

Fallen Sparrow

by Hanagasume

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

Chapter 1: Fall From Grace

Chapter 1 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A huge thank you must go to VIVAvivacious for all of her help as my beta for this story.

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The silence in the dark, crowded forest was deafening. The trees were thick, with branches that were twisted and gnarled, knobbly in places, all sharp angles with leaves that were browning.

Her heart was practically pounding out of her chest as her feet carried her quickly through the foliage as she ran. It didn't even matter she was getting scratched and cut as she forced her way through she just needed to get to the clearing. She could see a flicker of light just ahead through the gaps in the branches. Breaking through the last of the thick foliage, she stumbled into the clearing right behind the old log cabin she knew would be there. She leaned against it, struggling to catch her breath while attempting to make as little noise as possible.

She could hear shouting and thunder and spells being thrown and crashing against one another from the other side and suppressed a shiver. It was cold, and it had been too long since the last time she had a proper coat to shield her from the elements. Closing her eyes and gritting her teeth, she pushed away from the cabin and started making her way around it slowly. She could see Harry, covered in layers of caked-on dirt and blood, crossing wands with Bellatrix Lestrange. She was scared for him. Bellatrix was the most ruthless of their attackers, and Harry had too many unstable emotions involving her; it would distract him.

Swallowing hard, she pushed off from the cabin and sprinted as fast as she could towards Harry, dodging spells and almost tripping over her own feet at least twice. Her breath was coming hard and fast when she reached Harry's side, and she immediately flicked her wand and wordlessly added strength to the shield that was already in place. Harry offered her a brief but grateful glance before refocusing on Lestrange. She was beginning to weaken from the force of Harry's spells. Hermione nodded her head to indicate she would relieve him, and Harry withdrew.

'Harry Potter!' Bellatrix shrieked over the noise. 'Do you dare to withdraw from our duel?'

'Don't you even talk to him, you foul woman,' Hermione shouted, pointing her wand at her and muttering a stinging hex under her breath.

Bellatrix barely flinched at the spell, but it had gotten her attention. Smiling cruelly, she raised her wand to Hermione instead.

'Well, well,' she said, advancing slightly. 'What do we have here? A little Mudblood? Here to protect your boyfriend, are we?'

'Shut your mouth and fight me,' the younger witch said coolly.

'A feisty little thing, aren't you?' Bellatrix taunted. 'Let's see how feisty you are after Crucio!'

Lestrage was fast, but Hermione still had plenty of energy left in her to dodge it. She raised the power of her shield and sent a few slicing hexes towards her opponent, one of them catching Bellatrix across her cheek. They continued throwing hexes at one another until Hermione finally caught her off guard and threw her backwards. The older witch was thrown hard against a tree, knocking her out. Hermione pointed her wand at her leg and muttered a healing spell to close up a bleeding gash, then began to stumble towards the other witch, oblivious to what was happening around her.

She cast a binding charm on Bellatrix, and as soon as the witch was bound by heavy, thick ropes, she turned around to survey the clearing once more. Harry was battling Evan Rosier across the field, and from what she could see, Mad Eye Moody was battling against a Death Eater she did not recognise. Ron was nowhere to be found, and there were just too many people everywhere. Pausing to cast a charm to fortify her weakened leg, she was about to move on when she heard a voice whisper from behind her.

'Imperio,' a deep male voice said clearly.

Hermione felt all semblance of control leave her. She tried to fight against it, but nothing would work. Her wand was still in her hand, but nothing she thought connected with the rest of her. So this was what it was like to be under the control of another. She would have cried if she still had the ability to do so. Her eyes were fuzzy, and she could barely see what was in front of her.

'Look at me,' the man commanded.

Hermione felt her body turning to face her attacker. Her eyes were suddenly clear as she looked up into the face of Fenrir Greyback. His eyes were dark, and the smile on his lips was feral. He lifted a hand to her face and grasped her chin with sharp, ragged nails.

'Not bad, for a Mudblood,' he snarled, letting his hand creep to the back of her head so he could use her hair to tug her head back sharply.

She stared at him, unable to blink or scream or rage. If she could have, she would have spat in his face in that moment. He leaned his face closer, and before she knew it, his mouth was pressed against hers and was plundering her mouth with his tongue, practically gagging her with it. When he was finished, he pulled back with the most disgusting expression she had ever seen.

'You have a very sweet mouth,' he growled. 'I should like to sample you further; however, there are more pressing things to be getting on with.'

Hermione felt his sharp nails dig into her arm as he grasped her bicep. 'Follow me,' he barked out sharply, pulling her along as he walked. Her feet were cooperating with his command, and she followed along helplessly as he dragged her around the forest on the edge of the clearing.

'Listen to me, Mudblood,' Greyback snarled. 'You are to seek out your friend Weasley, and when you do find him, I want you to kill him. Your failure to do so will result in your destruction. Now go.'

Hermione felt her mind slipping away from her as his spell took over her body fully. She felt a dagger being pressed into her boot before Greyback roughly pushed her forward. She tried to fight against it, but her feet kept moving despite all her efforts. She couldn't kill Ron - he was one of her best friends. She loved Ron. Her head hurt from the effort of trying to fight off the Imperius curse, but her body was too tired. She had no more energy to fight, and she knew if she did kill Ron, she would never be able to live with herself.

Her pace quickened, and soon her pulse did too as she rounded a corner and saw Ron just at the edge of the clearing, battling Lucius Malfoy. Her feet stopped, and she felt a strange, eerie silence come over the clearing as Malfoy managed to disarm Ron. Her arm rose, and soon her wand was pressed between Ron's shoulder blades. She pushed against the spell, but all it achieved was for the tears she wanted to cry to come spilling forth from her eyes.

Ron spun around to face her and looked at her in horror. 'Hermione, what's wrong with your eyes?' he asked in a panic.

'Do not speak, filthy blood traitor,' Hermione's voice said, even as she tried to prevent the words from slipping out of her mouth.

'Hermione, quit it, will you? You're really starting to scare me,' Ron stammered as he began backing away from her.

'You are not worthy to call yourself a wizard,' the voice said again. 'You are filth - consorting with Muggles and Mudbloods alike. Prepare to meet your end, son of Arthur Weasley.'

'Hermione! What are you doing?' Harry yelled as he began limping towards the scene from the other side of the clearing.

Mad Eye Moody also began to make his way towards them, but all Hermione could see was Ron through the haze surrounding her. Her wand arm was still raised towards him, and she could feel her magic thrumming through her veins, all surging towards her right arm and into her wand.

'Hermione, please wake up! You don't know what you're doing,' Ron said. *Expelliarmus*.'

Hermione's wand cut through the air in front of her, and she blocked the spell, sending it back at Ron, whose wand flew out of his hand and landed on the ground a few feet away from him. His blue eyes were filled with a fear that broke her heart. She knew, even before she said it, the spell that would end his life was at the very tip of her tongue. Without knowing how it had gotten into her hand, Hermione could see the dagger that had been in her boot. In a second, it was flying through the air towards her friend.

It never met its target.

The knife was deflected by someone out of her line of vision and spun away. She could hear Greyback growling from the back of her head for the first time since he had taken her over. It was the most sickening sensation she had ever felt. Suddenly, a surge of power was released from the end of her wand and the blast sent everyone nearby flying backwards, save for herself and Ron.

'*Avada Kedavra*!' her voice roared, the green light spewing from the end of her wand and hitting Ron dead in the centre of his chest, throwing him backwards.

The blood was pounding in her ears, and everything suddenly felt like it was going in slow motion. Everyone was moving so slowly around her, and as she whipped her head around to see, there were many people heading right towards her. Before anyone could reach her, however, she felt Greyback slipping out of her mind, and her body was suddenly her own again. Her legs felt numb, and as she slipped to the ground, she prayed to God that whoever got to her first would end her life swiftly.

But not a single spell was flung her way, and she looked up from her spot on the dirt and grass to see a black-clothed figure standing before her, blocking her from the view of everyone else. Her head was throbbing, and she closed her eyes to take a breath so she could focus on what was being said.

'she was not in control of herself!' a deep, resonant voice shouted above all the arguments.

'How the hell would you know?'

'Did you see the girl's eyes? Surely, Mad Eye, even you know what it looks like when a person is under the Imperius curse,' the man with the deep voice shouted again.

'I saw her eyes,' said another male voice. Hermione recognised it as Harry's. 'Snape's right. Hermione was under Imperius. I saw Viktor Krum's eyes back in my fourth year. They were just like that.'

'It doesn't matter. We'll have to take the girl to the Ministry for questioning, and the sooner the better,' Mad Eye insisted gruffly.

'You won't be taking the girl anywhere near that place until she's been looked over by a trained medical professional,' the voice that she now knew belonged to Snape said firmly. 'I am taking her to Hogwarts to see Poppy Pomfrey. You lot can stay here and work out which Death Eaters managed to escape in the confusion.'

'Please take care of her, Professor,' Harry said softly, stepping around the Snape to crouch down beside Hermione, who was still collapsed on the ground. 'Hermione? Are you okay?'

Hermione's eyes snapped to his, and she could feel hot tears slipping from them when she blinked in response. She looked back up to Snape, who was now facing her. His face was blank, but he leaned down and scooped her up into his arms, and she could see a strange emotion in his eyes that told her he was not indifferent to the situation. Harry reached out and brushed a tear from her cheek before Snape turned on his heel and strode towards the other side of the clearing.

'Miss Granger?' he asked quietly.

She looked up from the spot where her head was cradled against his chest and saw a question in his eyes. She shook her head, unable to speak even now that she had the ability to do so on her own. Her eyelids were heavy, and as she felt herself slipping into unconsciousness, the only thing that she could see were Ron's scared blue eyes the moment before she had ended his life.

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A/N This is my first attempt at a Dark!Hermione, so please be gentle.

Chapter 2: Touched by Darkness

Chapter 2 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The white walls of the infirmary appeared even brighter than ever.

She blinked rapidly, clearing the sleep from her vision. Staring straight up at the ceiling, Hermione wondered for a moment why she was there. Everything in her head was still a little funny, and she had a niggling feeling her memories were temporarily being withheld from her. There was an all-too-apparent gap in her memories, making it clear something had been altered. She took a deep breath and used her arms to try and push up into a sitting position, her body falling forward awkwardly as she tried to push her pillows up with one arm behind her. When she was resting against the propped pillows, she breathed out and stared at the curtains around the bed she was occupying.

Questions were buzzing through her head. She couldn't for the life of her understand why she was in the Hogwarts infirmary. It had been seven years since she had graduated her seventh year, and the last thing she could recall before waking up was being in the library at Grimmauld Place, researching curses with Professor Snape and Luna Lovegood. She frowned deeply. It really was not polite of them, whoever they might be, to prevent her from knowing what she had done between that point and the point where she had ended up in the hospital wing.

Hermione thought about whether or not she should risk getting up from the bed for a few minutes before the sound of voices erupted somewhere up the other end of the infirmary. Deciding to stay put, she waited as the voices grew louder on their approach, and from what she caught of the conversation, they were most definitely talking about her. However, by the time the people reached the curtains surrounding her bed, their voices had dropped to whispers, and she could no longer tell what they were saying about her.

'You don't know what you are talking about, Snape!' said a male voice gruffly. 'I am a professional and have far more experience with Ministry dealings than you will ever have!'

The curtain suddenly flew open and revealed three men, including Snape, Mad Eye Moody and Arthur Weasley. She looked up at them in confusion and was about to ask why she was there but stopped when she saw Snape give her a strange look.

'Hermione, how are you feeling this morning?' Arthur asked gently.

Hermione stared at the man for a moment, taking in his slightly bedraggled appearance. He had dark smudges beneath his eyes, and his hair was not combed back neatly. His robes, too, were not exactly as wrinkle-free as they could have been. The man looked just like he had been put through the wringer recently.

'I feel tired and sore,' she croaked. Her hand immediately flew to her throat. It hurt as she had tried to speak. 'My magic feels drained.'

'Those symptoms are all very common considering what you have been through, Miss Granger,' Snape said, cutting across Moody who had opened his mouth as though he were about to speak.

'And just what have I been through, Professor?' she managed to rasp out before the need to have a drink of water became paramount.

'I'm not certain now is the appropriate time to discuss this,' Snape said before Moody could open his mouth to say something that would undoubtedly be rude or insensitive.

Hermione nodded, although she did not entirely understand why they were being so secretive. She imagined at least one of them had something to do with the reason for the missing part of her memory. One of them had either removed it or suppressed it, and when she was feeling a little less drowsy, she would demand to know why. Without saying a word, Snape walked to the set of drawers beside her bed and poured her a glass of water from the jug sitting atop it before handing it to her.

She looked up at him gratefully, taking a sip. 'Thank you, I needed that,' she whispered, attempting to save what little voice she had.

'I will send Madam Pomfrey in for a check up very shortly,' Snape said, shooting a look at Moody, as if daring him to make a comment.

That appeared to be the end of the visit, for all three men turned and made to leave the sectioned-off area that was hers for the time being. Before he left, Arthur Weasley looked at her once more with his sad, tortured eyes and followed the other two men back to the other end of the infirmary. No sooner did they leave before Poppy Pomfrey was bustling in with her wand in hand, fussing over Hermione every which way she was able.

'You were a right mess when they brought you in here,' Madam Pomfrey muttered under her breath as she went around the bed, waving her wand and checking Hermione's vitals as she did.

'How long have I been here?'

'Just two days,' the witch answered. 'But you'll be remaining in my care until I see fit to release you. After that, you will be Professor Snape's responsibility. Later this afternoon he will return to talk with you about the reasons why you are currently here.'

Hermione nodded and simply sat back, allowing the matron to do her job. The more easily she complied, the more likely it was she would get out of there sooner. After she had been declared physically stable, Madam Pomfrey finally left to order her some soup from the kitchens for her lunch. When it arrived a short while later, she ate it slowly, savouring the feeling of the thick, warm soup running down her throat and into her empty stomach. Apparently she had not eaten very much during her unconsciousness.

After her meal, she was drowsy once more and soon drifted off to sleep. When she awoke, she found she was not alone. Luna Lovegood was sitting in a chair beside her bed with a notebook in her lap and a pile of books sitting atop the set of drawers beside the jug of water. Hermione would have smiled if her muscles were not so tired.

'Hello,' Hermione said, gaining the attention of her companion.

'Ah, well, it's good to see you awake,' Luna said with a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. 'I was afraid you might not wake up before I have to leave for the day.'

'You look tired, Luna,' Hermione said quietly.

'It was a very tiring past couple of days,' she answered with a soft sigh. 'I was told you don't remember what happened and that Professor Snape was going to see you to talk about it this afternoon.'

'I wish I knew what happened now,' Hermione whispered. 'I keep wracking my brain for the answers, but I come up blank every time.'

Luna nodded solemnly. Much of her dreaminess had faded away over the last few years, especially after the day Death Eaters had attacked her family home and murdered her father. Hermione found it sad to see someone who had been so content with her life become someone different in a single moment. Luna had always been smart, but now there was an element of sharpness to her that had been missing from the younger woman throughout their entire time at Hogwarts together.

'I wish I could tell you,' she said softly. 'It's not good, Hermione.'

Hermione nodded. 'I gathered as much when I figured out my memories were missing. Will you stay with me?'

Luna nodded and reached out to hold Hermione's hand sitting on the sheet covering her lap.

An hour later, they heard the doors to the infirmary open. The sounds of heavy boots accompanied by the clicking of heeled shoes made their way down the aisle toward Hermione's curtained space. Soon the curtain was drawn to allow both Snape and Madam Pomfrey to enter before it was closed again. Snape looked exactly as he had in the morning, his face was a mask of indifference, but his pitch-black eyes were alive with an unnumbered array of emotions.

'Miss Lovegood, you may want to leave for this,' Snape said quietly.

'Hermione has asked me to stay by her side,' she mumbled softly

'Very well,' Snape murmured, drawing his wand from where he kept it tucked up his sleeve. 'You may want to stand back momentarily, Miss Lovegood.'

Luna acquiesced and stood up, walking over to stand by Snape as he pointed his wand directly at Hermione. He stared into Hermione's brown eyes and saw nervousness, even a trace of fear, there.

'Are you afraid, Miss Granger?' he asked.

'I am a little scared,' she admitted. 'Will this hurt?'

Snape nodded minutely. 'It will hurt only slightly and will feel like someone is exerting a lot of pressure on your head. I bound your memories of the events two nights ago for a very good reason, so prepare yourself as best as you can for the shock.'

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath. When she opened her eyes, she looked up at Snape and nodded. 'I'm ready.'

'*Aufero Redimio*,' Snape said in a clear voice.

A purple spark shot from the tip of his wand and headed directly towards Hermione's temple, where it entered. Hermione felt a terrible pressure in her skull, just as Snape had described. She grit her teeth hard, willing the pain to go away, but it was the least of her worries. For when the pain began to recede, the memories that were coming unbound were skittering through her head at an unbelievable pace. She could see the point where they were called away from Grimmauld Place to the forest where a battle had taken place. She saw the scene as she was sprinting as fast as she could through the forest towards her friends and fellow Order members. She could almost taste her fear and the adrenaline coursing through her.

Her fight with Bellatrix flitted to the forefront of her mind, the image of the witch being thrown hard against a tree filling her with pride for a moment.

But the next part of her memory was not a pleasant thing to remember. Her mouth was full of a bitter taste as she remembered being caught off-guard by Fenrir Greyback. He could have done anything to her: bit her, tortured her, raped her. Her disgust with herself was coursing through her as she remembered Greyback forcing his lips against hers and raping her mouth with his filthy tongue. It made her want to retch. The rest of her the scene began to unfold before her until finally the memory of him taking control of her via the Imperius Curse entered her mind.

She shivered when remembering the dagger he had slipped into her boot. The metal had been cold, but she had been unable to resist him. Her energy had been so low by that point that any attempts to fight him only drained her further. The moment in which Greyback delivered his instructions to her, however, was like a blow to her already-fragile psyche. She had killed Ron. She knew it even before the moment flashed; the shock and fear in his blue eyes made her eyes begin to water. She had killed her best friend, the young man she was certain she was falling in love with.

She began shivering and wrapped her arms around herself. Closing her eyes did nothing to ease the images or slow them down. A moment later, wracked with tears, she promptly leaned over the side of the bed and threw up the meagre contents of her stomach. She vomited until there was nothing left in her stomach to expel.

She barely noticed when Luna rushed over to sit behind her and rub her back, embracing her and holding her hair out of her face, which was covered in a mixture of saliva, tears, and mucus, a small dribble of vomit trailing down her chin.

'I killed him,' Hermione sobbed, her cries becoming louder and her breath coming rather frantically. 'I killed him.'

She sobbed until there were no tears in her body left to cry. She didn't want to open her eyes, but as she lay on the bed, sniffing and hiccupping, someone passed a wet washcloth over her face to remove the mess. Hermione felt her heart clench hard within her. Her whole life had been turned upside down.

Even as she drifted back into unconsciousness, there were only two things on her mind: Ron's empty, blue eyes staring up at her, and the word 'murderer' imprinted into the very fibre of her being.

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A/N Introductory chapters are now done. On to the real story.

Chapter 3: Waiting in Shadows

Chapter 3 of 34

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The steam in the bathroom was everywhere, fogging up the glass of the windows and the mirror sitting over the basin.

She was pressing her forehead against the cool tiles of the shower wall. The way it soothed the pounding of her head was the best thing that she had felt all day. It had been two days since she had been released from the infirmary and into Snape's care; guest chambers had been arranged for her alongside Snape's in the dungeons. Her body had been suffering the effects of her roiling emotions: she could barely stomach even the sight of food, she would more often than not have a severe headache, and every time she heard a noise that was out of place, her body would twitch uncomfortably in response.

It had taken the past day and a half to get used to the feeling of having some semblance of privacy. Snape would check on her twice a day to ensure she was neither having a breakdown nor harming herself in any way. She shook her head, curling her right hand into a fist beside her face. She had thought about harming herself a few times, but in the end she decided it would be fruitless. The only thing that would make her feel better was a well-placed *Avada* in her direction.

Sighing heavily, Hermione pushed off from the wall and stood beneath the showerhead, allowing the hot water to beat down on her as she rinsed conditioner from her hair.

After turning the taps off, she stepped out of the stall and blindly grasped for a towel. When she found nothing on the rack, she frowned. Sticking her arm out in the direction of the doorway, she summoned a towel from the bedroom and wiped her face on it before tucking it around her body. She made her way into the bedroom, pulling out a slightly oversized black sweater and an old pair of jeans and slipped them on after her undergarments.

She went to the sitting room, eyelids heavy from weariness and crying. She was certain she had no more tears left in her body after the past few days. Hermione felt like there was nothing left in her for anything else. She had not looked at a book since Grimmauld Place, she didn't even bother picking up a quill, and she hadn't seen anyone but Snape and Madam Pomfrey in days. None of her friends had come to see her since the day she had awoken from her unconscious state. And why should they? All the friends she ever had were in some way connected to Ron.

Her heart clenched hard in her chest before it returned to its slightly elevated beat. Her moment of weakness was proving to be one of her greatest losses. Closing her eyes for a moment, she tried to clear her head of everything, only to find it was all but impossible to block out the image of Ron's empty, blue eyes.

'Forgive me, Ron,' she said softly into the empty sitting room.

'Your friend would not approve of this behaviour, Miss Granger,' said a low voice from behind the chair she was curled up in.

She sat up a little straighter and waited for Snape to walk around and sit in the adjacent armchair. 'Pardon me for feeling sorry for myself after having just murdered one of my best friends,' she replied, frowning.

'Miss Granger, how many times must I reiterate you were not at fault?' Snape asked calmly. 'It could not be helped. Greyback, for all his lack of grandeur, is more powerful than either Bellatrix Lestrange or Lucius Malfoy. You were weak, and he took advantage of this. I am only relieved he did not assault your person, also.'

'He didn't bite me or rape me,' she whispered. 'He could have if he wanted to. I was so foolish.'

'It has been but a week since the battle. This is far from over, and you know the Order needs you to perform at your usual level. This entire attack was a deliberate one; the Dark Lord knew that by doing this, it would unsettle us. To prevent him from feeling as though he has won a great victory from this, it is imperative we do not allow him that satisfaction. It is what he wants.'

Hermione looked up at Snape, shock registering vaguely at his words. 'I killed my best friend. It's not as easy as just picking up and trying to act like it never happened,' she said, a lone tear escaping to trek down her cheek.

'How do you feel?' Snape asked, surprising her once more.

'How do you mean, sir?'

'What emotions are you experiencing, Miss Granger?' he asked.

Hermione stared at him for a moment before frowning in concentration as she tried to muddle through the emotions battling for dominance within her. It was hard she felt so dead inside, like all the good things had been ripped from her and all that was left was a shell of her former self. All her other emotions felt like something foreign to the rest of her body. There were just too many of them.

'I feel empty,' she said softly, allowing her gaze to slip from her former professor to the flames in the fireplace that were gently licking at the stones surrounding them.

The room was silent save for the soft sound of their breathing.

'I understand,' Snape said simply, drawing her focus once more back to him. 'I can understand because I, too, have been placed in a situation very similar to this one.'

'Really?' Hermione asked coldly. 'And just which one of your friends did you kill after allowing a Death Eater to get the jump on you?'

She saw anger flash through Snape's black eyes for a moment before he sucked in a breath and seemed to overlook her childish rebuttal. 'You know nothing, Miss Granger,' he said quietly, pushing himself up from the armchair.

He made his way across the room to the portrait covering its entrance, pausing for a moment once it had been opened. 'Do ensure you make an appearance at the Head Table for dinner in the Great Hall this evening,' he said before continuing through the exit and closing the portrait behind him.

As she watched him leave, a bitter taste filled her mouth. She had developed a knack over the past few days of driving Snape away when it was her want. He was trying to help her, she knew, but all she wanted was to be left to her thoughts sometimes. What she really wanted was for Harry to visit her. The last she had seen of him, Harry's green eyes had been staring at her filled with a mixture of fear, shock, and sadness. He probably wouldn't want to see her again, fearful the same could occur to him and he would die at the end of her wand, also.

She snorted mentally. It was ridiculous. A few days on her own had reduced her to thinking morbidly. She knew Harry was forgiving, but she doubted even he could overlook her killing his other best friend. She bit her tongue, willing her mind to calm. What good would it do her to sulk and pity herself for the remainder of her existence? She could not ignore everyone forever.

Snape was right. She needed to push aside everything and focus on her research for the Order. It was the only thing that she could do under the circumstances. She stuck out a hand and summoned a quill and inkbottle, leaning forward to grab her research journal from the coffee table sitting in front of her. She uncapped the bottle and dipped the quill into the ink, then opened her book to the first clean page and began to construct a list.

She didn't think she would ever get over Ron, but she could bury herself under research and work towards bringing down Voldemort. After the war was over, she had no idea what she would do to distract herself, but she had some time, and she would take advantage of it.

She remained undisturbed for half an hour, writing until her clock chimed to alert her there were fifteen minutes until dinner in the Great Hall would begin.

She didn't want to go, but Snape had been adamant, and who was she to refuse? After all, was it not he who had prevented her from being arrested and dragged to the Ministry and Azkaban? *Although, I probably deserve to be*, she thought as she went to her room and snatched out a set of plain, black semi-formal robes from her cupboard to wear over her jeans and sweater to dinner. Once she had tamed her hair into a somewhat-acceptable braid, she left her quarters and headed up to the Hall.

She entered through the side door as she had been instructed by Snape the day before and walked to the Head Table, uncertainty filling her. It was unnerving to be able to see all the students from their elevated position, especially as a large number of them would stare at her and whisper amongst themselves. She swallowed, her throat a little dry, and made her way directly over to where Snape sat and planted herself in the chair between him and Poppy Pomfrey.

'Good evening, Miss Granger,' Snape acknowledged.

'Good evening, Professor,' she answered quietly. 'I apologise if I was a little late.'

Snape dismissed her apology with a slight wave of his hand just as dinner appeared on the table, covering most of the spare surfaces with platters of food, carafes filled with gravies and sauces, and bowls filled with vegetables and salad. Hermione stared at the feast before her and was surprised by her lack of appetite. She had only eaten a piece of toast at breakfast that morning along with several cups of tea, so she assumed the smell of food might entice her stomach to desire it.

She stared at her empty plate for a moment but was startled when, from beside her, Snape started to pile roast chicken and steamed vegetables onto her plate before dousing it with a generous helping of gravy. She cast him a dark look for his interference but resolutely picked up a fork and began stabbing almost violently at the meal. Snape let a single dark eyebrow quirk up before he turned back to his own meal, content with seeing her eat, even if she was annoyed.

'Miss Granger, you needn't massacre your food in order to eat it,' Poppy quipped from her other side.

Scowling even further, she allowed her movements to become less jerky and irritable. 'My appetite has not yet returned, Madam Pomfrey,' she said softly, poking at a bit of broccoli.

'I will prescribe you a potion that will help ease you back into the routine of eating regular meals slowly,' the matron said. 'You can begin that treatment tomorrow and make sure you attend every meal in the Great Hall so I can monitor your progress.'

Hermione nodded. Dinner continued on, and she knew there were still many eyes around the hall trained on the Staff table, and more specifically on her. She felt uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of students she had attended school with just seven years beforehand. Her magic was tingling at the tips of her fingers, practically trying to jump out of her system. She picked up her knife to cut up some of her chicken and snatched her hand back when she felt her magic crackle against the object.

She frowned and took a deep breath, trying to settle her nerves and the magical energy. It had been rather unstable ever since she had woken, but before then she had managed to keep it from getting out of hand. She had a feeling she was going to have to pay a visit to the library to do some research. It was strange, after so many years of being under control of her magic, that in a few days it would become as uncontrollable as it had been when she was a child.

She noticed Snape glance at her curiously, but she shook her head at him. Snape didn't need to be aware of everything.

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A/N I had intended for Hermione to begin the stages of becoming dark by the end of the chapter, but it seems that she will need to wait a little longer yet.

Chapter 4: A Slippery Slope

Chapter 4 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thank you to VIVAvivacious for beta-ing this chapter.

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Autumn had brought along a lot of cold weather to the Scottish Highlands and Hogwarts.

Snape had all the fireplaces in his chambers lit to ward off the cold that permeated his dungeons. He had checked in on Granger early in the afternoon and had ensured before leaving her chambers all her fireplaces were lit, also. It wouldn't do well for her to end up ill after all the trouble everyone had gone through in order to prevent her arrest or death. Because it had been he who had prevented her immediate capture and questioning by the Ministry, she was now his responsibility entirely a responsibility he was finding harder than he had imagined it would be.

Granger had been withdrawn for several days now, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to entice her to converse and share with him what troubled her. She had spent increasing amounts of time in the library during the day and shut herself away in her chambers at night, researching something she seemed extremely unwilling to share with him. He didn't blame her. She was emotionally delicate at the moment, and he had not exactly been nice to her in the time they had been acquainted.

He sighed heavily, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose to chase away an impending headache.

Snape had been forced to do many things in his life he regretted, to the point where he thought ending his life would be the easiest way to deal with the problem. If the Granger girl had any suicidal impulses, she did well at hiding them, for he was certain she had not seemed to lean in that direction. Instead, she was curling in on herself, becoming an emotional cripple in the same way he had been doing all of his life. It was okay for an old man like him to be that way, but for a young woman with so much promise, he did not want that to be her fate.

He resolutely decided it was time to go and complete his nightly check-up of the Granger girl while it was still a reasonable time to do so. Getting up from his armchair, he left his chambers and walked down the hall to the next portrait that served as the doorway to her rooms. Muttering the password they had agreed upon, the portrait swung forward to allow him entry, and he closed it behind him as he stepped into her still-warm sitting room. He found her sitting in one of the armchairs by the fire, a book open on her lap and a quill idly twirling between the fingers of her right hand.

'Miss Granger, is everything to your satisfaction this evening?' he asked.

She turned her head to watch as he perched himself into the adjacent armchair. 'I'm fine, Professor,' she answered, closing the book on her lap he now identified as being her personal journal.

Snape nodded, satisfied. He noted the dark circles beneath the girl's eyes and slightly pursed his lips in anger at seeing her as she was. She was far too skinny, verging on gaunt, and her skin was an unhealthy shade of white and grey. To say she looked ill would have been the understatement of the decade. He stood up and went to her fireplace, tossing in some Floo powder from the mantle to call the kitchens. After ordering her a tea service complete with sandwiches, he relit the fire and returned to his seat.

'I'd like you to try and eat more and drink some tea,' he told her simply. 'It's chamomile, so you might find it helps you sleep.'

'I've tried chamomile to get to sleep, but very little is effective, short of working myself to the point of exhaustion and passing out in this armchair,' she answered, her voice quiet.

Snape nodded in understanding. There was a point when he, too, had trouble getting to sleep for the same reasons. He was always afraid of seeing their lifeless eyes in his dreams and nightmares.

'Regardless, Miss Granger, I would like you to try and eat some of the sandwiches and get some sleep in your actual bed before tomorrow morning,' he informed her, his tone brooking no argument. 'That being said, I will disturb you no longer. Good evening.'

He stood when she nodded in response and swept out of her chambers and back to the portrait guarding his own. He ordered himself a tea tray from the kitchens and sat down in his armchair to enjoy a cup of strong, black tea once the service had arrived. As he sipped the hot liquid, his mind reeled back to thoughts of Hermione Granger once more. She wasn't taking proper care of herself, and the dubious pleasure of doing so now fell on his shoulders. He was certain that if they were any narrower, they would break under the weight of all of his responsibilities. Dumbledore knew nothing of the monster he had created.

He closed his eyes for a short time, considering Granger's situation. It was obvious she was lonely, despite her increasingly reclusive tendencies. He knew, with her temperament, there was every chance she could be lulled into sinking further into the world she had created for herself within the deep recesses of her mind. With no one to confess her feelings to, she would bottle everything inside until she exploded.

Opening his eyes once more, he stared sullenly into the fireplace. He knew there was nothing else for it.

Hauling himself from his armchair, he went to the mantelpiece and scooped a generous amount of Floo powder from the jar. Tossing it into the fire, the flames immediately turned green. Crouching down, he stared into the cool, green flames taking the place of the warm, orange ones.

'Harry Potter, Grimmauld Place,' he stated clearly.

The messy hair of Potter appeared in the flames, and soon he was faced with the curious face of Harry Potter. 'Professor Snape?' he asked, confusion clearly written on his face.

'I realize it is late, but I need to speak to you about Miss Granger,' Snape said, shifting his legs to sit on the rug before the fire.

'Oh,' Harry replied, casting his eyes downwards.

'Mr. Potter, your friend is going through an intensely difficult time at present,' the older wizard said softly. 'She has been extremely withdrawn of late, and I believe seeing some of her friends may help her.'

'I understand,' Harry said, swallowing visibly. 'Do you want me to come to Hogwarts tomorrow and speak to her?'

Snape ground his teeth and frowned, his annoyance evident in his expression. 'Boy, you should have been here every day for the past week to see your friend,' he growled. 'I am not in charge of reminding you of your duties to your friends, Mr. Potter, nor am I interested in reprimanding you. In the future, I simply expect you to do what is correct and start splitting your time between the Weasleys and Hogwarts.'

'Mad-Eye said it isn't wise for me to be around Hermione while she is the way she is,' Harry mumbled under his breath.

'Mad-Eye Moody is named thusly because he has gone mad over time,' Snape spat, causing Potter's expression to turn to one of shock.

'I will talk to Molly and Arthur in the morning to see if I can be escorted to Hogwarts,' Harry stammered.

'Oh yes, because a young man aged twenty-five is unable to make any decisions on his own,' the older wizard said snidely.

Harry's expression immediately turned to one of anger at Snape's sharp jibe. 'You know, for someone who is fighting on the side of good, you really are a first-rate bastard.'

Snape sucked in a sharp breath, glaring at the boy's head. 'I feel as though this entire conversation has been a waste of my time, Potter. Be here tomorrow for your friend or do not bother coming to the castle at all,' he ground out.

Snape ended the Floo call without so much as a goodbye and hauled himself off the ground, waving a hand in the direction of the fireplace to light the fire again. When it was once again radiating warmth, he walked towards the door that led to his bedroom. Ridding himself of his boots and robes, he stalked crossly into the bathroom, shedding the rest of his clothing and placing it all into the wicker hamper. He waved a hand in the direction of his shower, turning on the faucets and setting the water to his preferred temperature before stepping under the spray.

As he grabbed a bar of soap and began to lather himself up, his thoughts turned to Potter. He snorted at the thought of Harry Potter being the person on his mind whilst taking a shower and shook his head in disbelief. Either way, he was more disappointed in the boy than he had ever been prior to that point. Granger had stood by the irritable piece of baggage for all of their years at Hogwarts and all of those that had followed, and the boy was allowing his ridiculous feelings for the Weasleys and the influence of Mad-Eye Moody keep him from paying her a visit.

Of all the ridiculous and disloyal things...

Snape closed his eyes and finished washing himself, allowing the water to rinse the suds from his body before manually turning off the taps. He grabbed a towel and dried off before heading into his room once more and donning long, silk pajama pants and a matching black robe. Climbing into his bed, he rested his head on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling, feeling weary beyond his years. And was it any wonder? After twenty years of deception, he was worn out. He had been forced to discontinuing spying for the Order two years ago, having nearly lost his life on more than one occasion, and yet he was still being pursued for his betrayal.

The addition of having to babysit a member of the former Gryffindor trio was hardly lessening the burden. He was stuck with the emotionally unstable girl for an indefinite length of time while being expected to both teach at Hogwarts and work for the Order.

He closed his eyes and willed away mental images of the Granger girl and the battle in which she had gone from beloved know-it-all to one of the least-liked people in the Wizarding world. Unsure how the story had managed to leak, Hermione Granger's slaying of one of her best friends had been widely publicized in a number of journals and newspapers. Snape had been very careful about screening what newspapers she actually saw in order to prevent her from having to read the worst of it. No doubt the Dark Lord had a hand in the revelation.

His mind drifted back to Hermione's face that night as he had checked to see how she was faring.

Her eyes were almost as dead as if she had been hit by a killing curse herself. It was hardly her fault the curse itself did lend toward the destruction of one's soul a little bit every time it killed. Rolling onto his side, he contemplated his options for the days and weeks that would follow.

He needed to help Hermione Granger come out of the lonely pit of despair she had been slowly burying herself in. He was certain she was the key to discovering just how to rid the Wizarding world of their worst dark terrorist yet. He needed to finish what he had started and repay the debt he owed to both Albus Dumbledore and Wizarding society for his misjudgments as a youth. He would strive to repair the damage inflicted on his unsuspecting young charge and repay the debt he owed to all those souls that he had destroyed himself or had been unable to heal.

Severus Snape had a clear purpose.

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A/N A few Snape chapters will be scattered throughout, and here is one of them. I hope you are all enjoying this so far.

Chapter 5: The Damaged Soul

Chapter 5 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious and her mad beta skills.

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The book was left open on the coffee table before the fireplace, the page marked with an old, worn bookmark, just in case.

It had taken Hermione the better part of three days to find information in the Hogwarts library about magical surges and control before she had finally found something that would be of use to her. All her digging prior to her search of the Restricted Section and old archives had been fruitless, and she had been close to giving up on her pursuit. However, her lack of control had only worsened, and while she was able to hide her condition from Snape until that point, she didn't want to risk him discovering sooner than she would have liked him to. So, she had continued her search.

The night before, she had snuck up to the library shortly after the students' curfew and searched through the old archives until she finally hit upon something that described her condition almost exactly. Her wand no longer responded to her or channelled any of her spells. It was resting on the nightstand beside her bed, untouched since the day it stopped working for her. Hermione had been relying solely on her ability to perform simple wandless magic whenever she was required to.

The day before, Harry had visited her for a few hours, and it had been a real drain on her energy to contain her magic and prevent it from lashing out at her friend.

Harry. There was something that had been unexpected. He hadn't come to see her for over two weeks after the battle in the forest clearing, and when he had, he had been so reluctant to speak with her about it. Hermione had spent nearly two weeks of her time in seclusion, avoiding questions and ignoring Snape, Madam Pomfrey, and even Dumbledore. All she had wanted was the chance to speak to one of the only friends she had left, and it seemed he had all but abandoned her, especially in light of all the negative press she had received over the incident. She was all alone.

Sighing, she pressed her forehead to the cool glass pane of the window. Beyond it was an idyllic autumn scene with a tall tree shedding orange, brown, and golden leaves, scattering them all over the ground. The window would enable her to see any scene she desired, for in the dungeons there was no natural light, nor was there any scenery

to speak of. She sighed heavily and pushed away from the window, walking back over to the armchair she occupied most regularly.

She stared down at her hands, turning them over so her milky-white palms were visible. It was almost like she was looking at hands that were not her own. Clenching them into fists, she closed her eyes. She was going to have to speak to Snape. She felt like she was in a body that was not hers anymore. She needed to purchase a new wand and attempt to get her magic under control once more.

In the book, it had described all the ways magic could become uncontrollable in adults, and she recognized hers had been a result of her soul being fractured by casting the killing curse. It had been a suspicion of hers since she had discovered the problem, but she had been unwilling to accept it until she had thoroughly researched the matter. It pained her to think her soul was no longer as whole as it once had been, but she cleared her mind of that quickly. Every time she looked into her mind, it never ended well all of the images of Ron and Greyback would dredge up to the forefront and torment her for hours on end.

Looking up to the clock on the mantle, she saw it was only three in the afternoon. There was still plenty of time for her to see Snape and convince him to take her to Diagon Alley to buy herself a new wand.

She left her chambers and walked down the hall to Snape's classroom, where she knew he would be fastidiously tidying up after his final class for the afternoon. She paused at the open doorway, peering in to see the man brandishing his wand and sending untidy piles of books back to their regular shelf. Seeing the familiar sight of Snape being as obsessive-compulsive as ever comforted her slightly.

