yesss... just like that. Can you feel how much I desire you?"

"Yes."

His grip on my hips was strong, and my eyes fluttered closed as I felt his long, calloused fingers knead my flesh. His hand curved around and down and searched until he felt my hardened clit. His fingers started to circle it in feather light caresses.

"Do you know what it does to me to see myself buried in your body? I feel like a complete man, Hermione. *You* make me feel this way."

"Severus..." I drew his name out in a ragged whisper.

"Yesss... that's it... moan for me, my beautiful Hermione. Give me your hand."

I reached my hand back, shifting my other to keep my balance. He took it gently and folding his own over it he brought it down to my clit.

"Show me, teach me how to make you sing... my beautiful goddess. Come for me... I want to hear you come."

I reversed our hands and used his fingers to rub myself the way I liked it. Back and forth with a firmer pressure, our strokes got faster as I felt myself drawing towards that magical moment when everything in the world is perfect for one magnificent point in time. He kept up his rhythm with his cock while his fingers flew back and forth across my clit. My own hand started to fumble, and I started to fall forward. He shifted closer and resumed pumping into me while his fingers made me moan and mewl.

"Oh, yes, my love... give me your gift, that's my love, let go..."

His voice, so low, so sexy, so deep and rich, made me spasm, and he groaned. Hearing him lose control just a little, hearing the effect my pleasure had on him pushed me over the edge, and I howled as I started to come. He pulled out quickly, and it almost ruined it but he flipped me over onto my back as if I weighed nothing, and he swooped down and put his mouth on me once again. Grasping my hips with his long hands, he lifted me up and sucked on my clit, and I exploded, shrieking out his name. It seemed to go on and on as he sucked and licked and groaned his own pleasure. I was reduced to babbling, I am not sure of everything I said, but I know I told him in no uncertain terms just how very much I loved him. He continued to lick me after my orgasm ended, and I had to shift away because it was too intense. I was really going to have to teach him when to stop. I weakly shoved myself up towards the pillows and opened my eyes to beckon him to me. Oh, he was a glorious sight. His face reflected raw passion. His eyes seemed to be pools of dark flames, and I didn't know if I would burn or drown. I held my arms open to him, and he came and covered my body with his, pulling the duvet after him. Cradled between my thighs and encircled by my arms, he looked so full of bliss that I felt tears form in my eyes. He kissed me. His kiss was the most perfect act of love I have ever experienced. I admit, I have not experienced many, but this kiss contained all the hopes and dreams of love I had ever had. He broke the kiss and then rose up over me. I reached down and found him and guided him back into me. His eyes slid closed, and he moaned out his pleasure as his hips rocked back and forth. I tilted mine up to meet his rhythm.

His heavy-lidded eyes opened, and he gazed at me with such passion.

"I love you, Hermione."

"I love you too, Severus."

"I will always love you. Your soul is so beautiful. I want you to be mine, Hermione."

"Oh, I am..."

"I want you to be mine forever."

"... I will..."

"Tell me I am yours, Hermione. Tell me you will never let me go!" As his words became more intense, so did his rhythm until he was pounding into me. I could feel his magic start to swirl around us.

"You are mine, Severus! I gave you the chance to leave; I don't think I can again. *Oh... yesss. I will never let you go! Never!*"

"I will keep you safe, Hermione! I will give you a home of your own! I will give you things to keep!" His movements became frantic. "*You are mine!*"

"Yesss!"

"Oh, my beautiful goddess! Oh gods *fuck... shite! Yesssss! Ah... gods! I'm cominghhngh...*" His magic exploded out from him, and I was blinded by the light that raced around the room as he emptied himself into me. When it dissipated, the room was in total darkness, the candles having been doused by whatever magic that was.

With a satisfied growl, Severus pitched forward and collapsed on top of me, crushing me flat to the bed. My face was smashed into his neck as his body completely enveloped me. I could feel his heart slamming in his sweat-soaked chest. I felt a curious mixture of smug satisfaction and awe. I felt powerful and protected and, well, squished.

"Sv'rus?"

"Hngh?"

"Can't brev."

"Unff."

He rolled to the side, pinning my arm under him. Some wiggling and grunting, and I was free.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"Did we just take another vow? Because I'll be rather put out if we did."

He chuckled, and I heard him lift up onto an elbow, and his sweaty hair fell across my face as he looked down on me in the dark. His hand searched until it cupped my cheek, and he pressed a gentle kiss to my lips and another on my forehead.

"No, Hermione. We did not. I only have one more vow in me, and I'm saving it."

"Which one? Saving it for what?"

"For when you become my wife, woman. Now go to sleep."

He flopped back down and a lanky arm scooped me around and pulled me in until I was nestled along his belly like a teddy bear. A long-fingered hand massaged a breast.

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Not yet," he rumbled in reply.

"Oh. Right then. As long as we're clear. But what was all that magic swirling around?"

"Aren't you supposed to wave your arm around in the air when these moods take you?"

"Answer the question, please."

"Hermione, I warned you I wasn't completely in control. And I can't say I'm used to beautiful women looking at me like that while I am buried in their bodies. I can't promise it won't happen again."

"Ah, so I made you lose control this time?" I admit I giggled. I had made Severus Snape lose control. I liked that a lot.

"Indeed. Now, good night, my goddess."

"Good night, my love."

He purred. It could have been just a rumble in his throat, but I really think it was a purr.

I have no idea what time of the night or morning it was when I woke to the most delicious sensations. A solitary candle burned next to the bed, and I saw Severus lift his mouth from my breast when I made a sleepy noise of pleasure; his fingers didn't stop what they were doing farther down.

"You said I could touch you whenever I want." His voice was so deep and husky it made me weak.

"So I did." I took his face in my hands and brought it back to my breast.

When the chime for first light sounded, we just pulled each other close and drifted back to sleep.

Flexible But Firm

Understandings are reached and alliances are solidified, as the women of the house get to hold a little power in their hands.

Thank you to Astopperindeath for mucho patience, as my computer repeatedly ate her edits on this chapter.

A persistent knock on the door disturbed my sleep, and I opened an eye just as I felt Severus jump out of bed. He shoved his legs into his trousers and snatched up his wand. He opened the door a crack, wand at the ready.

"Snape! I knew you were in one of these damned rooms. Shake a leg, old man, the wand maker's here," said Charlie

"I will be there shortly," was the curt reply before the door closed in Charlie's face.

I sat up quickly and noticed that at some point during the night he had repaired the damage to the room and that my clothes were folded neatly next to my side of the bed.

I jumped out of bed with an excited squeal, and, throwing my robes over my head, I ran over to him and threw my arms around his neck.

"A wand!" I did a little dance of joy, and it occurred to me that it was my first happy dance since the last time Ginny had caught a snitch or Ron had received top marks on a test all on his own.

Severus circled me with his arms and watched me with a bemused look on his face until he saw my expression falter.

"No," he said, lifting my face by my chin. "Allow yourself to be happy. You have paid your pound of flesh; there is no claim on your feelings. Missing them is acceptable. Feeling you owe it to them to stay in a perpetual state of mourning is ludicrous; you bear no guilt."

He lifted up a hand and smoothed back my hair.

"Things are happening quickly and will only move swifter from here, Hermione. I don't know how many more moments you and I will have before the end. But I want you to know that no matter what the outcome, you are, will be and always have been, worthy. There will always be moments of despair; do not allow them to lessen who you think you are. As for me, I can face what comes knowing I have been loved. It is my hope that you believe the same."

He placed a kiss on my forehead and pushed me away. I was too full of my thoughts to protest.

"Now go get ready. It's almost eight o'clock and that only leaves us four more hours before this place must be ready for its doors to open again."

He waved his wand at my robes, buttoning them up.

"Go find some knickers, woman."

I snickered at his comment and was going to say something about how he was going commando as well, but was suddenly struck silent by his appearance. He stood before me wearing nothing but his trousers, the top button still undone with feet bare and sleep tousled hair and all that pale skin displayed before me with a line of dark silky hair running from his navel down to disappear into his trousers. I don't think I ever really contemplated the beauty of the male form as I did in that moment, and the intimacy of the sight before me took my breath away. I saw him as he was but in two different aspects: one way he looked painfully thin, but if I tilted toward the other way of seeing him he was long, lean and deadly looking. One way saw him as hook nosed and pallid, and the other saw him as distinguished and almost luminous. My mouth went dry.

"Oh, no you don't," he said, turning me and giving a little push towards the loo. "As much as I revel in your desire, we've run out of time. Off you go."

Mr. Ollivander had returned and brought hundreds of wands with him, and the squealing and laughing of the women as they held a wand in their hand for the first time in years was infectious as I entered the room. When it was my turn, I practically danced up to the table. My palms positively itched to try one.

"Hello again, Mr. Ollivander. Thank you so much for supplying us with these marvelous wands," I said to the odd, yet kind looking man behind the table.

"Ah, Miss Granger. Vinewood, ten and three-quarter inches, dragon heartstring core. Gone into some vault hiding under the Ministry, I fear. No matter, I think you outgrew that one anyway. Yes, a little sturdier, a little longer... yes, this one might do. Try it."

He beamed at me as he held a long, elegant looking wand out.

I surprised myself by hesitating, suddenly overwhelmed.

"Go on, take it," said a deep voice over my shoulder. I looked back to see Severus standing behind me. I let him see the nervousness and fear on my face, and he nodded toward the wand and leaned in toward me.

"You're not the Princess of Hufflepuff; take the damned wand," he hissed into my ear.

I recoiled from his words. I had been expecting something supportive. Annoyed, I snatched up the wand and gave it a test flick. It spat out a few sparks and smoke came from the tip.

"Hmmm, no. Try this one," said the wandmaker, and the two of us spent the next twenty minutes swapping wands back and forth trying to find the right one. I was becoming increasingly upset by this point, and Severus had stepped closer and surreptitiously rubbed at the small of my back with his knuckles.

"Here, how about this one. Birch, eleven and a quarter inches with dragon heartstring, flexible but firm." He held out the wand and, as I took it, I felt just the slightest tingle race up my arm. It was lovely, not as elegant as some of the others, but by no means plain. I rolled the intricately carved handle in my palm and then turned and smiled back at Severus. His eyes lit up, just the slightest bit, and he gave me two quick taps with his knuckles.

Pointing towards an empty space to the right of the table, I called up my bluebell flames but instead of a small dancing flame I got a good sized fire. Quickly ending the spell, I looked at the wand and marveled. Clearly some adjustments would be needed, but there was no doubt this was my new wand.

The rest of the morning was spent with Percy, working up an oath for everyone to take to ensure security and working out channels of communication between factions. Once that was out of the way, it was time to get ready to open.

Ollivander was going to go with them to the forest to outfit the rest of our people, and as we all gathered in the foyer, I thanked him one more time and said my goodbyes.

Severus hovered as I hugged Percy and stepped closer still when Charlie came over and threw an arm around me.

"You're smiling a lot this morning. Was there a clearing of the air?" he asked.

"Yes, definitely. Things are much better now," I replied and grinned.

He dropped his voice and said, "Ruby explained after the ritual last night about why the blood had to be taken that way. I hope he explained that to you as well."

"When I finally gave him the chance to, yes," I replied.

"I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion about that."

"Yes, well, you weren't the only one. It's all been straightened out now, though."

"Everything is all mutual and on the up and up?"

I just beamed and nodded.

"And you're prepared to have that," he nodded his head towards Severus, a few feet away and scowling slightly, "looming over you all the time?"

"All day, every day."

"Right then, I still think you're mental, but you're a big girl. One of these days, you're going to have to fill me in on what other things besides being frightfully intimidating constitute 'major swoon factor'." He kissed me on the top of my head and left by the door.

Viktor came up, and even without looking, I knew Severus had stepped up behind me and was positively looming.

"I am going to take my leaf as well, for the moment," Viktor said. He wrapped me in a hug and stepped back. "I will head back to Bulgaria to see about some details. I will see you in three weeks, unless things change, yes?"

"Thank you, Viktor, for everything." I hugged him back, trying to put as much meaning into it as possible, and then stepped back, bumping into Severus. I bounced off just a little. "I'll see you when the planning needs to be finalized. Be careful and stay safe," I said.

"As you say, Herm-own-ninny," he said with a smile.

He raised his eyes toward Severus and held out his hand.

"I will haff your vord, sir."

Severus just looked at it and then back up, eyebrow raised, clearly waiting for more.

"You will protect her and keep her safe, this I know. But you will also make her happy when this is over, yes?" The smile had left Viktor's face and the unspoken *or else* was thick in the air.

The swiftly escalating tension was almost unbearable, and I found myself rapidly getting angry at the two of them and their infantile posturing, but Severus let out a heavy breath, and with a curt nod, reached out and clasped Viktor's hand.

Viktor relaxed, and his smile included both of us as he gave a little salute and followed the others out the door.

Turning on Severus, I grabbed his sleeve and dragged him over to the wall for a bit more privacy.

"That nonsense will stop! I am not some possession or territory that you have to assert ownership of," I hissed at him. "I'm a thinking, rational being, and I'm with you because I *chose* you, not because I am a tree you marked your scent on so you could claim it as yours!"

The man had the gall to smile. It started as an amused smile, but then he kissed the tip of my nose, and it quickly slid into a smug smirk as he backed away, brow raised and head tilted to the side in challenge, before he spun on his heel and stalked out the door as well.

Clearly he disagreed.

"I think you have just been metaphorically peed on," said Peaches, coming up behind me.

I narrowed my eyes at her, perfectly willing to have an object to take my frustration out on if she wanted to volunteer. With a laugh, she threw up her hands.

"Peace, Princess. I didn't mean to overhear you; I was coming because I think there's something you need to know."

"Now what?" I asked. I couldn't help the sigh that escaped; yesterday had been one of the longest days of my life, and I really didn't want today to be the same. I needed space to sit back and digest everything that was going on.

"You remember earlier when we were all getting our wands, and all the Death Eaters showed up, and Snape disappeared with them for a while?"

"Yes, he said they had a small matter of business to attend to and not to worry about it. Why? Should I be worried about it?"

"Well, it seems they have done something either really great or really stupid, I'm not sure which. You should come see."

With a muttered oath, I followed her into the Emerald Lounge to find a handful of remaining Death Eaters laughing and talking excitedly.

"There she is!" shouted Warrington. "On behalf of your loyal knights, I bid you welcome, Milady!" He swept a courtly bow in our direction. As the room erupted in cheers and howls, I looked over at Peaches and raised my eyebrows. She pointed at me to make sure I knew whom they had been addressing.

"Er, thank you?" I replied.

"Tell her, boys. Tell Princess what you have done," said Peaches. The two of us sat on the settee and waited for someone to explain.

"Only that we have all taken an oath," said Vaisey.

"A different oath than the one we all signed?" I asked.

"Well, you know that it was getting confusing referring to us as Death Eaters, right? So we really wanted a new name. I wanted 'The Knights of Slytherin' except, well not all of us were in Slytherin."

"I thought we needed something to also give us a bit of a PR push; I liked 'The Repentant Ones,'" said Warrington.

"I really liked that one," said Theo.

"Bah, I think it was pants. My bid was 'Hermione's Heroes,'" said Greg Goyle. I just raised my eyebrows at that. Theo stood up and came over to us and continued.

"There were other ideas the guys had, like: 'The Granger Guards,' and 'The Black Brigade,' and 'Restorers of the Light,' but we all eventually agreed on one, and so we have renamed ourselves."

"I am almost afraid to ask," I said.

"Well, in the end we thought it was best to keep it simple." The other ten men in the room came over and ranged themselves out on either side of Theo. "You're looking at members of 'Snape's Company,' my lady." And he too sketched a bow, followed by the others. Well, Snape's Company sounded a hell of a lot better than Hermione's Heroes.

"Marvelous, as long as you're happy; now, what's this about another oath? It is an oath and not a vow, right? Severus didn't make any of you make an Unbreakable Vow did he?"

"No, just an oath, but a binding one at that. To defend the Wizarding world from tyranny and to devote ourselves to restoring that which our former organization destroyed, to the best of our abilities."

Well, if that was the wording then Severus had actually given them a lot of wiggle room. Thank heavens.

"How lovely. I'm glad you all have a new name and now a mission statement. Was there anything else?"

"Show her, Theo," said Peaches next to me.

"Show me? Show me what?"

Theo actually fidgeted under my gaze.

"Well, you see, we knew there might be a problem, what with Death Eaters fighting Death Eaters and a hundred other fellow soldiers throwing hexes at anyone who looked suspicious, so we need a way to distinguish ourselves, a way to communicate and also to help identify us in combat conditions. We'll be able to be identified with a whispered spell in combat, and Neville's folk will know who the enemy is. It's brilliant, right?"

Peaches huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Stop procrastinating, Theo; show her."

He gave Peaches a scowl and then, with a look at his men, he started to roll up his right sleeve. They all did.

The blood drained from my face as they all revealed marks on the inside of their right arms. The magical tattoo was a serpent protectively coiled around a lightning bolt.

"Theo... why did you choose... this?"

"Well, it's the symbolism, see? They're not all the same; only those from Slytherin have a serpent: Blagdon and Cauldwell have badgers and Copplestone has a raven and, well you get the idea. Anyway, it's about protecting Potter's memory. It's about restoring what we helped to destroy by fighting for what Potter believed in. Sort of taking up the fallen standard." He stopped and looked at me with a terrible desperation in his eyes. "You understand why we did this, don't you? Most of us were too young to have been a part of his death, but we've been living with the consequences without really understanding what the price was. We reaped the benefits of that slaughter. We bear guilt as well. We need this, Granger."

"Oh, Theo." I couldn't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes. "Yes, I understand. Well done. Well done all of you." There was a collective sigh around the room, and the men shared proud smiles as they rolled down their sleeves.

Goyle puffed out his chest and excitedly said: "And Snape said we could get new masks too!"

"Oh, Merlin wept," muttered Peaches as she thumped her head down on my shoulder. I couldn't stop the giggle that bubbled up from me even though I knew it sounded slightly hysterical.

False Prophecy

Chapter 31 of 40

The final confrontation draws near.

Thank you to my beta, Astopperindeath

The days that followed were busy and exciting as well as nervewracking and tense. The newly expanded room, now dubbed the 'practice center' by the women, was in constant use.

Supplies showed up regularly. Viktor had sent robes, cloaks and sturdy boots. Severus continually sent healing potions and draughts and as many other medical potions as he had time to make. Neville had his people making an incredibly large number of illegal portkeys. They timed it for the days when a member of Snape's Company was in the Ministry of Transportation so they could intercept the alerts from going out. All this had to be smuggled in and through the house until it could be stored in one of the rooms in the east wing. We were developing quite a stockpile. Of course, I kept the potions in my room over the kitchen.

Ma had made clever usage of charms to simulate the sound of large parties going on in other lounges to explain the shortage of available women to whoever came to the door. That left us free to practice with our new wands unless any of the Death Eaters showed up. It was rather nice to have another name to call the younger men. Now when we spoke of Death Eaters, it came with all the same stomach clenching as before.

