

The Philosopher's Fate

by peskipiksi

Ginny's eighteenth birthday present to Hermione causes no end of trouble.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 13

Ginny's eighteenth birthday present to Hermione causes no end of trouble.

'Happy eighteenth birthday, Hermione,' Ginny said, sliding a wrapped parcel across the breakfast table. 'You're an adult in the Muggle world now, too!'

Hermione smiled her thanks at Ginny, but it was strained. "Happy" wasn't the word either of them would have used to describe the start of the new year at Hogwarts. After many bitter arguments, it had been decided that Harry and Ron should search for the Horcruxes, while Hermione returned to Hogwarts to keep an eye on things. Both Hermione and Ginny suspected that she was to keep an eye on Ginny more than on Hogwarts. Ron wasn't keen on his little sister returning to a school run by Death Eaters. The decision had been made, reluctantly, after the *Daily Prophet* announcement that Snape was to return as Headmaster. Harry said he wanted an ear to the ground - someone to report back to him. Admittedly, she had not been able to think of a way to contact him that wouldn't be intercepted, but she was working on it.

Doing her best to look happy, Hermione opened Ginny's present. It was a large, heavy book **Philosophy for Beginners**. Much to Parvati's amusement, Hermione's smile was genuine as she thanked Ginny.

She opened the book and began to read from Chapter One. "'The most appropriate age for marriage is eighteen for women and thirty-seven for men.'" – Aristotle'

Despite the restrictive atmosphere in the Great Hall, Ginny giggled. 'So who do you fancy? Lupin? Lockhart?' She threw a sideways glance at the High Table. 'Snape?'

'Tell me you're joking!' Hermione hissed, following Ginny's gaze. Sitting in Dumbledore's old chair, Snape looked cold and aloof, as usual, but there was something else. He looked strained, tense, as if he were waiting for something unpleasant to happen.

The arrival of the post owls distracted Hermione. She wasn't expecting any more presents – Hagrid had slipped her a card as he passed the Gryffindor table, her parents would be in Australia by now, completely unaware of her existence, and she knew there was no chance of hearing from Harry or Ron – so she was most surprised when an owl dropped a letter onto her plate.

She caught her breath as she noticed the Ministry of Magic seal on the back. She and Ginny knew who was running the Ministry now, and no letter from Pius Thicknesse would contain good news. With shaking fingers, Hermione opened the envelope.

Dear Miss Granger,

As of 1st September, a new law has come into force to which you must adhere. Under the Marriage Law of 1997, all of-age Muggle-borns are required to marry Ministry-approved pure-blood or half-blood witches and wizards. Please find enclosed a list of approved candidates.

Stunned, Hermione unfolded the second piece of parchment. It contained a list of names.

Dolohov, Antonin

Lestrangle, Rabastan

Travers, Jonathan

Mulciber, Edward

Murgatroyd, Despard

Murgatroyd, Ruthven...

Ginny had taken the first page of the letter and was staring at it, aghast. Now she grabbed the list, and her mouth fell open. 'They're all Death Eaters!' she hissed.

Hermione felt as if she was going to faint. 'How can they do this?' she gasped. 'I can't marry... any of these. I can't marry anyone!'

Ginny was looking as bad as Hermione felt. 'There is a precedent,' she whispered. 'In the Middle Ages, when fighting and illness nearly wiped out the magical population, a law was passed requiring Muggle-born wizards to marry pure-bloods to keep magical bloodlines going. But I never thought they'd resurrect it! We can't go back to the Dark Ages; it's barbaric!'

'It's the new regime,' Hermione answered grimly. 'We all know who's behind it, don't we?'

'And why today?' continued Ginny. 'Ruining your birthday for you.'

'So they can push it through without objections.' Hermione's tone became even grimmer. 'If they wait until we're eighteen, you can get married in the Muggle world without your parents' consent and no one can prove it wasn't consensual.' Tears sprang suddenly to her eyes. Not only was she being forced to marry a man she had never met, her parents wouldn't be at her wedding, and they would never even know.

Ginny had turned the parchment over. 'Have you read the rest of this?' she asked quietly.

'The rest?' Hermione stretched out a shaking hand. Please God, a let-out. The letter continued:

Muggle-borns would, under normal circumstances, be given a choice from the enclosed list. In your case, however, the Ministry has made the choice for you. In view of your academic record, and in order to allow you to remain at Hogwarts, it has been decided you will marry Hogwarts Headmaster Severus Snape.

No let-out. It was just getting worse and worse.

'It's my fault,' Ginny said in a small voice. 'I jinxed it.' She was looking at the book.

'Jinxed it?' Hermione tore her eyes away from the appalling letter and stared at her birthday present. She drew her wand unobtrusively out of her sleeve.

'No, I don't mean literally,' Ginny corrected herself hastily. 'I mean... I said you should marry Snape. I didn't think...this would happen!'

'Don't be ridiculous, Ginny,' Hermione snapped. 'You know I don't believe in Divination.' She lowered her voice as she caught sight of Ginny's stricken face. 'They've done this to keep me in line. So I can't communicate with Harry. So *he* can keep an eye on me.'

Still, as she glanced up at the High Table and met the Headmaster's severe gaze, the book did seem to be taunting her.

A/N: Many thanks to sandlapper for encouragement and ideas.

The Aristotle quote seemed like a great starting point for a fic, and I wanted to write a Marriage Law fic that didn't depend on Snape being pure-blood. I know Lupin says no Muggle-borns are allowed back to Hogwarts, but we know Colin Creevey was there: McGonagall talks to him at the Gryffindor table before the evacuation of the younger students (DH 31). I have capitalised on that small inconsistency to allow Hermione back to school. Travers' and Mulciber's names are not canon; I have used them in other fics, though. Ruthven and Despard Murgatroyd are the villains of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera "Ruddigore".

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 13

Hermione does not have a happy birthday - or wedding day.

Hermione had very little recollection of the rest of the morning. She remembered being escorted up to Dumbledore's – no, it was now Snape's – office by McGonagall and Flitwick. Snape walked with them, his back ramrod straight and his expression unreadable. Dumbledore was conspicuous by his absence from his portrait, and Hermione had an inkling he couldn't face her, knowing there was nothing he could do about this. Some Ministry official (Hermione had no idea who) was waiting for them and read the ceremonial binding words in a monotone. Hermione spoke when prompted to; McGonagall and Flitwick signed the witness register, the latter with tears running down his face. And now she wore a ring on her left hand, a gold band with a ruby and an emerald side by side. *So everyone will know*, Hermione thought dully.

At lunchtime Hermione went back to the dormitory to fetch her belongings. The common room went silent as she climbed through the portrait hole, and Ginny ran forward and led her to an armchair. 'Are you OK, Hermione?' Ginny asked, concerned. 'Why are you back here? He hasn't... you know... has he?'

'No,' answered Hermione, feeling exhaustion crash over her, even though it was only one o'clock. 'He hasn't done anything to me. We've barely spoken. He's sent me here to collect my things. I'm supposed to rejoin classes tomorrow.'

Lavender Brown broke free of the gaping crowd and faced the girls. 'So,' she said flatly. 'Teacher's pet has deigned to return. Always fall on your feet, don't you, Hermione? Allowed to stay on at school, safe at Hogwarts. You know they've already taken Dean, don't you? Merlin only knows who he's with now. They'll take me in June, too. I won't be lucky enough to become the Headmaster's wife.'

'Lucky!' cried Ginny in disbelief. She stood up and faced Lavender. 'You think Hermione's lucky to marry a Death Eater, do you? A killer, Dumbledore's murderer? You

have a strange sense of what's lucky, Lavender.'

Lavender dropped her gaze and slunk back into the crowd.

Happy Birthday, Hermione.

*

"Ginny's right, though, isn't she?" thought Hermione as she unpacked her things, trying to take up as little space as possible in Snape's rooms. "I know all Death Eaters have committed terrible crimes; most of them have probably killed, but this is different. I know what Snape has done; I knew Dumbledore. What would Harry say if he knew? What would my parents say?"

Suddenly, Hermione felt desperately lonely. Her parents were in Australia, Harry and Ron were God knew where, incommunicado, and now she didn't even have Ginny to talk to. Sorting through her possessions, she found the only photograph she had of her parents. It wasn't really safe to have a photo of them, but she needed something to anchor her to her Muggle life. It certainly wasn't safe to put it up, though. Regretfully, Hermione kissed her parents' smiling, static faces, then put the silver-framed photo at the bottom of her trunk, piling stuff on top of it to keep it hidden. Very carefully she closed the trunk, and then she burst into tears.

Crookshanks picked his way fastidiously through the piles of books, and she swept him up in her arms and buried her face in his wild fur. 'Oh, Crookshanks,' Hermione sobbed. 'What am I going to do?'

*

Hermione had managed to gain control of herself by the time Snape strode into the sitting-room to take her down to dinner. They had managed to avoid each other all day – he had spent the day in his office, and she had taken as long as possible over her unpacking. She had managed to cram all her toiletries onto one shelf in the bathroom, hung her robes on 'her' side of the wardrobe, and had shoved everything else into her trunk, which she had put at the end of the bed.

The bed. Hermione went cold whenever she thought of it. There was only one bedroom in the Headmaster's quarters, and only one bed. Hermione was trying hard not to think about what might be expected of her later.

Snape extended his arm to her. 'We should make an appearance at the High Table,' he said stiffly. 'If we do not, your friends will jump to all manner of erroneous conclusions.'

To her humiliation, Hermione flushed bright red at this, but took Snape's arm with her head held high.

'After you, Hermione,' Snape said, holding the door open.

'Thank you, Headmaster.'

He glared down at her. 'Oh, for goodness sake,' he hissed. Then, seeing her flinch, he lowered his voice. 'You must call me Severus, Hermione. We are, however unwillingly, married, and it would be *prudent* to put on a show of solidarity in public.'

Presumably that was why he pulled out her chair at the High Table and kept up a flow of conversation throughout the meal. Hermione answered him as best she could, but she could barely eat anything. All eyes had turned to her as she sat down, and she was certain the talk at the house tables was all about her.

All she could think of was the night to come. She remembered reading, in a history book at home, about the old Muggle tradition of 'showing the sheets'. The morning after the wedding night, the newly-weds' sheets would be shown to the village to prove the bride had been a virgin. Would her sheets be passed around a grinning, leering circle of Death Eaters tomorrow?

The rest of the meal passed in a haze of anxiety and nausea.

*

The rest of the evening passed in silence.

Hermione tried to reread her textbooks for tomorrow, but she couldn't concentrate. Snape was checking off lists of students who had earned detention. The Carrows' lists were several scrolls long. The only words they exchanged all night were when he asked her if she would like some Firewhisky and she said no, thank you.

At 11pm, Hermione packed up her books, plucked up her courage, and said she thought she'd go to bed. Severus replied, 'Very well,' and poured himself another whisky.

Hermione picked up Crookshanks and made her way to the bedroom. She brushed her teeth and washed her face, missing the girly chats she used to have with Ginny through mouthfuls of toothpaste. Then she burrowed in her trunk and found her thickest red tartan flannel pyjamas. It wasn't that she was cold – it was still only late September, but that she needed the armour. A jug of water and a pile of books on one of the bedside tables told her which was his side of the bed, so she slid into the other side, putting a pillow down on the floor beside the bed for Crookshanks. He leapt out of her arms, padded over to the pillow and settled down immediately to sleep. Hermione got into bed feeling rather abandoned. She curled onto her side, extinguished the candle and lay there in the dark, wide eyed and waiting.

She had waited only half an hour before the bedroom door opened and Snape came in. Without looking at her, he took something from the bedside cabinet and went into the bathroom. When he returned, he was wearing the long grey nightshirt Harry had seen him in the night he got caught with the Triwizard egg.

She lay on her back, regarding him fearfully as he got in beside her, but he merely said, 'Goodnight, Hermione,' extinguished the candle and turned on his side with his back to her. Hermione curled back into a ball, feeling extremely relieved and, at the same time, lonelier than ever.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 13

Newly-wed Hermione has to face her teachers and her classmates.

Lavender Brown, Hermione soon realised, wasn't the only one who resented her new status.

Fridays were bad enough for the seventh years. Their first lesson was Muggle Studies (compulsory for everyone), followed by Dark Arts (all pretence at Defence had been abandoned), which meant they had to cope with both Carrows one after another.

Hermione always hated Muggle Studies an hour and a half of being told her family were the scum of the earth, and that, as a "Mudblood", who had "stolen" her magic, she was not much better. The Carrows really did seem to believe that Muggle-borns had stolen magic from Squibs. It would have been funny if it wasn't so terrifying.

Today Alecto Carrow was lecturing the class on the Muggle-born Registration Committee. 'The Committee was set up and is headed by Dolores Umbridge. Its purpose is to investigate the blood status of Mudbloods and to determine from whom they stole their magic. It will also seek out and bring to justice those who have sought to evade the Marriage Law by going into hiding.

'Those Muggle-borns' (this phrase was always delivered with a sneer worthy of Malfoy) 'who have complied with the Marriage Law are exempt from interrogation, as their magical activity can be monitored and, if necessary, curtailed by their legally magical spouses.' Here she stared pointedly at Hermione, while Parvati and Lavender whispered and giggled, and Crabbe made obscene gestures at her with his fist.