'Professor?' she asked softly as she stepped into the classroom.

He spun on his heel sharply and looked at her with a surprised expression before he managed to arrange his features back to indifference. 'How can I be of service, Miss Granger?' he replied.

'I need to ask a favour of you,' she said, looking down at her feet.

'And that is?'

She took a deep breath before exhaling slowly. Snape certainly wasn't going to make it easy on her. 'I need to go to Diagon Alley,' she murmured, walking closer to him. 'There is something I need to purchase there, and it is important I do so as soon as possible.'

Snape's eyebrow rose in question. 'What is it?'

'I need a new wand,' she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Snape's eyes widened with realization faster than she would have expected. 'I understand,' he said with a nod. 'I should have probably guessed earlier.'

Hermione frowned at that statement. 'You mean, you knew this sort of thing could have happened to me?' she demanded.

Snape nodded and sighed heavily. 'Forgive me, but the idea slipped my mind with all that has been occurring,' he answered. 'I knew about the effects the killing curse would have on your soul and your magic, but I had not realized it was already in effect. I knew because it happened to me after the first time I was forced to cast Avada Kedavra.'

Hermione's eyes widened. Well, of course Snape had been forced to cast the killing curse. In his position as a spy, it would have been nearly impossible for him to avoid, but she had not expected him to admit this to her so freely. She watched as he withdrew a second wand from up the sleeve of his frock coat, laying it on his desk beside his regular black wand and beckoning her over to him.

'This was my first wand,' he said, indicating the brown wand to the left.

Hermione touched it reverently, running her index finger over the wood and feeling the texture of it. It had been a beautiful wand, birch, eleven inches, and from what her magic could sense, it contained a single phoenix feather at its core. She let her fingers drop from it before she slid them over to his current wand. It was thirteen and a half inches, made of ebony and had dragon heartstring at the core. It had a beautifully carved black handle and was a wand that was obviously created for the sole purpose of protecting its master, excellent for Wizards' duels.

'Your second wand suits you much better than the first,' Hermione whispered, looking up at Snape just in time to see a flicker of surprise in his eyes.

'Your wand, the one that no longer responds to you, what is it made of?' Snape asked her.

'It was made of buckthorn,' she began softly, staring at the wands on the desk before her. 'The wood has vine-like carvings all the way along it. I was always very proud of my wand it is ten and a half inches and has unicorn hair at the core. It was perfect for Charms and Transfiguration, but not terribly adept for duelling. I was lucky to get by mostly on speed and skill.'

'I can see how this entire situation has rendered your wand useless, especially with the unicorn tail hair for its core,' Snape said, picking up both his wands and slipping them up their respective sleeves. 'Your soul being torn by the killing curse reacts badly with something so pure.'

Hermione nodded. 'I could only find one book in the library archives that could confirm my suspicions,' she said. 'I didn't want to say anything until I was certain it was the only reason.'

Hermione watched Snape nod and then go silent. She knew he was thinking hard. She had seen that hard expression many times over the past three years as they were researching together in the library at Grimmauld Place. He walked down the aisle to leave the classroom, beckoning Hermione to follow him. After they had left and warded the classroom, he led the way down the hall, past his chambers to hers.

'Collect your wand and bring it with you,' he said simply when they stopped at the portrait that guarded her rooms.

She hurriedly complied, summoning the wand from her nightstand wordlessly, then quickly made her way back to the hallway. Snape stood waiting patiently, and when she emerged, he led the way even further down the hallway until they reached a dead end. He pulled his ebony wand from his sleeve and tapped it against a brick. Not unlike the wall that stood between the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley, the stones began to shift position until finally another dimly lit hallway was revealed to them.

As they entered, the stone wall closed once more behind them, and Snape grasped Hermione's arm as he led them down the hall. She could barely see a thing and was grateful for his intuitive grasp on her arm. She followed silently until they reached yet another dead-end, this one blocked by a heavy wooden door. Snape released her to grasp the iron handle and give it a great pull to wrench the door open.

When it finally opened, she moved away so he could open it fully. She stepped out of the hall into the cold air outside the castle. She looked back at Snape to see him pulling the door closed behind him before the pair began walking in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Once on the outskirts, Snape took her arm again.

'I am going to Apparate us to Diagon Alley from here, Miss Granger,' he informed her. 'I suggest envisioning Ollivander's.'

Hermione closed her eyes and thought hard about the wandmaker's shop. A moment later, she opened them and found both she and Snape were standing under the shop's sign. She followed Snape silently into the shop, the bell tinkling above them as they entered. She stared around the shop and found everything was exactly as it had been the last time she had been there everything except for herself.

'Ahhh, Miss Granger?' asked a voice, snapping her out of her reminiscence.

Hermione looked up sharply and saw Ollivander was standing just over the other side of his counter now. 'Yes, sir. That is me,' she replied.

'And what brings you here this fine autumn day?' he asked smoothly. 'Perhaps to purchase a new wand? Old wand not working for you anymore?'

Hermione could almost feel his blue-eyed gaze piercing her like a knife. So he had obviously read the articles in the newspapers about Ron's death at her hands. What did it matter? The people who knew the truth were all that mattered. She swallowed back a rude retort to his accusing eyes and nodded curtly.

'Yes, my old wand no longer responds to my magic the way it used to,' she said quietly. 'I would like to purchase a new wand.'

Ollivander nodded and wandered down an aisle, reaching up to pluck three boxes down from a shelf before returning to the counter. 'Your old wand contained unicorn tail hair, am I correct? Ten and a half inches made of buckthorn with a vine pattern engraved into the wood?' he asked, but he already knew he was correct. 'Well, let's see if this wand does you any good...'

Hermione accepted the first wand from him and gave it a wave. It sent every loose paper in the shop flying up into the air and scattering all over. Ollivander shook his head and took it back, replacing it in its box before taking out the next. Every light bulb in the shop shattered when she waved it this time. He frowned and passed her the final wand. Hermione felt the tingling feeling thrum through her veins in the direction of her fingers, and she knew then that her magic was flowing into the wand. She waved it this time and levitated all the quills off the top of the counter.

'Ebony, twelve inches and dragon heartstring,' Ollivander announced with a small, Dumbledorean twinkle in his eyes.

Hermione stared at the wand in her hand and nodded. It was the right one.

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A/N It will get dark soon, I promise. v

Chapter 6: Train of Thought

Chapter 6 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A huge hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta.

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The ticking sound the clock over the mantelpiece made was almost deafening in the silence of the room.

Hermione had spent a lot of time in her room that day contemplating the chain of events over the past two weeks. Her mouth filled with bitter hatred the moment she turned her thoughts to the battle in the forest. She could still hear Greyback's voice in the back of her mind, his cruel voice, forcing her against her will to do one of the worst things she had ever done. She felt her stomach turn anew when she thought of the moment he had forced his twisted, foul lips against hers, choking her with his tongue as he ravished her mouth. She had been so scared he was going to force her to have sex with him while she had been under the Imperius.

She imagined being raped in that manner might have been better than what he had forced her to do.

After she had killed Ron under his influence, she had obviously fainted. On waking up in the infirmary, she had been so confused. When her memories had been returned to her, she had been devastated beyond all reason. She was still quite devastated. It had been the most difficult fortnight of her life. She had been forced to miss Ron's funeral, stuck in the hospital wing. Her remaining friends had all but abandoned her to her fate as a Wizarding world pariah.

She felt her eyes burn with unshed tears. The hurt she felt at Harry's betrayal... she shook her head, trying to shake those thoughts out. She couldn't blame him for not really wanting to have anything to do with her. The Weasleys were the only family he had, and with his ties to them through Ginny, he could hardly choose between them. She was just one person, after all.

She blinked rapidly, clearing the tears from her eyes.

Staring down at her hands, she contemplated her magic. It was different, just like everything already was. She could feel her magic so much more than she used to be able to. Where it had once been white and clean, it was now stained dark with grey and red. She never imagined she would have blood on her hands, even if Ron hadn't even had the chance to bleed. Her soul felt older, darker, and she was consumed by her grief.

She sighed heavily. She didn't know what to do. She hated being at Hogwarts, she despised not knowing what was going on in the magical world, and she was angered by the lack of trust those in the Order were displaying towards her. She felt hate bubble up within her when she thought of Mad-Eye Moody and his open hostility. She felt confusion over Dumbledore's lack of interest in her beyond her usefulness to the Order. Now that she was a liability, she was of little importance. She saw him at dinner in the Great Hall only. Even Professor McGonagall had been strangely distant.

The only people she really had were Luna, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Snape. Luna had been to visit her whenever she was allowed time away from working for the Quibbler. It was the only paper that had not printed horrible stories about her in it, and for that she was grateful. It hurt to have so many against her when the circumstances had hardly been her fault. She hated the idea that she always seemed like she was feeling sorry for herself.

She glanced to the stack of newspapers and magazines sitting on the coffee table along with some textbooks and her research journal. Pariah... she had gone from being the brightest witch of her generation to being practically ostracised.

She stared at one of the books in front of her and noted the werewolf that stood out on the cover.

Greyback had not been one of the Death Eaters arrested after the battle in the forest. He was still at large, running around the countryside, killing and torturing Muggles and Muggleborns alike. She frowned. How had he managed to escape capture? He was hardly a man more beast than anything, but he was ruthless and more powerful than he had ever been given credit for. She knew she had been on the receiving end of his vicious spells on more than one occasion. Despite the beast that was constantly in

him, he was not an idiot by any stretch of the imagination. After all, he had managed to turn her into what she was now.

She wondered where the man was. How easy would it be for her to find him?

Her thoughts on Greyback were distracted when a knock sounded at the portrait entrance. She stood and went over to answer it, wondering who it could be. It wasn't Snape, as ordinarily he would come and go as he pleased. Besides, he was in the middle of teaching a class. She opened the portrait outwards and found Luna standing in the hallway with a small smile curving her mouth. Hermione's eyes widened, and she soon found herself wrapped in the arms of her friend.

Hermione felt a few tears escape from beneath her eyelids.

'Hermione!' Luna exclaimed with a soft sob. 'Oh, it's so good to see you!'

She allowed the younger witch to continue holding onto her as they entered her rooms, and the two sat down on the lounge that sat opposite to the armchair Snape occupied during his visits. The two sat together in silence for a while, staring into the fire. Hermione reached over and grasped one of Luna's hands in her own tightly, surprising the other woman by the suddenness of her action.

'How have you been, Hermione?' Luna asked, looking up into the older woman's face, noting the dark circles beneath her eyes.

'I'm fine,' she answered with a small smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Luna shook her head sadly. Her blue eyes widened when she spotted a black wand sitting on the coffee table beside Hermione's books and papers. 'That's new,' she said, nodding her head in the direction of the wand.

Hermione looked over to where Luna had indicated and nodded. 'I had to get a new wand,' she explained. 'The old one wasn't responding to my magic. It's darker than it used to be. Unicorn tail hair doesn't mix well with dark magic.'

The younger woman nodded. 'I understand,' Luna said softly. 'I've missed you terribly. It has been so busy trying to run the Quibbler these days without my dad to help me.'

'I'm sorry, Luna,' Hermione said, squeezing her hand gently. 'I feel really selfish dragging you away from your work like this. You didn't have to come all this way just to see me.'

Luna shook her head adamantly. 'I don't think you're being selfish at all,' she insisted. 'You must be so lonely here. I heard that Harry and the Weasleys haven't really been by to see you. I'm a little disappointed with him, if I'm honest.'

Hermione was touched by Luna's concern. If she was honest, she felt similarly. 'This entire situation is very difficult for everyone,' she replied calmly.

'Do you want to talk about everything that has happened? I am happy to listen.'

Hermione opened her mouth to say no, but she closed it again quickly. 'There is still so much I want to do,' she whispered. 'I wanted to help the Order defeat Voldemort, I wanted to finish my Apprenticeship and gain my Masters in Arithmancy. I was supposed to have a wonderful job, and Ron and I were supposed to get married and have a family together. He proposed to me once, you know? I told him if he could wait until after I had finished school and the war was over, I would think about saying yes.'

By this point, tears were beginning to leave wet tracks down her cheeks. Hermione looked at her friend and took a deep breath to calm herself. 'I knew Ron and I would never be truly compatible, even when I promised to give him a shot,' she admitted. 'But I would do that and more if I could take back what happened that day.'

Luna pulled Hermione into a tight hug, rubbing her back soothingly as she allowed her friend to cry the hot tears that she had been holding back for. Hermione knew how long. After a few minutes, the crying stopped, and Hermione pulled back from Luna, looking sheepish and sniffing. She quickly summoned a handkerchief from the other room and dabbed at her wet face before blowing her nose noisily. The pair chuckled at this together, and Hermione realised that having Luna there was the best thing that could have possibly happened.

Luna remained with her for the rest of the day until the sun began to set in the sky.

At dinner, Hermione was feeling decidedly less sad than usual and chatted to Madam Pomfrey about the hospital wing and how she had half a dozen students in there who were all sick with the Wizard's Flu. After offering her assistance during the day, Hermione quickly finished her meal and excused herself from the table. She didn't notice the pair of black eyes that were trained on her back as she exited the Great Hall through the staff door.

Once she was safely ensconced within her room, she summoned all her research materials to her. Her mind was quickly formulating a plan of attack as she flipped through her notebook to the page where she had jotted down a few formulas for speeding up the development time for a dark potion the potion Snape had been working on for five years that would rend the powers from Voldemort's body permanently.

She would help Snape complete the potion, for who was she to prevent the world she lived in from being rid of a madman? She would contribute to the war effort, but she would no longer be working for the Order of the Phoenix. She hadn't thought the day would come that she would outgrow the Order and feel the need to move on, but she had arrived at that day. If they would not support and accept her, then she would not work for them. Her anger at their betrayal had driven her away, and they would have nobody to blame but themselves.

'Miss Granger?' Snape's voice rang through the room as she heard him enter her chambers through the portrait.

She walked over to him with her notes and pushed the book into his hands, pointing at the formulas. 'This was the information I found on that day,' she murmured, staring at Snape's pale hands. 'I want to help you finish that potion.'

Snape nodded. 'I appreciate this,' he replied.

Hermione looked down at the ground. 'I can't work for the Order any more, Professor,' she said as calmly as she was able.

'I understand,' he said. 'The choice is yours to make. I envy you have this choice within your grasp.'

'You never had a choice,' she stated.

Snape shook his head. 'No.'

'I am sorry it is this way, but there are things I have to do now that I can't do while I am still part of the Order,' Hermione told him. 'I may need to ask for your help in return at some point; as for now, you are one of the very few people I think I can trust.'

Snape's eyes snapped up to look at her face, shock registering on his features. 'I will not betray that trust.'

Hermione nodded. 'I know you won't, so let's go to your lab and see what we can do about my calculations,' she said, her expression flat.

Snape looked at her oddly for a moment before turning around and leading the way out of her chambers and down the hall in the direction of his office. He took down the wards on the door and entered, walking straight to the door situated behind his desk. Taking down further wards, the second door opened to reveal his pristine lab. Hermione's eyes widened as she took it in. Unlike the Potions classroom, the lab benches were new and polished. All the cauldrons on the shelf set against the far wall were clean and the various other implements shiny. The row of sinks on the adjacent wall had granite tops, and she wondered how much it would have cost.

'Let's get to work, shall we?' Snape prompted from beside her.

Hermione nodded and went to the workbench.

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A/N I know it's only a glimpse of the darkness within, but there will be further development.

Chapter 7: Great Expectations

Chapter 7 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Big hugs of thanks go out to VIVAvivacious for all of her help with this chapter.

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The potion made a hissing noise, releasing little white plumes of steam from the bubbles that would pop occasionally while it was boiling.

Hermione glanced across the room at the sudden noise breaking the deafening silence that had permeated the stifling lab up until that point. She watched as Snape practically leapt from his chair and glided across the room towards the cauldron. He was wearing his dragon hide gloves to protect his hands should the boiling potion splash him. Grabbing a glass stirring rod, he gave it a quick stir before lowering the heat of the flame beneath the cauldron and returning to the end of the workbench where she was seated. The wooden surface in front of her was covered in books they were using for research.

She nodded towards a brown-wrapped parcel that had just been delivered by an owl not two minutes before Snape had arrived in his lab for the day. Hermione had assumed they were books due to the weight. When he collected the package and brought it to the table, he tore the paper from it and cast a few charms to ensure the books contained within were safe to handle. Hermione sent a small smile in Snape's direction when he passed her the book she had requested he have sent over from the Grimmauld Place library.

'Did Harry send them over?' she asked hopefully.

Snape shook his head. 'Mr. Potter seems to be rather heavily under the influence of both Mad-Eye Moody and Molly Weasley,' he answered, his voice cold. 'I believe the boy may have even moved to live in the Burrow for a time. I sent an owl to Kingsley Shacklebolt to send these particular books.'

Hermione closed her eyes to stall the tears that threatened to fall and nodded. 'All right,' she said, turning her attention to the book in front of her.

Snape eyed her warily, watching her expression slip to indifference. He found he wasn't too keen on seeing her look that way. He swiftly placed the rest of the books that had been delivered in a pile beside her and glanced over her shoulder at the calculations she was writing down in her journal. She had her shoulders hunched over a little as she bent to read a page of the book that she had just received. Hermione looked up at him when his hand lifted a loose curl away from the inkpot it was hovering right above.

'Thank you,' she said in surprise.

'The ink stains everything, Granger,' Snape said gruffly, moving to the other side of the room to check on his potion once more.

Hermione sighed and looked back down at her book. Snape had been gruffer with her over the past couple days, and she knew it was because his Dark Mark was hurting him. He never said anything to her about it, but she could tell from the way he rubbed it on occasion or gripped his arm suddenly with his other hand if the pain was particularly bad. She had often wondered why Voldemort had not ended the connection between them when Snape had revealed himself as a spy and traitor, but since spending a lot of time with Snape, she had discovered the reason. Voldemort wanted a way of reminding Snape he knew of his betrayal and intended to have his revenge.

The thought of what could happen to Snape by the end of the war had not occurred to Hermione before then. He could die. She shivered at the thought, unable to think of the Wizarding world without him, much less Hogwarts. He was the one person who had remained consistent in the entire time she had known him: intelligent, brave, and protective, with a cruel streak in him in the classroom that would often injure students with the cutting force of his remarks. When he had been researching with her and Luna in Grimmauld Place, he had been witty and snarky with a little black humour thrown in for good measure.

No, she did not even want to think about a world where he did not exist. He was one of her few allies, and she needed his help more than she was able to comprehend at the time.

'Miss Granger, we must break for lunch, lest we begin to waste away in this laboratory,' Snape said, startling her out of her musings.

She looked up at him with a stunned expression. 'I suppose you're right,' she mumbled. 'I did skip breakfast this morning, and I am feeling a little peckish.'

Snape cast a quick stasis spell over his potion and shut off the flame beneath it. He led the way up to the Great Hall as usual, pulling out Hermione's seat for her to sit before sitting in his usual chair himself. Hermione was beginning to help herself to some sandwiches when, instead of Poppy Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall sat down on her other side. She had a triangle of cucumber sandwich halfway to her mouth when her former professor cleared her throat in an obvious manner, and Hermione darted a look at the older woman.

'Yes, Professor?' Hermione asked politely, although inside she was seething angrily. How dare that woman even try to talk to her after spending three weeks avoiding her at every turn?

'Miss Granger, Professor Dumbledore and I would like to have a meeting alone with you in his office after lunch is finished and the students are back in class,' Minerva informed her in clipped tones. 'Severus will have a class then, so you won't be needed downstairs to assist him with anything.'

Hermione looked to Snape to confirm this, and when he inclined his head in the affirmative slightly, she turned back to McGonagall. 'Then I suppose I will see you and the headmaster in his office whenever you would like.'

'Excellent. The password is sugar mice,' McGonagall said, standing up from that chair and returning to her regular seat for the remainder of lunch.

Hermione ate the remainder of her sandwich slowly, her stomach roiling in protest of the food she was proffering to it to sate her earlier hunger. She was now eating only to engage her mouth in something that would distract her from her impending meeting with the headmaster and McGonagall. She knew it had to be Order business, and obviously it had something to do with Ron's death. Why else would they want her there? She had a feeling the two of them wanted to pick her brain for some reason, searching for something she had not already given them.

When the first bell sounded, indicating the students should vacate the hall and collect their belongings for the next class, she rose with Snape and followed him out into the hall beyond the staff door entry. They walked down the corridor and around the corner until they were alone for a moment. Hermione knew her panic was shining through her eyes.

'They're not going to harm you, Miss Granger,' Snape told her seriously. 'They may pick your brain and question you and say a whole litany of things, but you don't have to remain answerable to them.'

'I haven't told anyone but you and Luna I am going to leave the Order yet,' she said, looking at her feet.

'If they push you too far, this will be your chance to tell them you no longer wish to be controlled by them,' he said simply. 'I must go to class. Don't let them intimidate you, Granger. You are much stronger than they know.'

With those parting words, Snape turned on his heel and walked away. Hermione was left with a funny feeling in her stomach, but it disappeared when she began to walk down the hall and up the stairs towards Dumbledore's office. On arriving at the gargyle that guarded the stairs to the headmaster's office, Hermione said the password, and it immediately sprung aside and allowed her to pass, the stairs moving in a spiral upwards and hastening her journey to the tower.

She reached the door at the top and saw it was half-open. She paused to knock and heard the soft 'Enter' that came in reply. Pushing the door open the rest of the way, she let herself in and shut it properly behind her. She found the headmaster already seated behind his desk, with a smaller chair holding McGonagall right beside him. It felt a little like an inquisition already.

'Have a seat, Miss Granger,' Dumbledore said kindly.

Hermione felt her stomach muscles clenching as she shuffled her way across the room and dropped a little awkwardly into the chair on the opposite side of the desk. She looked up to see both of them staring at her with unreadable expressions on their faces. She bit the inside of her cheek to prevent herself from asking the question she had longed to ask them for three weeks.

'I suppose you are wondering why you are here, am I correct?' Dumbledore questioned calmly.

'An explanation would be nice, Headmaster,' Hermione replied, her tone formal.

'Miss Granger, we have come to notice your behaviour has changed quite a lot in the few weeks that have passed since Ronald Weasley's death. Professor McGonagall and I were wondering if you had anything you would like to talk to us about in relation to his death.'

'You want to know more?' Hermione said, looking at them incredulously. 'What else could I possibly have left to tell you about what happened? You already have a copy of my memories from the battle.'

'We just feel there is information you may be withholding from us for one reason or another, and the Order would be very grateful to you if you were to simply submit,' Albus Dumbledore explained, his voice filled with false pleasantry.

Hermione felt anger bubble to the surface. Her magic was surging towards the tips of her fingers, and she used every ounce of restraint she had to control it. There was no need to waste all of her magical energy on this charade. She took a deep breath and steeled herself to make one of the most difficult decisions of her life.

'I'm afraid you are mistaken, Headmaster,' she said calmly. 'I have nothing further I can offer the Order.'

McGonagall's cheeks were becoming pink by this point, and Hermione was certain it was not embarrassment colouring them. 'Now listen here, Miss Granger,' she began, her brogue thickening in direct correlation to her agitation. 'The headmaster has brought you here because he suspects something of you, and if you refuse to cooperate, then we will be forced to take more desperate measures in order to have you comply.'

Hermione let her eyebrow quirk up at this. 'Never before have I ever felt so disrespected and disappointed in my entire life as I do now,' she said, looking at them with hurt in her brown eyes. 'I said I have nothing further to offer the Order, and I mean that in every sense of the word. I respectfully withdraw myself from the Order of the Phoenix and hereby sever my bond from the Vow I took on my recruitment.'

Both Dumbledore and McGonagall stared at her, faces blank with shock and eyes wider than she had ever seen them. Hermione stood from the chair on wobbly legs. She managed to make it to the door to leave the office without stumbling and opened it. Turning back to look at two of the people she had once had a deep respect for, she sighed and shook her head minutely.

'I shall remove myself from Hogwarts as soon as I can arrange, which may be as early as tonight or tomorrow. I thank you for your hospitality, but I will not impose any longer,' Hermione said quietly.

She turned on her heel then and walked out of the office, closing the door behind her. Making her way down the spiral staircase, she allowed her shoulders to sag a little under the weight of what had just occurred in the office. Dumbledore and McGonagall didn't trust her, and neither would any of the other Order members once they heard of her defection. She shrugged internally and pressed on, heading down to the dungeons to her temporary chambers. She would make a start on collecting together her belongings and speak to Snape once his last class of the day was over.

She arrived in her rooms and summoned books and sheaves of parchment to her, ducking a few times to avoid objects hitting her in the head.

By the end of the day, she did not want to be in Hogwarts any longer. She hoped Snape would have a solution for her, because she sure as hell hadn't planned that far ahead.

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A/N Forgive the maddening pace, but good things come to those who wait.

Chapter 8: Spiralling Downwards

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big thank you goes out to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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The air in the room was cold and a little stale from years of disuse.

Hermione gasped, sitting up abruptly from her sleep. Her eyes were wide, and she was desperately sucking in deep breaths of air rapidly, her skin clammy and sweaty. She'd had a nightmare again. It was the third time in two days she had awoken to that very same bad dream. Scrubbing roughly at her face that was wet with tears, she pushed the bedcovers down, and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, sliding off it and onto her socked feet. She managed to exit the bedroom and stumble her way to the bathroom just across the hall and stand before the basin and mirror.

She was a fright to look at: skin pale, dark circles under her eyes, and the evidence of her slightly malnourished state was obvious in her gaunt cheeks. The delicate bones of her face were more prominent than ever, giving her a sharp and exhausted look. A few weeks earlier, she'd had a much healthier appearance, even if she had been a little on the thin side. Now she appeared to be in desperate need of a hot bath and a good meal.

Hermione felt as though it was predestined for her to look this way. It was as if the darkness of her soul was manifesting physically.

She felt her stomach lurch forcefully at that idea. If that was the case, she was going to be putting an end to it then and there. She refused to end up like some sort of Bellatrix Lestrange, with her mad eyes ringed with black circles and her bones far too prominent. What better way to satisfy the Dark Lord than the evidence his actions had affected her in any way?

She wondered for a moment at her dreams. It was the same as the battle in the forest, except everything felt like it was slowed down by half. She swore she could still feel Greyback's vile touch on her body. It made her skin crawl just thinking about it. He was, without a doubt, one of the most brutal and unconscionable killers in Voldemort's recruits. At the end of each and every one of her dreams, Hermione always saw Ron's blue eyes and heard Greyback's voice yelling inside her head for her to kill Ron.

She sighed heavily in resignation. She doubted very much she would be able to get any more sleep that night in the state she was in. Walking over to the claw-footed bathtub, she turned the faucets and spent some time adjusting the temperature to suit her needs. Slipping out of her warm flannel pyjamas and cotton under things, she kicked them aside and added some liquid soap to the water to create bubbles. Once the tub was full enough, she dipped her big toe in to test it before allowing an entire leg to slide into the hot water.

Once her entire body was immersed, she closed her eyes and let her head rest on the back of the tub behind her.

She emerged from her bath an hour later feeling much less sore and tired, and she felt clean after bathing herself so fully. She changed into comfortable jeans and a sweater before heading down the stairs and into the kitchen. She put the kettle on the stove to boil water for her tea and sat down at the small table pushed against one of the spare walls.

As she looked across the kitchen to the window, she could see a window box filled with herbs and small seedling potions ingredients. The cottage so obviously screamed Snape. She had never expected to be living temporarily in Snape's untraceable Scottish cottage near Aberdeen, but there she was.

Snape was there with her nearly every night, Flooing between there and Hogwarts. The potion remained in his lab for the time being, but when the Christmas holidays caught up with them in two weeks, he planned to move the entire setup to the lab he had fitted in the basement of the cottage when he had bought it.

As Hermione made herself a pot of tea, she wondered what Snape was doing. He was likely in his lab already, checking the potion before doing his morning rounds. It was barely six o'clock, but he always liked to catch students behaving badly as early as he could. He had an image to maintain, after all. Hermione felt her lips curl into a smirk at that. She carried her tea tray with her into the downstairs study and set the tray down on the coffee table in front of the fireplace. She curled up into the armchair and used her wandless abilities to pour herself a cup of tea, add cream, stir, and Summon it to her.

She quietly sat and drank her tea, staring at the flames in the fireplace until she had drained the cup before sitting up to get to work.

Over the past few days since moving into Snape's cottage, Hermione had been allowed the freedom of working on her own personal research. She had discovered a few ancient tracking spells she had found in the old Black family journals Kingsley had been kind enough to send her the day before. None of them were perfectly suited to her purpose, but a couple had elements to the spell that could work to her advantage if she was able to combine them properly to create the exact spell she would need.

Writing down all possible combinations of the spell, she gathered together as many possibilities as she could find before going back upstairs to her room to grab a spare spread of parchment from her trunk. It was the equivalent size of a regular map. Taking it back down to the study with her, Hermione spread it out over the large mahogany desk and went in search of an atlas in the study shelves.

It didn't take long. Snape's shelves were all meticulously ordered, and not a single speck of dust was to be found on the books.

She opened the giant atlas to the double page spread of Western and Eastern Europe and smoothed the pages out. Pulling her wand from the back pocket of her jeans, she pointed it at the atlas and spoke in clear tones.

'Exigo Restituo.'

A thin blue light crept from the end of her wand before it multiplied a hundred times over, and then there were little cotton-like lines of blue magic curling around all of the lines of the map she was copying. Once all the outlines and necessary information were faintly glowing blue, she transferred all of it over to the blank parchment. She stood back and watched as the plain parchment came alive with black lines that were an exact replica of the map she had taken the image from.

She spent the remainder of the day transforming her copied map into a map that would work similarly to the Marauder's Map, except instead of simply Hogwarts, she wanted it to cover the whole of Western and Eastern Europe. By the time she had completed her modifications, it not only showed people, it could zoom in on towns and villages if specific addresses were mentioned.

At exactly seven that evening, Hermione was making a light dinner of pumpkin soup with Turkish garlic bread when she heard the Floo activate in the sitting room. She walked out of the kitchen to greet Snape, and her eyes lit up in delight when she saw Luna was standing beside him, brushing soot from her coat.

'If I had known I was expecting so much company, I would have put on something fancy for dinner,' Hermione joked as she went to embrace her friend beside a rather uncomfortable-looking Snape.

'I came to see you at Hogwarts, but Professor Snape told me you had relocated,' Luna answered with a grin.

Hermione flashed Snape a grateful look, and he nodded before following the two young women into the kitchen where it smelled like roasting garlic and rich soup. Getting out her wand, Hermione began Summoning bowls, plates, spoons, and knives to the table. She set the table for all three of them, knowing Snape likely hadn't eaten his

dinner due to his slightly lax habits as far as his own care was concerned.

'Soup will do you some good,' Hermione informed him.

The pot of soup and platter of bread was soon brought to the table by Hermione, and she let them serve themselves before she sat down and served herself also. They all ate in silence until it became uncomfortably awkward.

'What have you been up to here, Hermione?' Luna asked, breaking the silence.

Hermione swallowed a mouthful of bread and soup. 'I can't really say,' she murmured, looking down at her food. 'It's something I need to adjust just a little more until I can finally get it to work. When it's perfect, you'll both be the first ones to know.'

'This... project of yours,' Snape began. 'It doesn't have anything to do with the potion for the Dark Lord.'

Hermione nodded, and the conversation was dropped. She knew the look in Snape's eyes and that it wasn't over between them, but with Luna there, she was reluctant to speak about it. The last thing she wanted to do was get her only friend involved in something as dangerous as what she was contemplating.

After spending some time with Snape and Luna while working on the final calculations for the acceleration spell for the potion, Luna Apparated home from the small courtyard behind the cottage. Snape gave her the address so she could return without being escorted there. When he returned from outside, Hermione was sitting in the armchair in the study, her copied map spread out over the table and her journal open in her lap.

'What are you planning?' Snape asked quietly.

'I am going to find Greyback,' she whispered, finally admitting to him what she had been keeping under wraps since her research began.

'And just what do you think finding Greyback will accomplish, Miss Granger? You know what that man can do. And if you give him half a chance, he will do it again, and this time, you might not come off as lucky.'

Hermione shot him a dark look. 'Lucky? You think the ripping apart of my soul was lucky? I would rather he had raped me!' she said, tears beginning to blur her vision. 'I am never going to be the same person I was before. I have death on my hands and darkness in my soul, and you think I am concerned he might actually rape me if he had half a chance? You know nothing!'

Snape glared at her then, stepping closer to her and staring down his hooked nose. 'You are the one who knows nothing, stupid woman,' he growled. 'He can transform himself into a beast even when it is not a full moon. He will tear you apart, literally.'

'I know what he is capable of,' Hermione snapped angrily. 'I know what could happen, and I will be prepared for that possibility. I can't sit here in this house and simply waste away. I am so angry, all the time. I can barely think straight until I think about finding him and making him pay for what he did to Ron and to me.'

'You will need to learn to control that anger,' he said, visibly reigning in his anger at her. 'I can't, in good conscience, allow you to do something so foolhardy while you are under my protection.'

'I'm twenty-five years old, Snape! I'm not a little girl,' she exclaimed.

'Your age is irrelevant,' Snape said through gritted teeth. 'Your judgment has been severely compromised by this entire situation.'

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head, willing away the hot angry tears that threatened to spill. 'I need to do this.'

Snape took a steadying breath himself at this. 'I know you do, but do not act so hastily,' he replied. 'I came here tonight to tell you the Wizengamot has decided to hold a trial to judge whether or not you are innocent of the murder of Ronald Weasley.'

Hermione looked at him, stunned. 'What?'

'Albus is obviously having a tantrum over your defection from the Order,' Snape explained. 'You will be found innocent, I can assure you. He is simply trying to make things difficult for you.'

Hermione closed her eyes and pursed her lips. Things were becoming increasingly complicated.

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A/N Yes, another twist thrown in for good measure. More twists and turns are on the way.

Chapter 9: Pensieve Memories

Chapter 9 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The deep, black, marble bowl sat on the sturdy mahogany desk. Silver-blue liquid swirled around within it, the shimmer of memories occasionally drifting to the surface.

Snape stared at his Pensieve, his mind filled with thoughts. He had an inkling of a feeling that one day the memories he was currently making would also be deposited with the memories already swirling within it. He blinked and looked away from it, casting his eyes towards the armchair before the fire. As usual, Hermione was curled up in the leather upholstery, scribbling furiously with her hair twisted and clipped out of the way, a spare quill tucked into the jumbled mass of curls.

He took note of her pallid complexion, much different than what it had been only a month before. He stared down at his own pale skin, noting the two of them made quite the pair: pale, troubled, and exhausted. Silently, he stood from the chair behind his desk and swept out of the room in the direction of the kitchen. He needed to take a break from thinking. Filling the kettle, he placed it on the stovetop to boil and busied himself with fixing a plate of sandwiches for himself and Miss Granger to share.

He stood with his hip propped against the bench, contemplating Miss Granger, as if he didn't already spend enough time unconsciously thinking about the woman. He groaned inwardly at the thought. She was the thing that most often occupied his mind of late. If he had still been a Death Eater, he would have been found out, tortured, and murdered before being left in a public place as a warning of some sort. Voldemort would have been easily able to penetrate his Occlumency shields within seconds from the amount of distraction his focus had to contend with.

He shook his head, refocusing on one train of thought. Miss Granger.

She was a dilemma, a very difficult one. He wasn't sure just how he should approach her. Her moods were a riot. The only time she was one consistent mood was when she was researching. It didn't matter what she was reading or taking notes on: making adjustments to her map, taking notes, or writing down formulas. Snape found a quiet relief in her acting like she normally did. It was something constant he could use as the stepping-stone for her improvement.

Picking up the tea tray he had loaded with a steeping teapot full of leaves, two cups and saucers, cream, sugar, and the sandwiches he had prepared, he returned to the study. He went to the coffee table, levitating a pile of books onto the floor beside it, before setting the tray down. The table wobbled precariously as he did so. He took a moment to lean over and see what could be done, pulling his wand from his sleeve and jabbing it in the direction of the loose bolts.

'That looks wonderful, thank you,' Hermione said as she eyed the egg and lettuce sandwich on the coffee table in front of her.

'Go ahead,' Snape said, nodding his head at the sandwich. 'I can just as easily eat the other one.'

She flashed him a small smile before picking up the egg and lettuce. Snape poured himself and Hermione a cup of tea each, adding cream and stirring before sitting down in the spare armchair. Picking up a triangle of sandwich, he bit off a corner and watched Hermione as she nibbled delicately at hers. He allowed his eyes to follow her cheekbone, along her jaw, down her neck, and over her collarbone. Her skin was pale, smooth, and flawless. No blemishes from the days when her hormones might have caused breakouts or scars from cuts or injuries she might have received in battle. His fingers itched to reach out and touch her cheek to see if it was as soft as it looked.

He frowned and gave himself a mental shake. What was he thinking, having thoughts about her like that? He was supposed to be protecting and helping her, not perving like an old leech, even if she was beautiful. Sighing heavily, he continued to munch on his sandwich until finally she coughed lightly and broke the silence. He looked up at her face to see her staring at him blatantly.

'I've already worked out my line of defence and which of my memories they have should be watched and what order to show them in,' she informed him with a triumphant look in her expressive brown eyes.

Snape crooked an eyebrow at her. 'Well then, pass it over and give me a look at it,' he said gruffly, thrusting a hand out towards her.

She smirked at him as she passed him the long roll of parchment she had been recording all of the details on. He scanned the page quickly before nodding his approval and handing the parchment back to her.

'It is all theoretically sound, but you will, perhaps, have to view the memories yourself to make sure the sequence of events is perfect,' he murmured, tapping his bottom lip thoughtfully with a long finger. 'You will also have to include the fact that the Wizengamot may ask for you to take Veritaserum during your questioning. Knowing Dumbledore, I wouldn't put it past him to suggest it to the Chief Warlock.'

'I thought Dumbledore was the Chief Warlock,' Hermione said, brow creased in her confusion.

'He did indeed hold the position until almost a year ago,' Snape replied. 'He stepped down, and Tiberius Ogden stepped in to fill his shoes rather quickly. I suppose Albus must have fancied himself too biased to remain objective; however, never doubt the amount of influence he still has over the members.'

'This is sounding more and more like I was set up by the Headmaster,' she said shrewdly, tossing her scroll onto the coffee table in front of her.

'Dumbledore does not take kindly to disobedience,' Snape said, malice dripping from each word he spoke.

'He likes to keep you on a rather short leash, doesn't he?'

'To put it in the most common of terms, yes, he does keep an eye on me,' Snape agreed with a nod.

'I don't mean to sound offensive when I say that, Professor,' she said hurriedly, almost sounding apologetic.

He shook his head. 'It doesn't bother me. I know how it appears, and you are not far from the truth.'

The room lapsed into an awkward silence, and Snape found himself glancing over at his Pensieve on the desk.

'Miss Granger, would you permit me to collect a copy of your memories?' he asked. 'I should like to see what the elders of the Wizengamot will see at your trial. It may help me to better understand the situation that you were in. I might even be able to help you with your special project.'

Hermione looked down at her lap and shrugged a little before nodding. 'All right, go ahead and take them,' she said quietly. 'It's... I don't want you to think any less of me because of what happened that night.'

'I assure you, anything you think you did on that night that caused you to believe you are guilty, I have probably done worse things willingly,' he said, his voice low.

Hermione's eyes widened at his admission. Standing from his chair, he closed the gap between them and pulled his wand from his sleeve. He touched the tip of it to her right temple after brushing a stray lock of hair out of the way. 'Now, I need you to think of all the memories that you want me to see, and bring them to the forefront of your mind,' he murmured softly, almost hypnotically.