We took rotation in our same groups of eight we had before, only this time eight girls from one dorm worked downstairs and sixteen were upstairs practicing spells. Ma would send one of her house-elves up after us if we had been requested specifically. We developed a routine of walking to the door, placing our wand on one of the small shelves Neville had set on the wall, shrugging out of our robes and hanging them on a hook by the door and then leaving to go take care of business.

It wasn't many nights before I realized that the other girls were making sure I didn't have any customers on my shift. Sitting in the lounge, I became aware of Dusty or Peaches moving to intercept even the slightest glance and Theo or Vaisey or one of the others would inevitably make some suggestive comment and escort me upstairs where they would immediately drop my arm and apologize.

I walked into the practice room one night, after having been escorted up the stairs by Caddoc Warrington, and saw Ma cuff Peaches and Theo on their heads. It didn't take a genius to realize they had been snogging on one of the couches.

"More wards were removed from this room than just those that closed you off from your magic. Unless you want to start the next generation of Snape's Company, you might want to take it to another room," she muttered and walked away shaking her head, but I saw the little happy smirk on her face. I waited until they had pulled themselves together a bit and approached them.

"Why am I being kept from working downstairs?" I demanded to know. "I'm not comfortable getting special treatment like this; it's not fair to the other girls. Did Severus put you up to this?"

Theo and Peaches looked at each other and then back at me.

"The girls needed a way to actively feel like they are doing something. Protecting you is a tangible thing they can do," said Theo.

"It's good for morale and leaves you free to plan. Get over it," added Peaches. "Snape didn't tell us to; the other girls decided, but I will tell you he was rather pleased with the idea," finished Theo. He grabbed Peaches by the hand, and with a nod to me, they hurried out of the room to finish their moment in privacy.

And so, I spent my days and nights in the practice center where I had a desk and all the ink and parchment I could want. All battle strategy was discussed in this room, since it was good sense to make use of a house that was known to have people coming in and out at all hours of the night. Severus drilled us in defensive spells as well as some nasty ones that would have got us in trouble with the Ministry before, well, before the Ministry started using them. Neville came by often, always under a glamour, to confer about tactics and preparations. Charlie and Percy came to help train us as well; both of them had deadly aim and greatly improved our accuracy. Percy helped organize my legion of notes and charts, and his wife Penelope would often come by, Polyjuiced to look like a man, to retrain people in healing spells and to help Peaches organize the medical corps.

Twice, we were honored to witness a team dueling demonstration with Severus and Theo against Charlie and Percy. I know I was supposed to be watching everyone, but I only had eyes for Severus as he whirled and twisted and flung his hexes in silence. The point of the first duel was to demonstrate the use of voiceless magic and if that meant that it was supposed to leave Peaches and me too breathless to speak, it was a success. After about twenty minutes, Percy clipped Theo, and his shield failed and Charlie quickly took him down, only to have Severus dispatch them both with a silent blasting hex that made it seem as if he had been holding back the whole time. The point of the second duel was straight up face-saving, as the proud Weasley brothers came back for a second match two days later. This time, it ended in a draw as Severus had spent most of the duel fending off a constant barrage of attacks while Theo threw shields on him and couldn't get off a good shot of his own. Charlie and Percy worked a similar plan of one defending as the other tried to pick a weak point. That lesson was actually highly instructive, and we found ourselves practicing working in pairs after that.

The members of Snape's Company kept me updated on the last ploy we ladies had decided to pull off via rumor. Goyle Sr. had made a comment about how we needed a prophecy right now to throw the Dark Lord over the edge. He had talked about how obsessive he had been about the last one and how it would have been nice had there been another to make him just as tactically blind as before. That had set my mind to thinking, and eventually, we had started to disseminate the rumor to the Death Eaters who still came in the evenings. A week later, according to Snape's Company, every wizard and witch on the street now thought there was a savior on the horizon according to prophesy, but no one knew the actual words or where it had come from.

Then one day, about a fortnight after we had set the rumor free, lo and behold: it was found. Once word of a prophecy reached the Dark Lord's ears, he ordered the Department of Mysteries searched until it was found by Mulciber. This caused quite a stir, not only among the people at the Ministry but also for us. We had made up a rumor; we didn't actually have a prophecy.

The mystery of the suddenly appearing prophecy was solved the next night when Severus and I were alone in our room. We didn't get much time together anymore, and this was the first time he had been able to stay the night since the night of our big argument. Not wanting to waste time, we had set upon each other as soon as the door was closed, and an hour later, we were relaxing in bed. I was still perched on his lap, leaning against his bent knee, fingers playing absent mindedly with his long hair. He was stretched back on a mountain of pillows. His body was languid, eyes heavy lidded, his movements sated as he lifted his arms and rested his hands behind his head. His two tattoos were visible in the candle light.

I smiled as I remembered the lecture I had given him on that subject. He had just smirked at me and it taken me a minute to realize that not only had he stopped listening to me, but he was actually enjoying my attempt to scold him. I think if he had actually said he thought I was adorable, I might have run screaming down the hall in my frustration. As it was, he didn't have to; he just radiated it in the most infuriating way. When I had demanded to know if he had marked himself as well, he just raised that damned brow and unbuttoned his cuff. Pulling back his sleeve, he showed me he had. Of course, his was slightly different, not just because his serpent was much larger and more intimidating and the lightning bolt was much smaller but also, under the lightning bolt, his serpent curled protectively around a lioness in full roar.

"Well," I had said. "I won't even go into detail about what Freud would have to say about you wanting the bigger snake."

I smiled now to remember his quiet rumble of laughter.

I had finished braiding the lock of hair I had and reached to grab a new one, when I remembered I had wanted to ask him his thoughts on the prophecy. I started to card my fingers through another lock, separating it into three pieces.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you know about this business with the prophecy?"

"Quite a lot actually."

His answer intrigued me, and I searched his face, waiting for an explanation. Reading Severus's expressions was a frustrating hobby, but I was desperate to perfect it. Once the effects of the backlash had worn off, he was back to introverted and rarely forthcoming unless he was undone by sex, and he was getting better at recovering from that quicker as well. It was important that I learn to break his code, to try to avoid miscommunications. A quirk of a lip there, a glitter in the eye, just so, a carefully too smooth brow, and it added up to... smug.

"Severus! You planted the prophecy!"

Full blown evil smirk. He reached up and tugged a lock of my hair and let it spring back.

"But how? What does it say? How did you manage it?"

"Easy, woman!" His hands shot out to stop my excited bounce, and I remembered my position. I threw him an apologetic look.

"I thought Goyle's idea had merit, but I knew it wouldn't work without proof. I whipped up something vague enough to sound real and creepy enough to send him over the edge. Krum helped."

"Viktor? How did he help? How did you make it creepy?"

"There is an old instructor in Durmstrang who knows how to fashion memory message bubbles that can pass as recorded prophecies. I sent Krum a message to record, and he had his sister speak the words into the matrix. He brought it back with him, and all I needed was to rig it with names and dates and place it on a shelf."

"What does it say?"

Snape looked at me and then cleared his throat and in a sonorous voice intoned:

"She comes. The one who purifies comes from the house of the vanquished. On the last day of the seventh month, she will purge the house of law. The phoenix shall be vindicated, and the loyal shall be laid low. She comes. The one who purifies comes from the house of the vanquished."

His voice trailed off, and then he ruined it by wagging his eyebrows, breaking the spell.

"That's very good!"

"Thank you, I'd like to think twenty years of listening to Sybill would lend a certain verisimilitude."

"It sounds real enough, too real; are you sure it doesn't point a bit too directly to me?"

"Well, I have been sent here to investigate the possibility, and I think I investigated you rather thoroughly, did I not?" His hands swept up and over my body.

"I'm being serious, Severus!" I batted at his hands.

"The Dark Lord is deranged, and with the discovery of the prophecy, he has only the most tenuous hold on his sanity. He ordered a rounding up of all the female Gryffindors still alive. I left the explanation of why that was unfeasible to Mulciber. He is still recovering, but he did get the order rescinded. I'm just following up on a possibility. I will present the Dark Lord with some edited memories of your more than willing acquiescence, and he will be satisfied."

"I can't say I'm happy with the idea of him watching us."

"He... has before."

"Oh. Right."

"Quite."

"Getting back to the prophecy, I have to say it sounds real, but it doesn't sound particularly creepy."

"You should hear it with a Bulgarian accent. Bulgarians always sound creepy."

"Stop that. How did you get it into the Department of Mysteries without anyone seeing it?"

"The same way you always snuck into the library at night before every exam."

"Oh, Harry's cloak!"

"Indeed. I especially liked how the prophecy was inscribed. It just said 'The Lioness' and then 'The Loyal'. So everyone that the Dark Lord forced into touching it thought it was about them. Idiots."

"Hang on, give me that date again?"

"...On the last day of the seventh month..."

"But Severus! That's Harry's birthday! That's only two weeks away, how can we be ready by the thirty-first?"

He sat up and pulled me into his arms while rolling over so he had me pinned to the bed under him.

"Don't be a dunderhead. The prophecy isn't real. We're not going to attack on the thirty-first."

I relaxed under him, relieved, and he started to nuzzle along my ear with his nose.

"We're going to attack on the first."

Role Play

Chapter 32 of 40

Severus and Hermione discuss battle readiness, and a few other things...

Thanks go to astopperindeath, who has done a wonderful job of knocking out the last few chapters so we could keep this train chugging towards its conclusion!

He had slipped his hands down my arms and so was in the perfect position to keep me from pushing him off me when I reacted to his statement.

"Are you mad? We couldn't possibly..."

"Hermione, it's the perfect time. You must see that everything is ready and momentum is on our side. If we wait any longer, doubt will creep in and that can destroy a movement faster than anything else."

He kissed along my brow, smoothing my worry lines with his nose.

"Having the Dark Lord be as mad as a hatter will only work to our advantage while people are afraid. Unfortunately, people are only able to be afraid for so long before they seem to get used to it and shut down. If we wait too long, that will happen, and we will lose those that might throw their lot in with us."

"There is a feeling in the air at the Ministry that something will happen soon. Now they know it. When the day comes and goes and the prophecy goes unfulfilled, the Dark Lord will become overconfident, and his loyal minions will take the next day off to celebrate. Being prepared for a battle and suddenly being summoned for one with no notice are two completely different things, psychologically." As he spoke, he never stopped his soothing caresses or his gentle nuzzling. He stilled my fears with his certainty and confidence.

"Trust me; we are ready."

"Alright. If you think so, but I'm afraid."

He let out a strangled laugh.

"Don't think I am not, Hermione. I have everything to lose now. I take comfort in the fact that if anything happens to you, I won't be around to suffer for it."

"Yes, but what about me? If something happens to you, I am alone. Severus, I don't want a shiny new world without you in it."

He lifted up on one arm, stroked his other hand down my torso and splayed his hand across my stomach.

"I don't want to leave you alone. I want to cherish you and worship you for the rest of my days. I would like to see this belly swollen and ripe with a child I have planted in you. But remember, Hermione, this happiness we share now came at the cost of dreadful despair. If I fall, trust that you will someday know happiness again and that I rest easy knowing I gave you the chance."

"No! Don't say things like that!" I struggled, and he let me wriggle out from under him until I was up on my knees facing him as he propped himself up on one arm.

"If you get yourself killed, I will find your little hiding place in your cellar, and I will take that damned stone, and I won't give you even a minute of eternal peace! I'll call you every day and tell you just what a prat you were for leaving me!"

He chuckled, and his hand came up and wiped away a tear from my cheek.

"I believe you would if it were possible. But the damned thing doesn't work. I've tried."

"You have? Why doesn't it work?"

"I'm not sure." He scowled and twisted to flop back down on the pillows. "I think it is because I am not related to one of those damned Peverells. Potter was. I don't think even Albus was...which makes it even more foolish for him to have tried to put that blasted ring on...but I suppose there was a compulsion along with the curse."

"Either way, despite my... reluctance, I risked using the stone. I wanted Dumbledore's counsel. As fortune would have it, the stone doesn't work. My research couldn't turn up an explanation."

"Why were you reluctant to use it?"

He gave me one of his patented looks he always used when someone asked a particularly ignorant question in class.

"Hermione, the stone calls your dead. Why would I have been happy with the idea of facing my dead?"

"Oh. Right. But surely... well... never mind."

"Yes, I tried to call... others. I see the question in your eyes. No one came. There was nothing."

I stroked his face.

"I'm sorry you were without counsel. I don't like to think of how long you were alone."

He captured my hand and kissed it.

"I tried other things. I went to Italy and showed some artists there photographs of Albus, but the portraits were always missing a spark. Oh, he would wave and twinkle and look as if he was pondering something of great importance, but he didn't do anything else. The portraits of Phineas and my mother eventually demanded I remove him; they didn't like being cooped up with an idiot. There are now three of him hanging in my cellar all waving at each other like pillocks." His sneer was rather evocative and contained all his frustrations.

"So if the stone doesn't work for you, what about the other Hallows? You've obviously used the cloak, but does the wand work for you?"

"Yes, the wand works, but I have to say using it is an unpleasant experience. It is rather powerful but also seems to be... eager. I dislike it. I worked with it enough to know its strengths, but I prefer my own."

"So we really are into the countdown, aren't we?" I asked.

"Yes, my love. It's time."

"What do we need to concentrate on in the next two weeks?"

"We will drill in formations and practice tactics. I wish we could have you women practice Apparating, but that's not possible, so we need to train for situations we can't leave in a hurry."

"If possible, we would like to have different clothing. Angel pointed out that lovely as they are, we are a little clumsy in our robes and thought Muggle slacks would not only be better but also symbolic."

"I'll see what I can do. Anything else?"

"Everything else, but nothing pressing at the moment."

He reached over and pulled me into his arms.

"I can think of a pressing matter that needs immediate attention."

He kissed me slowly. As our tongues played lazily with each other, a thought struck me, and I pulled away quickly.

"You said the Dark Lord would be looking at your memories of tonight, yes?"

"Yes, but that's not the thought we would particularly want in our heads at the moment," he tossed back.

"What if we created a better memory, one that would be a bit better at deflecting suspicion than a jumble of images you cobbled together?"

"Why do I suspect I am not going to like whatever you say next."

"Because it's perfect and you didn't think of it!" I shot back at him as I scrambled off the bed. I looked around until I found our robes over by the door.

I ran back to the bed with an armful of clothes and tossed them in his lap.

"First you need to transfigure my clothes into a school uniform..."

"I will do no such thing!" he bellowed. Tossing the clothes away as if they were infected, he scrambled out of the bed.

"Of course you will. Then you change yours to look more like your teaching robes."

"Like hell I will!" he thundered.

"Oh, do stop, Severus. This is a perfect idea. Now, let's see. Yes, a little more foolish wand waving, and we can make that area over there look like a potions bench."

"What? No! Hermione, I demand you stop this at once. It's not amusing; it's sick!

"I know, that's what makes it perfect. You get to 'put me in detention' and the Dark Lord thinks you're a kinky bastard, not someone with any other possible reason for electing to go question the Mudblood."

"Don't use that..."

"Hush, you said yourself that he leaped to the same conclusion that Macnair did. This is perfect! Ask all the questions you want. I get to sound vacuous and slutty, give all the answers that he would want to hear and then act all willing and acquiescent and then you have your way with me. Simple."

He looked at me like I had grown another head, but I could tell my logic had won out when he crossed his arms petulantly.

"I doubt I will be *up* to having my way with you dressed like that."

"Perfect, you're supposed to be inhibited anyway. This is only the second time, as far as the Dark Lord knows, right? The more uptight you are, the better. It will add *verisimilitude*."

He looked like he wanted to spit, but he waved his wand and levitated my robes back over to me.

"Detention, Miss Granger."

I do admit I shivered just a little bit at that. Fantasies I hadn't even realized I'd had danced through my head.

However, the reality was not the stuff of legends. Severus never really got into his part. I was an old hand at role play and acting vacuous and adoring, but he just kept putting his hand up and demanding I give him a minute.

At one point, I was on my knees before his chair with my hands clasped behind my back and chasing his limp cock around in a circle with my mouth while he glared down at me with his arms crossed over his chest and an 'I told you so' expression. I stopped for a moment to collapse laughing. That didn't go over well at all.

In the end we had enough to work with, according to him, and he couldn't change my robes back fast enough.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to put together a memory that doesn't make me look completely pathetic," he grouched as he sat down hard on the end of the bed.

"Don't worry, love, we'll keep track of whom he tells and make sure they all rot in Azkaban." I made him a cup of tea and brought it to him. "What if I made it up to you? What if I dressed in something you would *want* to see me in now?" I twirled my hands in the air as I stood before him.

His eye took on an appraising look, and then he smirked and pulled out his wand. It was one of those smirks I didn't like to see, one that usually occurred when there was revenge in the equation.

Just as I was thinking this might not be a good idea, he started flicking away. I blinked when a pair of glasses perched on the end on my nose and then looked down at my attire.

"Good heavens, Severus! You..."

Words failed as I recognized who I was dressed similarly to: Irma Pince.

"You made me a librarian!"

He chuckled as he stood up before me and gathered my hair up into a knot on my head and poked his wand through it.

"Books can be sensual things, Hermione. Does it not follow that a woman in command of thousands of them could be... enticing?"

I smirked at that.

"You're overdue, Mr. Snape. There will be a penalty."

My mouth went dry when I saw his eyes start to burn.

"You kinky man," I rasped before he kissed me.

A Last Briefing

Chapter 33 of 40

Hermione frets on the eve of battle.

A big thank you to astopperindeath for the beta.

Chapter 33: A Last Briefing

The thirty-first of July found the house crowded and tense. There was no business; things had been quiet on that front for the last two days. The Death Eaters were all on alert at the Ministry, and only Vaisey or Goyle had showed up to pass on information. Regular customers stayed away as well, as the Wizarding world settled in to wait for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

Neville's fighters had started to arrive in twos and threes in the early morning hours, and eventually, their entire company of ninety-two was at the house, supplemented by the twenty oath-bound friends of Viktor's from Bulgaria that had arrived the day before.

Ma had accommodated everyone into rooms and unused dorms, and even though it was crowded, things were going smoothly so far. Now with the exception of Snape's Company, and Severus himself, we were all jammed into the practice center for a last briefing.

"Alright, let's review one more time," I said to the packed room. "They don't fight as a cohesive unit but in a chaotic, self-centered manner. We have been drilling for that, and I think we can feel confident that our tactics are as sound as common sense allows.

"Agatha, you're in charge of operations in the house once our army moves out. Do we need anything else for the infirmary or holding area?"

"Not at the moment," she replied. "I've relocated the infirmary to the dorms upstairs, and it's fully stocked. I hope by all that's sacred we don't need that much room, but better safe than sorry. As for the detainees, I have a place for them but we'll have to wait for the wards to drop before I can secure it better. When it starts, I will make for there right away with three of Mr. Krum's gentlemen, and it will be only a matter of moments for it to be ready and functional."

"Excellent. You'll have to secure the Floo quickly; we can't have anyone gaining access to the house at all once this begins, except by Portkey."