After break, the Gryffindors headed reluctantly for Dark Arts. To add insult to injury, the Gryffindors shared this class with the Slytherins. They were only three weeks into the new school year and were already finding these classes a trial. Last week had been spent learning to perform the Imperius Curse. Hermione, Neville and the rest of the Gryffindors had somehow got away with fairly innocuous commands, such as Barty Crouch Junior had forced on them in their fourth year.

Neville had made Crabbe eat an onion under the impression it was an apple. Hermione had exacted a small measure of revenge on Lavender Brown, by making her turn cartwheels around the room so that her knickers showed. By subjecting Lavender to this small humiliation, she had at least spared her anything worse. Draco Malfoy had made Neville jump off the desk without making any attempt to ensure he landed safely. Neville was still limping slightly a week later.

Today, however, was to prove infinitely worse. The Gryffindors had been dreading the possibility of having to learn more Unforgivable Curses. When Amycus Carrow forced into the room at wandpoint a line of terrified students and explained, with barely suppressed glee, that the cowering students had all earned detention, Hermione remembered with a sinking heart the lists Severus had been poring over the evening before. She also realised that all the students ranging from fifth years down to miniscule first years were Muggle-born.

Unsurprisingly, Draco Malfoy was first in line to practise the curse. To Hermione's horror, the student dragged out to face him was Colin Creevey's younger brother, Dennis. Hermione remembered how excited the boy had been to join Hogwarts three years ago and wondered why the Creeveys hadn't gone into hiding like so many other Muggle-borns.

Amycus Carrow's harsh voice cut the air. 'All these students have committed crimes under the school rules, and they're Mudbloods. That means they stole from pure-bloods. They deserve this.'

Draco raised his wand. The scream Dennis Creevey uttered would stay with Hermione for ever. When Draco lowered his wand, Dennis crawled into a corner of the classroom and curled up there, shaking and sobbing. But he wasn't shaking half as much as Neville, who was next in line to perform the curse. Facing him was a small dark-haired first year girl, trembling from head to foot, tears streaming down her face.

Neville, white to the lips, stared at Professor Carrow. 'No,' he said clearly. 'I won't do it. Look at her; she's terrified.'

'She's a Mudblood,' Carrow replied, 'and yeh're pure-blood, Longbottom. Do yer duty.'

'Yes,' said Neville defiantly. 'I am pure-blood, and I'm better than this. I won't do it!'

Carrow made no reply but to slash the air with his wand. Neville gasped as a long cut like a sword-slash appeared on his cheek.

'Granger!' bellowed Carrow. 'Let's see if yeh have more guts than this snivelling coward.'

Hermione took a deep breath. 'No.'

'Granger, this is a Mudblood. Fancy taking her place, do yeh?'

Hermione held her ground. 'My name is now Snape, Professor. I refuse to do this, and if you have any objections, I suggest you take them up with the Headmaster. You can explain to him why you saw fit to torture his wife.' She turned to go, then felt a stinging pain on her right cheek. Raising her hand to her face, she felt a long gash like Neville's, and her fingers came away covered in blood. Suppressing her nausea, she stalked out of the classroom, forcing herself not to run until she turned the corner.

*

'Pure-blood.' Hermione spat the Headmaster's password at the gargoyle and stormed past Severus into the bathroom, pointedly ignoring him. As she examined the wound on her cheek, she realised he was staring at her in the bathroom mirror.

'What has happened to you?' he asked brusquely.

'Ask your friend Carrow,' Hermione snapped.

'I beg your pardon?' Severus had gone white.

'You heard me. Your mate Amycus did this to me. That's between torturing all those poor kids you condemned to detention yesterday.' Hermione was dabbing furiously at the cut with her handkerchief, but it was still bleeding.

'Let me help you,' Severus said, but his voice was cold.

'I can manage, thank you,' Hermione replied stiffly.

Severus took hold of her shoulders and swung her round to face him. 'Don't be ridiculous, Hermione. I can staunch the bleeding in an instant.' He moved to the medicine cabinet on the wall and took out what looked like a handful of lichen.

'What's that?' Despite herself, Hermione was intrigued.

'Bloodmoss. I do not have my accustomed access to potions ingredients any longer, and this is quite severe, so if I heal you magically without them you may have a scar. I wouldn't want to mar my wife's pretty face.' His voice was carefully neutral, and Hermione couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. Gently, he laid a strip of moss against the cut. It bonded to her skin immediately, stemming the bleeding. She now had a strange brown scab over the wound, but it didn't sting any more. Severus cupped her chin in his hand; she shrank from the unaccustomed contact, but he was surprisingly gentle as he wiped the drying blood from her face.

A little blood had run down to the corner of her mouth. With intense concentration, Severus wetted the handkerchief and wiped the blood from her lip. His eyes never left her mouth. Heat flooded Hermione's face; this intense scrutiny was disconcerting. She was trying to decide whether it was in a good or bad way when they were interrupted by the bell for lunch, immediately followed by a stentorian bellow.

'Snape! Get yourself out here; I want to talk to yeh!'

Carrow must have dismissed his class early.

Severus put a finger to his lips. 'Stay here. Lock the door.' He strode out of the bathroom with a face like thunder.

Hermione waited thirty seconds, then crept out and tiptoed into the sitting room to listen.

'I would appreciate it if you would kindly refrain from attacking my wife.' Severus' voice was cool and authoritative.

'Yer wife, eh?' sneered Carrow. 'Care what happens to her, do yeh?'

'It is merely that when she is angry, it is I who bears the brunt. She is intelligent enough, but she is a headstrong girl and has inconveniently strong morals.'

Carrow gave a wheezy giggle. 'Then pull her back into line, Snape. Good dose of Cruciatius every day'd soon show her who's boss.' He lowered his voice, and Hermione had to press her ear to the sitting room door to hear. 'While she's in my classes, I'll deal with her how I like.'

It was Severus' turn to sneer now. 'You would like me to go to the Dark Lord and explain that you are flouting my authority, would you? The Dark Lord chose me as Headmaster, not you, and in this school, the Headmaster is in command.'

Having been bested on his standing with Voldemort, Carrow tried another tack. 'Took yer time getting out here, Snape. Doing yer little Mudblood tart, were yeh?'

Behind the sitting room door, Hermione flushed with anger and embarrassment.

When he answered, Snape's voice was glacial. 'That, Amycus, is none of your business.'

'I'm glad it isn't. Wouldn't catch me shagging a Mudblood. Surprised you can get it up.' A pause. 'Maybe you can't. That why yeh're so crabby, eh, Headmaster?'

'You will find yourself a candidate for the Marriage Law soon enough. Although you will have a choice of bride a luxury which was not afforded me. Now, if all you are here for is to insult my,' Severus paused delicately, '*capabilities*, I will thank you to get out of my office.'

The office door opened, there was the sound of heavy footsteps receding, and the door was slammed with a resounding bang.

Hermione wrenched open the sitting room door and stormed into the office. Utterly humiliated, she took out her anger on Snape. 'Headstrong, am I? Intelligent enough? Inconveniently moral, am I? Well, for your information, I wasn't afforded the luxury of choice either.'

White faced, Severus whirled round to face her, but she strode past him, throwing him a contemptuous look over her shoulder. 'And now, thanks to your charming friend, I am going to be late for Transfiguration!' The office door slammed a second time.

Panting with fury, Severus hurled himself into his chair. On the desk was the philosophy book Hermione buried her nose in at every possible opportunity. It was open at a chapter discussing the philosophical worth of the Bible. His gaze fell on a quote from Solomon: "Better to live in the desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife."

Severus had never agreed with anything so whole-heartedly in his life.

*

A/N: The quote is Solomon 21.9. Bloodmoss is mentioned in Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy.

Yes, I know 20th Sept 1997 was a Saturday. Artistic licence.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 13

Severus decides Hermione needs another weapon against the Carrows.

That evening, like the one before it, was spent in silence. Not until Hermione was packing up her homework to go to bed did Severus speak.

'I told you to remain in the bathroom.'

'Well, I'm glad I didn't,' said Hermione in as haughty a voice as she could muster. 'At least now I know where I stand with you. And by the way, I have not the least desire for you to 'get it up' with me.'

She knew instantly she had gone too far. Severus blanched, and the quill he was holding snapped in two. Hermione thought he was going to scream at her or hit her, even, and she ran from the room, slamming the bedroom door behind her. She fully expected him to come storming after her... and what? Rape her, just to prove he could? She knew he was evil, but somehow she just didn't believe he would do that to her. Not after how gentle he'd been mopping her up this afternoon.

The sound of glass knocking violently on wood told her that he had sought refuge in Firewhisky again.

She was still angry though as much with herself as with him, and she wrenched up the lid of her trunk and hurled her textbooks inside with a scream of frustration and fury. From inside the trunk came the sound of breaking glass, and she dropped to her knees, scrabbling in the trunk to find out what she'd broken.

It was the photo of her parents. Miserably, Hermione grasped the frame, and then winced as a shard of glass cut her finger. That was the final straw. Hermione slumped down beside her trunk, sobbing wretchedly and cradling the photograph to her.

She missed them. She missed them so much. The last two days had been horrible, and Hermione found she simply wanted her mum. If only she could put the photo on her bedside table. But if Snape saw it, he would report it to the rest of the Death Eaters. Hogwarts had her home address on file, and it only needed one visit and all her careful plans to hide them would crumble. "Oh, yes," she could imagine old Mrs Moffat next door saying. "They left quite suddenly. Went to Sydney, I think. Said it had always been their ambition to move to Australia." Then the Death Eaters would find them, and Meriin only knew what they'd do to them. Especially if Hermione continued to fight Snape.

She tried to mend the glass, but nothing happened. Then she pointed her wand, in her left hand, at her cut finger and choked out, '*Episkey*,' but it didn't work. Tears splashed down onto the photo, wrinkling its glossy surface. She put the broken photo frame back in the trunk, threw off her robes and crawled into bed in her underwear and without brushing her teeth. She curled up into a ball again and put her finger in her mouth to stop it bleeding. Severus couldn't fail to hear her sobbing, but she simply

didn't care.

Again, he came to bed about half an hour after her, not bothering to go to the bathroom to change, as she was resolutely not looking at him.

When he had got into bed beside her, he said in a level voice, 'I was trying to keep you safe from Carrow.'

This was surprising news, but she refused to let her surprise show. 'I know.'

'And I will never force you to do... anything you do not want to do.'

'I know.'

'Then why are you still crying?' asked Severus, suppressing his exasperation with difficulty.

'I'm not.'

Severus sighed and shifted position to face her. 'Hermione, I know you think I am a monster, but I am not so utterly heartless as to ignore you while you cry yourself to sleep.'

'I cut my finger,' said Hermione, determinedly keeping her back to him. Even to her, her voice sounded childish. 'I tried to heal it, but I couldn't get the spell to work'

'That is because you have worked yourself up into such a state that you cannot concentrate.' But his voice wasn't reproving; he seemed genuinely concerned. 'Let me see.'

She turned awkwardly and held out her finger like a small child seeking comfort.

He scrutinised the cut, and then said, '*Episkey*,' and the shallow cut healed instantly. 'Now,' he continued briskly, 'I refuse to believe that a woman who has been through as much as you have would cry over a cut finger.'

A woman. He thought of her as a woman. Only this afternoon he had called her a headstrong girl, and now he was referring to her as a woman. That was new, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. But in the absence of Harry, Ron and Ginny, Hermione needed a confidante. In her distress she forgot Snape was supposed to be evil and untrustworthy. Besides, he did seem truly concerned about her.

She still felt a bit foolish, however, and couldn't bring herself to look at him. 'It's my parents; I broke their photo frame, and I modified their memories, and now they're in Australia, and I don't know if I'll ever see them again.' It all came out in a rush, then she started crying again.

Severus tilted her chin up so she had to look at him. 'Hermione, you're babbling. Take a breath and try to make some sense. I can't help you if I can't understand you.'

This was so unexpected, she stopped crying. 'You want to help me?'

'As I keep saying, you are my wife. And I cannot sleep with you crying yourself into hysterics.'

Hermione took a deep breath as instructed and told Severus the whole story. Instead of berating her for recklessness or saying he was not surprised she didn't think she'd ever see her parents again, he looked thoughtful. 'It takes a great deal of concentration to Apparate halfway across the world, but it can be done. And you have your Apparition licence, so we would not have to use Side-Along-Apparition, which will make it considerably easier.'

'We?'

'I believe it is customary to meet one's parents-in-law. I know it usually happens before the wedding, but we hardly have a conventional marriage.' He gave a sardonic smile.

Hermione returned the smile. Then she started to giggle. Then, as often happens when you're confused and emotional, the giggles turned to sobs again. She had spent so much time crying in the past few days that it seemed to be a reflex action.

Severus reached out tentatively and stroked her hair. Hermione seemed comforted by the repetitive motion, relaxing and gradually quietening. He didn't know what made him do it, but as her eyes opened, and she looked directly at him, he leaned over and gently pressed his lips to hers.

Hermione froze. Then she recoiled, her eyes now registering nothing but shock. She stared at him for a moment, horrified, then turned onto her other side and curled into a tiny ball again.

This time, Severus had no choice but to ignore her as she cried herself to sleep.

*

"Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."

That damned book seemed to be taunting him. Whenever he looked at it, his eye caught another quote designed to make him feel even worse than he did already. He had even wondered if Hermione was leaving the book open at pertinent pages deliberately.