Hermione let her eyes flutter closed, and he took a deep breath to steady himself. *Refero monumentum*, he said clearly.

With a hand steady from practice, Snape began to pull the tip of his wand away from her head slowly, thick strands of silver following it. He kept up the slow motion until the strands finally came to an end and hung from the tip of his wand like strands of hair. He slowly stood and walked over to his Pensieve before casting them into the silver pool of memories with a deft flick of his wrist. As soon as the memories hit the surface, flashes of images began swirling around at the surface.

'Shall I view them alone, or would you like to accompany me? If you did, you might be able to explain how you were feeling at the time,' he reasoned.

She stood from the armchair and made her way over to join him at his desk, her arms crossed over her chest. 'I don't suppose seeing the memories in a Pensieve will be any worse than seeing them in my head every time I close my eyes for long enough.'

Snape felt a pang of something at her words sympathy, perhaps? He didn't think it was guilt, but he was unfamiliar with it all the same. He reached his hand out to her, and she slipped one of her small hands into his, accepting the unspoken support and leaning her head down to the Pensieve as he did. He felt himself being tugged off his feet and thrown through the young memory until he landed, once more in the forest in the heat of battle. He glanced at Hermione from the corner of his eye and saw her eyes were bright with fear. He wasn't sure why, but he reached over and grasped her hand, tugging her along with him as he hurried to follow memory-Hermione through the foliage.

They emerged from the forest behind the cabin in the clearing just as memory-Hermione did, and they followed her as she crept around to witness Potter battling against Bellatrix Lestrange. Snape felt a chill run down his spine as they watched her make her way around the clearing in that direction. He bit the inside of his mouth as he watched Potter flee, and memory-Hermione stepped in to relieve him and battle the crazed Lestrange.

'What were you thinking, pulling a stunt like that?' he whispered as he and the real Hermione followed closer.

'I was thinking my friend was in trouble and looked like he could use a break from battling a crazy woman with a skill level higher than his own,' Hermione retorted bitterly.

'And yet, Mr. Potter still believes Moody when that washed-up, old Auror casts aspersions on your character,' Snape said, crooking an eyebrow at her.

Hermione frowned and silently watched as her memory-self blasted Bellatrix backwards into a tree, effectively knocking her out. 'Yes, well, Harry is obviously far less grown up and capable of thinking for himself than I originally thought,' she said, though he could sense she was holding back as she spoke of the "Boy Wonder."

Snape felt his stomach turn as he watched Fenrir Greyback creep up behind memory-Hermione, itching to throw a few dozen nasty hexes at him. He forced himself to calm; it was a memory, so cursing anything would have been a fruitless waste of time. He felt the real Hermione tense via the hand he still held with his as her other self was put under the Imperius curse. He tightened his grip a little in a small show of support and led her as they followed Greyback and Hermione to the other side of the clearing where Ron was battling.

'I'm suddenly not so sure if I want to see this again,' she whispered to him as they approached the horrible scene that was about to occur.

Snape released her hand and grasped both her shoulders gently. 'At least this way you will be able to pinch yourself and wake up, or just close your eyes,' he told her. 'Come now, if you find you can't look on, just turn into me and you won't have to see it.'

Hermione nodded, and they arrived just as memory-Hermione started yelling out the filthy words Greyback had planted into her mind at Ron. Snape felt a small hand slip into his as the clearing went deathly silent, and then his breath left his chest as green light shot from the end of the other Hermione's wand while the real one burrowed into his chest to block it all out. As soon as memory-Hermione dropped to the ground, Snape could feel himself being pulled out of the Pensieve and was soon once more on his feet in the study.

Hermione wobbled precariously on her feet, almost falling to the ground. Before she could slip down, however, Snape reached out and caught her in his arms.

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A/N Next up is the trial, which will be along soon.

Chapter 10: Trials & Error

Chapter 10 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thanks go out to VIVAvivacious for her help with this chapter.

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The black marble floors of the Ministry of Magic were polished to the point where they could have almost been a substitute for a mirror.

Hermione walked silently beside Snape as they headed down the long corridor to courtroom three. It was the biggest of the three courtrooms, and the one most often used for war criminals and Death Eater trials. She refused to be riled by this information, however, knowing it had been deliberately chosen to throw her off guard. She felt a surge of anger when she saw just ahead of them Harry, standing with Arthur Weasley at the door. She swallowed the comment on the end of her tongue and simply stared at her supposed friend as he offered her a big, fake smile.

'Why are you here, Harry?' she asked, her tone void of emotion.

His smile disappeared, replaced with a look of annoyance at her question. 'Well, I'm here to make sure you don't get thrown into bloody Azkaban, is what,' he said, sounding put out.

'I can do that perfectly well on my own, as you know,' she said simply. 'If you recall, I have always been the one who prepared for things in advance.'

Harry nodded at her coldly before turning on his heel and striding ahead of them into the courtroom. Arthur looked at Hermione apologetically and held his arms open to her. She felt a rush of gratitude for the man, accepting his embrace and patting his back as he choked back a sob he had unwittingly allowed to escape. Pulling back, Hermione could see the sincere remorse in his blue-grey eyes.

'I'm very sorry about all that has happened to you over the last month and a half, Hermione,' he said, patting her on the shoulder. 'If I could have spared you having to feel this way, I would do it in a heartbeat.'

Hermione sniffed and wiped a tear from her face. 'I'm so sorry about everything, too, Mr. Weasley,' she said quietly. 'I loved Ron and regret every day I was not more careful. I just wish I could relive the moment and do it differently the second time around.'

Snape cleared his throat from beside the pair, nodding his head in the direction of the courtroom. 'We had best get inside before you are held in contempt of the court for being late for your own trial, Miss Granger,' he said simply.

She nodded and hurried inside, looking over her shoulder for a moment to see Snape lean over and talk to Arthur. Despite her curiosity, she pressed on and walked along a small corridor until she was in the middle of a circular amphitheatre. The seats in the round went up as they went backwards, and she felt almost like she was in a play - a very horrible, very real play where she could end up in prison for likely the rest of her life if she didn't present her case well enough.

The seat that sat in the middle of the arena was faced in the direction of a large ornate chair flanked by smaller chairs, most of which were already holding various

members of the Wizengamot. She looked around, seeking out faces in the crowd she would recognise. When she saw Luna seated towards the front, as close as she could get to Hermione to offer her support, she almost smiled. The younger witch smiled at her and nodded encouragingly. Hermione nodded back before continuing her search of the room, her gaze seeking out Snape almost instinctively.

She saw him and met his dark eyes, blinking at him. He nodded minutely back at her and gave her a small half-smile. She felt something she was unfamiliar with rush through her at that, knowing she was likely the only person he had bothered to go to the effort to smile for in a long time. She turned away and looked back at the chair she was expected to sit in and frowned. She wasn't sure why there were still cuffs on the arms and chains wrapped around the back. She had come to her trial willingly, hadn't she? Didn't that mean she was unlikely to make a run for it?

Sighing and feeling more than a little put out, she made her way over and sat down in the prisoner's throne.

Just as she sat, the door situated behind the top row in front of her opened and admitted Tiberius Ogden along with a few other members of the Wizengamot. As soon as everyone was seated, all the doors to the courtroom immediately shut and locked with several loud clicks sounding through the sudden silence. The next thing that occurred took Hermione by surprise completely; the cuffs suddenly clamped around her wrists, and the chains wound around her stomach and seized her legs. She looked up at the Elders of the court in shock and anger.

'Hermione Jean Granger, you have been called to the trial this day charged with the crime of murdering one Ronald Bilius Weasley,' Ogden said clearly. 'How do you plead to this charge?'

'Not guilty,' she said just loudly enough for the people in the back rows to hear.

Murmurs erupted through the room, and Hermione allowed her eyes to dart around sharply, taking in the expressions of disbelief, doubt, and anger at her statement. She narrowed her eyes at a particularly smug-looking, portly man who had been talking about her rather louder than everyone else in the room. Ogden waited for a moment longer before he began pounding his gavel against the bench to divert the attention back to the Elders.

'Come now! Order!' he said loudly above the din in the chamber, and silence eventually fell over the stands.

'Now, Miss Granger, you have pled not guilty to a crime witnesses have claimed you did commit. What evidence or witnesses to this do you have that you can use to disprove the claims made against you?' Ogden said calmly.

Hermione took a deep breath to steal herself. She would not show them she was nervous. 'I can offer you three witnesses to the aforementioned charges laid against me, as well as my own memories and those of Severus Tobias Snape,' she replied coolly.

'Miss Granger, you may proceed to call your first witness to the stand,' Ogden said.

Hermione nodded. 'I would like to ask Harry James Potter be the first witness to take the stand,' she said clearly, knowing it was a bit of a crock to expect the "Boy-Who-Lived" to make an effort to help her after her cold words to him earlier.

Regardless, he made his way down to the stand and took a seat before being handed a glass of water laced with Veritaserum, Hermione could only assume.

'Harry James Potter, do you accept you are duty-bound to tell the truth without any outside interference under the influence of Veritaserum to ensure honesty?' a pointy-nosed witch sitting beside Ogden asked.

'I accept my duty,' Harry said, taking the glass and downing the contents in three large gulps.

'Mr. Potter, from the best of your recollection of the night in question, the 31st of October, 2005, what did you witness in regards to Hermione Granger and the murder of Ronald Weasley by means of the Avada Kedavra?' Ogden questioned.

'Sir, from my position on the battlefield, I saw Hermione approaching Ron from behind before everything went suddenly silent,' Harry answered. 'I yelled out to her, asking what she was doing and started to run towards them. While I was running, I could hear Hermione's voice begin to say horrible things to Ron about him being a blood traitor. When I was close enough, I saw her eyes they were clouded over completely, just like Viktor Krum's were in my fourth year in the maze for the third task of the Tri-wizard Tournament.'

'And would you say Miss Granger's actions were forced?'

Harry nodded. 'Hermione would never have killed Ron willingly. They might have been a little on the outs from time to time, but even Ron and I fought. We were best friends, the three of us.'

'So from what you have said, you believe Miss Granger was under the influence of another curse or potion at the time of Ronald Weasley's murder?' Ogden pressed.

'She was under the influence of the Imperius Curse,' Harry confirmed.

'Mr. Potter, you may now step down,' Tiberius Ogden said, gesturing to his left.

Harry left and returned to his regular seat before the Wizengamot turned back to look at Hermione. 'Who would you like to call as your second witness, Miss Granger?' Ogden asked.

Hermione nodded. 'I would like to ask Severus Snape to testify,' she answered.

Snape immediately stood and went to the stand, taking a seat and sitting ramrod straight as the Veritaserum-laced water was placed on the bench before him. When Tiberius Ogden repeated his question from earlier about agreeing to the terms of honesty under the influence of the truth serum, Snape nodded stiffly before picking up the glass and swallowing it down quickly.

'Severus Snape, to the best of your recollection, please tell the court how you viewed the events on the night of the 31st of October, 2005,' Tiberius said, clearing his throat softly.

'I was busy fighting off both Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange at the same time, which was no easy task,' he began quietly. 'The battle was rather heated, but when the clearing suddenly went quiet, the Lestrange brothers Disapparated, and I was left to look around for what was occurring. I saw Miss Granger, just as Mr. Potter did, approaching Ronald Weasley before yelling a number of things at him. I was a lot closer than Potter was to the pair when this occurred and saw from the beginning the girl was indeed under a rather strong Imperius Curse.'

'And can you tell the court if you saw who was responsible for the curse Miss Granger was under?'

'Yes, I can.'

Ogden frowned at Snape for a moment before prompting further. 'And just who was the person responsible for the curse?' he asked.

'The monster responsible for holding Hermione Granger under the Imperius Curse, and for the murder of Ronald Weasley via this connection, was Fenrir Greyback,' Snape answered loudly enough for the entire chamber to hear and be shocked by the vehemence in his deep voice.

Loud chatter erupted throughout the hall once more, louder than the last time. Gasps rang through the room, as Snape had shed light on this piece of information that had not yet been revealed. Hermione stared around at the faces of shock and sighed heavily. She was angry the emotion was clouding over her thoughts and refusing to be

tempered this time.

'Will you all just shut up and let us get on with my trial?' she shouted, the air surrounding her crackling with her magic. She had yet to learn control over her magic when she was in a dark mood.

The room fell silent once more, nearly everyone gaping at her, including a few of the Elders from the council. Tiberius Ogden looked at her with an eyebrow raised, but he said nothing. She looked around for Snape and saw his expression was as inscrutable as ever. He stood from the stand as he was dismissed and returned to his seat, refusing to meet her eye. She released a breath and sagged in her chair a little as the Wizengamot talked amongst themselves.

'We shall now adjourn to the next chamber to view the memories, and we shall announce the verdict on our return,' the pointy-nosed witch announced.

For almost an hour, Hermione sat fidgeting in her seat, staring around the eerily-silent courtroom as they heard murmurs and muffled arguments from the room next door. All the red-and-black-robed Wizengamot members were discussing her fate. She felt her nerves begin to get the better of her and wished she had a stress ball to squeeze and mangle. Instead, her magic crackled around her dangerously, at one point freeing her from the chains around her legs before they locked back into place automatically.

A few minutes later, the Wizengamot returned to the room. A couple ladies looked as though they had been crying, but more or less everyone looked thoroughly ashamed of themselves. Tiberius Ogden took his seat and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

'Hermione Jean Granger, for the crime of murdering Ronald Bilius Weasley, this court finds you not guilty,' he spoke clearly. 'This court is dismissed.'

Hermione had never been so glad to hear the sound of the gavel banging against the wood of the stand.

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A/N A confrontation is on the way. Sorry for the lack of updates - real life crept up on me.

Chapter 11: A War of Words

Chapter 11 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Snape's cottage was peculiarly quiet that afternoon, with both Hermione and Snape having left for London.

They had finally perfected the acceleration charm for the Dark Lord's potion, and in a week's time, they would be casting the spell on the potion to complete it. Hermione guessed, with the potion being of dark origin, the spell itself would also have to be a variation on old magic or something that had an element of darkness to it. When she had been looking through the last of Bellatrix Lestrange's journals that had been discovered at Grimmauld place, Hermione had struck gold, finding an interesting theory on charm work and how to make any original charm work into something darker.

For some reason, whenever Hermione had opened the books to take in what the mad woman had written, she felt a surge of power through her fingers. The book was dark, and it called to the dark stain on her soul. She willed the feelings away, but she knew she would always be unnaturally drawn to dark magic and artefacts, and her soul would call out to be with other beings that had torn apart their souls with darkness. Hermione desperately wanted to believe this was the reason for her unusual connection with Snape. He was just as damaged, if not more so than she was.

Snape had side-along Apparated with Hermione to the park across from Grimmauld Place. She had not been back to the house since before the battle in the forest. She looked up at the dirty brickwork as the house revealed itself when Snape spoke the address. She hadn't figured she would have to return there after she left the Order. She had rather hoped she wouldn't have to, either. There were too many memories associated with Harry and Ron.

When she entered the house, Hermione didn't receive an acknowledgment of any kind from Molly or Ginny Weasley, and Harry seemed to have made himself scarce, also. She was just about fed up with his behaviour, despite his testimony in her favour at her trial the week before. He was under the influence of Veritaserum he had no choice but to tell the truth. The Order meeting started ten minutes after everyone shuffled into the kitchen, and it wasn't until then when Hermione finally saw her so-called best friend.

'Now that everyone is here, we should get this meeting underway,' Dumbledore announced from his position at the head of the kitchen table.

Mad-Eye Moody cleared his throat loudly, cutting across Dumbledore before he could continue. 'I believe there is someone present in this room who is no longer an inducted Order member,' he said loudly, his magical eye twisting around to look directly at Hermione. 'We shouldn't be discussing private matters until they have been removed.'

Snape stood up sharply, his chair scraping roughly against the stone floor. 'Miss Granger is here because she is responsible, in large part, for the matters that are going to be discussed tonight,' he said sharply. 'She will stay.'

'I can leave,' Hermione said quietly, tugging on the sleeve of Snape's robe nearest her. 'It's evident no one really wants me to be here.'

'You will stay,' Snape told her, his tone brooking no argument.

Hermione frowned before looking over at Moody to see his reaction. The man was glaring at her with both his eyes, it seemed. She shrugged as if to say it didn't make any difference to her if she stayed or not, which only seemed to further infuriate the ex-Auror.

'That girl is not an Order member and therefore should not be included in any of our proceedings,' Mad Eye growled. 'You never know if information could be leaked via her if the Death Eaters were to get their hands on her again.'

'I agree with Alastor,' Dumbledore said, shooting a quelling look at Snape, who had his fists clenched and his mouth open to protest. 'Miss Granger, I am going to have to ask you to leave the room for the duration of the meeting. You can wait for Severus in the sitting room upstairs.'

Hermione looked up at Dumbledore, her feelings of betrayal evident in her expression. Nodding, she stood and walked back up the stairs, ignoring the stares of the rest of those present in the room. She entered the sitting room and lit the fire, then flopped down onto the lounge, sighing heavily. She pulled her wand from her sleeve and stared at it intently, running her fingers along the smooth, black wood.

She stared into the flames of the fire for what seemed like hours before she finally heard voices and shuffling sounds from out in the hall, indicating the Order meeting was over. She looked at the watch on her wrist and saw it had only been forty minutes since she had been dismissed from the kitchen. She stood up and walked over to the doorway, crossing her arms and watching as the Order members filtered through the front door on their way out. Remus stopped to greet her briefly, looking a little ashamed of himself, and patted her shoulder while wishing her a good night. Molly and Ginny continued to ignore her, but when the twins exited the kitchen, they went straight to Hermione and lifted her into hug from either side.

'Dumbledore was way out of order, Hermione,' George and Fred said quietly at the same time, making her smile.

'Thanks, you two,' she replied as they released her. 'You'd better hurry on if you don't want your mother to catch you consorting with the enemy.'

'Never,' the twins said in unison as they winked and walked out of the house.

Hermione watched them walk away, her stomach in knots. She missed Ron so much it physically hurt her to see his brothers looking the same as they always had when Ron was no longer with them his blue eyes would no longer be filled with energy. Arthur stood beside her as she watched his family leave. He put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze.

'Don't let Albus's and Alastor's attitudes upset you, Hermione,' he said softly. 'Their ignorance and distrust will come back to bite them on the arse one day. Keep up the good work. You have done well for Severus and for the side of good.'

'I do this to help Professor Snape because he is helping me, also,' she murmured, looking at her feet. 'I don't work for the Order. I am sorry I won't be able to share a lot with you because of your connection to Dumbledore, but I think it is for the best now.'

'Just don't do anything reckless,' Arthur said as he walked out to follow his wife and daughter.

Hermione hugged her arms around herself. 'I can't promise that,' she whispered just loudly enough for her own ears.

'Are you ready to leave now, Miss Granger?' Snape asked from behind her, startling her from her musings.

She spun around quickly to face him and nodded, heading straight for the cloak cupboard beside the front door to retrieve their heavy winter coats. She emerged and handed his to him before shrugging into her own. She accepted his arm so he could escort her from Grimmauld Place and back to his house. The door was closing behind them just as a male voice called out Hermione's name. She turned to look over her shoulder to see Harry holding the door open, staring intently at her with his bright green eyes.

'What is it, Harry?' she asked impatiently.

'I want to talk to you for a bit while you're still here,' he said, a little out of breath, as though he had run up the stairs to catch her. 'I've tried to contact you a few times, but I've never been able to get a hold of you wherever you and Snape have been hiding.'

Hermione let her hand drop from Snape's arm and frowned at him. 'It's Professor Snape, but I suppose I could spare a few minutes,' she said with an exaggerated sigh. 'Where did you want to talk?'

'Is the library okay with you?'

Hermione nodded and turned to look up at Snape. 'Is that all right with you?' she asked.

He nodded and gestured for them to go. Turning back to Harry, she followed him up the stairs to the library on the second floor. Once the door was closed behind them, Hermione crossed her arms and stood with her back to a wall. With things being the way they were, she didn't trust anyone not to attempt to do something to her even Harry. He was too involved in Dumbledore's scheme and poisoned by Mad-Eye Moody to be a truly trustworthy person to her any longer.

'So, what do you want to talk about?' she demanded, staring straight at him.

He shuffled from foot to foot uncomfortably, visibly shrinking under her cold gaze. 'I wanted to speak to you about what happened that night, and about Ron and the Order,' he said, looking up at her briefly. 'You know things would be so much easier if you would just come back to the Order and tell Dumbledore what it is he wants to know.'

'Oh, for the love of Merlin!' she cried, tossing her hands up in front of her. 'What is it with everyone and their preoccupation with what Dumbledore wants? I will say this to you only once, Harry. I do not know what it is the Headmaster so desperately wants to know. I was the victim of a Death Eater's attack on the Order, and suddenly everyone thinks I am either in cahoots with them or that they are using me as a means to convey information to you all! I am neither of those things!'

'Right, you don't need to get so worked up, Hermione,' Harry said. 'It was just a simple suggestion.'

'Harry, I came up here with every intention of giving you the benefit of the doubt,' she began, winding herself up for an argument. 'Now I have been called a liar, accused of many horrendous things, and shunned by the society that made me into what I am today. I expect this sort of treatment from Death Eaters, but not once did I believe you, my friend, would do such a thing. What have you done to Harry Potter? Where is the boy I grew up with and would trust with my life?'

'Well, what have you done with Hermione?' he demanded, looking indignant.

'You lot buried her along with Ron and any hopes for our friendship,' she whispered just loud enough for him to hear. 'Harry, I don't want you to ever try to contact me again. If I see you after this, it will only be a coincidence. You be happy with the path you have chosen. I only hope Dumbledore doesn't feed you to the sharks like he did me.'

'But, what about fighting for the side of good?' he asked as she made her way over to the library door to leave.

'I'll do my part,' she answered, not bothering to look back at him.

As she opened the door and walked away, Hermione could feel the dark depths of her very soul splitting just that little bit more until it was split neatly in two. Whatever shreds that had linked her to the Order and Harry after killing Ron had finally been severed. She could feel the darkness wrap around her heart and squeeze it, drawing her in and away from everything she had once known. It was a new beginning for Hermione Granger, and she knew just what she had to do.

She walked down the stairs and met Snape, who was waiting for her at the end of the banister as though he had not expected the conversation to last very long. Allowing him to tuck her left hand in the crook of his elbow, they left Grimmauld Place together and Apparated back to his cottage from the park across the road.

Just before they Disapparated, however, Hermione looked over her shoulder one last time to see Grimmauld Place disappearing as the Fidelius charm reasserted itself. Taking a deep breath, she silently said goodbye to the place, knowing it was unlikely she would ever return.

A/N And so ends the friendship of Harry and Hermione.

Chapter 12: On Retribution Road

Chapter 12 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Staring at the sheet of paper in front of her, Hermione sighed heavily. She was stuck. There was one last problem with her map she had yet to solve.

She had been so determined over the past week that she would crack the case all on her own. Snape had offered to assist her in her research once, even offering a book to her he believed would be useful. She had all but rejected his offer twice and had continued in that manner, pouring over countless books and journals in search of the spell that would automatically include every person living in the areas the map covered, so when she said a name, anyone called by that name would show up on it as a dot with their name written above it.

She thanked the heavens for the Marauders and their ridiculous map that had assisted Harry, Ron, and her into and out of trouble countless times. Closing her eyes and letting her head fall back against the tall back of the armchair, she sighed again. She was frustrated by the lack of improvement in her map. She opened her eyes and began tidying up her things on the coffee table, noting it was past midnight. If she hadn't gotten any further by that point, staying up later wasn't going to help much, either.

'It's doesn't get any easier as the night wears on, does it?' asked Snape's voice from the door suddenly, startling her.

'If you're here to gloat over my lack of success, then I suggest you take your words and shove them somewhere useful,' Hermione said through gritted teeth, stacking the books on the table before her neatly.

Snape chuckled, the timbre of it sending chills down her spine. The man knew how to use his voice to his advantage. 'I'm not here to gloat, simply to offer my assistance tomorrow after you've had some rest. You've been struggling with the same thing for a week now. All you need is some sleep and another fresh pair of eyes.'

Hermione nodded reluctantly. Standing from the armchair, she made her way out of the study and walked up the stairs. Warily, she walked into the bathroom and stripped out of her clothes, dropping them into the hamper before walking into the shower stall and turning on the water. She murmured a spell that adjusted it to the perfect temperature and quickly washed her hair and body before turning off the taps and walking out. Casting a drying spell on herself, she wrapped herself in a towel before making her way out into the hall to return to her room.

She was almost at her door when she paused and looked over her shoulder, noting Snape had stopped at the top of the stairs and was staring at her in shock. She felt her cheeks heating with a flush that travelled down her neck to her chest. She grasped the towel around her a little tighter and cleared her throat.

'Sorry,' she murmured before opening the door and dashing into her room.

Hermione closed the door behind her and rested her back against it, breathing heavily. What on earth was wrong with her? She never forgot to take a change of clothes with her to the bathroom. Snape had looked so shocked at seeing her in such a state of undress. She closed her eyes and sighed. She was mortified. Snape's cheeks had suffused with colour in embarrassment, also.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and a moment to get over it. Opening her eyes once more, she went to the bureau and pulled out a long-sleeved cotton shirt and long flannel pyjama pants. Sliding her knickers and clothes on, she went over to the bed and pulled the covers back just enough for her to slide in. Once nestled under the warm bedcovers, she closed her eyes and let the silence of the house lull her to sleep.

When the morning sunlight began to pour into her room through a gap in the curtain, Hermione found she could no longer think of another excuse to remain in bed. Stretching out her limbs, she pushed the covers back and threw her legs over the side of the bed, standing on the cold wood floor. She quickly hunted under the bed for her slippers and slid her feet into them before leaving her room and walking down to the bathroom to wash her face and relieve herself.

Once finished with her morning ablutions, she went down to the kitchen to find Snape at the table with the Daily Prophet and a mug of coffee. She saw him point at the percolator on the bench, indicating he had made enough for both of them. Grateful, she walked over and poured herself a cup before returning and sitting at the table. Assuming the night before was simply going to be dusted under the proverbial rug, she sipped the hot, black coffee, savouring the warmth as it slid down her throat.

She had awoken every morning for the past few days in the same fashion. Snape would always be awake before her, and she wouldn't have to put the coffee on herself. He was away from Hogwarts, and Voldemort's potion was now brewing down in the basement lab of the cottage for the Christmas break. The two of them hoped to have the potion finished by the time the holidays were over and Snape had to reassume his position as a teacher at the school.

'Are you feeling refreshed?' Snape asked from behind his paper.

'Yes, I suppose you were right about having some sleep,' she answered, placing her coffee down on the table in front of her but leaving her hands curled around the warm ceramic mug.

'When you've eaten something, we can begin on your research in the study,' he said, folding his paper neatly and tucking it under his arm as he stood to leave. 'I've already eaten there is a plate on the stove with a heating charm on it. I hope you like toast with eggs sunny-side up.'

Hermione balked at him as he walked out. He had made her breakfast and coffee, offered to help her with her research, and had bossed her around that morning like she was back in school. Grumbling, she got up and collected the plate, removing the charm and Summoning a knife and fork from the drawers. After she had eaten a significant portion of the food, she cleared the plate and cleaned it up before leaving the kitchen in search of Snape. She found him sitting in the armchair she didn't use in the study.

'Explain to me why you are doing this,' he said as she sat down in the spare chair.

'Revenge,' she said simply, picking up her journal and spreading the map out on the table. 'I know you are familiar with the concept.'

Snape looked at her as though he'd just seen a ghost. She knew such a blunt delivery of her intentions might be the reason. What difference did it make if Snape cared or assisted her? She was going to go through with her plan, with or without his help, although she would prefer to have someone she could rely on have her back.

'Are you certain this is a path you wish to travel?' he asked, staring at her intently, his disapproval obvious. 'Because once you go down it, you will find it very difficult to turn back should you change your mind later.'

'Snape, all I need to know is if I need it, you will have my back,' she said seriously, glancing back down to her work.

'You will only ever find an ally in me, even if I am wary about the decision you have made,' he replied.

She nodded, somewhat relieved. She liked the man she had come to know over the past month and a half. He was not exactly kind to her, but he was not unfair; he gave her space when she needed it, helped her in any way she asked him, and was always trying to protect her, even in situations where she did not need it. She looked him in the eye and flashed him a brief but grateful smile.

'Thank you,' she murmured, ducking her eyes. 'Now, where is that book of yours you have been so eager to share with me?'

Snape smirked at her and produced the book from beside his chair, handing it to her. They worked together tirelessly for an hour or so until Hermione finally struck upon the spell Snape had been certain was contained within. It was all clear to her the moment she had begun reading the chapter in the journal. All she needed to do was gather all the data files for births, which could be easily accessed from any government-run organisation, and simply transfer that information to the map. Once she did that, the spell would automatically show the location of any person who had been registered in an official manner at birth.

The map would be very useful to the Ministry of Magic one day; however, there was only one person whose birth details she would enter into the map when she located them.

'This is genius,' she exclaimed to no one in particular. 'Where on earth did this book come from?'

'It belonged to my mother,' Snape answered, stirring her from her musings.

Hermione let her eyes drift up to the face of her companion. 'Your mother was a very clever lady,' she said on seeing the fondness in Snape's gaze at the mention of his mother.

'I'm not certain if she knew the spells in that book would become useful one day, but she invented them for the sole purpose of doing some good for our society,' he continued, a smile lifting a corner of his mouth. 'But, she was a clever woman and good with spells and charms. She went to Hogwarts in the same year as Minerva McGonagall, but the two were never close because my mother was a Ravenclaw, while Minerva was always as Gryffindor as they came. They fought each other for the top marks in all the classes they were in with one another.'

Hermione smiled at his story, reaching out a hand to rest lightly on his arm nearest her. 'I think I would have liked your mother,' she said truthfully.

'When I first met you, I thought you would end up just like Lily Potter did after she left Hogwarts. Either that, or you would be a second Minerva,' Snape said, a dark chuckle following his statement. 'I was never so relieved to see you continue your schooling as far as you could before this war got out of hand. I hope you intend to press on and finish what you started after all this is over.'

'I have every intention of pursuing my Arithmancy apprenticeship after the war is over and the... well, the Dark Lord is destroyed,' she answered firmly. 'Without Ron and Harry around to hassle me into joining them in Auror training, I will be able to simply do what I want with my life.'

'About your plans... when do you intend to seek out Greyback?'

Hermione blinked. 'As soon as possible,' she answered.

'Granger, this is a very dangerous mission...'

Hermione held a hand up, stalling anything else he wanted to say about the dangers of her plan. 'I will find him, and I will make him pay for what he did to Ron and me. You know what it is like. You understand why it is I have to do this.'

Snape closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between two long fingers. 'Miss Granger, I am going to tell you something which might help you understand my reluctance,' he said, his words a little strained. 'When I first joined the Death Eaters as a young man of seventeen, I was tested on numerous occasions to prove my loyalty. One such time I was presented with a victim whom I was charged to kill because she openly rejected the Dark Lord.'

Hermione felt her stomach clench. 'Was it very difficult for you?'

He nodded, and she noticed his eyes were glazed over slightly. 'I had no wish to become a murderer, but was so caught up in all the pure-blood hypocrisy I had belted and even beaten into me during my years at Hogwarts by the other Slytherins and Lucius Malfoy.'

Hermione felt anger crackle through her on his behalf. She knew it had taken Snape a lot of courage to tell her that, but she still could not change her mind. She had to kill Greyback.

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A/N A little sharing moment between them.

Chapter 13: Mind Mapping

Chapter 13 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big thank you goes to VIVAvivacious for her help with the beta of this chapter.

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Fenrir Donovan Greyback...

Hermione stared at the three words scrawled in her neat script floating just above Glasgow. Her map had been completed for three days, and the one person she had been on the hunt for was finally revealed to her. Unable to think of a reason why he would be in Glasgow, she rubbed her sleepy eyes. She had waited for Greyback to finally appear on her map. For some reason or another, he had not been anywhere in the UK or Western Europe, and she had been unable to locate him until he returned. She thought perhaps she should have stretched the boundaries of her map even further, but she had to concentrate her focus.

Besides, she had been pretty confident he would return to somewhere on the map sooner or later.

She traced his name with the tip of her fingernail, skimming it just so. She would take great pleasure in what she had in mind for her prey. Dropping the map on the end of her bed, she left what had become her bedroom and went downstairs to join Snape in the study. Over the last couple of hours, since her discovery of Greyback on the map, he had become a little withdrawn from her, and she knew it was because he did not approve of her task. She didn't want his disapproval.

As she descended the staircase, she heard Snape's voice from the front sitting room and went to investigate, peering around the door that was slightly ajar. Snape was sitting in a chair before the fireplace, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. The flames in the fireplace were green, and from what she could make out, he was having a conversation with Dumbledore.

'Headmaster, you may have my loyalty at this time, but I can assure you that you will not be allowed to question my judgement as far as Miss Granger is concerned,' he said firmly. 'She had been a great help to me with this potion you commissioned. Just because she left the Order does not make her an enemy.'

'Just as long as you are aware I will not tolerate confidential Order information being passed to those who are not supposed to be privy to it,' Albus replied gruffly.

'I am aware of my responsibilities,' Snape said curtly. 'I have a lot to be getting on with today, so if you don't mind, I will be going.'

Hermione watched as the flames died down to nothing in the fireplace once more, and Snape sat up, resting his head against the back of the chair and sighing. Deciding to make her presence known, she pushed the door open further and entered the room, heading over to Snape and sitting in the armchair adjacent to him.

'How much did you hear?' he asked.

'Oh, just the part where you were telling Dumbledore that I was assisting you and I'm not the enemy,' Hermione answered with a small smile. 'You don't have to stick up for me where he is involved.'

'That's not really the point,' Snape murmured quietly. 'The point is Dumbledore has become increasingly senile and paranoid over the past few months, and no one in the Order is willing to acknowledge the fact apart from myself, Arthur Weasley, and Lupin. His vendetta against you has become ridiculous, but so many are willing to follow him that it has spilled over to influence everyone else.'

'I have certainly noticed, but what good will it do to stir up trouble for yourself with Dumbledore on my behalf?' she reasoned.

'Very little, I suppose,' he grumbled. 'I dislike it when you are correct.'

Hermione laughed at that. 'Not many people do like it,' she replied kindly. 'How about we forget all about this for now and go have some lunch?'

'When do you intend to act upon what was revealed by your map?' Snape queried cautiously.

'Does that really matter?'

Snape shook his head, but his eyes belied the truth it mattered to him for reasons Hermione was unable to grasp.

They left the sitting room, and Hermione bade Snape to sit at the table while she prepared some sandwiches for them. He complied and perused the newspaper he had neglected that morning. She returned to place a small platter of egg and lettuce sandwiches on the table before heading over to put the kettle on to boil. Once she had a pot of tea ready, she sat down across from Snape and they ate and drank their tea together in silence.

Once they had finished, Snape waved Hermione away when she tried to clear the table and sent everything flying towards the sink himself with a flick of his wand. A second flick and the sink filled up with hot, soapy water and began washing themselves. He gestured for her to follow, and they adjourned to the study where he sat at his desk and gestured for her to sit in a chair he had moved to sit opposite him.

'Where is your map?' he asked.

Hermione flung her arm in the direction of the door and Summoned her map to her. It was clutched in her hand mere moments later before she handed it over to him. Watching as Snape spread the map out over the table, she wondered what it was he wanted it for. He tapped it with his wand, showing Greyback's name in Hermione's neat script and cast the charm to zoom in on Glasgow. He pointed at the area the wizard was currently in.

'Summerston,' he murmured under his breath. 'That is the district he grew up in. He's obviously breaking in his family home for a while biding his time while he waits for the next mission he is sent on by the Dark Lord.'

Hermione frowned. 'How could you know that?' she asked.

'The Dark Lord once suspected Greyback of defection and sent me, along with Lucius Malfoy, to keep an eye on him while he was there,' he answered. 'I had forgotten about it until you mentioned you had seen him in Glasgow. His family had a couple houses throughout the UK. I recall his house, but I do not know exactly which street it is on. We had tracked him using one of his belongings. It was after your fifth year.'

'I suppose you already thought to search for it,' she said, and he nodded. 'I don't suppose I can get upset with you for misplacing something from ten years ago.'

'In any case, I did think about it this morning and came up with three possible areas I believe he might be in,' Snape said.

'I was under the impression you did not approve of my task,' she said shrewdly.

'I don't, but I refuse to allow you to go in unprepared. I would like to know what you are planning so I might be able to assist you in completing what you have to do as efficiently as possible.'

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. An hour ago, she thought he was going to try and stop her from going in search of Greyback; now he was offering to help her get to him. All she had to do was tell him what her plan was. But, she didn't really want to. For some reason, telling him she intended to seduce Greyback in order to get close enough to kill him felt like a betrayal. She wanted Snape to respect her, but she felt that if she went about her revenge so underhandedly, she would lose it.

Her head spun. She felt her magic soar to the tips of her fingers as her nerves became frazzled. She saw Snape look at her with a question in his eyes. She shook her head, pursing her lips a little. She reached out to Greyback's name and traced it with her fingernail before dropping her hand.

'I can't tell you exactly what it is I intend to do, but I can tell you I will be able to do this on my own,' she said quietly. 'If you can direct me to those locations, I will be able to take it from there.'

'Miss Granger, I... I would be very regretful should something happen to you,' Snape said, his voice strained. 'My conscience would be very difficult to live with.'

Hermione's eyes widened as she looked up at him and was surprised to see no small amount of concern in his dark eyes. She was hit with a pang of confusion. Why should Snape care? Why was it whenever she looked at him these days she felt something stir deep within her? So many questions rattled through her mind, most of them revolving around the man that had taken her in when all others had abandoned her. Certainly, she was grateful for all he had done for her, but it wasn't just that.

She forcefully pushed aside her internal musings. She didn't have time for any distractions at the moment. Sighing heavily, she looked at the map again. She would need to strike before Greyback had a chance to leave again on another of Voldemort's insane missions outside of the UK and Western Europe.

'I won't get hurt,' she said, looking him dead in the eye. 'I will be as careful as I possibly can. After all, this isn't about me being hurt or killed. I have more that I want to do with my life afterwards. This is about Greyback.'

'I certainly hope you know what it is that you are doing,' he said, holding her gaze. 'Because this whole thing is beginning to look increasingly hazy to me.'

Hermione nodded. 'I know what I am doing, Professor,' she said softly. 'I just need you to give me the means to do so.'

Snape sighed heavily and grabbed his wand, marking three magical circles on the map. 'He lives within one of those three circles there,' he told her. 'As you go to them, the circles on the map will disappear if Greyback is not present in the area.'

'Another one of your mother's spells?' she inquired.

'A magical tracking circle,' he answered with a nod. 'It's all very specific magic, so the spells themselves could not be recorded for everyday use. My mother was never one for practical magic.'

'In some ways, I am glad she thought about things the way she did,' Hermione admitted sheepishly. 'I could never have come this far without her or your help.'

'I'm sure she would be glad to hear you feel that way,' Snape replied.

Hermione nodded and decided to take her map upstairs. She still had much she needed to plan before she went to drop in on Greyback for a visit and very little time in which to accomplish it. She stood and folded the map into a neat rectangle, nodding at Snape and heading towards the door to leave. She was about to close it when she heard him call out to her, and she paused with her hand on the doorknob.

'Just ensure you try and let me know when you're going to leave so I don't worry that you've been kidnapped or the like,' he told her, not looking up from a book he had open on the desk before him.

Hermione nodded, knowing he could still see her through the dark curtain of his hair. Without a word, she slipped the rest of the way out of the room and closed the door behind her. Making her way up the stairs in silence, she entered her room and flopped onto her bed gracelessly. Rolling onto her back, she stretched out the hand holding the map to one side and dropped the folded parchment onto the nightstand beside the bed. She sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her magic was white-hot, like molten lava coursing through her veins. Greyback was an Apparation away, and she was sorely tempted to strike while the iron was hot.