"I can shut that down now, if you like; that doesn't set off any wards."

"How often do you use it?"

"Only for paperwork...budget reports and the like...about once a week."

"Let's just wait until we are closer to zero hour. I don't want to do anything out of the ordinary too soon, just in case." I turned towards Nadia and Penelope.

"You've checked over the new infirmary? Is there anything you need?"

"Not that I can foresee," answered Nadia. "It's fully stocked with potions, medical supplies and equipment. All we need are healers able to do more than triage." She looked towards Penelope.

"What's the status with our St. Mungo's connection?" I asked her.

"We have five people ready to Portkey here when they get my signal. All have been oath-bound and all are completely loyal to the cause. Three are trauma specialists, and two are trained in curse reversal. You get the casualties to us, and we can treat them."

An excited murmur ran around the crowded room.

"That's... much better than we hoped for," I said.

"Well, you have Blagdon and Goyle to thank for that. They approached Pansy Parkinson's sister, Dahlia, last week. She's now one of our new Trauma specialists. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named made a big mistake when he started killing his own. She brought in the last two, also grieving relatives with an axe to grind. So, yes, we have a much better infirmary now."

"That's excellent news. Excellent. Peaches, what about your cohort, are you ready?"

Peaches moved through the crowd until she was up front.

"Yes, we each have enough Portkeys to get anyone who goes down back to the house, and medical supplies for anything too critical to Portkey, and we've drilled on how to cover each other if one of us drops out of formation to stabilize someone for transport. We're as ready as we're going to be."

"Do all the fighters know the incantation to illuminate Snape's Company? We can't risk picking off our own."

"We do," said Neville

"Vee do as vell," said Viktor.

"Remember, when the Dark Lord goes down, those with the Dark Mark will be incapacitated, according to the ones who were there when he was defeated before. Be prepared for that, and try to keep our boys safe if possible; not everyone on the other side has a Dark Mark."

I looked down at my notes and heaved a sigh.

"Alright, let's talk quickly about what to do if the Dark Lord *doesn't* go down." I waited for the muttering to die down before I continued. "Does anyone not have a personal Portkey?" I held my hand up to show the ring on my middle finger. Everyone in the room held a hand up to show identical rings. "Neville, your people staying behind have theirs as well?"

"Yes. Everyone not in the fight will be in the forest with the centaurs. If they get the signal, they will all Portkey to Viktor's estate in Bulgaria."

I nodded and crossed off the last line on my notes.

"Remember, if we lose, there is nowhere safe in Britain. Don't hesitate; if you see the signal, get out." I turned back to Nadia and Penelope. "You will hopefully have enough time to grab supplies and activate the rings on any patients you can before you get out yourselves.

"I think that about covers it. Any questions? No? Really? Alright then.

"We move floor to floor, we stay in our formations, we stick to the plan until the plan stops working, then we improvise. Look to your team leaders and follow the chain of command on your teams."

I laid my notes down on my desk.

"Percy has maps of the Ministry for everyone; take the time to study them with your team. From now on, stay with your team members. We might as well spend the day getting used to each other now that we are all together finally."

At my signal Percy stepped forward with a stack of parchment and began handing maps out.

Charlie made his way over to me and gripped my shoulder as we looked out at the people in the room.

"You do know that you're an amazing woman, right?"

I tried for a self-deprecating laugh but only managed a noise reminiscent of mild hysteria.

"Thanks, Charlie."

"Ron and Harry must be very proud of you, wherever they are watching from now. I know I am."

"Oh Charlie! Why didn't this happen all those years ago? Why did Dumbledore leave it to us to do this when we were just children? Look at what has been accomplished in months; Dumbledore had years!"

He pulled out his wand and cast Muffliato around us.

"Easy, Hermione, this wasn't months. It was years too. Years for Snape to find all the pieces, years for the Wizarding world to understand what they could have prevented, years for all the pieces to fall back into place. Remember no one but those few people in the Order believed Dumbledore. Who knows what could have happened if Harry hadn't been tricked into going back to the Burrow that day. Dumbledore's plan might have worked if it had played out the way he intended. But that's all in the past now; you and Snape have played the cards you were dealt and this," he gestured to the room, "is the result. It will be settled tomorrow, one way or another. All we can do now is wait," he said, as a solid lump settled in my gut.

The rest of the day was spent smiling and reassuring everyone around me, until I thought my face would crack, and trying to find flaws in plans that seemed suspiciously competent. I wished Severus was with me. I had this irrational need for him to come in and swoop me up and put me in his pocket. All these people looked to me, and I was feeling more and more pressured. As evening drew to a close, my anxiety level increased to the point that Neville pulled me aside and asked if I needed a calming draught.

"Am I that bad?"

"Well, the last time I saw you walking around in small circles flapping your hands was the night before our O.W.L.S," he said. "Relax, Hermione, we've done everything we can until tomorrow night: fretting about it now won't help."

I sighed. "You're right, of course, but I just can't shut down my mind. I can't help but think I'm forgetting something important."

"All we can do is plan for the expected and try to prepare for the unexpected, Hermione. Of course we're probably forgetting something, but we'll run ourselves into the ground if we start to worry about every little detail." He guided me over to a table and poured me a cup of tea and added a few drops of potion to it. "Drink, you need to settle yourself."

"Thanks. It's just hard; everyone expects so much of me, and I'm terrified that this will go completely wrong."

"Hermione, even if it does, that doesn't mean it's your fault. The way I see it, you can't lose either way. We either win, or we've thrown everything we had at this one last stand. There's no failure in either scenario. You've already given everyone what they needed, a chance, a hope and a sense of purpose. That's much better than struggling to survive each day, griping about how the world has gone to the dogs and not doing anything to stop it. That's what ninety percent of the Wizarding world has been doing the last five years. Honestly, that's really all we have been doing. Oh, we called it biding our time, but in reality we were too terrified to make a move. You gave us the missing spark. When we heard you were alive and needed us to help destroy the Dark Lord, it galvanized our people. Everyone here is committed. We may have doubts about whether or not we can prevail, but no one has any doubts that we are doing the right thing."

"So, thank you, Hermione. Thank you for being a symbol, thank you for being an organizer, and thank you for being a leader who paces and frets and worries about her army."

I drained my tea and set my cup on the table.

"Hannah's a lucky girl, Neville," I said. "You have a marvelous way of making someone feel better about themselves."

He smiled broadly and patted me on the shoulder.

"Nah, I'm a lucky bloke. She keeps me running in the right direction, and she remembers all the little bits I can never keep track of."

We both laughed at that. Neville's limited memory had been legend when we were still in school, and I was comforted to know some things stayed the same. He had changed, though. He was still quiet and unassuming, but he was also still made of steel when he had to be.

"Feeling a bit more calm now?"

"Yes, the potion helped, but your words were most important. Thank you, Neville."

"Anytime, Hermione; why don't you get some sleep now? Tomorrow is going to be another long day of waiting, and if we don't get some rest, tempers will flare. I'll go send everyone else to bed as well."

He gave me a one-armed hug and sent me on my way.

The room over the kitchen didn't offer as much comfort now; it had been rearranged to make room for all the extra bodies packed into the east wing. Now there were two beds, and the seating had all been removed. Empty boxes were still crammed into corners from when all the supplies had been distributed earlier. Peaches and I shared the space now, and she came in shortly after I did. We spoke quietly, each mostly caught up in our own thoughts, but we took comfort in our friendship, and after a quick hug and urges to sleep well, we doused the lights and turned in.

Sleep eventually came, but it wasn't easy, even with the calming draught. Now my thoughts circled lazily instead of frantically as I listened to the sound of Peaches' soft snores.

I woke when the bed dipped down, and I struggled to sit up. A long arm pulled me back down and onto a warm chest, and I nestled into the damp smell of a freshly showered Severus.

"What time is it?" I asked sleepily.

"Four in the morning, go back to sleep." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, and I heard him sigh deeply.

"Everything go alright?"

"Hush, Hermione. Everything is fine. The Dark Lord is secure in his hubris and his superiority, but the spy needs sleep."

"Alright, sleep well, Severus."

"Dream well, Hermione."

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

His arm contracted around me and his deep husky voice replied, "Thank God."

Zero Hour

Chapter 34 of 40

It begins.

"Princess, dear, come over and meet this fine gentleman!" I looked over to the doorway of the lounge and saw Ma standing next to a middle-aged businessman. I stood and straightened my black peignoir and smoothed any stray hairs that might have escaped from where it was piled on top of my head. I narrowed my eyes at the man and stalked over to him. My eyes reflected, honestly, all the things I was going to do with him, and he flushed and smiled broadly.

"Please show this gentleman upstairs and give him a night to remember."

"Absolutely... This way, sir," I said in my most sultry voice.

I took his arm and felt him flex slightly. I smiled viciously and led him up the stairs and to the east wing.

"Here we are." I opened the door to the bedroom, and he gallantly allowed me to go first with a little bow. I entered and walked over to the tray of refreshments. I was about to offer him some, but he had rushed up behind me and began pawing at my arse, obviously in no mood for preliminaries.

"Stupefy!"

I almost sprawled across the table as the man's weight hit me; he was hauled off quickly.

"Do you think you waited long enough?" I snapped at the empty room.

"I was waiting for him to close the door; I wasn't expecting him to scuttle quite so quickly. Are you alright?" Severus asked, pulling off Harry's cloak.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Then why are you complaining?"

I took a deep breath and then reached for the pot of tea and made myself a cup.

"Forgive me, it's nerves. How many does that make so far?"

"Five innocent fornicators so far. Who's arrived downstairs?"

"So far Gibbons, Avery and a few of their people, about ten so far. They are expecting Jugson and one or two others but that's it."

"What about Nott's group, what are they doing?"

"Most of them are set up in the Emerald Lounge having a loud party with the doors open, but the two Goyles are in with Avery, and Vaisey is with them as well, so there is some traffic between the two rooms. Warrington and a few others are at the Ministry. They will signal when they are in position." I finished my tea and set the cup back down, and Severus tapped the tea service with his wand and it disappeared, called back to the kitchen by the elves.

The lights in the room flickered, and I hastily made for the door as Severus levitated the other man over to a corner and cast a Disillusionment charm over him. The lights flickered again, and I cursed.

"No time, get by the bed!" he hissed as he threw the invisibility cloak over me.

I hid under its folds as Severus Disillusioned himself and backed into the wall.

Stupid man. The cloak allowed unseen movement. Disillusioning only worked if you stayed still, otherwise it might be noticeable to the observant. He should have been wearing the cloak.

The door opened, and Ruby came in, followed by another client. My heart froze when I saw it was Avery.

A tray appeared on the table, and Ruby walked over to it and picked up the unopened bottle of wine and corkscrew that had appeared. Avery was still half in the doorway, giving her an appraising look.

'Get in and close the door!' I screamed in my head.

"What are you planning to do to me from over there?" Ruby said in a husky voice.

Avery looked like he was sulking, and she put a little more authority in her voice.

"Are you being a naughty boy already? Don't make Ruby angry, young man. Come here right now," she ordered.

He smiled his sickly smile and came into the room, pushing the door closed behind him. He was almost all the way to Ruby, when he glanced eagerly over to the bed. I don't know if he saw movement or heard a noise, but he spun on his heel with his wand out and just dodged Severus's Stupefy. He fired off a silent hex that blasted a hole in the wall, and I was already running at him when Ruby smashed him in the temple with the wine bottle. He crumpled to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Bad boy," she said to his unmoving form as Severus and I appeared. "Huh, in the movies these always break," she said, holding up the still intact bottle. "I swear I heard it break."

Severus leaned down and checked him for a pulse.

"I thought they were going to be down there a little longer," he said over his shoulder.

"This one couldn't wait and was planning on an all-nighter. I thought it best to just go ahead and get him out of the way since no one down there is expecting him back. Did I make a mistake?" she asked, worried. "It's not like I could have conferred without it looking suspicious."

"No, you did well," he replied.

I noticed a distinct odor and decided to hustle her out of the room.

"Good job, Ruby," I said. "Since you're officially with him for the rest of the night, why don't you go ahead upstairs and get yourself ready."

"Good idea. I'll go change." She raced out of the room, and the door clicked shut behind her. I tossed the invisibility cloak back to Severus.

"He's dead isn't he?"

"Yes, she crushed his skull."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"For now? Turn him into an end table. We need to get the other one upstairs."

"What about the smell?" I asked, waving a hand to try and clear the thickening stench of emptied bowels.

"Honestly, Hermione," he huffed, "doubt my skills later; right now, go and get one of Krum's boys."

I left the room and hurried up to the practice center. I took my robe off the hook by the door and slipped it on. It had been a long time since I had been self-conscious, but with the new house guests here, all of us girls were, and so there was a privacy screen blocking a portion of the door and the hooks on the wall next to it.

Viktor came over quickly as I stepped out from behind the screen, and I explained what had happened.

"It will be taken care of," he assured me and signaled two of his men and they left the room in a hurry.

"What's the situation up here?"

"They are ready to perform the Blood magic when we get the signal. They can drop the vords very swiftly with so many here."

"And you are sure we won't be as affected this time?"

"No, your Snape had to push the vords away from this room without anyone at the Ministry being suspicious, yes? They will drop them completely," he said. "This time, as long as Snape's men are in the right place in the Ministry at the right time it will be alright. If not? We start fighting earlier, yes?"

"Alright. Let me know if anything changes, okay?"

"I will," he said as I headed back out into the hall.

Out in the hallway, I saw one of the men Viktor had sent down to Severus coming with the levitated body of my client following behind him. He nodded at me, and I followed him and the stunned man into another room.

I said hello to Aberforth Dumbledore, who was watching as the new arrival was settled against the wall next to the previous four. I had been shocked when I met him the first time--the resemblance to his brother was uncanny-- but the differences were striking as well. He was the Headmaster, without the twinkle, or kindness, or manners for that matter. I liked him a lot, and it was mutual.

"What're you doing here, missy. Don't you have a war to go start?"

"Oh, that? Well I thought I'd put that on hold to see how an old grouch is doing with his new toys." I gestured to the men.

"Oh, they're fine. A dose of that dreamless sleep when this one wakes up and he'll be fine as well. If we win, we send them home. If we lose, well, I'm sure someone will send them home. Never you mind, girl, they're safe as lambs." He pointed his wand towards the Stupefied man but then turned his head back at me and told me to run along and let him get back to work.

"Alright. Do you need anything? Tea?"

"Tea would be lovely," he said, and his voice sounded so much like Professor Dumbledore's that I blinked. No wonder Severus wouldn't go near him.

I headed down the hall and stopped in the last room before the stairs.

"Everything alright in here?" I asked Neville.

He looked up from the table he was standing around with ten of Viktor's friends.

"Yes, they were just explaining to me about the wards. Fascinating, but nothing I would ever touch I think," he said. He turned to thank them and headed out the door to join me. I watched as each man picked up a vial of blood from the table.

"How are you holding up?" asked Neville once he had closed the door behind him.

"Honestly?" I quipped, "I think I stopped knowing that about an hour ago. I've been on automatic since the first client showed up."

"I know what you mean. I just wish it would get a move on and start."

As if on cue, the lights on the upper floor blinked. Ma's house-elves had given the signal that the last Death Eater expected was in the house.

"Well, here's your wish. Zero hour at last," I said. I unbuttoned my robes and tossed them to Neville. He gave me a light slap on the back, and I headed down the stairs checking the sloppy knot of a bun on my head.

The silencing spells on the rooms made it seem eerily quiet as I hurried along to the next staircase, and so I almost yelped when a door flew open and I barreled into nothing.

Arms came up around me, and as Severus shook the hood of the cape back off his head, his features ghosted into sight.

We said nothing, just looked at each other, and then he kissed me hard. He set me back on my feet, and I turned away from him and raced toward the stairs. I could feel him at my back.

Ma came up the stairs and cast a quick Muffliato when she saw me.

"Yaxley and Jugson have arrived with some of their flunkies. There are about fourteen in all. Mulciber's not coming after all, nor any others. I'm sorry; I really thought my free offer to celebrate would have brought more."

"We'll manage; you did your best," I reassured her.

She took a deep breath and then squared her shoulders.

"The Floo is shut, and I'm on my way to take care of the holding area. Angel has the wine. Do be careful, Princess. Where's Snape? I'd feel better if he was with you."

"I am, Agatha," came his voice over my shoulder.

She started and laid a hand on her bosom.

"Keep her safe, Severus," she said, and then with a flick of her wand, she canceled the charm. Before she headed up the stairs, I stopped her.

"Can you make sure Aberforth gets a cuppa?"

"Hermione!" hissed Severus in my ear.

"What?" I hissed back as I headed down the stairs.

Ma let out a short hysterical laugh and ran in the other direction.

Good Luck

Chapter 35 of 40

The house is secured and the fighters form into teams.

Thank you so much to astopperindeath, for the final polish.

I didn't break my speed fast enough and entered the foyer with a skid. As I caught my balance, a streak of silver slipped in from under the front door and shot past me up the stairs.

"Too soon!" I moaned quietly. I took a moment to catch my breath and walked into the Lilac Lounge with my plastic smile in place.

"Gentleman! A toast!" called Goyle Sr. as I entered the room. Angel was just passing out the last glasses of wine, and I saw that several more members of Snape's Company had insinuated themselves into the crowd. Dozens of glasses lifted, and I sent a silent plea to whomever might be listening to help Goyle make it a short speech.

"To our Dark Lord and to his prophecies!" There was a bawdy roar of laughter, and then the glasses were drained. I almost sagged with relief. Severus had said the potion we put in the wine would take effect in under three minutes. Now, all we had to do was wait and hope they all went down at the same time. I took another deep breath to calm myself just as the wards dropped two and a half minutes too soon.

The room erupted into yells as everyone in the room felt the dampening field go down.

"Easy! Easy!" cried Goyle Sr. "I'm sure it's just some mistake, brothers! The ladies have no wands; you can't tell me you're frightened of a bunch of trollops, now can you?" He laughed and reached out and snagged Angel by the arm. She let out a yelp that quickly turned into a giggle as she tucked herself under his arm. The other girls took their cue and relaxed and smiled vacuously.

"Still, this needs to be reported," said Yaxley, and he pushed his way through the crowded room towards where I was standing in the doorway with my own stupid smile on my face. I stepped to the side and let him pass. Being the only one close to the door, I was the only one who heard the muffled thud.

The tension in the room at Yaxley's exit was unmistakable. Goyle had done well to try and diffuse the situation, but now it was back ten-fold, and the women's faces were changing from happy smiles to sickening fear. Nadia yelped when the first Death Eater collapsed on her, and the room erupted in chaos.

Men shouted and jumped up only to be hexed by what they thought were their fellow Death Eaters. I reached up and snatched my wand out of my hair and the other girls did the same as Jugson made a break for the door only to be knocked flat by a hex that came from over my shoulder. There was an incredible amount of shouting and yelling for the full minute it took for the Death Eaters to drop either from hexes or the drugged wine.

It sounded like a herd of cattle came pounding down the stairs as Percy, Charlie, and Viktor appeared in the doorway with over a hundred others crammed up behind them.