What the hell had made him do it? He could only think it was that he had never been able to cope with girls' tears. Even when Lily was small and cried over the latest mean thing Petunia had said, he had just stood there, twisting the sleeve of his robes and feeling useless.

Lily. He felt a crushing blow of guilt as he realised he hadn't thought about her for days. True, he tried not to dwell on her, but she was always there, at the back of his mind. But since this marriage had been forced on him, it was Hermione who filled his thoughts. She had grown, over the years, from a bossy little bushy-haired swot into a very pretty girl. Even with memories of Lily always there, he could not fail to notice that. And the confrontation with Carrow yesterday had only made things worse. Carrow seemed to have divined that their wedding night had not been a success, and if gossip spread, Hermione could be in grave danger. There was nothing actually about consummation in the Marriage Law (it was, after all designed to control Muggle-borns, not to strengthen magical bloodlines), but it was implied in the very word 'marriage', and Severus was sure that if the Ministry heard the rumour they would annul the marriage immediately and force Hermione to marry someone else. Someone like Carrow, who, for all his professed disgust, would not hesitate to rape her. Bile rose in Severus' throat at the thought.

No, he had to keep Hermione safe, and, for the moment, the easiest way to do that would be to teach her Occlumency as soon as possible. Luckily, today was Saturday, and Hermione, being Hermione, had finished all her homework last night, which meant they could start straight away.

After a rather strained breakfast, Severus led his wife back to the Headmaster's study and said, tersely, 'I think it would be prudent for me to teach you Occlumency. I do not wish the details of our... private life to be known by others.'

Hermione looked wary. 'Will you be able to see everything? Stuff I don't want you to see?'

'Hermione, as I told you yesterday, I will not force you to do anything you do not want to do.'

She coloured, but ignored the implication. Instead she said, 'You did with Harry. You forced your way into his memory.'

'That would not have happened had Potter practised as I instructed him.'

'Yet you're prepared to make an effort with me,' Hermione pressed.

Severus shrugged. 'Self-interest. As I said, I do not want the details of our life to be known by others.'

'Amycus Carrow, perhaps?' Hermione knew she was straying into dangerous territory, but she couldn't stop herself.

'Amongst others. Now kindly sit down and face me. We are wasting time.' He sat in his desk chair and conjured one opposite for Hermione.

'We will take this in stages. The easiest way is to imagine your mind as a room with doors leading off it. You will hide memories you do not want me to see behind those doors. Make the room plain no paintings or photographs which could give anything away.' He pointed his wand at Hermione and said, 'Legilimens.'

She had done exactly as she was told; he saw a plain room with doors in the panelled walls.

Good. Now think of a memory you want me to see. Something innocuous.'

Hermione imagined doing her Ancient Runes homework.

'Excellent.' Severus permitted himself a small smile. For once, her ability to perform any given task perfectly was useful instead of annoying. 'Now remember something you wish me not to see, and put the memory behind one of the doors.'

Hermione smiled this time. Quite deliberately, she remembered kissing Viktor Krum at the Yule Ball. Viktor and Hermione, still entwined, opened one of the doors and slunk through it.

'Good.' Severus' voice was strained. 'Now let the room disappear, along with the memory of... the memory you wish to hide, but allow the thought of you studying to remain.'

Hermione concentrated hard. It was difficult; she could still see Severus in front of her, concentrating too, but she managed to let the room in her mind dissolve. The Hermione doing her homework remained.

The real Hermione grinned in triumph and lost her concentration. The memory of Viktor Krum burst through the door, still, as Ron would have delicately put it, snogging her.

Abruptly, she felt Severus' presence in her mind wrenched away. Focusing on his face, she saw that he had gone white, and his black eyes were glittering.

'Very good,' he said stiffly. 'You lost concentration at the end, but for a first attempt that was excellent.' He looked distinctly displeased, though, and after a second the reason hit her.

"He's jealous," she realised. "Jealous of Viktor Krum." The thought was strangely gratifying.

*

A/N: The idea of the mind as a room with doors behind which to hide private thoughts comes from Trudi Canavan's 'Black Magician' trilogy. The quote in the philosophy book is Solomon 25/28

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 13

The antics of the DA lead to uncomfortable revelations for Hermione.

During the next few weeks, Severus continued to teach Hermione Occlumency. He made no further attempts to touch her, and she was careful not to show him any more memories of Viktor Krum.

He continued to assure her he would not break into her thoughts uninvited, remarking wryly that he was sure she could produce a potent Shield Charm, and that there were some memories he was not yet ready to show her. As their lessons became more advanced, however, he did have to show her some memories of his own in order to teach her. These, she suspected, were carefully chosen to be neutral him teaching, marking essays, sitting in the staff room, but they were always accompanied by a strong sense of isolation, of terrible loneliness. With her parents gone and her friends no longer able to communicate with her, Hermione knew only too well how that felt, and she resolved to make an effort to be nice to him. She no longer pushed him on the subject of Harry, she no longer insulted or ignored him, and sometimes she even allowed herself to brush his hand as he passed her a Butterbeer, or touched his shoulder as she passed him sitting hunched over piles of paper at his desk.

He often seemed tired or strained, and although he never confided the reasons to her, he did seem to accept her small gestures of comfort. Gradually, they seemed to achieve a sort of unspoken solidarity.

Until, one day, Seamus Finnegan approached Hermione in Transfiguration. He strode up to her, leaned over her desk and hissed in her face, 'Tell your bloody husband to leave our friends alone!'

'What?' Hermione asked, leaning backwards in an attempt to escape Seamus' wrath.

'Neville, Ginny and that mad Ravenclaw girl,' Seamus spat. 'He's only gone and given them detention in the Forbidden Forest!'

Hermione's stomach sank. A few years ago she would have said Ginny, Neville and Luna would be safe with Hagrid and Fang, but Hagrid himself had said it wasn't safe for him to enter the forest now Aragog was dead, and the centaurs had made it very clear that they would not tolerate students encroaching on their territory any longer.

'What did they do to deserve that?' she asked faintly.

'Ask *him*,' Seamus spat. 'I'm saying nothing!'

Fortunately, Professor McGonagall swept into the classroom at that moment, and Seamus scurried back to his desk.

*

After Transfiguration, Hermione raced up to Severus' office, burst through the door and then stopped dead, staring at the wall. The glass case that housed the sword of Gryffindor was smashed, empty. No glass littered the floor, however; Severus must have cleared it up. He was sitting at his desk, writing a letter, and he looked up at Hermione as she skidded into the room, took in the sight and gasped, 'What happened?'

'Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood and Longbottom had evidently decided the sword of Gryffindor had no place in a Slytherin's office. I caught them trying to smuggle it down the stairs.' He eyed her suspiciously. 'Did you know anything about this?'

'Not until Seamus bawled me out in front of the whole Transfiguration class,' Hermione said hotly. 'I never see Ginny or Luna now, and I doubt Neville will talk to me in class after this.'

'I must maintain discipline in the school.'

'For God's sake, Severus! There are werewolves in there. And Acromantula. There are probably even Dementors in there now!'

'Would you rather I handed them over to the Carrows?'

Hermione felt sick as she remembered Dennis Creevey being tortured in their Dark Arts lesson, but now she had worked herself up, she couldn't stop herself, and months' worth of fermenting anger burst out of her: anger at Severus, the Ministry, everything. 'You know what?' she yelled. 'I'm sick of this. I've had it up to here with the way you treat the students. I'm sick of walking down the corridors, hearing their tales of abuse at your hands and feeling guilty by association. You bullied Neville because he's slow, me because I'm not, Harry because he's Harry: because you hated James at school!'

Severus ignored the outburst, although it seemed to cost him some effort: his black eyes were glittering again. Instead he looked up at the portrait of Dumbledore which, for once, contained its subject. 'It is time,' he said heavily. 'She cannot continue in ignorance; it is making my life impossible. You agree?'

'As discussed then, Severus,' said Dumbledore, smiling. 'I am only surprised you have waited this long.'

Severus strode to the cupboard and took out the Pensieve. Hermione eyed it warily. Harry had told her about his excursions onto the memory-keeper with Dumbledore, and she didn't fancy it one bit.

'Where are we going?'

'Back into my past. You have shown me your memories. It is time I returned the favour.' He took hold of her hand and looked into her eyes. 'Trust me. Please.'

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded mutely.

They landed on the floor of a dingy room occupied by three people. Hermione knew immediately who they were. The tall, hook-nosed man in front of her could only be Severus' father. He was shouting at a sallow skinned, terrified looking woman. Hermione heard a tiny sob and looked round. Huddled in the corner sat a small, dark haired boy, watching his mother and father through his fingers and crying his heart out. Hermione longed to be able to go to him and pick him up.

'How old were you?' she whispered.

'That time,' said Severus coldly, staring straight ahead, 'four. But it was not the last time and, although it is my earliest memory, I do not suppose for a minute it was the first.'

Hermione didn't know what to say. Mutely, she reached out and took Severus' hand.

*

Half an hour later, they landed back on the floor of the office. They had seen all of Severus' salient memories except one. Dumbledore had warned him against showing Hermione what he had learnt about the eighth Horcrux. They agreed that if she knew Harry had to die, she would go rushing off to find him and would land herself in trouble from which even Severus would not be able to rescue her.

Hermione's face was wet with tears, and Severus looked drained, physically and emotionally. He sat down on the desk and motioned for her to sit beside him. There was almost a pleading note in his voice as he said, 'Say something.'

'Lily?' said Hermione almost inaudibly.

He smiled ruefully. 'I thought that might be your first question.'

Hermione just stared at him.

'I loved Lily. I will not lie to you, I think in some way I always will. But she is a part of my past, whilst you are part of my present and my future.'

'Your Patronus...'

'Matched hers. It wasn't a conscious decision.'

Hermione made no answer. Severus sighed, then put his head in his hands. 'I am glad you know everything,' he said, his voice muffled. 'It lightens the load somewhat. The whole school is depending on me, and yet I have felt utterly alone.' He raised stricken eyes to Dumbledore's portrait. 'How did you stand it?'

Dumbledore beamed. 'I had you, Severus. And now you have your wife.'

Severus turned to Hermione. 'I realise this is a lot to take in, Hermione, but I can't do this alone. I need your help.'

Hermione thought of what she had just seen: of Dumbledore asking '*I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?*'

'Yes,' said Hermione, and she seemed to gather herself together. 'Yes, I'll help you whatever I can do.'

'The two of us against the world, then.'

'It is the quality of one's convictions that determines success, not the number of followers.'

'Who said that?' he asked, thinking of the philosophy book again.

She smiled. 'Me.'

They stared at each other for a few moments, then, to his utter astonishment, she launched herself into his arms.

'Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry!'

He gazed down at the top of her head in utter bewilderment. 'Sorry for what?'

'Everything,' she sobbed. 'We've been so horrible to you all these years. I've been horrible to you ever since... ever since... we got married. I accused you of hating Harry because you hated James... I...'

'Shhh, Hermione, don't upset yourself,' Severus said softly, getting up from the desk. He led Hermione round to his desk chair, then sat down and lifted her onto his lap. She refused to look at him, hiding her face in his shoulder instead.

'You knew nothing about my double life,' he whispered, stroking her hair as she cried. 'You were right to mistrust me; I have played my part well. If you hated me that much, I must be convincing. That is reassuring; it will stand me in good stead this year.'

Hermione thought about everything she'd seen in the Pensieve: how much he had suffered, how lonely he had been all his life, those few short years of happiness with Lily, then nothing but suffering and loneliness again. For some reason she couldn't analyse right now, the thought of him feeling alone upset her even more than the memory of how awful she'd been to him. And worse than either of those was the knowledge that no-one else knew, that everyone else still hated him.

She raised tear-filled eyes to his, and as he looked down at her with nothing but concern in his face, she saw through the cold mask behind which he always hid, to the man beneath.

Then she didn't know how it happened she had her arms around his neck and was kissing him fiercely. After a moment of stunned disbelief, he responded with equal ferocity, twining his fingers in her hair and pulling her as close as possible.

When, after several minutes, they broke apart, breathless and dazed with surprise, neither spoke. Hermione laid her head on Severus' shoulder again, and he rested his chin gently on the crown of her head. They stayed like this until the sun had set outside the office window.

*

A/N: Dumbledore's line is from DH Ch 33. The 'quality of one's convictions' quote and the next two lines come from the final Harry Potter film.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 13

Hermione learns first hand just how difficult the life of a spy is.

'Are you sure you're ready for this?' Severus asked Hermione anxiously. 'You've only been learning Occlumency for a few weeks.'

'Yes, I'll be fine,' she reassured him. 'None of my friends can do Legilimency anyway.'

Hermione was keeping her promise to help Severus protect the school. If her classmates would let her, she was going to rejoin Dumbledore's Army. Severus was facing constant low-level mutiny from the students and, accepting that he could not stop it, had asked Hermione to monitor the disruption and report back to him before the Carrows got to hear about any of it. It wouldn't have been possible before, but now he had gained her confidence, and she was fairly proficient in Occlumency, they had decided to go ahead.

They were both particularly glad her Occlumency skills were strong after last night. Nothing more had happened they were both too dazed to take it any further, and Hermione had a feeling Severus hadn't wanted to push his luck. But, as Severus had explained, using Occlumency allowed one to lie more fluently, and they could not afford Hermione to blush or stammer if asked questions about her personal life.