But the way Snape had been acting lately gave her pause. She would try and be more cautious now, if only because he asked her to.

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A/N Next chapter will hopefully be a Snape chapter.

Chapter 14: A Dangerous Mindset

Chapter 14 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thanks to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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The clock on the mantelpiece was ticking away, setting a beat in the room, which had been silent save for the soft sound of breathing.

Snape looked up as the clock began to chime, noting it was a quarter past five in the evening. He glanced at the armchair adjacent and saw his companion had nodded off in the chair, curled up with her head resting on one of the arms and her knees pulled into her chest tightly. He felt his breath hitch in his throat at the sight and tried to curtail the errant emotions that bubbled within him. Now was not the time to go ruining the agreement he and Hermione had come to. Not when she needed and trusted him so much.

Merlin knew he had come to admire Hermione more than he really ought to, especially with the situation they were in. He knew it would have been wrong for him to take advantage of her in the wildly uncontrollably emotional state she was in. She was so stubborn and intent upon having her revenge that it scared him a little. He would not want to be Greyback on a regular day, let alone the day Hermione Granger hunted him down and had her revenge upon him.

Her magic was still unstable, and once unleashed, it would hit at full force without any form of restraint whatsoever.

Unable to resist the temptation, Snape allowed himself the diversion of watching Hermione as she dozed. Her breathing was soft, barely audible, and the little puffs of air that passed through her lips blew gently at the loose curls that had come out of the knot she had tied her hair into at the back of her head. With her hair hanging down over the other side instead of obscuring her neck, he was able to soak in the pale column of her throat. She was such a pretty thing far too pretty to have such darkness growing within her. Very few men of her generation would be up to the task of meeting her needs now, which was such a shame. She deserved to be with a young, whole

man.

The clock chimed half past the hour, and Snape was finally roused from his silent admiration of her. Standing from his chair, he covered Hermione quickly with a soft throw rug and made his way out of the room down to the basement to begin working on the last few stages of Voldemort's potion, which required the addition of ingredients. After that it would simply be a matter of time before they could use the charm Hermione had created and see if the results were as sound as the theory.

They were her calculations, so he didn't have any doubts they would be correct.

Once he had the burner set up beneath the cauldron, he lit the flame and removed the stasis spell once the temperature was correct. Within an hour, the potion was bubbling away happily, and Snape was chopping and slicing up his ingredients in preparation to add them. When it was finally time, he took up a glass stirring rod and placed it in the cauldron, followed by all of the ingredients in order, stirring occasionally to prevent the brew from turning into a lumpy mess, which would effectively render it useless.

He was unsure as to how long he had been down there, but he heard a knock on the door upstairs before it opened and Hermione walked down.

'I made some dinner,' she informed him quietly.

He blinked, taking in her state of dishevelment. Her hair was still slightly tousled from her nap in the study, and her jeans and sweater were rumpled. He checked the time on his pocket watch and noted it in the journal before turning the heat of the flame lower and gesturing for Hermione to lead the way up the stairs. Despite her own dishevelled appearance, she had managed to put together a fairly decent meal consisting of fettuccini with white sauce, salad, and herb bread on the side. She had even set the table with a cloth he had not been aware of owning with matching silverware and ceramic plates.

'I didn't know you could do this,' he murmured, inhaling the aromas appreciatively. 'This is impressive.'

She flushed a little at his compliment and indicated they should sit down and partake of the meal. Once seated, Severus did the gentlemanly thing and began to serve her first, spooning a generous amount of the sauce over the pasta before doing the same with his own. Sensing there was something missing from the table, he realised there was nothing to drink with the meal and immediately stood. He went to the pantry and searched around the top shelf until he found an acceptable bottle of white wine. He cast a cooling charm over it to chill the beverage to the correct temperature to serve it and Summoned two wine glasses from the cupboards.

'I hope you like Moscato,' he murmured as he filled both glasses and passed one to her.

She swizzled the wine just a little and took a dainty sip, testing the flavour like a connoisseur before nodding her approval. 'It's lovely and sweet,' she informed him. 'It's a very nice accompaniment. You have good taste, Snape.'

'I should think by now you might have assumed to call me Severus, Granger,' he said, a hint of teasing in his tone.

'I don't know if I would be comfortable doing so if you're going to continue to call me Granger or Miss Granger as though I were still a schoolgirl,' she rebutted swiftly.

'Touché,' he said, raising his glass to her before taking a hefty swallow.

They continued the rest of their meal in silence except for the occasional scrape of cutlery against the ceramic of the plates. Snape wasn't so sure where she had found all his rarely used kitchenware, but it was nice and different to be eating a proper home-cooked meal off decent flatware for once. The pair usually survived on soup and quickly thrown-together sandwiches they took turns making. Matching plates had never been a necessity for those sorts of hastily-consumed meals.

After finishing his food, Snape sat back in his chair and patted his full stomach in satisfaction. He desperately hoped she hadn't made some sort of dessert also. He was certain he would turn it down if she offered. Across from him, Hermione was also sitting back in her chair, hands folded over her own scrawny midsection. He took note their meal was already having a positive effect on her colouring. She was desperately in need of more nutrients, and he was going to ensure she got them.

'Thank you, Miss Granger,' he murmured with a barely-there smile. 'That was very good indeed.'

The smile he got in return lit up her face, but he noted it still failed to reach her eyes. 'I am glad you thought so, Professor,' she replied. 'I was a little nervous. I wasn't sure what you would like.'

'Well, I thank you again for going to the effort,' he murmured. 'Seeing as you were so kind to provide the meal, I insist you allow me to take care of the cleaning.'

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but a look from him silenced her and she simply nodded. 'All right, if you insist,' she said quietly. 'I suppose I might just go upstairs and bathe before I have an early night. I've been feeling a little tired all day.'

'You overwork yourself, Granger,' he chastened, shooing her out of the kitchen before she could begin to protest again.

Once she was gone from the kitchen, he withdrew his wand from his sleeve and gave it a flick, sending the dirty dishes to the sink that was now filling with water. He collected the serving dishes with food manually and put the various leftovers in containers that could be kept in the refrigerator for later consumption. Once he was satisfied that the kitchen was scrubbed clean, he went back down to the lab to check on the potion.

He remained down there, watching over the softly simmering potion, losing track of time completely. Snape hadn't been aware when he had fallen asleep, but he awoke abruptly with a crick in his neck, having dozed off with his head on his arms that were rested on the bench in front of him. Taking note of the time, he put the potion in stasis and quickly cleaned up his workbench and equipment, placing the cauldron in a dark closet for safekeeping. He made his way upstairs and straight to his room, where he fell on top of his bed, still fully dressed, and fell into exhausted sleep once more.

The next morning, Snape woke up feeling a little disoriented. The weak morning sunlight filtered through the gaps in the curtains. He grumbled to himself, kicking his dragonhide boots from his feet and listening to the satisfying thump they made as they hit the floor beside the bed. It took him another ten minutes until he was ready to go to the bathroom and make use of the facilities and shower. Uncaring of whether Hermione would see him clad in only a towel, he made the journey back to his bedroom that way.

Once he was freshly dressed in a new pair of black slacks with a white button down tucked neatly into his trousers, he threw on the first frock coat he found in his wardrobe and walked down to the kitchen without bothering to button it. He was in such careless mood that morning; he couldn't care less if Granger would keel over from the shock of seeing him in such a casual state of dress.

When he arrived to the empty kitchen, however, with no other sounds in the house save for the ticking of clocks in various rooms, he felt discomfort pool within him. The discomfort increased tenfold when he saw a neatly folded square of parchment on the table with Hermione's purple wax seal pressed to it, a weight like a tonne of stone in the pit of his stomach. Cautiously, he approached the table and plucked the offending letter from the wooden surface, rubbing a thumb over his name written in her neat script.

Flicking the wax open with a thumbnail and unfolding the note, fear scattered through his veins like a fast-acting poison.

--

Severus,

Yes, I do choose now of all times to finally take it upon myself to call you by your name. I figured that if this goes badly, I would have at least called you Severus once, even if it were only on paper. As I am sure you are aware by now, considering you are reading this, I am no longer in your home. I don't want you to be alarmed we both

already knew I was going to go after him soon.

I will try my very hardest to ensure I am neither gravely injured nor dead so I might return to help you complete the final incantation for the potion together. Please, for my sake, do not attempt to follow me. This is something that I must do on my own.

Take care,

Hermione

--

'Fuck!' he swore loudly, slamming the letter down onto the tabletop hard.

Why did the thrice-damned woman have to go ahead on her own that way? Grinding his teeth together, he cursed, curling his fingers around the parchment the still had his hand on and crumpling it into a ball that he through across the kitchen. He cursed Gryffindors for being such foolhardy and stubborn creatures. He did not know what he would do with himself if she were to be harmed in any way. It was obvious to him now that she was more than just a charge and protégé to him. His chest ached painfully as his mind turned over the various different situations she could find herself in. Greyback could outwit her and turn it around so he had the upper hand. She would not be able to stop him if he attempted to rape her.

'Fuck it all,' he swore again, dropping heavily into one of the chairs at the table. 'Hermione...'

She would never forgive him if he followed her. He knew this, but his hand itched to pull the ebony wand from his sleeve and make that little Apparation anyway.

--

A/N Oho, we're finally getting somewhere.

Chapter 15: Street Reconnaissance

Chapter 15 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The street was empty, snow laying thick over the roads and pathways. If it were spring, she would be able to see bitumen and concrete in its stead.

She had always loved winter as a child, but now she would always view the season through different eyes. Colder eyes. The warmth in them had long since fled, leaving cinnamon where there was once sweet chocolate. Her eyes scanned across all the houses tightly packed together along the street. She had searched the other two zones Snape had marked for her on the map but had come up empty-handed. In this area, two different streets had lit up like magical beacons.

She just had to narrow down the two houses by the afternoon, so that when she had them, she had time to investigate which of the two it was before nightfall. After all, she intended to be working very late that night; she planned to wait until Greyback had a chance to have a few drinks and therefore be less resistant when she attempted her seduction. Well, she rather hoped he was the kind of man who would toss back a few at the end of the day.

It was nearly an hour later when she was able to seek out the first house and work her way through the wards, taking them down layer by layer but re-erecting them behind her as she went. She didn't need to make the owners suspicious, let alone aware of her presence. Once she cracked through the final ward, she gave the outside of the house a scan and noted it seemed to be a fairly regular house. She didn't even have to break in to know it was not the house she was looking for.

Resigned, Hermione removed herself from the premises swiftly and expertly, ensuring all the enchantments and wards were perfectly in place before moving on to the house she was certain Greyback would be hiding away in. She found it a little odd there were two Wizarding households in such close quarters with one another, but she merely shrugged it off. It wasn't as though she knew everything about the living habits of all magical folk.

She walked through the snow, an Impervius cast over her shoes to deflect the snow and prevent them from leaving prints. She didn't want anyone to be alerted to her walking the streets. When she arrived at her destination the next street down, she looked at her map quickly and saw Greyback's name was still hovering over the area where her name was also scrawled. Tapping her wand against the parchment, she refolded it and tucked it away in the inner pocket of her heavy winter coat.

She approached the house carefully, casting a few small charms that would be barely noticeable over it to establish what kind of wards were in place. She was then dumbfounded to find there were only minor theft charms at work, as well as a really low-level intruder alert. Frowning, Hermione took both enchantments down in quick succession and replaced them once she was a little closer to the house. Peering in, she saw exactly what she wanted to, right in the front sitting room.

A family portrait hung on the wall opposite the window, a younger Greyback featured in it, standing beside a lady who was sitting in a chair and a taller man on his other side. It was an old photo, but it was still unmistakably him.

She could see the fire was crackling, indicating he was obviously home, so Hermione decided to take her leave quickly for the time being before Greyback noticed there was something amiss. She walked to a park just down the road, and from behind a large tree, she Apparated back into the centre of town, intending to stop for a time to get out of the chill and replenish her strength with some food.

Entering a tiny cafe on the corner of the main street, she sat down and waited for the busboy to attend her.

'What can I get for you today, Miss?' he asked, his brogue so thick Hermione was barely able to understand him.

'Just an espresso with cream and whatever soup the chef suggests,' she answered, looking over at the specials menu.

'Right you are, Miss,' he said congenially with a wink before walking off.

Hermione sat back in her chair by the window and relaxed, staring at the random passersby as they trudged their way through the cold, wet snow. Her coffee arrived a few moments later by the same man who had taken her order. Mixing a spoon of sugar and some cream into the brew, she took a dainty sip. Satisfied, she continued to stare out the window. Just as her soup arrived at the table with a side of thick-cut herb toast, Hermione noted small flakes began drifting down from the sky. It was snowing.

She snorted inwardly. Of course it would begin to snow the one day when she hoped it wouldn't.

She began to eat her soup, pumpkin, savouring the warmth as it slid down her throat. She ate in silence, very aware of the fact that the busboys at the counter were eyeing her off and chatting about her. She supposed she couldn't blame them the shop was nearly empty and they likely didn't get many visitors from out of town during this time of the year.

When she was finished with her meal, she pulled out her map after pushing her bowl and plate to the side, finishing the rest of her coffee as she spread out the portion she needed to view.

Wandlessly, she cast a charm over the map so that it would look like any old regular map to the Muggles if they were to see it. She didn't need to risk exposing herself to non-magical folk while she was there when she had been so careful to avoid the magical ones from discovering her. Casually, she shifted her right leg just enough under the table to be able to adjust the item she had strapped to her shin. She was carrying a hunter's knife she had from her father's old weaponry collection. It never hurt to have some back up in case she was unable to access her wand.

The sky grew dark earlier than she had expected, being just past five. Paying her bill, she left the cafe and made her way to an alley to Apparate back to the park near Greyback's house. On her arrival, she chose a swing on the playground to sit on, dusting off the new layer of snow that covered it. The snow was still falling rather lightly, but she knew there was a chance it could develop into a full-blown blizzard at any time.

When her gloves no longer warded off the chill and her body began to shiver, she left the little park and resumed her trip down the road to the home of Fenrir Greyback. On arrival, she removed the intruder alert ward and slipped through the gate, raising it again behind her. She had little to no need to remove the anti-theft spell. She wouldn't be removing anything from the premises, after all. Shakily, all nerves, she walked the pathway up to the front door.

Hermione paused before knocking, resting her gloved hands on the door, the wool rasping lightly against the chipped paintwork.

This was the moment she had been tirelessly working towards for weeks. She had put so much time and effort into finding Greyback, and here, perched on the very edge of the precipice, she was hesitant to push forward. She felt a lump form in her throat. Why was she not pushing ahead just as she had planned? Closing her eyes, she took several calming breaths, willing her pulse to return to normal. When she felt confident she was able to continue, she raised her hand to the heavy brass knocker and tapped it against the door clearly.

Straining to listen, she heard heavy footsteps from behind the door, and she steeled herself to face the monster that had changed her forever. She stepped back from the door when the footsteps grew louder and grasped the bottom of her wand with her right hand in case she would need to use it right away. All her nerves fled the moment the door opened, revealing Greyback in a state more dishevelled than usual.

His smile on seeing her was feral, to say the very least. 'Mudblood, I see you managed to find me,' he said, fingering his wand that was tucked into the front pocket of his pants lazily. 'Did you come here to kill me?'

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. 'I hadn't really decided yet,' she lied effortlessly, her years in Drama Club when she was younger finally paying off. 'Are you going to let me in, or are you going to let me freeze?'

'If I didn't know any better, I would say you were here of your own free will,' he said. His words were oily and dripping from his mouth. 'Get inside, then.'

Leaning in close to him as she moved to go inside, she allowed her mouth to brush against his roughly-stubbled cheek. 'And now, how can you be so certain I'm here against my own will,' she rasped huskily into his ear before grazing her body against his as she walked the rest of the way inside.

It didn't take long for Greyback to follow her inside, closing his door behind him as he did. Hermione walked slowly down the hall and into his sitting room uninvited, leaning a hip against the old buffeted lounge she found there. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, accentuating them slightly. Greyback fell for the bait, eyeing her appreciatively.

'You're overdressed,' he said silkily. 'Let me take that coat for you.'

Hermione shrugged out of her winter coat, leaving her in just her slacks and a white button down. She passed the coat to him, and he draped it over the back of a worn leather armchair as she took in her surroundings. Her eyes clapped onto the family picture she had seen earlier. He looked like an evil prick even then. She snapped her eyes back onto Greyback and watched as he began to approach her, like a beast coming down on its prey.

'I know why you're here,' he murmured softly.

Hermione let her eyebrow quirk up at him for the second time that night. 'Oh, really? And what might that reason be?' she asked, deliberately licking her bottom lip.

'Your magic sings to me,' he growled, coming to stand before her, grasping her chin with a roughened hand. 'I can feel the darkness travelling within you. It knows my darkness they reach out to one another.'

She allowed him to tilt her face up to look directly at him. 'Your darkness does indeed call out to me,' she said, and she wasn't lying. So close to him, she knew the darkness in her soul was reaching out to its maker.

'You want to continue what I started that night,' he said, staring deep into her eyes with his own dilated, amber-coloured ones. 'I know you want it. Why else would you have come here if you weren't sure I wouldn't kill you on sight?'

'I want you to continue what you started,' she breathed, restraining the gasp that threatened to pass her lips as he leaned in to nuzzle her throat with his disgusting lips.

'You are such a fucking pretty little Mudblood,' he spat, latching onto her ear with his teeth and nipping at it roughly.

Hermione didn't hold back. She knew she needed to lure him into a false sense of security. She knew he wanted her. His arousal pressed hard into her thigh, and his hands went up to cup her breasts over her white shirt, massaging them roughly. She bit back a cry of anguish, feeling filthier than she had since the night in the forest.

Greyback finally mashed his lips to hers, roughly biting on her bottom lip, causing her to gasp. His tongue invaded her mouth like an out-of-control eel, sliding against hers and practically gagging her. She was just about to close her eyes when she felt him stiffen against her. Looking up into his eyes, she saw the faint realisation.

'You filthy, little bitch,' he spat.

Hermione had only just enough time to grasp her wand before he grabbed the front of her shirt and threw her bodily across the room. She hit a wall with a thump and a crack.

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A/N Yes, my very first cliffhanger.

Chapter 16: Bloody Violence

Chapter 16 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Many thanks go to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta.

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The wall was crumbling, dust scattering everywhere as bits of plaster sprayed around the room.

Hermione felt as though a speeding train had hit her. She coughed, pulling herself up and out of the broken plastered wall she had just been thrown into with a ridiculous amount of force. She'd some broken ribs, for sure. Rubbing an arm across her face to clear the dust and blood that was coming from a cut on her forehead, she stared at the half-man half-beast across the room from her. Greyback's sharp teeth were all bared, and his fingers had half-transformed into the wolf claws. Sucking in a sharp breath, she tightened the grip on her wand, steadying herself on her feet.

'You had me fooled for a moment, Mudblood,' Fenrir growled, allowing his jaw to return to its human form. 'But you forget who you're dealing with. I can smell you.' He paused, considering the thought for a moment. 'Or rather, the problem would be that I couldn't smell you.' He leered at Hermione as her eyes widened when she realized what he meant. 'You will not be leaving this house alive tonight... or in one piece.'

Hermione felt a shiver run through her for a moment. She could taste blood in her mouth and felt that her left shoulder was dislocated. If he managed to get a hold of her to throw her like that again, she doubted she would be able to survive it a second time. She tried to raise her wand arm, but she gasped when she felt her side throb. She glanced down just a little to see there was a piece of wood roughly the length of her wand, but twice as thick, jutting out from her side.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed it and yanked it free, tossing it to the ground before raising her wand once more. Greyback growled, transforming his face once more into that of a wolf, snapping his teeth at her menacingly before making his way towards her, his movements heavy and deliberate. Feeling a little trapped, Hermione managed to dodge to one side as he made to launch towards her; his teeth snapped shut on the empty space she had just been occupying.

He whipped around, his long arm soaring through the air and aiming right at her head, but she ducked out of the way and escaped the blow, dodging the heavy hand. She launched herself in the direction of the lounge, ducking to crouch behind it and pressing fingers to her side. She lifted her fingers to look at them and saw they were coated in her own blood. Swearing under her breath, she was about to move along when she felt the lounge shift and was surprised when Greyback lifted it up and tossed it aside as though it weighed nothing.

Exposed, Hermione stood up and tried to make a run for it, but it was too late. His powerful arms caught her up and pressed her against the wall beside the fireplace. She could feel his claws piercing into her flesh, making her bleed even more. He growled, taking her wand from her and tossing it aside before transforming his head back to its human form. She could see a vicious glint in his eyes and his feral, bloody smile.

'You chose the wrong wolf to mess with, Mudblood,' he said, leaning in and forcing his mouth on hers again, yelping in pain when she bit his lip hard. 'Little bitch!'

'Hurry up and kill me, you worthless excuse for a human being,' she said, spitting bloody saliva directly at his face.

Greyback growled loudly at this, his hands going around her throat tightly, holding her a foot above the ground. Hermione struggled, her fingers clawing at the hairy claws as she violently thrashed about, attempting to free herself. He stared at her, his expression a pleased one as she gasped for breath, choking and beginning to turn a little blue in the face. She could feel tears leaking down her cheeks.

She dropped one hand from the ones clenched around her throat and pointed her fingertips towards her leg, willing her magic into her fingertips. She had one last chance to get this right. Stretching her arm as far down as she could reach, she looked Greyback in the eyes before allowing her blue lips to curve into something that vaguely resembled a wicked grin.

'*Ac-accio knife*,' she croaked, just loud enough for the spell to activate.

The knife that was strapped to her shin flew into her right hand, tearing the leg of her trousers as it did so. Greyback's eyes went wide suddenly in shock as she dropped her other hand to the handle of the knife and pushed it right into his chest. The blood was everywhere, spraying from his chest and soaking into her clothes and hair. If she hadn't got his heart, she was certain she at least hit a major artery. She looked up then, just in time to see Snape run into the room.

The hands around her throat released her, and she fell to the floor along with him, coughing and wheezing, gasping for breath.

She stared beside her where Greyback was clawing at the knife in his chest with his human hands, attempting to tug it from himself. Blood was dribbling out of his mouth and his legs were jerking in all directions as he struggled. Hermione didn't try to stop him as he ripped the knife from his chest. The blood spewed forth even faster, pooling on the ground surrounding him, and in a few moments, his legs grew still and the gargling sound ceased. All that was left was the blood that was slowly spreading all over the carpeted floor.

She looked back up at Snape to see him staring at the scene with shock and disbelief written all over his features. She coughed and wrapped her arms around herself as pain coursed through her at the simple action. A second later he was kneeling on the ground beside her, gathering her bloody form into his arms and cradling her as he stood at his full height. She accepted this without a word; for she feared if she spoke, she would surely lose the capacity to breath.

'Hermione...' was the last thing she heard before the darkness consumed her.

An indefinite time later, Hermione felt herself begin to stir. It was pitch black, but she realised she had yet to even attempt opening her eyes. Carefully, she allowed one eye to squint open and was struck by a sudden pain in her head. She snapped both eyes shut tightly but was forced to relax when she realised the effort to press her eyelids together was what caused the pain to flare up again. She groaned softly when she lifted her arm to rub her eyes, wincing once more when she realised her shoulder, too, was in a severe amount of pain.

'Don't move around so much, Hermione,' said a soft, familiar female voice from beside her.

She couldn't open her eyes, but Hermione would know that voice anywhere. 'Luna?' she croaked.

Her hands flew to her throat, which was as sore on the outside as it was inside. Gentle hands reached and covered hers, prying them away from her neck and easing them back down by her sides. She felt a warm, damp towel pass over her face and neck, cleansing her of what she assumed was blood, dirt and plaster.

'What are you doing here?' Hermione croaked out again, needing to know. 'Where are we right now?'

'We're in Professor Snape's cottage in the bedroom you've been staying in,' she answered, gently cleaning away as much of the dried blood as she could. 'You really shouldn't be talking right now. The professor is downstairs in the lab brewing some potions to heal your neck and throat, and I'm up here to watch over you and clean you before he is finished.'

Hermione nodded, warily beginning to open her eyes. The lighting of the room was not so hard this time, and she barely flinched. Allowing her eyes to dart around, she saw the dishevelled blonde locks and the teary-eyed face of Luna Lovegood. Hermione offered her a small, tired smile before closing her eyes again and feeling herself drift back into unconsciousness.

The pattern continued throughout the rest of the night and early morning.

Hermione would wake up and open her eyes to look around and see what was happening around her for a while, asking what potions she was being given by Snape whenever he was in the room during her lucid moments. She knew her dislocated shoulder had been popped back into place, and the ribs that had been broken were all mended. The last potion Snape was working on was one to help inflate her lungs back to their regular capacity before Greyback had thrown her against a wall the first time.

She remembered snippets of conversation she had exchanged with Luna vaguely, and she knew her body was likely to be sore for many days to come. She had been foolish and so extremely lucky she had not gotten herself killed. Maybe Snape had been right, but it was of no consequence any more. Greyback was dead and she was hurt, and Snape, with Luna's help, was attempting to fix what she had broken. Her eyes stung with hot tears. If she had died, she would have broken so many promises.

She wouldn't have been able to keep her promise to Snape to stay alive.

Eventually, the man himself returned to the room to give her the last potion she would need. Luna left the room to make some tea downstairs, leaving her alone with Snape. He sat on the bed beside her, having needed to be there when he fed her the potion, his back to her and head tilted forward so his hair obscured his face from view. Hermione reached a hand out to him, lightly touching his shoulder.

He looked over his shoulder at her then, then began to turn and face her when she reached a hand out to touch one of his hands beside her on the duvet. His long fingers wrapped around her thin ones, and he simply held it.

'You played a very dangerous game with your life yesterday, Hermione,' he told her, saying her name aloud to her for the first time willingly. He couldn't call her Miss Granger any more not when she had nearly died in his arms.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, her throat still a little raw despite the potions. Some things just needed to heal themselves naturally.

'I know you are,' he murmured. 'I'm sorry, too.'

'Whatever for?' she asked, her eyes growing wearier by the second as the Dreamless Sleep Potion he had given her began to kick in.

'You asked me not to follow you,' he said simply. 'I knew something bad would happen. I am only sorry I didn't arrive sooner. Had I not hesitated, I might have been able to spare you some pain.'

Hermione's chuckle was husky, sounding painful to his ears. 'It was all self-inflicted,' she said, her voice beginning to sound a little more strained.

'Rest now,' he instructed, releasing her hand and drawing the duvet up to sit beneath her chin. 'Later in the morning I will send Miss Lovegood up with some broth and some pain potions.'

She nodded in response, and she watched as he walked out of the room and closed the door quietly behind him. She stared at the closed door for a little while, wondering about Snape's lack of anger towards her. He had been forced, yet again, to step in and essentially solve her problems problems she had created herself. What had happened to the snarky, cranky professor who had once taught her potions and used to turn his acid tongue on her and her friends so often in class?

Blinking, she let her head roll up to face the ceiling, staring at the plain white paint.

She was more messed up than she had ever been, and this time she had literal blood on her hands. All over her clothing, body, and hair, in fact. A sick feeling crept through her, settling in the pit of her stomach. At the same time however, her magic and the darkness within her was singing its triumph. Her bloodlust and vengeance was satisfied for the time being. She dreaded the thought that it was not totally sated and that she would be driven to seek revenge on others, also. On Lucius Malfoy for his unprecedented, blind prejudice. On Bellatrix Lestrange, for torturing her on Albus Dumbledore, for turning nearly everyone she had ever cared for against her.

Hermione let her eyes drift closed then, grateful that Snape had given her the Dreamless Sleep. She hated to think of what nightmares she would have had without it.

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A/N And so we reach a small peak in Hermione's tale of woe.

Chapter 17: Auld Lang Syne

Chapter 17 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The curtains in the room had remained mostly shut for the better part of three days, with only a sliver of white winter light filtering through a slight gap.

Hermione had been in bed for the better part of that time, able to walk but unwilling to face what was beyond the four walls of her bedroom just yet. Never before had she spent a Christmas morning in this manner; it hardly even felt like Christmas to her. There was no excitement leading up to the day, no frantic present shopping at the last minute, and she had been so wrapped up in what she had been doing that she had almost forgotten the presents she had purchased for both Luna and Snape months in advance. She even had something for Harry and Ron tucked away at the bottom of her trunk.

She propped up her pillows against the headboard so she was in a sitting position and rested herself against them. Flinging an arm out to one side, she Summoned a book from her trunk and gently ran her fingers over the words on the cover. *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. It was one of her favourite books as a young girl, and every year around Christmastime, she and her mother would sit and read it together.

But her parents were gone now, and there would be no one to read the book with her. When she had gone to Hogwarts and stayed at the school or with the Weasleys, she at least would have company and people chattering around her, distracting her from her sorrow over her lost family.

Luna had been forced away the day before, having to attend an Order meeting and do some work. Hermione knew what was really happening. Dumbledore was punishing her. He knew Luna was the only friend she had left, and he deliberately took her away. Luna told Hermione she would leave the Order too, but the older witch had told her not to. She couldn't expect Luna to leave simply because she was her friend.

Hermione sighed, placing her book on the nightstand. She was contemplating getting up and going to take a shower when she heard a knock on the bedroom door.

'It's open,' she said clearly, her voice much improved.

It made a soft creaking noise as it opened, and Snape stepped inside, dressed in black trousers with a black shirt tucked neatly into them. He was not wearing a frock coat or robes or any other formal attire. She was stunned. He offered her a small half-smile, closing the door behind him before sitting down in the chair that still sat alongside the bed.

'Happy Christmas,' he said quietly.

'Happy Christmas to you, as well,' she replied, reaching out a hand to touch Snape's wrist briefly before retracting it.

'Did you think you might like to come downstairs and have a proper breakfast this morning?' he asked, looking her over quickly.

She stared at his face, his expression earnest. How could she deny him? 'Of course, I think I would like that very much,' she answered, offering him a smile that just barely reached her eyes.

It was enough apparently, for he stood again and went back to the door, leaving as swiftly as he arrived. Hermione looked down at the ends of her curly mop of hair and decided she had left it in the state it was for far too long. It had not been washed since Snape had brought her back to the cottage from Greyback's house. Luna had done her best with various Scourgifying spells, but it was getting greasy and gritty. She didn't even want to think about trying to run a comb through it until after a shower.

Deciding she had wallowed quite enough, she tossed back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed, standing up on marginally wobbly legs. She hopped from foot to foot until they had accommodated her weight, and then grabbed her bathrobe from the wardrobe on her way to the bathroom. After washing her hair and the rest of her, she dried off quickly and returned to her room wrapped in the robe, careful to pick out a maroon sweater and dark jeans to wear.

When she was dressed and her hair cascaded in damp curls down her back, she made her way to head downstairs. On the way down, she caught sight of her reflection in a small mirror on the wall. There was a bruise, slightly yellow, that sat just above her right brow, and there was still slight bruising around her neck. Her eyes were a dark chocolate that day, and she was dreadfully pale almost as pale as Snape.

Shaking her head, she continued on her way, heading for the kitchen. On entering, she was surprised to hear the sound of the radio playing 'Auld Lang Syne' along with the slight crackle of whatever Snape was frying in the pan at the stove.

'I didn't know you liked Christmas music, Snape,' she commented, a smile curving her mouth upwards at the corners.

He spun around to look at her, surprise in his dark eyes. Hermione smirked. Snape was so used to hearing every single little thing; she doubted many people had managed to get the drop on him like that. Walking over to join him at the stove, he moved over to allow her to take over watching the eggs while he tended to the bacon and fried tomatoes in the other pan. He shut the flames off beneath both pans when they were ready, and together they set the table and served themselves.

'I don't really like Christmas music,' Snape said when they began to eat. 'I just turned the radio on to channel four because I thought you liked it.'

Hermione smiled, recalling Christmas the year before at Grimmauld Place. Ron had turned on the radio to channel four and made her and Harry dance around the sitting room and sing along to the tunes with him. It had been one of her favourite Christmases. Snape had stood in the corner beside Remus Lupin and watched them with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. Hermione thought perhaps Snape wasn't really as opposed to the season as everyone had assumed he was.

'It was a good Christmas,' she said, smiling at him brightly. 'Thank you. It was very thoughtful of you to turn the radio on for me.'

Hermione thought she saw Snape's cheeks flush a little at this before he disappeared behind his newspaper as he usually did in the mornings. Chuckling a little, she finished her breakfast off quickly and collected their empty plates, taking everything to the sink and filling it manually. She washed everything up on her own before returning to the table and tugging the newspaper down a little so she could see Snape's face.

He looked up at her with a dark eyebrow quirked up in question. 'How might I help you, Miss Granger?' he asked.

'Let's go into the sitting room and sit on the lounge by the fire. I have something I want to get from upstairs to give to you,' she suggested.

He sighed dramatically and nodded. 'All right, I suppose that sounds like an agreeable idea,' he murmured, folding his newspaper up and placing it back on the kitchen table. 'I'll meet you there shortly.'

Ten minutes later, Hermione entered the sitting room to find Snape perched on the lounge with a book open, sitting furthest from the fire, leaving her the seat beside it and the throw rug flung over the back of it. She clutched the neatly wrapped gift behind her back and walked across the room to present it to him. He smirked at the sight of the silver wrapping and green ribbon.

She gestured for him to open it, which he did carefully, tugging the ribbon out of the way and neatly pulling the tape before slipping the wrapping off of the leather-bound volume he now held. It was a First Edition copy of *Moste Potente Potions* that she had found in a little bookshop in Muggle London, tucked away in the fiction aisle. His dark eyes could not hide the smile that was in them at his gift.

'Thank you, Hermione,' he said with a nod. 'This is a very fine gift, indeed.'

Hermione could not contain the flush of pleasure that spread through her at hearing this. It was something she had accidentally stumbled upon, but it did not diminish its meaning. She took a seat on the lounge and tucked her legs up beneath her, grabbing the throw rug and laying it over her lap.

'I have something for you, also,' Snape said, holding out a small rectangular parcel wrapped neatly with gold paper. 'Yes, it is ironic we would both choose to wrap one

another's gifts in house colours.'

Hermione laughed softly at that, accepting the small parcel. She peeled off the sticky tape carefully and with almost as much grace as Snape, slipped the box laying within onto her palm and leaving the wrapping intact. When she lifted the lid of the box, she saw a bright blue lapis lazuli pendant in the shape of a teardrop wrapped in silver sitting on the end of a fine silver chain.

'It's a Portkey,' he said quietly. 'It's keyed to this cottage and can only be used by you once you have activated it with your wand. The lapis lazuli is the stone of protection.'

'It's beautiful,' she said, her breath catching in her throat. 'It seems as if you are always trying to protect me, Severus.'

'Someone has to,' he replied with a hint of his usual sarcasm.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and turned her back to present her neck to him, holding her curls up out of the way. 'Can you help me put it on?' she asked.

He took the necklace from her and swiftly secured it around her neck. 'The chain won't break unless it is being used as a weapon against you.'

Hermione smiled. The man thought of everything. 'That is a handy little bit of charm work,' she noted.

She watched as a delighted flush stole across her former professor's cheeks and thought it was definitely worth pushing all the darkness out of the way for the day just to see him almost smiling at her and acting as though they were friends. And they might very well be friends after all they had been through together in the past couple of months. He had seen her murder in cold blood and could still look at her as he did every other day. He was good to her in a way she had not thought possible.

She pulled her wand out of her sleeve and pointed it in the direction of the doorway. *Accio Little Women*,' she said clearly, and in seconds, the book came zooming into her hands.

'Louisa May Alcott?' Snape asked.

'It was one of my favourites as a child,' she replied. 'My mother used to read it to me every Christmas until I learned to read myself, and then we would take turns and read it together. Would you care to read with me, Severus?'

He reached over and plucked the book from her hands with nimble fingers, opening it to the first page. "'Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,'" grumbled Jo, lying on the rug,' Snape read, his deep, resonant voice flowing over her and soothing her.

Hermione listened to him for a long time as he read chapter after chapter of her favourite book. Eventually the sound of his voice had her falling asleep, and she nestled into the warmth of a firm chest unknowingly. When she woke a few hours later, drowsy from the warmth of the fire, she turned her head to see she was resting snugly against Snape's side, her cheek pressing against his chest and his arms wound tightly around her. She looked up a little to see his eyes were closed in slumber, also.

She should have been worried or dismayed, but somehow, with his strong arms around her and her face nuzzled into him just so, she felt like she could curb the darkness with his help.

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A/N Yes, it was a tender moment between the two.

Chapter 18: The Winter Tempest

Chapter 18 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thanks, as usual, go out to VIVAvivacious for all of her help.

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The weather outside was the worst it had been all winter; a blizzard warning had been issued on the radio, alerting residents along the east coast of the sudden change.

Seated in front of the warm fire in the study, furiously scribbling notes, Hermione paused to look beyond the frosted windows. She had to squint in order to see the snow swirling wildly around in the air as the winds began to pick up a little. She was torn between wanting to go outside and dance about in the storm for a little while before it got really serious and staying indoors where it was warm and she was unlikely to catch hypothermia. She chose the latter, not wishing to add to Snape's growing list of burdens.

As she observed the weather, she allowed herself a moment to retreat within her own head. Over the past few days, she had been ignoring the continual fight between the light and darkness within her. At one point, she had been more light than dark. Now, she was unsure as to whether it was an even playing field or if the darkness was trying to move in on more of that territory. Pushing it all aside was only a temporary solution.

Guilt washed over her. She didn't deserve to sit there pitying herself when she had plotted the murder of another person. One part of her screamed it was of no consequence, that Greyback was hardly a regular human being. The other congratulated her for a job very well done.

Her thoughts then turned to Snape. Snape had borne witness to so many more horrors and had been forced to do things far worse than her murdering Greyback. He had been forced to kill innocent people all for the sake of Dumbledore and his games. Yes, Hermione did think Dumbledore was a master manipulator who used his puppets in all his plays. Snape was far too loyal and not the sort of man who would break a promise or go back on his word.

Following the train of thought, Hermione's mind flicked back to the memory of waking, curled into Snape's side on the lounge Christmas day after he had read her to sleep. A tingle ran through her. After she had found herself in his arms, she had snuggled closer and simply fell asleep once more. The next time she woke up, she was on the lounge by herself, her head resting on a pillow that had been slipped beneath it, and the throw rug was tucked snugly around her.

Neither of them had mentioned the incident to one another, and she simply assumed it had been one of those odd tender moments that would be swept under the proverbial rug.

She looked back at the journal on her lap and sighed. She wasn't going to be able to concentrate in the study any longer. Snapping the book shut, she grabbed her quill and ink, as well as the journal, and made her way to the door down to the lab. She descended the stairs as quietly as she could, not wanting to make too much noise in case Snape had reached a delicate stage of his brewing.

'What brings you down here?' Snape asked.

Hermione looked over to see him sitting on a stool at the bench, right beside the cauldron. His journal was open, but he was leaning his elbows on the table and had his head propped up on his hands. Hermione thought he looked as though he had been in the middle of a contemplation or daydream before she had entered and disturbed him.

'I didn't mean to interrupt,' she murmured apologetically.

'If I did not want anyone else down here, I would have locked the door,' he replied, gesturing for her to join him at the bench. 'What have you been up to today?'

'I've just been refining the spell we're going to use on this potion so the acceleration process is not only faster but a perfectly smooth transition from semi-complete to completed,' she answered, opening her journal to the page she had been scribbling on and pushing the journal across the table to Snape.

He drew the journal closer and nodded his approval. Her logic was as sound as always. He returned her journal to her quickly and returned to stir his potion six times counter-clockwise.

