

The Price of Madness

by PlaidPooka

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

Dangerous Assumptions

Chapter 1 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I've had some fun in slashy fic land, but it's lovely to get back to my favorite pairing. I'm having a great time writing this fic, and I hope that you enjoy reading it as well. I do want to say one thing before we carry on. Some post-HPB writers are making an attempt to write what they think may happen in book seven. They carefully study all the clues from the first six books, and arrange their plot accordingly. This is not that kind of story. In fact, I can practically guarantee you that my fic will have absolutely nothing to do with what happens in book seven. I'll leave book seven to JKR. In the meantime, I plan to have some fun! I hope that you do as well! ;)

As always, big thanks to my intrepid beta, Vaughn. I couldn't do this without her. Well, I could, but it wouldn't be very pretty! Thanks for all your help, Vaughn. You rock!

Disclaimer: I don't own them; I only take them out to play.

Sanity calms, but madness is more interesting.

-John Russell 1921-1991

Waking with a start, Hermione realized that she had no idea what had awakened her. Looking around her childhood bedroom by the soft glow of the streetlight showed nothing amiss. Hermione waited for what seemed like an age, listening intently for any clue as to what had brought her out of a deep sleep. Eventually she heard the soft sounds of footsteps from the ground floor. Ah, that must be it; her parents must have come home. Though she'd been surprised to find them away when she arrived, it hadn't worried her. It was summertime, and her parents often went visiting on weekends in the summer. Now that Hermione had left school and was living on her own...well, on her own with two roommates...she and her parents had gotten out of the habit of telling each other their plans.

Still terribly sleepy, Hermione decided she could wait until the morning before letting her parents know she was there for an unexpected visit. To be honest, if she went downstairs and appeared suddenly in the middle of the night, she'd likely frighten them to death. A sudden thump from below caused her eyes to open again. It was her parents, wasn't it? Of course it was; who else would it be? She was just being silly, jumping at bumps in the night. Rolling onto her back, Hermione dozed as she thought about what had caused her to run off to stay at her parents in the first place. It had all started five days ago.

Sitting in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, stacks of leather bound tomes and scrolls almost hiding her unkempt mane of hair, Hermione plucked a stray quill from her head and wrote furiously in a Muggle tablet of paper. At the moment, she was researching Godric Gryffindor in her fourth such attempt to figure out what sort of

object Lord Voldemort may have acquired from the founder to add to his collection of Horcruxes. This fourth attempt was going no better than the three previous, and Hermione was beginning to contemplate an answer to the Horcrux dilemma that was grim indeed. Taking a break from her intense scribbling, Hermione rubbed at weary eyes while she thought about her situation.

This should have been her final year at Hogwarts...she should be studying for her N.E.W.T.s instead of frantically skimming ancient books about the founder of Gryffindor. However, even the studious Hermione knew that now was not the time for education. The war between the Death Eaters and the forces of Light had never been fiercer. At the end of his sixth year, Harry had decided to leave school and dedicate his time to tracking down the remainder of Voldemort's Horcruxes. It was inconceivable that Ron and Hermione would do anything other than help him, so they had all moved into the grim house that Harry had inherited from Sirius.

The move itself had caused its own problems. The Order had stopped using the house as its headquarters shortly after Sirius' death. When Albus Dumbledore had been killed, the house's Unplottable status and Fidelius Charm had ended. There had been much arguing amongst Harry and the Order about what was to be done. Molly Weasley in particular had been dead set against any of her brood living in a house that the traitor, Snape, knew the whereabouts of. Harry, with the help of Moody and Shacklebolt, had solved this problem by redoing the spells with Harry as Secret Keeper. Now no one could find the house without Harry's personal invitation--not even those who had known its location through Dumbledore. The Order once again set up headquarters there, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione had moved in permanently.

Their first order of business had been to try and discover what had happened to the real Slytherin locket. It had been a shock to Harry when the locket from the cave was so obviously a fake. The mysterious note hidden within that locket had puzzled them all for far too long. Quite frankly, Hermione had been mortified when she realized that the note enclosed in the false locket had to have been from Sirius' brother, Regulus. She should have known sooner! After she made the connection, there had been a very tense week where they all worried if Mundungus had stolen and sold the locket when he had been pilfering Sirius' house. It seemed that Dumbledore had stopped Mundungus from nicking it in time. Even when Shacklebolt questioned him under Veritaserum, Mundungus swore he had never even seen such a necklace.

This confession resulted in Harry, Hermione, and Ron's first month at the house being spent ransacking it while they frantically looked for the locket. In the end, it was Ron who figured out what to do. Catching Kreacher skulking about one day while they searched, Ron said, "Harry, I bet that nasty excuse for a house-elf knows where it is. Why don't you ask him?"

It had taken some arguing, some shouting, and a lot of patience. In the end, Kreacher had no choice but to obey his new master. Scuttling off into his nest beneath the boiler in the kitchen, Kreacher soon returned with something wrapped in a dirty old handkerchief. Embroidered on the handkerchief, quite plainly in dark green thread, were the initials 'R.A.B.'. Opening the filthy wrapping with shaking hands, Harry found the locket. It was most definitely the same one he had glimpsed in the Pensieve when he had been studying with Dumbledore.

Now they had it, but they had no idea how to destroy it.

In the end, Moody had taken on the task. After refusing all offers of assistance, Moody took the locket out into the small backyard of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The locket had indeed been destroyed that night, but Moody had not survived its unmaking.

Now, during breaks in her research of Godric Gryffindor, Hermione searched through the pitiful amount of information she possessed on Horcruxes and tried to think of some way to destroy the remaining talismans that would not destroy the wizard making the attempt. Of the known Horcruxes, it looked like Nagini would be the easiest. Apparently, there was good reason that a wizard should not choose a living thing to use as a Horcrux. All they had to do on that score was kill Nagini and the Horcrux would be destroyed. However, Hermione did not find this information very comforting. Indeed, based on her current research, she found it horrifying in the extreme.

Putting the idea that so frightened her resolutely out of her mind, Hermione thought about the known receptacles for Voldemort's seven pieces of soul. Firstly, there was Voldemort himself, proud owner of one seventh of his soul. Then, of course, there was Nagini. Three of the remaining receptacles had already been destroyed, Salazar Slytherin's ring, his locket, and the diary that had caused Ginny so much trouble her first year at Hogwarts. They knew that the Hufflepuff item was a cup. The cup had not yet been located, but Harry was working with the rest of the Order to track it down.

That diary that had been the catalyst of all their trouble during second year had definitely been a Horcrux, but its involvement was a source of argument among the order. It hadn't been an object of any especial worth; it was a simple Muggle diary that Voldemort had bought in a shop. It was generally speculated that Tom Riddle must have made it when he was fairly young. Hermione's personal theory was that he made it while still a student, and used the death of Moaning Myrtle to do so. Perhaps Riddle had meant to replace that object with something loftier, but he fell before having an opportunity to do so.

That left one receptacle unaccounted for, and it was clear that the object in question either belonged to Godric Gryffindor or Rowena Ravenclaw. Two Ravenclaw items had been discovered, a mirror and an elaborate hair comb, but both tested clean. Perhaps the last item was associated with Godric Gryffindor, yet no such item had ever been discovered. Indeed, the only known Gryffindor relic was the sword that Harry had used to kill the basilisk. Thorough testing of the sword had shown that it was not one of the receptacles. Harry spent weeks searching Godric's Hollow, convinced that the death of his parents had been the perfect opportunity for Voldemort to split his soul for the final Horcrux. Since Voldemort had lost his body that night, it seemed conceivable that the object in question might still be hidden there. Harry's searches had turned up nothing; and now Hermione was afraid she knew why.

Later that evening, after Harry had returned from another fruitless search of his parent's ruin of a house and Ron had returned from an equally uneventful search of a small, hidden library at the Ministry that his father had smuggled him into, the three friends sat eating dinner in morose silence.

Eventually, Hermione broke the silence. "Harry," she began hesitantly, "I know that Minerva gave you the headmaster's Pensieve." While Hermione had eventually gotten used to calling her former professors by their given names, she still resolutely referred to the late Albus Dumbledore as 'the headmaster' or 'Professor Dumbledore'. To do less seemed disrespectful to his memory somehow. "Did she also give you the memories that the headmaster shared with you?"

"No, Hermione. She looked for them, but she couldn't figure out where Albus had hidden them."

Though Hermione flinched a bit at Harry's familiar address, she would never chastise Harry for it. Knowing that Harry and the headmaster had grown much closer during Harry's extra studies the previous year, Hermione could understand that Harry would want to call the headmaster by more familiar terms than she was comfortable with.

"In that case, Harry," she continued, "could I ask you to put your own recollection of those memories in the Pensieve so that I could have a look at them?"

"I suppose I could," Harry said simply, a puzzled expression coming over his face, "but what's the point, really? I've already told you all about them."

"Harry, I don't mean to be beastly, but your memory of conversations leaves much to be desired."

"What do you mean I don't remember things?" Harry snapped.

At the same time, Ron chimed in with, "Here now, Hermione, why are you taking the piss? You talk like Harry's dim or something!"

With a sigh of exasperation, Hermione tried to explain, "I know Harry's not dim, but you both have to admit that neither of you have the memory that I do, especially when you are talking about spoken words. Harry, honestly! You're always saying to me 'how do you remember that?' Has it never occurred to you that I remember practically everything?"

"Well, you've talked about your eidetic memory, I know you remember everything you read, but we aren't talking about reading..."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted, "I've got aural memory as well. Remember how amazed you were that I remembered the Sorting Hat's song...Umbridge's speech at her introduction...any of this ringing a bell?"

The blank expressions of her two mates were seriously trying Hermione's patience. After a brief pause while she counted to ten under her breath, Hermione began to repeat, word for word, the short conversation Harry and Ron had shared when they first entered the kitchen. When she finished, the blank expressions had turned into surprised ones.

"I thought you said your dad stopped on the way to that library to talk to Bill?" Harry asked Ron.

"No...no, it was Charlie...he was in from Romania. Hermione's got the right of it."

For another moment, both Harry and Ron stared at Hermione as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head. Eventually, Harry roused himself enough to speak. "It's obvious that you're right, Hermione. You remember things better than I do. But why now? Why do you want to do the Pensieve now?"

"I've got a hunch about the last Horcrux." Holding up a hand to quiet the questions she knew that they would ask, she continued. "I'm not going to explain it yet. I'd rather be more certain before I say anything more. I'm hoping your memories of what Professor Dumbledore told you will clear up some of my doubts. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will. It won't be easy...but if you think it will help..."

"I wouldn't ask you, Harry, if I didn't think it was important. I know it will be hard for you. I think we're both too tired to start tonight. Let's give it a miss for now and start first thing in the morning."

The sun rose to shine upon a warm summer morning. Tired from their various endeavors the previous day, the three friends slept in a bit later than usual. Shortly after a late breakfast, Harry and Hermione started the first of many journeys into the realms of the Pensieve. It didn't take long for Hermione to sort out an efficient plan of attack for the endeavor. By the second day, Harry would put a memory into the Pensieve and he and Hermione would go in to view it. Hermione would pull them back to reality every half hour so that she could furiously write down every word Dumbledore had spoken. The days passed as her stack of notes grew.

Then, on the fifth day, Hermione wanted to see both the trip that Harry took to the cave with the headmaster and what exactly happened on the tower the night the headmaster had been killed. Completely helpful until now, Harry suddenly balked. Despite Hermione's rational assurances, Harry stubbornly refused to show her either scene. To say that Hermione was upset by this was an understatement. Hurt by what she perceived as Harry's lack of trust in her, and made furious by his stubbornness and refusal to discuss the matter, Hermione had left the house in a fury. Only taking enough time to stuff her notes in her knapsack, she left, slamming the door behind her. When she heard the portrait of Sirius' mother begin her rant, Hermione had been rather childishly pleased by the trouble she'd caused.

Tired, unhappy, and angry, Hermione had Apparated to the one place she thought she might be able to find enough peace to think clearly, her childhood home. Finding no one there, she'd taken a quick, relaxing bath, put on an old nightgown which now barely covered her bum, and gone directly to sleep.

Another thump, louder than the first, woke Hermione from her dozing thoughts. Suddenly she was frightened. What was she thinking? She wasn't three years old anymore, and she wasn't magically safe just because she was in her parents' home. Loud footsteps echoed on the stairs; a far heavier tread than either of her parents. Now worried, Hermione thrust her hand under her pillow to retrieve her wand. As the door to her bedroom began to slowly open, Hermione's hand closed on empty air.

Ohgodohgodohgod! It's in my knapsack! What the hell was I thinking? If poor Moody weren't already dead, he'd kill me himself for having the pure audacity of being too stupid to live!

The door swung completely open and the soft light from the streetlamp disappeared into heavy black robes and glinted sharply off of a silver mask.

Death Eaters! In my home! Thank god my folks are away...I am so dead.

In a reflexive action, Hermione opened her mouth to scream, even though she was aware that it would do no good. The Death Eater in the doorway flew into the room, kicking the door shut behind him. Falling on the bed and crushing Hermione under his full weight, it took but a moment for the larger, stronger man to pin both of Hermione's wrists in one strong hand while he clamped the other firmly over her mouth.

"Don't move...don't speak...don't even breathe," the man whispered viciously, looking her directly in the eye for an instant before his gaze slipped down to her nightgown covered breasts.

The look in his eyes reminded Hermione of a dog she had once seen that had rabies. The man's eyes were wild, restless, and intense. Her fear increased as she could feel his manhood stir against her trapped thighs.

Oh please...just let him kill me...just let me die.

The man's wild gaze traveled up as far as her mouth, but he would not meet her eyes again. "I am going to take my hand away from your mouth," he hissed, his voice suddenly eerily familiar. "There are a dozen Death Eaters downstairs...I suggest you hold your tongue if you don't want them all to join in the festivities."

When he removed his hand, Hermione stayed silent. Certainly she might scream later, but at the moment she wisely chose to try to deal with one Death Eater, not twelve. The man pressing her into the mattress used his free hand to grasp his wand. His murmured incantation surprised her; she had thought that he meant to magically undress them so that he could use that hard rod she still felt pressing into her legs. Instead, the silver light of a Patronus leapt from his wand. At first, the Patronus looked like a small dog-like creature, but at once it began to morph into something different.

Its legs lengthened to those of a brace of chickens and then small bat-like wings grew from its shoulders. Before that change was even completed, the dog's snout melted down to something almost bovine. The chicken feet changed to hooves as the back legs morphed into those of a hare. The changes continued with increasing speed. Hermione had to drag her eyes from the grotesque, dizzying sight to keep from becoming nauseous.

"Fetch the boy," was all the man holding her down said, before tucking his wand away and again clamping his hand over Hermione's mouth. Still changing in its sickening fashion, the monstrosity of a Patronus disappeared through the door.

As it left, Hermione gave up all hope of escape. There was only one reason for a Patronus to behave so, and that was the complete and utter insanity of the person it belonged to. She was being held down on her bed by a madman with a hard-on. And she knew exactly who the madman was. She was going to be raped and murdered by the traitor, Severus Snape.

No Time For Tears

Chapter 2 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Firstly, I want to thank everyone who was kind enough to leave me a review. It really means a lot to me! There were many questions and conjectures. This chapter should shed a bit of light on some of them.

As always, huge thanks to my lovely beta, Vaughn. Despite having a very busy real life, she still makes time for me and my stories. She's the best!

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Lying helplessly under Snape's greater weight, Hermione had little to do except frantically wonder what was going to happen to her. Snape had said that she should be quiet if she didn't want a dozen Death Eaters to "join the festivities," and yet he had obviously used his Patronus to summon one of them. What was his intent? Was it more fun for him to have another man hold her down rather than to use magic for the task? Did he intend to use magic to secure her and then share her rape with the other man? There were so many possibilities, and none of them good. So many questions to ask and no way to ask them with Snape's hand still pressing harshly against her mouth.

Trying to read the intent in his wild eyes, Hermione searched his face in vain. Snape seemed strangely calm for a madman. His expression was passive and he would no longer meet her eyes. Indeed, he now refused to look at her at all. Gaze flitting around the room, he looked at her knapsack, her books, the knickknacks on the shelf above her bed, but not at her. For some time, he even studied the light switch near the door with a strange fascination. If the man hadn't been holding Hermione down and if she hadn't still felt his erection pressing into her thighs, Hermione would have thought that he had completely forgotten about her altogether.

Soon enough, Hermione heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Whatever her fate may be, she knew that she was quickly running out of time. Trying in vain to struggle, Hermione only succeeded in bouncing Snape's hips against her own, which was definitely not helping matters. As the door to her room opened, Hermione went limp in resignation. Another Death Eater strode into the room, closing the door behind him. The new man was also masked and robed, so Hermione didn't recognize him until he spoke.

"What have you got there, Severus?" Draco Malfoy asked softly.

"The pretty little whore," Severus said affectionately, still gazing raptly at the switch plate on the wall. Despite the sweet tones with which Snape uttered the phrase, it did nothing to calm a Hermione, who was now even more convinced of her imminent rape and murder.

"Granger?" Draco asked incredulously. "Of all the...what the bloody fuck is she doing here?" Turning from where he'd been leaning over the bed, peering at Hermione in the dim light, Draco drew his wand and cast both a Silencing Charm and a locking charm at the door. Whipping off his mask, he glared at Hermione with obvious anger. "Let her up, Severus. They won't hear her now. We've got to figure out how to sort this mess."

With a certain lack of grace, Snape managed to get off of Hermione and stand. Walking over to the bookcase, he peered at the titles and seemed to forget that anyone else was in the room. Sitting up on the bed, Hermione glared at Draco. Though she felt like screaming, she didn't want to give Malfoy the satisfaction. Hermione had just managed to open her mouth to speak when Draco interrupted her.

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me what the bloody hell you're doing in what was supposed to be an empty house?" Not giving her a chance to answer, he continued. "Do you even have a clue how much trouble you've caused? Of course you don't, you stupid Gryffindor *Mudblood*. You're too used to jumping straight into a muddle and expecting others to get you out of it." Again Hermione opened her mouth, and again Draco refused to give her one solitary second to speak. "Well, you're lucky this time, you stupid twat. You're lucky Severus got up here before any of the rest of them."

Suddenly, Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears. Strong as she was, it was just all too much. To be suddenly awakened by a Death Eater in her room and then to have reason to fear being raped and killed by that Death Eater was bad enough. To then have this swotty little Malfoy shouting at her like she'd ruined his day was the last straw. Draco saw the tears in her eyes. Crossing to her, he knelt before where she sat on the bed. Taking both her arms in a firm grip, he gave her a rough shake.

"No time for that, Granger. No time for tears, or questions, or explanations. We have to get you out of here and we have to do it fast. They've already set fire to the garage downstairs."

"You're going to help me?" Hermione asked, her disbelief apparent on her face.

"Yes, we'll get you out, if we can. I know you have no reason to trust us, but you've no choice in the matter."

Nodding her head, she said, "I'm sorry, I thought...I thought--" Unable to voice her fear, she waved a hand towards where Severus' trousers were still obviously tented.

Addressing the lamp near her bed, Severus said grumpily, "Just like a Gryffindor whore...blaming a man for a reaction he can't control."

This was too much for Draco. With a soft chuckle, he climbed to his feet. "How do you want to do this, Severus?"

"Invisible knapsack," Severus said lovingly to a small spider crawling across the ceiling.

"You or me?" Draco asked.

"Me. It will be easier," Severus replied, still seeming to address the distant spider. "They expect me to act oddly. I'm mad as a hatter, after all," Severus said dryly.