'I'll be fine,' Hermione repeated. 'But if I don't go, I'm going to be late for Charms.'

By running all the way down from the second floor, Hermione managed to arrive breathless, but on time, for Charms. Ever since he had cried while signing her marriage register, Professor Flitwick had been extra-nice to her, and he awarded her fifty points when she managed to master the Gemino Curse in five minutes.

'Cool, sir!' called Seamus Finnegan. 'Does it work on Galleons?'

'Alas not, Mr Finnegan,' squeaked Professor Flitwick. 'Money is one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration. Otherwise the world economy would collapse.'

The entire class gave a groan of disappointment.

After the class, Hermione approached Neville. 'Neville,' she said in a whisper, 'I'm really sorry about you being sent into the Forbidden Forest!'

'No problem, Hermione,' Neville said, grinning. 'We had a good laugh with Hagrid.'

'I felt awful, though,' Hermione continued, steering Neville by the elbow away from the rest of the class pouring out into the corridor. 'I yelled at Snape about it.'

'Merlin's beard!' said Neville, shocked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yes, he just asked if I'd rather he handed you over to the Carrows, so I dropped it. Anyway, that's why I wanted to talk to you,' Hermione continued. 'I'm sick of it, so I want to rejoin Dumbledore's Army.' She looked hopefully up at Neville.

'Ah,' said Neville, looking uncomfortable. 'I'd love you to, Hermione, but what if Snape finds out what you're up to?'

'He won't,' replied Hermione, beaming. 'He's taught me Occlumency; he won't be able to see anything I don't want him to. What an idiot!' she added brightly.

'Why's he done that?' asked Neville, his eyes widening.

Hermione giggled. 'So no-one finds out what he looks like in that old grey nightshirt of his, I should think!'

Neville's jaw dropped. 'Hermione, he hasn't... you haven't... have you?'

Hermione determinedly suppressed her memories of kissing Severus last night and let out a deliberate giggle. 'In that awful old nightshirt? No way!'

*

Hermione took her contact Galleon out of her pocket and showed it to Severus. 'Well,' she told him, 'I'm in. What do you want me to do?'

'Firstly, let me know what they're planning, so I know what to expect and can protect them from the Carrows as far as possible,' he added grimly. 'Secondly, teaching them Occlumency would be a good idea.'

'I can't do that!' exclaimed Hermione, horrified. 'I've only just learnt it myself! Besides, I'd need to know Legilimency to make sure they were doing it right.'

Severus considered. 'Maybe I am asking too much of you. What would you feel confident teaching?'

Hermione thought for a moment, then said slowly, 'Well, Harry taught us all how to cast a Patronus in our fifth year, but I can get mine to speak now. I suppose that might be useful.'

'You can produce a vocal Patronus?' said Severus. 'That would certainly be of use. It is normally the last exercise taught at NEWT level Defence, but Amycus Carrow is hardly following the approved syllabus.' He looked down at her with respect in his eyes. 'I am impressed. You could already teach NEWT in all your subjects, Hermione. You know,' he mused, 'I have often wondered if the Ministry matches candidates for the Marriage Law by intellect.'

'Do you really think we're equally matched intellectually?' asked Hermione, inordinately pleased at the thought.

'Don't fish for compliments, Hermione. It is not possible to learn everything by quoting large chunks of the textbook verbatim. You must be innately magically powerful to be top of the class consistently, as you are. What are you smirking at?' he asked suspiciously.

'Plato's three levels of pleasure.'

'I beg your pardon?'

Hermione picked up her philosophy book from the coffee table, flicking through it rapidly. 'The three levels: eros, philia and agape. Level One,' she said, blushing, but continuing resolutely, 'sex: sensual and physical pleasure. Level Two: aesthetic pleasure, beauty and marriage. Level Three: intellectual pleasure unsullied by physical interaction.' She looked up from the book, her face a fiery red. 'We seem to be doing them the wrong way round.'

At that moment the Galleon in Severus' hand started glowing. 'You're going to be late for your first meeting if you don't hurry up,' he said, handing it back without looking at her.

*

'OK,' Hermione announced to the Room of Requirement at large, 'you can all cast a Patronus, can't you?'

Nods and murmurs confirmed this. People were still looking suspicious of her, but Neville had promised he would explain everything to them before she arrived everything she had told him, anyway. She hoped he had kept that promise.

'For those of you who can Apparate, making your Patronus speak takes the same sort of concentration. For all those who haven't learnt Apparition yet, I'll demonstrate.' She gazed around at the expectant, upturned faces, trying not to let her nervousness show. 'I'm going to need a separate room,' she said, speaking directly to the Room of Requirement now.

Immediately, a partition wall with a door in it appeared a little further down the Room.

'Dennis,' said Hermione, 'you go into that room. I'll send my Patronus to you, and then you come back and tell us what it said.' After the way he had been treated in the Dark Arts class, he deserved this moment to shine. Dennis nodded, then trotted happily off into the next room.

'Hermione?' asked Parvati Patil dubiously. 'You don't know what that room looks like, so how are you going to send your Patronus into it?'

'It doesn't matter about the place,' Hermione explained. 'You might not even know where the person you need to contact is. The important thing is to concentrate on the person him or herself. She thought how proud of her Severus was going to be when she told him everyone in the DA could cast a vocal Patronus, and a shining silver otter burst from her wand.'

'Now I'm going to concentrate on Dennis and what I want to say to him,' she told the assembled students. The otter disappeared, they heard a loud shout of laughter, and a moment later, Dennis Creevey burst back into their room.

Hermione grinned at him. 'Go on, Dennis. Tell them what it said.'

Dennis glanced shyly at her. 'It said... it said, "Snape stinks!"' he giggled, then looked at Ginny, clearly embarrassed.

'Go on,' Hermione urged him.

'Then it started singing "Severus is a git" to the tune of "*Weasley is our King*".'

Everybody fell about laughing, and Neville clapped Hermione appreciatively on the shoulder.

Hermione smiled ruefully to herself. She felt horribly disloyal to Severus, but she seemed to have regained her friends' trust, and that was the important thing.

*

A few nights later, just as she was going to bed, Hermione felt her contact Galleon grow hot in her pocket. She took it out, read the coded message and felt her heart sink.

'What is it?' asked Severus, noticing her expression.

'The Carrows have got Euan Abercrombie chained up in the dungeons.'

'Who?' Severus asked, frowning as he tried to fit a face to the name. 'I'm losing track of the new students now I'm no longer teaching.'

'Gryffindor third year.'

'What did he do?'

'Wrote "Snape stinks" on the walls of all the boys' bathrooms, apparently. I feel so guilty. He got the idea from me.' She explained hurriedly about the DA meeting before Severus' expression could get any more thunderous.

But to her surprise, he laughed grimly. 'Unchain him and bring him to me. We will have to think of a suitable punishment for him before the Carrows do.'

Hermione threw a cloak on against the chill of the dungeons and rushed downstairs. Euan Abercrombie gasped as she rounded the corner at a sprint, and she put a finger to her lips and mouthed, 'Shh!' urgently.

A non-verbal 'Diffindo' released his chains, but the clanking and clinking they made as they fell to the floor brought both Carrows out of the office which used to be Snape's, Alecto yelling '*Stupefy!*'

Hermione threw a Shield Charm up around herself and Euan, bracing herself for a fight, be it magical or verbal.

'What the hell d'yeh think yer doing?' wheezed Amycus.

'The Headmaster wishes to speak to Euan,' Hermione said, her heart thumping wildly. She should have made Severus a contact Galleon in case she needed his help.

'We caught him, we punish him,' jeered Alecto.

Hermione swallowed. 'As the insults are personal, Professor Snape wishes to deal with this personally. He is very interested to know who has been defacing the castle walls.'

'How did yeh know he was down here?'

'One of the portraits told the Headmaster,' Hermione said, thinking quickly.

'There're no portraits down here,' Alecto pointed out.

'There are plenty on the way down here. I don't suppose Euan here kept quiet as you apprehended him, did he?' Merlin, this spying thing was mentally exhausting!

'Yer a student; yeh can't patrol the corridors!' snarled Amycus, his face very close to Hermione's. He had horrible breath.

'I was asked to by the Headmaster,' she replied, trying not to inhale. 'As I am sure you are aware, my marriage vows included the promise to obey.'

Amycus seemed to weigh up the pleasure of chaining both students to the wall, with the possibility of incurring Snape's, and by extension Voldemort's, wrath.

'All right, all right, get out of my sight, both of yeh!'

*

'Who told you to do this?' Severus barked, striding round the unfortunate Euan. The more he terrified the boy, the happier the Carrows would be when they inevitably heard about it. 'Presumably you are not the ringleader here? Whose instructions are you following?'

'Ginny Weasley's,' Euan stammered and immediately burst into tears.

Severus crossed his arms, folding the sleeves of his robes across his chest. 'I fail to see why Mr Filch should spend his valuable time cleaning up your mindless vandalism. You will clean every wall you have defaced.' His dark eyes flashed. 'Without magic. *And* you will write me two rolls of parchment on...'

'On why a historic building like Hogwarts shouldn't be subjected to "mindless vandalism",' supplied Hermione quickly.

'On my desk tomorrow evening, Abercrombie,' snapped Severus. 'Hermione, escort Mr Abercrombie to his common room to make sure he does not deface any more school property.'

Hermione ushered the stunned boy out of the office. When they were out of hearing of the gargoyles that guarded the magical staircase, she said, 'If I remember my third year History of Magic timetable correctly, you should be on the history of Hogwarts about now?'

Euan nodded solemnly.

'Right,' Hermione continued. 'Put in a load from Hogwarts, a History.' Chapters twelve and thirteen should be useful. Then, when you've finished, point your wand at it and say '*Geminio*', and it'll duplicate itself. Just take out all the stuff about graffiti, and that's your homework done for next week.'

Euan gazed up at Hermione in awe.

'Why do you think I suggested that particular essay to the Headmaster?' she asked, grinning.

*

When Hermione got back, Severus was sitting at his desk looking exhausted. By now it was two o'clock in the morning, and Hermione knew exactly how he felt.

'What am I to do with Miss Weasley?' he groaned. 'I have given her lines, detentions, cleaning duties in the hospital wing. I have even sent her into the Forbidden Forest. If she continues in this vein, I will not be able to save her from the Carrows' intervention.'

'Ban her from Hogsmeade?'

Severus considered this, rubbing his eyes against creeping exhaustion. 'Will that appear severe enough?'

'I'll start a rumour Fred and George are opening a Hogsmeade branch and that you've done it specifically to prevent her visiting her brothers.'

Severus looked impressed at the deviousness of this idea. 'Hermione, you should be in Slytherin!'

'How did you do this for twenty years?' she asked, yawning. 'I've been spying for a week and I'm exhausted!'

When, eventually, they were able to crawl into bed, Severus held out his arms to Hermione. She scooted over to his side of the bed and snuggled into his embrace. Warm, comfortable and exhausted, she was asleep before he could even consider kissing her again.

*

A/N: Apologies for the bitty nature of this chapter, but spying is a messy business!

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 13

Hermione finds herself facing her worst nightmare.

'You got me banned from Hogsmeade!' Ginny held Hermione back from the DA meeting, clearly furious that she would miss the Christmas shopping trip.

'Ginny, he wanted to hand you over to the Carrows!' lied Hermione. 'Would you rather be chained up in the dungeon like Euan?'

Ginny grinned, her anger suddenly forgotten. 'That was really brave of you. He was so chuffed to have next week's homework done already.'

'I didn't mean the Carrows to catch us,' Hermione whispered, grimacing. 'I had to take him to Snape and then try to influence his punishment. Snape was so angry about the graffiti, banning you from Hogsmeade was the only thing I could think of that didn't involve the Cruciatus Curse! I told him you'd be devastated because Fred and George are starting up a Hogsmeade branch.'

'But they're not!'

'I know that, but Snape doesn't, does he?'

Hermione was realising that spying was nearly a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. She understood now why Severus always used to be so irritable. And he had been alone. At least he now had her, and she had her friends back. Even Lavender, Parvati and Seamus were being nice to her now she appeared to be defying and deceiving Snape.

This meeting had been a quick lunchtime get-together for Hermione to explain the theory of Occlumency to the three leaders. Neville and Luna had already left for afternoon lessons, and Hermione was itching to leave the Room of Requirement herself. She had a free period now, which she was going to spend with Severus, learning Legilimency and trying to come up with a good cover story for why she had done so.

'Fine, I forgive you,' Ginny said, smiling. 'Got to go got Divination in North Tower!' She streaked away, red hair flying.

Hermione continued down to the second floor alone, lost in contemplation of what lie she could possibly come up with to explain why Severus had suddenly decided to teach her Legilimency.

So she didn't see the two Snatchers creep up behind her, she didn't see Amycus Carrow leering round the corner as his lapdogs Stunned her, and she didn't realise she had been kidnapped until she was in the Ministry of Magic.

*

Scabior was heartily wishing he'd not revived Hermione until he'd got her inside Courtroom Seven at least there the Dementors would subdue her. But Apparating with the dead weight of a Stunned person was difficult, and Scabior, in his own words was "bloody knackered".