'We should have performed the charm on the Winter Solstice to slightly boost its effectiveness; however, as neither of us were able to, any time in the near future would serve our purpose just as well,' he informed her. 'I wouldn't mention any of the Winter Solstice details to Dumbledore, if I were you.'

'Noted,' Hermione answered with a frown.

It was her fault they had missed the Winter Solstice. Guilt ripped through her for a moment before she clamped down on the feeling. No it was too late to change anything. The guilt would only make things worse for her. Shaking her head, she looked down at her spell.

'We could cast this today if you wanted,' she offered. 'It's still close enough to the Solstice for it to count even a little.'

Snape allowed a small bark of laughter escape him at that. 'I'm certain the tides and position of the earth to the sun and moon doesn't actually work that way,' he responded, cleaning his glass stirring rod with a cloth.

'It couldn't hurt to give it a shot,' she replied with a shrug.

Snape nodded and removed the apron he had taken to wearing whenever he was not dressed in a frock coat and robes. He turned the flame beneath the potion down so it was just a simmer before beckoning Hermione around the bench to join him over the side where the cauldron sat. Unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt, he rolled both sleeves to his elbows. Hermione's eyes widened at the sight of so much of Snape's pale flesh. Never before had she even so much as glimpsed his skin.

His arms were wiry in strength and muscle tone. She saw the Dark Mark tattooed starkly against his white skin. One day she would discover a way to remove Snape's Dark Mark. Without even realising she was doing it, Hermione reached out a hand and touched Snape's forearm, her index finger tracing over the dark tattoo. He looked down at her hand, startled.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, snatching her hand back, her fingers tingling from where she had touched the smooth skin of his forearm.

Snape frowned and reached over, grasping the hand that had just been on his arm and held it up in front of both their faces. The tips of her fingers were glowing slightly with a white light. He rubbed his thumb over hers and the glow increased and sought out his fingers as he began to withdraw them.

'It seems your magic is drawn to the darkness,' Snape murmured, gently tracing his thumb over the knuckles of her hand.

'Apparently,' she replied, unconsciously leaning closer to him as his hand continued to hold hers.

He quickly released her hand then and put both of his hands on her shoulders, steadying her and bringing them both back into the present. She blinked up at him rapidly, swallowing and taking a couple steps backwards. Uncertain of what had just passed between them, she decided to push it aside. Whatever it was, she worried it had something to do with the darkness within her.

Snape cleared his throat beside her, picking up his wand from the bench. Hermione pulled her wand from her sleeve and went to join him beside the potion. Grabbing her journal, she opened to the page the final spell was jotted down on. She slid the end of her wand into the simmering potion, and Snape followed suit.

'*Veneficus Propero Quod Universa is Venenum*,' they chanted in unison. '*Scindo Veneficus ex Animus*.'

A beautiful turquoise glow emitted from the ends of their wands and swirled around and through the bubbling potion. It lasted for a moment before the colour faded and the potion stilled, clear as crystal. Hermione looked up at Snape, who nodded and turned off the flame beneath the cauldron. They removed their wands from the brew, and Snape grabbed a silver spoon, scooping out the crystal liquid and using his hand to waft the scent to his nose. It had a very strong scent, similar to the Old Spice Hermione could remember her grandfather wearing from when she was a young girl.

'Congratulations, Miss Granger,' Snape said with a smirk. 'You have just cut six months off the brewing time for this very complex dark potion.'

Hermione allowed a small smile to curve her lips. 'I could not have done so without such a formidable assistant,' she said jokingly.

Snape allowed a low chuckle to escape from him and lifted the cauldron from the stand over the burner and moved it to cool on the bench beside the sink. Once they cleaned up the bench and all the chopping boards, knives, and stirring implements, Snape cast a charm around the cauldron to ensure there was no contamination. After they were certain there was no more they could do in the lab, Hermione led the way up the stairs to the sitting room, where she stoked the fire.

Afterwards, she manoeuvred herself into the empty space on the lounge beside Snape, tucking her legs up beneath her as usual.

She stared for a while into the flames that were gently crackling in the warm fireplace and casting shadows over the walls of the dark room. Neither had bothered to turn on the lights, content to just sit on the lounge and allow the light of the fire to cast a warm orange glow over them. Unlike the blizzard beginning to rage around the cottage, both of them were warm, and for the time being, safe.

'I was wondering about something concerning the potion,' Hermione piped suddenly, startling Snape out of his silent, trance-like state.

'Go ahead and ask your question,' Snape replied. 'It's not as though I'd be able to stop you from asking even if I didn't want to hear what you had to say.'

Hermione raised an eyebrow at his sarcastic teasing before continuing. 'Well, now that the potion is complete, the Order will have the final weapon for Harry to use against Voldemort in order to destroy him,' she began. 'I was wondering, how exactly do you intend to deliver this potion to the Dark Lord? And when do you think the Order will begin sorting out when to strike?'

Snape pursed his lips in thought. 'Well, as to your first question, I am, as of yet, uncertain as to how I intend the Dark Lord to come into contact with it,' he replied. 'I will give that some more thought over the coming days before I report the completion to the rest of the Order. As for your second question, I imagine Dumbledore will simply include this potion as the final piece of his arsenal and will likely go on the offensive next month.'

'January? But that is during the school term,' she said, confused.

'When I say next month, I could mean as early as New Years' Day up until around the ninth before students return to Hogwarts from their holidays,' Snape replied.

Hermione nodded in understanding.

'I suppose we're going to have to come up with something really quickly, or Dumbledore will likely attempt to accuse me of delaying progress with the potion.'

'Don't pay any mind to the senile old man,' Snape said, reaching over and tucking a curl she had been trying to blow out of her eyes behind her ear. 'Albus has simply seen one war too many in his lifetime, and after so long you begin to lose all sense of self-preservation and clarity of mind.'

'He will have to come to me on his knees to have a chance to earn my forgiveness and favour again,' Hermione said, her dark, mean side giving a whoop of joy.

'There may be a time in the near future when this could indeed occur,' Snape said with a small smirk. 'I would be interested to see it.'

Hermione almost smiled at him, taking in the tenderness in his dark eyes. She didn't know what any of it meant, but for now, she did not want to think on it.

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A/N Potion complete! I hope you enjoyed the Snape/Hermione interaction.

Chapter 19: A New Year's Eve

Chapter 19 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The shower stall was filled with steam, the heat of the water fogging up the glass doors and the mirror above the sink.

As Hermione rinsed the last of the conditioner out of her hair, she paused to contemplate what she hoped to accomplish for the day. She intended to help Snape find a way to deliver the potion to Voldemort as soon as possible. Sooner was better, as Snape would be forced to reveal the completion of the potion to Dumbledore and the Order. There was very little he could keep from Albus Dumbledore for very long. Hermione supposed it was sort of second nature to do as the Headmaster asked of him, considering he had spent over twenty years doing just that.

It was still quite early in the evening to be having a shower, but Hermione had been crippled in pain for the past few days from migraines. Snape had clarified that it was all just changes in her magic. He explained it worked in a similar fashion to the physical cramping one got whenever they grew larger physically. Hermione had immediately wondered what other sorts of surprises she would be in for in the next little while as she adjusted to the changes in her magic.

Her line of thought brought her back to what had transpired over the past week. She had killed Greyback. She felt revulsion towards herself. What was it in her that kept driving her towards revenge? Why had she developed an insatiable lust for blood? She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the forearm she had propped against the tile shower wall. She hated the complications life had dropped into her lap with all the grace of a tonne of bricks falling from the top floor of a skyscraper to the busy streets below.

She opened her eyes and wiped the water from them before reaching for the faucets to turn them off.

As she was moving to open the glass door to exit the shower stall, she felt her right foot in pain the instant she stood on it and looked down to see a tile had broken and come loose, and she had just slashed her foot open with it. Her blood, mixed with some of the leftover shower water, was making a direct path to the drain. There were a few smaller bits of porcelain stuck in her foot still, and she bent over slightly to remove them. She snatched her hand back with a loud yelp when a sharp piece sliced her finger open too.

Frowning, she brought the finger up to inspect it, leaving her foot as it was. If she touched it again, she would only end up in more pain. She saw the blood trickling from the tip of her index finger and watched as it flowed over and along the creases in her hand. Blood. There had been so much of it the night she had killed Greyback. It had been everywhere: all over the floor in a giant pool, on her clothes, drenching and staining her head before it began to coagulate.

Hermione felt her stomach lurch, and she made a direct beeline to the toilet, making it just in time to retch the contents of her stomach into the bowl. After a few moments of heaving, she stood on shaky legs, spitting in the bowl before flushing the toilet and making her way to the sink. She rinsed her mouth and scrubbed her face before Summoning her towel from the rack and tucking it around her shivering form.

Her body was trembling hard from the exertion. Blood had a totally different meaning to her now. It was something she wanted and hated all at the same time. She looked down and saw the blood on her hand still shone red, and the throb of her foot reminded her she still had a heavily bleeding foot with ceramic tile shards in it.

Without bothering to think about the consequences of her next action, she took a deep breath to yell for help.

'Snape!' she called out as loudly as she could, hoping with all her might he was nearby.

She flipped the lid of the toilet down and used the commode as a makeshift chair, allowing her injured foot to stick out from the rest of her to reduce the pain of standing on it. She listened patiently for a few moments before she finally heard footsteps approaching the bathroom. There was a knock, and she wiggled her fingers at the door to unlock it for Snape to enter. His eyes widened for a moment when he saw her state of undress. She nodded in the direction of her foot quickly and his eyes widened even

further before he dropped to his knees and withdrew his wand from his sleeve.

'What on earth happened?' he demanded as he used his wand to gently loosen the tile shard from her foot before extracting it the rest of the way with his hands.

'The tile was broken,' she answered. 'I'm not sure when it happened. I don't usually look at the floor when I'm in the shower.'

'Whatever the case, do remain still while I attempt to stem the bleeding and knit your skin back together,' he told her, effectively silencing her.

It took a few minutes, but with a patient hand, Snape healed every single cut of abrasion on the bottom and side of her foot before sitting back to look it over. Satisfied, he stood and held out a hand to help her stand. She stood with both feet planted firmly on the ground and looked up to see Snape was relieved. After he used his wand to clean up the bathroom and fix the tiles, he gave her a light nudge on the back to precede him out of the bathroom and inclined his head just a little before turning to head down the hall and downstairs.

'Thank you for helping me with my foot,' she called after him softly with a small smile.

'You're welcome,' he replied. 'I'm making dinner. Come down whenever you are ready to eat or if you want to help me carve the turkey.'

Hermione smiled. It was New Year's Eve, and she and Snape would be sharing a roast turkey and vegetables for dinner. Shaking her head in disbelief at what had just transpired, she made her way to her room and got dressed. When she arrived in the kitchen, the aromas immediately assailed her senses, and she had a feeling this was going to be one of the best turkeys she'd ever have, which said a lot after many New Years of Molly Weasley's cooking.

'I can make some gravy to go with the turkey and bread,' she offered, causing Snape to jerk his head around to look at her sharply.

He hadn't known she was there. 'Go ahead,' he murmured in response. 'I have nothing made yet, so you are welcome to it.'

Hermione nodded and smiled, taking out a small saucepan and beginning to prepare a gravy mixture that would complement their turkey. Once the table was set, they sat down and Snape served the two of them thick slices of the turkey breast and a big pile of vegetables. He always gave her more than she would serve herself and watched her to ensure she ate every bite and was not just Vanishing the food from her plate magically. As if she would do anything so underhanded.

'You've been quiet,' Snape commented when they were about halfway through their food.

'Oh, I'm just enjoying the lovely meal you made,' she said quickly, not sounding terribly convincing even to her own ears.

'Are you feeling unwell?' he asked.

Hermione thought about it for a moment and realised he might be right. She had been feeling a little dizzy and lightheaded since her shower, and she realised it might have been caused by her blood loss from the cut on her foot.

'I think I'm a little lightheaded,' she answered. 'Do you perhaps have Blood-Replenishing Potion down in the lab?'

Snape nodded. 'I will get one for you right after you've finished your dinner,' he answered. 'But for now, just eat. It will help make you feel better.'

Hermione nodded and then grinned suddenly. 'Did you happen to find time to make dessert as well?' she asked.

Snape smirked at her. He had obviously noticed she had a bit of a weak spot where sweets and desserts were concerned. He waved his hand in the direction of the oven, which opened and displayed the baking dish within it. She could smell the rich aroma of chocolate and caramel and knew it was going to be good.

'Dark chocolate and caramel self-saucing pudding,' he replied.

Hermione could feel her mouth begin to water at the thought. The oven door shut suddenly, and she shot Snape a glare before she resumed eating her dinner. When she was finished, she whipped out her wand and sent all the dishes to the sink before manually beginning the task of packing the leftovers into containers to store in the refrigerator. Snape assisted by washing the dishes before he went to the oven to retrieve the pudding.

'Snape, I swear I am going to end up pudgy the way you've been feeding me over the past few days,' she moaned even as she sat down at the table to eat the generous bowl of pudding he handed her.

'If one can't celebrate the holiday in some form, then there is no holiday at all,' he murmured, joining her with a bowl of his own.

After they had finished, they both adjourned to his study, and Hermione immediately began opening up books. There were a few different things she wanted to look into concerning how they were going to get the potion into Voldemort that had been niggling in the back of her mind. She opened the last book to a random page and spotted out of the corner of her eye something she had a feeling would work. She smiled and made a noise of triumph.

'I've got it!' she exclaimed, almost a little too excitedly.

'Oh? What have you got?' Snape asked.

'The way to give that foul snake-face the potion you made,' she answered, beaming. 'Look here, there is an aspirator. We could send the potion to Voldemort as a gift!'

Snape looked at her in horror. 'A gift? Are you daft? And just how do you suggest we get this "gift" to the Dark Lord safely? Surely you know all his mail is screened.'

'But that's just it! It is so obvious and un-devilous it just might work,' she answered. 'We simply need to ensure it is delivered by one of the current Death Eaters.'

She watched as Snape paused for a moment to think, and his expression became one of grudging acceptance. 'I suppose your plan does have some merit. All the Dark Lord needs to really do is inhale the potion into his system,' he said quietly, tapping a finger against his lips. 'Although as to the Death Eater delivery method, just how do you propose we make that work?'

'Well, there is always Polyjuice. I could take some and impersonate one of them to deliver the gift?' she suggested.

Snape frowned. 'Absolutely not!' he snapped. 'You will not be taking one step in the direction of the Dark Revels. It is not a place for someone who does not know what to expect. If one of us were to impersonate a Death Eater, it would be me.'

Hermione opened her mouth to argue with him when a heavy knocking sound began on the front door. She looked over at Snape, who had a confused look in his eyes, also. She made to stand, but he waved her off, getting out of his chair and swiftly making his way out of the room. Hermione got up as soon as he was out of sight and poked her head around the doorway to look down the hall at the front door.

What she saw there was not at all what she had expected.

'Miss Granger, it appears we have a guest,' Snape said, his arm around the waist to support a very bloody Draco Malfoy.

Her eyes widened, and she went quickly to his aide, closing the door and helping to carry Draco up the stairs on the opposite side. As she and Snape worked together to heal the now-unconscious young man's wounds, Hermione thought there was a lot about Snape she had yet to learn.

When she went to bed that night, all she could think about was the pained look on Snape's face as he sat by the bed in the guest room, watching over her former school nemesis.

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A/N Surprise! Draco's here.

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Chapter 20: Sins of the Father

Chapter 20 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The air in the room was cold and made breathing a difficult task. He had not realised the fire had died down.

Standing from his chair, Snape went over to the fireplace and threw a few more logs in from the stack in the corner, igniting the wood with a quickly-murmured spell. After he was satisfied it was burning away properly and the room was beginning to warm up again, he returned to Draco's bedside and took his godson's temperature. The fever was beginning to break, but there was still a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead, and he was shivering slightly.

It had been that way for two days now. Since Draco's arrival on New Year's, Snape had been his constant bedside companion, caring for the man and healing his injuries. The moment he had arrived on the doorstep, Draco collapsed, unconscious, into Snape's arms and had been in a semi-coma ever since. Hermione had been a great deal of help. She ensured he was getting food and would watch over the younger man whenever Snape felt like he needed to have some sleep.

If he was honest with himself, Snape was nervous about the state Draco arrived in. It was unclear whether he had been beaten as a punishment or whether it had been the entertainment kind. In the Revels, oftentimes Death Eaters would be set against one another in boxing and wrestling matches to amuse the Dark Lord. Although, he did not recall a time before when Draco had been called upon to participate in such events. Usually he was exempt because Lucius Malfoy was Voldemort's right hand.

Sighing heavily, he tried to push it out of his mind. In due time, Draco would wake from his unconscious state, and he would be able to ask all his questions.

He was about to get up to go to the bathroom when a knock sounded on the door before Granger entered, levitating a bowl of soup and a plate of thick-cut garlic toast along with her. She gave him a wary smile before placing the food on the nightstand beside Snape's chair.

'I thought you could use some lunch,' she murmured. 'You didn't have anything to eat for breakfast this morning.'

'You're not my nanny, Granger,' he growled.

She flashed him a warning look before sniffing delicately. 'I might not be your nursemaid, but if you don't start taking care of yourself better, I will be forced to do so for you,' she scolded. 'You won't be able to help Draco all that much if you are wasting away yourself.'

Frowning, Snape picked up a piece of toast and took a large bite. 'Satisfied?'

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him and snorted. 'Very,' she replied. 'I'll watch over Draco if you need to go to the loo and take a shower.'

'Are you implying something by that?' he asked even as he stood to comply.

She sighed and shook her head. 'Just go. I will put a warming charm over your food so it doesn't go cold while you're out.'

Snape muttered under his breath and left, heading straight for the bathroom. He emerged fifteen minutes later, clean and wearing a thick, black bathrobe. After he re-dressed in his room, he immediately returned to the guest room and found Hermione sitting in the chair beside the bed, reading aloud from one of the books from the study. He recognised it as being one of the old Transfiguration texts from one of Minerva's classes.

Reaching out a hand, he gently touched Hermione's shoulder, alerting her to his presence. She made to close the book and get out of his chair, but he waved her off and simply sat himself on the end of the bed beside Draco instead. She closed the book anyway and looked at him as though she had something she wanted to say.

'Well, spit it out,' Snape said, sighing in exasperation.

'I was just thinking you should probably tell Dumbledore about the potion now,' she answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

'I haven't the patience for the old man at present.'

He watched Hermione's brow furrow. 'Don't you start on that,' she scolded. 'We've already figured out all the kinks involved. Withholding the potion's completion from them will only cause problems.'

Snape closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. 'I know,' he said eventually. 'I will Floo Albus soon. Just be aware there is a good chance you and I will have to travel to London this evening, if that is the case.'

Hermione nodded in acceptance. Snape stood from the bed and made to leave the room. He watched Hermione pick the book up once more and begin reading it before he ventured down the stairs and to the sitting room. Lighting the fire, he tossed in a generous scoop of Floo powder before sitting down in the armchair in front of the green flames and calling out Dumbledore's name. The head of the man in question appeared in the flames in seconds, looking at Severus curiously.

'Severus, it has been far too long since your last update,' Dumbledore scolded.

'I apologise, Headmaster, but things have been very busy this holiday,' Snape replied. 'It will please you to know the potion for the Dark Lord is now complete.'

'Excellent,' Dumbledore said gruffly. 'And just what do you mean when you say it has been busy? Are you having complications with Miss Granger?'

Snape shook his head adamantly. 'Miss Granger has been most helpful as far as the potion is concerned,' he answered. 'My godson, Draco, appeared here two nights ago and has been unconscious since his arrival. We are caring for him and waiting for him to reawaken.'

'That is interesting news, indeed,' the Headmaster said thoughtfully. 'I will arrange an Order meeting for tonight where you will be able to announce the results of the potion and charm work. Bring Miss Granger along it was, after all, her spell.'

Snape frowned then. 'With all due respect, Headmaster, I will not be bringing Miss Granger along to Grimmauld Place again if she is to be subjected to Mad-Eye Moody's disdain as well as your utter lack of reigning in your dog,' he said, his tone cold. 'She is not to be treated so poorly. She is not a Death Eater or a traitor.'

Snape saw Dumbledore roll his eyes at that but nod. 'Very well, I will personally ensure Miss Granger is treated well while she is at Grimmauld Place,' he agreed.

'I'll need you to send someone over to watch Draco while we are attending. I would prefer if it were Luna Lovegood,' Snape told him. 'She already knows the location of this house and is the most competent person I can think of to care for Draco.'

Dumbledore nodded, and the connection was dropped. Snape stood from the chair and walked from one side of the room to the other, pacing out his steps. He would likely receive a message via Dumbledore's Patronus later as to when the meeting would occur. He hoped the Headmaster would go through with his promise not to ridicule and make Hermione feel uncomfortable. His chest constricted a little at the thought of Hermione. She was upstairs, reading to the one boy who had been cruel to her their entire association as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Times had definitely changed; a Gryffindor caring so easily for a Slytherin would have been unheard of only a few short months ago. And yet, there they were, in his cottage, caring together for his injured godson, waiting to see what they could make of the information Draco could give them. He walked up the stairs to the guestroom to see Hermione was still reading aloud. Taking a moment to just look at her, he noted she was looking a lot healthier than she had a week beforehand.

He knew she was constantly fighting an internal battle; her light and dark sides were having at one another, fighting for the right to be the only side within her. She was in a grey spot, struggling not to cave to either side too quickly. He knew her heart was with the light, but her mind was sharp, and her magic was a powerful opponent. He walked all the way into the room, grazing his hand against her hair and alerting her to his presence while enjoying the feeling of touching her.

She looked up at him and gave him that half-smile of hers that never failed to reassure him she was still Hermione Granger, brightest witch of her age and the woman he had come to care for a great deal.

He was just about to sit on the bed when he heard a moan coming from the other end. His eyes shot to Draco's face, and he could see the man moaning softly, his eyelids flickering spasmodically as he tried to open them. Hermione dropped her book on the nightstand and immediately reached for one of Draco's hands as he tried to scratch at the bandage on his head.

Snape went around the other side of the bed to hold his other arm down, and together the two of them murmured soothing words as they tried to calm the young Malfoy as he began to wake up. It took ten minutes before Draco was able to open his eyes and look around the room and at the two of them, his grey eyes fearful.

'Where'm I?' he rasped out harshly.

'You are in my cottage in Aberdeen, Draco,' Snape answered calmly. 'You came here two days ago with some serious injuries, and you looked as though you had been beaten rather badly.'

Draco's eyes widened, and he nodded, his grey eyes becoming watery. 'I was beaten,' he said softly. 'It was my father.'

Snape's eyes widened when he heard this. Lucius Malfoy had done this to his own heir? 'Why did your father beat you, Draco?' he pressed, squeezing the younger man's hand as his eyes began to drift shut again.

'Wouldn't deliver you and the Granger girl to him,' he whispered. 'He wanted to give you to the Dark Lord to prove his worth...'

After the words slipped from Draco's mouth, he once more slipped into unconsciousness. He was severely concussed, and when he had arrived at Snape's doorstep, he looked like more than just Lucius Malfoy had beaten him. He looked over to Hermione, whose eyes were filled with shock, but her expression held nothing. She blinked and shook her head, unable to believe what she had just heard.

'He was protecting me,' Snape said softly. 'The daft little idiot chose now, of all times, to be more loyal to me than his own father...'

Hermione flashed him a half smile. 'At least you know now Draco loves you as much as I think you must love him,' she said, looking down at her lap and releasing the young man's hand.

Snape felt his chest clench again in the way it always did when Hermione was around. Oh, he knew for a fact he was fast falling for her. It might have even been a long time in the making, but it all culminated at the point when he became the one person she could rely on. The one point when he knew she was the only one he could rely on. In their own strange way, they had become far more to each other than simply friends. He released Draco's hand and walked around the bed to her, holding out one of his large, roughened hands to her. When she slipped her small hand into his, he felt his heart warm.

It had taken him many long, lonely years to find someone he could connect, read, smile, argue, and enjoy the quiet with. But there she was with her hand in his. Trusting him like no other had before so implicitly. He was just growing used to the rapid beat of his heart when Hermione's hand slipped out of his as she pointed in the direction of the window. He turned to see Dumbledore's Patronus floating in silver-blue just beyond the glass; he waved his hand in that direction to open the window and let it inside.

'Come to Headquarters as soon as Miss Lovegood arrives,' it said.

Snape heard the Floo downstairs activate and knew it was time to go. Hermione looped her arm through his and allowed him to lead the way out of the house and Apparate them both to London.

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A/N Yes, Draco is a good little boy, and Snape has feelings.

Chapter 21: Grim Old Discussions

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big hug of thanks goes out to my lovely beta, VIVAvivacious, for all of her help with this chapter.

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The park across from Grimmauld Place had never seen the coming and going of so many people within the span of three days.

Hermione had not spent so much time at Grimmauld Place since before the battle in the forest, and she could not say she liked it all that much. The run-down, dusty, old house was the place of many of her best and worst memories from when she was both a student and an adult. After all, it was there she had come to appreciate and understand the real Snape better, but also the last place she had been before she became the Wizarding world's pariah against her own will.

It seemed to be a constant uphill battle for her: struggling with her magic and dark urges, battling with her old friends and support network while at the same time trying to find some reason to forgive them for casting her aside. In the end, she came to the conclusion she could not do it until the day came when Harry, Molly, and Ginny apologised to her for their ignorant behaviour. Snape was a constant help to her, silently supporting her without being asked.

She knew she was falling for Snape, but she resisted it at every turn. It was far too dangerous for either of them to have feelings for one another. She had seen something a few times in his eyes also and knew that if she looked directly at him, he would see that same something reflected in her own. But she could not allow it to happen, and neither could he. There was too much at stake, and if either one of them were to die, the other would be broken-hearted and left to mourn. If she resisted, there would be nothing to mourn.

At least, that was how Hermione was going to approach the issue.

Her mind turned back to Grimmauld Place and the reasons why they had been forced to go back and forth between the cottage and there constantly. They were planning. Dumbledore had every spare person there to assist in his battle strategy they were building around the notion the potion would do as it was supposed to. All the Dark Lord needed to do was inhale the vapours on a regular basis for a few weeks, and his magic would diminish and split itself from his very soul.

Hermione had been able to contribute very little, as Moody would often interrupt whenever she wanted to speak, and she would sit there and glare a hole into the back of his head until Snape would finally nudge her and calm her. Her magic crackled around her rather violently whenever the ex-Auror was present in the room. Harry had been running from her like a scared, lost little boy every time she cornered him to talk, making up some excuse to see Ginny or talk to Remus. She was tired of his games.

That particular day had been the last day of planning for any pre-battle strategies, and as it drew to a close, Hermione was feeling weary. As a result, her magic was spontaneously casting charms on things, and she had found herself at one point covered in pillows the moment she thought of how nice it would be to go home to bed. Snape had laughed at her misfortune, surprising everyone in the room at his uncharacteristic outburst of mirth.

Needless to say, he had been extremely reserved and had thrown a wall up around him for the rest of the day.

It was eight in the evening and everyone had been called to the kitchen so they could discuss all the plans as a whole before everyone would finally be dismissed. Hermione hated it. She wasn't even a part of the Order anymore, and yet there she was, forced to sit through Dumbledore's drivel because she was there to support Snape in any way she could. She didn't know if Snape knew her reasons for continuing to attend with him every day, but she hoped one day, if they both survived, the reasons would be clear.

She looked over at Snape, who was standing with his arms crossed, back pressed against the wall right beside the only exit. He looked exactly like he wanted to make good on his escape as soon as he could. When everyone was finally packed into the kitchen, making it seem even more cramped than usual, Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat to gain everyone's attention.

'Thank you all for coming to the final meeting for the day,' he said, looking out at everyone, his eyes resting coldly on Hermione for a moment before travelling over the rest of the room with their usual warmth. 'I just wanted to run through the stages of the Order's plans we have made thus far before we all leave for the evening.'

'Evening? More like night,' Hermione heard one of the twins whisper.

She smiled at that but quickly schooled her expression when the Headmaster threw a look at both her and the twins.

'So, from what I've gathered, the first stage of the plan is going to be delivering the potion Severus and Miss Granger worked together to complete to Riddle,' Dumbledore began. 'Severus, would you be so kind as to explain the details of this to everyone?'

Snape pushed himself off the wall and cleared his throat quietly. 'The plan will be executed in approximately two days' time. My godson, Draco, will be delivering the potion to the Dark Lord under the guise it is custom-made cologne. The potion itself has no scent at present, but tomorrow it will be modified so it can pose as such,' he explained. 'I trust you will all accept the plan for what it is. Draco works for me, and I would trust him with my life. He is doing us all a rather large favour.'

Moody snorted in disbelief. 'We'll trust it when the boy comes back after delivering it like you say,' he growled.

Snape opened his mouth to shoot something potentially venomous right back at Moody, but he was interrupted swiftly by Dumbledore.

'Continuing on from that, if all goes well with this plan and Riddle is exposed to the potion for a month, we will be ready and able to go on the offensive,' Dumbledore said. 'The potion should have torn Riddle's magic from him, rendering him helpless, and his Death Eaters will likely begin to scatter. Now, nothing is set in stone, except for young Mr. Malfoy's part for the time being.'

'Are we done for the night, then?' asked George a tad impatiently.

'We do have wives and families to go home to, and it's a bit late, if you ask me,' Fred agreed.

Dumbledore frowned but waved off the twins dismissively. Hermione rose and watched as everyone else walked out of the room, save for Moody, Dumbledore, and Snape. She eyed them warily as she walked out of the kitchen and paused just at the top of the stairs, straining to listen to what they had to say to one another. Flattening herself against the wall, she inched her way silently back down to the bottom so she didn't have strain so hard to listen.

'Severus... Alastor informed me today Fenrir Greyback was found brutally murdered in his old family home a few days ago,' Dumbledore said in a hushed voice. 'The Aurors are keeping the matter hushed up because they are allowing some leniencies where Death Eater killings go, but I must ask you, swear to me you had nothing to do with his murder.'

Hermione felt her breath hitch. Dumbledore thought Snape had murdered Greyback? How could he be so thick?

'I did not murder Greyback, Headmaster,' Snape said simply.

'I can never be too sure what it is you get up to when you are away in that cottage of yours,' the Headmaster continued. 'Especially with you locked away in that house with Hermione Granger. I fear she has been a bad influence on you, my boy. It feels to me like your loyalties may be shifting away from me, and I do not like it.'

Snape glared at the old man. 'You seem to have forgotten, Headmaster, I was the Death Eater, not Miss Granger,' he said through clenched teeth.

Hermione felt her blood boil in her veins and her magic crackle to the tips of her fingers, seeking Dumbledore out. She bit her bottom lip, trying to maintain control of her urges and taking a deep, steadying breath. Her mind kept ticking towards hexing the bollocks off the old man, so she quickly and silently made her way up the stairs to the coat closet and grabbed her coat, throwing it on before grabbing Snape's and heading back to the kitchen. She noisily opened the door once more and stomped down the stairs, giving them plenty of time to stop discussing her and Snape.

'Shall we leave?' Hermione asked when she reached the bottom, her eyes alive with her anger as she held out Snape's coat towards him.

Snape nodded and crossed the room to her, gently lifting the coat from her hand and shrugging into it. He led the way to the stairs then and paused when he realised she did not appear to be following him. Hermione waved him on and gave him a pointed look. She wanted to speak to the Headmaster and Moody on her own. He nodded minutely and walked up the stairs, the door closing gently behind him. She took a moment to admire just how good he was at controlling his anger. Hermione had very little control over her rage.

'I hope you are proud of yourselves,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She feared if she spoke any louder she would be screaming like a banshee. 'Severus Snape is a good man, and yet you chain him down and treat him like his only purpose in this life is to act as your dog. How dare you? You are not the great man I thought you were, Albus Dumbledore.'

'Miss Granger,' Dumbledore spluttered, his face becoming splotchy and purple.

'No, I don't even want to hear it,' she snapped. 'I come here voluntarily to help because I want the dark times to end as much as the next person, but after hearing the way you have spoken to Severus countless times over the past few months, I know now even more than I did then why I left the Order. I will not be one of your dogs, and Severus shouldn't have to be either.'

'Rest assured, Miss Granger. I will hold Severus to his vow until this war is over,' Dumbledore warned. 'He is not yours, nor shall he ever be. Severus Snape owes me his life.'

Hermione crossed her arms and surveyed the Headmaster coldly. 'Then you are going to be a very, very lonely old man when this war finally blows over,' she said before turning and walking up the stairs.

She could hear Alastor Moody sputtering to Dumbledore and asking why he had allowed her to speak that way. She simply snorted and opened the door to leave, closing it quietly behind her. She found Snape leaning against the wall beside the coat closet, his expression blank. There was a good chance he may have heard what she had said, but she didn't care. Let him know what she thought. He might even learn from it and start acting on things rather than allowing his supposed life-debt to Dumbledore get in the way.

'Are you ready to leave now?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied briskly, opening the door to leave Grimmauld Place and trudging down the snowy steps.

Snape followed her and caught up with her when they reached the Apparation point in the park across the road. He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. She knew he could still see the flames of her rage in her eyes. She wasn't sure why she didn't resist, or even why Snape did it, but his arms went around her, and she felt her cheek pressing against the wool of his coat. Hot tears leaked from her eyes into the fabric as he simply held onto her and tried to bring her back down to earth from the heights of her anger and the darkness that threatened to consume her.

After a few minutes, she pulled back and sniffed a little before nodding and looking up at him, hoping he could see the gratitude she expressed with her eyes. His nod in return reassured her he had seen and understood.

'Let's go home,' he murmured before Apparating them both to his cottage.

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A/N Dumbledore is becoming quite the nuisance, yes?

Chapter 22: Den of Iniquity

Chapter 22 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The silence in the house was so deafening that even the sound of a pin hitting the floor would have been heard.

Hermione had been sitting alone in the study all morning, simply staring out the window. That night was the night they would be sending Draco to what surely would be his death if he was not careful. She did not know him as a man, but as a child, he had been hot-tempered and prone to speaking and acting foolishly before thinking. He was the typical Slytherin in the ways that showed but not in the ways that counted. He lacked the subtlety and cunning that coloured the lives of most Slytherins she had ever known; Snape was not exempt from this.

She wondered exactly what it was Snape had spent all morning preparing with Draco for. She then wondered why it was that she had thought of him as Draco, rather than as Malfoy, ever since the night he had arrived on the doorstep, bloody and beaten. Perhaps that was a reason in itself. Once she saw someone hurt, she felt like she couldn't think of them apathetically anymore. She shook her head. It was not time for thoughts like that. They would have to wait until Draco returned safely.

She allowed her thoughts to run in Dumbledore's direction and immediately felt her anger and pent-up darkness surface.

He was the worst kind of manipulator there was. At least Voldemort was up-front about what being part of his dark army entailed. They got to kill Muggles and Mudbloods, rape and torture people, and purify a world that they thought was impure. Certainly, she hated the Dark Lord with every fibre of her being, but she found the Headmaster, too, had awoken a very different sort of hate within her.

She looked at the clock above the mantelpiece and noticed it was well past lunchtime and hunger had yet to claim her. She was thinking about interrupting the men in the next room when she heard the door to the study open, and both Snape and Draco entered. She got up from the bench by the windowsill and walked over to meet them halfway to see what it was they wanted.

'Have you eaten?' Snape asked quietly.

She shook her head. 'I was just thinking about it before you walked in,' she replied. 'Are you both hungry?'

Draco nodded vigorously. It appeared that even during times of great stress, young men could still fit food into their stomachs. Hermione knew for a fact Snape was not a typical man, but she liked to make sure he ate enough to prevent him from becoming any thinner than he was.

'I can make some soup and sandwiches for lunch, if you'd like,' she offered. Despite cooking not being one of her hugest strengths, she had grown a lot more confident with preparing meals and even enjoyed the task at times.

Snape nodded. 'All right, we'll help and eat in the kitchen.'

The three of them left the study and moved further into the house until they were in Snape's immaculate kitchen. Hermione immediately set the two men on preparing the sandwiches while she pulled out the ingredients to make a potato and leek soup. Half an hour later, they were sitting at the table, munching on the ham and chutney sandwiches the men, well, mostly Snape, had thrown together and sipping at the soup. Afterwards, Draco offered to clean up due to his lack of effort in making the food.

Hermione beckoned Snape to follow her to the warm study and locked the door behind him after he had entered.

'I want to know what is going to happen to Draco,' she demanded.

'I don't know exactly how things are going to pan out,' he said curtly. 'I'm neither a Seer nor can I practice Legilimency on the Dark Lord from here, or anywhere for that matter.'

'Don't be thick,' she snapped back. 'You know perfectly well what I meant. Just what is it you and Dumbledore planned for Draco to do? How will he deliver the potion and get out of there alive before another beating or torture? Surely Lucius Malfoy has alerted Voldemort to Draco's disobedience.'

Snape sighed heavily, reaching out and resting one of his hands on her shoulders. 'Hermione, must you always overreact?' he asked wearily.

Her shoulder burned where his hand was beneath the fabric of her cotton shirt. She looked up at his face and saw for the first time the exhaustion in his eyes, his expression as open and true as she had ever seen it. So, he was human after all. Sighing and feeling the steam that had been building within her dissipate, she stepped closer to Snape and rested her own hand on his where it was on her shoulder. He looked at her in surprise then and removed his hand, more slowly than strictly necessary, and let it rub down her arm to her wrist.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured.

He nodded in understanding. She couldn't help it, and he knew it. She led him over to sit in the two armchairs in front of the coffee table and fire, waving her hand at the door to unlock it. It didn't really matter what Draco was intending to do. She had to trust Snape knew what he was doing and would have instructed the younger Malfoy on how to complete his mission and escape unscathed.

'Can I come in?' asked Draco from the other side of the door.

Hermione snorted. 'The door is unlocked, you fool,' she answered.

No sooner than the words had come out of her mouth, Draco entered the room with a big smirk on his face, most likely hoping to have caught her and Snape in some sort of compromising position. If he had arrived not two minutes before, he probably would have. Friends did not touch each other the way Snape would touch her even the lightest caress of his fingers brushing her curls behind her ear was intimate in a way she understood but was not familiar with.

The look Snape was giving her that very moment was not in any way just friendly. It was something more, and she knew it was still reflected in her own eyes after the touch that had been shared between them. No innocent touch should have felt like that.

Giving herself a mental shake, she brought herself back into the present and into the study.

Draco gave her an amused look she was having trouble interpreting. 'Well, I think I am going to have to get a move on if I am going to meet with Father and smooth things over before going to the Revels tonight,' he said, almost a little too casually to convince Hermione he was all right with it.

'You'll promise to be careful, won't you, Draco?' she asked.

He nodded and stood, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. 'I'll be back before you know it,' he answered. 'Well, I might not come straight here I'll have to go home with Father for a while, but I'll send an owl to let you know how it goes, if I can.'

'If all else fails, send a message via your Patronus,' Severus instructed, standing from his armchair and walking Draco out.

Hermione waited with bated breath until Snape returned to the study alone. She could see the fearfulness in his eyes fear for Draco. It was obvious to her Snape cared for Draco a great deal and was worried Dumbledore's scheme would mean the end of the young Malfoy. In the short time Draco had been staying in Snape's cottage with them, she had grown rather fond of having him around, and given some time, she thought they could probably be friends. After all, both of them had been forced to do things against their own will on more than one occasion.

'I think I should warn you Draco is quite taken with your friend, Miss Lovegood,' Snape said, breaking the silence.

Hermione's eyes widened as she snapped them up to look at him. 'What do you mean by that?' she asked. 'They've only been on speaking terms for less than a fortnight!'