"Fine," Draco agreed. "Now Granger, we're going to put a Disillusionment Charm on you. Then you'll go out of here on Severus' back. Once we leave this room, you'll have to stick on him like a burr. If he's caught looking as if he's carrying something, then that will look too suspicious, even for him. Once we are clear of the house, Severus will shrug you off. Try to stay quiet until you're in the clear enough to Apparate."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Hermione.

"No time. Just do as I told you," Draco snapped. "Where's your wand?"

"In my knapsack."

"Fat lot of good it will do you there, you foolish twit," grumbled Draco, as he fetched the knapsack, pulled her wand out, and thrust it into her hand. Hermione almost made an issue out of the way he was speaking to her, but the trusting way in which he nonchalantly returned her wand to her made Hermione bite her tongue. Besides, he was right. If she got out of here alive, she'd never again leave her wand out of reach.

When Hermione started to put her knapsack on, Draco pulled it out of her hands. "Can't risk it," he snapped. "Leave your things. They won't do you any good if we're caught."

"But my notes!" Hermione pleaded, "It's important...please!"

Even as Draco was repeating an emphatic 'no,' Severus reached for the pack, muttering under his breath. Hermione didn't catch most of it, but she distinctly heard the phrase "stupid little whore." Why the hell did he keep calling her a whore? Grasping the pack in one hand, Severus flicked his wand at it with the other. At once, the bag shrank until it was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. Severus handed it to her without looking at her. Then, focusing his eyes on the streetlight outside her window, he said simply, "We should go."

Standing on the bed, Hermione wrapped her arms around Snape's neck and her legs around his waist and hung on as tightly as she could. It wasn't until Snape batted fiercely at her hands that she realized that she was choking him. When she tried to adjust her grip, she almost took out one of his eyes with the tip of her wand, which was still clenched in one hand.

"For fuck's sake," Severus grouched, "do try not to blind me, little whore, or we'll never get out of here."

"Sorry," she mumbled, still taken aback by his colorful choice of address.

Once she was situated, Draco rapped Hermione on the top of her head, and she felt the cold, tickling sensation of the charm as it ran down her body. Draco then took the charms off of the door and preceded Snape from the room. As he passed over the threshold, he whispered, "Nice knickers, Granger."

Only then did Hermione remember the shortness of her old nightgown. Malfoy must have gotten quite a nice view when she'd clambered onto Snape's back. Damn him! Just like a Slytherin to make such a comment when she couldn't respond. If he wasn't so busy saving her life, she'd see if she could reproduce the charm that would turn him into a ferret.

As they made their way down the stairs, Hermione could feel Snape's hands on her bare thighs, supporting her. She tried her best not to notice how warm his hands were on her bare skin and how firmly, but gently, they gripped her. As they came off the stairs, Snape released his grip and crossed his arms nonchalantly on his chest, exactly between where Hermione's arms wrapped around his neck and where her legs clenched his waist. If the man was mad, he was still brilliant, as that was perhaps the only natural looking position he could maintain without her limbs interfering.

They entered the living room, and Hermione could already smell the smoke from the fire in the garage. Soon her childhood home would be engulfed in flame. Feeling tears prickling in her eyes, Hermione tried her best to deny them. She knew that if she hoped to get away from the Death Eaters, she must make no sound. It was hard, it was damned hard to ignore the death of her home. Reviving her spirits by reminding herself that at least her parents were safe, Hermione leaned her face into Snape's hair. One of his hands slipped down to give her knee a brief squeeze.

Why was he being so kind? Why was Malfoy of all people helping her, a Mudblood? It was obvious that there was more going on here than Hermione understood. If she made it out of here alive, she was going to get some answers, and she was going to start with Harry. Harry was going to show her those scenes in the Pensieve if she had to hex him into next week. That made her think of another person she needed to talk to. Remus Lupin had been regularly giving the Order information from a contact that he refused to identify. Hermione rather suspected that she now knew where Remus was getting all of his useful information.

Hermione's wandering thoughts were interrupted by a near disaster. One of the Death Eaters had come up behind Snape and was almost close enough to touch Hermione before Snape dodged away. Making his way to an empty corner of the room, Snape studied a painting on the wall intently. The painting didn't deserve such scrutiny. It was a horrible depiction of a basket of kittens that Hermione had spent years trying to get her mother to throw away. The sight of Snape, traitor and Death Eater, studying a painting of kittens like an art critic almost made Hermione giggle aloud. Biting her tongue until it bled, she determined to keep silent no matter what happened.

A rough voice broke through the idle chatter of the Death Eaters. "Well, Malfoy, was anyone upstairs?"

"No," Draco said coolly, "the house is empty."

"That's the third time this month we've carefully plotted only to find an empty house when we arrive," the nameless man growled. "I tell you there must be a leak. We've got to find out who it is and stop them."

"Perhaps," Draco said in that bored tone of voice that the entire Malfoy family excelled at. "Or perhaps they've simply set up better wards. An early warning system would be just as detrimental to our plans."

"You could be onto something there," the man said, placated. "We've searched for a spy in vain. We should have someone check the wards and see if there is anything unusual."

"Too late for that now," Draco said with a disdainful sniff. "We'd best be on our way before the house burns down around us." Stepping over to Severus, Draco said, "What's that you've got there, Severus?"

"Mudblood trash," Severus said disdainfully. "The stupid whores don't know how to paint."

"I see that," Draco said with a wry chuckle. "Regardless, it's hardly a painting worth dying over. Come, Severus, let's get out of the house."

With an exaggerated, world-weary sigh, Snape said, "Oh, I suppose you're right," and docilely followed Draco out of the front door and into the yard. The Death Eaters milled around for a bit, talking and arguing. One of them cast his wand towards the heavens and the eerie sight of the Dark Mark lit the night sky. It wasn't until most of the Death Eaters had Apparated that Hermione got the signal she was waiting for. Trailing behind the last of the black robed men, Severus shrugged his shoulders. Trying to be as quiet as possible, Hermione slipped off of Snape's back and slowly retreated to the side yard. When the last Death Eater had vanished with a crack, Hermione Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

For a moment, she simply stood on the porch in her skimpy, old nightgown. In one hand she fiercely grasped her wand, and in the other, the miniaturized knapsack. Shivering more from reaction than from cold in the warm summer night, Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door. She was barely into the hall when Harry and Ron burst out of the library. Sleepy looking and tousled, they had obviously been waiting up for her. The worried expressions on her friends' faces confirmed her suspicions.

"Where have you been?" demanded Ron.

"Are you all right? We were worried sick!" Harry added.

"What were you doing outside in your nightgown?" Ron said, staring at the short hem.

As both young men came up to her, Hermione flinched with reaction. "Don't touch me," she said, raising her hands as if to keep them at bay. "Listen, I'll answer your question as soon as I can, just please don't touch me right now." True, Hermione had not been harmed, but her fear of what had seemed like imminent rape had left its mark. Knowing that her friends would never hurt her made no difference; she needed a little time to think and to calm down. And to get some answers.

Both Harry and Ron respected her odd request, though they looked confused about it. As Hermione went into the library and up to the hearth, they followed her. When she then tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fire, they flanked her protectively, standing close at her sides without touching her.

"Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall's office," Hermione said clearly, as she knelt down near to the hearth. In a moment, she could see the headmistress' office and luckily, the headmistress herself.

"Hermione," Minerva said, peering into the fire, "is that you, dear?"

Not bothering to answer, Hermione got directly to the point. "Minerva, exactly where are my parents?"

"Oh dear," Minerva said, tightening the sash of her tartan dressing gown. "Stand back, child. I'm coming through."

In a trice, Minerva was there. Looking Hermione up and down with both sadness and concern, Minerva opened her arms. It was as if a damn burst in Hermione. With a plaintive cry, she launched herself straight into the older witch's arms. Minerva held her tightly as Hermione wept with reaction.

"It's all right, my dear. All is well. Your parents are safe. We were tipped off that there was to be a raid on the Grangers' house, so we got them right out of there. It was a near thing; we only got the information this afternoon. They're at Hogwarts, Hermione. They'll stay there until we find them a safe house...though they seem so enchanted with everything we may just keep them safe with us." Releasing Hermione, Minerva grasped her shoulders and looked kindly into her eyes. "Now, do you mind telling me how you knew that they weren't at home?"

"I went there to spend the night," Hermione said, her voice trembling only slightly.

"Merlin's gory ghost! Whatever were you doing there? The house was supposed to be empty! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Hermione assured her. "I'm absolutely fine...just shaken up a bit."

"Were you there when the attack occurred? How did you escape?"

Hermione was one second away from telling Minerva and the boys the whole tale--then she stopped herself. Malfoy and Snape had saved her life, at great risk to themselves. They were obviously Remus' secret source of information, and he kept that a closely guarded secret, even from Minerva. That settled it. She simply couldn't tell the true story until she spoke to Remus and discovered what was going on.

"I was lucky, Minerva. I heard them when they were still downstairs and was able to Apparate away. It was a close call, and I'm still rather overset, but I'm fine, really."

Hermione was a terrible liar, but Minerva had always trusted her to tell the truth, so she bought the tale. Looking at Harry and Ron, Hermione could tell that, unlike Minerva, her friends could tell that she was lying. Luckily for Hermione, they kept quiet, obviously willing to wait until Minerva left.

It didn't take long. Once Minerva had assured herself that Hermione was well, she stepped back to the hearth and returned to Hogwarts. As soon as the older witch had left, Hermione turned to the boys.

"Wait!" she said sternly. "I am absolutely not going to discuss anything in my nightgown. You," she said, pointing at Harry, "go and make us some tea. You," she then pointed at Ron, "go and get us a snack. I am going upstairs to get my robe."

Seeing the determination on her face, the boys dutifully went off to do as she asked without argument--though they may have rolled their eyes a bit at her dictatorial attitude. In a few minutes, the three were back in the library, tea poured, and with a plate of sandwiches on the table near the sofa. Just as Harry opened his mouth to ask a question, the fire turned green.

"Hermione!" Remus said, his face appearing amongst the flames. "Have you told anyone? *Have you told anyone?*" he asked desperately.

"No," Hermione said simply. "But Harry and Ron are aware something is going on."

With a sigh, Remus said, "I'd better come through then."

Keeping Secrets

Chapter 3 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave me a review. You have no idea how very much they mean to me. (I'm a confessed review slut.) Everyone has been so kind, and I thank you all!

This chapter was beta read by the fantabulous Vaughn. She is the apple of my eye, the cream in my coffee, the willy in the porn flick of my life...ok, perhaps I've finally gone too far. I'll just say that Vaughn rocks!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Insanity - a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world.

-R. D. Laing 1927-1989

Dusting off the soot from his journey, Remus looked warily around at Hermione, Harry, and Ron. It was a shock to see a man who had always been so open and honest with them looking so uneasy. Harry seemed more taken aback by this than any of them.

"This is serious, isn't it, Remus?" Harry asked quietly.

"Deadly serious, Harry," Remus said, running a hand nervously through his hair. "I confess that I'm not at all certain about what to do."

"Listen, Remus. It's true that Ron and I are curious about what happened to Hermione tonight...we were dead worried about her. However, if this falls into the "need to know" category of Order business, then you can count on Ron and me not putting any pressure on you or Hermione for answers."

"Harry's right," Ron agreed. "We aren't eleven anymore. We've left school and we're Order members. If this is something that you can't tell us, then we trust you to have good reason for it."

With a relieved sigh, Remus sat heavily on a wingback chair and leaned his head back, closing his eyes for a moment. He suddenly looked older than his years, and so very tired that Hermione was surprised he was managing to stay awake at all, let alone take part in an important discussion. Though she wished she could let the weary man rest, Hermione hadn't even begun to say her piece.

"Remus," she began softly, "I understand very well why secrecy is important in this matter, but is such tight secrecy necessary or even wise?"

Sitting up straight, Remus gave Hermione a sharp look as he opened his mouth to protest.

"Wait," Hermione said, holding up a hand, "let me explain before you give me hell. Certainly, secrecy in Order matters is important; we all know that. However, it seems to me that we have been getting a little too paranoid in our secrecy. The three of us are trying our best to find some answers to some very important questions. The Order's left hand not letting its right hand know what it is doing is not helping that. Consider this, Remus. Because someone decided that I had no "need to know" about the hit on my parent's house tonight, I almost died."

"I understand that, Hermione, and I am sorry for it," Remus said, his voice both kind and firm. "But that's a rather different situation than me risking the life of...another person just to satisfy someone's idle curiosity!"

"It's not a matter of curiosity!" Hermione countered, her voice getting more heated. "Dumbledore himself believed in the Order sharing as much information as possible, and with good reason. We can't fight in the dark, and we shouldn't have to. Knowledge is power, Remus. The more each of us knows, the stronger we all shall be. I'm not saying that the entire Order needs to know the identity of your source. But consider this: the information that you are receiving is invaluable. What happens to it if you get killed? Who would trust your source if you were not there for confirmation? What happens to your source if you die before the war ends, and there is no one to tell the world that they were working for the light?"

Remus had gone pale while Hermione talked; the worried expression was back in his weary eyes. "You would know," he said softly.

"I would not be enough," Hermione replied just as softly. "The Order would not listen to the seemingly insane opinions of one young witch, and you know it. However, they would listen to the three of us, if we all said the same thing. I know why you are worried...I know exactly why, but I would trust Harry and Ron with my life, and, more importantly, I would trust them to do what they knew was right, even if they hated it."

Having been silent through the whole serious and inexplicable discussion, Harry decided it was time to speak. "Hermione is right. We all three would do what we knew was right, even if we truly hated the idea." His eyes looked haunted as he spoke, and Hermione wondered why.

"We've also been used to keeping secrets since we were eleven years old, Remus," Ron added. "I won't pretend to know exactly what the situation is, but the circumstances must be dire indeed, the way you two are going on. Hermione, Harry, and I are used to working together and used to keeping our own counsel. You can trust us to keep that up."

With another sigh, Remus stared at the carpet for a moment, obviously thinking hard. Eventually, he raised his eyes to regard each of them in turn. "I know you can be trusted; it's not a question of trust. I had thought that the fewer people who knew, the safer it was for my source. You've made me question my logic on that, Hermione. However, it is not my decision to make, and I simply cannot do so without first speaking to the person involved."

"Understandable," Hermione agreed. "I'll stay silent on the matter until I hear from you."

"Thank you," Remus said sincerely. "Now boys, if you don't mind, I would like to speak with Hermione alone for a moment."

"Of course," Ron replied. "Hermione, Harry and I are both pretty knackered. We'll go on up to bed. Don't be afraid to wake us if you need anything."

"I will, Ron, I promise. But I think that I will be going back to bed as well. I didn't get much sleep tonight." Remembering her earlier actions, Hermione went up to her friends and gave them each a fierce hug. "Thank you for listening to me earlier. I was jumpy as hell when I arrived. I'm fine now, I promise you."

After Harry and Ron had left the room, Remus took the precaution of casting a Silencing Charm.

"Is that necessary, Remus?" Hermione chided. "They gave their word; they won't spy."

"It's not them, Hermione, it's Kreacher. Without Harry giving that nasty little piece of work specific instructions, I'd rather not chance it."

"Of course, you are quite right. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for, love. You've every right to question my actions at the moment. It was my decision not to tell you about the hit tonight. I didn't want to upset you. Believe me, I regret that very much. I'm afraid that I do still think of the three of you as children sometimes."

"You aren't the only person in the Order guilty of that," Hermione said, her tone of voice showing her exasperation.

"Well, I can't speak for the others, but this Order member is going to try his best to do better by all of you. You have all behaved admirably tonight, and I am not going to forget that, Hermione."

"Thank you for that, Remus."

"I have to go back soon...I only wanted to tell you that it may be a few days before I can get in contact with Draco and Severus. I'll let you know what they decide as soon as I can. It's up to Draco, really; Severus already said that the three of you should be filled in."

"He did?" Hermione asked, her eyes showing her confusion.

"Yes, he did. Draco was going on about how you had probably already told every member in the Order and then some about what happened to you tonight. I told him that I didn't think you would even tell Harry and Ron until you knew what was going on. Draco really had a fit about that. Severus agreed with me. He said...let's see, how did he put it? 'It hardly matters, at any rate. They may act like they're all fur coat and no knickers, but the whores know how to keep their mouths shut.' I tell you, Hermione, it's hard to believe...well..."

As Remus' voice trailed off sadly, Hermione asked him the question she was fairly certain that she already knew the answer to. "Is he truly insane, Remus?"

"He's completely off his head, Hermione. Draco is having a terrible time trying to keep him safe."

"Why don't you get him away from the Death Eaters then? He can't be that much help, not in the shape he's in."

"He won't leave. Draco has tried. He says that Severus is looking for something, he won't say what, and he won't leave until he finds it. Severus has also been doing a lot of research in You-Know-Who's library, and he won't tell Draco what it's about."

"You mean to tell me that Voldemort lets a madman run around loose with all those dark arts tomes?" Hermione asked, her voice going a bit high and squeaky.

"He lets Severus do much more than that, Hermione. Draco and Severus practically live with You-Know-Who. He's always had a strange patience with the insane...just look at how he lets Bellatrix fawn all over him. As his supposed spy in Hogwarts, Severus always was a favorite of You-Kn...the hell with it, Voldemort." Remus said the dreaded name in a firm voice, though he did flinch a bit. "Now that Severus has run mad, Voldemort seems fonder of him than ever. His fondness only goes so far though. He's not above hexing Severus for the slightest offense, and he certainly does nothing to keep the other Death Eaters from doing so."

"You said that Snape was doing some sort of research. What's it about?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Draco tried to find out, but Snape's written all of his notes in Goblin."

"Goblin? I didn't know that anyone knew Goblin, except for Bill Weasley, of course. What in the world could Snape be doing?"

"No one knows. The truth is that he might not really be doing anything. Severus may only think he's doing something important. He's mad enough that he might not know the difference."

"What happened to him, Remus? What drove him mad?"

"Draco said that it started as soon as they left Hogwarts, though it's been steadily worsening. He loved Albus, Hermione. I know that he did. I'll never understand why he...did what he did, but it broke his mind...killing Albus."

"Have you asked him about it? Surely Snape could tell you why."

"I can't ask him," Remus said with a sigh. "Oh, I've tried, but it does no good. If you mention Albus' name, or the Astronomy tower, or that night, or even mention the word 'headmaster,' Severus goes completely nutters. The last time I tried, it took thirty minutes to calm him down, and thirty minutes of a wailing, clothes rending, hair pulling Severus is about thirty minutes too long."

"He seemed so calm tonight!"

"He is, most of the time. But he has triggers that simply throw him into screaming fits. Anything to do with Albus is the worst one. I tell you, Hermione, I'll never understand what happened on that tower. If you look at everything Severus has done over the years, that action simply doesn't belong."

"No, it doesn't, does it?" Hermione said, tilting her head in thought. "If something like that doesn't fit the pattern, then we are missing something. Something important. Could he have been under the Imperius?"

"No. Severus can shake the Imperius--I've seen him do it. Draco did tell me that his mother forced Snape into making an Unbreakable Vow to finish Draco's assignment, to kill Albus if Draco did not. Bellatrix Lestrange was there when Narcissa confronted him. I'm sure that Severus felt he had no choice, if he wanted to keep his cover. But I would have bet my life that Severus would have died himself before he'd have done anything to hurt Albus. I don't understand it, Hermione. I never have."

"I don't understand it either, Remus. Like everyone else, I simply accepted that it was. I didn't try to understand it." Hermione paused for a moment, lost in thought. "I need to consider this. And I need Harry to show me what happened that night. Maybe that will give me some clue as to what was going on."

"I could try asking Dumbledore's portrait again," Remus said, rubbing at his eyes, "but that's as impossible as asking Severus."

Giving a small chuckle, Hermione said, "Harry tried that. He didn't get very far."

"Butterflies?" asked Remus with a tired smile.

"Butterflies," said Hermione, shaking her head.