Now she was conscious, and conscious of what was happening to her, Hermione was putting up such a fight, the portraits were all running into each others' frames to follow her along the corridors.

'You can't do this!' Hermione screamed, thrashing in Scabior's grip. 'I did what you wanted. I married him!' But as he dragged her down the stairs to the courtroom, she felt a tell-tale chill and all the fight went out of her. She immediately stopped screaming, knowing that the wider she opened her mouth to scream, the more likely the dozens of Dementors were to try and suck the soul out of her. Whimpering and moaning, Hermione was half-dragged, half-carried into the courtroom and dumped in the chair in the centre. When the golden chains on the chair snaked their way up her arms, she began to cry.

'Thank you, Scabior. You may go.' The girlish voice was horribly familiar. Dolores Umbridge was smiling down at the weeping Hermione with an ugly sort of leer on her toad-like face. She was also twirling Hermione's wand in her short, stubby fingers.

Hermione raised her tear-stained face. 'I... d... don't understand,' she stammered. 'I haven't broken the law. I sh... shouldn't be here!'

'We are not here to examine your magical heritage, Mrs Snape,' said Umbridge sweetly. 'As you so loudly informed us just now, your marital status makes you immune from that line of interrogation. No. What we wish to ascertain from you is the whereabouts of Harry Potter.'

Hermione was shocked out of her crying. 'Harry? I don't know. I haven't had any contact with him, I swear!'

'Come now, Mrs Snape. We all know you and Mr Potter are thick as thieves, so you will save yourself a lot of *unpleasantness* if you just tell us where he is.'

'I don't know!' Hermione whimpered, looking fearfully over her shoulder at the Dementors flanking the walls. Umbridge's hateful cat-Patronus was stalking around the interrogator's desk, but its influence didn't stretch as far as Hermione. It glowed brighter as Umbridge's voice rose shrilly.

'Your magical heritage may not be in question here, Mrs Snape, but let me assure you, the punishment for obstructing this Committee remains the same. If you persist in proclaiming your innocence, you will be taken to Azkaban. If you resist, you will be subjected to the Dementor's Kiss.'

Hermione burst into tears, trembling in her chains. 'C... call Severus,' she choked out between heaving sobs. 'He'll tell you I haven't contacted Harry!'

'Ah, yes, your *husband*.' Umbridge's voice became even more girlishly sweet as she savoured the *coup de grace*. 'But is it a true marriage, or is "Miss" still the most appropriate title for you? I hear from certain sources that it might well be.'

The little colour in Hermione's face left it as she realised what Umbridge meant. "How did she know?" thought Hermione wildly. How did Umbridge know she and Severus hadn't... "Carrow!" Amycus Carrow must have realised from that short, embarrassing argument with Severus after he had attacked her in class all those weeks ago.

Tears still pouring down her face, she sobbed, 'I don't know where Harry is, I swear! I haven't spoken to him! And I *am* married! Her voice rose to a scream. 'I am married, and I WANT MY HUSBAND!'

'*Accio* Mrs Snape's wand!'

Hermione nearly fainted with relief as Severus burst through the courtroom door, aiming his own wand directly at Umbridge. Hermione's wand soared through the air, and Severus caught it deftly.

'Well, Madam Undersecretary.' Severus' voice was sleek with fury. 'That would appear to answer your question. The wand recognises our marriage. This session is unlawful, and you will release my wife this instant.' He was still pointing his wand at Umbridge, who seemed too stunned to retaliate.

Severus said, '*Relashio*!' and, despite the fact his wand was still pointed at the interrogators' bench, the chains binding Hermione fell off instantly. He threw her wand to her, and, to her own amazement, she caught it too.

That shocked Umbridge into speech. 'Now see here, Snape,' she shrieked. 'You haven't got the authority to...'

Severus cut her off mid-sentence. 'There is nothing in the Marriage Law which entitles the Ministry to pry into the sexual activities of its subjects. I repeat: this court is unlawful.'

'I want to know where Harry Potter is, Snape!' Umbridge screamed hysterically. 'And she knows; I know it! She will tell me!' Umbridge pointed her wand at Hermione. '*Imperi...*'

'*STUPEFY!*' roared Severus, then turned his attention to Yaxley, who appeared to come out of some sort of shocked trance as his superior crumpled to the floor.

With its caster unconscious, the silver cat-Patronus disappeared, and Hermione let out a little squeak of fear as she felt the Dementors closing in on her. Gripping her wand, she concentrated on the only happy thought she could at the moment: Severus was here! In her terror, she had called out to him, and he had come to rescue her.

Out of her wand burst a shining silver animal, but it wasn't her usual otter. It was big, and it had wings some sort of bird? Hermione couldn't focus on it enough to make it out; it was taking all her strength just to keep it between her and the Dementors.

As Yaxley slumped over his desk, Stupefied, she felt her concentration slipping, and the Patronus flickered and died. Before the Dementors could make their move, however, Severus had grabbed her hand and was pulling her out of the courtroom. Speeding along the corridor, hand in hand with her husband, Hermione panted, 'How did you know? I was yelling for you, and you just appeared!'

'Everard saw you being brought down here from his portrait. He hastened to my office to inform me.'

'Severus, I don't think I can Apparate; I can hardly stand.' As they skidded to a halt in the Atrium, Hermione swayed alarmingly, and Severus caught her before she fell. He wrapped his arms around her, held her close, and Apparated them both back to Hogwarts.

*

The walk up to the school had never seemed so far; Hermione was still shaking from her ordeal, so when she stumbled on a rocky patch and nearly fell, Severus caught her around the waist and, in one swift movement, swung her up into his arms. He carried her all the way through the grounds and up to the second floor where they almost ran into a shocked Professor McGonagall.

'Headmaster! What are you doing with Hermione?' she demanded.

'It seems that despite my exhaustive defensive strategies, I still have a bit of a security problem. My wife was abducted from the school and interrogated by the Muggle-born Registration Committee. Apparently they believed she had been communicating with Potter.'

'How on earth did Ministry officials get in here? I shall have to strengthen the Stealth Sensors in the castle.'

Severus snorted. 'It seems Amycus Carrow is resentful of my status as headmaster and, to use the common phrase, *shopped* her. I imagine he let the Snatchers into the castle.'

'But she's married! She's immune!'

'They believed ours is not an entirely binding union.'

'But Filius and I signed the register... Oh!' McGonagall gasped as she realised what he meant.

'Minerva.' Severus lowered his voice. 'I would be grateful if you would keep this knowledge to yourself. For Hermione's sake.'

Minerva looked down at Hermione, shock replaced by concern. She hadn't reacted to the conversation, but she didn't appear to be Imperiused or drugged, nor did she seem passively resigned. The girl was actually enjoying being in the Headmaster's arms. Her face was turned away, into his shoulder, and she was nestled into him like a lover, like a bride being carried over the threshold. Minerva wondered what Snape had done to merit that.

'Of course, Headmaster. I shall go and see to those Stealth Sensors at once.'

*

He carried her into their sitting room, lowered her onto the sofa, and pushed a glass of Firewhisky into her hand. It burnt her throat as it went down, but it did stop her shaking. When she felt back to herself, she ventured to ask, 'Did you see my Patronus?'

'No. I was too busy dealing with Yaxley.'

She took a deep breath. 'It's changed. It's always been an otter, but in the courtroom, it was a bat.'

'Charming,' Severus snorted. 'You do realise half the people in this castle call me that behind my back?' He was making light of it, but she could see he was startled.

She matched his teasing tone. 'It's your own fault. Sweeping round the castle with your robes billowing behind you!' Seeing his offended expression, she laughed. 'Don't worry; I think it's sexy!'

He stared at her, completely non-plussed, and she realised that never before had he been told he was at all attractive. After a lifetime of being laughed at for her buck-teeth and frizzy hair, she understood that and, in that instant, made her decision.

'Severus? Take me to bed. Please.'

'Are you sure? You're not just saying that because of Umbridge are you? Because I was right, there is nothing explicit in the Marriage Law about...'

She pressed a finger to his lips to silence him. 'I called you my husband for the first time ever in that courtroom. I want you to make that true in every sense.' And, rising from the sofa, she took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

Crookshanks tried to follow them in, but Severus scooped him up and very firmly set him down outside the bedroom door.

By the time he came back in, Hermione had lost her nerve. She just stood there, facing him, without a clue where to start. Severus took charge, taking her in his arms and dipping his head to kiss her. She had never been more aware of the difference in their heights, but by standing on tiptoe and leaning into his arms she was able to respond.

When he released her, he took the initiative again, pushing her robes onto the floor, carefully unbuttoning her school shirt, and unzipping her skirt, steadying her so she could step out of it.

Wild thoughts chased through Hermione's brain. 'I shouldn't be wearing my school uniform for my first time. I should be wearing a slinky dress or a gorgeous nightie or something.' She suddenly felt acutely embarrassed by her white cotton bra and briefs. 'Little-girl-clothes,' she thought. 'All wrong for a married woman.' She crossed her arms over her breasts, hugging herself self-consciously.

Severus gently unwound her arms from her chest. 'Don't cover yourself, Hermione,' he told her firmly. 'You're beautiful.' Kissing her again, he reached around her back to

unclasp her bra and Hermione gasped as her breasts were freed from the confines of the fabric. He knelt down in front of her, and she caught her breath as his fingers hooked into the waistband of her knickers and gently pulled them down. He placed her hands on his shoulders to steady her as she stepped out of them, and she suddenly wanted to cover herself again, but then she felt tiny, fluttery kisses being dropped onto her belly, and she whimpered with pleasure. When he stood up, she felt bereft.

The appreciative look Severus gave her, the way his breathing quickened as his eyes swept her figure gave her confidence, and she reached up to pull off his professor's gown and unbutton his coat. She managed to get his shirt unbuttoned and, with a daring that surprised her, ran her hands up his chest to slip it off his shoulders.

She reached out to undo his belt, but when her hands brushed the bulge at his fly, they shook too badly to manage the buttons. He had to take pity on her and divest himself of the rest of his clothes. Severus' skin was pale and his frame skinny, but he had faintly defined biceps and pectoral muscles (probably from years of carrying heavy cauldrons around the Potions lab). His stomach was flat and taut and he had a thin line of dark hair running down from his navel.

Hermione's eyes followed the line downwards, and her eyes widened. Severus sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her down to sit on his lap. 'It seems I am forever saying this, but we don't have to do anything you don't want to do.'

'I do want to; it's just... I'm... I haven't... I've never...'

'You are a virgin,' he stated calmly.

She nodded, embarrassed, stole another look down and gulped slightly.

Severus tilted her chin up with his forefinger and bestowed on her a genuine smile. 'Oh, Hermione, you are such a tonic for my ego! But if you want to stop, just tell me.'

But he started to kiss her, one hand holding her close to him, the other caressing her breasts, drawing small circles around her nipples, and soon she didn't want him to stop, not ever.

A little while later, Severus swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and laid her gently down on it. Propping himself up on his elbows as he lay above her, he looked down at her, concerned.

'You're sure?'

'Yes.'

'Are you ready?'

She was so ready she felt she might just die if she had to wait any longer, and the answer came out as a moan as she pulled him down to kiss her. 'Yes! Oh, yes, please!'

And a little while after that, they became husband and wife in every sense.

*

A/N: The 'exhaustive defensive strategies' line is from the final film.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 13

Severus and Hermione have a happy Christmas and an unhappy New Year.

The Christmas holidays were the honeymoon Severus and Hermione had never had. They saw no-one; all the students had gone home, desperate to escape, and the Carrows didn't celebrate Christmas. Hermione doubted they celebrated anything, except possibly death and murder. There hadn't been any reprisal for her escape from the Ministry, but she had no doubt Amcyus was biding his time, waiting until the bustle of Christmas was over.

She and Severus kept to their rooms, seeing only the house-elves who brought them food. They spent the whole of Christmas Day in bed. Thanks to the roaring fires the house-elves kept burning in the grates, they were able to walk around naked whenever they pleased, and, gradually, Hermione lost the desire to cover herself up. Frequent sessions of ever more inventive lovemaking taught her not to be embarrassed, as did Severus' constant assertions that she was beautiful. The way he would watch her as she moved about the bedroom, reclining on the pillows, arms behind his head, as if he were the luckiest man alive, gave her confidence.

Severus, too, seemed more at ease with himself. The rigidity in his spine seemed to soften, and his prowling walk was replaced by something more akin to a strut. Steamy sessions in the bath ensured his hair lost the lankness and oiliness she was used to seeing. She teased him that everyone would wonder where the Demon Headmaster had gone, and he told her this was just for her to admire, that no-one else would ever see him like this. To which she replied, thank Merlin for that; he would lose all respect if he walked down the corridors naked. He had growled, scooped her up and taken her straight back to bed.

They saw in the New Year in bed, too.

*

On 2nd January, both Severus and Hermione were sitting, fully clothed, in his office (Hermione had insisted it was time she actually did her holiday homework) when Phineas Nigellus came hurrying into his portrait.

'*Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The blood traitor...*'

'Don't call him that!' snapped Hermione. 'His name is Ron!'

'...Ron, then, mentioned the place as he opened his bag, and I heard him!'

'*Good. Very good!*' cried the portrait of Dumbledore behind the Headmaster's chair. '*Now, Severus, the sword!*'

Severus pulled aside Dumbledore's portrait to reveal a hidden cavity Hermione had had no idea was there, and pulled out the sword of Gryffindor.