Snape chuckled. 'One thing you will come to learn about Draco Malfoy is he is hopeless when it comes to the fairer sex,' he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling from his smile.

Hermione felt her breath leave her lungs swiftly. The corners of Snape's mouth were turned up in the most genuine smile she had ever seen on him. It seemed to transform his face and take years off. She couldn't help but beam back up at him. In that moment, something passed between them that could not be named or explained.

'Come to the sitting room,' Snape murmured, his mouth returning to its usual state. His eyes, however, remained like warm coals.

Without saying a word, Hermione stood and followed him, both of them sitting on the lounge side-by-side through some unspoken agreement. Hermione remembered the last time she had sat like this on the lounge with Snape. It had been only a few weeks ago, but since then, she had been very careful around him. The moment she had agreed to go to the sitting room with him, she knew she had crossed one of her own lines.

She didn't care one whit.

'I'm worried about Draco,' Snape whispered into the quiet of the room.

'I know you are,' she said softly. 'I can't imagine a place worse for him now than that Den of Iniquity, wherever it might be.'

Hermione reached over and put a hand on top of Snape's where it rested on the cushion between them, giving it a light squeeze. She felt Snape turn his hand over and squeeze back, surprising them both. Without releasing her hand, he flung his other arm out towards the door and cast a Summoning spell. She heard something flying through the air towards them and was surprised when Snape presented her with the unfinished *Little Women*, a marker stuck into the place Snape had left off.

'It's your turn to read,' he told her with a small smirk.

She took the book from him and moved to tuck her legs up beneath her, but Snape manoeuvred them into his lap instead so they were stretched out. She was about to thank him when he ran a long finger down the sole of one foot, making her jerk it involuntarily. She shot him a quelling look.

'That was evil,' she said with an exaggerated huff.

He merely smirked and gestured for her to read. She opened the book to the page he had marked. As she began to read, Snape rested his head on the back of the lounge and closed his eyes. She didn't know how long they had been there, but the book had long ago dropped to the ground, and once more Hermione found herself snuggled against Snape's side, the man himself with his eyes closed, breathing softly. She reached an arm up a little way and let her fingertips graze Snape's cheekbone and down to the slightly rough stubble beginning to grow on his chin.

She almost snatched her hand back when his eyes flickered open to look at her, but the warmth in his black eyes made her pause.

'Hermione,' he whispered softly.

Her heart clenched in her chest. She could have chosen in that very moment to get up and leave. She could have followed through with her plan to avoid any romantic entanglements with Snape until such a time when they were not in danger of losing their lives. But for the time being, she really didn't care about the rules she'd made up for herself.

'Severus,' she whispered back, shifting so that she was propped up on one elbow, looking down at his face.

She didn't know whether she had lowered her face to his, or if it had been he that lifted up to meet her. Their lips met gently between them, and in that moment, Hermione knew she would have always regretted not having kissed Snape if either or both of them were to perish before the war ended. A large, roughened hand came up to cup one of her cheeks as the other buried itself in her curly hair, drawing her closer as their kiss deepened. Hermione allowed his tongue to sweep past her lips, chasing it playfully with her own.

When they pulled back for air, the way Snape's thin lips glistened and his eyes shone made her glad she had thrown caution to the wind.

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A/N There you go another moment of tenderness. Hopefully this will be enough for the time being.

Chapter 23: Waiting in the Wings

Chapter 23 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The fire burning low in the sitting room was the only source of light in the house, warming the room.

For the better part of that day, Snape had paced back and forth in front of the fire, unable to help himself. It has been three days, and they had yet to hear any news from Draco, which concerned Hermione but was driving Snape out of his mind with worry. Hermione had attempted to calm him, making him tea and trying to ensure he ate, but in the end his stomach was just too knotted, and the food would not stay down for long. When he was sick, she put a cold flannel on the back of his neck and stroked his black hair soothingly.

Naturally, being the proud man he was, Snape had barely spoken for the remainder of the day after she had cared for him when he was ill. Hermione thought it was silly, but she supposed she could understand to an extent. She hated needing someone to care for her it made her feel useless, as though her life should not have been entrusted to her in the first place. She imagined Snape saw illness and worry as weaknesses rather than for the strengths they could be.

Hermione didn't mind. She was not faultless. In fact, she had never been as hopelessly flawed in her entire life as she was at the moment.

With the time nearing nine at night, she decided she should try and make Snape eat a little something so he wouldn't end up getting even sicker. She stood and went to him where he was pacing furiously and pressed up against his back, wrapping her arms around him to embrace him from behind. He paused in his movements and placed one of his own large hands over hers that were linked over his front.

'All right, I'll try to refrain from pacing any further tonight,' Snape said with a sigh, detangling himself from her for just long enough to turn and face her. 'Are you hungry? I began feeling slightly peckish half an hour ago.'

Hermione nodded, taking one of his hands in hers. 'I'm not surprised,' she replied, leading the way into the kitchen.

Together they threw together some plain ham sandwiches on brown bread and washed them down with pumpkin juice. Afterwards, Snape cleaned up and sent Hermione

ahead of him to the sitting room once more. Before he returned, Hermione added a few more logs to the fire, stoking it with the heavy iron poker and watching as the bright orange flames grew and lit the room up a little more. She wrapped her arms around herself and stood like that in front of the fire for a while as she waited, watching the way the flames would lick at the stone walls enclosing them, run over the slowly disintegrating wood, and cast flickering shadows all around.

She didn't hear Snape enter the room, but she saw his long shadow as it was cast along one of the walls of the room. Hermione thought about how strange things had been between the two of them since they had kissed just a few nights before. Not awkward, per se, but certainly not the same as it had been before. Hermione had never spent so many hours of her day with him; usually both would go on with whatever they had to do alone and only meet during mealtimes or if they had something important to discuss.

Now, Hermione felt obliged to keep an eye on Snape, afraid he would lose his mind and leave the house to go on a wild hunt for Draco.

She felt him move away from the doorway and sidle up to her quietly, his hands coming to rest on both of her shoulders. Without bothering to turn around, she simply leaned into him, taking comfort from the strength of his grip. She was just as tense as he. His nimble fingers worked their way around her neck and collarbone, gently massaging until he got to her back and shoulder blades. She melted beneath the touch. It had been so long since she had someone touch her that way.

'Mmm, feels good,' she mumbled as her head dropped forward to give him better access to the back of her neck.

Snape chuckled. 'Perhaps one day you might be so kind as to return the favour,' he murmured in response. 'Let's have a sit-down, shall we? I am feeling worn out from all the pacing.'

Hermione smiled. 'I said you would wear yourself out, Snape,' she mocked lightly. 'Perhaps next time that will teach you for not listening to me.'

He frowned a little at her use of his surname, and she shook her head at him with a sigh and a small smile. She could understand the look after all, she had been constantly nervous around him, neither declaring anything nor even really talking about it. She turned around and grasped one of his hands and led him over to the lounge, transfiguring it slightly to accommodate them more comfortably when they sat together. She gestured for him to sit first and then sat beside him, scooting so she was pressed up against him.

'Don't be so apprehensive, Severus,' she whispered into his ear, gently urging him to turn his back to her so she could reciprocate the massage.

'Don't nag so much, Granger,' he muttered under his breath, earning him a poke in the back with her elbow. 'Merlin's beard! Please refrain from causing me permanent injury, if you please.'

Hermione ceased digging her pointy elbow into his back and resumed massaging his shoulders firmly until she felt the muscles loosen. When she felt he was sufficiently relaxed, she stopped and eased him around so his back was against the lounge, and then snuggled in close to his side. He Summoned the throw rug to them and draped it over Hermione and himself before picking up what she had come to think of as their copy of *Little Women* and began to read.

It wasn't until nearly midnight, when they were both drowsy and beginning to nod off for the night, when the flames in the fire turned a brilliant green, and Draco's head appeared in the flames. Hermione nearly jumped off the chair, shocked at the younger man's sudden appearance and gasped.

'Draco!' she exclaimed, dropping to the floor in front of the fire as close as she could without getting soot on her.

'Hey, Granger,' he said with a smile. 'You and Uncle Severus both look like shite, by the way.'

Hermione bit back the comment that was on the tip of her tongue as Severus dropped down to join her before the fire. 'I'm glad to see you're safe,' she told Draco.

'You're being very reckless, Flooding us like this, Draco,' Snape warned. 'If you get caught, I can't imagine what would happen to the plan and potion we had concocted. Bear in mind it took Hermione and me many months to brew it.'

Draco nodded, but Hermione still saw him roll his eyes sarcastically at them. 'I just wanted to let you know as soon as I could that we returned from the Revels unscathed and that Father and I have returned to Malfoy Manor. The Floo connection in my room is heavily warded against eavesdropping.'

'So, how did the plan go?' Hermione asked, curiosity getting the better of her now she knew Draco was alive and seemingly well.

'It went off as well as it could have,' he answered, pausing and frowning. 'My mother, well, she had managed to half-calm Father down before I even arrived home. I suppose it's a good thing. Father is now under the impression I am saving you both for later when the Dark Lord supposedly wins and takes over the Wizarding world. We're to be able to keep slaves, and he thought it would be amusing to have you both.'

'That sounds exactly like something Lucius would do,' grumbled Snape.

Even though they could only see his face, Hermione could tell Draco had shrugged at the comment. She knew it had to be difficult for him to go against his father after so many years of unwavering loyalty, but she was proud of him. She knew it would make it easier for Draco to handle his father's potential demise come the final battle.

'Anyway, Father aside, I was taken to the revels, and they were having a bit of a celebration in honour of McNair's wife becoming pregnant. It seems the old fart managed to knock her up yet again, and the Dark Lord found this news to be stupendous,' Draco sneered. 'I was presented to him, and he forgave me for going against Father and praised me for my brilliant plans to turn you both into slaves when we "win." The Occlumency you taught me came in handy, also. Thanks, Uncle Sev.'

Hermione saw Snape's lip curl when Draco addressed him in that manner and couldn't help but to smirk. So, Snape had been teaching the younger man how to block his mind from Voldemort. She imagined learning such a skill might come in handy. Resolving she would ask Snape to teach her later, she turned her attention back to the conversation in front of the fire.

'... and the Dark Lord took the bait. Vain bastard he is, he loves gifts just as you said he would, and he sprayed it on him then and there,' Draco continued. 'I saw him put it on a few times over the two days we were there as well, so no doubt it will be having some sort of an effect of him in the next week or two.'

'This is good news indeed,' Snape said, tapping his fingers against his chin. 'I suppose I will have to report this to the Headmaster tonight, and we shall wait and see what he wishes to do with the information.'

Hermione turned to look at Snape, her expression wary. He looked back at her, opening his mouth most likely to ask her what was on her mind. She shook her head and looked back at Draco, who was staring at the pair in amusement, obviously picking up on the changed dynamics.

'Well, I had best be going,' Draco said. 'I can see you two want to discuss something, and there is no knowing when my father is going to come pounding on my door to talk to me about some evil plot or another.'

Without waiting for either of them to respond, Draco's face disappeared along with the green flames, leaving the room cast mostly in darkness save for the glowing embers. Wordlessly, they decided to leave the sitting room and walked wearily up the stairs to the door to Hermione's bedroom. She leaned her back against the closed door and looked up at Snape, who was standing before her.

'Are you really going to allow Albus Dumbledore to push you around and treat you like a second-class citizen for the rest of your life?' she asked. Her voice had a slightly hard edge to it.

'I don't expect you to understand,' he said, his expression as neutral as she had ever seen it. 'I owe Albus more than just my life. There are things I have done that are unforgivable, and he saved me from having to live with those mistakes.'

Hermione sighed. She knew Snape would say that. He always thought he was the guilty one that he was the one who owed Dumbledore. But she felt he had already paid his dues for those mistakes, just as she was still striving to make amends for being unable to resist Greyback and the darkness that continued to creep through and fill her. She reached a hand out between them and touched his shoulder, letting her hand run down the front of his open frock coat to grasp one of the lapels. She gave it a gentle tug, drawing him a little closer to her and tilting her face up a little more, entreating him to kiss her.

Obligingly, he closed the gap between them, pressing his lips against hers as his arms went around her and crushed her against his chest.

She sighed in relief as his tongue gently invaded her mouth, teasing hers into a dance between them. He drew her further into the kiss until they could no longer breathe, then ended the kiss gently and released her. He stroked a thumb along her cheekbone and down to her chin.

'Go to bed, Hermione,' he murmured. 'There is much to do come morning.'

She nodded and opened the door behind her, pausing to look over her shoulder at him as she went inside. 'Goodnight, Severus.'

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A/N Draco is safe!

Chapter 24: Worst Nightmare

Chapter 24 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thanks go out to VIVAvivacious for the generous application of her beta skills to this chapter.

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Carefully, she made her way through the snow, feet crunching softly in the icy white flakes beneath them.

It was cold, but she could barely feel the wind that whipped around her or the frostiness that permeated the surrounding air. Her eyes focussed on the graveyard she was approaching, darting around helplessly as she searched. On the edge of the graveyard, she sucked in a nervous breath, fear pooling in the pit of her stomach as she pressed her back against a tall headstone. She poked her head around to see if she could see anything from her position.

Red. There was fresh blood spilled on the snow. Her eyes widened. Perhaps she was already too late? She felt sick at the thought and pushed it out of her mind. Ducking around the headstone, she made her way carefully through the various graves and past the tall statues that littered the site. She could see the bloodstained snow becoming increasingly red as she approached the centre of the yard, splashed on the cold grey stones that surrounded her.

She shivered. The sight both thrilled her and sickened her. She felt her foot bump into something on the ground, and she looked down to see a bloody hand in the snow, her eyes following up from the hand to an arm and shoulder. Reaching down, she brushed more snow away and gasped, snatching her hand away.

Remus... His eyes were empty and lifeless, just as she had expected them to be.

She held back the sob that threatened to pass through her lips, feeling anger surge through her at the very same time. Her magic crackled around her head, making her curls seem static despite the moisture in the air. Drawing her wand from her sleeve, she pressed on, not bothering to turn and look back at her fallen friend.

Slowing down, she paused behind the statue of a cloaked figure, poking her head around it to see if there was anyone around. Her eyes widened when she saw a bloody and bruised Snape on his knees in the snow right beside an equally-crippled Draco, who was slumped over slightly. The air left her chest when she moved further around to see who their captors were. Her breath whooshed out of her lungs as quickly as she had inhaled.

Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange.

She should have guessed it would have been them. Grasping her wand more tightly, she inhaled a deep, steadying breath, preparing to take them by surprise. She moved forward suddenly. Staring down at her feet, she saw they were moving but could barely feel the action with the rest of her body. She felt a little disconnected. Suddenly, she was out in the open, holding her wand out straight. She could see Snape stare at her, shaking his head minutely as she continued to press on.

Her mind was raging at her body. All she could see was Snape and Draco. Bellatrix and Lucius were long out of her line of vision. She felt her magic rippling beneath her skin, soaring through her veins. She vaguely saw a flash of green, and a moment later Draco's body slumped to the ground, unmoving. Her stomach lurched. Where had the curse come from? She changed her focus to the elder Malfoy and Lestrange. Both were smiling cruelly wickedly. She had barely even seen the green flash of light.

She fought within herself, staring back down at Snape. One of his cheeks was bruised badly enough to close up one of his eyes, and his bottom lip was split and bleeding. Her feet kept pulling her towards him slowly. She was only three feet away when she stopped in her tracks. She could feel her magic coursing through her like wildfire, pulsing through her veins, constantly seeking an outlet.

She stared at Snape's face, willing him to say something. She forced her gaze up to both Malfoy and Bellatrix, wondering why it was they had not struck her down.

When she felt her arm move of its own accord, however, the answer was clear. She grit her teeth in her mouth, pressing as hard as she could against the magic coursing through her and controlling her. Tears of fury glazed over her eyes but never fell. She could hear the laughter coming from both before her and behind her as Lucius Malfoy walked to stand beside her.

'Ah, Mudblood, fool you twice, shame on you,' he whispered into her ear, allowing a long, leather-clad finger to travel over the skin of her neck. 'Now, my precious little

Mudblood whore, do what your master commands and teach Snape a lesson for us.'

Hermione felt revulsion and anger rise within her. She wanted to spit in his face. He had used her to kill his own son. Anguish over Draco swept through her but was quickly replaced by fear when instead her wand arm rose and she found it pointing directly at Snape, who stared at her wordlessly. She looked at him, silently begging him to understand. His eyes told her he did.

'Crucio,' her own voice said, and immediately Snape was writhing on the ground in pain.

Hermione felt hot tears sear her skin as the moisture finally built up to the point where they could no longer be contained by the curse she was under. Her mind screamed at her body, fighting as hard as she could to stop what was going on. She wasn't strong enough to fight it. She wanted to scream, but she could not control her mouth.

A moment later, the curse on Snape was ended. She looked down at him through eyes that could see nothing else. They were torturing her by forcing her to do this. She was forced to watch as Snape struggled to haul himself upright and out of the snow. Her captors, whoever they were, struck again before he had time to recover slightly.

'Sectumsempra,' she hissed. The voice was hers, but the words belonged to another.

Blood began to flow freely from large cuts that began to open all over Snape's body. She could hear the gurgling sound he made as the blood choked him, spilling from the corner of his mouth. He fell to the ground on his back, writhing and clutching at his throat. His eye that could still open properly was wide with fear. Hermione pushed hard, harder than she had ever pushed before against the magic controlling her, forcefully expelling it from her subconscious.

She threw herself to the ground, clutching at Snape, his deep red blood seeping into her clothes and hair as she sobbed, holding his head to her chest.

'Snape... Severus,' she moaned loudly. 'I'm so sorry, Severus!'

'H-Hermione...'

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'Hermione? Oh, for the love of Merlin! Hermione, wake up!'

Hermione's eyes flew open, and she looked around wildly, abruptly sitting up. Snape was sitting on her bed right beside her, grasping one of her shoulders, his eyes wild and dark hair tousled from sleep. She felt her breathing slowly ease back to normal, and she reached up to touch her face to find hot tears wetting her cheeks. She dropped her hand and saw the beads of salty water glistening on her fingertips. It had all just been a dream.

She sucked in a deep breath when he reached out to swipe the tears from her cheeks. He cupped one of her cheeks in his large, warm hand and shifted closer to her. She felt her bottom lip begin to quiver as the tears began to fall freely from her eyes once more. Guilt wracked her. Even though it was just a horrible nightmare, the cold feeling that settled in the pit of her stomach made her shiver and shake as she cried out all of her emotions.

Snape's arms immediately went around her, rubbing her back gently as she sobbed onto his shoulder.

'Hermione,' he murmured into her hair, moving a hand up to twist his long fingers into her curls. 'Shhh, it was just a nightmare. You are safe.'

'I... I killed him,' she cried out, her tears wetting his bare shoulder. 'I k-killed him, and they made me... made me hurt you.'

Snape kissed the top of her head, murmuring soothing words and rocking her ever so slightly as she cried, her body shaking hard from the force of her tears and hiccoughing. Eventually the tears ran out, and she simply remained in his arms, clinging to the warmth of his bare skin and burrowing deep into his embrace. She felt safe and warm there, and her magic was singing through her veins at their closeness. Snape said nothing to her when she pulled back and looked up at his face with her tear-stained one. He simply Summoned a handkerchief to him from his own room and dabbed away the wetness slowly, allowing her to take it so she could blow her running nose.

'Come now,' Snape said, gently releasing her from his grasp and helping to ease her back beneath the bedcovers. 'You must try and get some proper sleep.'

Hermione's eyes widened and she shook her head. 'I don't th-think I could possibly sleep again tonight,' she murmured softly. 'I don't want to dream that again. I killed you both in my dreams. It felt so real...'

'Tell me,' he urged gently, stroking her hair out of her face as she lay back on her pillow to look up at him.

'I was walking towards a cemetery at first, and it was snowing. It was so cold for a while that I felt like my fingers would go numb and fall off,' she whispered, staring up at the ceiling. 'When I got there, I hid behind the statues and gravestones as I made my way through the mess. I saw lots of blood and dead Order members, but I didn't stop until I looked around and saw you and Draco kneeling in the snow surrounded by Death Eaters. I didn't know why, but I started to walk to you. I couldn't feel the cold or understand what was drawing me to you. There was a flash of green, and Draco slumped over, dead. It took me too long to realise someone had me under the Imperius curse.'

'What was the cemetery like?' Snape asked, frowning slightly from her mention of the place.

'It was huge, and there were large grotesques and statues situated above many of the gravestones. There was a large crypt towards the centre,' she answered, confused.

'Have you ever been to the place you have just described?' he asked.

'Not at all, why?' she asked.

'That graveyard you described just now, I know it,' he replied quietly. 'It is the Riddle family's burial site. All the Dark Lord's Muggle ancestors were buried in that very plot, including Tom Riddle, his father.'

'I knew it would be significant,' Hermione replied, stifling a leftover hiccough from her cry. 'I won't be able to sleep like this, Snape.'

He nodded. 'Give me a moment,' he told her before getting up from his seat on her bed and quickly walking out of the room.

When he returned, Hermione took a moment to admire Snape's naked chest. He was clad in only a long pair of cotton sleeping pants that rode low on his hips, leaving his pale, well-sculpted torso bare. He was no body builder, but there were toned, wiry muscles where she thought he would be skin and bone, and she appreciated the sight. He held in his hand a vial of clear blue liquid she immediately recognised as a mild sedative that would help her to grow drowsy enough to sleep. She had been administered too much Dreamless Sleep that week already.

'If you take this, you may find slumber will come easier to you, but you will not sleep so deeply that nightmares will plague you again,' he told her.

She nodded and held out her hand to accept the offering, popping the cork and swallowing the bitter contents with a scrunch of her nose. She placed the empty vial on her nightstand and looked up just in time to see Snape walking towards the door to leave. She felt panic rise in her again, and she reached out a hand to him frantically.

'Stay!' she called out softly, the potion already beginning to have an effect on her system.

She watched as Snape paused for just a moment before closing the door quietly and walking around the bed to the other side. He turned the covers down just enough to slip in beside her, and he quickly gathered her into his arms, spooning against her. She wriggled against him until they were flush, and the last thing she could recall as she drifted into the darkness was Snape's lips pressing against the back of her neck.

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A/N Loved ones dying in dreams is always scary.

Chapter 25: An Eloquent Silence

Chapter 25 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big huge hug and chocolates go out to VIVAvivacious for practically writing half of this chapter for me. I am eternally grateful.

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The day had passed in its regular quiet manner. The morning had been a pattern of pacing, sitting, reading, and standing by the window to stare at the snow.

She had spent a great deal of it contemplating the impending war and how she and Snape were going to somehow manage to survive it together. She had been thinking a lot about those sorts of things; she had been thinking a lot, full stop. She already knew he meant a great deal to her. He was tender toward her in a way he was with no one else, and she knew her magic, her light and her darkness, all reached out to him and drew her to him like a moth to a flame whenever he was near.

Draco was someone she had unexpectedly come to care for in a very short amount of time. He was so unlike the bratty little Slytherin boy she had known seven years beforehand, and she was glad Snape had managed to influence him and set him down a better path than he had been walking.

At this thought, her mind turned toward what she had felt creeping up on her all day thoughts of the final battle, what would occur that day, and what position she would assume. There had once been a time she, Harry, and Ron would have fought side-by-side together as they made their way to Voldemort, where Harry would deliver the final blow and kill the dark wizard. Those days were a memory of a better time, when the only complications she had in her life was the choice she would have to make when the time came for her to apprentice to a Master.

Now though, things were very unusual, and her mind had a very different agenda. She felt numb just thinking the way that she was beginning to.

The first name that popped into her head was Lucius Malfoy. Oh, how she despised that man for all he did while she was a student, and all he did to Draco. She would render him impotent, or rather have him castrated, if she could. She'd do it herself if she had to she was not averse to a little bit of blood and pain. In fact, she thought she might almost enjoy his punishment the most of all the Death Eaters. It was a shame the task would likely fall to Draco.

She desired for him to be gutted and left to lie in the snow, to die by whoever it was that got to him first. His red blood in the snow would be a striking sight indeed. She could see his bloody face and the dark red staining his long platinum locks. A man as vain as Lucius Malfoy would hate to die in a state such as that.

Next, she would seek out Bellatrix Lestrange.

The countless times she had been on the receiving end of one of Lestrange's curses had left her with a desire for revenge. What would be the best way for that woman to die? She tapped her lip in thought. Well, she would die by the curse she most often used. Hermione felt her magic hum in delight at the thought of torturing Bellatrix into an even greater madness, leaving her as little more than a vegetable. Her revenge would serve the dual role of her own personal retribution and that for Neville and his parents.

No, Bellatrix Lestrange did not deserve to die; she deserved to live and become the one thing she would despise the most, to live the rest of her life in prison as a crippled being with no control over her body no control of the mind. Hermione smiled. Yes, what a fitting revenge that one would be.

She then thought of Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange the husband and brother-in-law of her aforementioned adversary.

They had not personally gone out of their way to target her in a battle, but one bad seed could spoil an apple, as they said. If she wanted one Lestrange out of the way, she would have to deal with all of them. Rodolphus was a brutish thug of a man. He had been there on the day Neville's parents had been tortured into insanity and also when Neville himself had been murdered. Hermione had been so upset and disgusted the day Dumbledore announced Neville and his grandmother had been attacked in the middle of the night in their own home some six years earlier.

His death should be one fitting a man of his huge stature. Hermione let her mind wander over all of the possibilities and smiled when she grasped onto one. She could imagine wrapping her thin fingers around his thick neck, her hands not quite meeting in a neat circle right the way around. She could imagine herself, suffocating the life out of him, seeing his eyes widen in shock as his face went from red, to purple, to blue from the lack of oxygen. She wouldn't stop until after he took his last breath.

His brother, Rabastan, would receive no special treatment. He barely ranked notice as far as Hermione was concerned. For him, the killing curse would suffice rather than forming anything elaborate or special. He would be on the ground in seconds, and there would be very little to clean up afterwards.

After all of them were out of the way, she would go after Avery. She still had a shiny white scar on her torso that she had received from the curse he had flung at her in the Ministry at the end of her fifth year. She would slice him open everywhere with simple slicing hexes and then use Sectumsempra to deliver the final blow. She would watch as his crimson blood flowed freely from his wounds. No number of healing spells would heal his wounds without Snape's counter curse.

She continued musing about revenge, thinking of various others that she would like to hex out of existence.

Mad-Eye Moody, the cantankerous, old ex-Auror. She had never really liked the man, but his blatant dislike and distrust of her made her apathy towards him develop into something much more sinister. If he had just kept his mouth closed every time she was at an Order meeting, perhaps her resentments might not have grown to the proportions they had. The first thing she would do to him would be to remove his magical eye and toss it as hard and as far as she could into the air and incinerate it as it returned to the ground. She'd destroy his prosthetic wooden leg, setting it aflame while it was still attached, even. Perhaps if she were lucky, the flames would consume the man himself and save her having to come up with a more colourful method to remove him from existence.

Hermione longed to give Molly and Ginny both two tight slaps across the face to wake them up. They were living in a fantasy world, a world where they believed they were far more important and better than they actually were. Hermione liked to think of it as damsel syndrome. They were of very little use to the Order.

She paused for a moment, wondering who else there was, when she finally came to the last person on her hit list: Albus Dumbledore.

How she hated the man. He had manipulated everyone. He had fooled them all even herself for nearly eleven years of her young life. She knew Snape was aware of the ridiculous amount of power he allowed Dumbledore to have over him. She wished Snape would fight as she had against the tyranny. She knew he wanted to rebel with every fibre of his being, but he was still too wrapped up in the ridiculously idiotic notion that his entire being was due to Dumbledore. The headmaster was as ruthless and cunning as a Slytherin; in fact, he would have made a much better Slytherin than a Gryffindor.

She would hex the old man into the next millennium. She knew not what she would cast, only that the desired result would be that she would not have to see him again for the rest of her life. She knew it was fruitless. Dumbledore was the one man everyone in the Wizarding world held in high regard. So few knew exactly what he was. He was bad-tempered and fickle when it involved his plans not going as he wanted.

Hermione felt a strange elation run through her at the thought of Dumbledore no longer being a nuisance to her life. Her magic was beginning to crackle around her hair and run through her veins to her fingertips when she heard the distinct sound of the Floo come to life. She turned her head sharply to see the green flames that had snapped her out of her trance-like state. She looked down at her hands and saw the glow fading and the magic slowly receding.

A cold, shocked feeling settled over her as she watched Snape emerge from the green flames and step into the sitting room, then brush non-existent soot from his black teaching robes. What had she just been thinking? Had she really just contemplated the deaths of half a dozen people? She blinked once, but her eyes still remained wide with shock as she stared at Snape, who was looking back at her with concern.

'Hermione, are you quite all right?' he asked, snapping her once more out of a daze.

She swallowed and didn't move, unable to tell whether she should nod or shake her head. Logically, she knew what she should be feeling was guilt and horror over her chain of thoughts. However, the darkness within her whispered seductively to her subconscious, telling her it was perfectly right perfectly okay for her to want them dead. She couldn't deny the voice, not when it was making so much sense to her while at the same time making no sense at all.

'I've been doing a lot of thinking today,' she murmured, sitting down in the armchair she had moved over to the window.

Snape walked over to join her, leaning against the back of the chair as he stood to listen. 'Are you going to share with me what it was you were thinking?' he asked.

Hermione nodded. 'I don't see how keeping things from you will benefit me,' she replied. 'I was thinking about you and Draco for a while.'

'Why would you think of myself and Draco?' he questioned.

'Well, I'm not sure if you had noticed, but aside from Luna, you are the two most prominent people in my life at present,' she said sardonically. 'Of course, it is only natural for my thoughts to turn to you when I think of the dangers you put yourselves into on behalf of the Order and Dumbledore.'

'And were there other things you were contemplating?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I thought it would make me feel sick or something, but it has only further exhilarated me,' she answered. 'Thinking about murdering people it's sick, isn't it? But something in me craves it. I can't feel guilt over my thoughts. How shall I be able to feel the guilt in the heat of battle? Will I kill for the sake of killing now, with my urges being the way they are?'

'Is that all that was upsetting you? You looked like you saw a ghoul.'

Hermione was quiet. 'No, that wasn't all,' she said softly, looking away.

'Hermione,' he said, and she looked up at his use of her first name. 'You can tell me about anything you're struggling with.'

She nodded, looking down at her hands. 'I know,' she replied, 'but it's just so... so disturbing, what I was thinking, and what I was feeling was even more vile.' She peeked up at him, looking for a reaction, but all she saw was a smooth face, patiently waiting for her to continue.

She let out a breath. 'I was contemplating deaths. Of people who who I think deserve it. Death Eaters,' she said. He nodded, a look of understanding crossing his features.

'But it wasn't just that!' she said in a rush, wanting to get it out and over with. 'It wasn't just them, it was... others, too. Not just Death Eaters, but... but Order members, as well.' If Snape was surprised, his face did not betray it.

'I thought about Moody, and Dumbledore, and even Ginny and Molly Weasley,' she said, a dark look forming in her eyes. 'I can't stand them,' she said, looking back up at him. 'I want them to suffer, for everything they ever did to me, to you, to anyone.'

'You need not worry about me, Hermione,' Snape said gently.

'I know, but it doesn't change my reasoning. But the worst part is, not only was I revelling in the thoughts, once I realized what I was thinking, I wasn't shocked or horrified. I felt... numb. It felt normal to feel so vengeful, to have such hatred.' She looked up at him imploringly. 'I can't feel guilt over my thoughts. How shall I be able to feel the guilt in the heat of battle? Will I kill for the sake of killing now, with my urges being the way they are?'

'You are not alone in this,' Snape reminded her.

'I know I'm not alone. You feel the same way I do.'

Snape nodded.

'I couldn't blame you, being forced to do what you did all those years ago.'

His eyes snapped to hers. 'What are you speaking of?'

'You know exactly what I'm talking about, Snape,' she said, looking at him with a mixture of determination and sympathy in her eyes.

'How could you possibly think to presume?' Snape snapped at her, his eyes cold for the first time in months.

'I presume because I can, Snape,' she said, her temper bubbling to the surface. 'Because I have been thinking about it every day for the past month, and it all leads down the same path.'

'Get out,' he said quietly, averting his eyes from her.

Hermione stood from the armchair she was occupying and, with a wave of her hand, sent it back to its original position in front of the fireplace. Angry, she walked out of the room and didn't look back until she reached the door. She turned just in time to see Snape slump into the armchair she had been sitting in, his head dropped into his hands. Her anger dissipated like fog in the morning sun. She was hurting him, the one person she could count on. How could she? How sick was she really, that she was starting to turn into someone who lashed out at those closest to her?

'Severus,' she murmured softly. 'I'm sorry.'

With those parting words, she turned and walked out of the room, closing the door gently behind her. As she leaned her back against the door, Hermione felt she wasn't sure what was to come any more. Her thoughts that day had led her down a dangerous path. Logically, she knew contemplating all of those deaths was sick at best.

But it didn't change a thing.

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A/N They were too peaceful together. It's time to shake things up.

Chapter 26: Conflict Resolution

Chapter 26 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A huge hug goes out to the lovely VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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The glass of the window fogged up from the exhalation of her warm breath against it. She traced a slender finger through it, drawing two letters: SS.

Hermione knew she was being maudlin. She hadn't spoken to Snape in two days, aside from when they were accidentally forced into one another's presence in the kitchen and he would excuse himself. A cloud of awkwardness had settled over the cottage. She was regretful of the things she had said to Snape. He had been so unfailingly kind and understanding towards her ever since the battle in the forest, and she had repaid him by insulting him and invading his privacy.

She felt herself growing darker all the time. It was unsettling to her, having her entire being cast into the shadows. She sighed, her breath heavy with the weight of her thoughts. She was drifting in limbo now, unsure of what was going to come but almost certain it would be soon, and it would be dangerous. Pressing her forehead to the cool glass, she closed her eyes for a moment. Pushing away, she walked across her bedroom and was about to slump onto her bed when her stomach growled, demanding both attention and food.

It was then she realised she had managed to skip both breakfast and lunch already that day, and judging by the darkness beyond the windows, it was already well and truly night. She checked her watch and saw it was already half past six in the evening. It was a wonder she hadn't felt her stomach growl earlier. Changing course, she walked out of the room and down the stairs in the direction of the kitchen. What she found when she arrived was a surprise to her.

'Severus?' she asked, too stunned to say anything else.

The table was set for both of them, and there was a single white rose resting beside one of the plates. Snape was standing at the stove, cooking. Her stomach growled again at the smell of whatever it was he was preparing. He looked over his shoulder at her, his black eyes once more filled with the warmth she had not seen in them for two days. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she felt her feet carrying her towards him.

'I hope you like creamy spinach soup,' he murmured when she was finally in front of him.

'Did you grow the vegetables yourself?' she asked with a small smile.

He nodded. 'Yes, in the vegetable garden,' he answered, turning around to face her fully. 'It was about time it produced something of use.'

Hermione felt a small laugh bubble out of her at that. 'Severus, I I didn't expect this,' she admitted quietly. 'I was rude to you. I'm sorry.'

He sighed heavily and put down the wooden spoon he had been using to stir the pot with and opened his arms to her, drawing her into the warm cocoon of his embrace. She pressed her cheek against his chest and exhaled in contentment. She'd had no idea how much she missed his touch until it was ripped away from her. He stroked her back and ran his fingers gently through her curls.

'I feel I must also apologise to you,' he mumbled, resting his chin on top of her head. 'It has always been a sensitive topic. I'm afraid sometimes I am just unable to control my emotions, especially where you are concerned.'

Hermione felt her heart throb hard in her chest at his words. 'Let's not fight over something like this again,' she said, lifting her head up to look at him and offer a small, apologetic smile.'

'I agree,' he said with a small half-smile of his own. 'Let us only fight over important things.'

Hermione poked him in the side and moved out of his embrace. He threw her a look that said 'yes, very adult' and turned back to stir the soup again. Five minutes later, he turned off the stove and opened the oven to pull out the toasted garlic bread. Hermione took it to the table on a plate, and Snape served up the soup in their bowls. Before Hermione could sit down, however, he hooked an arm around her and drew her to him once more, dipping his head down to claim a kiss from her.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss enthusiastically, their tongues mating gently before they finally withdrew for breath. Snape pressed a kiss to her forehead and then ushered her into her chair before taking a seat himself. They ate the soup in silence, and when time came to clean up, they simply sent all the dishes to the sink where an enchanted cloth washed everything. He led her out of the kitchen and into the sitting room, seating himself on the lounge before pulling her down to sit alongside him.

'I never would have imagined things would be like this,' he told her, wrapping his arm around her. 'I never imagined anyone would be here with me towards the end of it all, least of all you. I always assumed I'd be alone.'

Hermione could practically feel her heart break at his confession. Why was it that such a man felt doomed to loneliness? 'I never thought about how it would be,' she said in reply. 'I never understood how you could be as you were all those years ago in school. You are much more than a teacher, spy, and potions master, Severus Snape.'

He cupped one of her cheeks in his hand and tilted her face to kiss her. She accepted the kiss and returned it with rising passion. Here was a man who could melt any woman with the sound of his voice used correctly, and he was kissing her without restraint and holding her like she was the most precious thing in the world. If she had any doubts about what it was she felt for Snape, she needn't wonder any further.

She was falling in love with the tall, dark, scowling man wrapped around her.

Her magic crackled around the two of them as she let go and enjoyed the sensation of being touched of being cared for. Snape pulled back just long enough to inhale another breath before he kissed a path across her jaw, nipping tenderly and continuing to trail hot kisses down her neck. He pushed aside the neck of her sweater and gently sucked the hollow between her neck and shoulder, drawing a squeak out of her.

He pulled back, his thin lips shiny and a little flushed a combination of the warmth of the room, desire, and his passionate exertions. Hermione reached out a hand to gently trace the furrow between his brows, smoothing it. She traced her fingers down the side of his face, down his neck, along his shoulder and arm, until she finally reached his hand. Grasping his hand with hers, she brought it up to kiss his knuckles gently before pressing his hand against her breast.

'Touch me,' she said breathlessly.

His eyes widened, but he did as he was told, leaving his hand on her breast above her sweater and giving a gentle squeeze. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she made a small mew of pleasure. She gasped when she felt his thumb press over the spot where her nipple rested beneath the layers of clothing between them. Her eyes snapped open when she heard his soft growl as he pushed her sweater up, exposing her bra-clad breasts to his hungry eyes. She was a tad embarrassed she wasn't wearing something nicer she hadn't come downstairs intending to end up on the couch with Snape.

Without warning, he plucked the clip between her breasts and quickly pushed aside the fabric, exposing her breasts entirely to his gaze.

'You're lovely,' he murmured, before ducking his head and immediately lapping on a nipple, tearing a shocked gasp from her throat.

She felt her need pooling between her legs, the dampening of her knickers causing her to squirm as he suckled and lapped, pinched and rubbed both of her breasts. When he was satisfied both her breasts had been given sufficient attention, he helped her to remove her sweater and bra completely, tossing them somewhere behind him. He allowed one of his hands to latch back on to her left breast, passing the pad of his thumb over the nipple, causing it to tighten further.

His free hand passed down her stomach, stopping to detour around her navel and continuing to trace along the top of her jeans. He looked to her for permission, and at her succinct nod, he popped the button and drew the zipper down with excruciating slowness. She lifted her bum to assist him with the removal of her pants, wriggling in anticipation. Once they were discarded, she realised exactly how it looked. There she was, with the man she desired on his knees between her legs, sprawled out on her back on the lounge in his house. He moved to lean down and kiss her, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

'Let's get you out of those first,' she whispered, indicating his clothing.