There were bodies lying all over the room, and furniture was knocked all over the place.

"Well, that was a rather uninspiring display," drawled Severus as he *Ennervated* Goyle Sr. and Angel. "Weasley, the ballroom, if you would; get that foyer clear."

Peaches hurried over to make sure they were okay, and I asked Nadia to check the bodies and see if any more of our own had gone down. Several women had to be treated for hexes, and Nadia and Peaches made short work of fixing them up.

"Let's clear the room; we need space," I said.

Agatha entered the room, her eyes as big as saucers.

"Ma, where should we take our prisoners?" I asked.

Her expression changed instantly. Her eyes got flat, and her mouth fell into a cruel smile.

"The Brown Room," she said and every woman's head turned to look at her with the same expression that she was wearing. "Plenty of restraints there already, don't you

think?"

The men in the room backed off as the women aimed their wands at the Death Eaters on the floor and began to float them out of the room.

"Gods, I'm glad I was never interested in that room," said Vaisey.

"Yea, me too," agreed Nott.

After quickly changing into the tracksuit bottoms and comfortable shirts that Severus had sent, Peaches and I hurried out of the bedroom and headed toward where everyone was gathered in the ballroom downstairs. Penelope joined us with five people in healers' robes following her. We made hasty introductions on our way down the stairs.

"They just Portkeyed in; I thought we should see you all off and give them a look at who's fighting," she said breathlessly.

"Great, and thank you all so much for joining us. Did you all get rings?"

One woman held up her hand, showing the ring on her middle finger, and then reached out to stop me.

"I just want to thank you, Miss Granger. We will help in anyway we can. My sister would have joined you had she known, and I know there must be others there who feel the same way, so look for allies."

I saw the family resemblance and put my hand on her shoulder.

"You're Dahlia Parkinson?" She nodded. "I am so very sorry. For what it's worth, the death of your sister spurred a lot of young men towards rebellion."

She pressed her lips together and nodded her head, and we hurried into the crowded room.

"Oh! So many!" Dahlia gasped. She turned to me with a tremulous smile. "I have to admit, I really thought that this was going to be a symbolic attack and that you all had no chance. I had no idea your group was as big as this! You might just pull this off, Miss Granger."

"Call me Hermione," I said.

She nodded.

"Dahlia," she tossed over her shoulder as she joined the other healers in the corner. Penelope and Nadia were with them. I made my way over to Peaches as she was organizing her group.

"Everyone has her bag? Check the straps; we can't risk losing them in the fight." She walked among the women, checking that they had their supplies and Portkeys in the bags strapped across their chests. "Okay, then, good luck and go find your teams."

She watched as our girls scattered about the room, joining the teams of fighters that had already started to form.

"You think we have a chance, Hermione?" she asked.

"One way or another, we're free, Peaches," I replied honestly. "But I do have a good feeling about this."

"Yeah, me too," She gave me a hug. "You know I always thought of you as a friend, even when you were a soulless bitch, but you are more than that now, so you take care of yourself, Princess." She backed off and scrubbed at her face.

"Same here, Caroline," I replied. She beamed at me, and I was unbelievably happy that I finally remembered to use her real name. She reached over and pulled a last bag off the table.

"Make sure your straps are tight; I don't want to see Portkeys flying all over the floor," she ordered and then turned and headed towards Theo.

I pulled the strap over my head and shoved my right arm through it. Behind me, I felt warm fingers lift my hair from under the strap, lightly caressing my neck in the process. Just that small touch, and I could feel stress start to lose its grip on me. I leaned back until I was just touching his chest, and his voice rumbled in my ear.

"You will be careful. You will not do anything foolish; and you will stay behind Longbottom at all times."

I turned to face him.

"I will try, Severus." I reached up and smoothed a wrinkle out of his robes. "And what about you? Could I make the same demands?"

He graced me with a sour face, and I chuckled.

"No, I suppose not. Are the wards set?"

"Yes, the house is secure, there is no way in except by Portkey now." He lifted his hand and brushed back a lock of my hair. His black eyes glittered with his thoughts, but his face gave nothing away.

"It is time," he said.

I wanted to throw myself in his arms. I wanted to crawl into his pocket. I wanted to let him know how much he meant to me and how glad I was that he had come to the house that night, months ago, lost and empty and looking so defeated and pathetic. I wanted him to know that he had become my reason for living and that if he didn't survive, I would die inside, and this time there would be no one to pull me back. I wanted him to know all these things and more, but I didn't say a thing. I just looked into his eyes and thought them all.

He closed his eyes after a while, and when he opened them, they were so full of love and pain I felt tears form in response.

He leaned in and in a fierce whisper said: "You will live, my goddess. You will survive this!"

I nodded, struggling to keep my lip from quivering, and he stepped back. Reaching into the deep pocket inside his robes, he pulled out Harry's cloak.

"It is time!" he announced loudly and the room fell quiet.

"You know the plan," he continued when all eyes were on him. "Keep your heads and try not to hex each other. Good luck to all."

With a last, intense look thrown my way he walked over to join the members of Snape's Company. They would wait behind for the Dark Lord to call them and then Apparate directly to where ever he was. I watched him don Harry's cloak and disappear from sight. He would go after Nagini alone and then link up with his fighters.

I joined the first group and stepped into formation with my team, which consisted of Neville, Viktor, Angel, myself and two people from the forest: Kenneth and Andrea. We all reached out and grabbed hold of the Portkey for our team and waited for it to activate.

The room went silent as each group stood ready and waiting, and then they all activated at once.

I felt the familiar pull behind my navel and the room whirled away.

Avada Kedavra

Chapter 36 of 40

The Battle of the Ministry.

Thanks to astopperindeath for the wonderful beta.

I landed hard, thrown to my back on the floor of a courtroom, and struggled to catch my breath and get my bearings.

"I thought you lot would never show up," said Blagdon quietly from the doors to the courtroom. "This room is secure; no one is in any of the chambers behind it."

Neville nodded to him as he hauled me to my feet, and we moved as silently as possible as we helped others set themselves to rights. Only the first group had arrived in the lowest level of the Ministry. We were the largest and needed to move the fastest to join Charlie's group. They were Apparating into the Atrium to secure the Floor network. Percy was taking the smallest group to secure the employee entrance.

Dusty looked thoroughly embarrassed as she scrambled around on the floor scooping up the Portkeys that had spilled out of her bag, as Peaches just stood over her and glowered. I checked my own bag and saw it was secure.

I pulled out my wand and signaled to my team with a gesture towards my eyes. They nodded and all of us whispered a spell and tapped our foreheads. Blagdon now appeared to glow with a golden aura. Around us other teams did the same.

At the door, Blagdon pulled his hood up and placed a mask on his face. Unlike the Death Eater masks, this one was very plain and simple, matte black with a white tear in the corner of the left eye. He waited at the door until we were assembled into our teams.

At a signal from Viktor, we moved out. Neville quietly cast *Homenum Revelio* at the door and it showed three people farther down the hallway.

Neville nodded to Blagdon, and he threw open the doors of the courtroom. We spilled out of the room and raced down the hall. The people out in the hall spun around shocked and were quickly stunned. The first groups continued past them, and the following groups moved up to secure them.

We moved swiftly and efficiently as we cleared the tenth basement level of the Ministry. Each team worked the same way: three or four fighters in front and two behind casting shields and collecting wands from the prisoners. We herded all the confused and frightened ministry workers into a large room with no other exits and locked them in and warded the doors. Only three had tried to put up a fight, and Angel dosed them with Draught of Living Death to keep them out until long after the fight was over.

"That was easy," said Blagdon, sounding nervous.

"Too easy," agreed Peaches.

"Better than that mess we made of the Lilac Lounge," drawled Dusty.

"Should we leave anyone down here?" asked Andrea, next to me.

"I don't think so," I replied. "They can't get through those wards without wands, and we might need everyone on the higher levels."

"I agree," said Neville.

We all moved in formation towards the stairs leading up to the Department of Mysteries. Just as we were about to ascend, Blagdon hissed and clutched his left arm.

"I'm being summoned," he gasped. "Good luck to you all, and I'll see you on the way back down."

Shoving up his sleeve, he pressed his wand to his arm and vanished from sight.

"Right then, it would seem that the Dark Lord knows he's in trouble now," said Neville. "Let's pick up the pace just a little and keep on our toes."

We took the stairs at a jog and with Silencing Charms on our feet. We knew this floor could be problematic; the Dark Lord didn't have much use for research unless it was in the Dark Arts, so our plan was to secure and ward the door to the stairwell and hope the other teams got the lift out of commission. If we simply trapped the occupants of this floor here, we could come back with Snape's Company and clear it then. As we got closer to the landing on the ninth level, we realized our plan might not work. Starting with those teams in the front we were all affected by feelings of despair and hopelessness. Just as we made the landing, the door at the top of the stairs was thrown open and a cold mist started to flow down towards us.

"Expecto Patronum! Dementors!" shouted Viktor as his luminous falcon Patronus flew out of his wand and through the doorway.

Everyone that could sent a Patronus ahead of us, and the rest of us threw up shields as our fighters dashed off the stairs and into the corridor in front of the Department of Mysteries. Seeing the Dementors again brought back old fears, and images crowded my mind. I shook my head, trying to get a grip, and saw Neville struggling to fire off his Patronus charm and keep moving forward. I kept my shield on him and reached forward and squeezed his shoulder as more of us made it out of the stairwell, and the Dementors and the people with them started to retreat back down the long hallway towards the lifts. One man dodged low and threw a slicing hex. It bounced off my shield, but I heard a cry as it clipped someone behind me.

Suddenly, a cold, blue light fell over our fighters, and I glanced behind me to see the door of the Department of Mysteries standing open and people pouring through doors into the circular, candle-lit entrance-room. As they joined the fight, we were pinned down in the hallway being fired upon by blasting hexes from both sides, and petrified fighters started to go down amidst the chaos, trapping others underneath them. As each Patronus started to fail, the despair came back. I aimed my wand at a Dementor that was drifting closer but my charm failed. I had always had trouble with it and cursed my own stupidity for not practicing this spell more. I, more than many here, knew they would be here. I summoned up my happiest memory, focused on the face of my lover, and shouted the charm, hoping this time my little otter would come to my aid. It did, and I felt a surge of pride as I watched it gambol towards a Dementor that retreated before it. The sight was almost entertaining, the little otter chasing after the

retreating Dementor. More Patronus charms joined mine, and they beat the Dementors back while fighters continued to take down the opposition. We gained a few feet of ground. Angel tapped my shoulder and pointed behind us to a closed door on the far side of the circular room. As we watched, a glowing light raced around the edges of it. When the door was fully lit up, it opened and about a dozen elderly wizards and witches ran out. They moved quickly, despite their apparent age. My gut clenched at the new reinforcements, but they surprised us by aiming their wands at the Dementors as well, and I remembered Dahlia Parkinson's words about unexpected allies. We fell back into the blue-lit room, and our combined Patronus charms drove the Dementors back up the corridor and into the Department of Mysteries. As they passed us in a freezing wave, one of the witches across the room shouted "The veil!"

We started to herd the Dementors and the opposing fighters through an open doorway and into the Death Room. My hair stood up as I reached the doorframe and looked in on the room that Sirius had died in. Some of the men and women fighting against us started to throw down their wands and were stunned to the ground as a precaution. Our side spread out along the top levels of the benches and drove the Dementors down towards the veil. More and more wizards and witches tossed down their wands and threw themselves on the floor to avoid the hexes and curses, along with Patronus Charms that pushed the Dementors closer and closer to our goal. Finally, the first one, surrounded on all but one side by an assortment of Patronus shapes, took that fatal step backwards. Another joined it, followed by a third, and after what felt like forever, the last of them was gone.

I sagged against Viktor with relief. He swept an arm around me and hugged me to his side.

"Vee did quite vell."

He turned toward the stunned people on the floor and started to secure them with magical rope. Peaches and Dusty jogged back out into the circular room to revive our people who fell and see to any injured.

Reaching into my bag, I pulled out chocolate and handed it out to my team. Angel collected wands and marked the foreheads of those that had fought so viciously.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked her.

"So we know who to try for war crimes later," she said with asperity.

Neville and Viktor moved over to the people that had helped tip the balance.

"Thank you for your assistance; your timing was much appreciated," said Neville.

"Thank you, young man," replied the tallest Wizard. "Your timing is a bit off. Our calculations showed you were supposed to arrive ten minutes later than you did. However that may be, we will help secure this floor. Yes, yes, we've already had this discussion. I understand you are now ..." he stopped and looked back at a colleague.

"Nine point oh two," said a short squat witch.

"Yes, you are now nine point oh two minutes behind schedule. Off you go; we will secure the rest of this."

Neville looked back at me, and I just shrugged, not knowing what to say. He pointed to a team and had them go make sure the lifts weren't operating, then we assessed the damage.

"Peaches, how are we doing?" I asked as our teams regrouped and took head counts.

"I sent seven of Neville's people back to the house along with four of our girls and three of Viktor's. Other than that, everyone is good to go now."

"Okay, regroup and head back to the stairs," I said. "We move when we're sure this area's clear."

Victor jogged back towards us and reported that all the rooms in the department had been secured, and that unless there were more people hiding behind magic doorways, it was as good as it was going to get. The wizards that had come to our rescue were Unspeakables that had been in hiding in the Ministry for over five years, and they didn't explain anything more than that, but assured us that they would mind this floor as long as we blocked off access to other floors so no one could come in on them until the Ministry changed hands.

We fell into our teams and headed into the stairwell, the last team securing and warding the door before following us up another flight of stairs. The sound of fighting could be heard before we made the first landing.

"Keep your heads down," said Viktor when we reached the top of the steps.

Neville signaled for two groups to go first, and we waited until Peaches stuck her head back into the stairwell and nodded. We all ran up the last stretch and poured out of the doorway into madness.

"Form up, stay with your team!" I shouted and was proud to see they did. Each group of five or six fighters moved forward and to the side allowing room for the next group out the door. We all moved forward into the Atrium, each team next to another, and swept everything before us. Kenneth went down screaming, flames shooting from his mouth, and Angel barely slowed her pace as she slapped a bottle cap on him and tapped it. He disappeared, and we moved forward. I kept up my shield spells as Andrea slid over to close the gap left by Kenneth.

I recognized two of Victor's men up ahead of us and realized we had caught up to Charlie's group already. We merged with them, our fighters picking off targets, while those behind kept up a constant shield, and I asked one of them where Charlie was. He just looked at me and shrugged and dropped back behind our group, visibly exhausted. I couldn't tell if he didn't know where Charlie was or didn't understand my question. What I did know is that we weren't that close to the incoming Floors on the left of the hall, so they had been driven back a good bit. We had cleared two floors in the time they had needed to hold out and wait for us. Those that fell back behind us to catch their breath looked pretty bad. Advancing further into the Atrium, we encountered more fighters and the Killing Curse for the first time. Severus had trained us as best he could for this, and I was proud to see a desk, a chair and a large potted tree fly through the air, thrown by three different teams, to intercept the spells that rushed towards us with a roar of displaced air. The group was taken down quickly due to our superior numbers but not without injuries to our side as well.

We came up behind a large group of people pinned down behind a barricade made from more desks and the shattered remains of two giant statues, blasted from their black stone throne. Two of the fighters had ginger hair. The desks had been partially transfigured several times and had melded together with the statues to form a half wooden, half stone blob with drawers, decorated with tiny, distorted human figures. There were several bodies all over the floor, and I made out Ruby as she crawled into view and slapped a Portkey on someone lying relatively close. A chunk of her hair drifted to the floor as the slicing hex missed her neck by an inch. I signaled to Angel, Dusty and Peaches, and we moved together and forward, crouching low against the wall; our fighters threw spells over our heads. When we came within ten feet, we threw shields up in front of the barricade. Once the group behind the barrier was safer, the rest of our numbers came up behind firing non-stop.

Our combined groups overpowered the resistance trying to find cover by the shattered stump of the great throne, and it only took about another fifteen minutes to subdue the last of them.

A rumble that was felt more than heard disturbed the building, and dust drifted down from the ceiling.

"What the hell was that?" asked Peaches.

"Snape," replied Charlie, "or the Dark Lord. We encountered Death Eaters here pretty quickly, Mulciber and his lot as well as Rowle and that Carrow bitch. We held them off for about a fifteen minutes, but then they all Apparated upstairs, leaving their minions and toadies down here to fight. I think that means Snape got the snake. That fight that you hear has been going on for about ten minutes now. But we don't know what floor they're on."

"We need to get to them," I said.

"I agree," said Percy, "but there are seven more floors above us; we need to regroup and move cautiously.

Staying alert, we moved slowly out into the open and started to Portkey away our wounded as well as see to our dead. There were many. We sent them back to the house as well. Percy thought to pry open a drawer from the misshapen desk and scribble a quick status report and tuck it into the robes of one of the Bulgarians before we sent him back as well. A handful of those on the floor needed only minor healing charms and an Ennervate. A quick head count showed that of the one hundred and twenty-nine people who set off in the three groups, we had only seventy-seven left in any shape to continue. Charlie and Percy's groups had taken heavy damage.

We arranged ourselves into new groups and moved off toward the closest stairwell, leaving no one behind to guard our backs. We blocked and warded the door to the stairs behind us and took off at a run.

Our new strategy was to head towards the noise of battle. Besides those with us, the only group of fighters we had left in the building were Snape's Company. There were thirty-two of them, including Severus, and there were still easily one hundred Death Eaters. On each floor, we listened, and not hearing anything, we continued up, sealing the doors behind us until we reached the second level. We knew at once we were close because whatever spells were being thrown were shaking the stairwell, and large cracks could be seen in the walls from the stress. My mind reeled at the force of magic being used.

When we got to the landing for the second level, Viktor and three of his men flattened out against the wall and slowly opened the door to peek. He waved his hand and went into a fighting crouch as the first group went through the door. I was with Neville, Percy and Charlie along with Angel, Ruby and Peaches. We spilled through the door, keeping low, and slid behind some desks. The stair opened into a large open space in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement part of the Aurory, from the look if it and the area was separated into cubbies by low walls. Perfect.

Staying in a crouch below the level of the partitions, we had time to get everyone out of the stairwell and into their team formations before we set off. Keeping low, we scurried through the room until a huge explosion knocked us all off our feet. Ceiling tile and dust rained down on us, and I clamped my hand over my mouth to keep from coughing out loud.

"TRAITORS! You will all die like the dogs you are! I will rend your flesh and tear your souls!" The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, and more than one person swung around to look behind us. "My demons will torment you for eternity!"

Neville and I exchanged confused glances, but Viktor and his men groaned softly, and one of them started muttering in Bulgarian.

"He doesn't really have demons does he?" asked Neville.

Just at that moment, we became aware of noises getting closer, and we trained our wands ahead of us just in time to see what looked like a large bundle of black cloth moving around a corner towards us. No one moved as we tried to gauge the new threat until it pushed up on what we realized were the stumps of its arms and we saw the dead eyes of Alecto Carrow. Someone behind me screamed.