'So that's where you put it when Ginny tried to steal it!' she cried. As he swung a travelling cloak over his robes, she asked apprehensively, 'Where are you going?'

'I must give this sword to Potter, apparently,' Severus replied, looking askance at the portrait as he replaced it.

'You're going to see Harry! Wait while I get a cloak too!'

'You are not coming with me,' he told her shortly.

'Why not?'

'I would have thought your experience with Dolores Umbridge would have taught you that. You are far safer in blissful ignorance.'

'It's not blissful! I've been worried sick about Harry and Ron ever since I came back to school!' Tears shimmered in Hermione's eyes. The thought of Severus seeing Harry and Ron without her was intolerable. She let them fall, making no attempt to hide them from him. She didn't often use tears as a weapon, but she remembered how completely disarmed Severus had been when she had cried in the early days of their marriage. She felt horribly guilty manipulating her husband like this, but the tears were real, and this was Harry and Ron he was about to go and see, and she'd be damned if he was going to leave her behind.

'And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?' Severus was addressing Dumbledore again.

'No, I don't think so,' said Dumbledore's portrait. 'And Severus, be very careful.'

Snape turned at the door. 'Don't worry, Dumbledore,' he said coolly. 'I have a plan.' He met Hermione's eyes.

'Please, Severus,' she begged.

'Very well,' he said, relenting. 'Come along then.' And he ushered her out of the door.

*

Severus' plan was two-fold. First he needed to find out exactly what Dumbledore was withholding from him, and Hermione knew that, he was sure.

'How on earth did Phineas Nigellus end up in Weasley's schoolbag?' he demanded as they made their way through the grounds.

'When we found out you were Headmaster, I took Phineas's portrait from Grimmauld Place so he couldn't spy on us for you. I put an Undetectable Extension Charm on Harry's rucksack, and Phineas has been living in there ever since.'

'I see. And what exactly are Mr Potter and Mr Weasley doing in the Forest of Dean?'

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. 'Dumbledore didn't want anyone else to know.'

'Hermione, please. Don't make me remind you about "love, honour and obey".' He smiled to soften the demand. 'Hermione, I am about to run the latest in a long series of errands for Dumbledore. In the course of these errands, I routinely risk my life; I may now be about to risk yours. I think, even if Dumbledore doesn't, that I deserve to know why.'

Hermione couldn't fault his logic. And actually, she agreed with him. So, as they made their way to the gates, she explained about Dumbledore's mission, the Horcruxes and why Harry needed the sword.

It was the first time she had ever seen Severus lost for words.

*

The forest was so dark that Hermione wouldn't have recognised it, even though she had been camping here with her parents. They landed so close to Harry, who was keeping watch outside the tent that she had packed for them, that she could have reached out her hand and touched him. She hoped he had remembered the protective enchantments she had taught him before she'd left for school.

Although every instinct told her to run to Harry, to make sure he was all right, to burst into the tent and see Ron, she let Severus guide her silently away through the trees. He threw his cloak around her too, as she hadn't had time to fetch her own. The hem of the cloak slithered along the ground as he did so and, for a fleeting moment, she thought she saw Harry stir and tense as if he had heard. But he seemed to give himself a little shake and settle back against the tent pole again.

Severus led her away through the trees, deeper and deeper into the forest until they reached a small, frozen pool, where he stopped and pulled the sword of Gryffindor out from under his cloak. Pointing his wand at the pool, he flicked it three times. Hermione realised the three non-verbal spells were '*Silencio*', '*Diffindo*', and '*Wingardium Leviosa*', as the icy surface of the pool broke without a sound, and the sword rose into the air and floated out to the pool, coming to rest under the shattered ice. Severus flicked his wand a final time, and the pool froze over again.

He led her back behind a tree again and raised his wand for the third time. A dazzling silver doe emerged and cantered off among the trees. Hermione felt like she had been punched in the stomach.

After the last two weeks, if he were to cast a Patronus, she would have hoped that his happy memory would be of some time in those weeks (hers would certainly have been); in which case his Patronus surely would have been... well, it certainly would not have been *Lily*.

Involuntarily, she let out a little gasp, and he turned to glare at her, one finger pressed to his lips.

He need not have bothered. Hermione had her hand pressed over her mouth. But, in the bright white light of the Patronus, he could clearly see tears sparkling in her eyes.

He turned abruptly from her and sent the silver doe in the direction of Harry's tent. She couldn't bear to look at his face, but she knew he was concentrating hard as he watched the doe winding through the trees, enticing Harry towards the pool. As Harry came into view, Severus grabbed her arm and pulled her behind a large oak tree, and when Harry stopped at the pool, he let the Patronus die, cast a Silencing Spell over them both and Apparated them back to Hogwarts.

It was the first time in a fortnight she hadn't enjoyed being in his arms.

*

By the time they got up to their rooms, Hermione was crying, silently but steadily. She tried to run into the bedroom as soon as she got inside the office, but he reached the door before she did, and stood with his back to it, blocking her path.

'What is the matter?' Severus demanded.

She sniffed, swallowed and forced herself to look up at him. 'You still have Lily's Patronus. I thought that since that night... since we...' She took a deep breath, determined to be adult about this. 'Since we slept together...'

He interrupted her. 'You thought that my Patronus would change as yours did? I told you I will always love Lily.' Severus was angry, but with himself rather than her. He

should never have taken her with him, never have let her see it. He should have known she'd think like this.

'I thought you loved me!' She groped in her pockets for a tissue and, finding none, dashed the tears away with the back of her hand. 'Stupid Hermione fell for the oldest trick in the book he seduces me so he must be in love with me. I'm such an idiot!'

'You seduced me!' Severus exclaimed, then broke off. That was childish, and this was an adult situation; he needed to explain calmly. 'I do love you, but that Patronus has been part of my life for twenty years. It can't change in an instant.'

'Mine did!'

'You have been casting Patronuses for two years.'

'So you're saying that because I was sixteen, my loving Ron didn't count?'

He stared at her. 'You loved Mr Weasley?'

'Yes! And it was real! Surely even you can see an otter isn't that far from a weasel. Which is why it's such a big deal that my Patronus changed. My loyalties, my affections have changed. And yours haven't. And to me, young, stupid, eighteen-year-old me, that's a big deal!'

And she reached round him, yanked the door open, making him stagger forwards, and ran into the bedroom. Once there, she slammed the door, threw herself down on the bed and burst into tears.

The honeymoon was over.

*

A/N: I have just been told I must italicise any direct quotes from the novels. Therefore, throughout this story, Hermione's thoughts are now in double quote marks and, apart from where italics are necessary for emphasis, any lines in italics are from DH.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 13

Hermione has another run-in with the Carrows, and a heart-to-heart with Severus.

The next few days were much like the first weeks of their marriage. They hardly spoke, went to bed at different times and never touched. Hermione spent the week worried sick that the Carrows would exact revenge for her escape from the Ministry, and approached Friday's Dark Arts lesson feeling like she was headed for the gallows. She knew the sensible thing to do would be to ask Severus for help, but the self-sufficient, stubborn part of her refused to.

Amycus Carrow ignored her throughout the lesson, and she began to nurture a faint hope that he would leave her alone, possibly out of a desire not to lock horns with Severus again. But as the bell rang, and the rest of the class packed up its books as quickly as possible, Carrow barked, 'Granger! Stay here; I want to talk to yeh!' and her stomach sank.

Neville shot her a sympathetic look as she picked up her bag and dragged herself to the front of the classroom. Carrow stood there, smirking at her, until the students had vacated the premises, then he took out his wand and aimed it straight at her. Hermione flinched.

'I hear yeh didn't cooperate with Madam Umbridge,' he sneered.

Hermione lifted her chin in an attempt to bolster her courage. 'My husband took objection to my being kidnapped and came to fetch me home.'

Carrow's eyes narrowed at her mention of "my husband". 'Well, see, the thing is, Madam Umbridge didn't get the information out of yeh that she wanted, so I'm gonna see if I can get it for her. *Legilimens!*'

He had turned his wand on her so fast she was taken by surprise, but the memory of his sneer as she said "my husband" goaded her into action. She quickly employed Occlumency and deliberately showed him, in slow motion, exactly what had happened between her and Severus after their return from the Ministry.

Carrow snarled and broke the connection. 'Might've known he'd teach you Occlumency,' he wheezed. 'Still, there're other methods for getting information out of people.' He sneered at her again, a look of malicious pleasure spreading over his lumpy face, and she knew she was about to pay for what she had just shown him. 'Less pleasant methods. Let's see if I can't loosen that tongue of yours. *Cruci...*'

Hermione cowered, expecting agonising pain, but before he could finish the word, Carrow staggered backwards, clutching his left arm.

'Amycus!' Alecto Carrow had obviously been lurking outside the door, hoping to eavesdrop on any information her brother managed to extract from Hermione (or else simply to enjoy the sound of her being tortured). Now, she barrelled into the classroom, wild excitement in her eyes. 'Leave the Mudblood,' she screeched. 'We got to go. The Dark Lord's waiting for us!' And she and her brother hared off out of the castle without giving Hermione a backward glance.

Hermione leaned against the teacher's desk, gasping for breath as her mind processed her lucky escape. Then she began to run up to her rooms, ignoring the stitch in her side. If the Death Eaters had been called by Voldemort, then Severus would be gone too. And despite their differences over the last week, she found she didn't want that to happen. The rational, adult part of her brain, which she had shut off while wallowing in injured teenage pride, admitted that the reason she had been so jealous was that she loved him, and she couldn't bear the thought of him facing Voldemort, being made to do Merlin only knew what, while thinking she hated him. If he had indeed gone, she would sit up for as long as necessary to wait for him, and then she would apologise for her behaviour.

But when she crashed through the door of Severus' office, he was there, pacing the room, his normally calm, stoical demeanour replaced by agitation.

'Severus!' Hermione flung herself at him with such force that he staggered backwards before regaining his balance and closing his arms around her to steady her too. 'I thought you'd be gone! The Carrows were summoned; their Marks burned!'

'No, that summons was for the Carrows alone,' he told her, leading her into the sitting room and lowering her onto the sofa. 'I became alarmed when Amycus made no move against you this week. I was sure he was waiting for your Dark Arts lesson, and, rather than confront him myself and risk another reprisal for you, I decided to have a

little word with the Dark Lord.'

'You made him call them?'

'I told him the Carrows were undermining my authority over you. I have a legal duty to keep you under surveillance, and I cannot do that if they insist on Imperius and kidnapping you.'

'He was about to use Cruciatus on me,' she whimpered, trembling.

'Then I am glad I persuaded the Dark Lord to summon them in time,' Severus replied gravely. 'The Ministry sees it as my duty to subdue you. I see it was my duty to protect you. You will not be placed within the Carrows' reach again. I shall take over your lessons from them.' He smiled grimly. 'Once the Dark Lord has finished with them, I doubt they will dare touch you again in any case.'

He had saved her from Carrow yet again, and at the risk of incurring He Who Must Not Be Named's wrath. 'You do love me!' she blurted out.

'I do. I told you that when we returned from the lake. It was said in anger, but I meant it.' He put an arm around her and kissed her, but not passionately; it was as if he were testing the waters, trying to ascertain her mood towards him. When he released her, his voice was serious.

'Hermione? You do understand that my Patronus is about more than my feelings for Lily, don't you? It reminds me of the promise I made to Dumbledore to protect Potter, to help him defeat the Dark Lord.' His voice hardened still further. 'It reminds me of the consequences of my youthful stupidity.'

'I understand. I was being idiotic and jealous, and I apologise.' She squirmed in her seat, as if wanting to say something else and not quite daring to. Then she took a deep breath and said, 'Severus? I've been thinking about what you said when I told you about my new Patronus. You said, "Half the people in this castle call me that behind my back". Did I upset you? Does my new Patronus offend you?'

'No. I am perfectly aware of how I am viewed; it is all part of the act.'

She was quick to clarify, the words coming out in a jumble like they used to then she was a child. 'But I don't think of you like that. I used to, but that's not why it changed. It was the way you strode into the Ministry like an avenging angel. That's what I was thinking when I cast it. I thought you were going to descend on me and sweep me away. Did I mention I think it's sexy?'

One eyebrow rose. 'You did indeed.'

'Good, because I wouldn't want you to think I still hated you like I used to. I know we all used to call you a great black bat, but...!' She waved her hands in the air, gesticulating wildly in an attempt to explain.

He caught hold of her hands and held them tightly. 'Hermione, stop. Stop worrying. I am not offended. In fact I think it's useful that your Patronus is something suitable for a Death Eater something that suggests you are still afraid of me. If I were to choose, I think I would like a cat sleek, independent and an expert in the prowling walk,' he told her with a sardonic smile. 'But if any of the Dark Lord's supporters saw that, even the Marriage Law would not save you.' Both his smile and his voice warmed. 'You were supposed to marry me. You were not supposed to fall in love with me.'

'I messed up, then,' she whispered, 'because I did.'

'And I with you, Hermione, I with you.' She looked up into his eyes; they were glittering, for once not from anger or malice, but from desire. 'Now,' he asked in a low voice, 'what were you saying about my being sexy?' He stood up, and spread his arms wide, so that the sleeves of his black gown extended.