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore, which had appeared in the headmistress' office on the night that he died, was always up for a chat when people came for a visit. He would talk about wizarding history. He would talk about spells and incantations. He would talk for hours about his favorite sweets. But ask him anything about his death, or about Severus Snape, and he always talked about the same thing. Butterflies. When Harry had approached the portrait to make inquiries about the events that fateful night on the tower, Harry had gotten an hour long lecture on the butterfly *Boloria euphrosyne*. Harry now knew that this particular butterfly...also known as the Small, Pearl-bordered Fritillary...lays its eggs singly on dead bracken in the month of July. Harry also knew that this species tended to form colonies around suitable breeding areas. After an hour, he learned far more about the Small, Pearl-bordered Fritillary than he ever wished to know. He learned nothing, however, about what happened on the tower.

Stubborn, Harry tried again. He hadn't gotten past the word 'Snape' before Albus began telling Harry all about the *Neozephyrus quercus*...also known as the Purple Hairstreak butterfly...and its penchant for oak trees. Wisely, Harry had left in disgust after the first ten minutes of this lecture. Needless to say, he hadn't tried a third time.

"It's interesting, isn't it," said Remus. "The two people who could tell us what we need to know seem incapable of doing so."

"Interesting, or fishy?" asked Hermione, her expression growing suspicious as she raised an eyebrow.

"Fishy, definitely," agreed Remus with a slow smile. "And with the two most interested parties refusing to talk about it, I think I know just the witch to get to the bottom of the matter."

"I'll try...I will...but I've a number of other mysteries on my plate at the moment," Hermione said. Then her mouth opened as she gave a huge yawn.

"I do believe that's my cue," Remus said, yawning in turn. "If I don't leave now, I'll be sleeping in this chair when you wake up in the morning."

Looking out the window, Hermione could see the first traces of dawn lighting the sky. "It already is morning," she grumbled, "but if I don't get some more sleep, I won't be figuring anything out."

"Goodnight then, Hermione. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Remus. I'll keep quiet until you do."

With a flash of green fire, Remus vanished into the hearth.

Climbing the stairs slowly, lost in thought, Hermione made her weary way up to her bedroom. Taking the time only to take off her dressing gown and change into a more acceptable nightgown, Hermione crawled into bed. Despite her sleepiness, rest did not come to the witch for a very long time. Her mind spun in circles as she examined all of the new information it had received. Once Hermione had fretted over that for a while, she thought about exactly what she would tell the boys the next day, and how she would convince Harry to show her what she needed to see in the Pensieve. With a plan of attack in place, Hermione rolled over at last and immediately fell asleep.

Sense and Sensibility

Chapter 4 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

AN: I tell you, all of the kind reviews I've received have really given me a boost! I've been writing like a fiend! Thanks to every one of you, it means a lot to me. I won't promise to always be able to update so fast...dang real life...but I'll do my best to keep this fic rolling along.

My fantabulous beta, Vaughn, has a bigger bear of a real life than I do, yet she still makes time to help me out! Three woots and a big squee for Vaughn!

Special thanks to alert reader, Karen, who caught the fact that I used the word 'council' when I meant 'counsel' in chapter 3. Thanks Karen! :)

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity.

-Technel Herman Melville 1819-1891

The conversation around the kitchen table was not going at all well. Having brought up the subject of the two scenes that she still wanted to view in the Pensieve, Hermione sat quietly as Harry shouted. Hermione had thought that, after last night, Harry might be able to talk with her about it like an adult. Apparently, she'd been wrong. The whole situation puzzled Hermione. Normally, Harry didn't behave this way unless he felt very guilty about something. When he felt he himself was at fault, he tended to act out. He'd get very angry and even go so far as to blame others for what he felt he'd done himself. Hermione knew that Harry still felt guilty about Sirius, and even about Cedric, but what was making him so impossible now? Well, she'd never get anywhere with this if she let the situation digress into another screaming match, as had happened yesterday. Frustrated but determined to be patient, Hermione waited for Harry to shout himself out.

Ron sat by Hermione's side, wisely staying out of it. Watching Harry as quietly as Hermione did, he showed just how much he'd matured over the past year. Once upon a time, Ron would have immediately taken Harry's side, even if he didn't understand the situation. During the short time they had been dating, Ron had done the opposite by taking Hermione's side no matter what the issue. Hermione was still a little wistful that their relationship had not worked out. After two months of dating, they had both conceded that it wasn't really going anywhere. Not terribly surprising, really. After all, school relationships rarely made it past a brace of months. The best thing about the whole situation was that both Ron and she had been determined not to let it ruin their friendship, and it hadn't. Four months ago, Neville and Luna had tried dating. It had scarcely lasted a week and they still weren't speaking to each other. No, Ron and she had been very lucky. They were still friends, and she couldn't think of anything that would ever change that.

Hermione's private musing ended as Harry suddenly wound down, looking at her a bit sheepishly. He must have finally realized that he'd been involved in a one-man shouting match.

"Now that you've had that out," Hermione said coolly, "do you think we might manage to have a discussion about this like adults instead of caterwauling like a dying jobberknoll?"

"I've told you before, there's no use discussing it. I'm not going to show you, and that's that," Harry said hotly.

"That's too bad, Harry," Hermione continued in the same cool voice. Standing up, she faced him over the table. "Because if you won't discuss this with me rationally...if you won't treat me with the respect that a trusted friend deserves...then I am going to go upstairs. I am going to pack my things. And then," she said, leaning over the table, a dead serious expression in her eyes, "I am going to walk out of the front door of this house and I am never, ever going to come back. So what's it going to be, Harry? Rational discussion or do I treat you in the same rude and childish manner that you have been treating me?"

"You don't mean it!" Harry exclaimed, his face going as pale and grey as ashes.

"You know how to tell if I'm lying," she continued, still leaning over him. "What do you think, Harry?"

"She's not lying, mate," Ron said, his voice painfully calm. "And quite frankly, I don't blame her...what with the way you've been screaming at her. You've shown her everything else. It does make me wonder what's so bloody terrible about those two scenes that you would treat a friend this way."

Looking stricken, Harry sputtered for a moment, sound but no sense coming out of his mouth. With obvious effort he tried to calm himself, perhaps knowing that all it would take was one more moment of shouting to drive Hermione to make good on her threat to leave. Suddenly, a sly look came into his eyes. "If I agree to discuss it--not do it, just discuss it...then you'll stay?"

"Yes," Hermione said firmly as she once again took her seat. "But you have to promise to try to listen to what I have to say with an open mind. After I've said my piece, if you still don't want to show me what I need to know, then I want to know why. And none of the lame excuses that you've been trying to shut me up with, either."

In Harry's defense, he considered Hermione's words very carefully. He knew that if he agreed to do what she'd said, there would be no backing out later. At last, he nodded. "Agreed," he said simply.

Something tight in Hermione's expression finally relaxed. Knowing that she still had her work cut out for her did nothing to stop her sudden relief. Harry was stubborn as a mule sometimes, but he generally would see sense if you could get him to calm down and listen.

"All right then," Hermione began. "I'm probably not going to talk about what you expect me to, but I want you both to stay silent for a bit and hear me out. You may not like what I have to say, but I promise you that it's important."

Both of the young men nodded their agreement, though they looked somewhat wary.

"I want to talk about Severus Snape." The words had scarcely left Hermione's lips when both Ron and Harry's mouths opened, their expressions both angry and disgusted. "Stop right there! You said that you would listen!"

The two mouths closed, but the boys still looked a bit mutinous about it.

"Believe me, I know how you feel about the man. I know what he's done, and I know this won't be easy, but I swear there is reason for it."

"Fine," growled Ron. "You've made your point. Get on with it."

Closing her eyes for a moment, Hermione took a deep breath as she gathered her thoughts. "To start with, I want us all to look at Snape and how he treated people while we were in school. I need you both to try to ignore what happened on the Astronomy tower. We need to specifically take a good look at Snape the whole time that we knew him up until that point. Do you understand?"

"What good will this do? The man's a filthy--"

"That's enough, Harry! I said what I need you to do. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry grumbled.

"You don't have to like it, you just have to do it," Hermione said with a small, amused smile. "Now, I also need us to look at his actions, not how he spoke to us. I know he was a right prick to us verbally; we don't need to rehash all of that. We do need to look at his actions."

Hermione paused again while both Harry and Ron nodded their understanding. Both still looked disgusted, but neither were arguing or shouting. As beginnings went, it was better than Hermione had hoped.

"Now then, I'm going to start with our first year and I'm going to remind us of some events which I think are important. When I'm done, I want to ask you some questions. Remember, we aren't concerned with Snape's attitude only with his actions. As they say, actions speak louder than words."

Hermione talked for over an hour. She spoke of how Snape had saved Harry's life first year. She spoke of how Snape had brewed the potion their second year that had restored all the petrified students. For a long while, Hermione talked about the events that had happened third year in the Shrieking Shack. Yes, he'd been stubborn and nasty, but Hermione repeated, word for word, what Snape had said to Harry in that room. There was no doubt that...wrong as he was...Snape had been convinced that he was saving Harry from a dangerous criminal. For fourth year, Hermione reminded them how Snape had fiercely shown Fudge his dark mark when Fudge had been too dense...or too frightened...to listen to Albus about Voldemort's return. It was hardly the action of a loyal Death Eater. She closed with their fifth year, reminding them that Snape had given Umbridge fake Veritaserum when he knew she meant to use it on Harry. She also spoke of how Snape had contacted the Order immediately after Harry had given him the jumbled message in front of Umbridge, and how he had gone looking for them in the forest after that. When she finally finished, she began her questions.

"Now then, focus on our first five years at school. Ignore his hateful words to us. Focus on his actions. Do you agree that Snape has done things to help Harry, indeed, to help all of us? That he has saved Harry's life as well as done other things to aid him?" The boys reluctantly agreed. "Is there any time, any time at all that Snape has hurt a student?"

"No," Harry said. "But no teacher would risk hurting a student. That doesn't prove the man isn't evil!"

"Harry," Hermione said softly, "He was a mean teacher, no doubt. But evil?" Reaching out to him, Hermione picked up Harry's hand and lifted it until the faded scar which read "I will not tell lies" glinted in the light. "I think that we have a perfect example of what an evil teacher would be like," she said emphatically. "Can you honestly tell me that Snape was anything like that evil old hag?"

Though he looked as if he dearly wanted to argue, Harry gave in, closing his eyes and dropping his head. "No, Hermione. I see what you mean. Umbridge was evil. Snape was only mean."

"So, looking at all of Snape's actions leading up to our sixth year, what do you think about what happened on the tower?"

Both young men were silent for some time. Finally, Ron looked straight at Hermione and said, "It doesn't fit."

Unable to hide the flash of triumph in her eyes, Hermione said, "Explain what you mean, Ron."

"It simply doesn't fit. If you look at all of Snape's actions up until that point, what happened on the tower doesn't fit. It's a glaring discrepancy. Sure, there are rumors, but we don't have one shred of evidence that Snape has ever hurt anyone, aside from the usual jinxes and such that we all do. Then he up and kills someone who was supposedly his friend. It doesn't make any sense!"

"What does it matter?" Harry snapped. "He still killed Albus!"

"Yes, Harry, he did. I'm not arguing that," Hermione said calmly. "But why? Why did Snape suddenly do something that simply doesn't seem in his usual nature? Why won't the headmaster's portrait talk about it at all? Dumbledore wasn't shy in life and his portrait doesn't seem to be either. If he felt betrayed...if he felt that Snape was a threat to us and to Hogwarts, he would shout down the castle telling us so."

"I still want to know why it's important," Harry said, the anger gone from his voice.

"As I said to Remus last night, knowledge is power. There are far too many mysteries running rampant, and it's beginning to look to me like Snape killing Dumbledore is the biggest of the lot. If we don't understand why, then that means that we are missing something. If we are missing something, it might be something damned important. I don't know about you, but when it comes time for us to face Voldemort, I don't want to be missing an important piece of the puzzle. I want to know every last thing that may be a factor in whether we win that battle, or whether we lose it."

"But, Hermione," Ron said, "Harry's told us about what Hagrid overheard. Wouldn't that be the missing piece? Couldn't Snape have killed him because they had a falling out?"

"Two wizards who have been on friendly terms for years have a falling out, so the wizard who has never been known to harm anyone suddenly kills the other? I think there must be more to it than that. That's one of the reasons I want to see what happened for myself, Harry. I also want to see exactly what Snape did, how he looked, and how he acted. It's important, Harry, I know it is. If it wasn't, do you think I'd risk losing your friendship arguing about it?"

"No, of course not," Harry said. "You've proven your point. I see why you need to see it. I need some time to think over what you've told me, and to calm down first. It's not going to be easy, living through that again."

"I know that, Harry. If I didn't think it was desperately important, I would never ask you to."

"I need to be alone for a while, give me until tonight. Then I'll show you what happened on the tower."

"And in the cave?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know about that...damn...I told you that I'd tell you why if I refused. Telling you why would be as hard as letting you see it. Listen, I'll think about it, I promise, just give me some time."

"Of course, Harry. I don't mean to rush you, I really don't. But I feel like there is still so much we have to do, so many questions to find answers for, and so little time to do it."

"I understand, love," Harry said, managing a small smile, "I really do, just give me a little while."

"I've an idea," Ron said. "We've gotten rather low on supplies. What say Hermione and I go shopping for the afternoon? We can stock up and you can have some peace and quiet."

"That's a great idea, Ron! We do need groceries, and that way Harry won't think I'm lurking around, ready to pounce on him!"

The three friends laughed together, which made them all feel instantly better after so much serious talk. While Harry went off the tiny backyard to lounge in the sun and think, Ron and Hermione got their things together and went shopping.

Hermione had always thought any sort of shopping that didn't involve books and writing implements a terrible chore. Today, after so much talk and worry, the simple ritual of buying food and toiletries was a welcome distraction. By unspoken agreement, Ron and Hermione shied away from talking about the discussion in the kitchen. Instead, they talked of comforting, inconsequential things. Ron told her about Charlie's visit. Hermione told Ron about talking to Luna recently and how Luna and Neville still weren't speaking to each other. Both of them talked about how glad they were that they had managed to overcome such foolishness when they had split up. It wasn't until Ron ducked into a Quidditch shop that Hermione had a moment alone. Without Ron's lighthearted chatter, she immediately found herself rehashing bits of the discussion.

It had gone much better than she ever could have hoped. Both Harry and Ron were stubborn, and both could hold a grudge for ages. Neither of them had one good thing to say about Snape when they had been in school. All three of them, Hermione included, had hated Snape after the Headmaster's death. Remus had gotten Hermione to think about the situation in a more intellectual way, which wasn't surprising. Hermione was simply more intellectual than the boys. Harry and Ron were more inclined to let their emotions take precedence over their intellect. To be honest, it was rather a miracle that she'd gotten them to calm down and listen to her at all. Hermione had hated to have to resort to telling them that she'd walk out, but she'd seen no other way to make them truly realize how serious she was about the matter.

There was one thing about the whole discussion that puzzled Hermione exceedingly. Harry had still balked over showing her the trip to the cave that he'd taken right before Dumbledore was killed. Having thought that Harry would protest more strongly about having to relive his friend's death, Hermione didn't understand why he would agree to show her that yet still be nervous about the cave. What the hell had happened in that cave? She'd assumed he'd gotten so furious because he felt guilty for being helpless when Dumbledore was cornered. Apparently, he felt more strongly about what he and Dumbledore had done in the cave. It didn't make any sense. No matter. That night she would get to see for herself what happened on the tower, and it seemed likely that Harry would eventually show her the events in the cave as well. Once she had that information, Hermione was certain that things would make more sense.

Of course, it's when we begin to get answers that a plethora of new questions appear.

Traveling by Pensieve

Chapter 5 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

AN: Thanks to all the kind folks who have taken the time to review. Your comments mean a lot to me! There have been many comments that folks are missing Snape, I do too, but I promise he'll return before too long.

Special thanks to alert and eagle-eyed reader, Kiwifire, for catching one of my most common typos. I have a that/than problem. Believe me, I know the difference, but I seem to type them interchangeably when I'm hurrying along, and that is a hard one to catch. Thanks Kiwifire!

Biggest thanks to my lovely beta, Vaughn. I tell you, I'd be lost without her!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Where does one go from a world of insanity? Somewhere on the other side of despair.

-T.S. Eliot 1888-1965

Ron sat in the library of Harry's house, trying not to be impatient. It was a chore for him. Personally, he thought that impatience was his worst fault. The only time he could truly quiet his mind and not rush straight into things was when he was playing chess. Lately, Ron had been trying to apply the way he played chess to other things in his life. It seemed to be having a good effect; he'd been able to stay quite calm during Hermione's discussion earlier in the day.

Unfortunately, chess strategy had little to offer him when all that was required was waiting. Hermione and Harry had disappeared into the Pensieve over a half an hour ago. Though they had invited him to go as well, Ron had never used a Pensieve and was a bit nervous about it. He'd also not particularly wanted a close look at Dumbledore's death to be his first such experience. Knowing that Hermione would be able to fill him in on anything important, he'd declined. His friends had not pressured him, and they'd left him to stand watch over the Pensieve while they were gone. Pensieve travel, if it could be called travel, was very safe. However, Ron wouldn't put it past Kreacher to try to tip the bowl over while Harry was inside. Having sealed the room with various charms to ward it, Ron now sat, bored out of his skull, keeping watch. Perhaps they should have forced Kreacher to remain at Hogwarts, but when Harry had moved into the house, Kreacher had come as well. Hermione still felt sorry for the nasty little thing, so Harry had allowed it to stay.

Watching a bowl full of silvery fluid was not an especially intriguing pastime. True, he'd momentarily been distracted by the silvery light which shone from the liquid after his friends had entered, but after a few moments of that, his interest had waned. Then, he'd tried looking through the Quidditch magazine he'd purchased earlier when he'd gone shopping with Hermione, but he couldn't concentrate enough on the articles to enjoy it.

Now he sat fidgeting, looking about the library, trying to fill his time until his friends returned. Ron liked this room, perhaps not as much as Hermione did, but he liked it all the same. It had several good things about it, not the least of which was that it was completely clean of muss, hexes, and infestations. Some of the other rooms in Harry's house still needed attention. The library was in the best shape, and the kitchen and lavs had been squared away, as had the small drawing room. Harry stayed in what had once been Sirius' room, and Hermione and Ron stayed in the only other bedrooms that had been thoroughly sorted. Hermione, naturally, stayed in the bedroom on the ground floor near the library. It was the same one that she had shared with Ginny when they had all stayed at the house before their fifth year at school. Ron had commandeered the dark, high-ceilinged second floor bedroom that he had then shared with Harry. It was still rather gloomy for his tastes, but it had the unarguable charm of not being infested by anything. On the rare occasions that Remus had stayed over, he'd slept on the sofa in the library. Some of the other bedrooms had indeed been used in the past, but they were anything but comfortable.

That was another nice thing about the library. The furniture was old, but it was sturdy and comfortable. It had the squashy sofa that Remus sometimes slept on, a brace of wing backed chairs, and a padded easy chair near the fire, where Ron presently sat. There was also a desk in the corner and a small worktable, not to mention the floor to ceiling bookshelves that Hermione so adored.

However, it wasn't the furniture that Ron most enjoyed, it was the many objects in the room. An old suit of wizarding armor stood by the door to the hallway, complete with sword and shield. There were several tapestries in the room, and one depicted a long battle in the goblin wars. This particular tapestry moved, and over the course of about three days, it showed the entire prolonged battle in complete detail. Ron had spent hours watching this tapestry, and he still hadn't seen nearly the whole thing. Presently, the tapestry was showing the bitter end of the battle, which was slow moving and without much action. It was just Ron's luck that he was stuck here when the tapestry wasn't showing anything particularly interesting.