"Inferius!" yelled Charlie. He blasted it to pieces just as more came around the corner. This time I screamed as I saw a dead Vaisey crawling towards us. Percy leaped in front of me and fired a shot from his wand. The Inferi tried to scramble back, but they weren't fast enough and started to burn and writhe silently. The smell of burning flesh hit us, and I turned my head to keep from vomiting on Neville, who promptly did.

A blast hit the ceiling over our heads, and we knew our position had been spotted.

"Fire works on them! Hit them with fire!"

We jumped up and raced towards where they came from, burning any that came into our path: as frightening as they were, they moved slowly so once the initial shock was over, they were more or less easily dealt with.

Now that we were standing we could see how the battle was going. Snape's Company, easily distinguished by their golden auras, seemed to be pinned down in the corner of the room farthest away to our right while Death Eaters fought against them from the far left. We were diagonally across the room from our people. A second glance showed that Severus and his men had effectively blocked the Death Eaters from reaching the other set of stairs, and no one could escape by the doors into the corridors to either side of the Aurory without being in the line of fire.

"Should we make our way around to them? Or take the Death Eaters on from another side?" asked Charlie.

A shrill scream tore through the room, and the Dark Lord hurled another curse. It looked like a wall of sickly green acid flowed towards our men, eating away at the furniture and even one Death Eater witch unfortunate enough to be in the way. Snape's Company surged back, leaving Severus standing out front, surrounded by shield spells.

With an answering roar, Severus bellowed a countercurse, and his magic hit the wall of ooze with enough force for us to feel the discharge from the other side of the room. The wall of ooze dropped to the floor and dissipated. Snape's Company surged forward again and Severus dropped back. He looked terrible: his face was gray, and his clothing was burnt, and I saw a patch of his shoulder through his ruined robes; the skin was shiny and red from a burn. Looking at the others, determined yet grim, I realized they didn't have much longer before their strength gave out. Both sides threw Killing Curses, but both also threw debris and office equipment into the air to block the curses. I saw that Selwyn fought at Severus' side now, but he looked like so much raw meat himself. Nott was cradling one arm close to his chest but flinging hexes and shields without pause. There was no time to make our way safely to them, and they were on the verge of collapse.

"Second front!" I yelled and scrambled up onto a desk. "Shield me!" I was enveloped by at least six shields all at once. The effect of that much magic made my hair stand on end and lined my body in a silver fire. I must have made quite a sight.

"Voldemort!" I screamed. "I come for you!"

The effect of my battle cry was immediate. All attention in the room turned towards me.

"WHO DARES?" he bellowed.

"I do! The last friend of Harry Potter! Your day is over, Tom Riddle! Your life is forfeit! You will die today, and no one will remember you with anything other than pity and contempt!"

"The Mudblood whore dares to defy me? What fresh treachery is this? Kill her! Kill them all!"

I started to see my strategy of using myself as a diversionary tactic was intrinsically flawed when a barrage of curses came flying at me. I swept my hands out to my sides and simply dropped backwards off the desk as several Killing Curses flew above my body with the sound of a jet engine and hit the wall behind us. Several hands caught me before I hit the floor.

"That was an amazingly stupid thing you did!" Viktor shrieked at me as I was lying on the floor. "You will never do that again!" I shuddered to think what Severus was thinking right at the moment and prayed I would get to hear every blessed word.

"That was the most ballsy thing I have ever seen," muttered Peaches in my ear as she patted my shoulder.

I got up, and we started across the room using the same tactics that had got us this far. Voldemort's rage made him turn his attention away from Snape's Company as he directed all his men to attack us. Done with being a symbol, I had dropped back and was casting shield spells as fast as I could. We gained ground at a steady pace as we shot curse after curse, hex after hex, across the room at them. We blasted desks and partitions out of our way and made our own direct path. Our teams became fluid as

people dodged killing curses and merged into the group next to them rather than take the time to move back.

Severus's group renewed their attack as well, and the Death Eaters had to turn and protect themselves but not before several of them went down. We were chipping away at their numbers, but Voldemort was raising them back up again as Inferi and sending them after us as well.

We kept up a steady pace and worked in rhythm, but a blasting hex found its way through our shields, and Neville and Ruby went down. I grabbed a Portkey and slapped it on Ruby, seeing how badly she was hurt, and then stepped over her for the next group to see if she was able to be ported. Neville screamed and rolled around next to me, clutching his face, and Peaches shoved a Portkey down the collar of his shirt and tapped it while I kept them shielded. His screams cut off as he disappeared. We regrouped again. Charlie and Percy stepped in front of me, and Angel and Peaches stayed at my sides. Viktor and his men closed ranks in front as well, and those from the back that hadn't seen much fighting yet spread out until we almost stretched the length of the room. Holes in our line appeared and disappeared as everyone leaped to avoid the green streaks of light that meant instant death. Viktor himself went down screaming from a slicing hex, and Dusty was quick with a tourniquet spell as Angel tucked his severed arm into his robes before activating the Portkey. While I had my shield covering their group, a curse took off Andrea's head next to me. Still we pushed on.

The ends of our line started to curl in and we had them boxed into the corner finally, with our boys in the other corner now safely behind our lines. Angel turned and signaled four girls to go see to their injured.

The battle became intense as our line thinned out: people on both sides were falling. The most vicious fighter wasn't the Dark Lord, but Mulciber. He was the one that killed Dusty with an Entrail-Expelling Curse as she was bent over Greg Goyle. Enraged, I directed our fighters to target him, but he simply faded back into his fellows when it got too intense. Snarling my fury, I stepped forward to close the distance and let off one blasting hex before an arm like a steel band slammed around my waist and snatched me back against a sweat soaked robe.

"Keep your head, foolish girl!"

Severus literally handed me on to Charlie without taking his eyes off the battle.

I gulped deep breaths to try and focus myself again: I was at that thin edge between functioning in spite of all the insanity around me and curling in on myself and screaming forever. I could feel the hysteria bubbling and just waiting to seize control. I forced myself to step up and cast a shield and concentrated on that one task until my mind started to calm and I went numb inside again.

I saw Caddoc Warrington, his mask long gone in the fight, firing hexes while shielding Angel with his body while she Portkeyed another to safety. She turned just in time to see the Killing Curse coming from their left as Warrington was braced right. I watched as she surged up from the floor and slammed into him, throwing him out of the line of fire. She almost made it too. Warrington screamed in rage and grief as Angel landed on top of him, dead. I dug into my bag and pulled out a Portkey and slapped it on her body and activated it. Warrington threw his wand away as he started to claw at his clothes and tear at his hair: I took one look into his eyes and grabbed another Portkey and sent him on his way out of the battle as well.

I heard more than saw the green streak of the Killing Curse coming towards me. I heard Severus's shrill *"Accio Hermione!"* and was snatched sideways into his arms. I heard his ragged breathing in my ears as I flung up a shield to repel the hexes thrown at us.

Again Voldemort let out a high shriek and again a wall of sickly green acid came towards us. Charlie yelled the counter curse but it only collapsed part of the wall. With a roar like a maddened bull, Severus shoved me behind him, and the wall fell to the ground and smoked as it dissipated from his countercurse. Selwyn and Goyle Sr. stepped forward to flank him as he threw curses non-stop and hammered at the Death Eater lines. The force of his curses were deafening as they detonated. The Death Eaters before him retreated into tighter and tighter formations as their shields failed from the assault, and we smashed at them with our own spells. Several went down at once and a gap in their lines revealed the Dark Lord.

Severus didn't hesitate as he cast his final curse. He didn't even shout, just said the words and a jet of green light burst from the Elder Wand, and boxed in as they were, the Dark Lord had nowhere to run. He grabbed Rowle and tried to push him in front of the curse but it hit them both, flinging them back to hit the wall behind them with a sick thud.

Death Eaters screamed as they fell to the ground clutching their arms. I ran to where Severus was, as Percy ran to incapacitate as many Death Eaters as he could before the pain wore off.

Severus had collapsed, and I could tell by his face he was in agony, but unlike those around us, he let no sound escape. I threw my arms around him and held him tight. I could feel the warm slick dampness of his blood and sweat under my arms. I pulled him towards my body and rocked him, but I don't even know if he was aware of me until I felt a shudder run through him, and he started to relax just as the noise level started to fade. I loosened my grip, and he pulled away just enough to see my face. I ran my hands over his body and down his chest searching for injuries and didn't even know I was crying until he wiped a tear with a shaking finger.

"It's over," he said. His voice was so soft and gentle that it startled me, and I looked up to see his face. His eyes were full of emotion, and he seemed completely dazed by our victory. "My goddess," he whispered. "I get to keep you after all."

I lifted my face up to kiss him but turned away at the last second because a sudden movement caught my eye. Severus turned to see what caught my attention just as Mulciber aimed his wand at us and shouted: "Avada Kedavra!"

Time seemed to slow down as I reached to shove him to the side. I saw the people around us reacting as if under water. Faster than my mind could take in Severus pushed me backwards and spun towards the green light. He threw his arms wide to protect me, and I saw him lean in to catch the spell closer before it had a chance to diffuse enough to catch me as well. I couldn't even scream as my hero and lover was encased in green light and collapsed to the ground, still clutching the Elder Wand.

AN: Without Whitehound's extensive knowledge of the Floor Plans of the Ministry, this chapter would have been impossible. This time she actually stepped in and helped keep it canon when I had thrown my hands up in despair. Whereas I only managed to get the correct department on the correct floor, she put the correct candle in the correct room. Many thanks.

Her Ghosts

Chapter 37 of 40

Hermione comes close to ending up in the Janus Thickey Ward again, but her usual rescuers come to her in her time of need.

Severus collapsed to the floor with a sickening thud. From behind me, I heard several voices shout curses and streaks of light flew over my head. One streak was a distinct color green, and I knew the voice that shouted that curse belonged to Peaches, but I couldn't bring myself to care. It felt like ice had glazed up along my body until I was numb, and now I was only waiting for it to stop my heart.

Like a child that doesn't understand why a toy is broken, I crawled to Severus and pulled him over onto his back. I didn't say anything; I didn't make a noise. I just looked at him, waiting for him to do something. He looked wrong. His hair had been caught in a hex, and so most of it was bobbed back to his shoulders. There was only one long section left on the right side. His robes were so tattered that I could see Harry's cloak spilling out of the inside pocket through the split side seam. His face should have been relaxed if he was sleeping, but instead he looked... annoyed. Ron would have found it funny. *Ron! Come see Severus! Ron?* His legs were splayed awkwardly, and it seemed so undignified. I tried to straighten them out, but they felt like dead weight. I pushed and shoved. *Harry, come help me with this!* I lifted up his shoulders and slid forward on my knees until he was resting back against them. I was sure he would be much more comfortable that way. *Severus, wake up, my love. I need you now. Severus? Harry, where's Severus?*

I smoothed his hair back from his face. He felt like he was getting cold, so I rubbed at his chest and shoulders to keep him warm. I was vaguely aware of people trying to speak to me, but I knew I had to stay silent. If I made any noise, it would make it real, and I knew it wasn't real. He made me a vow. He promised to free me. This didn't feel like freedom, so he must not have been finished. I waited and kept my silence, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing to keep him warm.

I heard noises around me, but I blocked my ears. I couldn't listen to their words; they would make a real world I did not want.

I felt hands pull at me, and I lashed out at them with my wand. Keep your real away! I don't want it! I cast a shield around us to keep them out.

Harry? Did you find Severus yet? Ron, help him, please. Harry could never find anything on his own. I couldn't seem to keep him warm. I rubbed and rubbed but he was still getting colder. I leaned forward and pulled Harry's cloak from his pocket. As I did so, I saw he had dropped the Elder Wand. *Severus, you can't leave that just lying around. Tsk.* I tucked his wand back into his hand and laid his hand on his chest. Then, I spread out Harry's cloak and covered him with it and rubbed and rubbed and rubbed. *Hurry, Harry, I need him!*

I liked how he was invisible now, because I could feel the weight of people's stares. I leaned down and hid his face with my hair. Severus wouldn't like this many people watching him while he slept, so I knew it was my job to give him what privacy I could. Still, I felt the weight of their stares, pushing their reality at me, trying to force me to accept it. I could taste their thoughts in the air. I closed my eyes and rocked gently to soothe Severus in case the smell of their thoughts disturbed his sleep. All the while I rubbed and rubbed and rubbed.

Hermione? We found him. He's coming back to watch over you both. Ron made him take a vow, but I think you need to watch over him as well.

Oh, God, they found him. I heard a collective gasp from all around me and opened my eyes. A great shuddering sob of relief tore through me as I saw Severus' body come back into view. His hand was empty. The cloak and the wand were gone, and I was sure that wherever he had hidden it on him, the Resurrection Stone was gone as well.

Thank you, Harry, I needed him ever so much...

I couldn't help the heaving sobs that wracked my body as I felt him draw that first labored breath. I clung to him and cried. I was spent, broken. I only wanted to crawl into his pocket and hide from the world forever. Protected. Finally.

I became aware of voices again and realized my shield had dissipated.

"Hermione? Let us help him."

I looked up and saw Percy.

"He's alright now. He took another vow; Ron made him," I answered. His face recoiled as if I had slapped him. I thought I saw fear in his eyes.

"Don't be afraid, Percy, he's going to take care of me now. A man is defined by his vows," I told him.

"Oh, Mother of Mercy, she's losing it again," said Peaches. She elbowed Percy aside. "Hermione, honey, can you hear me?"

"Of course I can, Caroline."

"Are your friends with you?"

"No, they left already."

"Okay, I have an idea, Hermione. We're gonna take you and your man somewhere he'd be more comfortable. Is that okay?"

"Alright, Caroline, that would be nice."

"I'm going with you just for the ride, alright?"

"That's okay; you can come too."

She knelt down on the floor behind me and wrapped her arms around me and pressed a broken plate into my hand. She reached down and grabbed Severus' hand as well, and with the three of us holding it, she tapped it with her wand, and the world went away.

"Someone! Anyone!" I lifted my head, still dizzy, as Peaches screamed in my ear. I was very disoriented and more than a little nauseous, so I held still as Dahlia came running over to us.

Peaches scrambled backwards off the table we had landed on but I clung to Severus, refusing to move as they waved wands at us. I remember what they said but none of it meant anything to me.

"What happened?"

"He was hit by the Killing Curse."

"That's not possible: he'd be dead. Even a glancing blow is enough."

"That's just it; he was dead. Now he's not. He just started breathing again not three minutes ago."

"How long was he dead?"

"Long enough, several minutes."

"Not possible."

"You already said that. Look, I just left a room full of people that can confirm it. Just check him out; he's breathing now, but Princess here wouldn't let us near him when he

wasn't. I want to make sure there's a whole lot of brain activity if you know what I mean."

"What's wrong with her? She looks catatonic."

"She'll be fine; don't you mess with her. Just fix him. You fix him, and she'll be fine. Very simple, get it?"

"Well, we need to move her."

"I don't think you want to do that just yet. She took out five of us when we tried."

"Very well, but I'm going to check her out too, since she's here."

"Fine, you just do that."

They stopped speaking, or I stopped listening at all, and so I just stayed there, on my knees, holding my lover's head in my lap. I listened to him breathe and felt his strong pulse as I caressed his neck. I watched his eyes dance under his long lashes. At one point, Peaches asked me if it was okay if she checked out my belly. I told her that was fine, but to be quick as he needed me to keep touching him. I kept my hand on his forehead as I leaned back so he would know I was still there. She was very quick. She's a good friend.

Peaches came back again and asked me if Severus and I would like to sleep.

"Yes, I think that would be lovely."

"Alright, sweetie, just keep a hold of him and back off the table slow. Your legs are going to be really wobbly; you've been sitting like that for an hour now. Yes, that's it, no you don't have to let go, just hold onto him like that. Okay slowly, just lean on the table. I know, pins and needles. There you go, better? Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Good girl. Come over here and hold his hand: Theo and I are going to move him to your room; I got it all fixed up for you."

I held his hand all the way to our room over the kitchen. Theo and Peaches were very sweet, being extra careful around the turns, unlike Sirius Black that time in the tunnel. I told them how much Severus would appreciate that when he woke up.

"What's wrong with her, Caroline?"

"Nothing is wrong with her, Theo; she's fine."

"But why is she acting like this then?"

"What the fuck would you act like if you'd been through what she's had to live through these last five years? She always gets like this when she's overwhelmed. But her ghosts always find her and bring her back."

"Her ghosts?"

"Her friends. Whenever life gets too much, she talks to them, and they give her the strength to keep going."

"Um, you mean the actual ghost of Potter..."

"No, you can't see them, and I used to think they were bullshit too, but after five years of watching over her, I don't anymore. She always said the person she was before died that day, that she never left them. But the truth is, I think they never left her. I believe they have been watching over her all this time. They put her back together, and then she just wakes up and is fine. Well, actually she wakes up and is a soulless bitch for weeks afterwards, but that's because they made her strong again. She never really remembers them though, when she's better; she forgets my name every time too."

"Caroline..."

"You can think I'm as nutty as you want; I don't give a damn. You saw it yourself, Theo. He ~~was~~ dead. Dead as a doornail. Now he's not. Now apparently all he needs is a good night's sleep. So you go ahead and tell me my theory is whacked after what we all saw tonight."

"No, I'm not going to say anything, not after what I saw tonight."

"Here we are, Hermione. Would you like help getting him ready for bed?"

"Yes, please."

I clutched his limp hand and watched as Peaches used her wand to remove Severus' garments, and when he was down to just his pants, I pulled the blankets up over both of us.

"Don't you want to change, sweetie?"

"No, it would take too much time, and I have to keep him warm."

"At least kick your shoes off, there you go. All set?"

"Thank you, Caroline. You're a very good friend."

"Sure, you tell me that every time. Sleep well, Hermione."

I wrapped myself around my love, resting my head on his chest, and fell asleep listening to his heartbeat.

I Did This

Hermione wakes up to find her world has changed.

Thank you to astopperindeath for the betawork!

I heard the sound of pages turning. The simple, evocative sound, so ubiquitous in my former life, was unique enough now for me to claw my way up through the layers of fog I was in to listen to it. I was still, not moving, just listening. I became aware of other sounds. I could hear the muffled sound of chairs scraping and footsteps walking past in the distance. There! There it was again, that glorious sound: a book. Then, I remembered there were no books where I was, no chairs were ever scraping along stones in a room below me, no sound of footsteps was ever heard from outside in the hall. I must still be dreaming.

I woke up confused.

There was a gasp close by, and then I heard a shout and felt a whoosh of magic. I panicked and struggled to sit up.

"Easy, Hermione, you're safe, I got you."

"Peaches?"

I looked around to see I was in the room over the kitchen. The other bed had been removed, and the room was back to its original configuration. Peaches was next to me on the bed, leaning against the headboard and, yes, she had a book in her lap.

"Here, drink some water," she ordered. "You're very dehydrated."

I drank gratefully. I reached for the book she had in her lap, and she gave it to me. The title was Advanced Spell Repair and Cursed Tissue Replacement.