Snape smirked and wordlessly reached up to unbutton his shirt as Hermione sat up just enough to unbuckle his belt and set to work on removing his trousers. He groaned when she inadvertently brushed the back of her hand against his hard length still trapped beneath his trousers and pants. With a wicked smile, she deliberately caressed him, drawing a deep groan from him. He reached down and stopped the movement of her hands on him and stood up from the lounge, shrugging off his shirt and pushing both his trousers and pants down in one movement.

He stood back up, totally nude before her and radiating sexuality from each and every pore. She sucked in a breath as her eyes travelled over his pale flesh. He was no Adonis, but he was lean and his muscles compact. Everything was as it should be, and as her eyes travelled down from his chest to the dark line of hair that made its way ever-downwards, she smiled in satisfaction when she saw his hardened length jutting out proudly. She beckoned him forwards with a finger, reaching out her hands to grasp his hips.

She liked the way that it looked: long, of reasonable girth, but not too large or thick that she felt she might split in two. The head wept the clear pre-come, and she noted he had indeed been circumcised. Curious, she let her tongue dart out and licked the tip, noting it was slightly salty, but not so much she wouldn't enjoy taking him into her mouth. She heard him gasp from above and looked up coquettishly before opening her mouth and sucking in the tip.

'Oh Merlin, Hermione, yes,' he muttered, his hand going into her hair.

She smiled around him, taking more of him in and slightly hollowing her cheeks as she began to suck, applying one of her hands to the base where she couldn't reach. She continued, only pulling back when Snape gently eased her off him. Detangling his fingers from her hair, he kneeled down before her and grasped the top of her knickers, whisking them down her legs before spreading her to his view.

Hermione gasped as he eyed her hungrily. 'S-Severus,' she stammered out breathlessly as he leaned in and lapped her slit, stopping at the top to suckle her clit.

She moaned loudly, her fingers immediately threading in his hair as he licked and sucked, dipping his talented tongue within her before he would lick back up to the top and tease her peak. It wasn't long before her insides began to clench and ripple as she went over the edge, writhing against his face as she came. As she descended down from her high, she watched as Snape wiped his mouth on the back of his hand before standing back up and holding out a hand to her.

She took his hand and was immediately hoisted to her feet, wobbling slightly from legs still trembling from her pleasure. He wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her before pinning her with a demanding kiss and Apparating them upstairs to his bedroom. She barely got a look around the room before he lifted and deposited her in the centre of his bed, climbing on to hover over her and situating himself between her thighs.

'Let me take you, Hermione,' he whispered into her ear hotly.

'Please,' she whimpered, lifting her hips up a little to press against his, encouraging him to fill her with his hard length.

He grasped his erection and lined it up, pressing into her gently, and on meeting no resistance, slid the rest of the way home with one thrust. Hermione sucked in a breath sharply as Snape groaned. He held still for a moment before slowly pulling out and then slamming back within her. His thrusts were deep and slow, each movement making the bed shift ever so slightly, and as he looked into her eyes, she could see the desire and emotions flickering through them.

'Hermione,' he whispered tenderly, dropping onto one elbow so he could reach her mouth for a kiss.

She responded with passion, seeking out his tongue with hers as the pace of his thrusts quickened. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she adjusted their position a little so his every push would send a jolt straight to her core. With her hands gently clawing at his back and their mouths mating frantically, Hermione felt herself go over the edge once more, her inner muscles contracting around his length. She heard Snape's loud moan, and with a few more sharp thrusts, he emptied his hot seed within her.

Sated and slightly sweaty, Hermione encouraged him to roll onto his back. With a wave of her hand, they were clean, and the sheets and blanket on his bed moved to cover them. She looked up at Snape's face and was surprised by the genuine smile that shone through his eyes. Wrapping an arm around her, he drew her closer, and she snuggled against him, pressing a kiss to his chest.

As the pair drifted off to sleep, Hermione murmured her confession of love against his skin, not yet ready to say the words to his face.

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A/N And there is your smut. I do hope it was to your satisfaction.

Chapter 27: Eye of the Storm

Chapter 27 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The steam from the hot bath water spiralled towards the ceiling, fogging up the windows and mirror and covering the tiles on the walls thinly with moisture.

He watched as Hermione stepped towards the tub and lifted a leg, dipping her toes in to test the heat. He saw her small smile as she allowed the rest of her leg to slide into the heat, and the other leg followed as he grasped her by the waist and assisted her the rest of the way in. She gazed up at him from beneath her dark eyelashes coquettishly, parting her legs invitingly and making a vague gesture with her head for him to comply with her unspoken request. With a feral smile to match hers, he stepped into the water and slid down to sit in the tub with his back to her.

Snape was comfortably nestled between Hermione's long legs, his back resting against her chest as she lay back against the claw-footed tub they had expanded just a few short days before. The water was as hot as it was because Snape knew she hated to be cold. He smiled and moaned softly when she picked up the washcloth and began to bathe his smooth, pale chest, wrapping her arms around his front and leaning her chin on his shoulder. She continued in that manner before moving on to his shoulders and neck.

'Mmm, feels good,' he mumbled as she continued to wash him.

He felt her smile against the skin of his neck and exhale softly. 'I am glad it had the desired effect, then,' she replied. 'Now, shift forward a little tiny bit. I need access if I'm going to wash your back.'

He complied immediately, and she gently soaped up the cloth and thoroughly covered every inch of his skin before pulling him back to lean against her and resuming the slow washing of his chest. He could feel his length begin to swell from her attentions and stifled a groan when her fingernails gently grazed one of his nipples. He could feel her hard nipples poking his back, her trimmed curls below brushing against his lower back. Unable to take much more of the torture, he pulled away and spun around the face her, a hand on either one of her knees, keeping her legs spread for him.

She looked up at him in surprise. 'Oh,' she said breathlessly. 'I thought it might take longer than that for you to be ready for another go.'

He grinned wickedly at her teasing. They had left his bed not twenty minutes beforehand, and he too was a little surprised at his recovery time. 'More ready than you can know,' he whispered, reaching down with one hand to line himself up before sinking within her tight, wet warmth.

She gasped beneath him, her arms coming up to grasp his hands on her knees once more. 'S-Severus!' she moaned loudly.

Her voice saying his name in such a way spurred him on to move faster as he thrust into her. Her breasts were jiggling ever so slightly with every movement. Her mewls of pleasure and the grasping of her hands at his arms made him redouble his efforts, pushing harder and letting one of his hands drop down into the water to rub her clit as he pumped into her wildly.

A small tingle at the base of his spine and the tightening of his balls signalled his impending release. As he prepared to go over the edge, he looked at Hermione's head thrown back in pleasure, her hands grasping and rubbing her breasts and eyes closed. She came with a jerk of her hips upward and a loud gasp, followed by a moan and the clenching of her inner walls around his length. His resolve crumbled, and with a groan, he emptied his seed within her, thrusting just a few more times before collapsing against her in the water, splashing water over the edge of the tub onto the floor.

A few moments passed before either of them spoke. 'Wow,' Hermione said softly, with a small laugh.

Severus lifted his head to look her in the eye, hoisting himself onto his knees in the bath before her. She gestured for him to turn around again, and he complied, casting a warming charm over the water that was already beginning to grow cold. Sinking down to sit between her legs again, he sagged back against her, closing his eyes and sighing. He was utterly spent, and his body was sufficiently sated that he would not become aroused again for another few hours.

'You are going to be the death of me, Hermione,' he mumbled, drawing yet another chuckle from his companion.

Wrapping her legs around him again, she picked up the cloth and resumed her washing of him. 'A little death, I hope,' she murmured into his ear, gently nipping it with her teeth.

He chuckled softly. 'Ah, the littlest death there is,' he replied. 'I am old enough to be your father, you do realise?'

Hermione nuzzled his neck with her nose, nudging wet hair out of the way. 'My father would be much older than you are right now if he was still alive,' she said, voice barely trembling. 'What does age matter at this point?'

'I don't suppose it means anything.'

He felt her nod against him. 'As far as I am concerned, I'd rather you didn't start talking about any of the reasons you believe make us unsuitable for one another,' she continued. 'I want to be with you, and I know you want the same. Can that not be reason enough for us to just continue as we are?'

'For you, I can drop the subject for the time being,' he replied. 'You know, I never was able to convince Albus to tell me exactly what happened to your parents.'

He heard her sharply indrawn breath. He wondered if she would respond. 'Death Eaters attacked them two years ago when they were driving home after visiting our relatives in the country,' she whispered, almost as though she was too afraid to say it any louder. 'I never even got to say goodbye, or hide them away like I had been planning to... I wish I had been quicker to act.'

'I'm sorry I was not able to inform the Order of this attack,' he told her, guilt rising within him. She had suffered because he had not remained a spy.

'Don't you dare blame yourself for their deaths, Severus Snape,' she scolded. 'It's not as though there was any doubt something would happen if we didn't get them into

hiding. In fact, it is just another thing to add to my list of reasons to distrust the Headmaster.'

'He did nothing to save them?'

He felt her shake her head and heard a slight sniff. Reaching a hand up to cover the one washing his chest, he gave it a slight squeeze of encouragement. She buried her face into his neck, her trembling lips pressing a kiss there.

'He didn't lift a finger to help me when I asked him if there was anything the Order could do to find my parents a safe house to stay in,' she answered after a long pause. 'I suppose he thought they were an acceptable loss that it would drive me to fight even harder for the Order.'

'The Headmaster is famous for his backwards logic,' Snape told her simply, turning to look over his shoulder a fraction to see her teary eyes. 'Come now; let us not talk of such things anymore.'

Hermione frowned at him. 'The other night, you were angered by something I said to you,' she stated simply.

Snape sighed. He knew this topic would come up with what they had been discussing about her family. He could feel his heart still for a moment too long in his chest. Was he ready to discuss this with anyone? Albus was the only other person he had ever confided to throughout his life, but it had been many years since he had felt compelled to tell the old man anything. Perhaps Hermione was the one he had been waiting for the one who would save him from retreating into himself so often.

'I've been desperately trying to leave that part of my life behind me,' he said, blowing out a shaky breath. 'When I came to Albus over twenty-four years ago, I was a mess. Guilt was my constant companion. He offered me a way to try to repay my debt to society and absolve myself of the great sin I committed before I was finally admitted to the Death Eaters. I had not realised at the time that no matter what I did, the sin would not go away, and neither would the guilt.'

'I'm sorry,' Hermione whispered. 'I know this must be painful to talk about...'

Snape shook his head. 'It's all right, Hermione,' he replied. 'I trust you not to use or hold this against me.'

She nodded and leaned around to kiss his slightly stubble-roughened cheek. 'You know I won't,' she whispered. 'Now, when are you going to admit to what I already know?'

'When did it become obvious to you?' he asked.

'They way you've always spoken about her with such reverence and sadness gave it away,' she answered. 'I can't say I know exactly what happened or that I understand your motives at the time, but I don't hold what happened against you.'

'It was my final test before they would admit me as a full Death Eater and mark me,' he said, glancing down at the godforsaken stain of the skull and snake on his forearm. 'The Dark Lord himself had her brought before everyone, and she was beaten before my very eyes. He said she was a blood traitor and she had been secretly working against him and everything they stood for. I was so young and blinded by my own desire to become powerful that I was sucked into the lie. I killed my own mother to be a part of one of the worst things that has happened to Wizarding Britain.'

He wasn't even aware of the tears he had streaking down his cheeks until Hermione gently wiped them from his face. He turned in the tub so he was facing her and cupped her face in his large, strong hands before bringing their lips together for a salty-sweet kiss. Hermione returned it gently before rising from the water and slipping out of the tub. She Summoned two towels to her and held one out towards him. Accepting the towel, he rose from the water and they dried off.

'You know, it's hard to imagine what Hogwarts is like without you there teaching Potions,' Hermione said as they walked to his bedroom where, oddly enough, the vast majority of her clothing had ended up over the course of just a few days.

'It feels strange not to be at Hogwarts during the term, actually,' he admitted. 'But the Headmaster assured me someone competent was teaching the classes for me. I will probably have to get used to being away from the castle now, anyway. After the war is over, and if I survive, I will not be returning to teach there.'

Hermione looked at him in surprise as she pulled on her knickers and a bra. 'Not that I'm not glad to hear it, but are you really serious about leaving Hogwarts?'

'Deadly,' he answered, tucking his shirt into his slacks. 'I have long tired of the chore that is teaching dunderheads.'

His heart nearly stopped at the smile she threw his way before her head disappeared inside the sweater she was pulling on over it. When she re-emerged, he stepped towards her, smirking at her lack of pants before swooping in to claim a kiss. Her arms went up to wind around his shoulders when a knocking sounded on the front door. His wards had barely shifted, so he assumed it was Draco.

'Finish dressing,' he told her firmly. 'Find your wand and follow me down as soon as you are able.'

She nodded, and he swept out of the bedroom without a second glance. He ran shaky fingers through his hair as he took the stairs two at a time. He spared a momentary glance at the clock and saw it was already half past midnight just as he opened the door to reveal Draco dressed in full Death Eater regalia.

'The Dark Lord is taking over the Ministry of Magic,' Draco said breathlessly, slumping against the doorway as Snape stepped aside to let him in.

Hearing a gasp from behind him, Snape spun on his heel to see Hermione stopped on the stairs, hand over her mouth. 'What on earth happened?' he asked his godson.

'Pre-emptive attack,' he answered. 'He said something about striking while the iron was still hot. But I think it's because he can feel himself getting weaker. Your potion wouldn't have had time to reach full effectiveness yet, but I know for a fact his magical aura is diminished. We've all been feeling it at each of the meetings.'

'We'll need to alert the Order,' Snape said, walking towards the sitting room. 'You do whatever it is that you need to, Draco.'

The younger man nodded and swept out of the house, closing the door behind him. Snape crouched before the fireplace, igniting the few logs in it before tossing in some Floo powder and calling for the Headmaster. He felt Hermione crouch beside him and place a hand on his shoulder; he felt a wave of gratitude for her support. A moment later, Dumbledore's weary face appeared in the green flames.

'What news, Severus?'

'Riddle is going to take the Ministry,' he answered simply, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach.

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A/N Yep, I leave you with yet another cliffhanger my bad.

Chapter 28: Manifestation of Chaos

Chapter 28 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Upon arriving at Grimmauld Place, Hermione and Snape found the house in a state of utter pandemonium.

There were people everywhere, some Hermione didn't recognise from the Order meetings she had attended over the years. She didn't imagine the whole of the Order would fit in the kitchen, so obviously Dumbledore had other safe-houses somewhere else. The more she thought about it, the more the entire thing made sense to her. The Order was not just a handful of vigilante witches and wizards it was an entire army.

'Oh, Severus! You're finally here!' a voice down the hall called from the front door.

Hermione looked down to see Remus Lupin standing at the edge of a group, beckoning them forward. She looked up to Snape, who nodded and grasped her hand, leading her with him towards the huddle. As they got closer, she could hear Dumbledore speaking in hushed tones. It was obvious to her only certain Order members were privy to the information being passed along.

'Now, I do not want anyone to act rashly,' Dumbledore said seriously over the din around them. 'Stick to your assigned pair, and take no prisoners.'

'Headmaster, what of Draco?' Snape asked, pushing his way past an instantly indignant Molly Weasley so he could be heard, pulling Hermione with him.

'He is to be spared,' the headmaster replied evenly. 'His contribution was enough that he has earned himself a position amongst the living after this battle is won.'

Hermione felt her stomach turn. Dumbledore's plan was a ruthless one, and she agreed not one true Death Eater should be spared. However, she was disgusted by how casual he was about Draco's contribution. It was almost as though he had not willingly gone back to the Death Eaters to assist the Order and spy for Snape. She reigned in her temper quickly. She needed to save every bit of her rage for the battle, where she would execute her own battle plan. She didn't intend to leave many standing.

Snape looked down at her curiously, his brow furrowed slightly. She noted he did not release her hand. Obviously she was going to be with him. There was no way she would trust any of the others with her life. They broke away from the huddle and made their way back out into the entry hall just in time for Hermione to spot Luna pushing her way into the house through the very crowded front area.

'Luna!' she called out, waving at her to get her attention.

The younger witch spotted her and pushed her way through the crowded hallway, throwing herself at Hermione in a hug that left her breathless. It wasn't until they parted that Hermione realised Luna was crying.

'Oh, what's wrong?' she asked, hugging her again and stroking her long blonde hair fondly.

'I've been so worried about you,' she murmured against her shoulder. 'Dumbledore has been so strict where contacting you is concerned. I'm so sorry! I would have Flooed and written, but he sent me to France to liaise with the Order members there.'

Hermione swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth at the mention of the headmaster. 'Luna, I don't blame you for a second,' she told her friend. 'I am well aware of what Dumbledore is up to as far as I am concerned.'

Luna looked over her shoulder at the doorway and gestured for Hermione to look over in that direction also. She saw Draco standing just outside, his Death Eater mask clasped in his hand with a look of urgency on his face. Nodding, Hermione grasped Snape's hand once more, and the three of them pushed their way through the throng of people until they managed to get through the door.

'I'm going with Draco,' Luna said quietly, drawing the hood of her cloak over her head. 'He'll need someone to back him up, and I'm not sure anyone else within the Order can be trusted to do it.'

Hermione nodded. It was a legitimate fear. 'You take good care of Luna, too, you understand, Draco,' she warned. 'If anything happens to her, I will hold you responsible, even if you are my friend.'

Draco didn't nod, but the fierce look in his steely-grey eyes told her everything she wanted to know: he would protect her with his life. 'When it becomes apparent I am not on the side of the Dark Lord, I will become a target. I need to know I can count on Severus and you.'

Snape stepped forward and rested his hand on Hermione's shoulder, halting her response and clearing his throat. 'Hermione and I will both have your back if things turn ugly,' he said firmly, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Hermione nodded in agreement. Draco took Luna's hand then, and the pair took off in the direction of the park across the road to Apparate. Hermione felt Snape's hand come down on her shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. She turned her head minutely to look at his pale hand, the fingers long and tapered with calluses and potion ingredient stains on the ends. It was not a perfect hand, but it was still one she adored as much as she did the man it was attached to. She tilted her head just a little more so she could brush her cheek briefly against it.

'We have to move now, Hermione,' he told her seriously.

She nodded. 'I know. Let's go, then.'

Taking the hand Snape offered her, they made their way across to the park also, hiding behind one of the tallest hedges to avoid being seen by Muggles. Hermione closed her eyes as he wrapped his arms around her, and a moment later, she opened them to find herself behind a pillar in the entry hall of the Ministry of Magic. Draco and Luna were nowhere in sight, and the area seemed to be deserted. Apparently the Dark Lord and his minions had yet to arrive.

'Stay right here while I scope out the parameters,' Snape told her, pressing her up against the pillar firmly. 'I won't have something happen to you if they show up while I am looking around.'

She shrugged him off and frowned. 'I can take care of myself, Severus,' she snapped, her nerves making her magic seem frazzled as her anger rose to the surface more quickly than usual. One look at his pained expression, however, softened her slightly, and she nodded reluctantly at him. 'I will stay.'

She remained still, focussing on the sound of her breathing and the sounds of Snape's footsteps. She didn't know how long it had been, but soon she heard the sound of

the Floo network come to life right across the hall. She gasped softly, shifting a little so she could peek around the pillar she hid behind. The hall glowed green, and she saw first Bellatrix and then Lucius walk through. She felt a moment of fear before the darkness within her reared its ugly head, sending her magic soaring through her veins and into her fingertips, crackling around her.

She moved to step out of the shadows when she felt an arm come around her waist and the warmth of a large hand cover her mouth when she made to speak.

'Shhh, it's only me,' Snape whispered softly. 'It appears they have only just arrived. They will move to the Minister of Magic's office with the Dark Lord from here.'

'What about the rest of the Order?' Hermione asked softly when he finally removed his hand.

'I received a message from Dumbledore. They are already waiting on the fifth floor where the Minister's offices are located,' he murmured softly. 'We are to tail them, and Draco is already aware of the plan.'

Hermione frowned slightly. It all seemed far too easy. Where was the chaos? Where was the blood and fighting? There was no sudden attack. It was as though everything that had been planned, despite Voldemort going on the march sooner than they had expected, was going as expected. It was strange, and it made her feel nervous. She looked up at Snape's face and could see he felt the same way.

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she re-focussed on the task at hand.

'All right, that appears to be the last of them,' Snape said, indicating the group of what was certainly over three-hundred black-robed figures, most of them with the silver Death Eater masks disguising them.

Hermione felt alarm run through her for a moment. There were so many of them. Her momentary panicked expression quickly morphed to a smirk. Many of them would not be proficient duellists. She and Snape, along with the majority of the Order, were all master- or at least intermediate-level duellists. So they were outnumbered three to one? Skill was always preferable to number.

She peered around the pillar even further and saw Lucius Malfoy at the head of the group, his long blonde hair pulled back with a silk scarf. Hermione almost snorted aloud at that. Trust Malfoy to only wear silk in his hair. She drew her wand and held it tightly, the handle warm against her palm. She could feel the shift of her magic as it made to redirect itself into her wand, but she held on tight, refusing to let her spells go until she was ready to use them. She caught Snape staring at her, pride in his eyes, as he observed her reining in her powers in the way he had taught her over the months they had been together in his cottage.

'We may not make it out of this,' she said simply, the words sounding empty.

'I am very aware of that,' Snape said, pulling her against him and wrapping his arms around her tightly.

Both of them were aware this moment of distraction could cost them, but it was worth the risk. If either or both of them were to perish, they would never get a chance to do over that moment. His forehead came to rest against hers, and she sighed shakily, wrapping her arms around his neck. They simply stood and absorbed each other while the noise of the Death Eaters gathered in the hall grew along with their eagerness. Hermione lifted her face up to meet his lips in a slow, gentle kiss their last kiss before the battle to come.

'I wish I could keep you from this,' he whispered against her lips. 'I don't know what I would do if you were to perish and I was left to continue this life without you.'

Hermione smiled at him, tears shining in her eyes. If only he knew how incredibly touched she was to hear those words come from his mouth. 'That is the loveliest thing you have ever said, Severus Snape,' she told him seriously. 'And I am so privileged to be the one to hear those words.'

'You have come to mean a lot to me these past few months,' he said, his voice growing a little hoarse with emotion. 'These past few years working alongside you, in fact, have been a great joy to me.'

Hermione swallowed a hiccup, a lone tear slipping from her eyes and sliding down her pale cheek. 'I love you,' she said softly, stroking one of his cheeks with a small hand, rasping against his stubble.

'And I love you,' he confessed, leaning in to kiss her once more before pulling away. 'It is time for us to move, however.'

Hermione nodded in agreement, even as her heart swelled with emotion. The darkness, driven away for the time being, allowed her to have one small moment of joy. He loved her. It was more than she could have ever hoped for from him. If they both survived, she would not let him out of her sight again.

She felt his large hand close around hers before they were immediately pulled forward along the outer edges of the hall. Hermione became aware her feet were no longer touching the ground before she realised Snape was using some sort of magic in order to make both of them fly. When they reached the end of the hall, she could see that Lucius, Bellatrix, and Peter Pettigrew, along with the other members of the inner circle, were piling into the first lift, and others were cramming themselves into the other two while some opted for the staircase.

'We need to try and take out as many of the stragglers as we can,' Snape murmured into her ear.

Gripping her wand even more tightly, she released his hand and moved out of the shadows just as the doors began to close on the lift that held Malfoy and the other inner circle members.

She smirked when she saw the look of horror and confusion in his steely-grey eyes.

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A/N The battle itself is on the way.

Chapter 29: In the Line of Fire – Part One

Chapter 29 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big thank you goes out to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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The blood roaring in her ears was unlike anything she had ever felt before.

A spell grazed her left shoulder, the red beam of light burning a gaping hole into her robes, exposing the tender white flesh of her arm beneath. She glanced over her shoulder to see Snape fending off three Death Eaters at once from behind her and turned back to focus on the two junior idiots who were walking towards her with their wands raised. She frowned, thrusting her free hand in their direction. Her mouth curled into a sneer.

'Do you truly believe that you can handle me?' she shouted, her voice booming above the noise. 'Go ahead, if you dare.'

She saw a slight tremble in the steps of one of the young men and took the opportunity to strike, ropes wordlessly soaring straight towards him and wrapping around tightly to bind him mercilessly. As he dropped to the ground in front of her, Hermione looked up to see that the other man approaching had faltered in shock for just long enough for her to gain the upper hand. Oh, how she was tempted just to kill the men then and there...the magic coursing through her was driving her to do things she had never before considered right until recently. She had discovered, in the end, it didn't even matter.

She was not going to be forgiven by anyone for the lives that she would take. She might be tried later, but at that very moment, nothing meant what it did normally.

'*Stupefy*,' she said, her voice empty of any real feeling.

No, she could not just kill anyone. It had to be them...the inner circle of the Dark Lord's recruits. They were the ones responsible for the death of her parents and Ron...for the destruction of her soul. Her blood boiled with rage, and she whipped around to see Snape battling hard against none other than Rabastan Lestrangle. Now how did one so close to the inner circle end up so far away from the one he was intended to protect? She turned her head just slightly to see that no one was advancing on her from behind and forced herself to Snape's side, throwing a Confundus at Lestrangle, hitting him right in the centre of his forehead.

'Hermione!' Snape shouted at her, pushing her behind him as Lestrangle advanced on them clumsily. 'Stay out of this one!'

Her brows furrowed at him momentarily before she spun around sharply and surveyed the battle before her. The Order had finally arrived, and a large number of them were involved in fighting off this fledgling army that Voldemort had obviously put together as some form of detour and distraction tactic...to keep them away from him for longer. She groaned in annoyance as another junior Death Eater broke through the ranks and charged towards her, wand raised. She was having a hard time being patient.

'Give over, already,' she growled as she threw a stinging hex followed by another stunning spell at whoever it was with lightning speed.

It was clear that the younger Death Eaters were all amateurs. After kicking off the mask and checking to see that the young man was truly out for the count, she rolled him onto his front and walked away. She turned to see Snape send a hex at Lestrangle that sent him flying into one of the Ionic marble columns, cracking him against the stone sharply before he slumped to the ground. Uncaring as to whether he was dead or just mortally wounded, Hermione grabbed Snape's arm and dragged him with her towards the elevator. They needed to get to the floor where the Minister's office was.

Snape was quicker than her and was soon pulling her along behind him as they hastened towards the lift. He punched the button and soon the doors were opening before them. After pushing her inside, he followed, and as the doors were closing, a cloaked figure tried to jam the door with his body. Hermione pointed her wand at him, but Snape pushed her arm out of the way, settling for giving the young man a hard kick with his booted foot. With a yelp, he got out of the way and the doors finally closed.

She watched as Snape leaned on the back wall heavily, his expression weary. She felt a pang of sympathy for him through the angry haze and reached out for a moment to touch his brow, smoothing away the frown. He reached out a hand to cup her face gently just a bell sounded, signalling that they had arrived at the desired floor. Quick as a flash, Snape withdrew from her, holding his wand at the ready in case there was an ambush waiting on the other side of the elevator doors.

'Stay behind me,' he told her, pushing her behind him with one arm as the doors opened.

What it revealed was a bloodbath unlike she had ever seen in her life. People were strewn all over the ground...some in Death Eater robes, others in the bright blue robes of the Order. The blood was a rich red shade, splattered against the walls and marble floors, pooling around the bodies. If she had been even the slightest bit sensitive to blood, she would have fainted at the sight before her. Fortunately, she was not.

Snape urged her forward, and she moved alongside him, peering around cautiously as she did so. The fighting in this particular area of the floor seemed to be over, and she could barely hear the shouts and muffled cries from further along. Sticking together, they moved with haste towards the end of the hall, turning the corner at the 'T' formed by the two halls converging in the direction of the most noise. It was mere moments later that they came upon a new lot of Death Eaters...the inner circle amongst them as well as many of the Weasleys and other prominent Order members.

'Granger!' barked a voice from beside her as she made to advance.

She turned her head to see Alastor Moody slumped against the wall, clutching his hand to his chest tightly in a fist. His breathing was irregular and heavy, and as her eyes continued over him, she saw that his prosthetic leg was missing and he appeared to be losing a lot of blood, fast. She nodded coolly at him.

'You're on the right side, aren't ye?' he wheezed, coughing up some blood and turning his head minutely to spit on the ground beside him.

She frowned but nodded. 'What do you want?' she demanded.

'Make sure the right people find me when it's over,' he murmured, pushing his wand that was on the ground towards her. 'Use this if you need to, but don't you let those damn Death Eaters win this.'

Hermione nodded in understanding. It appeared that near death, Moody was feeling somewhat less suspicious of everyone around him. She leaned down to pick up his gnarly wand, battered with age and quickly cast a simple healing charm over him, stopping the blood flow before knocking him out with a Stupefy. There was her revenge on the bastard, even if he deserved so much worse; it would have to suffice for the time being. She had much bigger fish to fry.

She turned around to see that Severus had disappeared from view and felt a moment of panic, her eyes flickering around the chaotic hallway until they finally clapped onto him. He was engaged in battle with Bellatrix Lestrangle and Rodolphus, who appeared to have teamed up in order to bring him down faster. Hermione felt her magic soar through her veins and into her fingertips as she made a mad dash in the direction of her lover. There was no way those two would get the better of her Snape.

'*Rictumsempra*!' she shouted, her wand pointed directly at Rodolphus, who had not seen her approaching from behind Snape.

The man was thrown back several feet, his body twisting around as it did so, landing in a heap on the floor. Bellatrix shrieked with rage, her eyes practically bulging out of her gaunt face as she turned her focus to Hermione. Hermione smirked, flicking a few simple slicing hexes at the woman, damaging her dress and leaving a large gash across her left cheek. Meanwhile, Hermione noticed Rodolphus pulling himself off the ground and nodded at Snape, who switched sides with her and allowed her to focus on Bellatrix while he took care of her husband.

'So, little Mudblood,' Bellatrix taunted, using the back of her hand to swipe at the blood from her cheek. 'We meet again. You look older every time I see you.'

'The same could be said for you, Lestrangle,' Hermione replied coolly, raising her wand arm into the appropriate position for duelling. 'You're looking particularly old this time. Is the stress getting to you?'

'Smart-mouthed little bitch,' the other woman spat. 'You'll be dead before you can even utter another word from your filthy mouth*Crucio!*

Bellatrix was fast, but Hermione had seen it coming, dropping to the ground and rolling to one side, successfully avoiding the spell. She stood back up, silently sending another few slicing hexes at Lestrage, most of which she managed to dodge, save for another across the same cheek as before, creating an 'x'.

'Too much talking, Lestrage,' Hermione said with a feral smile. 'You're really losing your touch, old woman.*Crucio!*

She had expected that after the taunting, Bellatrix would pick up her game and dodge the attack. Instead, Hermione was mildly surprised that the curse instead hit, and the woman fell to the ground, writhing in pain and shrieking at the top of her lungs. She felt a surge of power run through her, and she was urged on by the darkness in her to continue, to torture the life out of the woman, until all she was left with was madness. She pushed harder, allowing more magic to flow through her and into the wand. She had held on so tightly to what control she did have over the darkness, but here in the midst of battle, it was unleashed.

'Hermione! Hermione, stop this madness!' she heard vaguely from outside the blood and whisperings in her ear to keep going.

Without removing the curse, she looked over to see Harry gesturing at her wildly. She frowned and turned back to Bellatrix, removing the curse and waiting to see how long it would take for her to stand up again and fight. It took less time than she had imagined, and she soon found her opponent once again on her feet.

'Y-you're much better than I expected, Mudblood,' Bellatrix stammered, seemingly out of breath. 'A more painful *Crucio* than the Dark Lord's. But you stopped. Why?'

'I was thinking about giving you another chance to fight me properly,' Hermione answered. 'But I can see that would be a waste of time*Sectumsempra!*

The spell hit Lestrage right in the centre of her chest, and the blood immediately sprayed forth. Bellatrix dropped to her knees on the ground, slices appearing all over her, blood seeping through her clothes to soak them red. Hermione made her way closer, a look of satisfaction on her face. She once would have felt guilt at such a ruthless act, but she only felt pleased with herself and that one of her intended victims had finally got what was coming to them.

'Goodbye, Bellatrix,' Hermione said quietly, lifting her booted foot and kicking the woman over so that she was sprawled on the marble floor.

She sighed heavily and turned around to see Snape watching her in disbelief. She walked over to him and reached out to touch him, frowning when he grasped her hand and lowered it. She was about to jerk away from him in annoyance when he brought his other hand up to swipe just above her eyebrow.

'You've got a cut,' he murmured.

She breathed out in relief. No...Snape would not reject her for the sin she had just committed. After all, he knew exactly how she felt. She was about to lean in to his embrace when she heard loud shouts from a little way up the hall. Peering around Snape, she was surprised to see Draco with his hood thrown back, the silver Death Eaters mask nowhere to be found. His wand arm was held out in the direction of his father, who stood just across the hall from him.

'Are you going to kill me then, son?' Lucius taunted loudly, his voice echoing through the hall.

It was stonily silent, all the other battles throughout the hall having paused to gaze on the spectacle of a son turning on his own father.

'It would be the least that you would deserve,' Draco spat, glaring at the man across from him in hatred. 'I never wanted what you have made me into. I never wanted to be like you! You're a disgrace to the name of Malfoy.'

Lucius smirked. 'Well then, go ahead and end me now,' he said, spreading his arms out on either side, inviting Draco to deliver the final blow.

'*Avada Kedavra!*

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A/N Yes, I know, but I just could not resist ending the chapter there. Fortunately for you, there is more on the way.

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Chapter 30: In the Line of Fire – Part Two

Chapter 30 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious for beta-ing this chapter.

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'*Avada Kedavra!* Draco yelled, the bright green light shooting from the tip of his wand straight in the direction of his father.

Hermione watched on, disbelief clearly written on her features. Lucius stepped aside at the last moment, allowing the spell to crash straight into the wall, spraying plaster at everyone within reach. She knew that the senior Malfoy would not go to his death so willingly. She grasped Snape's arm as she tucked her wand into her sleeve, reaching down to her boot where there was a knife hidden within a sheath.

'I need you to cover me,' she whispered frantically. 'Draco doesn't have it in him to kill his own father.'

'I can't allow you to do that,' Snape told her firmly. 'Let me...you have done enough for now. My soul is much more used to this than yours. I will kill Lucius.'

'But he was once your friend,' Hermione argued, slightly annoyed that he would take this revenge away from her.

'And he is now my bitter enemy,' Snape said, grasping her hand and dragging her out of the heat of the fighting that had once again flared to life around them. 'When we spoke of my mother's death and my involvement in it, I never was able to tell you that it was Lucius who was responsible for her capture and the suggestion to the Dark

Lord for me to be the one to kill her. I need to do this.'

Hermione felt her magic calm itself as he spoke. Yes, he did have every reason to want this revenge more than her. The darkness would have to be satisfied with what she had given it that night. Sighing heavily, she nodded at him, pressing the knife into his hand.

'Use this,' she said softly. 'I could think of no more horrible a way for Lucius to die than by your hand using a Muggle weapon.'

Snape smirked at her, leaning in to kiss her dirty forehead. 'Sadist,' he told her before began to make his way around the room.

Hermione followed a little way behind him, watching both Snape and the smaller battles around them as he moved closer to where Lucius was battling with his son. Even if Draco couldn't kill his father, he was certainly capable of weakening him. She stopped when she saw that Avery was approaching Draco from behind, and with Luna nowhere to be seen, Hermione knew it was up to her.

Moving quickly, she dodged a number of fallen victims and whipped her wand from her sleeve, immediately pointing it at the Death Eater.

'*Incendio!*' she shouted, the flames spewing forth from her wand to curl around Avery, setting his black robes alight.

'Mudblood bitch!' he roared, his arms flying around wildly as he tried to put out the flames with his hands.

Hermione watched his struggle with glee, the darkness chuckling all the while. It took him a lot longer than she had expected for him to release the clasp of his robes and throw them to the ground. The right side of his face was glowing red from a burn, and both of his hands already appeared to be blistering. Pleased with her handiwork, she then sent a few small slicing hexes at him, cutting his blistered hands and cheek, causing him to cry out in further pain.

'That will teach you to sneak up from behind on someone in a duel,' she said, walking to stand before him as he slumped to the floor, clutching his face as he trembled from the pain he was experiencing.

'Malfoy should never have brought that blood traitor of a son into our midst,' Avery spat as he looked up at her. 'I should have known he was mixing with the likes of you. He came to too many meetings smelling of filth.'

'Those are big words for someone at my mercy,' she said, raising an eyebrow at him.

He spat at her, his saliva tinged with blood. 'Go ahead and kill me,' he snarled. 'I'd rather be dead than live in a world full of Mudbloods, half-bloods, and blood traitors.'

Hermione glared at him before casting a quick spell to bind him in ropes and gag his mouth. 'I spare your life only so you will see the Magical world the way it should be, free from the reign of tyranny...free of your Dark Lord,' she told him before kicking his nose, listening for the sickening crunch it made as it broke.

She spun swiftly on her heel and turned her attention back to Snape after making certain there was no further threat to Draco from behind. She felt panic rise within her when she realised that, once again, her lover was nowhere to be found, and the noise in the hall was so deafeningly loud that calling for him would have been fruitless, not to mention give away his position to his intended victim. Biting her lip until it nearly bled, she dodged a few poorly-aimed spells and made her way around the hall the same way she had seen Snape go a few minutes earlier.

She couldn't see either Malfoy either, and this worried her some. Where on earth had they all disappeared to?

Growling in frustration, she set off at a jog, ducking and stepping to the side of many curses, and she made her way around the corner into the next section of the hall. There was even more fighting occurring there, and she spotted Charlie Weasley waving her over and pointing towards the large set of double doors that obviously led to the Minister's office. She nodded her thanks to him for his assistance and set off at a run in order to reach the doors, her lover, and most probably, Voldemort himself.

Hermione slipped into the room with as much stealth as she was able. What faced her was something she never expected to see. Draco was lying in a corner, blood pooling around him from an open wound in his side; Lucius Malfoy was on his knees with a nasty gash on his right cheek, bleeding a trail down the side of his face; and Snape was standing with his wand pointed directly at Malfoy Senior's forehead. She closed her eyes for just a moment before opening them again...the scene unchanged.

'Kill him, Severus,' she said just loudly enough for her lover to hear.

Snape didn't look at her, but she knew he had heard her the moment she saw him withdraw her knife from his robes and immediately strike Lucius, both hands forcing the blade into Malfoy's chest. Lucius cried out, but the sound became choked as blood began to spew forth from his mouth. Hermione watched as Snape released his hold on the knife, his hands trembling slightly. Malfoy fell backwards then, his blood immediately beginning to pool around him on the marble floor.

Not bothering to wait and see if he was dead or not, Hermione rushed over to the corner of the room where Draco was lying. She whipped her wand out and immediately began casting healing charms over him, cleaning the gaping wound in his side and watching as the skin began to knit itself back together. He would need the attention of a proper Healer, but until then at least she had stopped the bleeding. She checked for his pulse and was relieved to find it. He was unconscious, but she was confident he would survive.

'Is Draco all right?' Snape asked from behind her, his voice a little rough with emotion.

She turned to look over her shoulder at him and nodded. 'He will be fine until he gets to a Healer in St. Mungo's,' she answered. 'What happened?'

'Lucius decided to throw a rather dangerous wood-cutting hex in his direction just before I was able to disarm him,' Snape answered, dropping down beside her to check Draco's pulse himself.

'You did your best,' Hermione said, reaching a hand over to rest on his shoulder. 'I am proud of you for what you did just now. I've never been more glad to see that monster dead.'

Snape closed his eyes tightly as she spoke. 'Speaking of monsters...' he began.

Before he could continue, the two heard a loud screeching sound coming from the Minister's office just beyond the next set of double doors. Hermione felt panic rise in her as she jumped to her feet. With the knowledge that Snape was following close behind her, Hermione ran in the direction of the doors, throwing her arm out in front of her and wandlessly blasting the doors open and off their hinges as she went.