There were also several wizard paintings in the room. Harry had moved the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black down from Ron's bedroom. Phineas was a rather dour character with a cutting wit that reminded Ron uncomfortably of Severus Snape. Possibly the two men had been distant relations; there was definitely a certain resemblance between the two. At any rate, Phineas was worth keeping handy, no matter how unpleasant he could be. Having once been a Hogwarts headmaster, he knew a lot of interesting information. Phineas also spent a great deal of time at his other portrait in McGonagall's office, and would keep them informed of the latest news when he was in a good mood. Because of this, Harry, Hermione, and Ron all went out of their way to try and be pleasant to the grumpy old sod. Today, when even Ron would have welcomed a chat with the man, Phineas had gone off to Hogwarts. He was probably gossiping with Albus, as both portraits were terrible busybodies. Ron wouldn't have minded, if only Phineas would show up and entertain him with the latest rumor.

Hermione herself had brought a welcome change to the library. In addition to the many books she kept buying for the already over-stuffed shelves, Hermione had brought in a new ceiling light fixture and several table top lamps and floor lamps. Older wizarding homes relied on torches and gaslights. These more modern fixtures used a derivative of the Bluebell Flame spell. Thus they burned cleaner, brighter, and much steadier than other wizarding lights. The lights had empty glass bulbs that had been

spelled with the bright, bluish light. When the long-lasting spell eventually wore off, one could either re-spell them oneself or buy pre-spelled replacement bulbs. With Hermione around, they'd never need to buy replacements. She'd always had a knack for portable, waterproof fire spells and she'd easily learned this version of the Bluebell Flame. Though it had taken Ron some time to get used to this non-flickering light source, even he had to admit that it was a great improvement on the gaslights that had been in the room when they moved in.

Suddenly, and with a flash of silvery light that made Ron's eyes water, Harry and Hermione reappeared out of the Pensieve. While Hermione looked lost in thought, Harry looked as though he was about to be ill.

"I'll go and make some tea," Ron said, giving Harry's shoulder a comforting squeeze. After taking a moment to pull down the wards, Ron headed for the kitchen in the basement.

When Ron returned to the room, he found that Harry had taken his place by the fire and Hermione was sitting cross legged on the sofa, staring at the blue light of the ceiling fixture but looking as if she was not actually seeing it. Quietly, Ron poured tea for them all, with lots of sugar for Harry and him and only a bit of milk for Hermione. Setting the cups into his friends' hands, Ron sat down next to Hermione on the sofa and waited for his friends to be ready to speak. Finally, Hermione did.

Looking at Ron, she said, "Draco didn't want to kill Dumbledore, I mean, he really didn't. Even when the other Death Eaters arrived to back him up...and they were yelling at him and egging him on...even then he couldn't do it."

Considering this for a moment, Ron then said, "He's like Snape was, isn't he? All nasty talk, but not much bite. Sure, we all hexed one another, but he never actually hurt anyone, did he?"

"No," Harry said, moving to join them on the sofa. "I always thought that he was an evil little bastard. We always fought, we always despised each other, but even when we were fighting, he never went too far, did he?"

"Sweet Merlin," Hermione sighed. "I never thought that I'd feel sorry for the ferret, but how can I not? Can you imagine, growing up with a dad like that? What would I do if I was told that if I didn't kill someone, then Voldemort would kill my whole family? Damn, boys, I'd give my life for the cause--if it was necessary--but how could I sacrifice my whole family?"

"He's probably killed people by now," Harry said solemnly. "He's really with the Death Eaters now."

"I know," replied Hermione, "but it seems like such a waste! Now I feel that...if only something had been done to help him, or to encourage him, then maybe things might have ended up differently."

"I know what you mean," said Ron. "I never liked the little ferret; I don't think I ever would have. But now that you've pointed out the difference between your basic git and folks that are truly evil, I'll be damned if I don't feel sorry for the bastard. What else did you learn?"

"Harry," Hermione said, turning to face him, "you always said that Dumbledore begged for his life. He didn't."

"He did so! Didn't you hear him?" Harry replied hotly. "He said 'Severus' and then he said 'Severus, please', and he was begging, Hermione! Didn't you hear it in his voice?"

"Oh, he was begging Snape to do something, Harry, but he never said exactly *what*! I admit, he looked and sounded pitiful...all slumped and weak...but did you look in his eyes? His voice might have sounded pleading, but there was nothing pleading about the way he looked at Snape!"

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Snape got there, and then he locked eyes with Dumbledore. The headmaster was the perfect picture of a begging suppliant, except for his eyes. They were steady and almost commanding. It seemed clear to me that something was fishy about it. It just wasn't your typical 'here I am all helpless and begging for my life' scene. Dumbledore was weak, certainly, but the expression in his eyes said that he was still in command of the situation."

"Maybe that was because he trusted Snape not to kill him!" Harry practically shouted.

"No, I don't think that was it, Harry. His expression did not change when Snape raised his wand, and the only change in his eyes when Snape began the spell was one of relief!"

"You're having me on!" shouted Ron. Looking to Harry, Ron expected his friend to protest. Instead, Ron was absolutely gobsmacked by the look of pure guilt that clouded Harry's features. "Harry? All right?"

"Hermione is right. Albus did get a look of relief in that last moment. That's always haunted me, because it must have been my fault," Harry finished softly, tears in his eyes.

Rising from the sofa, Hermione then knelt before Harry and put both of her hands gently on each side of his face. "Harry, how could it have possibly been your fault?"

"The cave," Harry whispered brokenly. "It was my fault what happened in the cave...and...maybe, well...maybe because of what I did, Albus hurt so much that he was relived at any thought of it being over. Even if he had to die."

"What happened in the cave, Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice soft and kind.

"There was a potion...in a big bowl," Harry began, his voice coming in stops and starts. "What we thought was the locket Horcrux was at the bottom of the bowl...and you couldn't reach it...not through the potion...and Albus...he made me promise!" Leaning forward, Harry wrapped his arms around Hermione and pressed his face into her neck. Sliding closer to his friends, Ron wrapped his arms around them both, making it an awkward three way hug.

"What did he make you promise, Harry?" Hermione encouraged, her voice still soft and calm.

"He had to drink it...to get the locket out..." Harry said into her neck. "He made me promise to keep him drinking it, force him if I had to. I did, Hermione! I forced him to drink that vile stuff when he faltered. I lied to him and told him it would make him feel better! It hurt him; he begged me to stop, but I didn't. That's why he was so weak when we got back. That's why Snape could kill him so easily. It was because of me!"

By this time, Harry was weeping into Hermione's neck. She could feel his tears running down and soaking into her shirt. Pushing Harry away slightly, she once again cradled his face in her hands. "Harry, I want you to listen to me carefully. If Dumbledore made you promise to force him to drink that potion, then he must have known very well how vile it was. You promised him. That was his decision to make, not yours. You promised him and you kept your promise. It's not your fault, what happened. You promised to do what he asked of you!"

"But it got him killed, Hermione," Harry whispered.

"That isn't your fault. The headmaster was brilliant; he must have known the dangers. Yet he thought it important enough to do, so he did it."

"But it wasn't even the real Horcrux! He died, and it was for nothing!"

"No, Harry," Ron said. "It wasn't for nothing. Because of that fake locket, and the note from Sirius' brother, we found the real Horcrux. If Dumbledore hadn't made that sacrifice, we never would have had the clues we needed. Because he did, that Horcrux is now destroyed."

"That's true," Harry said. Untangling himself from his friends' embrace, he scrubbed at his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Dry eyed, he looked at Hermione, his sorrow still

apparent in his expression.

"Harry," Hermione said, "I know that you'll feel badly about this for a long time. That's understandable. It was a horrible thing that Dumbledore made you promise to do. But when you feel badly about it, remember this; hard as it was, you did the right thing. You kept your promise, even though you hated it."

"You did the honorable thing, Harry," Ron added, "you kept your word."

"I don't feel very honorable."

"It's like chess, Harry," Ron continued. "Sometimes you don't have a choice between good and bad...sometimes it's just a choice between bad and worse." Deciding to change the subject, Ron turned to Hermione. "What else did you find out?"

"Snape looked terrible when he confronted Dumbledore," Hermione replied, "all angry and disgusted. But there's no way to tell if his expression was about Dumbledore personally, or because of what he was about to do. There was something odd about the Killing Curse, and I can't quite put my finger on it."

"It was a typical Avada Kedavra, Hermione. Believe me, I've seen them before," Harry said bitterly.

"I know that you have, Harry. I've seen it too, when Barty Jr. did that demonstration in class. But there was still something that seemed a little off about this one, and I can't figure out why."

"You'll figure it out, Hermione," Ron said confidently. "You always do. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm absolutely starving! What say we give this a rest and go put a dent in those new groceries?"

Hermione had been a little afraid that Harry wouldn't be able to eat after their upsetting Pensieve trip, but her fear proved unfounded. Certainly, Harry didn't have his usual appetite, but he managed a fair amount of the pasta and salad that they whipped up. Perhaps finally getting his guilt out about what had happened in the cave had been good for him. While he wasn't his usual self, he was much more cheerful than Hermione had expected him to be. In his life, Harry had been forced to bounce back quickly far too many times from the upheaval a distressing situation. That practice had obviously paid off.

While she was chasing the last bit of pasta around on her plate, Hermione brought up a subject that she'd been wondering about for some time.

"Harry, from what I've read, one of the main reasons that Pensive are good to sort what's truly happened in any given situation is that the person traveling by Pensive doesn't have to stay especially close to the person whose memories are being viewed. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is," Harry said. "I can't tell you the exact details, but I saw a scene once that had my dad in it. I was able to walk well away from the source of the memory and see what my dad was up to. There is a limit, but it's fairly wide."

"Does the person whose memory you want to see have to be the one to use the spell? Or could a wizard do it on someone else?"

"Not against their will, at any rate," Harry said seriously. "They would have to be voluntarily thinking about the memory in question. But why would you need to? The spell is so simple, practically anyone could use it."

"What if they weren't very good at magic? Could another wizard do it for them?" Hermione asked.

"I don't see why not. As I said, it's a simple spell. We could give it a try after we finish up here, if you want. But I still don't see what use it would be. It has no effect on Muggles, and anyone who has magic should be able to do it themselves."

"What about Hagrid? His magic is always a little dicey. I don't think I'd want him trying that on himself; he might do himself a harm."

"Oh, Hagrid! You're right, Hermione, I don't think that he is up to it. Let's me and you see if it can be done. If so, then we could try it on Hagrid. Folks with giant blood are magic resistant, but it's not an aggressive spell, so it should work. But why do you want to?"

"Remember when we were visiting Ron after the poisoned mead incident? Hagrid told us snippets of an argument he heard in the forest between Snape and Dumbledore. I'd really like a chance to get closer to that conversation and see what was really said."

"I remember you two telling me about that," Ron said. "It seemed really damning at the time. What do you think we'll find out?"

"I don't know for certain," Hermione said solemnly, "but the more I think about the reason why Snape would possibly decide to kill Dumbledore, the more my mind returns to that conversation. Hagrid didn't hear much, and he may have misremembered what he did hear. I think we need to hear it for ourselves."

"Sounds sensible," Ron said. "You and Harry see if the spell can be done by another wizard, and then we can go see Hagrid tomorrow. I think I'll brave the Pensive and go with you on this one. I've always wanted to hear what really transpired during that conversation."

Shortly, Harry and Hermione found out that a wizard could indeed pull a memory from a willing subject. Their plans in place, the three friends went off to bed, determined to visit Hagrid the next day.

In Hagrid's Head

Chapter 6 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: As always, big thanks to everyone who has left me a review. I can't tell you how encouraging it is to hear a bit about what folks think of this fic so far. I just love it!

Extra special thanks to my intrepid beta, Vaughn, for this chapter. She helped me a lot in getting Hagrid's voice down better. I'd done all right in spots, but in others I had him sounding a bit like an Irish elf. "giggle" I really like Hagrid, so I was glad to have some help making him sound more like himself. Vaughn rocks!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Much madness is divinest sense - to a discerning eye - much sense - the starkest madness.

-Emily Dickinson 1830-1886

"Nah, Harry, I don't mind if yeh try that spell on me noggin'," Hagrid said pleasantly. "Yer a right good wizard, yeh are. But why would yeh want ter?"

"I've been trying to find some answers to some dicey questions, Hagrid," Hermione replied, setting her huge mug of tea down on Hagrid's kitchen table. "We want to see if we can hear a little more of that argument you overheard between the headmaster and Snape. Tell me something, Hagrid. How did you feel about Professor Snape, and what was your reaction to him killing Dumbledore?"

Though Hagrid's face clouded over at the mention of the traitor's name, he then made an obvious effort to calm his emotions on the matter and speak objectively. "I always rather liked Sev'rus. Made me feel a great fool when I found out tha' he couldn't be trusted. A'fore tha, I liked 'im fine. Sure, he was a bit prickly... 'e always reminded me o' a hippogriff, touchy and proud--but a good man fer all tha'. 'E used to make me the potions I needed for my wee beasts...I was never tha' good with fiddly potions. Sure, he'd grumble a bit, but 'e always done it for me, no matter how often I asked."

"What did you think when he killed Dumbledore?" Ron asked.

"I didn't believe it at first. If young Harry hadn't seen it with his own two eyes, I'd still nah believe it. Like I said, the man was a might touchy, but 'e always seemed like a good man ter me."

"We've been talking about this a lot, Hagrid," Hermione said. "I think he was a good man at heart, up until that night on the tower. We don't understand what made him change. That's why we want to hear what happened in the forest."

"Like I said, yeh can do the spell if yeh want ter. I'm not worried about it."

Standing up, Harry retrieved the Pensieve from where he had left it by the door to Hagrid's hut and carefully placed it on the table before approaching Hagrid. It was a good thing that Hagrid was seated; otherwise, Harry would have been hard pressed to reach the tall man's head. Pulling out his wand, Harry said, "It won't hurt, Hagrid. It just feels a bit funny, like your head has gotten cold all of a sudden. Now, I need you to concentrate on that specific memory before I do the spell."

"Anytime, Harry," Hagrid said, closing his eyes. "I got it firmly in my head."

The three friends had continued practicing silent magic after they'd left school, so Harry made no sound as he started the spell. It worked as easily on Hagrid as it had the previous night on Hermione. In a moment, he'd drawn the long, shimmering trail from Hagrid's temple and placed it into the Pensieve. The Pensieve flashed brightly as the memory hit it and then it returned to its usual churning silver surface.

"Do you want to come with us, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Nah, I'll leave the three o' you ter it. I don't rightly know if I feel up ter hearin' the headmaster's voice just yet, so soon after..." Hagrid's voice trailed off, and he rubbed a hand at his watering eyes.

"It's all right, Hagrid," Hermione said soothingly. "We'll fill you in on anything that we find out. There's no need for you to come."

With a final 'Good luck ter yeh' from Hagrid, Hermione, Harry, and Ron leaned over the Pensieve.

Suddenly, Hermione found herself in the Forbidden Forest on what looked like a seldom used path. As the large form of Hagrid moved past her and walked along the path, Hermione at first thought that Hagrid had changed his mind and joined them. Realizing that she was seeing the Hagrid from his memory, she shook her head as she joined Harry and Ron in following him. It wasn't long before the three friends heard voices in the distance.

"Let's go!" Harry said. "Quickly!"

Leaving Hagrid behind, they wound their way through the underbrush until they drew nearer to the people who were arguing amongst the trees. As they hurried, they caught snippets of the conversation.

"I'm sick to death of being..."

"...that. You were never that."

"...should never have let you talk..."

"...the right thing to do..."

"...push me, old man!"

"...I promised you...an alternative."

"...is none! You lied..."

Suddenly, as they grew nearer to the speakers, they could hear the rest of the argument clearly.

"We've been through this already, Severus. You gave me your word that you would do what I asked of you."

"What do you want of me, Albus? A fucking Unbreakable Vow? As you are well aware, I've got one of those already, and I assure you that one is more than enough!" Though Snape's voice was sharp and venomous, when Hermione peeked through the tree trunks, she was shocked to see that Severus Snape sat cross-legged on the ground, his head in his hands.

"My dear boy, your word has always been more than enough for me," Albus said so softly that it was no surprise that Hagrid had not heard him.

When Snape then lifted his head, Hermione could see that, though he didn't weep, his eyes were watery and an expression of great sorrow belied his sharply spoken words. "There's no guarantee that this will even work, Albus. I only agreed because you promised to look for a way out of it. Even if I do it...even if I go back to them...I may never even find what we need."

Stepping over to where Snape sat on the ground, Dumbledore knelt beside him. Putting a comforting hand on Snape's shoulder, Albus said, "I know that you will find it, Severus. If anyone can, it's you."

Shaking off Albus' hand, Severus shouted straight into the older wizard's face. "Damn it, Albus! You take too much for granted! I don't want to do this anymore, and short of forcing an Unbreakable Vow on me, you can't make me do it."

The voice that answered him had grown firm and cool, "Never forget, Severus. You've already made me your promise. I've never known you to break your word to me, and I don't think you'll start now. That's all there is to it."

"You are supposed to be my friend, Albus," Severus said in so soft a voice that Hermione could barely make it out. "What kind of friend would make me promise to kill him?" At that point, the tears that had been threatening to fall slid silently down Severus Snape's face.

Gathering the weeping man close to his chest in a firm hug, Albus said, just as softly, "The kind of friend who wants you to live, dear boy. My time is almost done, and you are still a young man. Even if we discard the other reasons for this to happen, it's not only your life that hangs in the balance, but Draco's as well. Believe me, lad, if I find no other way out of it, then this is the correct thing to do."

For another moment, the two men murmured together in voices so hushed that even Hermione, who was standing the closest, couldn't hear them. Then Snape and Dumbledore rose and prepared to leave.

As they began to walk, Albus said, "Don't forget to start your investigations into Slytherin house about that cursed necklace, my boy."

"Lot of foolish nonsense," Snape grumbled softly. "Wasting my precious time pretending to look for the culprit when we know damn well who it was."

"Too true," Albus said, chuckling. "But we must keep up appearances, or the boy will get far too suspicious."

At that point, Hermione felt a strange pull that drew her away from the two wizards. Looking for Harry and Ron, she soon saw that they were being pulled away as well.

"Hagrid must be moving on," Harry said. "We can only be so far away from him."

The words were scarcely out of Harry's mouth before the Hermione felt the odd feeling of the Pensieve and the three friends abruptly reappeared in Hagrid's hut. Still seated next to the table, Hagrid smiled happily at their safe return. As Harry put the shining string of Hagrid's memory back into his head, Hagrid remained quiet. As soon as Harry had finished, he spoke.

"So how did it go?" Hagrid asked. "I expect 'twas just a silly argument about that fool necklace, just as I said, weren't it?"

As Harry opened his mouth to tell Hagrid all that they had learned, he then snapped it shut as Hermione quickly interrupted him. "You're right, Hagrid. It was just a foolish disagreement. We didn't learn anything important after all."

Rising to wash up the empty mugs, Hagrid missed the confused expressions that Harry and Ron gave Hermione, as well as the sharp look she threw them in return.

"Well, I am sorry tha' I wasn't more help ter yeh. I told you back when it happened tha' it weren't likely as bad as it sounded. Sev'rus always was one for shoutin'; it didn mean that he was especially angry."

"I suppose that you're right, Hagrid. You knew him better than we did, after all."

"Too true. I miss him sometimes, yeh know. Then I remember what he did, an' I feel right foolish."

"We don't know why Snape did what he did, Hagrid," Hermione said kindly. "Whatever happened, that doesn't mean that he wasn't truly your friend before that. Things change. People change."