"This is marvelous; where did you get it?" I asked.

"Theo brought it for me," she replied.

Broken bits of memories came in jagged pieces. Some of them cut quite deep.

"Theo is alright then?"

"Oh, yes, he made it through fine. How much do you remember?"

"I remember... I... He's dead, isn't he?" The words came out in a whisper.

"No, Hermione. He's not dead, and he's on his way. I sent him a Patronus as soon as I saw you stir."

Relief caused me to sag back down onto my pillow, and I had to take gulping breaths.

"But Angel..."

"No, Angel's gone, along with Dusty and, well, we lost ten of our girls," she said as I reached for her hand.

"Who else?" I asked.

"Seven of Viktor's friends died, and one had to have a leg removed. Viktor got his arm back, and they think he'll be okay. Neville's okay as well, although he still has some issues, but we lost about forty of the forest folk."

She pulled me into her arms, and we cried together for our dead.

"They knew," she said. "We all knew there was a chance we wouldn't make it. It was worth it, Hermione, it will always have been worth it."

I pushed away and scrubbed my face with an overlarge cotton sleeve.

"Easy, sweetie. Let's get you to the loo. Come on, steady on my arm. He's going to be here any second now, and you don't want to cut short your reunion because you need to pee."

I struggled to get up out of the bed, and Peaches moved swiftly to support my back with her arm.

"Why am I so weak? Was I injured?"

"No. You and a few others shut down after the battle. Warrington woke up last night. You've been sleeping for almost three days"

"Three days?"

"Yeah, your man was here for a large part, but he's been needed in other places and wouldn't allow you to be alone, so Agatha and I have been keeping an eye on you when he's at the Ministry or off brewing. You need to get better quickly. I think he's starting to overtax himself, and someone needs to take care of him. It sure as hell isn't going to be any of us."

I shuffled slowly across the room, leaning heavily on her arm. I looked down and saw I was wearing a long, old fashioned cotton night gown. I watched my toes peek out and disappear again under the ruffled hem.

"Where did this come from?" I asked, lifting up my arm and displaying a ruffled cuff at my wrist.

"Huh, I was hoping you could explain it to me. I don't know if he transfigured it or borrowed it from his mother. Whatever, I get where he was going with all that fabric, and I think that makes him sweet. Just don't tell him. I don't want to die now that we've won. He's been a real bastard with you out of commission. Effective? Yes. Pleasant? Not so much."

I snorted, and it felt good to smile. If it had been anyone else helping to bunch up the yards of material in the gown so I could sit on the toilet, it would have been humiliating. However, Peaches and I had no secrets or dignity left between us, and so I didn't even bother to hide the relieved sigh. Needs met, face washed, teeth brushed, and I felt almost human again.

We were just shuffling our way out of the bathroom when we heard feet pounding up stairs somewhere off in the distance.

"Noisy in this place now," I remarked.

"Agatha won't put the silencing charms back up. She says the noise makes it sound like a home. Theo and I found that out the hard way the other night when Charlie and Ruby started banging on the wall because we had woken them up. Brace yourself, I think that's Lover Boy now."

Sure enough the pounding footsteps were getting closer.

"I'm not sure; he never used to make that much noise stalking the halls at Hogwarts."

"He probably never waited three days to speak to the woman who called him back from the dead before either."

"That's not what happened."

"If you say so, but I want details later; for now, smile."

She angled me towards the door and kept a firm arm around my shoulders.

"How do I look?"

"Wretched."

"Thanks for that."

And then the door flew open.

He stood in the doorway and assessed the picture of the two of us clinging together in the middle of the room. He was gaunt looking, but smartly dressed in good robes. His hair was evenly cut to just shoulder length. He looked tired and underfed and intensely irritable. In other words, he looked just like Professor Snape and very little like Severus.

"Why is she out of bed?" he demanded to know.

"I needed to..."

"I asked you a question, Miss Williams."

"I took her to the loo."

"How long has she been awake?"

"Fifteen minutes? I gave her a glass of water, but she needs her potions as well as a lot more water."

"Thank you, Miss Williams, for your assistance. You may go." He stepped to the side and gestured stiffly, yet politely, to the hallway outside the door.

"Yea, um, but if I let go of her she's going to fall down, and by the way she's shaking, I think that might make her even more pissed off than you just did."

She knows me so well.

His face paled, just the slightest, and he moved quickly. He wrapped his arms around my legs and shoulders and scooped me up like I weighed nothing. I was enveloped in his scent of fresh rain and lemon grass.

"Forgive me," he said to us both. "I have been... well, none of us are in top form."

"It's all right; here, let me just fix the blankets for you, and then I'll go. Hermione, I will check on you later. Minister, can I have some food sent up?"

"Please, and thank you again, Miss Williams." This time his voice was sincere.

"Thank you, Caroline," I added.

She smiled and quietly closed the door behind her.

He laid me down on the bed and covered me with blankets. Turning toward the bedside table, he started to empty his pockets of nearly a dozen potion vials. He turned back towards the bed and pulled out his ebony wand and started to cast diagnostic spells as I sat there with my arms crossed glaring at him.

"Aren't you even going to say 'hello', *Minister* Snape?" I huffed.

"Do you mind if I make sure of your physical state first, *Madam Chief* Granger?" he snapped back.

"Yes, I do mind. And what the hell are you talking about? I can't be a member of the Wizengamot; I've been asleep!"

"You can because I appointed you. They made me a damned dictator, so I exercised my currently unlimited Executive powers and made you one as well. You're Chief Witch of the Wizengamot. I'll be hanged if they're going to make just my life miserable."

"Ah, so I get to be miserable with you?"

"Yes, damn it all, for the rest of your miserable life." He turned and swept up four potions and tossed them in my lap. "Now shut up and drink these potions, woman, and I will fetch you a cup of tea."

My mind reeled in irritation and confusion as I drank the potions. I gagged and reached for the glass of water. Severus came back to the bed and sat down next to me, placing the tray of food on the bed next to my legs. He took the glass away from me and replaced it with tea.

"Drink."

I looked at him over the rim of the cup and saw how angry, nervous and exhausted he was. He lifted a bowl of soup from the tray and handed it to me, taking away my tea cup.

"You do still love me, right?" I asked, with a mixture of dry humor and abject terror.

"Desperately, now eat the damned soup."

"So we're just crap at the whole 'loving reunion and happily-ever-after' thing then?"

"Well, I don't know about you but this is my first 'happily-ever-after', and so far, it falls a bit short of my already low expectations."

"Tell me." He gave me one of his patented 'significant looks'. "Tell me while I eat my soup, then."

He launched himself off the bed and began to pace.

"I just don't see why it wasn't one of those damnable Weasleys! I mean, what the hell was wrong with Percy, for Merlin's sake? I would have thought it was an obvious

choice! But no, they had to go off on the damned symbolism and emotional reactions, and it was fucking unanimous! The truth is out; they know I was Dumbledore's man from the beginning now, and even Nott only gave me one confused look before he returned to his fucking hero worship! It's out of control! Gods, Hermione! They're calling me the bloody Man-Who-Lived! I've no damned idea what needs to be done, but I spend all my time doing it instead of something useful like working more on Longbottom's healing potions.'

"What's wrong with Neville?"

"He's still blind." He waved away my concern. "He'll be fine once we find the correct potion. There's no physical damage, just spell damage. But those dunderheads at that pitiful excuse for a hospital couldn't brew a decent potion to save their lives, and I just haven't been allowed enough *time*."

"I don't want to be the damned Minister for Magic! I don't know what to do with all the innocent people that were locked up in Azkaban! I haven't a damned clue how to go about restoring people to their rightful homes. I have no idea what to do with the forty orphans I now have custody of. I couldn't care less about restoring the fucking legal system, freedom of the press, human rights, magical creatures' rights, free trade, tariffs, taxation, returning St Mungo's to the free care system it used to be, or even the pending trials of the previous administration!"

"You are very angry," I said understandingly.

"You're damned right I'm angry. I'm angry at the lot of them! How dare they do this to me! Do I not deserve a rest? Can I not crawl away now, duty done, and lie down in the sun? Am I not allowed to be with the woman I love for even a fucking week?"

"And *you!* Don't think I'm not still angry at you, you foolish girl!"

I had been waiting for this one.

"Just what the hell were you thinking climbing up onto that desk? Do you know how close I came to hexing you myself? Did I not tell you to stay behind Longbottom? Didn't I ask you not to be foolish? Was that simply too much to ask?"

His chest heaved as he drew in furious breaths of air. His hands were clenched, and his face was twisted in fury, and I could tell he was trying to keep a tight rein on what little control he had left.

"You're frightened," I said softly, just a statement of fact, not a judgment.

"I'm terrified, Hermione."

"Tell me why, my love."

"Because they need so much from me, and I don't know how to be everything everyone needs me to be." He stood at the end of the bed, and I watched as his shoulders drooped and his face infused with fear and worry.

"I don't know how to run a government. I don't know how to make them happy again. I don't have any experience with this."

"Do you know what those fucking bastards said when I told them that? They said 'surely it's not much different from being a Headmaster?' As if everyone in my school hadn't been slaughtered on my watch! Don't they see? Everything I touch turns to death and ashes! I make terrible decisions! I don't know how not to, and I am terrified I will destroy what's left of our world. I'm terrified of being Minister! I'm terrified of being in control! And I'm absolutely bloody fucking petrified of being a father!"

I blinked.

His face went a remarkable shade of pale before he froze it into his emotionless mask.

Words and images started to replay in my mind.

I heard Harry's voice say *'he's coming back to watch over you both...'* I remembered Peaches asking me to let her check my belly. I remembered his hand stretched, fingers splayed, across my belly. And then I remembered an outpouring of uncontrolled magic that had swirled so brightly around this very room that I had nearly been blinded the night that he had used his own blood to reseal the wards.

I clumsily dropped the soup bowl back onto the tray and brought both of my hands to cover my stomach.

"I'm pregnant?" I whispered.

"They said under eight weeks still," he replied to his boots.

"You knew?" I asked. "Before?"

His manner was stiff as he came over and lifted the tray off the bed. His hair swung in front of his face.

"No," he said. "I... wondered." He turned to walk away, to take the tray back to the sitting area. Seeing him turn his back on me sent a stabbing pain into my chest.

"No! No, don't do that!" His face whipped around and he froze, staring at me in utter panic. "I need you here, not there! I need you here! You can't... don't... no walking away!" I stretched my arms out to him, but then used one to shove the blankets off my legs as I tried to make it out of the bed and reach for him at the same time. He looked at the tray like he wanted to destroy it for offending me and bent over and dropped it to the floor. Three long strides brought him crashing into my arms, and he lifted me and twisted as his momentum brought us down onto the bed.

"I'm here," he crooned. "I'll always be here."

I burrowed my way into his robes until I was completely enshrouded in his embrace as he murmured into my hair and stroked my back.

"I admit I'm scared, Hermione, but I am not a coward. I will never walk away from you. I will be here for you always, just, please gods, tell me what to do, for I am completely lost. Tell me you forgive me."

I scrambled back out of his robes until I was eye to eye with him.

"Forgive you? What did you do?"

His hand slid down my back and around my waist; he pushed me gently until I was on my back again and splayed his hand over my belly. He brought his head close until his forehead was touching just above my ear.

"This. I did this. I am so sorry."

"Why? Why are you sorry? Do you not want this? Or did you do this intentionally?"

I could feel the tremors running through my body from him as he shook.

"I didn't give you a choice. I didn't make a conscious decision, but yet, Hermione, I wanted this to happen. That night that I lost control of my magic, all I was thinking about at that moment was how I wanted to claim you as mine for all to see. I want this," his hand clutched at my stomach, "but I did not ask."

I snorted. "You did nothing intentionally that night, Severus; you were practically out of your skull. Yes, something like this would have been better off planned, but if the future of the race was left to planning for convenience, we'd be extinct soon." I placed my hand over his, and together we cradled the new tiny life inside, still so fragile and uncertain. "So what do we do now? I don't know anything about being pregnant or childbirth or how to raise a child. I have no idea what I am doing. Gods, I've only known for three minutes; no wonder you were overwhelmed by three days."

His arms came around me, and he pulled me into his chest.

"Do you have an idea of what you will do with it, Hermione?"

"No! Not a one! I supposed it will depend on how fast we can get the Ministry back on its feet. If we're still working at that, then perhaps I could bring the baby with me to work; I'd rather not leave a newborn in daycare. Do they have daycare at the Ministry?"

I twisted around to look at him, waiting for an answer to that last question, and the expression on his face would have been comical had it not been so painful to see.

"Oh. You meant am I thinking of keeping it. Well, of course I am; don't be daft. You already said you wanted to, and I have no particular need to wait to start our happily-ever-after. I know once upon a time my priorities might have been different, but a family sounds like heaven to me just now, and we'll just have to be terrified of the prospect together. And..."

His silencing kiss was almost violent, and like a spark on dry tinder, took almost no time to go from gratitude, to reassurance, to loving, to passionate. Both of us were desperate to reclaim our intimate connection after the events of the last week. We got as far as getting him out of his robes and getting his belt off, but the rest of our clothing was simply shoved down or up as we raced madly toward our joining. Cradled in his arms as he was by my legs, I felt our completeness, our oneness, and rejoiced. No words were spoken, no demands, just a need feeding a need as he filled me and was fulfilled. He threw his head back and shuddered his release as he let out a howl that descended into a low groan and ended with the word *'fuck'*.

I wiped his hair from his eyes as he recovered. He was a long, lanky pile of barely responsive limbs on the bed next to me. Somehow, he managed to retain his dignity even with his trousers bunched around his knees.

"I'm sorry," he panted. "I thought I could last long enough for you to..."

"Hush," I said with my hand on his lips. "Don't spoil the moment. You owe me, and let's leave it at that for now."

We lay in each other's arms, each in our own thoughts, until he eventually reached down and pulled his trousers back up and buttoned them. He twisted around until he had the pillows propped up behind him and opened his arms to me. I settled my nightgown and relaxed onto his chest. He hauled me up closer and rubbed his face in my hair.

"I owe you a lot more than an orgasm, Hermione. I owe you my life."

"What do you mean? I thought you took care of that with all the Hallows you had squirreled away on your person."

"Yes, well, that was the original backup plan. Did you ever read the story Albus gave you?"

"Yes."

"Well then you remember how the Brothers Peverell tricked Death and yet Death, with the exception of the one brother, managed to trick them as well in the end?"

"Yes, but Death was just a metaphor."

"Like hell he is; and let me just tell you that Death can be a ruddy prick when he wants to be. And a veritable Slytherin to boot. I tried to bargain with him, and he played me like the most simpleminded of Hufflepuffs. Oh, he took his fucking Hallows back in return for letting me live out my life with you. But he never bothered to mention that I had no connection anymore and couldn't get back. So there I was, not dead and not alive. I had a grand old time sitting for what felt like eternity on a gray rock in a gray wasteland with a gray sky and fuck all else to do but sit and think of what a mess I had made of everything."

"But how did you get back?"

"You sent Potter and Weasley to find me, and they did."

My arms broke out in gooseflesh, and my hair felt like it was trying to crawl off my scalp. He must have felt me shiver, because he chafed my arms and bent his knees up until I rolled onto his lap.

"And you made a vow to Ron..."

"Now, don't get angry about that, woman, my back was up against the wall at that moment, and it wasn't exactly a burdensome vow."

"You really spoke to them? You saw Harry? And Ron? They were real?"

"Yes; I thought you knew that. They explained that they talked to you all the time and that their relationship with you would be my connection back."

"I always had memories, images, but I thought they were fever dreams."

"Shhh, easy now. They brought me to where all our departed were. I spoke with all of them." His voice was heavy with emotion.

"Everyone? Draco?"

"Yes."

I didn't know what to say, so I just leaned up and kissed him gently.

"Such a remarkable soul, that boy," he rasped.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him.

"All this time, I thought it was a sign that I was going insane. I always looked forward to it, because it was my last escape, and whenever it was close, they would come. I always thought they were just in my head or just a half remembered dream. I, well... Severus... I... have had many bouts of madness over the years. Peaches could probably explain better. I always end up with memory gaps when I recover."

"Miss Williams explained about your less than lucid moments during your imprisonment here as well as the unseen ghosts that helped you stay sane."

"Then you aren't worried? It doesn't bother you that the future mother of your child isn't exactly, well, sane?"

For this bit of idiocy, I got one of his premium looks complete with eyebrow and scowl. I wondered if our child would inherit that eyebrow.

"Oh, heavens, a baby," I blurted out suddenly. "What are we going to do with a child, Severus?"

"Well, I've been researching what I can and asking a lot of questions in the last three days, and the best I can come up with, out of the unending stream of nonsense I have received is: practice on the first, don't repeat the same mistakes on the second, it is customary to forget to take any pictures of the third, at least make sure the fourth doesn't smell, and call it a good day. Then pretty much hand the rest of them over to the first, who by then has all the answers."

"Just how many children are we having?"

"The choice is completely yours," he replied blandly.

"Why do I think there might be some heavy lobbying involved on your part."

"I admit, I do want a large family, and that I can be persuasive, but I promise from here on in, you will always have a choice."

"Like I had a choice about being Chief Witch?"

"You can always quit, I promise. Just please don't until after the first election. Then we can both wash our hands of it and go lie in the sun."

"When is that?"

"This time next year, as things stand right now."

"Good lord, that's not much time. I'll have to do an enormous amount of reading!"

"Yes, about that...hand me my robes, would you, dear?"

I leaned over and caught the collar of his robe and dragged it up the length of the bed. He caught it from me and started searching through the pockets. In a nice display of wandless magic, he pulled out nearly a dozen shrunken books that regained their size as he tossed them down next to me on the bed. When he was done with that, he rearranged me so that I was lying against his chest with my legs propped over his knees as if he was my personal recliner. He rested his chin against my head as we perused his gathered collection of Magical and Muggle pregnancy guides, as well as the first seven volumes of The Complete Wizarding Laws of Great Britain and Ireland. We chatted excitedly about the baby books, and he constantly assured me that any changes to my body would be both welcome and worshipped, and he made me promise never to take any potions not brewed by him personally.

I reached for the law books.

"Okay, so where do things stand as of now? What decisions have you made so far, Minister Snape?"

"Well, I made it official that those living in the forest have the full use of Hogwarts until they can get back on their feet, and I have ensured that money for food and amenities will continue for the school from government funds. I have confiscated the properties and Gringotts accounts of all wizards accused of crimes committed during the wars and all deceased Death Eaters proven by testimony to have been loyal members, and the funds are in escrow with the interest payable to the Ministry."

"That's very good! I'm rather impressed, Minister Snape. What about the resettlement of people who had their property taken by Death Eaters?"

"They have also been allowed use of Hogwarts until I can figure out who owns what."

"Fair enough. What about these people you say were released from Azkaban?"

"Many of them require round the clock medical attention as well as a place to live until they can be returned to their homes so I, ahem, I sent them all to Hogwarts, along with a medical team of specialists."

"I do sense a pattern here. Orphans?"

"Hogwarts."