Hermione squeaked and ran, giggling, into the bedroom, with Severus in pursuit. He swooped down on her, swept her up and deposited her on the bed. In one fluid movement, he had straddled her waist and pinned her hands firmly above her head. The gown fell about her, trapping her in his thrall, and she stared up at him, wondering if she would regret teasing him. Then his mouth descended on hers, and she knew she regretted nothing.

*

Hermione was drifting off to sleep on a cloud of post-coital bliss in Severus' arms, when his voice woke her up.

'Hermione. There is something I should tell you.' He hesitated: this was clearly an important confession. She lay still, her cheek on his chest, listening to his quickened breathing. 'My Patronus *has* changed.'

Hermione turned in his arms and stared at him. 'Why didn't you tell me earlier?'

'I wanted to be sure you understood what the doe represented.'

She was confused. 'You said it represented defeating You Know Who, and helping Harry.'

'You accused me of not changing my loyalties and affections. My loyalty to Dumbledore and to Lily's memory has not changed. I still want the Dark Lord destroyed. I will still do everything I can to assist Potter. And there will always be a place in my heart for Lily. But my priorities *have* changed. *You* are my priority now and I will do everything in my power to protect you. Your Patronus changed due to an emotionally traumatic event a not uncommon trigger. Mine changed the moment I realised I would risk my life to keep yours safe.'

It is a not an easy thing to do, asking a favour from the Dark Lord. As I made my way there, it was of you I thought, you whom I was trying to protect, and it was the thought of you that carried me through the interview. I can only say that as I considered how foolhardy my errand was, I felt my priorities, and my feelings for you, change. I had a suspicion that if I were to cast a Patronus then, it would reflect that change.'

Hermione gaped at him. 'You didn't cast a Patronus in front of You Know Who?'

'No. That would be suicide, or, in this case, utroxicide.'

Hermione looked blank. In all her extensive reading, she hadn't come across that term.

'The murder of one's wife,' Severus explained, smiling. 'No, I waited until I was back in the Hogwarts grounds; there are enough Dementors there to warrant a Patronus, but I hid amongst the trees and made sure I was not observed. And I thought of you.'

'What is it now?' Hermione asked breathlessly.

'A lion. Highly embarrassing. I am the first Slytherin headmaster for a hundred years and I have a lion for a Patronus.' Incredibly, Severus was laughing. 'It's that blasted great cat of yours which inspired it. Women! Am I never to be allowed to choose my own Patronus?'

'Hogwarts Headmaster Henpecked,' giggled Hermione. 'Rita Skeeter would love that!'

He growled at her, and she wriggled up his chest to kiss him, still laughing.

Eventually Hermione calmed down enough to say, 'Actually, I think it's appropriate. Dumbledore said you were sorted too soon.'

Severus became very still, looking at her intently.

'You said asking a favour from You Know Who was scary,' she explained 'but you still did it for me. I'd say you earned that Patronus.'

'I am your husband; it is my duty to protect you. My duty and my pleasure.'

He pulled her round on top of him and kissed her until they had both forgotten about Patronuses, the Carrows, even Voldemort himself.

At length, Hermione pulled away, eyes sparkling. 'Oh! I forgot. Happy Birthday, Severus!'

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 13

As Severus and Hermione grow closer, the DA starts to fall apart.

'I can't do this; it's too difficult!'

Severus and Hermione were in his office, attempting the Legilimency lesson which Hermione's kidnap had aborted last year, and Hermione was not used to being unable to cast a spell.

Severus, however, was calm and patient. 'Did you see anything?'

'No, it was all jumbled up – like a scrambled TV signal.'

'So you saw my memories,' said Severus, having considered her answer. 'You just couldn't control them.'

'Suppose so.' Hermione knew she was sounding childish, but she was annoyed at herself.

'Hermione.' The voice, emanating from the portrait of Dumbledore behind the headmaster's desk, made them both jump. 'Excellence does not require perfection,' Dumbledore said gently.

Hermione smiled slightly. 'I know that one. Henry James.'

'Yes.' The portrait returned her smile. 'I normally prefer to rely on my own wisdom, but that pearl seemed appropriate. You are expecting too much of yourself. Legilimency is well beyond NEWT level. Only those undertaking further training for the Ministry learn it, and then only for certain roles – Aurors, for example, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.' He looked at Snape. 'And Death Eaters, of course.'

Severus glowered back. 'We have been going about this the wrong way,' he told Hermione. 'The easiest way is for me to penetrate your mind, and for you to throw up as strong a Shield Charm as you can.'

'I'll hurt you. Harry threw you across the room last year!'

Severus didn't look too happy at being reminded of this, but said calmly, 'Don't worry; I'm ready this time.' He raised his wand and said '*Legilimens!*'

Immediately, Hermione cried '*Protego!*', and was once more immersed in his memories.

It was an unsettling experience. She caught flashes of the scenes she had witnessed in the Pensieve – they were less jumbled now, more like a video on fast-forward. Then she came to an image which made her catch her breath in surprise, and the memories stop moving. It was of her, standing in their bedroom after they got back from the Ministry. But it wasn't her as she knew she looked in the mirror. Her skin was creamy, her curves far more luscious than she had ever noticed them. Her eyes were luminous and her hair hung in perfect ringlets rather than its usual frizz.

Hermione broke the connection and stood, gazing at Severus, an idiotic grin spreading over her face.

'Well?' he asked briskly. 'Did you feel you had any control over my memories this time?'

'Not at first,' she admitted. 'At first, they just sort of rushed at me.' She looked down, embarrassed. 'But when it came to our first night together, they slowed down.'

'Yes,' he said laconically. 'I noticed you lingered over that one.'

'I was interested in how you see me,' she told him, face flushed. 'It's like a prettier version of me. Like I've been airbrushed.'

Severus decided this was not the time to inquire about some strange Muggle technology he'd never heard of. 'I keep telling you you're beautiful. Well, now you have the proof.'

Hermione blushed again, but tried desperately to keep her mind on her lesson. 'Anyway, I wanted to see that one, so I made the rushing stop.'

'Very good. That is the control you need with the *Legilimens* command. It takes force of mind to call up the memories you want to see and sift through them.'

Hermione smiled shyly up at him. 'Can I see the way you see me again?'

'I very much doubt I shall get any peace until you do.'

They didn't get any more Legilimency done that afternoon, either.

*

In the end, she didn't get to use Legilimency, or teach it to the DA. Hermione had been horrified to learn, at the first meeting after Christmas, that Luna had been snatched off the Hogwarts Express, and when Ginny did not return from the Easter Holidays the DA began to fall apart. Through her contact Galleon, Ginny had been able to

reassure the others she was safe, although she wouldn't tell them where she was.

True to his word, Severus had withdrawn Hermione from Muggle Studies and Dark Arts classes. They spent that time learning Legilimency, and reinforcing her Occlumency and other defensive knowledge. She kept out of the Carrows' way, but Neville reported delightedly to her in Charms that both were looking pale and shaky and were sporting scars on their faces remarkably similar to the ones Amycus had given him and Hermione in the second week of term. Hermione surmised from this that the Carrows had had their predilection for the Cruciatus Curse turned against them. With Hermione untouchable, the Carrows redoubled their efforts to bring the rest of the school under their control. Michael Corner was caught releasing a first year they had chained up, and they tortured him so badly that Michael spent a week in the hospital wing. Severus was furious about that, but there was nothing he could do. Hermione begged him to go to Voldemort again, but he explained that he was walking an infinitesimally fine line between protecting the students and keeping his cover. For her he would risk going to Voldemort, but anyone else would have to fend for themselves. Hermione wept for Michael, but understood the situation.

Then, in the middle of April, Neville stopped coming to classes. He managed to send a coded message to Hermione on her contact Galleon, just as Luna had done to him when she had been kidnapped: "In Room of Requirement. Don't worry, am safe."

Over the next fortnight, Hermione became used to feeling a permanent warm patch in her breast pocket as more and more students sent her messages:

'With Neville. Seamus.'

'With Neville. Ernie.'

'In Room of Requirement. Lavender...'

Parvati & Padma... Colin & Dennis... Hannah... Demelza... Susan.'

Severus greeted each message stoically, but Hermione began to feel more and more alone. If she hadn't had Severus, she thought she might have run mad. She remembered what he'd said to her the night he had shown her his memories: 'The two of us against the world, then.'

This was one prediction which seemed rapidly to be coming true.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 13

Hermione thought Dolores Umbridge was her worst nightmare, but events in the Shrieking Shack prove her wrong.

1st May

'I don't want to do this, Severus!'

'We have no choice. Potter has been sighted in Hogsmeade. When he gets here, the Dark Lord will follow, and we will all have to fight.'

'I don't mean I don't want to fight! I mean I don't want to leave you!'

They were in his office. All around them the school was making preparations to fight, casting protective enchantments, organising battalions. Severus knew the time had come to keep his final promise to Dumbledore: to find Potter and tell him Dumbledore's last secret, but just now, his concern was all for Hermione. He placed his hands on her shoulders. 'We cannot be seen together. As far as the Death Eaters are concerned, ours is a marriage of convenience. If they realise we have feelings for each other, even Occlumency will not save you. They will kill you. If you still refuse to go into the Room of Requirement...'

'I can't! I can't stay in there while you're out here!'

'In that case...!' He stopped and gave a short, mirthless laugh, 'I cannot believe I am saying this, but you will be safest with Potter. At least Weasley will want to protect you.'

Hermione slipped her wedding ring off and put it in Severus' desk drawer, which she then charmed locked. 'I don't want to lose it,' she explained. 'And I don't want to have to explain to Harry and Ron.'

Severus stared at her naked finger, trying hard not to see it as an omen. 'When this is over, we should renew our vows. Our ceremony was a miserable affair; you deserve better. We'll go to Australia, find your parents, and you shall have a proper wedding.'

'If we survive.'

Severus clasped her to his chest and kissed her hair. Hermione felt him trembling against her as the enormity of what was to come overwhelmed him. She couldn't breathe, crushed against him, but she would happily have stayed there forever, quietly suffocating, if it meant she could have prevented him leaving. He didn't answer her; he simply pulled her closer and kissed her, desperately, as if he would never let her go. Tears flooded down her cheeks and made their kisses taste salty.

*

Hermione caught up with Harry and Ron outside the Room of Requirement. Having friends in the DA was turning out to be very useful.

'Harry! Ron!' she yelled, hurling herself at them so hard, she knocked the breath out of them. 'Are you OK? Merlin, I've missed you. I'm sorry I couldn't contact you; it was... difficult. How are you getting on; have you got the Horcruxes yet?'

'Let us breathe, Hermione,' panted Ron, extricating himself from her hug.

'We've destroyed the locket,' Harry gasped, massaging his side. 'We've got the cup, but we need to destroy that too. What about you? Did you get taken in by the Registration Committee? How did you escape?' His eyes widened as the other possibility hit him. 'You're not *married*, are you?'

'Course she's not,' scoffed Ron. 'Hasn't got a ring, has she?'

'I escaped,' Hermione told them, mentally crossing her fingers. 'I'll tell you later. Not now; we've got work to do.'

Several hours later, Hermione and Ron were bent over Harry as he emerged from the trance in which he had sought Voldemort. *'He's in the Shrieking Shack,'* Harry said. *'The snake's with him. He's just sent Lucius Malfoy to find Snape.'*

Hermione's stomach dissolved. She felt sick.

'You two stay here,' Harry was saying, *'I'll go under the Cloak and I'll be back as soon as I...'*

'No,' said Hermione, trying not to let her voice give her away, *'it makes much more sense if I take the Cloak and...'*

Eventually, Harry threw the Cloak over all three of them and they made their way to the Shrieking Shack, dodging battles, giants and Professor Trelawney's crystal-ball-bombs. *At last the tunnel began to slope upwards towards a sliver of light. Hermione tugged at Harry's ankle. 'The Cloak,'* she whispered. *'Put the Cloak on!'* Severus could not see her here.

Then he spoke, and Hermione's heart lurched: he was inches away from where they crouched, hidden behind a crate. 'Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please.'

Snape strode past the gap in the crates, and Hermione had to fight every instinct she possessed: to run to Severus, to cast herself in front of him. But if she did so, Voldemort would kill her, and she wanted Severus to see that even less than she wanted to experience it.

'I have a problem, Severus,' Voldemort was saying softly, raising the Elder Wand. *'Why doesn't it work for me?'*

Hermione's eyes were fixed on the same sight as her husband's: the coiling serpent in its protective sphere.

'I think I have the answer,' Voldemort continued, his voice barely louder than a whisper. *'While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine.'*

Hermione was paralysed by horror, her voice trapped in her throat, sweat pouring down her spine.

And Voldemort swiped the air with the Elder Wand, and spoke in Parseltongue, 'Kill.'

There was a terrible scream. It was echoed by Hermione, who had found her voice at last, but no one paid her any attention. The room was swirling around her; her head was echoing with her husband's scream; she couldn't breathe as the snake's fangs pierced his neck, and his face drained of colour.

'I regret it,' said Voldemort coldly. *He pointed the Elder Wand at the starry cage holding the snake, which drifted upwards, off Snape, who fell sideways on to the floor, blood gushing from the wounds in his neck. Voldemort swept from the room without a backwards glance.*

'Harry!' breathed Hermione. *Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak, and looked down at the man whose widening black eyes found Harry as he tried to speak. Harry bent over him, and Snape seized the front of his robes and pulled him close.*

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from Snape's throat. Hermione bit down on her knuckles to stop herself crying out.