"I hadn'a thought about it like tha'. I always thought that he'd just been pretendin' ter be my friend. I still hate the bastard fer what he did, but knowing tha' maybe it weren't all an act does make me feel better. Thanks, Hermione."

"Anytime, Hagrid," Hermione said, her expression much sadder than the cheerful tone that she had forced into her voice. "We'd best be off. Now that we've hit this dead end, we had better sort out what to do next."

After the three friends had said their goodbyes and promised Hagrid that they would come back again when they had time for a proper visit, they left Hagrid's hut, silently walked to the Hogwarts' gate, and Apparated back to Harry's house. Once they were inside, the silence was loudly broken.

"What did you do that for, Hermione?" Ron snapped. "You heard Hagrid; he *liked* the great git! It would have made him feel better to know that Snape had made that promise to Dumbledore."

"Do you think I don't realize that?" Hermione snapped back. Her tone quieted as she said, "Sorry. Sorry. I didn't mean to shout at you. Give me a moment to explain."

With obvious effort, Ron got hold of his temper. "I shouldn't have jumped you like that. It's just that I don't understand."

"I don't understand it either, Hermione," Harry added. "What harm could it possibly have done to let Hagrid know what we found out?"

"Possibly a lot of harm. Look, I adore Hagrid, and I'd do a lot to make him happy. But Hagrid isn't a great one for keeping secrets, is he? Especially secrets that he knows will make others happy. If we had told him what we found out, how long would it be before he was off to Minerva, or Filius, to tell them the good news?"

"Why would that matter? The teachers all rather liked Snape when we were in school. Why shouldn't they be told that he had no choice about killing Dumbledore?"

"Why do you both make it sound like what he did is suddenly all right?" Harry loudly interrupted. "I don't care what Albus said, Snape is still a bloody murderer! He should have died first! He should have died!"

"Harry," Hermione said, keeping her tone of voice as calm as she could manage, "he promised the headmaster. You heard him, Harry. Snape didn't want to promise that, but he did. Dumbledore must have had good reasons to ask that of Snape. Snape did the honorable thing...he kept his word, even though he hated it. Just as you did in the cave."

"It's not the same thing, Hermione. I didn't kill Albus!"

"I don't mean to be cruel, Harry, but how do we know that? I saw your memory of Dumbledore on the tower; he looked horrible. He looked like he was dying...even the Death Eaters said so. Whatever that potion was, it was very vile." At Harry's stricken expression, Hermione quickly continued. "I'm not saying that you did the wrong thing, Harry; we've already discussed that. You kept your word, and that's important. I'm only saying that Snape did the same thing."

Though Harry still didn't look as if he agreed, he stopped arguing. Feeling it a good idea to get the subject back to something less volatile, Ron said, "What about Hagrid, Hermione? Why was it important to lie?"

"Snape's with the Death Eaters now. From what he and Dumbledore were discussing, it sounded like they knew that would happen. It also sounded like the headmaster expected Snape to do something important there. All the Order members, even Hagrid, can keep a nasty secret. But as you said, Ron, this would be welcome news to the Hogwarts professors. It's far harder to keep good news a secret than it is to keep something nasty."

"So you're saying that if knowledge of Snape's promise gets out, it would compromise his position with the Death Eaters, and he wouldn't get to do whatever it was that Dumbledore asked him to do," Ron said.

"Exactly!" Hermione replied. "We don't even know what Snape is supposed to do. It might be something truly important. I know that I said the Order is getting too obsessed with secrecy, but that doesn't mean we should act foolishly. I really think that we should keep this to ourselves...at least until we know exactly what we are dealing with."

"All right, I can't argue with that," Ron said kindly. "I still think it's a bit crap, but I understand why it was necessary."

"Thank you, Ron. Harry, all right?"

Though he still looked upset, Harry nodded. Unsettled by both the heated discussion and the trip through Hagrid's memories, Hermione left her friends and headed to the library for some much needed thinking time. Carefully, she studied the conversation that they had overheard in the forest. Several things seemed clear to her. Snape had not wanted to kill the headmaster, and he had been angry that Dumbledore had not found any other alternative. The headmaster expected Snape to stick to his promise, and thought that Snape could find out something important when he went back to the Death Eaters. He'd made it quite clear that he was willing to give up his life if it meant that Snape and Malfoy would be saved. It was a noble decision he had made, and Hermione respected Dumbledore for it, though it made her miss the older wizard all the more.

Her musings were interrupted by a loud crack of Apparition coming from outside the house. Rushing to the library window, Hermione studied the street outside. Evening had fallen and the night was dark and gloomy, but the dull shine of the Muggle street lamps gave a decent view of the street just in front of Harry's house.

Severus Snape stood on the pavement near the house. The frustrated expression on his face made it very apparent that he could not see the house, even though he knew where it was. Pacing back and forth on the pavement like a caged tiger, he soon began to shout.

"I know that you bloody whores are in there! Come out, you whores! Come out!"

As Snape continued to pace and shout, another loud crack of noise split the night. Draco Malfoy appeared. Striding up to Snape, it was obvious that Malfoy was trying desperately to get Snape away from the house. Pulling on Snape's arm, Hermione could see that Malfoy attempted a Side-Along Apparition, but that was a rather dicey thing to try at the best of times. It was impossible with an unwilling partner. In a Side-Along, both parties had to make the turn at the same time, almost like dancing. It was clear that Snape was having none of it. Shaking Draco off, he shouted again.

"I know that you're in there. Get your whorish arses out here! Whores!"

As Hermione gazed at the whore-shouting man in shock, Ron and Harry rushed into the library, wands drawn, to see what was going on.

Whores and Serpents

Chapter 7 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Thanks to all of you readers who have been kind enough to leave a review. It really encourages me to keep on plugging along! Many of you have expressed curiosity about Severus' "whore" habit. *giggle* Yes, there is a reason that he's fixated on the word, but we aren't going to get to that for a bit. In the meantime, this fic should be chocked full of our whore-shouting madman, so we should have some fun!

Ginormous thanks to the lovely and talented Vaughn, who not only has been helping me with this fic, but also my SS/HG gift exchange fic. A beta's work is never done!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Insanity is knowing that what you're doing is completely idiotic, but still, somehow, you just can't stop it.

-Elizabeth Wurtzel 1967

"Come out, you bloody whores!"

The word 'whores' echoed softly off the neighboring houses as Severus Snape continued to pace the pavement in front of Harry's warded house. Though Draco tried to drag the shouting wizard away, Snape was having none of it.

"What the effing hell are *they* doing here?" Harry snarled. "I don't care if Snape killed Albus on Albus' orders or not, I'm not going to let Death Eaters cause trouble outside of my house! The way he's shouting, he'll have the Muggle police down on our heads."

"Let's go drive them off then," Ron growled. "I've always wanted a chance to hex Malfoy good and proper."

As the two young men turned to leave the library, Hermione blurted, "No! You can't." When Harry and Ron turned back to her with puzzled expressions, Hermione continued. "I promised Remus that I'd keep quiet until he got back to me, but I think you both have suddenly developed 'need to know' status."

"Bloody hell!" Ron said. "Are you telling me that Snape is Remus' secret source?"

"Not only Snape...Malfoy too. Listen, I don't have time to explain everything right now." Outside the house, Snape was still shouting, which proved the need for them to hurry. "I'll go out to them and try to calm Snape down. You two fire-call Remus. If he isn't home, track him down, but don't the two of you come out until he gets here."

"Hermione," Harry said tensely, "there is no way that I am going to let you go confront those two alone. I don't care if they are Remus' sources, you could get hurt. I've never trusted Malfoy, and Snape's acting like a madman."

"You don't know the half of it," Hermione muttered under her breath. "Listen, without Snape and Malfoy's help, I would have died at my parents' house the other night. They saved my life...they won't hurt me now. Just trust me and get Remus!"

"It will only take one of us to call Remus," Ron said sensibly. "Let me go with you while Harry calls."

The shouting in the street grew louder, and more frantic. "No, Ron. I can't explain right now, but if you go out there, it might upset Snape more." As Hermione headed for the front door of the house, she shouted back, "Just trust me and get Remus!"

Hurrying across the small front lawn, Hermione saw Snape take one brief look at her before he focused his attention on a nearby dustbin. He stopped shouting as soon as he saw Hermione, and waited patiently for her to approach.

"I need to see the whore's son," he said conversationally to the dustbin.

"Sorry about this, Granger," Draco said, coming up to stand near her. "I tried to get him out of here, but I couldn't get him to budge."

Dragging her eyes off of the sight of Snape staring interestingly at an old, crumpled newspaper lying near the dustbin, Hermione turned to Draco. "I know...I saw you pop in after him. How did you know he was here? Did Remus tell you that this is where Harry's house is?"

"No, of course not." Hermione watched as Draco lifted a suddenly quiet and docile Snape's right hand. There was a simple silver bracelet on Snape's wrist. "Tracking spell," Malfoy explained. "He has a tendency to wander off, and I'd never be able to look after him without it."

"Why did he come here?" Hermione asked.

"Haven't the foggiest. He's been telling me he has to talk to the whore's son all day. I told him that we should wait until we spoke to Remus. The sneaky bugger waited until I was in the shower and snuck off!"

"Whore's son?" Hermione asked, her tone of voice showing her confusion.

"That means Potter, though why he wants to talk to Potter, I have no clue."

Growing impatient, Severus placed a gentle hand on Hermione's arm. When he spoke, he addressed the general vicinity just to the side of Hermione's left ear. "Pretty little whore," he said cajolingly, "I need to see The-Whore-Who-Lived. Won't you go and fetch him out?"

"You'll see him in a moment," Hermione said in the sweet and calm tone of voice used by placating mothers the world over. "Why do you want to see him, Mr. Sn--"

"Severus!" Draco shouted before Hermione could finish the word. "We like to be called Severus, don't we?" he continued with a rather forced cheerfulness. The hard look he gave Hermione belied his tone of voice.

Never a fool, Hermione quickly accepted the hint before she continued speaking. "Severus, why do you want to see Harry?"

Unfortunately, Severus had gotten tired of her attempts to distract him. Stepping away from Hermione, he once again stared hard at the place where he knew the hidden house was. "Stupid whores," he muttered. "I haven't got time to play ridiculous games." Just as Severus opened his mouth to shout at the house again, Remus, Harry, and Ron appeared, hurrying across the lawn to join them.

Going right up to where Severus stood, Remus placed a friendly hand on the mad wizard's shoulder and said pleasantly, "Why Severus! What a nice surprise! We weren't expecting you to visit this evening."

Completely ignoring Remus, Severus took one glance at Harry and started unbuttoning his robe. The onlookers stared at him in shock as he unbuttoned enough of the opening to drag it off over his head before flinging the garment carelessly down on the pavement at his feet. As they still stared, Severus began on the buttons of his shirt.

Stopping the strange strip tease by firmly taking both of Severus' hands in his own, Remus said calmly, "Severus, what are you doing?"

"I have to take my shirt off!" Severus said in the tone of voice some people use when speaking to a particularly dimwitted child.

"Yes," Remus said, continuing to hold Severus' hands still, "I see that, but why are you doing so in the middle of the street?"

"Unhand me, werewhore! I told you, I have to take off this bloody shirt!"

Letting go of Snape's hands, Remus wrapped one arm around Snape's shoulders and pulled on him gently. "Severus," he said firmly. "Severus, come here."

To Hermione's shock, Severus stopped trying to unbutton his shirt as Remus drew him into a strange, one-sided hug. Though his arms hung limply at his sides, Severus leaned into the embrace and rested his head on Remus' shoulder.

"Now, Severus," Remus said, his voice low and affectionate. "Can you explain to me what you are trying to do?"

"I *have* to take *off* my *shirt*!" he grumbled. "How many times do I have to repeat myself?"

Remus raised an eyebrow at Draco, who shrugged in response. "Don't look at me. This is new. Usually I can't get him to take anything off. I have to practically hex him to get him to shower."

"All right. You have to take off your shirt," Remus said pleasantly to Severus. "Do you have to take it off here, in the middle of the street? I know it is summertime, but it's still rather chilly tonight to go parading about the street with no shirt on. Why don't we go into the house...hmm? Why don't we go inside and you can take your shirt off there?"

"Oh, all right!" Severus growled. "But you'll have to show me; I can't even see the ugly old whore of a house!"

"Harry," Remus said calmly, still holding Snape tightly against his side, "you'll have to invite Draco and Severus in."

"Remus," Harry replied impatiently, "are you certain that's wise?"

"Just do it, Harry," Remus said in that same calm tone. "Trust me on this one, please. We have to get him off of the street before he attracts any unwanted attention."

"Fine," Harry snapped. Turning to Malfoy, he said peevishly, "My house is at number twelve, Grimmauld Place." After he made the same statement to Severus, the group went inside. Remus kept his arm around Severus, who was strangely manageable now that they were moving. Taking the time to snatch Severus' robe from the pavement, Draco hurried to follow them.

"Lupin," Draco said as he caught up with them at the door, "I don't want them upsetting Severus any more than he is already. They don't know--"

"I talked to Ron and Harry before we came out," Remus interrupted in that same maddeningly calm voice. "They know about the name, and they know the worst one. Hermione doesn't know about the name."

"I told Granger about the name. We'll just have to take our chances with the rest."

Once inside the hall, Severus shook Remus off of him and went immediately back to the buttons on his shirt while the rest of the group stared at him in awkward silence. When the shirt was removed and flung impatiently to the floor, they could see that Severus had an odd harness on. Hermione thought that the device looked much like a Muggle shoulder holster. However, instead of a gun, it strapped a leather pouch close to Severus' body.

"What's that, Draco?" Remus asked curiously.

"No idea. I've never seen it before."

As Snape opened the pouch and rummaged through it, Hermione noticed that his bare torso was marked with scrapes, hex burns, and bruises. "What's happened to him?" she said with concern.

"The other Death Eaters happened to him," Draco said bitterly. "I try to protect him the best that I can. He only sleeps a couple of hours a night and he keeps wandering around without me."

"Why haven't these injuries been attended to?" Hermione snapped, appalled at Snape's condition.

"Look, Granger," Draco snarled, "I do my bloody best. I can barely force him to take a blasted shower let alone get him to allow me to point a wand at him."

The argument abruptly ceased as Severus drew a shining object from the pouch. Cradling it in his hands, Snape gazed at it for a moment like it was the most precious thing in the world.

"Hermione," Harry whispered, "is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, Harry," Hermione replied in an awed voice. "I think that there is no doubt about it."

The object that Severus held so lovingly was a small gold cup. It had two graceful handles and, as Severus turned it in his hands, an engraving of a badger on its bowl.

"That's one of Voldemort's Horcruxes," Hermione said, her face still showing her surprise. "It's Helga Hufflepuff's cup. We knew that it existed, but we haven't been able to find hide nor hair of it."

"The Dark Whore hid it most carefully," Severus said softly, caressing the rim of the golden cup lovingly with a fingertip. "The whore thought he was so clever...that no one could get to it. But I found it. Oh, yes, I finally found the cursed thing." Abruptly, his attitude changed. Holding the cup disdainfully between his thumb and forefinger...as if it was suddenly odious to him...he offered the cup to Harry. He averted his face, as if he could no longer bear the sight of it. "It's for you, whore's son. I was supposed to bring it to you."

Surprisingly, Harry did not object to the odd nickname. With a strangely mixed expression on his face, Harry gently removed the cup from Severus' grasp. "Thank you, Severus," was all that he said.

Now that he had accomplished what he had come to do, Severus seemed at a loss. Standing awkwardly in the hallway without his shirt on, his eyes began flickering around the hall as he gave the pictures and gaslights a brief glance.

Draco broke the sudden lull. "I don't know about all you whores," he joked, "but I could really use a drink."

"You know, Malfoy," Ron said with a grin, "I never thought I'd agree with anything that you had to say, but that's a bloody brilliant idea."

The group trailed into the library with Severus following along, his discarded shirt still littering the hallway floor. Once in the library, Severus began exploring the room, looking at its many objects with interest, as if he'd never been there before. As she accepted a glass of port from Harry, Hermione noticed that Severus seemed particularly fond of the suit of armor that stood by the door and the various Bluebell Flame lamps. She also couldn't keep herself from staring at his bare chest. The sight brought back uncomfortable recollections of when he had thrown himself atop her at her parents' house. Oddly, it was not her fear that she remembered. What invaded her thoughts was remembering the feel of his weight as he lay on top of her. The tickle of his hair on her neck. The hard bulge pressed against her thighs. Shaking her head as if to rid herself of the memories, Hermione put down her drink and went to the hall to fetch his shirt.

When she returned, Hermione did not immediately give the shirt to Severus. Putting a hand softly on his bare shoulder, as Remus had done in the street, Hermione said, "Severus, you know me. I think that you know that I would not do anything to hurt you. Won't you let me heal these marks before you put your shirt back on? They hurt--I know that they do--and there is no need for it. Let me fix them."

Her speech obviously agitated the mad wizard, but he did not shake off her hand or drive her away. Fidgeting, his eyes traveled wildly around the objects in the room. He looked at the ceiling light, the tapestry of the goblin battle, the bottle of claret on the mantel, and the shield that belonged to the suit of armor. Then, for the briefest of instants, he looked straight into Hermione's eyes. Dropping his eyes to the floor, Severus shrugged and said, "I suppose."

Taking his hand, Hermione lead him over to the straight backed chair at the worktable. Severus sat quietly as she began simple healing spells on the marks on his chest.

When Draco saw what Hermione was doing, he interrupted the awkward small talk he had been attempting. "Granger, how in the world did you get him to let you do that?"

Stopping her work to glance at Malfoy, Hermione saw that he wasn't teasing her as she had at first thought. His eyebrows were raised so high that they were almost lost in his fringe. His stunned expression showed exactly how shocked he was. Rather at a loss, Hermione simply said, "I just asked him."

The surprise on Draco's face melted into a huge grin. "Well, Granger, don't look now, but I think someone fancies you." He then broke into a rather girly fit of giggles. Both Harry and Ron looked a bit disgusted on her behalf, but Hermione noticed that Remus was trying to hold back a grin.

For once, Hermione was speechless. Though she opened her mouth and several protesting squawking sounds came out, she couldn't manage a word to save her life.

"Boy," Severus drawled, "I'll thank you not to annoy the pretty little whore while she has her wand pointed at my nipples."

This was too much even for Harry and Ron. While Draco burst into full-fledged laughter, Remus chuckled, and even Harry and Ron cracked smiles.

"I promise you that I shall do my level best not to blast your nipples off," Hermione growled, to the amusement of all present. Looking down at Severus, she could see the corners of his mouth twitch. Why, it was almost as if he'd done it on purpose!

"See that you don't," Severus said dryly.

Hermione knew that he was mad. She knew that she should try to be patient. But for Merlin's sake! The man had only been in the house for ten minutes, and he already had Hermione itching to hex him!

She could only hope that Malfoy and Severus took their leave before she succumbed to that desire.

Putting Aside the Past

Chapter 8 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Here is chapter eight, all shiny and beta read for your reading pleasure. I'm afraid that I've caught up to myself, writing wise. But I have managed to finish the first draft of the next chapter and it's off to my beta, Vaughn, who (in case you hadn't heard) rocks! So it shouldn't be too long before the next update. Now if I could just get chapter 10 written!

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave me a review. Every update day, I wait with great impatience to see what you all think of the new chapter, and I'm so happy to see those review emails in my inbox! Thanks!

Psychologically speaking, to discover something mysterious in objects is a symptom of cerebral abnormality related to certain kinds of insanity.