"Right. Well, it looks like the first order of business is Property Law."

Conversation dropped away as I became more and more absorbed in the first volume of Wizarding Law. He conjured a small lap desk with quill, ink and parchment and continued to hold me as I began to take notes. It wasn't until I stopped to cross reference a point of law in another volume that I realized he had his hands under my gown and was working his way up to my breasts. I turned to look at him and accidentally poked him in the nose with the quill stuck in my hair.

"Severus, what are you doing? I'm reading."

"I know, don't stop," he said in that dead sexy voice that made me go boneless every time. He moved all the other books and the parchment and ink off the bed with a wave of his wand and brought his lips to my ear. "Keep reading."

I tried, I honestly did, but another twenty minutes found me furiously riding his cock while straddling him backwards as a reward for bringing me my first multiple orgasm. Who knew, if he kept going eventually, he would get me off again? The man's fingers were magic. He bucked wildly as his release approached, and I leaned forward to grab his legs and hold on for dear life. He keened and pulsed deep within me, and when he was spent, he pulled me back to flop on his chest as we recovered.

There we were, sweaty and exhausted with my granny nightie rucked up into my armpits and his trousers and pants twisted around his boot-covered feet, with his limp, twitching cock still buried in me, when he proposed, while still gasping for breath.

"Marry me, Hermione Granger. Make an honest man of me. Please?"

I laughed.

"Of course I will; do you think I am so insane that I would pass up a man who thinks I'm sexy when I read? Have you even met me?"

We didn't even kiss to seal the deal; we were so exhausted. He just reached up a limp arm and patted my breast. I think he had been aiming for my shoulder but didn't have the strength to make it all the way there.

"Good then."

He waved a hand weakly at his robes.

"There's a ring in a pocket."

I nodded while still trying to get my heart to slow down.

"I'm sure it's lovely."

"Very."

We slept the rest of the afternoon away and far into the night.

Nothing To Forgive

Chapter 39 of 40

Wherein the past is laid to rest.

Thank you to astopperindeath for the final beta.

A gentle hand brushed at my face and a low, velvet voice spoke my name.

"Hermione."

I opened my eyes to find Severus showered and dressed, sitting next to me on the bed.

"I'm awake," I mumbled. "What time is it?"

"Four in the morning. I have something I need to do, and I would like you to come with me."

"So early? What is it?" I struggled with the blankets, and he stepped away to allow me room.

"It is something Albus asked me to do, and dawn is a peak time to do it," he replied. He turned and lifted up a small valise from the floor. "I have clothes for you in here. Get yourself ready, my love. You're leaving this place."

He stepped away and walked over to the breakfast tray sitting by the settee.

Leaving. The idea both thrilled and scared me. I wasted no time. I was out of the loo and dressed in the rather somber robes he brought me as fast as my wobbly legs would let me. After a cup of tea and a buttered scone, I drank the potions he gave me and then met him at the door. I hoped the potions would work as quickly as they had the day before.

Severus had been silent the whole time, packing up the books and our discarded clothes into the valise, and something in his manner told me I wasn't coming back to this room. I looked about in a sudden panic, feeling I might be leaving something behind.

"Here," he said. I turned back to face him. He reached out and lifted up my left hand. He placed a very old ring on my finger, a wide band of what looked like silver, set with emeralds and deeply carved with runes.

"This is the only thing you forgot," he said with a small smile. His eyes glittered with emotion. A tap of his wand, and the ring shrank down to a perfect fit.

"I love you, Hermione. I will always protect you. I will give you a home, and I will give you things of your own that you can't bear to leave behind."

"This is all I'll ever need," I replied. I wiggled my fingers in a rare girlish display and smiled deeply.

His kiss was like a branding, so fierce and burning. There was no question I had just been formally claimed. I kissed him back just as intently.

We broke apart, and he lifted a hand and brushed at my face softly. His eyes were full of wonder.

"I love you, Severus. I will give you a family; I will give you a place to belong, and I will always stand at your side."

His eyes slid shut after becoming suspiciously moist, and he leaned down and pressed his forehead to mine.

"Thank you," he whispered.

He placed a quick kiss on my nose and spun towards the door. We left the room for the last time, and my heart was full with an amazing array of emotions.

Severus guided me down the stairs, and I leaned on him not just because my legs were weak but because my head was dizzy, either from my impending freedom or the effects of so much lying in bed. By the time we got to the foyer where Agatha stood, I was steady on my feet.

"Princess!" she exclaimed. She set down the stack of parchment she had in her hands and came running over to pull me into a hug. Agatha was transformed. Her dark robes were plain, yet elegant, and her face was devoid of the layers of make-up and charms that had always given her the look of a faded doll. Her hair was a soft brown, swept back into a simple bun. She looked both older and younger than her years.

"How are you, dear?" She pushed me back and looked intently into my face. Scanning me for signs of things she had seen too often in the past.

"I'm fine now. And you? How did you fare during the battle?"

"Well it was madness, to be sure. I mostly just ran errands and saw to the stabilized patients. I stayed in the dormitory infirmary; it was too terrifying to be down in the practice center as bodies suddenly appeared in all kinds of conditions. The last of the patients have been moved to Hogwarts now. And I've spent the night transporting our departed there for the burial today. I'm embarrassed I had to look up many of the girls' real names."

"Thank you, Agatha. Your diligence has been a great blessing," said Severus. "We will see you at the service later, but I'm afraid our time is running short. I have an important matter to attend to and must be off."

"I shall see you later then, Severus." He turned to walk towards the door. and Agatha's hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. She lifted up my hand and stared at my new ring. She gave me an enormous grin and threw her arms around me quickly before pecking me on the cheek and shooing me towards the door.

I stopped in the open doorway and peeked at the still dark world outside. I had left the house before, usually unconscious or by Floo, but I hadn't been outside since I left

Azkaban, all those years ago. I remembered a limping, sick, terrified girl, buffeted by the winds of the North Sea as she left her prison thinking she was on her way to her execution. I remember drinking in the sight of the vast ocean and wishing I had the strength to pull away from the grasp of my guards and fling myself down to the rocks below.

Go on, Hermione, he's got you.

I reflexively lifted my face and turned to look for Ron. Instead, I saw Severus, waiting patiently with one long-fingered hand outstretched and the other clutching the valise. I leaned out and touched his hand, and he clasped mine gently and pulled me over the threshold. He tucked me into his robes, wrapping his arms around me, and I looked back one more time to see Agatha closing the door with tears running down her face. I pressed my face into his chest and breathed in the smell of fresh rain and lemongrass. Severus pressed his cheek against my head, and I felt him start to spin to the right before the world disappeared with a crushing pressure.

A loud crack filled my ears, and I came to a stop, clutching at Severus' robes until the nausea passed. He held me tightly and stroked my back until he felt my grip relax.

"Alright?" he murmured in my ear.

"Yes. Yes, I think so."

He relaxed his arms, and I turned, looking around until I spotted the gates of Hogwarts. I looked up at Severus.

"This task Albus set you, was it something he asked you to do before he died?"

He took my hand and led me to the gates.

"No," he answered, tapping on the gate to release the wards. "It was something he asked me to do four days ago."

We set off in silence up the path until we came around a curve that revealed the large expanse of lawn plainly visible with the sky just beginning to lighten as dawn approached. Seeing the vast open space filled me with a sudden terror, and my knees locked up. Severus turned towards me in alarm, but I couldn't explain, I couldn't speak. Only a pathetic little squeak bubbled out of my throat when I tried. My heart started to pound, and I was filled with an immediate need to run and hide. I hid in the safest place I could find. I threw myself at Severus and buried my head in his robes.

"Look at me." I didn't. "Hermione, look at me." I couldn't. "I need you to look at me, Hermione. I can send you somewhere safe if you want. But it's best if I try to complete my task at dawn and I... need you."

I tilted my face up towards his voice but my eyes stayed shut.

"I don't want to leave you!"

"Then open your eyes. I can help. Trust me."

I opened my eyes. His hands cupped my face, and his eyes filled my vision. I saw images flash through my mind. A large holding area in the bowels of the Ministry the first time I was raped. A rat-infested guardhouse in Azkaban where I was subjected to unspeakable acts. A little camp bed in the attic, the only place I was safe from being pawed at or groped. Severus' arms, where I was truly safe. The feeling of panic started to subside and the warmth and contentment I felt whenever he held me gained ground. I didn't notice that Severus had let go of me and had stepped back until he broke contact. I looked around at the wide-open space and felt uncomfortable, but I was no longer terrified.

His hand rested on my shoulder.

"You were not the only one of the women this happened to. Several of the people from Azkaban went through it as well," he said.

"What did you do?"

"I disconnected the fear from the trigger. You were not really afraid of being outdoors; you were afraid of not being safe. Not uncommon among released prisoners."

He took my hand and led me towards the castle.

"Come now, there is little time."

"What is it that we need to do?"

"Send someone home."

We kept silent the rest of the walk up to the castle. My mind filled with memories and emotions as I looked from tower to tower. I looked back down the hill towards Hagrid's hut, and I mourned for all those rock cakes and dreadful cups of tea I would never have again. A warm hand squeezed mine, and I turned back as we went up the stairs and entered the castle through the huge doors. The sound of the doors closing behind us resonated through the halls. I noticed his hand starting to get clammy in mine and suddenly remembered the years he had spent searching through this place, tormented by a ghost, while trying to fulfill his mission. I realized that this was his first time back since finding the diadem and understood now why he said he needed me. I squeezed his hand, and he looked back at me gratefully before dropping his bag by the empty hourglasses in the corner and setting off up the stairs.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

"I won't know until we get there," he replied, mysteriously.

We walked up and down staircases and along empty corridors, sadly devoid of any paintings or tapestries. I was deeply grateful for the potions that had returned my strength. Severus took us through passages I never knew about and down back stairs until we came out in the dungeons. Just as we were passing a battered but mostly intact suit of armor, Severus stopped suddenly. I looked up and saw we were just outside his old Potions classroom. I looked through the open door and saw what had made him freeze.

Oh.

Before us, in the middle of the classroom, floated the ghost of Minerva McGonagall.

She stared at us without saying a word, but her ghostly features knotted up in a fearsome expression just before she threw her hands up in front of her and started to zoom towards us with a wail.

"Severus!" she howled.

"No!" I shouted, as I jumped in front of him with my arms spread wide to shield him as best I could. The ghost stopped short just inside the doorway and looked at me in amazement, and then her expression changed to a familiar one of pride.

"So, that's the way of it," she said. "I see you are protective of your mate; but you misunderstand me, Miss Granger. I meant Severus no harm. I wanted to beg his forgiveness," she said. Her eyes lifted up to his face as she added: "If it's even possible."

I turned to look at Severus and saw he was stricken. His mouth worked and silent tears ran down his face, and finally, he rasped his reply.

"There is nothing to forgive, Minnie."

Her face crumpled into intense pain.

"Oh, my boy, there is everything to forgive. I should have known. Mr. Longbottom explained everything to me finally, and I have been waiting here for you ever since. I was so terrible to you!" She loomed closer and made a useless clutching gesture. I stepped out of the way, even though that wouldn't have helped.

"You did what you thought was necessary to protect them. It was the only thing to be done," he replied

"I never gave you the chance to explain! I never even considered that you might have had a reason. I never thought there could have been some kind of explanation for you killing Albus! Severus, how can you forgive me so easily? I hated you! I was cruel to you because it felt *good*! I will spend the rest of eternity regretting that I was so faithless a friend to you, my boy."

Severus stepped forward into the classroom, and the ghost floated backwards. I followed him into the room.

"No. No you will not do that. You were protecting your cubs; you had no way of knowing I was innocent, Minerva. It would have been my death if anyone suspected. Even if you had given me a chance to explain, I would not have done so. There was too much at risk."

"Still, I am so very, very sorry, Severus."

"And again, I say there is nothing to forgive. But there is one thing we must do, Minerva, and the moment is at hand."

She gazed at him in wonder even as I looked at him in confusion.

"This was never meant for you, Minerva."

"I stayed out of fear, like the lot of them," she said with a vague, dismissive gesture back towards the castle.

"You feared for their safety; you did not fear death. They are all safe now. Albus... asked me to send you home."

"Severus... is that possible?"

She and I had the same expression on our faces.

"I did not return from the afterlife without being... affected," he replied.

He held out his hand palm up.

"Let me be your connection, Minerva."

She looked at his hand for a long time before she rose up her own and drifted close. She stopped before she rested her hand on top of his and looked at me.

"You take care of him, Miss Granger. He's not as solitary as he has always seemed."

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied.

She looked back at him.

"Watch over them for me, Severus."

"I will, Minerva," he said. "Please, give Draco my love."

Her lips quirked, and she nodded solemnly.

"Good bye, Severus, Hermione. I hope not to see either of you for a long, long time, but I expect to hear great things about the pair of you."

She rested her hand down on his palm and looked like she was about to say something more, but her head turned quickly, and she looked over my shoulder, her mouth open in happy surprise. I turned to see what she saw, but there was only the empty corridor. When I turned back, she was gone.

I walked over and wrapped my arms around his middle. He stood stiffly, staring off into the unseen distance for a long time before his hand came up and rubbed my arms.

"Thank you," he said. I just squeezed him harder in response.

We walked back up through the castle, hand in hand, until we reached the Transfiguration classroom.

Severus stopped outside the door and scanned the walls until he found a suitable empty hanger. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shrunken painting. He tapped it and when it was enlarged he hung it.

He placed his palm on the portrait of a sleeping Minerva McGonagall, and after a tingling flare of magic, she woke up. After a brief look around in obvious confusion, she turned and looked at us.

"Hello, my boy," she said, warmly.

"Hello, Minnie."

"It's a bit empty around here, isn't it?"

"Not for long," he answered. "Not for long."

The sun was streaming through the windows of the Great Hall as we sat and ate breakfast with the residents of the castle.

Viktor came over and gave me a careful hug with both of his arms. We spoke softly of the upcoming funeral, and how his friends had already left to bury their dead in Bulgaria, and how sad he was that he couldn't be there with them. The Healers expected him to recover full use of his arms but travel, either by Portkey or Floo, was not recommended for another week and it was much too far to Apparate. He placed his fork back into his eggs and reached over to take my hand, pulling it up, he looked at my ring and then gave me an inquisitive look.

I smiled and blushed. He gave me a sad little smile and then looked past me to where Severus was discussing whether or not there was enough time to brew one last experimental potion before the funeral with a still bandaged Neville and his Hannah.

"Congratulations, Minister. I am very happy for you both," said Viktor.

"Happy for who? What are we happy for?" inquired Neville.

"Miss Granger has consented to be my wife, Mr. Longbottom."

"Oh! That's brilliant! Congratulations, Hermione!" he said.

Charlie and Ruby came walking up together with Nadia.

"What are we congratulating?" he asked. Pretty soon the news was all over the Great Hall, and as I fielded more and more well wishes, I watched Severus glow with pride.

The funeral was held by Dumbledore's Tomb. The turnout was phenomenal; it seemed like the entire Wizarding World had showed up to pay their respects to the fighters that had freed them.

Severus and I were flanked by Charlie and his new Aurors, made up of most of the members of Snape's Company. Agatha sat with Peaches and the rest of the women, and they were surrounded by Neville's group. Hannah whispered a running commentary to her husband on everything that there was to see and what was going on. Percy and his wife sat with the freed prisoners from Azkaban. Beyond this group were thousands of magical folk, wizards and witches from many countries, as well as Centaurs, Goblins and house-elves.

As the new Minister for Magic, Severus was expected to give the eulogy, and he did so with great dignity and aplomb.

He left his seat and stood before the massed array of over fifty coffins. His voice rang out clearly over the gathered audience.

"We are gathered here today to lay to rest our brave fighters. Men and women who chose to stand in the face of impossible odds to set right a great wrong. Men and women who paid the ultimate price for our freedom. But we must also remember those who fell before, struggling against that same wrongness that ultimately sickened our world. Some of whom died trying to prevent the great evil and some who simply died senselessly because of that evil. Let the bodies of our fallen fighters stand as a wall eternally guarding us from ever allowing such a thing to come to pass again. Let this wall act in the future to shore up the flagging strength of a people too burdened with their own grief to do more than turn their face to the wall when their mettle is put to the test. Let this wall stand as a monument to the shining examples of cooperation and commitment possible when people put their petty jealousies and bigotries aside for a common good. Let this wall stand as a monument to the idea that even a blackened heart can know a moment's grace and turn towards the light. I ask you all for a moment of silence as we take this time to remember every person who is not here with us today."

He turned and faced the coffins and bowed his head. After a full minute of silence, several men and women came and joined him. I recognized them from the Department of Mysteries. Together, they raised their wands and a bright, blinding flash erupted in front of them. When the light died down, the coffins were gone; instead, there stood a large, blank, marble wall. It was five feet tall and ten feet wide. The Unspeakables stepped away and left Severus alone in front of the wall.

He pulled out his wand and tapped the wall and a name appeared. He tapped it again and another showed up. He continued to tap the wall until he had left a column of names that included each and every member of staff at Hogwarts as well as the entire membership of the Order of the Phoenix and the Malfoy family. When he was done, he slipped something off his hand and placed it on top of the wall. He returned to his seat and Charlie and Percy went over. With each tap they incised the name of yet another member of the Weasley family butchered by evil. When they were done, they repeated Severus' action of slipping off their Portkey rings and placing them on top of the wall. Agatha went after them, inscribing the real names of the ten women who had died from the house. She kissed her fingers and touched the names before she slipped off her ring and placed it on top of the wall. Theo walked up dressed in his full Death Eater robes, his mask in his hand, and added the names of all the fallen from Snape's Company. When he was done, he paused a moment, then added the name of his father. He slipped off his ring and placed it atop the wall as well. Neville went next, and with Hannah guiding his arm, he placed the names of every one of his fighters. They too left their rings. Viktor placed the names of his fallen friends and left his ring as well. Xenophilius Lovegood, freed from Azkaban but not in good health, struggled on the arm of Penelope Weasley until he reached the marble wall and inscribed the name of his daughter, Luna. Dahlia Parkinson came up and added the name of her sister. She also slipped off her ring and left it atop the wall. After that, there was a constant line as anyone and everyone that lost a loved one in the long years of terror added names to the wall. The women from the house came, one by one, and left the names of Muggle parents and siblings murdered callously. The list of names stretched farther across the wall and the number of rings on top of it grew. A lone house-elf approached, and with an encouraging nod from Severus, placed his hands on the wall and added the names of all the elves that had also given their lives in defense of the students. Finally, there was no one left but me. I stood, and Severus walked at my side until I reached the center of the wall. The list of names stretched out on either side of us as I reached up and tapped the wall next to Ron's name. I only had one name to add: Harry Potter. The top of the wall glittered with all the tiny cheap rings we had prayed never to use. I added mine.

I stepped back, and Severus spoke a soft incantation and tapped the wall one last time. Several dozen new names appeared: the names of students and their families that had no surviving loved ones left to represent them. A final incantation and the wall flared with light. Each and every name on the wall started to glow with a golden light, and the rings sank into the stone to become a permanent embellishment.