She was surprised to find that only Harry and Dumbledore were in the room with Voldemort standing on the other side of the room, flocked by a number of cloaked and masked Death Eaters. Hermione could see the black blood sliding down the Dark Lord's cheek from what appeared to be a freshly-caused wound. Her veins were singing with magical energy just waiting to be unleashed. She bit her lip in order to maintain control, afraid her dark rage could hit the wrong people if she allowed it control over her.

'Ah, what do we have here?' Voldemort taunted, his voice a higher pitch than usual. 'A traitor and a Mudblood have come to your rescue, Potter. You might even have a fighting chance now.'

Hermione felt her temper flare at these words, but when she moved to step forwards even further, she felt Snape grip her arm and hold her back, his dark eyes staring into hers imploringly. She gritted her teeth to prevent herself from unleashing herself on him, taking a deep, calming breath.

'You know, Tom, taunting your rivals will not win you this battle,' Dumbledore spoke, his voice alarmingly calm.

'Ah, Dumbledore, you old fool,' Voldemort said coolly. 'You place far too much faith in that overgrown school boy to win this battle. Stop playing your silly games and just fight me yourself.'

"As you wish," he replied with a hard glint in his eye, and a red jet of light flew from the tip of his wand in the direction of Voldemort.

At this point, everyone else in the room had drawn their wands and began casting spells and hexes at one another. Hermione made her way around the outside of the office, her own wand aimed at the Death Eater nearest her. She cast Levicorpus, hanging him upside down immediately, and left him in the air as she bound him with ropes. Both Harry and Snape had also managed to stun, bind and knock the other three Death Eaters unconscious before Dumbledore withdrew from his battle with Voldemort momentarily, casting a shield around all of them.

'Harry, now!' he ordered sharply.

Harry stepped forward, thrusting his wand out in front of him, his brow furrowed in concentration. Hermione and Snape pointed their wands in the same direction, all three preparing to cast the curse that would rid them of the Dark Lord forever.

'*Avada Kedavra!*' Harry, Hermione, and Snape shouted in unison, even as Riddle opened his mouth to cast another spell of his own.

The three green ribbons of the curse joined together, hitting Riddle square in the chest at the same time, throwing him backwards into the large desk, which pushed against it with enough force to hit the wall behind it. Hermione stared at the scene; Voldemort's red eyes were grey and empty, and his mangled body was sprawled over the desk, limbs splayed in different directions from the impact.

She opened her mouth to speak when she felt a sharp pain in her side and looked down to see the blood seeping through her shirt. She numbly felt the wound with her hands, her fingers tearing at her shirt so that she could see it, but without success. She could barely even hear Snape's voice as he shouted at her. Her knees became weak, and she sank to the ground, looking up to see her lover running towards her through the blurry haze beyond her eyes.

'Hermione?' Snape asked her, his own hands fumbling to lift her shirt from the wound that was now bleeding heavily.

Her eyes closed, almost against her own will, as she felt the darkness taking over. All she could see was blackness despite the blood pounding in her ears, even as she vaguely heard Snape calling out to her. The last thing she heard before the darkness took over fully was the sound of Snape's voice begging her not to leave him.

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A/N I hope the battle was worth the wait.

Chapter 31: Waiting Games

Chapter 31 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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The sun created lines of shadows on the whitewashed walls of room through the blinds shading the windows.

Snape opened his eyes wearily, rubbing a hand over them to clear the sleep as he woke from his slumber. His neck ached, which meant he had fallen asleep sitting up again. It had been a pattern of his for the past four days. He looked at the pocket watch he pulled from pocket of his open waistcoat, noting that it was nearing sunset. He waved a hand in the direction of the blinds, making them open up just a little more. Even if she was still unconscious, Hermione would appreciate being able to enjoy the sunrises and sunsets with him.

He allowed his gaze to slip from the window to the occupant in the bed beside him. Hermione's eyes were still shut as tightly as they had been the day she was brought in. The hospital gown that covered her form hid her heavily-bandaged midsection from view, although he figured it was for the best that way. The wound still had traces of dark magic lingering, preventing it from being able to heal properly.

The Dark Lord had been destroyed by the combined power of himself, Harry Potter and Hermione, just four days beforehand. The only person who left the Minister of Magic's office wounded had been the woman that he loved. At some point during their tandem casting of the Killing curse, Voldemort had managed to fire off one last spell...a dark spell. It was a spell Snape had never heard of before, and it had sliced her side open and prevented it from being able to heal properly, no matter how many times the Healers had attempted to stitch it.

In the end they had resorted to stitching the wound up the Muggle way, dosing her with Blood Replenishing Potion frequently and cleaning the wound with antiseptic as often as they could. Snape had never felt more disheartened in his entire life. If they were unable to help Hermione, he was not certain he would be able to continue on without her. Too many times in his life had Voldemort taken away the people he loved...the ones who loved him in return.

Blinking back the tears that threatened to fall from his eyes, he reached his hand over and grasped one of Hermione's pale, cold hands in his.

This was his only comfort, sitting by her side and desperately wishing for her recovery. He was about to stand and collect the bowl of water and a washcloth to begin cleaning her face and neck when he heard a knock at the door to the room. He turned around to see it open and reveal Luna Lovegood and Draco standing in the doorway.

'How is she doing?' Luna asked softly, tears filling her once bright, blue eyes.

'There are no changes,' Snape replied, his heart clenching painfully in his chest as he spoke.

'We were hoping it would not be too much if we asked to sit with her for a while,' Draco said, closing the door behind him.

'By all means,' Snape replied, summoning another chair from the corner to sit beside the one he had already pulled up to the side of the bed. 'Hermione would be pleased

you have both come to visit her.'

Luna sat down in the chair Snape ordinarily occupied while Draco commandeered the chair beside it. Snape watched as the younger witch lifted Hermione's cold hand into her own, the tears sliding down her cheeks unchecked. He continued over to the dresser to retrieve the basin and washcloth, casting a spell to fill it with warm water before carrying it over to the unoccupied side of Hermione's bed. Dipping the cloth into the water, he wrung it out before gently beginning to clean her face.

'How is your own injury faring?' Snape asked, looking over at his godson.

'They finally let me out of my room today,' Draco answered as he gently rubbed Luna's back with one hand as she cried. 'I'll be discharged from St. Mungo's tomorrow, but they said Hermione did such a good job of healing me at the beginning that the muscles will regenerate fully within the next couple weeks.'

'She always was rather thorough,' Snape said, a fond smile appearing on his mouth as he looked down at the woman he loved.

'Why is it that they are having so much trouble with healing her magically?' Luna asked as she wiped at the tears on her face.

'As capable as the Healers here at St. Mungo's are, there is very little they can do as far as the curse goes,' he answered quietly. 'I have done some research as well, and all of what I have found has indicated that healing spells feed the curse and allow it to continue to affect her and refuse to let the wound to close. If we starve the curse of magic, it will eventually come to an end, and she can then begin to heal.'

'That makes sense,' Luna agreed. 'But who knows how long it will take for the curse to run out of steam?'

'I should think it will cease to affect her in another few days, but we have to try and keep her with us until at least then, or her body will be too frail to heal itself.'

As he spoke, his voice became rough with emotion, and he felt himself on the brink of tears yet again. For a man that could count the number of times he had cried in his life, he was one that had lost count of the number of times he had been forced to stop himself from crying over the last four days. It was all he could do to keep it together when the chance of losing Hermione was a very real possibility.

'The nurse outside told me that you barely leave the room except to shower and eat for two hours a day,' Draco said, looking up at him in disapproval. 'You need to start taking better care of yourself, or Hermione will have nothing to come back to when you are withered away to nothing.'

Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he wiped the washcloth over Hermione's forehead one last time before carrying it back over to the dresser. Returning to her bedside, he sat down beside her and grasped her free hand in his, stroking his thumb over her prominent knuckles.

'I know you're right,' he said softly. 'But I just couldn't bear to leave her alone for any longer than I have to. What if she wakes up while I am gone? What would she think?'

'The Healers would tell her that you needed to rest,' Draco replied, a trace of annoyance settling into his tone. 'There will be someone here to watch over her, even if you leave for a few hours to sleep at home in your own bed.'

'I don't trust many other people a great deal,' Snape confided quietly.

'Let Luna and I take a shift and watch her whenever you need to sleep,' Draco implored softly. 'We are just as capable as you at keeping watch.'

Snape opened his mouth to protest, but instead a long yawn emitted. He covered it with his hand quickly, but he knew then that Draco made sense. He was weary beyond belief, and the naps he took in the chair beside Hermione's bed only refreshed him so much before he was tired again.

'Very well,' Snape answered. 'As soon as you have been released tomorrow, come by here and we will work out a schedule for who will stay with Hermione when. But tonight, I will remain here with her, and Draco, you shall sleep in your room here, and Miss Lovegood, I trust you will also get a good night's sleep at home. I won't have either of you sleep-deprived as well.'

They both nodded in agreement, and the three fell into silence. An hour or so later, Luna and Draco left the room, and Snape returned one of the chairs to the corner manually before returning to his place by Hermione's side. Gripping her hand in his own once more, he sat and began to think about the kind of life they would have together when she finally awoke from her coma.

He dreamed that the two of them would leave the country...he would quit teaching, and Hermione could finish both of her Apprenticeships wherever they chose to go. They could buy a house together, and he could start a garden in the backyard where he would grow the finest potion ingredients available...become an independent brewer and supply both schools and apothecaries throughout Europe.

He smiled sadly for a moment. He only hoped his dream would be allowed the chance to become a reality.

Some time later, Snape awoke to find he had once more drifted off in his chair, this time with his head resting on his arms that were propped on the bed beside Hermione. He sat up and felt the ache in his back screaming at him for falling asleep like that yet again. His body protested with another stab of pain as he stood from the chair, stretching and flexing his body until it began to feel normal once more. When he walked over to the window and closed the blinds, he was startled when he heard the door to the room open once more.

He turned to see that it was the nurse, her head peeking in through the partially-opened doorway.

'Miss Granger has some visitors, Professor Snape,' she said, flashing a kind smile at him that reminded him vaguely of the way Molly Weasley had once smiled at him.

'Who is it?' he asked quietly.

'It's Mr. Harry Potter and Miss Ginevra Weasley, sir,' she answered.

Snape felt anger bubble up within him. The nerve of the boy to pretend he even cared about what had happened to one of his supposed best friends four days beforehand. He shut his eyes and took several calming breaths to prevent him from taking his anger out on the St. Mungo's staff.

'If you would turn them away, I would be most grateful,' he answered. 'Hermione would not want to see them if she was awake, and I doubt she'd be grateful if I allowed them entry while she is in this state.'

'Very well, Professor,' the nurse answered. 'Is there anything I can get for you, sir?'

'I would love a cup of coffee if you have the time,' he answered.

'Not a problem, sir,' she answered with a cheery smile. 'How would you like it?'

'Black, strong with no sugar or cream,' he answered.

'I'll be back in just a few minutes with it.'

'You have my thanks.'

The door closed behind the witch, and Snape let a harsh puff of air pass through his lips as he struggled to keep himself from punching the wall. Why did everything have to be about Potter and what he wanted? The Boy-Who-Lived-Twice was still proving to be the biggest pain in his rear end despite not even having to teach or watch out for

the boy anymore. If it weren't for the life debt he owed Lily and James Potter for being the one to tell the Dark Lord of the prophecy in the first place, he would have hexed the boy a long time ago.

He paced the room until he no longer felt like he might spontaneously combust. Just as he stopped, the nurse returned with his coffee. Accepting it gratefully, he slumped back into the chair beside Hermione's bed, holding her hand with one of his while he held the cup with the other, taking a sip of the strong, black liquid. It was just as he liked it.

When he had finished, he walked over to the dresser and sat the empty mug beside the now-empty bowl, watching it disappear from sight. They really were quite a lot more efficient than he ever imagined they would be.

Turning back to look over at Hermione, he sighed.

She looked so small and fragile as she lay there on the bed. Her brown curls seemed duller in shade than usual, and her skin was slightly grey. The moonlight that shone into the room through a slight gap between two of the blinds illuminated her face. He felt his heart clench with sadness.

He didn't know what he would do if Hermione didn't survive.

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A/N A sad chapter, yes, but essential to the plot.

Chapter 32: Survival of the Fittest

Chapter 32 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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A big hug and chocolates go out to VIVAvivacious for her help with this chapter.

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The bright light that filtered into the room shone beyond even the protection of her closed eyelids.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, her eyelids flickering as she attempted to blink away the burning sensation and the tears that were pooling in her eyes as they attempted to adjust with the light. Moaning softly, she tried to roll her body in the opposite direction of the light so she could attempt to open her eyes to something less harsh. Her side hurt, and she bit her lip to keep from making any noise. Slowly, and very carefully, she peeped one eye open and let it adjust to the dimmer light before opening the other.

She blinked both eyes a few more times to clear them of excess moisture so she could see where she was.

She saw a white wall with a generic landscape painting hanging up on it and a door down the far end, and then she shifted focus to another white wall, this time with a painting of a haggard of old witches at a tea party. She rolled onto her back again, breathing in sharply as her side ached once more. The next thing she saw was a window with horizontal blinds, the sun shining through blindingly before her eyes settled on the dark-haired man in the chair beside the bed.

His hair was long...past his shoulders...and it looked a little scraggly. The white shirt that lay beneath the open waistcoat was creased and untucked from the black trousers he sported. Hermione wondered for a moment how long she had been there, for his hair was a good inch longer than it had been, and his face was gaunt and paler than she remembered. She opened her mouth to speak and found that her voice was raspy and very faint. She was not about to let that stop her as she reached an arm in his direction.

'Severus,' she croaked.

His eyes slowly flickered open, and she watched as he shook off his tiredness before looking in her direction. His eyes widened on seeing her awake, and she smiled at him faintly. His fingers wrapped around hers immediately, and he stood from the chair and moved to sit on the bed beside her, gently easing her onto her back before leaning down to kiss her forehead.

'Hermione,' he choked out, his voice rough with emotion. 'I was worried you would never come back to me.'

Hermione reached up to cup his cheek just as a single tear escaped him and slid down his face. She caught it with her thumb and brushed it away. Her own eyes filled with tears then, and she allowed them to escape freely. It had been such a long time since she had last allowed herself to cry, or so it seemed.

'I could never leave you without saying goodbye at the very least,' she said through her tears, delighting in the small smile he flashed her at her joke.

When she had calmed down some, he summoned a damp washcloth to them and gently passed it over her face, soothing her swollen eyelids. She brought his hand that she was still holding to her lips and pressed a grateful kiss to his knuckles.

'How long have I been here?' she asked, her voice struggling to become accustomed to speech once more.

'Six excruciatingly long weeks,' he replied hoarsely.

Hermione closed her eyes then. He had most likely been by her bedside for the majority of each day, judging by his own appearance. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and opened her eyes to gaze at him again despite a sudden weariness that weighed down on her once more. She had survived. He had survived. The two of them could live together again like they had before, and she could do all the things with her life that she had put on hold. She knew she wouldn't be running any marathons, but the fact that she was alive was as wonderful as it was surprising.

'I'm so tired, Severus,' she told him before yawning. 'And thirsty, too.'

'Go back to sleep for a while,' he murmured softly, gently stroking her hair with his free hand. 'I will let the Healers know you have awoken, and we'll see if you can have something to drink later.'

She barely registered the rest of what he had said after telling her to sleep, as the moment she closed her eyes, she felt herself drifting into a black oblivion.

She awoke later, feeling disoriented before finally remembering she was in St. Mungo's. She immediately moved to roll herself over to see Snape when she saw that it was not him but Luna and Draco who were occupying the two chairs beside her bed. She smiled when she saw that they were reading the paper together, heads bent together and both too focussed to notice that she had moved.

'You two look happy,' she croaked.

Draco's head snapped up in surprise, and the wide smile he flashed her when he realised that she was awake made her grin in return. 'You look like you had a good sleep,' he told her teasingly.

'Would anyone like to tell me why my side is throbbing like mad?' she asked.

'Voldemort's final blow,' Luna answered, her voice taking on a slightly misty quality. 'He threw an unknown hex at you just before the killing curses that were cast struck him. It felt like it was going in slow motion around everyone, but we were frozen to the spot.'

'You were in the office?' Hermione asked, stunned. She had not seen Luna.

'I ran into the room just in time to see the green flashes of light,' she replied, reaching a hand out to grasp one of Hermione's. 'When you fell, everyone started shouting, and Severus caught you, and the two of us Apparated you right here before I returned to collect Draco.'

'Where is Severus?' she whispered, trying to push herself up into a sitting position against her pillows with little success.

'We sent him home to shower and have some rest,' Draco answered, standing and gently easing Hermione up so Luna could arrange her pillows, before helping her to sit with her back against them.

'He would've hated that,' she murmured with a slight chuckle.

'He was making himself ill,' Draco said as he returned to his seat. 'I managed to convince him by telling him that if he didn't take care of himself better, you wouldn't have any reason to come back to a dead man.'

Hermione nodded in understanding. Her lover was a stubborn man, but she knew he loved her beyond a shadow of a doubt. Draco's threat might have been in jest, but Snape was the type of man who took everything seriously. She looked down at her arms and saw that she was thinner than she recalled. Her entire being was smaller than she recalled.

'How healed is the wound in my side?' she asked suddenly.

'It took Severus and the Healers a while to discover that the dark hex was feeding off the magical attention it was receiving when we were attempting to heal it,' Draco explained. 'They starved it, and the curse "died." For the first little while, you were healing naturally, and it is only in the last two weeks that they have been introducing a few magical elements into your healing. It'll be another few weeks, now that you are awake, before they will release you.'

'And apart from the two of you and Severus, has anyone else been by to visit?' she asked softly, unsure if she even wanted to know.

'Arthur, Charlie, Bill and the twins came by a few times, and Severus let them have some time with you,' Luna answered. 'Professor McGonagall also paid a visit once. Harry and Ginny came once, but Severus had them turned away, and they didn't return.'

Hermione felt a pang of anger and sadness course through her. Harry. He was an unfortunate casualty of the war...at least as far as she was concerned. If he was as concerned for her as he had always claimed to be, he would not have allowed being turned away once stop him from visiting. She felt her eyes burn with unshed tears but blinked them back. It was not worth shedding tears over, especially as she was already dehydrated.

'I'm still thirsty,' she murmured, touching a hand to her throat.

'The Healer said she could have some lukewarm water,' a voice answered from the doorway.

Hermione's eyes flitted over to the doorway, and she smiled upon seeing Snape standing there dressed in fresh clothing, his arms folded across his chest. He walked the rest of the way into the room, closing the door behind him before immediately going to the dresser and pouring a glass of water from the jug provided. He cast a mild warming charm over the liquid before striding across the room and sitting beside Hermione.

'Your hands are still weak,' he murmured. 'I hope you won't mind if I assist you in drinking this.'

She shook her head no, and with Snape guiding the glass to her mouth, she managed to take a few small sips before accidentally drinking too much at once, causing her to splutter and cough it up. Efficient as ever, he summoned a dry towel and gently dabbed away the water that was spilled before wordlessly continuing to help her sip at the water until the majority was gone.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

He nodded simply in response. 'I think tomorrow you might even be allowed to have some broth, if you become hungry.'

Silence settled over the room for a moment before Draco and Luna stood from their seats and declared that they would be leaving for the night.

'We'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Hermione,' Luna said, leaning down to kiss her cheek and embrace her for a moment.

Once the door closed with a soft click behind the couple, Snape sent the two spare chairs back into the corner with a wave of his hand. Hermione smiled when she felt the bed beneath her increase in width so he could sit beside her comfortably. She was certain it was against hospital policy to transfigure the patients' furniture but was equally certain that no one would question Snape about it. Despite his attitude towards her, Draco, and now Luna, he was still an intimidating man.

A little while later, when Hermione felt herself beginning to drift off once more, she felt Snape press a kiss to her forehead before he mumbled, 'I missed you' into her hair.

'I love you,' she whispered softly as her eyes began to drift shut.

'When you are allowed to leave, will you come to live with me again?' he asked.

Hermione felt her heart swell with love. Eyes still closed, she leaned over and pressed her lips to his cheek right beside his mouth. 'Where will we live?' she replied.

Hermione felt his mouth curve into a smile as her lips remained pressed to his skin. He turned to press his mouth to hers for a moment before pulling back to answer. 'We could live in the cottage, if you like,' he said quietly. 'Or we could leave here and live in another country entirely. Anywhere you want to go, name it.'

'I'd like to live somewhere else for a little while,' she replied with a grin. 'It's going to be a media circus here when the press find out that I am awake, I suppose.'

'It has yet to be leaked, which means I have successfully managed to intimidate all of the St. Mungo's staff into keeping their mouths closed for the time being,' he said, and she laughed softly in response. 'I have no doubts that you will be hounded as soon as it becomes common knowledge.'

'The sooner I get well, the better then,' she said, feeling the darkness encroaching on her consciousness once more. She was so very tired again.

'Yes, love,' Snape said as he shifted her pillows and lay her back down.

As Hermione fell asleep again, the only things she was aware of were Snape's long fingers as he stroked her hair gently and the combined sounds of their breathing.

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A/N We are almost done now!

Chapter 33: A Master Manipulator

Chapter 33 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

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Thanks to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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Four weeks flew by, and soon it was the day of Hermione's release from St. Mungo's.

She had worked really hard, and by sheer willpower alone she managed to both endure physiotherapy and magically regenerate and heal her own wound completely. Snape had played a vital role in ensuring that she both ate decent meals consistently and completed all the exercises the Healers assigned her when she was not in the recovery room with a trainer. She was eternally grateful to have found someone who cared for her as much as he did. The only people she allowed to see her were the Weasley men, Remus Lupin and Tonks, and both Draco and Luna.

She was not able to walk on her own due to the amount of muscle atrophy she suffered from so long in a coma, but she had regained the use of both hands completely. Until the time came that she was able to stand and walk on her own, she had the use of a wheelchair. Much as it embarrassed her to be trapped in one, she was grateful enough to have survived that it mattered little in the end.

Snape had been away for most of the day before adapting the cottage to accommodate her wheelchair, so she had spent the day playing wizard chess with Draco.

It was midday, and Snape had yet to arrive to collect her. She had been waiting in the room she had remained in for the duration of her stay, postponing the signing of her discharge papers until he was there to sign as her witness. She was staring out the window when she heard a cough from the doorway behind her, alerting her to a visitor. She turned her wheelchair with a little difficulty to see Albus Dumbledore standing there wearing spangled mauve robes with a matching wizard's hat covered in stars. If that couldn't be considered garish, she didn't know what would.

'Good day, Miss Granger,' he said formally, his mouth curved up in a smile that seemed too cheerful to be natural. 'I trust you are well.'

'I am doing much better, Headmaster,' she answered, her tone clipped. 'You seem to be fairing rather well.'

'I was not injured to any permanent extent during the final battle,' he replied, his blue eyes registering that he had caught on to the frostiness of her tone. 'I came here today to a purpose, Miss Granger.'

'I can't imagine you visiting for any other reason,' she said tartly, not even bothering with civility any more. The darkness within her was slowly awakening from its long slumber.

Dumbledore frowned at her then. 'I have been asked on the behalf of the Ministry of Magic and Wizengamot to offer you an Order of Merlin, First Class, for your contributions to the war effort,' he recited, almost from type. 'If you chose to accept this award, it shall be presented to you during a ceremony at the Victory ball later this month.'

'And I suppose there is going to be a giant press release about this,' she said with a haughty sniff. 'If this entire thing is just a publicity stunt, then I am afraid I will have to decline this offer. I will not abide being front page news.'

'Miss Granger, I came here on the behalf of the Wizengamot and Minister of Magic, not for any personal reasons,' he answered, dropping his friendly facade. 'If it were up to me, you would not have been offered an award of such distinction.'

'Albus Dumbledore, I never thought I would see the day where you would sink as low as you have in the last two minutes I have been here,' said a deep voice from the doorway.

Dumbledore spun around, and Hermione craned her neck to find Snape in the doorway. The man had impeccable timing. He stepped into the room and was illuminated further, and Hermione nodded that she was fine to him before he turned his focus back to the Headmaster.

'You have insulted Hermione for the last time, Albus,' Snape said quietly, folding his arms over his chest.

'This does not concern you, Severus,' Albus snapped gruffly with a dismissive wave of his hand. 'As a member of the Order of the Phoenix, I command that you leave the room until I have finished discussing private matters with Miss Granger.'

'I really wish it didn't have to come to this, but Albus, I would like to respectfully withdraw myself from the service of the Order of the Phoenix. My debt has been repaid,' he said, whipping out his wand as it began to glow. The light flashed like a heartbeat in slow motion until it faded to simply the wand in his hand.

Hermione had never been more proud of Snape as she was in the moment. Dumbledore had been controlling everyone from the start. He was a master of manipulation.

And now that they were finally free of the Dark Lord and his band of Death Eaters, they were all free to live as they wished ... without Masters.

'Now, if your offer to Hermione was the only reason you came here, then your business has been concluded, and you are free to leave,' Snape said, stepping out of the doorway so the Headmaster could leave.

'You seem to have chosen a side then, Severus,' Albus said coldly. 'And you have chosen wrongly. You are, however, welcome to return to the school to teach until the end of the school year. After that, you are on your own.'

Hermione watched as her lover's eyebrow quirked up as he stood to his full height and looked down at the old wizard.

'However... generous your offer might be, I am afraid I will have to decline and offer my resignation to you as of this very moment,' he replied. 'I will see to it that I find you a suitable replacement by this week's end.'

Hermione knew it was wrong, but the darkness that lurked just beneath the surface was enjoying the way Dumbledore's face turned purple at Snape's parting words. He turned back to her and gave a curt nod before stalking out of the room in a way that Hermione had never seen before. It was as though he had reverted back to his childhood as he trudged out in a temper. She just managed to hold in the laugh that was bubbling up into her throat, threatening to escape.

Snape shut the door after the Headmaster was out of sight and went to Hermione just as she allowed a laugh escape her. He knelt on the floor before her and brought his lips to hers, greeting her properly with a kiss.

'So, are you ready to sign your discharge papers and be done with this place for a while at least?' he asked with a small smile.

Hermione stroked her index finger down his nose and grinned. 'Yes, let's get out of here,' she answered. 'Take me home.'

He immediately jumped to his feet and went behind Hermione to wheel her out of the room and into the hall. They took the lift down to the ground floor where they had to wait a few minutes while a new patient with boils all over his face was having his details taken down before he was sent to the all-day clinic. After Hermione and Snape had both signed her papers, she was released, and the band around her arm disappeared.

They went to the Apparition point, and Snape Apparated both of them into his house, right into the sitting room of the cottage.

'It's so good to be back here,' Hermione exclaimed with a bright smile she directed to her lover.

'It is so good to finally have you back here with me,' Snape murmured, wheeling her chair over the couch before reaching down to lift her from it and depositing her onto the lounge.

He sat down beside her and waved a hand at the fireplace, igniting the logs. The orange flames provided the one source of light and warmth to the room. Hermione could barely even remember the last time she had been like that with Snape ... simply sitting in front of the fire, wrapped up in one another and enjoying the silence. She sighed in contentment, burying her head in the crook of his shoulder and neck.

After a while, she felt her eyes begin to droop as they so often did those days. She still suffered from the fatigue caused by the seriousness of her injury and the amount of potions still floating around in her system. It would take another couple weeks until she would return to normal.

When she woke up, she blinked a few times to clear the sleep and looked up to see that Snape had manoeuvred her to lie on the lounge properly with her head resting on his lap. She could see he was reading some sort of academic journal, his brow furrowed in concentration the way that it always did when he was thinking. She reached a small hand up and gently touched his cheek, attracting his attention immediately.

'How long have you been awake?' he asked quietly.

'Only a couple minutes,' she answered, using her arms to push herself into a sitting position. 'I'm hungry.'

Snape chuckled a little at her blunt admission, standing from the lounge and placing the journal down on the coffee table beside the chair. Wordlessly he helped her back into the wheelchair, and the two of them went to the kitchen to see what could be done for dinner. In the end they settled on soup and herb toast, which Snape made as Hermione sat at the table, blatantly admiring the view of his rear as he worked. She had always thought that Snape had an admirably taut body for a man of his age.

'Are you enjoying the view, then?' he asked, snapping her out of her daze.

Hermione smirked, noting that he was looking over his shoulder at her. Unable to deny that she was staring, she simply settled for a shrug. 'Well, what else is there to do?' she asked. 'You have decided that I am unable to do things for myself.'

'Making dinner for the two of us is hardly me taking responsibility for everything,' he said, wandlessly levitating two bowls of steaming pumpkin soup to the table with a plate of the herb toast.

Hermione gratefully dug into the food before her the moment Snape joined her at the table. Her stomach had started protesting rather loudly. When they were finished with their meal, Snape cleared away the dishes and set them to washing themselves before walking Hermione into the hallway and levitating her up the stairs. It was an unspoken agreement between the two that they would be sharing Snape's bedroom.

What had surprised her, however, was to find that he had redecorated the room and added a whole new dresser beside the one he had used for his clothes. He walked over to it and opened the drawers to show her that he had moved her clothes to his room. As he told her, his cheeks had flushed just a little. He was embarrassed by his presumption, but Hermione immediately reassured him that it was a very sweet and thoughtful gesture.

After the two had bathed, Snape slipped beneath the covers behind Hermione and she felt his arm wrap around her waist as he spooned against her after lighting the logs in the fireplace.

'Hermione, are you going to accept the Order of Merlin being offered to you?' he asked quietly.

Hermione paused in thought for a moment. It was a great honour to be offered the award, but she was just too uncertain as to how the entire thing would be treated. She was worried that Dumbledore had some other plan behind it that he could twist to trap her into doing something for him in return.

'I would like to accept it,' she answered finally. 'I just don't know whether I should. I don't know how much involvement Dumbledore has in the whole thing.'

She felt Snape nod from behind her. 'I can understand your reservations, and I can assure you that no public ceremony need occur for you to receive the award,' he murmured against the back of her neck before he pressed a soft kiss to her nape. 'Dumbledore has nothing to do with the Order of Merlin itself ... he just happened to be the representative sent to deliver the message.'

'Well in that case, maybe I could accept it after all,' she answered, muffling a yawn with her hand. 'It would look good on all my resumes and letterheads.'

Snape chuckled softly at that. The pair fell asleep shortly afterwards to the soft sound of the fire crackling.

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A/N Just one more chapter, and then we are done!

Chapter 34: A Time of Peace

Chapter 34 of 34

Considered pariah by Wizarding society, and spurned by those she had held most dear to her during her time of need, Hermione turns to Severus Snape to guide her through her struggle with the darkness and her desire for revenge.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

I would like to say a final thank you to VIVAvivacious for her patience with me as the beta for this entire story. Her assistance has been an unbelievable boon.

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The warm orange glow of the fireplace lit up the room, casting long, dark shadows in the corners and over the furniture.

When Hermione had first walked into the house, she thought it was empty. The hallway light had been left off, and the house was freezing. Of course, it always was freezing in the winter. It hadn't been until she walked up the stairs that she noticed the door to the study was slightly ajar, and the light from inside was casting a sliver of light against the floor and the wall across from it. There she found Snape, sitting in an overstuffed armchair in front of the fire with a book open on his lap, his head tilted back slightly, and his eyes closed as he slept.

She had covered him with a light throw rug then, reluctant to disturb his peaceful state. Instead, she had returned to the bottom floor and went to the kitchen to begin preparing the fish she had taken out of the freezer box for dinner. After skinning and de-boning the fish, she went back up the stairs, and the way she had left Snape asleep in his armchair was exactly how she found him on her return.

'Severus?' she said softly into his ear, stroking his face gently to wake him.

He murmured her name softly, making her smile. She gave him a slightly harder prod in another attempt to wake him, this time being more successful. His eyes flickered open slowly, and the moment he focussed on her, the corners of his eyes crinkled slightly from the smile that brightened his whole face. Hermione was still amazed how much seeing this man smile drove away the darkness that continued to push for control over her every time she read the newspaper or heard news about Dumbledore.

After Hermione had accepted her Order of Merlin in a private ceremony in Kingsley Shacklebolt's office, she and Snape had gone through with their plans and left the country, settling down in house in Southern France. They still had the *Daily Prophet* delivered at Snape's insistence that 'it is better to keep one's enemy closer'. And although it had been nearly a year since the last time she had seen Albus Dumbledore, her blood still boiled with anger every time there was so much as a mention of him. Still, she was resolved to ignore him, for the man hardly warranted a moment of her attention.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she looked back at the man before her who was staring at her curiously, his eyebrow raised in question.

'And what thoughts are distracting you from interrupting my sleep this evening, hmmm?' he asked with a smirk.

Hermione shook her head and offered him one of her hands to help haul him out of his chair. 'Nothing of importance,' she replied as he stood up on both feet fully.

Snape gestured for Hermione to lead the way, so she turned on her heel and made her way into the hall, stopping at the stop of the staircase to turn around and place a swift, teasing kiss on his lips before flouncing down the stairs, leaving him staring after her and shaking his head at her behaviour. When she arrived in the kitchen, she placed a griddle pan on the stove and turned on the gas, lighting it manually. She had always preferred cooking things the Muggle way...it always tasted better. Snape entered the kitchen just as she was placing the fish on the pan to grill.

'I believe it was my turn to cook dinner tonight,' Snape murmured, wrapping his arms around her waist and placing a kiss atop her head.

'I don't mind making dinner two nights in a row,' she said with a smile, spinning around in his arms so she could wrap her arms around him also. 'Besides, you looked so tired, and I know you had to deliver your potions all day.'

Snape, since moving to France, had started his own potions business, creating both standard and rare potions to sell to apothecaries all over Western Europe as well as tutoring two days a week at the Academy of Magic in Nice. On the days that Hermione was going to be returning home late from her work as an apprentice to the Arithmancy Master at Beauxbatons, Snape would usually make dinner after completing his work for the day, and it would be sitting on the table waiting for her when she walked through the door.

Likewise, on the days when Snape was tutoring at the Academy, Hermione would leave the school early and make dinner for the two of them. It was not very often that she would come home to find the house as silent as it had been.

When the fish was cooked, Hermione gave Snape a nudge, and he moved out of the way and went to pull down two plates to put their meal on. With their fish, salad and a glass of white wine each, they went to the sitting room and ate their dinner sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table with the light from the fireplace bathing the room in just enough light for them to see in front of them.

'What were you thinking about when you woke me up, love?' Snape asked suddenly as Hermione was taking a bite of her food.

She chewed and swallowed hastily to reply. 'It was nothing, honestly.'

He frowned at her and sat back from his empty plate, patting his full stomach. 'You and I both know that it is never "nothing" when it comes to you,' he said seriously. 'Please don't try to hide this from me.'

Hermione sighed heavily. She could never hide anything from Snape. 'Dumbledore,' she muttered under her breath.

'Now why would you be thinking about him at a time like this?' Snape asked her, leaning forward and gently capturing one of her hands in his.

'I've been having a hard time of letting go of the bad things,' she murmured softly. 'I never used to hold grudges like this or think badly of people, no matter how much I disliked them. It's as if the darkness within me is desperately trying to burst out and strangle someone with an iron grip on their throat.'

'In this case, I suppose you'd like to strangle Albus?' Snape stated, his hand still gripping hers and his calm, even tone unwavering.

'Well, yes,' she admitted with a slight shrug. 'I suppose you are going to tell me that the urges will fade with time?'

'It will,' he said with a small smile. 'When I was first seduced by dark magic, I had a lot less restraint than you have so far, and I allowed it to control me for some time before I matured and realised that what I was doing was wrong. You are that much stronger than I was to be conscientiously battling against it from the start.'

'I killed people, though,' she said, staring down at their clasped hands. 'Those kinds of stains don't just go away.'

'I agree, and these urges might bother you and continue to influence your decisions for a few more months, or years even,' he said, looking her right in the eye. 'It is how you manage it and deal with it when you lose control for even a moment that defines you as a person. You are one of the strongest people I know, Hermione.'

Hermione smiled, the beginnings of tears starting to fill her eyes. She blinked and they fell away, rolling down her cheeks to splash onto the tabletop before her. He reached his free hand over and brushed away the remaining moisture. She had never known what it would be like to be in love with a person as much as she was with the man sitting across the coffee table from her. He was her rock, the support structure on which she was building the rest of her life. Without him, she did not know what she would be doing at that very moment. Perhaps she might have lost her mind and ended up in an asylum.

'I am only strong because I have you.' She whispered her confession, afraid that if she said it too loud he would be ripped away from her.

With a wave of his hand, Snape made the dishes disappear, most likely to the kitchen to be washed magically, and stood up from the floor. He held out a hand to Hermione, hoisting her to her feet and guiding her around the table to sit on the lounge beside him, her legs draped over his lap as they cuddled one another tightly. He stroked her hair gently and pressed a kiss to her temple.

'I wish I had someone like you around to guide me in the right direction when I was young and foolish,' he admitted quietly. 'But then I suppose if that had been the case, I would not have found my way to you now. I'd much rather have this.'

Hermione smiled contentedly. 'I am pleased.'

After a while the fire died down, leaving only the smouldering embers, and the pair finally decided to move upstairs to bathe and go to bed. They showered together to save time but ended up delaying to pursue more pleasurable pastimes, washing one another and giving each other pleasure until they reached their climaxes and collapsed against the tiles of the shower wall. Soon after, when they were sufficiently clean and dry, they collapsed onto the bed, Hermione magically summoning the bed covers over them and snuggling with her back to Snape as he spooned against her as usual.

Hermione listened to the sound of Snape breathing as he fell asleep behind her before she rolled onto her back and pressed herself to his side to maintain their closeness. She turned her head a fraction and opened her eyes to look at him as he inhaled and exhaled every breath. She recalled a discussion the two of them had a couple of weeks beforehand, while lying beside one another in bed, when he had asked if she would ever consider marrying him. It wasn't a proposal per se, but it was as close as he would come until the day when he actually proposed to her.

She didn't mind. He could ask her at any time, in any way he liked...hell, there didn't even have to be a ring involved, and she would still say yes.

She pushed herself up to lean on her elbow and gaze down at her lover's pale face as the moonlight shone through a gap in the curtains directly over the two of them. He wasn't conventionally handsome or charming, but he was the perfect sort for her. She reached out a hand and stroked his cheek gently, causing him to stir from his light slumber and peek an eye open to look up at her.

'Aren't you going to go to sleep tonight, witch?' he mumbled sleepily.

'Oh, yes, I will go to sleep in a little while,' she answered with a smile. 'I just like to look at you is all.'

'You're a strange little thing,' he said with a husky chuckle.

'But you like that about me,' she said, and he could only nod in agreement before reaching out to pull her back to lie with her head on the pillow beside his own.

'I like everything about you,' he commented, running his long fingers through her slightly damp curls. 'But as I am biased, don't go getting a big head about it.'

'Be careful not to snag your fingers in a knot,' she said as he eased his hands out of her hair and wrapped his arms back around her.

'I'm always careful with you.'

Hermione laughed softly. 'Too careful.'

'Just careful enough.'

'I thought you wanted to sleep, not have a debate,' she challenged.

'I do want to sleep. Now close that pretty little mouth of yours, or I shall do it for you,' he retorted swiftly.

'Oh? And just how shall you do...mpph...' She was cut off by his lips covering hers in a passionate kiss, his tongue sliding easily into her mouth to play with hers.

'That was cheating,' she said breathlessly when he pulled away.

'I love you,' he said, pressing another swift kiss to her lips.

'And I love you,' she replied. 'But don't always expect to win our arguments that way.'

A short time later, they welcomed sleep together.

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The End.

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A/N I hope you enjoyed the ride as much as I did.