Giorgio de Chirico

After Hermione had healed the marks on Severus' chest, she had him lean forward over the worktable so that she could heal his back. She worked silently, lost in thought. It wasn't like her to get so worked up over what was obviously just a bit of lighthearted teasing. Yet, when Draco had joked about Severus fancying her, she'd been so flustered that she couldn't even retaliate in kind. It was absolutely ridiculous. She'd actually thought about hexing Severus, when she should have been glad that he could joke at all in his condition. It simply wasn't like her, to act like that, and Hermione found it confusing.

When she saw how much more comfortably Draco, Harry, and Ron were talking together after sharing a good laugh, Hermione decided that she was acting like a prat. Determining not to ruin the tentative good mood that permeated the room, Hermione forced herself to lighten up. When she had finished healing Snape's back, she healed the bruises on his left arm. They looked distressingly like a handprint.

I don't care what Remus said about Snape not wanting to leave that place; this is inexcusable. He obviously can't defend himself properly. If Draco can't keep the poor man safe, then he needs to be moved.

Noticing Snape's Dark Mark, Hermione sighed. It was a pity that all marks couldn't be healed as easily as a bruise could. Moving on to examine Severus' right arm, Hermione found it unmarked save a collection of small, circular burns on the inside of his forearm. When she tried to heal one with a spell, she found it oddly resistant.

"Severus," she asked calmly, "how did you get these burns?"

"Cigarette," he said with an exaggerated air of indifference to one of the bits of parchment scattered over the worktable.

"That was Crabbe Senior," Draco broke in to explain. "He smokes Muggle cigarettes. The bastard had Goyle hold Severus down while he did it. I found them at it and hexed the hell out of them both, but they'd already been at him for a while."

Closing her eyes for a moment in order to remain calm after hearing such a tale, Hermione knew she had to focus on the task at hand. If she showed signs of upset, she might spook Severus before she got these burns taken care of. She could get angry later, now was not the time. It was little wonder that the burns had been unresponsive. The basic healing spells that she knew worked better for magically induced wounds. Certainly someone like Madam Pomfrey would have been able to manage the task easily, but Hermione was no Healer, and she knew it. Luckily, she had a burn salve that should do the trick. Excusing herself from Severus for a moment, she went to the downstairs lav and fetched the jar of salve that she needed. When she returned, Hermione ran into a snag.

Taking one look at the jar in her hand, Severus gave it a look of complete and utter disgust and said, "Take that away. I'm not about to let you slather some moronic imbecile's idea of a potion on my bare skin. Have you gone mad?"

Now that was an odd comment indeed, coming as it did from Severus. Ignoring the irony, Hermione began to explain, "Severus, back when we were at..."

"Careful, Granger," Draco warned, his voice low but sharp.

Damn. Could she say nothing about Hogwarts to Severus without alarming him? Abruptly changing tacks, Hermione began again. "Severus, you know me very well. I may not be in your league, but I'm a fair hand at potions. I daresay that I can manage a simple burn salve."

"You made it yourself?" Severus said, still eyeing the jar distrustfully.

"Yes. I made it not three weeks ago, so it's well within its acceptable shelf life."

"Did you pick the ingredients by hand, or let some grimy-fingered shopwhore do it? Did you prepare the ingredients yourself?"

"Yes," Hermione replied. When Snape still looked wary, Hermione decided to take a chance. "I learned from a very good potions maker. I have not forgotten what he told me about such things."

"Oh for fuck's sake!" snapped Severus. "I was the bloody potions maker. I'm deranged; I'm not stupid!"

"If you aren't stupid, then stop acting like a spoiled child and let me heal those burns," Hermione said archly.

"Fine!" Severus growled. Despite his short tone, he dutifully held his arm up for Hermione to heal. Once it was sorted, Hermione asked, "Is there anything else that needs attention?"

"Not that you are going to see, you naughty little whore," Severus said teasingly. "You'll have to try harder than that if you intend to get me out of my trousers."

"Honestly!" Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

Deciding that she needed to get away from Snape and his teasing before she did something she'd regret, Hermione went over to the group of men sitting around the coffee table and sat on the sofa with Ron and Harry. Ron and Harry were doing their best to talk civilly to Draco, who sat in one of the wingback chairs. Remus, who sat in the other chair, appeared to have dozed off. The poor man still looked exhausted. Perhaps now that Hermione and her friends knew about Draco and Severus, they could help the overworked werewolf out more. Having joined the young men in the middle of a conversation, Hermione tried to catch up.

"What do you mean that he isn't an Occlumens any longer?" Harry asked, his face showing his shock. "I didn't think that was a skill you could suddenly lose once you managed it."

"My dad told me that Aunt Bella was once one hell of an Occlumens. Bella lost the skill when she began to lose her mind. When Severus and I started working with Remus, I remembered what Dad had said and I was worried about it. So I tested him. The way he is now, any Legilimens that has any talent at all can get in easily."

"Good Merlin!" said Ron. "How in the world do you manage? He could give the whole game away at any moment!"

Tilting her head in thought, Hermione said, "I suppose that's why he rarely looks anyone in the eye, isn't it?"

"Rarely? Try never...unless it's me," Draco said. "He doesn't seem to have any trouble meeting my eyes."

"Severus has looked me in the eye at least twice," said Hermione. "It was very brief, both times, but he did do it. He did so just now, when I asked if I could heal him."

"Huh," Draco said, nonplussed. "You know I was just ribbing you, when I said that he might fancy you...now I'm not so sure it's all that funny."

"Oh please!" Hermione said, her voice conveying exactly what she thought of that idea. "That is...well...it's just ridiculous!"

"Maybe so," Draco said, chuckling, "but it's clear that he trusts you more than most people. Severus won't even look Remus in the eye."

"As amusing as all this is, I'm still concerned about Severus no longer being an Occlumens," Harry interjected. "If Voldemort finds out that Severus can get into this house--"

"You don't have to worry," Draco said confidently. "His mind may be as open as a barn door, but for some reason it always shows the same memory when you try Legilimency on Severus."

"What memory is that?" Ron asked curiously.

"I assure you it's perfectly harmless," Draco began. Unfortunately, he was distracted by Severus before he continued. Otherwise, the three friends may have found out something that was either a great clue or a very strange coincidence. "Oh, for heaven's sake! Would you look at the man!"

Following Draco's eyes, Hermione saw Severus, standing in front of the suit of armor. Severus was having a heated...if one-sided...discussion with the armor about the necessity for using the freshest fluxweed available when brewing Polyjuice Potion.

"Just look at him!" Draco repeated. "He always talks to objects instead of people, but when he starts to have discussions with them, it means that he's completely knackered. Look, I know the four of us have never gotten along, and I'd hoped to leave you in peace as soon as possible, but I'll never get him anywhere, what with him so tired. Severus only sleeps a couple of hours at a time. Is there somewhere here where you wouldn't mind him taking a kip?"

While Ron and Harry fidgeted, Hermione said, "He can use my room...it's right next door. I'll show him."

As Hermione rose to go get Severus, Draco said, "You can't just show him where and assume he'll sleep. Tell him outright to lie down and take a nap, or he'll just wander around in your room for hours, talking to the furniture."

Holding out her hand to him, Hermione said, "Severus, come with me." She could see the weariness in his eyes, and when he placed his hand in hers and meekly let her lead him from the room, he reminded Hermione of a little boy who was long overdue for a nap. Once in her bedroom, Hermione led him to the bed and told him to lie down. Though he followed her orders easily enough, he looked nervous and antsy.

"Severus, you should sleep now," Hermione said kindly.

"It's not safe," Severus said, his voice a nervous whisper. "It's not safe to sleep."

Sitting near him on the side of the bed, Hermione tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear. He seemed very much like a little boy, lying there frightened, as if he were afraid of nightmares. Unfortunately, Hermione knew that the things that frightened this poor, mixed-up man were all too real.

"You're safe here," she said softly. "No one can hurt you here. Remember how you couldn't see the house when you got here? The people that hurt you can't see it either, and Harry isn't about to show them how to get in."

"The whore's son doesn't even like me," Severus said gruffly. "Why shouldn't he let them all in?"

"It's true that Harry doesn't like you very much," Hermione agreed. "But he doesn't wish you to come to any harm. You don't like Harry much either, do you?"

"Not much!" Severus said with a sudden, rather inappropriate grin.

"But you wouldn't hurt Harry, would you?"

"No. I wouldn't hurt the brat of a whore," Severus admitted reluctantly.

"You see? That's the same thing. You are safe in Harry's house, and he's not about to let anyone in to hurt you. Besides, I'm here, aren't I? And I like you just fine. I won't let anyone in here to hurt you. All right?"

For one brief moment, Severus looked directly into Hermione's eyes. "Pretty little whore," he cooed sleepily. "Such a pretty little whore."

Rising from the bed, Hermione leaned over and gave Severus a small kiss on the forehead. She looked much like a mother tucking a frightened child into bed. "Sleep now," she whispered. "All will be well."

"You'll leave!" he said suddenly. "You'll all leave me alone in this ugly old whore of a house!"

"We won't," Hermione said gently. "Draco is here, and he wouldn't leave you, would he?"

"I suppose not," Severus grumbled.

"And I am here. I'm not going to leave you either. I promise. We will be in the library, right next door. When you wake up, you can come right over to the library and see us. All right?"

"I suppose," Severus said sleepily.

Leaning over to give him one more peck on the forehead, Hermione saw that he was fast asleep. Quietly, she left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her. Returning to the library, Hermione saw that Remus was once more awake, and the men were again in the midst of a discussion.

"There is only one solution that I can see, as much as I hate the idea," Harry was saying as Hermione reentered the library. "He'll have to stay here."

"Harry!" Ron yelled. "Surely you're joking! We've got some serious work cut out for us. How are we going to accomplish anything with that yampy bastard living here?"

"He wouldn't be much trouble here, actually," Draco broke in. "I've had to run myself ragged trying to keep the other Death Eaters from giving him hell, but you won't have that problem here. Severus is pretty content to keep himself occupied. You'd only have to make sure he remembers to sleep, and eat, and shower from time to time. It's a bit like having a fairly self-sufficient toddler around."

"I was thinking much the same thing when I put him to bed. It was a bit like I was tucking him in, if you know what I mean," Hermione said with a smile.

"Hermione," Ron said tensely, "don't tell me that you are for this plan? However you look at it, having a madman underfoot is going to be nothing but trouble!"

"I don't think it would be as bad as all that," Hermione said coolly. "You and Harry have to leave the house a lot, but my research is here. I hardly ever go out anymore. I could keep an eye on Severus while you two work in the field."

"I still don't like it," Ron said stubbornly.

"I don't think that any of us like the idea, Ron," Hermione began sensibly, "but it's the right thing to do. He can't protect himself, Ron. You saw the shape he was in when he took his shirt off. It would be unnecessarily cruel to send him back to that when we can offer him safety here."

"I don't like the bastard, but I don't want him hurt," Ron reluctantly admitted. "Harry, I'll leave it to you. If you think that this mad idea is what we should do, then I won't fight it."

"Potter," Draco said, "I know we've never got on well, but it would mean a great deal to me to have Severus safe. It would also leave me freer to do my bit for the Order. I'd owe you."

"Nonsense," Harry said simply. "If having Snape here means that you are more free to spy, then that's reason enough right there. Look, Malfoy, we may never adore each other, but I'm willing to put our schoolboy scuffles in the past if you are. I keep thinking about how Snape and Sirius acted. They were working on the same side, but always at each other's throats because of something that happened years ago. Don't get me wrong; I loved my godfather, but I don't want to be like that."

"Sirius could never let go of the past," Remus said quietly. "It was his greatest fault. Of course, Severus didn't help matters any. Those two were always like oil and water."

Standing, Draco approached Harry and held out his hand. "I think I can try to let go of the past if you can," he said firmly.

Shaking the proffered hand, Harry gave a nod of agreement. Draco went on to shake Ron and Hermione's hands as well before he returned to his seat in the wingback chair.

"As nice as it is to see you all talking together without any hexes flying," Remus said with a lopsided grin, "I'm afraid that we still have a problem." His expression turned more serious as he continued. "This house is still Order headquarters. What do you think the other Order members are going to do when they pop in and find the man who killed Albus talking to the potted plants?"

"Good grief!" Harry said, dropping his head into his hands. "I hadn't thought about that."

Getting Things Sorted

Chapter 9 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I managed to finish the first draft of chapter 10 last night, so I decided to celebrate with an update! Chapter 10 was big fun to write, but before we get there, here's chapter 9 in all its freshly beta'd glory!

Speaking of betas, Vaughn rocks my socks!

And to all the folks who have been kind enough to leave me a review, you absolutely make my day! Every single one of you!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Insanity destroys reason, but not wit.

-Nathaniel Emmons

For the next hour, the five people gathered around the coffee table in the library of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, discussed a variety of reasons that would explain why they intended to move the Order's headquarters. In the end, they decided the simplest reason would work to their best advantage.

"It will be big news when the Order finds out that you have Hufflepuff's cup here," Remus said. "If I explain that Hermione needs uninterrupted peace and quiet in order to sort how to destroy the cup, then no one is going to argue."

"That would also excuse Hermione from Order meetings, which would mean that someone would always be here at the house," Harry added.

"That not only works well for looking after Severus," Hermione said to Draco, "but if you ever needed anything, and Remus wasn't available, you could Floo here."

"That would be a relief, to be honest," Draco said. "It's not always easy to get in touch with Remus. When Severus and I found out that your parents' house was going to be targeted, it was a full moon. That's why the Order got the information so late. Remus was barely himself before I was practically beating down his door."

"Malfoy," Ron said, "how difficult is it going to be for you when you return to the Death Eaters without Snape?"

"You'd better get used to calling him Severus, even when he isn't around," Draco cautioned. "He'll throw a right fit if you call him Snape or professor."

"You'd best tell us what we should avoid while he's still asleep," Hermione said with a sigh. Even with her memory, it would be so easy to slip up.

"Too true," Draco agreed, "but let me answer the Weasel's question first. The Dark Lord won't be pleased when I come back without him, but it shouldn't be too bad. I'll just say that Severus took off his tracking bracelet and I couldn't find him. They'll assume that he'll show up eventually since they won't know that he has anywhere else to stay."

"You know, Ferret," Ron responded in kind, "if it gets too rough for you, you could always join Severus here."

For a moment, Draco simply looked stunned. Seeing the clear agreement on both Hermione's and Harry's faces prompted him to speak. "Thanks," he said simply. "It's good to know that I've got a bolt hole if I need one. I'm going to stick it out as long as I can, though. With Severus here, I'm the only spy that Remus has left."

"I can understand that," Harry said. "But don't leave it too long. Better a live fighter than a dead spy."

"Too true," Draco agreed. "Listen, Severus won't sleep long, so I'd better tell you what to avoid doing and saying around him. Even with my help, a lot of it's hit and miss with him. The other day I mentioned that I'd like a chocolate éclair. Severus started laughing hysterically until he gave himself the hiccoughs. I still have no idea why. I just

want to warn you that no matter how careful you try to be, he's still barking mad and he's bound to act it sometimes, no matter what you do."

"He seems very calm most of the time," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"Oh, he is, usually," Draco agreed. "He can spend most of the day calm and seemingly normal, and then go off like an insulted hippogriff for no reason at all. I want to make very sure that you understand what you are getting into if you keep him here."

"We know it won't be easy," Harry said seriously. "Look, I don't like the man, I never have, and I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive him for what he did to Albus. But there's no arguing the fact that he has saved my life on more than one occasion. I owe him. The least that I can do is give the batty git a safe place to stay. If we can't deal with it, we'll find some other solution, but I'm not going to send him back to the Death Eaters to be tortured on a daily basis."

"If it gets too difficult, fire-call Remus. We'll find another safe house for him. We've already gotten my mother into a safe house. She's supposedly visiting Malfoy relatives in France and trying to recruit them to the Dark Lord's cause, but we've got her in a house protected much as this one is. I could always try sending Severus to her, but I'm not at all certain that she can handle him."

"Much as I hate the bloody idea," Ron said, dragging a hand through his hair, "Harry has made a good point. We all owe the nasty bugger for one thing or another. Let's try it and see what happens. At least Hermione seems to have a way with him. That should help."

"It will only help if I can manage to keep my temper," Hermione said with a wry grin. "He wasn't here fifteen minutes before I was itching to hex him."

At this, Draco laughed long and hard. "I don't think that a day has gone by that I haven't wanted to do the same thing. He may be mad, but he's still Severus and just as irritating, if not more so."

"Isn't he your friend?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Of course he is," Draco replied, still grinning. "There's a great deal that I admire about the man, but that doesn't mean that he isn't a right prat when he wants to be."

"I suppose that we all have our little ways," Remus said in his gentle voice. "Speaking of which, you'd best fill these three in on Severus' more interesting ways before he joins us."

"Well," Draco began, "you already know the big ones. It's safest to call him Severus. Don't make any direct statements about Hogwarts or the fact that he was a teacher there. You can sometimes come at the subject indirectly, but you have to be careful."

"I did that earlier," Hermione said. "When you warned me off the subject of Potions class. I said something about 'the man who taught me Potions.' Severus got a bit snippy about it, but he wasn't upset."

"You did well," Draco said with honest appreciation. "Sometimes if you come at a subject from a different direction, it works. Sometimes he'll go off the deep end no matter what you say or do."

"What else do we need to know?" Harry asked.

"You can talk about most the staff at Hogwarts and most of the Order, but only if you stick to their given names. Don't use surnames or titles. Of course, that doesn't work with Dumbledore...it's best not to speak of him in any way. Oh, and don't mention Hagrid if you can help it. He won't throw an eppy, but it makes him terribly depressed."

"That makes sense," said Ron. "We spoke to Hagrid earlier today. According to Hagrid, he and Sn...er...Severus were better friends than we had thought. At least, until--" Ron's voice drifted away in embarrassment.

"Before I got Dumbledore killed, you mean," Draco snapped. His tone of voice was harsh, but his head dropped as he spoke and he looked completely miserable.

"Draco," Remus said kindly, "no one here likes what happened. But Voldemort threatened the lives of your parents. I don't think any of us are going to blame you for that. I only wish that you would have come to me sooner."

"I didn't truly realize that I could. I was brought up with my parents' beliefs, and I followed them because that's the only way that I knew how to be. That night on the tower, it hadn't occurred to me that there was any other way out, until Dumbledore offered it to me. By then it was far too late." Looking at Harry with eyes full of regret, he continued. "I am sorry for what happened...I wish that I'd been smarter...I wish..."

"I understand, Draco, I really do," Harry said with a gentleness that surprised the others. "I never knew my parents, but I love them, just the same. My first year at school, Voldemort told me that he would bring them back if I did what he wanted. I don't think I can possibly express how completely tempting that thought was to me at that age. Only my conviction that the bastard was lying about being able to bring back the dead kept me from making a huge mistake. Losing Albus was like losing a father. I don't think that I'll ever be over it. But I can't blame you for wanting to protect your family. I can wish that you'd found another way, but I can't blame you."

"Sometimes I remember meeting you in that robe shop. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if you'd accepted my offer of friendship. I don't know if I would have dragged you down, or you would have straightened me out."

"Well," said Harry with a sad smile, "it's a little late, but here we are on the same side. I suggest that we make the most of it."

"Potty," Draco teased, "I believe that you have a deal."

It was then that Hermione disturbed all four men by bursting into tears. She simply couldn't help it. She had hated Draco in school, but she was proud of what he was doing now. As for Harry, she'd never seen him act with such maturity or such mercy. She'd never been more proud of him in her life. Embarrassed by her emotional reaction while surrounded by staring men, Hermione scrubbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt and tried to pull herself together.

"What's with her?" Draco said, nonplussed.

"Nothing much," Ron teased, "except that she's a girl. Weepy, you know, girls. I suppose that it's that time of the--"

"Not one more word, Ronald Weasley!" she snapped. "Not one!"