Severus and I stood off to the side once the ceremony was over. People streamed past the wall to read the names. I turned to him and saw him staring hard at Dumbledore's tomb. He looked so tired, so burdened. I thought of what he had to have gone through that night Albus had begged him to fulfill his vow. The demands on him to find a way to rectify a terrible miscalculation. I was suddenly overwhelmed by the debt I owed this man, a debt that every wizard and witch in Great Britain owed this man. I stepped closer to him, and as he turned toward me, I placed my hand over his heart and felt the steady beat there.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you for giving me my life back. Thank you for everything you have ever done for me and the rest of these people."

His eyes softened, and he brought his hand up and pressed it to my stomach.

"Thank you, Hermione. You have given me life in every meaning of the word."

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me gently. My heart was full to overflowing.

It was at that moment, when we were blinded by flash bulbs and dozens of people started to shout questions at us, that I realized just what I was in for, being the chosen mate of The-Man-Who-Lived.

This chapter was requested by, and is dedicated to, Whitehound. Thank you for all your input, patience and the sacrifice of your own time as I constantly barraged you with chapters and questions.

Epilogue

Chapter 40 of 40

The end of the tale...

Special thanks to astopperindeath, for her hard work betaing this story, and for inviting me to come play in this archive.

The tale of The Princess of Gryffindor started with the whisper of hope disguised as detritus drifting in on the evening human tide, and I have decided to end it with the memorial to all who gave their lives because of what that hope blossomed into.

My story doesn't end there, but the rest is already public record. My husband and I worked feverishly that first year to reestablish a functioning society. Many, many people came forward and lent their knowledge and expertise to help reestablish a rule of law and Wizarding rights. I am proud to say that we even expanded those rights to include our allies, the centaurs, as well as granting what rights to house-elves that they would allow. Severus renegotiated treaties with the goblins, and I don't know if it was because he was still sore at his failed bargain with Death or not, but he was a shrewd negotiator and a ferocious reader of fine print.

Our greatest resource during that time was the portraits. People all over the Wizarding community donated portraits of ancestors that they had been hiding after Voldemort's infamous Portrait Massacre. Artists imported from several countries furiously painted copies or new settings to be hung in the Ministry and also to grace the walls of Hogwarts. We had the minds of hundreds of esteemed former members of the Wizengamot to help us as we pulled and pushed our Ministry back into shape. Severus had come back from the great beyond with a tremendous gift. It seems his status of not-dead-yet-not-alive for that short time was enough for him to act as a catalyst for those portraits that had been utterly destroyed. We were able to have portraits painted of all of the Hogwarts staff and a large number of former headmasters. Thus, an enormous amount of knowledge was preserved as well.

We were able and more than ready to hold free elections on the first anniversary of Voldemort's final death. One of Severus's last dictatorial acts was to demand Percy Weasley run. On election day, Severus and I furiously packed up our offices and slipped from the Ministry with our son, Julius, under one arm and boxes of personal possessions and handmade thank you gifts from a grateful population under the others. I was more than willing to cede my office to anyone with a modicum of training in law, and Severus would have gladly turned his office over to a pygmy puff.

We were at home, sitting quietly on the couch watching our son sleep in the cradle Neville had made, when the press arrived to congratulate us. At first, we thought it was on a job well done and were gracious, but we were swiftly disabused of the notion. Severus had won the election by a landslide. An election he didn't enter, nor did he allow anyone put forth his name as a candidate on the ballot. The vast majority of the Wizarding population ignored the official ballot and simply wrote his name on a piece of parchment, affixed their magical signature and flooded the Ministry with their personal owls.

So we were stuck for the next five years, and the next five, and so on. Severus appointed me Deputy Minister, and together we thrashed out the important issues of that second year. With experienced people in key positions in the Ministry, as well as dependable representation on the Wizengamot, it was fairly easy to get reforms and changes passed.

Most of the displaced people had been returned to their homes or gained new ones by that point. So, the focus of the second year was the reopening of Hogwarts as a school. In an act of both farsightedness and petty revenge, Severus appointed Percy Weasley as Headmaster and then proceeded to micro-manage him to the point of apoplexy. Neville Longbottom was hired as the Herbology teacher, and Viktor Krum took the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Theodore Nott became our Charms master, and his wife Caroline became the School Matron. Greg Goyle settled into the groundskeeper's hut and was surprisingly content, saying that that was what his oath wanted him to do. Professor Firenze came back to teach Divination and the other professors came from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.

The school was set up slightly differently; remedial lessons were mandatory for those students denied any education for the five years of Voldemort's rule, so it was many years before it was returned to the traditional seven-year curriculum. Another change Percy made was to have every student resorted at the beginning of every year. Few stayed in the same house all seven years, and it strengthened ties as well as helped develop the changing strengths of each student.

The ladies of the house all moved back into society in a variety of ways. A few struggled, but we were always there for each other in the following years to lend a hand or a home or just an ear, when needed. I will not say where they went, or what they did, because with the exception of Peaches, who couldn't care less what people thought of her, the rest of them would rather not have their past follow them around. We all meet up once a year at the house and talk. Sometimes we talk about our families, and sometimes we talk about the past; we always remember our fallen. As for Caroline, well, at least once a year a bold student makes a comment about the nurse's past, and about once a year that same student has to dust all the portraits in the castle without magic while listening to the hundreds of lectures from those portraits. Molly and Arthur hang on the fourth floor and are always especially vocal during a 'lecture series', as Caroline likes to call it.

Agatha Rosier took it upon herself to see to the welfare of those children orphaned by the fighting. Severus turned over the Malfoy estate for her to use as she saw fit, and she turned it into a happy, if loud, home. They referred to themselves with pride as Snape's Children, and as much as he grumbled about that, Severus spent a good amount of time there with them, listening to their tales and giving advice. When the last of the orphans married and moved away, Agatha went to work for the Department of Magical Cooperation. Seventeen years of playing arbiter of disputes to forty children gave her a unique set of skills, and this year she was promoted to head of the department.

The orphans have made Severus an honorary grandfather eight times over now, and he is a ridiculously indulgent one. It would seem the rules he always felt were important for training a young mind go out the window when it comes to that next generation. Severus never gets tired of referring to himself as a man with forty-four children and he is, if you add the forty orphans to our own set. Julius is finishing up his Charms apprenticeship here at the school under Theo and already has an offer to teach next year at Durmstrang, and Silvia is an Auror. Our eight year old daughter Brilliant is always either reading a book or dragging her six-year-old brother Auberon off on some adventure bound to get them both filthy and in trouble. Silvia is quite attached to Percy's son Arthur, and I expect a wedding announcement by Christmas. It's hard to picture having a married daughter when you are still running around making sure your youngest didn't put his shoes on the wrong feet.

Severus is a stern but doting father and never shirks his responsibilities. More than one important meeting was interrupted by a squalling infant waking from a nap behind his chair or preempted for a child's Gobstones match. In my opinion, for a man terrified he would be a terrible father, he could have written 'how to' books on the subject.

We raised our children in a constant state of chaos, and the Ministry became their second home during the fifteen years that my husband was Minister for Magic and the following five where our dunderheaded Wizarding population finally took Severus seriously when he said he would flee Britain completely if he was elected again so they wrote me into office instead. I served one term and then threatened to become the new Dark Lord and that was how, after twenty years of Snape rule, Percy Weasley finally became Minister for Magic.

Severus graciously accepted the position of Headmaster at his beloved school. Percy joked about how he always had been anyway and was more than happy to finally hand over the reins and become Minister. Severus mostly left him to it unless he felt the Minister was about to commit an act of utter stupidity and needed a personal visit to set him straight.

My connection with Harry and Ron never left, and under intense strain, such as late pregnancy or the act of childbirth, I would be able to talk to them quite freely. They have always been able to connect with the little soul under my heart and would often pass on reassuring tidbits on their personalities before they were born. I was always happy for the heads up. Unfortunately, it was just such an instance that resulted in the name of our youngest daughter. Ron was chattering on about how much this baby had Fred and George's playful streak just as Severus was inquiring about what name I had decided on. Under the influence of pain potions, my words were a jumble of two conversations before I passed out. Severus had learned not to argue with me for weeks after a birth by this time, so he just scowled and wrote what he thought I said on her certificate, and that is why my eight-year-old holds the utterly apt name: Brilliant Mischief Molly Snape, instead of Caelia Ginevra Molly Snape.

My life since that day we buried our dead has been full: full of life, full of love, full of laughter, and full of challenges. The love of friends and family has allowed me to accept my past and learn to trust that life can be good. I am not without my inner scars; I still get unsettled in large open spaces. A picnic outing with the children to Yorkshire could turn quickly into Severus sending the children off to find frogs or some such while he discreetly held me and crooned reassurance, as I tried to calm my racing heart and will away the irrational feeling of danger. The advantage of living with a man that can read your mind is that I never had to find the words to explain. He simply understands. If I was short tempered or withdrawn sometimes, he would coax me back with gentle reassurances and reminders that it was to be expected. The man that

was never known for his patience always had an endless supply for a wife that might suddenly need to slip away to be alone.

Indeed, you could say that Severus has become a very patient man. Free from the terrible pain and pressure that had been on his shoulders his entire adult life, he has slowly relaxed and become more tolerant of others. Still not one to suffer fools, he at least waits until the fool leaves the room to vent his spleen to me in private. He was not without his own after effects either. Many a night in the early years, I would be woken from a sound sleep when he would snatch me up in a crushing embrace with his heart beating frantically and sweat pouring down his body, seeking reassurance that I was indeed whole and safe and his.

My only regret in all these years is my parents. They still reside in Australia with the false memories I had given them. It took me months and many nights crying on my husband's shoulder to work up the courage to go find them. I agonized over how much of the truth to tell them, and my conscience was still sore at my decision, when we found the matter was moot. They had lived too long with their false memories, and the charms could not be reversed. They know me as a slightly strange but nice person who made friends with them on vacation years ago and always welcome my visits. It hurts.

Every person who lived through those times has a story to tell, and I was very interested and supportive when I received the entreaty to tell my tale from Rosamund Sage, Rita Skeeter's daughter. She has become quite a historian, and I am very impressed with her work and her effort to create an official record of the accounts of all the survivors as a memorial. However, twenty-five years of living with Severus has rubbed off, and so I shall spell this diary closed until after the death of both Severus and myself. Some of the facts would be better told when my children are grandparents themselves, and Rosamund is a Skeeter, so even though I do enjoy our discussions, I cannot bring myself to trust her with the truth yet.

It is my deepest desire that my life, and I have it on good authority that I am looking at another hundred years at least, will be quite boring from here on in, and so I foresee no need to ever write another journal like this again. However, I must say that I have enjoyed the experience. I have never told my tale to anyone who wasn't already a part of it, and the act of putting it all down on parchment has been very cathartic.

To anyone in the future who reads this, I hope you are living your happily ever after as I am living mine. And to anyone caught under the weight of despair, I say this to you: do not give up, do not surrender, for life can turn on a Knut and change is still possible as long as you still have breath left and the will to clutch at any straw that brushes against your fingers, no matter how pathetic the possibility looks.

-Hermione Jean Granger Snape, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and School Librarian.

Young Angel Anne Warrington tried not to look into the eyes of the Headmaster and tried to keep her breathing normal as he soundlessly vanished the cake she had been hiding behind her back.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, Miss Warrington, for being out after curfew, and detention with Professor Longbottom tomorrow evening. I am disappointed in you, child. Your father would be as well. You were in Slytherin last year; did you learn nothing of discretion?" he asked the diminutive second year. He sighed as she hung her head in shame.

"Miss Warrington, there are reasons we don't allow students to run amok in the hallways at night or have free access to the kitchens; can you tell me what they are again please?"

Angel Anne looked up into the black eyes of the Headmaster and repeated the words he had said to her when he had caught her the first time.

"Because we need our sleep, sir, and the stairs are dangerous in the dark, and the elves have better things to do than stuff students full of sugar, and your job is difficult enough without a whole school full of sleepy students with rotted teeth and broken legs. Sir."

"Very good, Miss Warrington. Now can you explain what part of that you did not understand last week?"

As Angel Anne stumbled through her excuses and apologies, the Headmaster lifted up his hand and held it out to his side. A few moments later Madam Snape showed up from around the corner and rested her fingers lightly on his hand.

"What have we here?" she asked in a gentle voice

"A recidivist," replied the Headmaster.

The girl screwed up her face in confusion.

"It means a repeat offender, Miss Warrington," the librarian explained.

"Yes, Madam Snape. Thank you for explaining that to me."

"Miss Warrington, do you think it possible to find your way to your common room without any more rule breaking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then be so good as to do so immediately, please."

The girl took off with only one last glance back at the couple watching her go.

When she was out of sight, Hermione let out a soft musical laugh.

"So that's this year's broken heart."

"I have no idea what you are prattling on about, woman," Severus replied as they walked down the hall towards the stairs.

"Oh, yes you do. I bet you two galleons you catch her next week as well; it's as plain as the nose on your face that she has a crush on you."

"I have it on good authority that my nose is rather uncommon and, indeed, noble; one could hardly call it plain, Madam."

"Regardless, I stand by my words."

"You're on. I think you and Caroline are completely ridiculous with your claims of adolescent adoration and will be happy to prove you wrong."

"And I will reassert that you are positively dreamy in the eyes of a young girl. You are a hero, you are dark and mysterious, and since you grew that beard, you can stop hearts at a hundred paces. Add to that how every new batch of female students is regaled with tales of how deeply misunderstood you were for years, and that makes you the stuff of dreams and legend."

"I thought Lockhart was the stuff of young girls' dreams," he said snidely.

"Oh, gods, Severus, don't throw that in my face again, I beg you. I can't believe I ever told you that."

He brought her hand up to his lips for a kiss.

"You're the only one that ever found me so, Hermione, but if it amuses you to see conspiracies where there are none, then I will put forth my opinion that perhaps you

simply have too much time on your hands with Auberon now running off after Brilliant all the time. Well, more of a stumble really. When is that boy going to learn which shoe is which?"

"I don't know; I despair of ever getting him to even bother to look at his feet. Weren't we supposed to have handed him over to Julius to raise anyway by now? I seem to remember that being the plan."

"Indeed."

The couple continued on their way through the silent halls, stopping to exchange pleasantries with Sir Nicholas before making their way to the Headmaster's office and up to their private apartments.

They made a striking couple, indeed. She was a beauty with her swanlike neck and her ample curves accentuated by the cut of her dark red robes. Her hair was swept up into a tight bun, elaborately braided and held in place by the combs she had received as an anniversary present. A trace of wrinkles around her eyes were the only concession to her more than fifty years.

He cut an even more impressive figure in his seventies with his floor length silvery-green robes, heavily embroidered with black stitching. His hair flowed down to his shoulders before being gathered in a braid that fell another eighteen inches. It was iron grey in color, shading toward black underneath. His face was creased with hard lines, and his nose was ever a long, sharp hook; and he sported a black beard, neatly trimmed to a point just below his chin with a silver streak down the center. Their eyes matched in intensity of gaze, reflecting a high intelligence and quick wit as well as deep contentment and gentleness.

They entered their living room and found the usual motley collection of young adults. Snapes, Weasleys, Longbottoms and Notts, along with a few unidentified friends.

"Hello, Mum," said Silvia before wrapping herself in her father's arms. "The little ones are asleep. We were just heading out to the Three Broomsticks; is it okay if we all crash here when we're done?"

"Ask your father," Hermione replied, which was as good as saying yes.

Silvia just looked at her father with her enormous black eyes and smiled as his lips pressed a kiss to her head.

"As long as all of your friends are aware that the door is warded and they will not be allowed access to the school."

"Thanks, Dad!" She leaned up and kissed his cheek. All the young people gathered themselves by the Floo but stopped when Severus raised his voice.

"Julius," he called, "it is Friday evening. You have until this time on Sunday to teach Auberon how to put his shoes on correctly, or I promise you, there will be thestral stables in your future."

Julius Snape raised an eyebrow at this unexpected request, but used to such things, he simply quirked his lips, nodded his acceptance and blew his mother a kiss before turning back to his girlfriend and disappearing into the Floo.

Two minutes of chaos, and then the room was silent.

Severus took his wife's hand and tugged her towards their bedroom.

She pulled her hand back.

"You go ahead; I want to check on the children."

"You don't need to. Sylvia said they're fine," he said as he reached to pull her towards him.

"Yes, I do, now leave off," she laughed and pushed him away.

Twenty minutes later, Hermione entered the bedroom with a slightly sad expression on her face. Her husband was under the covers reading a journal and seemed to not notice her as she came into the room. She changed into a silk nightie and sat at her table and started to unbraided her hair. She thought she felt her husband's eyes burning her skin, but every time she darted a glance in the mirror, he was simply reading. She looked at him lying there with his knees up and his long hair flowing across the pillow and down off the bed, and her breath caught at how handsome she thought he was. He was such a fool not to see how happiness had made him so attractive. Hermione heaved a sigh.

Watching her older children take off with their friends had made her feel old; watching her little ones sleeping without a care had made her feel curiously unneeded. Watching her husband simply reading while she brushed out her waist-length hair for some reason made her feel undesirable. She crawled under the covers and blew out the candle on her side of the bed and snuggled up close to her husband. She gave a happy little cry when she realized he was completely naked.

With a smug smile, he tossed his journal down and doused the lights with a flick of his fingers.

"You are a ridiculous woman if you think you are undesirable in any way," he said as he started to nibble on her neck.

She laughed and brought his face up to kiss.

"I'm sure it must have been a passing moment of sadness."

"No it wasn't; you've been restless and broody for weeks." He continued down her collarbone, disappeared under the blankets and pressed kisses along the tops of her breasts.

"I've been working on my journal, it made me... pensive."

He slid back out from under the covers and kissed her on her nose.

"Did you finish, my love?" His eyes were full of concern.

"Yes, this evening, just before I closed up the library."

"Will you let me read it?"

"No. When I finished it, I spelled the book shut until after we are both dead and gone. You do not need to read it, love; you were there."

He kissed her tenderly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, caressing her face with his nose.

"No. I think I am done talking about it. I'm done writing about it and maybe even done thinking about it, at least for a long while. I'd rather think about something else," she said, running her hands up her husband's strong back.

His eyes closed as he leaned into her touch.

"What would you like to think about," he growled as his hands slid up along her sides.

"Oh, probably the same thing you have been thinking about for the last year," she said whimsically.

Severus went still above her.

"Do you mean it?" he asked. His voice was soft and full of barely restrained hope.

"That I want another child? Yes, Severus. I do."

He kissed her passionately, and with a wordless charm, he Vanished her nightgown.

He broke the kiss, lifting himself up on his arms, and looked deep into her eyes. His own were on fire with a powerful combination of love and lust.

"I love you, Hermione."

"Thank God," she answered.

As he crashed down on her and enveloped her with his passion, Hermione closed her eyes and thanked fate, as she did every night, for the day she saw that poor dumb bastard, dragged unwillingly into her prison clutching hope tightly in his fist.