'Take... it... Take... it...' Snape rasped.

Something more than blood was leaking from him. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, it gushed from his mouth and his ears and his eyes.

Hermione thrust a flask into Harry's hands. She knew Harry had to see Severus' memories, and the sooner he collected them, the sooner she could help her husband.

Harry lifted the silvery substance into the flask with his wand. When the flask was full to the brim, Snape turned pain-filled eyes on Harry. 'Where... is... Hermione?' he whispered.

The paralysis affecting Hermione's body broke; her head cleared, and she shoved Harry aside to kneel down by her husband. 'I'm here, Severus. It's going to be OK, I promise.' She forced an optimism she didn't feel into her voice whilst scrabbling in her pockets for the bloodmoss and bandages she had stashed there earlier.

'Don't bother,' Ron muttered. 'Another thirty seconds and he'll be a goner.'

"Another thirty seconds and I'll be a widow," Hermione thought desperately. "No, I won't let that happen." She pulled a handful of bloodmoss out of her pocket and pressed it to the wounds the snake had made. 'Don't you dare die on me, Severus Snape,' she told him fiercely. She took a length of the bandage she had torn from their clean bed sheets and wound it around his neck, binding the bloodmoss in place.

As the white cotton turned red, she began to sob. 'Don't do this to me, darling; don't leave me; stay with me, sweetheart, please!'

'Sweetheart!' Ron spluttered. 'What the hell? Have you... with him? No!' He lurched forward, clearly intent on tearing Hermione away, but Harry grabbed him round the waist and held him back.

'Hermione, what's going on?' Harry yelled, still battling with a furious Ron, while Ron himself, looking like he'd just been slapped in the face, roared, 'You married him didn't you? You didn't escape from the Ministry at all; you bloody married him!'

Instinctively Hermione threw her arms wide to protect her husband, and yelled over her shoulder, 'Ron, not now, please! Harry, go. Get those memories into the Pensieve.' The boys froze, staring at her in horror. 'Go, just go!' Still staring, Harry dragged an incoherently shrieking Ron out of the room.

Hermione pulled several phials of Blood Replenishing Potion out of her pocket, thanking Merlin she'd had the foresight to bring them although she had imagined having to use them on Harry or Ron, not her husband. Severus' eyes were closed, and his breathing was horribly laboured. She uncorked a flask and forced the potion down his throat. 'Come on, Severus, drink it. Just try, love, for me.' While she was babbling away to him, more for her sake than his, she managed to get three more phials into him. He seemed to be losing blood as fast as she was replacing it, however. She needed to get him to hospital, now. She wrapped one arm around him, cradled his head in her other hand like a baby's, and Disapparated.

Hermione landed so hard on the floor of St Mungo's reception, she nearly winded herself. Vaguely aware of gasps and shrieks all around her, she raised her head with enormous effort and addressed the Welcome Witch. 'I need Healer Smethwyck. Now!'

As the shaken Welcome Witch hurried away, Hermione looked down at herself and her husband. She was covered in blood. Severus was deathly pale, but still breathing, and a weak pulse fluttered at his throat.

Healer Smethwyck came haring round the corner in a swirl of green robes, skidding to a halt as he took in the gruesome scene in front of him.

'We need whatever you gave Arthur Weasley two Christmases ago,' Hermione gasped. 'My husband has been bitten by the same snake.'

The Healer recovered his professional demeanour, and levitated his patient onto a stretcher.

*

Hermione sat beside Severus' bed in the Dai Llewellyn ward. She had refused to go home, but had taken the Healer's advice and got herself a cup of coffee to try and stay awake. Severus was still deathly pale and had two drips in his arms one of anti-venom and the other of Blood Replenishing Potion. But his breathing had eased, and his pulse was stronger. Hermione took hold of his hand, and his eyes flickered open.

'Hello, darling,' she whispered, smiling. 'Good to have you back.'

Severus' eyes blinked, then focused on her face. 'Who are you?' he rasped.

*

A/N: I have used many lines from 'The Deathly Hallows' to make this fit with canon. Except from where italics are necessary in my own work for emphasis, anything in italics is from DH 32.

Lines in double quote marks are Hermione's internal musings.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 13

Hermione decides she doesn't want to be a philosopher after all.

Hermione decides she doesn't want to be a philosopher after all.

Hermione stared, appalled, at Healer Smethwyck, who shifted uncomfortably.

'Your husband appears to have been subjected to a particularly strong Memory Charm,' he said. 'I'm afraid there is very little we can do for him, apart from accommodating him in our Long Term Residents' ward.'

Hermione blinked back tears. "He has no idea who I am," she thought desperately. "After all we've been through, he has no memory of me at all." Then it hit her. He has no memory! She leapt up. 'I can fix this,' she shouted over her shoulder at the stunned Healer as she raced out of the room. 'Give me half an hour and I'll get my husband back.'

*

Hermione stopped in the Hogwarts Entrance Hall and stared about her, aghast. The Great Hall had been turned into a temporary Hospital Wing, and injured and dying people lay everywhere. She averted her eyes from the lifeless bodies of Remus, Tonks and Fred Weasley, lying side by side, and choked down a sob. There was no time to mourn others now, not unless she wanted to grieve for her own husband's living death.

The Pensieve was on Severus' desk, presumably just as Harry had left it. Hermione was in such a hurry the memories kept slipping off her wand as she tried to scoop them up. "More haste, less speed," she told herself sternly. "Severus has all the time in the world." As she transferred the silvery strands into a crystal flask, a thought hit her. "I could just leave all the memories of Lily here; I need never compete with her again." But her conscience forbade her to do it. "If you edit his memories, he will not be the man you married, the man who won your trust and your love. And if you do it for your own gain, you will not be worthy of him."

Taking a deep breath, she hastily scooped all the memories out of the Pensieve into the little glass phial Harry had left there, and ran out of the office.

*

As Hermione held her wand to Severus' temple, watching the silver strands disappear back into their rightful place, his eyes flickered open, and he smiled weakly at her.

'Hello, wife.' His voice was still hoarse from the bruising to his throat, but he was clearly back to himself.

Hermione flung her arms around him, nearly dislodging the drips. 'Severus! Oh, love, I thought I'd lost you!'

'You might still, if you persist in crushing the breath out of me.'

'Sorry, sorry!' She sat back on her chair, beamed at him, and then burst into tears of relief.

'Shhh, I'll live. Although I do have a confession to make. I defaced your birthday present.' He reached into the pocket of his robes and brought out a crumpled piece of paper, which he held out to her. 'I wanted a piece of you with me,' he said softly. 'Something that means everything to me and that would mean something to you if I died.' He smiled weakly at her. 'I wanted you to know: I never wanted to become a philosopher anyway.'

Hermione straightened out the paper, utterly bewildered. It had been torn from the book Ginny had given her, and, underlined, was a quote from Socrates: 'My advice to you is to get married. If you find a good wife, you will be happy. If not, you will become a philosopher.'

Epilogue

Severus stayed in St Mungo's for two weeks, after which he was discharged with strict instructions NOT to go back to Hogwarts and work. Not that there was much left of Hogwarts to go back to. It had been almost completely destroyed, but Kingsley Shacklebolt, Acting Minister for Magic, had promised to pour as much gold and wizardpower as necessary into rebuilding it. It might open late this year, but that was all to the good, as it would allow Severus more time to recover. Severus was determined to return as Headmaster; he said he preferred the behind-the-scenes organisational role to teaching the brats, and Hermione was going to take over from Alecto Carrow as Muggle Studies teacher (being married to the Headmaster had its advantages!).

Since Hermione's parents had sold their house to finance the trip to Australia, the only place left to them was Spinner's End. It was still, as Bellatrix had once described it, a 'Muggle dunghill', but Hermione had done her best with it, cleaning and dusting everything in sight, reminded of those endless hours making Grimmauld Place fit for habitation.

Under her care, Severus gained strength. The bite on his neck was still sore, and he had abandoned his usual high-collared coat and stock for soft, collarless flannel shirts. He was still pale and anything more than a short walk left him breathless, but his progress was steady and getting better every day.

The thing that had raised their spirits most had happened in St Mungo's a few hours after Hermione had returned with Severus' memories. Healer Pye had been changing the drip in his left arm, when Hermione let out a shriek which caused the Healer to stab his patient in the crook of the arm.

'Ow! For Merlin's sake, Pye.'

'Look! Just look!' Hermione cried, pointing. There, on Severus' forearm, the Dark Mark was fading before their eyes. 'You know what this means,' Hermione whispered.

'Voldemort is dead,' Severus said softly. It was the first time he had ever said Voldemort's name, and he looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Hermione squealed and punched the air. 'Harry did it!'

Then all three of them, Pye included, laughed out loud, whooping and cheering, until Severus succumbed to a violent bout of coughing and the Healer insisted he needed to rest.

A few days after he had been discharged, Severus and Hermione were sitting curled up together on the sofa (Hermione had come so close to losing him, she was happy just to sit with him for hours) when a knock at the door made them both jump. Severus struggled to rise, and Hermione restrained him. 'I'll go.'

'If we have visitors,' Severus explained, 'I want to sit in the wing-back chair. This thing ruins my posture and my confidence.'

Hermione smiled and helped him transfer to the leather chair, then went to open the door. Standing on the doorstep were Harry and Ron. Hermione greeted them with a shrill squeal of surprise, then became suspicious. 'How did you find us?' she demanded.

'Hello, Harry; hello, Ron. Nice to see you. Would you like to come in?' said Harry sardonically.

'Oh, yes, all right then, come in,' said Hermione distractedly. 'How did you find us?' she repeated, closing the door.

'Phineas Nigellus,' replied Harry, grinning. 'Told him I'd make him stay in my bag forever if he didn't tell us where you were.'

Despite her worry at what she had no doubt was going to be a very awkward scene, Hermione giggled. 'Congratulations!' she cried, flinging her arms around Harry. 'I can't believe you did it! Well, I can; you were amazing!'

'I couldn't have done it without Snape. Is he here?'

'Yes,' Hermione said, ignoring Ron's snort. 'Come and see him.'

She led them down the hall, Ron muttering darkly all the way. Hermione had a suspicion Harry had told Ron all about Severus' memories and warned him not to make a scene, but Ron clearly wasn't going to give in without a fuss.

Harry approached Severus, who, with an effort, sat up straighter in his chair, but didn't attempt to get up. Ron stood in the doorway, glowering. Harry took a deep breath.

'Professor, I want to thank you. I misjudged you and I apologise for doubting your motives. I couldn't have defeated Voldemort without your sacrifice. I think...' he hesitated, then ploughed on with what Hermione suspected was a planned speech. 'I think you're the bravest man I've ever met.' He held out his hand.

Severus' face was impassive, but he shook Harry's hand with good grace.

Hermione motioned for the boys to sit on the sofa, while she herself sat on a stool beside Severus' chair. There was an awkward silence.

'So you're married,' Harry said eventually, looking at her left hand.

Hermione explained about the Ministry letter, Occlumency, spying for the DA, her kidnap and Severus' rescue. She told them about everything but the sex: she didn't want to try Ron's obviously strained temper. Ron's hands were clenched, a vein in his temple pulsed, and his ears were going red.

Eventually his control seemed to snap, and he burst out, 'Can't you get a divorce?'

Ron was lucky Severus didn't have the energy to do more than raise a sardonic eyebrow.

'I don't think wizard marriages can be dissolved, Ron,' Hermione explained. 'They form a binding magical contract.'

'Yes they can. Kingsley Shacklebolt's repealed the Marriage Law. Dean's already filed for divorce; so has Lee Jordan.' He shot a nasty look at Snape. 'You don't have to stay with *him*.'

'But the thing is, Ron,' Hermione said gently, 'I want to.'

Ron gawped at her, mouth opening and closing like a fish. Then he declared, 'I don't believe you – he's Imperiused you!'

Hermione's control snapped too. 'No, Ron, he hasn't! Harry's told you about Severus' memories, hasn't he? Now, either you believe him and accept my choice, or you don't see me again. That's *your* choice.' She took hold of her husband's hand, still looking Ron in the eye. 'We've been through so much together this year, I can weather whichever you decide.' Ron seemed to realise Hermione was serious, and didn't answer.

'We should go,' Harry said loudly. 'Professor, thank you again, and I hope you feel better soon. Come on Ron!' He manhandled Ron, who was muttering dark threats he wouldn't have dared utter if Snape had been his usual self, through the hall and out of the front door. 'I'll talk to him,' Harry promised, 'I'll make him see sense.'

Hermione had decided not to tell Harry and Ron that she and Severus were going to renew their vows. Harry would probably be delighted and eager to attend the ceremony, but Hermione thought it would be best to let Ron calm down first.

They had plenty of time, after all. Their priority was Severus' recovery. The wedding would have to wait until next summer, especially if she wanted to go to Australia and find her parents first. If anyone had told Hermione on her 18th birthday that she wouldn't see her parents for two years, she would have burst into tears. But with Severus, she felt she could face anything. There was a line in 'Philosophy for Beginners' which she loved. Appropriately, it was on the page after the one Severus had torn out, so whenever she picked up the book, it fell open at this quote:

"Without his love, I can do nothing. With his love, there is nothing I cannot do."