That broke the serious mood, and even Hermione had to smile when she heard Draco snickering again. Suddenly it seemed like they were back at school, laughing together, only this time the blond young wizard who giggled like a girl was no outsider, but a part of their group. The feeling of camaraderie continued as Draco explained a few last things to avoid doing around Severus, and then it was abruptly shattered by an incensed voice.

"Exactly what, may I ask, is going on here? I was beginning to expect that you three had at least one brain between you. Now I return from my visit to find you entertaining a Death Eater in the library. I'm certain that Minerva will find this very interesting."

"Damn," muttered Harry. "I forgot about Phineas."

"We've forgotten about Kreacher as well," Remus added. "Leave Phineas to me, Harry. You'd best go find Kreacher and give him very specific instructions about not mentioning your guest to anyone."

While Phineas was not the most pleasant of portraits, he was no fool. Though he'd been the least popular headmaster that Hogwarts had ever seen, he'd been a very effective headmaster. His intellect was unquestionable. Phineas had also been present for many of the Order meetings which had taken place at Harry's house; meetings

where Remus had offered information from his nameless sources. Despite Phineas' harsh manner of speaking, it did not take Remus long to convince him that his sources must remain secret, even the mad one that would soon be living with Harry.

When Phineas and Kreacher's silence on the matter had been squared away, Hermione brought up a question that had been bothering her.

"Draco, you said that you tried to get Severus to stay someplace safe before, and he refused. What makes you think that he will go along with the idea this time?"

"He always refused because he said he had to look for something." Draco replied. "I suppose that I'm assuming it was that odd cup that he gave Potter. Speaking of which, do I want to know what a Horcrux is?"

"I think it's better if you do not," Remus said firmly. "That's a bit of knowledge that would make Voldemort very suspicious of you, were it to come to light."

"I'll take your word for it," Draco said. "To be honest, I'll have enough to worry about when I return without Severus. I don't need any more things to hide. I'm a fair hand at Occlumency, but the less you have to hide, the easier it is."

"Perhaps that's why I have never gotten a good handle on it," Harry said. "I've always had so much to hide."

"Or maybe," Hermione said archly, "you only need to apply yourself more to the task. You've improved a lot these past few months."

The discussion was halted by the sudden appearance of Severus Snape. Obviously agitated, he rushed into the room, came to an abrupt stop just inside the doorway, and glanced briefly at the occupants of the room. Seeing that he had not been abandoned, he stood examining the suit of armor very intently. Severus had the air of a cat that's been caught doing something undignified but refuses to acknowledge it.

Rising from the sofa, Hermione went over to Severus and put a gentle hand on his arm. "I told you that we would be here when you awoke," she said kindly, "and here we are."

"So I see," Severus said to the vicinity of the suit of armor's chest. With the finger of one hand he was lightly tracing the breastplate's decoration as if it was the most fascinating thing that he'd ever seen.

"I told you that you would be safe here," Hermione continued. "Severus, how would you like to stay here with us? You could stay with us and be safe all the time."

"This isn't your house," Severus growled. "You can't invite me to stay. It isn't your house."

"You're right, it isn't my house. But Harry wants you to stay here with us. It was Harry's idea for you to stay here and be safe."

A loud snort and a melodramatic rolling of his eyes showed exactly what Severus thought of that idea. "Stupid little whore, the whore's son hates me. He would no more do that than he would try to fly a broomstick to the moon!"

Crossing to them, Harry said, "Severus, Hermione was telling you the truth. I know we've never cared for one another, but I don't want to send you back out there to be hurt. Stay here. Stay here with us and be safe."

This short speech caused a reaction very much like Hermione had caused when she asked Severus to let her heal him. Clearly flustered, Severus' eyes darted around the room. He looked at the window seat, the potted fluxweed plant, the cluttered top of Hermione's desk, the floor lamp next to Remus' chair. Then, for one brief moment, he looked straight into Harry's eyes. Dropping his gaze to the floor, Severus stood very still for a moment, lost in thought. When he eventually raised his head, he looked straight at Draco.

Crossing to where Draco sat, Severus kneeled before him. Placing both of his hands on Draco's shoulders, Severus stared into Draco's eyes. "Boy," he began softly, "will you be all right? Will you be all right in that nest of whores without me?"

"It will be easier for me if I don't have to worry about you," Draco said firmly. "Stay here, Severus. Stay here with Potter and let them look after you. I'll be fine."

"If it gets too rough, if the Dark Whore gets too suspicious, you promise me you'll get out of there, boy! Better a live Slytherin than a dead Gryffindor."

Draco laughed at that. "Potter told me much the same thing, though not as elegantly. Don't worry, Severus. I want to continue to spy for the Order, but I'm no fool. If things go south, I'm to come here. Potter told me I can come here and stay with you. But you need to stay here Severus. All right?"

Letting go of Draco's shoulders, Severus sat back on his heels. Rolling his eyes, he said, "Oh, I suppose."

That was the end of the matter. After taking a moment to explain Severus' tracking charm to Hermione, Draco left to make his excuses to the Death Eaters. Severus barely acknowledged Draco's goodbye, as he was having a heated discussion about wizarding law with Phineas' portrait.

That was one problem taken care of, thought Hermione, but where was the man going to sleep? The unoccupied bedrooms in Harry's house would give a sane person nightmares. For the moment, he could sleep on the sofa in the library, but they needed to get him a room sorted straight away. The room next to hers probably needed the least work to make it habitable, and Hermione could keep a better eye on the man if he was close to her room. That settled, she sat back down on the sofa with Ron and Harry to tell them of her thoughts on the matter.

Throwing Tantrums

Chapter 10 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Due to uninterrupted gloomy rain, and a bit of gentle arm twisting, *giggle* I've decided to update this fic a little sooner than I expected to. Normally I like to wait until I at least have the next chapter's first draft done, but this blasted rain is making me blue! I decided a few reviews would perk me right up. So here's the next chapter, and I'm hoping it won't be too much of a wait before I update again, though it may be a bit longer than usual.

I wouldn't be even thinking about updating if the lovely and comma wielding Vaughn hadn't sent this chapter back to me today. Vaughn rocks!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

I wouldn't recommend sex, drugs or insanity for everyone, but they've always worked for me.

-Hunter S. Thompson 1937-2005

"I'm not going to do it! Leave me be!" Severus screeched at the top of his lungs. Rushing from the downstairs lav, Severus ran to the library. His arms flailed wildly above his head as he continued to shout, "Leave me be!"

With a frustrated sigh, Hermione trailed behind him. The first few days with Severus living in the house had been unexpectedly easy. The very first day had been exhausting, but not because of the madman in their midst. It took Hermione, Ron, and Harry all day long to get the bedroom next to Hermione's sorted for Severus. In the morning, Severus had done his best to help. There was certainly nothing wrong with the man's magic; he'd accomplished quite a bit until he tried to open the curtains and gotten bitten by a doxy. The doxy bite upset him, and despite the fact that Hermione had the antidote at hand, Severus quietly pouted about it for the remainder of the day.

On the second day, Hermione was doing her best to get back to her research. It was no easy task when Severus was haunting the library like a wraith, puttering about and talking to the furniture.

Frustrated, Hermione asked him, "Severus, is there something that you would like to do today?"

With a sneer worthy of his old self, Severus surveyed the desk and worktable that was overflowing with Hermione's books and parchments. "I might," he said disdainfully, "continue with my own research, if some whore hadn't spread her things all over creation."

Rising from the worktable, Hermione shook her head with a sigh. "Severus, if you need something, you should ask me. We all want you to be comfortable here. I may not be able to give you the moon and stars, but I think that I can manage a desk."

With her wand and a few well placed levitation spells, Hermione rearranged the furniture to make space near her worktable. She then levitated over a life-sized and ugly statue of an erklng. The statue was truly hideous, so Hermione doubted that Harry would mind it doing temporary duty as a desk for Severus. A few charms later, and the nasty little erklng had become a large and handsome desk. There was a bookshelf built in above it, and a row of drawers down one side. Another smaller but no less hideous knickknack was soon transformed into a matching chair.

"There you go, Severus," Hermione said with a smile. Hermione had always had a knack for transfiguration and was rightfully proud of her work.

With a clear look of childish delight, Severus ran one hand lovingly over the desk's shiny surface. "This is for me? This is mine?" he said with a note of uncertainty.

"All for you," Hermione replied with a smile.

"No messy whore is going to let her research spill all over it?" he said, giving her workspace a frightful glower.

Chuckling, Hermione said, "I promise to keep my things off of it. All right?"

"I suppose," he said in a bored voice, but the delight was back in his eyes.

For a while longer Hermione was distracted while Severus took off his shirt, removed the leather pouch that he still wore strapped to his side, and took a myriad of tiny objects from it. He then began restoring them to their normal size. By the time he was done, the shelf above his desk was full of books and the drawers were full of scrolls filled with Severus' rather cramped writing. Before long, Severus was rummaging through several books and making notes on a new sheet of parchment. Left in peace for the first time that morning, Hermione went back to her own research.

There had been a minor kerfuffle at lunchtime that day, but nothing catastrophic. It had happened when Ron had come into the library to tell them that lunch was ready.

"Busy," Severus had replied shortly.

Leaning over Severus' shoulder, Ron picked up a piece of parchment and asked, "What are you so busy working on that you can't take a moment to eat?"

In a flurry of sudden movement, Severus had snatched the parchment away from Ron and given his hand a loud smack. "Don't touch my things, you redheaded whore!" he snarled. Quietly immediately, Severus sat staring at the top of his desk with his shoulders hunched forward. He looked like a frightened dog who was expecting a blow from its master. Hermione was about to intervene when Ron spoke.

"Severus, I need you to do something for me," he said calmly.

"What?" Severus snapped.

"I'm willing to try to get along, but I need you to tell me what you expect from me instead of throwing a fit when I get something wrong."

"I didn't throw a fit," Severus said petulantly, rolling his eyes.

"No, you didn't. But that was pretty rough, smacking me like that. How about you try talking to me first? What made you angry and what would you like me to do?" Ron continued calmly.

"Don't touch my things!" Severus snapped. Then, with a sigh, he said it more pleasantly. "Please don't touch my things, redheaded whore."

"All right," Ron said. "I will not touch your things. Is there anything else?"

"Please don't loom over me," Severus said with an exaggerated shudder. "It gives me the willies."

Realizing that he was still leaning over Severus' shoulder, Ron straightened up and moved to the side of the desk. Squatting down so that he was at a level with where Severus sat, Ron said, "I shall do my level best not to loom. Better?"

"Yes, thank you, whore," Severus said politely.

"Now then, you have told me what you need me to do," Ron began, "I have something that I need you to do."

"What?" Severus asked suspiciously.

"I went to a lot of trouble to make lunch for us all. I don't want that trouble to be for nothing. I know that you are busy, but I need you to come and eat lunch. It won't take long, and then you can come back here and work."

Tilting his head to the side in thought, Severus then shrugged his shoulders and said, "I suppose that I can manage that."

"Thank you, Severus," Ron said politely.

As Severus and Ron stood, Hermione continued to work. "Aren't you coming?" asked Ron.

"I really need to get this bit sorted," Hermione said distractedly. "I'll grab something later."

Walking over to where Hermione sat at her worktable, Severus leaned over her. Apparently he had no trouble looming over others.

"The redheaded whore went to a lot of trouble to make lunch for us," he said archly.

"I'm really very busy..." Hermione began.

"It won't take long, and then you can come back here and work," Severus parroted with a crooked grin.

"You really can't expect Severus to be polite when you are showing him such a shabby example yourself, Hermione," Ron said, chuckling.

"Fine!" Hermione snapped. "I'll go eat your nasty old lunch!" Rising, she dutifully followed the two men from the room.

As they walked down the stairs to the kitchen in the basement, Severus muttered to himself. "Is the lunch nasty? Is it old? I don't care how much trouble the whore went to, I'm not going to eat a nasty old lunch."

"I'm sure that it's a very nice lunch, Severus," Hermione said with a sigh. "Ron's a good cook; Molly taught him."

"You called it a nasty old lunch," Severus muttered.

"I didn't mean it. I was frustrated."

"Silly little whore lies when she is frustrated. She must lie all the time!" Severus said gleefully as they entered the kitchen.

"Just sit down and eat, Severus!" Hermione said, giving him a gentle push towards a chair.

Severus had indeed sat down and he ate politely with the rest of them, but every time he glanced in Hermione's direction, he had giggled like a schoolboy. It had been all Hermione could do not to hex him.

That had happened yesterday, and as frustrating as it had been, it didn't hold a candle to the situation that Hermione now found herself in. She had obviously committed a high offense, in Severus' opinion. She had suggested to Severus that he take a shower. Malfoy had warned her that it would be a difficult task, but Severus had seemed so reasonable so far. She certainly hadn't expected him to throw a complete and utter tantrum like an angry three year old.

Following him into the library, Hermione saw that Severus was still running about, still shrieking at the top of his lungs, and still flailing his arms wildly in the air. When he saw that Hermione had followed him, he fled to the corner of the room where he stood, head wedged tightly into the corner, still yelling loudly.

Words interrupted his high pitched shrieking. "Leave me be! Leave me alone! Don't touch me, you nasty little whore!"

Luckily, Ron and Harry were out of the house at the moment. While they had both been surprisingly patient with Severus, if faced with this situation, they may have reached for their wands. Hermione's hand itched to grab her own wand, but Draco had warned them that using magic to try to contain Severus when he was throwing a fit would only make it worse when the magic was lifted. Though Hermione was a Muggle-born, the years at Hogwarts had left her very dependant on magic. The present problem left her rather at a loss.

Crossing to where Severus was pressed into the corner, Hermione tried putting a hand gently on his shoulder. Shaking off her hand, Severus pushed past Hermione, dropped to his hands and knees, and crawled away to hide behind the sofa. It wasn't a very good hiding place, not only because Hermione had watched him go there, but because he hadn't quite crawled far enough. Staring at where Severus' feet and bum stuck out from behind the sofa, Hermione simply stood immobile for a moment, shocked at his behavior. She had wondered why Severus had not been able to protect himself from the Death Eaters, as he seemed odd but sensible most of the time. Here was her answer, hiding behind the sofa with his arse hanging out. When Severus was upset, he lacked all sense about such matters. With a sigh that was becoming a habit, Hermione went over to Severus and sat down on the floor next to him.

"Severus," she said as calmly as possible, "would you talk to me please?"

"No!" said Severus, stubbornly wrapping his arms around his head.

Reaching out a tentative hand, Hermione stroked it gently up and down his back, as her mother used to do when she was frightened. Severus seemed to relax, but he didn't unfurl. It was then that Hermione noticed that he was trembling. Why, he wasn't just being obstinate, he was frightened!

"Severus, I've upset you, and I certainly didn't mean to. Won't you please sit up and talk to me about it?"

"Leave me be! I don't want a shower!" Severus whined.

"I promise that I just want to talk right now. I'm not going to force you to do anything. But I need to understand what's upset you so."

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because I care about what happens to you, Severus. I don't like it when you get upset, or frightened. It makes me feel bad."

Finally uncurling, Severus sat on the floor and looked at Hermione curiously for a brief moment. "I make you feel bad?" he asked sadly.

"No, not you. I like you!" Hermione reassured him. Lifting a hand to sweep his dirty and tangled hair out of his face affectionately, she continued. "I like you...so it makes me feel bad when you are unhappy."

"Then don't make me take a shower and I'll be happy!" Severus said with a crooked grin.

"But that's not healthy, Severus. And if you got sick, that would make me unhappy too." At his skeptical look, she changed tacks. "Besides, you're already getting pretty whiff. Much as I like you, I won't want to be around you if you smell bad," she said in a mock serious tone.

"Then I'll do a spell again," he said petulantly.

"Those cleaning spells only go so far, as you very well know. You need a real shower. Why don't you want to take one?"

At first, Hermione thought that he would not answer. Dropping his head until his chin hit his chest, it was a long moment before he spoke. When he did speak, his voice was soft and hesitant. "I don't like being naked. That's when they hurt you...when you're naked...when you don't have your wand. That's when the whores find you. That's when they hurt you and burn you."

Surprised to find herself near tears, Hermione did her best to blink them away. This poor man before her would likely be frightened by her tears, even if they were on his behalf. It simply broke her heart to see what this once strong and proud wizard had become. He was like a strange caricature of his former self in some ways, a lost little boy in others. It was little wonder that Severus was afraid of showers; he had obviously been the victim of the other Death Eaters' nasty little games when he was unprotected.

"Severus," Hermione began, doing her best to remain calm, "we've talked about how things are now that you live in Harry's house. No one is going to hurt you here. None of us will ever hurt you."

"I know that!" Severus snapped. "But you won't be there, will you? I'll be all alone in there and they'll come and you won't be there and they'll hurt me again!" he said in a rush. "I'm not taking a shower! You can just hold your nose, little whore!" Here he demonstrated the action on his own nose.

"What if I stand guard outside the door while you shower? I promise I won't let anyone in."

"This isn't Hogwarts," Severus said in a tone which suggested that he thought Hermione was a complete idiot. "Any old whore could Apparate in there, and you'd never know."

"Fine then," Hermione said, nearing the end of her patience, "what if I stay in the bloody lav with you? I could turn my back, so that you could shower, but I'd be right there in the room in case any whores pop in."

"You'll peek!" Severus shouted gleefully. "The naughty little whore will peek to see what sort of wand I have!" Severus dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"Believe me, Severus, no one in the entire world cares about your wand! I promise that I won't spy on you."

"Silly little whore must be frustrated. She's lying again. Perhaps when my research is done, I'll make you a list of the whores in the entire world who do care about my wand," he said seriously.

"You may spare me the experience," Hermione snapped, which made Severus giggle again.

Rising to her feet, Hermione held out a hand to help Severus up off the floor. For a moment, he just stared at her hand, and then he lifted his eyes to look briefly into her eyes.

"You'll stay with me? You won't let the nasty whores in?"

Hermione's impatience fled as she looked down into those black, trusting eyes. "I promise," she said softly.

Taking her hand, Severus let Hermione help him to his feet and followed her docilely into the downstairs lav.

An Uncomfortable Shower

Chapter 11 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Despite the rain that continues to be quite the drag here in Louisville, I managed to finish this next chapter, and the lovely Vaughn got it fit to be read. So here it is!

As always, gimormous thanks to all the readers who have been kind enough to leave me a review and let me know what you think. There isn't any better cure for the rainy Ohio River blues than having some reviews to read! You all rock!

You may be right

I may be crazy

But it just may be a lunatic you're looking for.

-Billy Joel b.1949

The first floor lav at Grimmauld Place was perhaps the largest lav in the house. In addition to the expected plumbing...shower, toilet, and sink...there was a large cabinet for potions and such, and a pretty vanity with a mirror and a small bench to sit on. Entering the room with Severus on her heels, Hermione went to the vanity's bench and sat facing the room. Drawing her wand, she spoke.

"You see, Severus. I'm completely prepared to protect you."

Glancing at her, Severus' only response was to give her a dignified nod. Drawing his own wand, he placed it carefully on the ceramic wand holder near the door of the shower. When Hermione had first come to Hogwarts, she hadn't known what the odd little holders on the wall of the girl's lav were for. They were long and narrow, looking much like a small version of the chalk ledge found under chalkboards. Hermione had been puzzled until she had seen Lavender make use of the wand holder before stepping into the shower one day. Wizards were a cautious bunch and they didn't like being separated from their wands, not even long enough to shower.

His wand placed reverently on the holder, Severus quickly took off his shirt. Unable to keep herself from admiring his bare chest for a moment, Hermione firmly told herself that she was merely checking to make certain that all his wounds had healed properly. She wasn't particularly successful. Hermione's experience with scantily clad wizards was rather limited. In the spring, on the rare days that were warm enough for such things, Hermione had seen a few brave students swimming at the lake. Though she'd never joined them...no spring day in Scotland was warm enough for taking a plunge, in her opinion...she had rather enjoyed the view. But this situation was different. Never had Hermione been alone with a man who was soon to be naked, and it made her very uncomfortable indeed.

In truth, Hermione was shocked to find herself rather excited at the prospect. This was a former teacher, after all, and a madman. But logic couldn't put a halt to the warm, tingly feeling that now accosted her. It wasn't surprising, really. At seventeen, Hermione's sexual encounters consisted of a few smooches with Viktor Krum and a bit of heavy petting with Ron before they had broken up. The thought of being in the same room as a completely naked Severus Snape was rather more exciting than the innocent young woman was comfortable with.

Tossing his discarded shirt to the floor, Severus began unbuttoning his trouser placket. "I'm beginning to think that you want to see my wand after all," he said with a rather wicked smirk that did nothing to help Hermione regain her composure.

Blushing, Hermione quickly shifted on the bench to face away from him. Finding herself looking directly into the vanity's mirror, Hermione was just in time to see Severus drop both his trousers and his pants before leaning forward to turn on the water. For a moment, as she sat gaping at Severus' bare arse, Hermione had not one thought in her entire head. Dragging her eyes off the startling sight, Hermione resolutely stared at the top of the vanity as she tried to regain her composure. When she heard Severus step under the spray, she lifted her eyes only to be trapped again.

He hadn't closed the shower door. Hermione vaguely suspected that this possibility should have occurred to her...knowing how paranoid the mad wizard was. At the moment, his side faced her as he leaned his head back into the spray to wet his hair. When he lifted his arms to run his fingers through the tangled mess, it gave Hermione an uninterrupted view of his nude form. Seeing that Severus had his eyes closed, Hermione could not keep herself from taking a good look at all of that wet, naked skin. Her eyes traveled quickly from the curve of his arse, up over his slightly furry chest, and then dropped against her will to where his cock peeped out from behind one muscled thigh.

This sight shocked Hermione enough that she was once more able to force her gaze away. Though Hermione had felt Ron's erection, hot and hard through the cloth of his trousers, she'd never actually seen one. Severus was obviously not aroused, but the sight of his bare member had sent a shiver down Hermione's spine.

"Severus!" she yelled. "Why didn't you close the bloody door?"

"I don't want to be shut in a box!" he snapped. "I want to know if any whores come in." Then his sharp tone fled as he laughed uproariously. "You peeked!" he said gleefully. "After all that bluster, you peeked! So what do you think, pretty little whore?" he asked, his voice coming out with a masculine purr of satisfaction. "Shall I add your name to my list?"

This question so infuriated Hermione that she looked up without thinking. Severus remained in the same position as he lathered his hair with shampoo, but as Hermione stared at him, she couldn't help but notice that quite a lot more of his cock was now peeping past his thigh. He was getting aroused! Because of her! Tearing her eyes away from the intriguing sight of her semi-aroused former teacher, Hermione racked her brain for something else to focus on. She needed a distraction and she needed one fast. She smiled with relief as an idea came to her.

"Kreacher!" she called. "Come here, Kreacher...I need you."

Though Kreacher hated Hermione and called her all sorts of names, she knew that he would come. Harry had given the house-elf very specific instructions about minding Hermione and Ron as long as they lived there. With a small pop of Apparition, Kreacher appeared in the lav.

"What does the nasty Mudblood want with us now?" he asked himself bitterly.

"You will keep a civil tongue in your head, you whore of an elf, when you are speaking to the pretty little whore," Severus said, his voice suddenly full of authority. For a moment, he sounded exactly like his old self.

Bowing his head, Kreacher only said, "Yes, sir."

It had come as a complete and utter shock to Hermione, Harry, and Ron that Kreacher not only accepted Severus' addition to the house, but he willingly did so. In fact, the twisted house-elf absolutely doted on the madman. Though it was as hard as pulling teeth to get Kreacher to do most tasks, anything that Severus wanted was done immediately, as was anything asked on his behalf. At times, Hermione found this made her life much easier.

"Kreacher," she began politely, "Severus' clothes need washing and mending. Could you bring him one of Ron's dressing gowns and then take Severus' things away and see to them?"

Hurrying over to where Severus' clothes lay in a tangled pile on the floor, Kreacher assessed them carefully. Clicking his tongue in chastisement, he then said, "Very worn and old they are. The poor Master needs new things; yes, he does. But Kreacher will do his best for the Master's sake. Kreacher knows that the Mudbloods and Blood Traitors won't take proper care of the poor Master. It's all up to Kreacher, it is."

Biting back her anger at the house-elf's less than polite speech, Hermione kept her voice calm as she spoke. "You are quite correct, Kreacher. He does need some new things. We'll have to make do with those clothes for now, so fix them up the best that you can. I'll get Severus some new clothes as soon as I can."

"We will believe the whore means what she says when we see it with our own eyes," Kreacher mumbled to himself. He then got a sneaky look of delight on his face, and Hermione knew exactly why. It hadn't taken Kreacher any time at all to discover that, while most foul names were frowned on by the wizard that he now fawned over, 'whore' was one epithet that Severus never grumbled about. Because of this, Kreacher now often sounded much like Snape himself.

Kreacher wasn't the only thing at Grimmauld Place that Severus had a positive effect on. Earlier that same day, Severus had been in the entranceway when Ron had left to meet his dad at the Ministry. When Ron shut the door a tad too loudly, the curtains over Mrs. Black's portrait had flown open and she had commenced shouting her usual rubbish. Taking one startled look at the portrait, Severus had then hexed her with a curse so strong that the mouthy woman hadn't uttered a syllable since. Hermione had no idea what spell Severus had used, but she was dearly hoping that the effect was permanent. She hadn't even bothered to close the curtains over Mrs. Black's animated and fiercely angry yet silent visage. It was terribly amusing to watch her blustering away without making a single sound.

As Kreacher gathered up Severus' clothes and vanished with a pop, Hermione chanced a glance at the man in the shower and found him running a bar of soap over his stomach. Quickly dropping her eyes from the sight, Hermione wondered why she was reacting so strongly to a man taking a much needed shower. It was true that she wasn't used to such situations, but shouldn't she be a little more mortified and a little less intrigued? The man was ill and he had been left in her care. It simply wasn't right of her to sneak glances at his wet, soapy, and naked body!

But perhaps that was part of the problem. Severus Snape was in her care, and she couldn't help but be concerned about him. She looked after the man like a mother caring for a child; there was bound to be an effect on her because of it. However, finding her former professor attractive was not the effect that she had been expecting. He was such a fascinating man, even in his madness. When he spoke to her about her research, there were times when he seemed just as he used to be. He was sharp tongued, to be sure, but he was also intelligent and dryly witty. Already he had made some suggestions about how she could broaden her research and find some answers to what options were available for dealing with a living Horcrux. She had known that killing Nagini would destroy that particular Horcrux, but--kind young woman that she was--she balked at killing an animal who may have had little choice about becoming a vessel for Lord Voldemort. And she had other reasons to worry. Reasons that she was not yet willing to discuss with anyone, not even Severus.

Just when she got used to the Severus who seemed so like her Potions professor of old, something would happen and Hermione would find herself facing a very obviously ill man. These sudden changes practically broke her heart. It was little wonder that Hermione found herself reaching out to the man and trying her best to help him. Severus Snape was painfully aware of his madness, and there were times that Hermione could see his inner struggle as he tried to work around it. He had been a brave--if unpleasant--man when she had been at school, and in some ways he was just as brave now. Certainly there were things that easily frightened him, but the way that he struggled daily against his madness had earned Hermione's respect. Exactly when had that respect turned into a feeling that made her heart pound and her stomach flutter?

It was a hopeless situation, in any event. Even if Severus had all the Healers of St. Mungo's at his disposal, it was likely that he would never again be the man he had once been. Neville's parents and Gilderoy Lockhart were blatant proof that, once a mind snaps, it is dreadfully difficult to put it back together again. So, it was only prudent that Hermione push any attraction that she had for the black-eyed wizard far out of her mind. Severus himself was in no condition to know what he truly wanted, despite his sometimes obvious flirting. Hermione did not want to tie herself to a man with so little chance of recovery; no matter how well he looked in his altogether. She would just have to try to muddle through this situation as best she could and content herself with being friends with a madman. Friends, but no more than that.

Flooded with a sense of relief when she heard the water being shut off in the shower, Hermione knew that it was only a reprieve. If she was to be an honest caretaker, she should make certain that Severus showered daily. In some ways that would be torturous, but Hermione knew that she had to be strong and continue to do what was best for the poor man in her care.

"All done?" she asked, her tone rather falsely cheerful and her eyes seemingly glued to the top of the vanity. "Kreacher hasn't brought a dressing gown for you yet, but I imagine he'll be around soon. There's a fresh towel on the rack for you to use. After you dry off, you can wrap it around you until Kreacher returns."

"I'm a grown man, in case it has escaped your notice," Severus rumbled. "I believe I need no instruction in how to properly dry and cover myself."

"Believe me," Hermione muttered, "I know that you're a grown man."

"I thought that you might be convinced...after all of that peeking," he said smugly. He then laughed at Hermione's blush.

Lifting her gaze, Hermione saw that he was watching her through the vanity's mirror. His gaze was uncharacteristically steady. She was relieved to see that he had wrapped a towel tightly around his waist. After a brief smirk at her reflection, Severus turned to the sink.

Though Hermione hadn't gotten around to getting their guest any clothes, Harry had been thoughtful enough to get Severus some personal items. Severus had his own toothbrush, comb, shaving soap and a shaving brush. When Harry had offered Snape a safety razor, Severus had glared at it in disgust. Like Ron, Severus shaved with his wand, a procedure that Harry had not quite mastered. After Severus had brushed his teeth and combed his hair, he began lathering up his face. Hermione watched the proceedings with interest. What was it about such a mundane act as shaving that seemed so erotic? Having watched Ron shave before with the same effect, this wasn't the first time that Hermione was confused by her response to it. Maybe it was the odd hint of vulnerability that made a man shaving so sexy. Or maybe it was something about the complete concentration men gave to shaving. All that Hermione knew was that it probably wasn't very prudent to be watching Severus shave with her mouth hanging open. How in the world was she supposed to manage her bathroom time with Snape every day if she couldn't stop staring at him? Deciding to bring a book with her tomorrow, Hermione gave into the desire to watch Severus shave. She did, however, make sure that her mouth was no longer hanging open.

Severus was as deft at shaving as he was at making potions. His movements with his wand were fluid and graceful. As he made each pass with his wand, the soap and bits of hair magically vanished. It seemed much simpler than using a razor that had to be rinsed off after each pass and banged on the side of the tub to get rid of the hair. Wondering if she should take up the habit, Hermione tried to remember what particular spell Severus had used. She soon realized that she didn't remember because he hadn't spoken it aloud. That wasn't very surprising. Severus was adept at silent magic and rarely spoke the incantations out loud unless he was demonstrating something.

Eventually, Severus was finished and Hermione had to Summon Ron's dressing gown. It was unlike Kreacher to forget to do something for Severus, but the clothes that the house-elf had taken away had been in bad shape. Perhaps the elf was so busy with them that he'd forgotten. Once Severus had loosely belted Ron's dressing gown around himself, they returned to the library. In a rare quiet mood, Severus took a book from the shelves and settled in one of the wing backed chairs. When he sat down with his legs parted in his usual sprawl, Hermione was distressed to see just how far up Ron's dressing gown gaped open. Retreating to her desk, Hermione stuck her nose into her research and refused to look up.

With a noisy clatter of activity, Harry and Ron returned home and made a beeline for the library.

"Say there, Severus," Harry said with a chuckle, "either close your legs or adjust that dressing gown. No one wants to come home to a sight like that!"

With a snort and a melodramatic roll of his eyes, Severus demurely adjusted the fabric until it covered his lap.

"Isn't that my dressing gown?" Ron asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, redheaded whore," Severus replied. "The house-whore is mending my things."

"Well, that's all right then," Ron said amiably. "Just make certain it gets washed before you give it back. I don't want to wear something your dangly bits have been rubbing all over," he finished with a grin.

This statement struck Severus as outrageously funny, and he laughed so hard that he gave himself the hiccoughs. After he had calmed down a bit, Harry kindly charmed the hiccoughs away. Surprisingly, Severus did not flinch from Harry's wand anymore than he did from Hermione's.

"I'll get you some new clothes tomorrow, Severus," Harry said kindly. "And I'll get you your very own dressing gown so that you and Ron's dangly bits don't have to share."

This set Severus to laughing again, and it was a long time before he calmed down enough for Harry to charm away his returned hiccoughs. Ron, Harry, and Hermione laughed right along with him. There was something absolutely contagious about the laughter of a man they had always thought so sour.

Uneasy Thoughts

Chapter 12 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I'm sorry about the wee delay before this chapter got posted. Writing has been slow lately, but I hope to get back in the swing of things soon. Big thanks to everyone who has been kind enough to leave me a review. You have no idea how much each and every one means to me. Thanks!

Special thanks to alert reader Subversa for finding a couple oopsies in the last chapter. She was kind enough to email me about them, so now they are fixed. She rocks! Anyone who catches a typo or mistake is welcome to email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com.

As always, this chapter wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for my intrepid beta, Vaughn. Vaughn rocks!

For the next few days, peace reigned at Grimmauld Place. Harry and Ron came and went as they dealt with their own tasks for the Order. Hermione had taken a break from her sluggish research on living Horcruxes, and was trying to tackle the more immediate problem of how to destroy the Hufflepuff cup. Though the cup seemed safe enough here at the house, the sooner it was destroyed, the better.

Unfortunately, Hermione had no idea how to go about it. Moody had shared his own research on the subject with Hermione, and it had proved effective. However, Hermione would much rather find an answer that would not destroy the wizard along with the Horcrux. Though she trusted in her own intelligence, Hermione was very discouraged about the likelihood of finding a better solution. After all, Dumbledore himself had not remained unscathed when he had destroyed Slytherin's ring. Hermione wished that she had Dumbledore's insights on the matter. The withering of a hand seemed like a much smaller price to pay than the giving up of one's life altogether.

Severus had been uncharacteristically easy to handle lately. Having found some books of interest in the Black family library, he was poring through them eagerly. He gave off the air of someone who has had a sudden breakthrough, though what sort of breakthrough was anyone's guess. No one knew what his research was about...if it was indeed about anything...and Severus would not discuss it. Harry and Ron were of the opinion that it was unimportant, perhaps even nonsense. Hermione wasn't certain. Though Severus was mad and his mind thoroughly mixed-up on occasion, he still showed signs that his intellect was intact, if not always accessible.

The books themselves gave Hermione no clue as to what Severus' research was about, as they were all written in German. Hermione had a fair knowledge of Latin due to her schoolwork, and spoke traveler's Italian, but she hadn't progressed in German farther than being able to say 'Ich spreche Deutsch nicht'...which was enough to recognize the language, but not translate the titles on the spines of Severus' newly chosen books. In fact, none of the books ensconced on the shelf of Severus' desk were in English. Some were obviously in Gobbledegook, some in German, and some in a language that Hermione didn't recognize at all. Was Severus truly able to read in at least four languages, or was this some strange illusion of his addled mind? Was Severus simply some modern day Don Quixote, taking a scholarly approach to tilting at windmills? Either way, it did no harm and it kept Severus blessedly quiet while Hermione did her own research.

Unfortunately, Hermione's own research was leading nowhere. Hermione found no fault with the research of the late Alastor Moody except that it had blown him up spectacularly. She also was finding nothing new to add to it, despite the interesting books found in the Black family library. This library put the Restricted Section at Hogwarts to shame. The Black family, having been mostly comprised of Death Eaters and other Voldemort supporters, had more books on the Dark Arts than Hermione had ever seen in one place. Some of the books were downright scary. There were tomes that seemed to be written in blood and a few that looked like they were bound in covers made from human skin. Hermione didn't even want to look at those books, let alone touch them. But amongst the frightful tomes were others which were very helpful indeed. For every book that told you how to curse and poison, there were others that dealt with counter-curses and antidotes. These were the books that Hermione pored through, looking for any mention of Horcruxes and how to destroy magical objects.

Though she'd been looking for days, Hermione found nothing to add to Moody's parchments on the matter. What were they supposed to do? Go to the Order and ask who wanted to die for the cause? Dying in battle was one thing...all the Order members knew the risks, and believed in the cause fiercely enough to take those risks. Asking for a volunteer to agree to magical suicide was another matter entirely. And who could they possibly do without? If she could find no other answer, who was she supposed to single out for extermination? All of the Order members were known to her, many of them friends. There was simply no way that she could tell them that one of them had to die.

All sentimentality aside, when Hermione tried to think as a chess master and decide who was most expendable, her mind simply turned in circles. Some of the Order members' magic was simply not strong enough to destroy the Horcrux. Unfortunately, those with strong enough magic were the least expendable. Harry was out, for obvious reasons, and Ron was Harry's greatest source of support. Remus was also out. Not only was the man working with Draco, he was also their only hope of bringing some of the other werewolves to their side. Minerva was needed at Hogwarts. With Albus gone, if anything happened to Minerva the Ministry was sure to put some Umbridgian idiot in charge. Filius was powerful, but he was not a member of the Order, nor did Hermione want to see the cheerful little Charms professor die for the cause. The Weasleys all had stronger magic than most people would suspect, but they each had an important role to play. Mr. Weasley was their best tie to the Ministry. Charlie's work with dragons was as important as Bill's ties to the Goblins. Fred and George were coming up with both imaginative and useful products to help people fight. Ginny was a strong fighter, and even were she not, Harry would fall apart if anything were to happen to her. Molly was as strong a fighter as Ginny, and more importantly, her firm hand kept the brash Weasley clan in line. Then there was Percy. Percy probably wouldn't piss on the Order if it were on fire.

No matter who Hermione thought of, she found some unquestionable reason for them to stay alive and continue doing what they were doing. In fact, it seemed like the most expendable person who had strong enough magic was Hermione herself. Could she do such a thing? She had once told Harry and Ron that she would die for the cause, but could she be brave enough to do so purposefully? Would the Order miss her? Not the members themselves--she knew that she would be missed personally--but was her contribution so great that they couldn't do without her? Thinking the matter over as objectively as possible, she had to admit that her contribution to the Order's work would be the least missed of any of the candidates who she was considering for the task. Though her magic was strong, she was not a particularly adept duelist. She had no connections to the Ministry or to other wizard factions that made her particularly valuable. What she did best was research, but she was hardly the only member who could do that. It was true that she was good at her work, but when stacked up against the work of the other Order members, it seemed a paltry contribution to the cause. Merlin, she couldn't even improve on Moody's research to make this sacrifice unneeded! Suddenly, having taken a good look at the big picture, Hermione seemed very small and insignificant.

That was not the only argument in favor of Hermione trying to destroy the Horcrux herself. Her Gryffindor spirit balked at the idea of asking someone else to do something that she herself would not. In some ways, it seemed far easier to contemplate dying herself than it did to ask another to give up their life for the cause. Though she made no definite decision, over the next few days, Hermione found herself putting her other research in order. She already had an answer to the living Horcrux dilemma, even if she didn't like it. If Hermione did indeed sacrifice herself to the cause, the Order would not suffer unduly for it.

Though Hermione told no one what was on her mind, it was only natural that such serious thoughts both disturbed and depressed her. Knowing that she wasn't behaving quite as usual, Hermione kept a close eye on the reactions of the others she shared a house with. If she decided to go through with her plan to try and destroy Hufflepuff's cup, then it was imperative that no one get wind of her plans. They would no more agree to her sacrificing herself than she would agree to anyone else doing it. Thankfully, neither Ron nor Harry seemed to think anything was out of the ordinary. Certainly they had noticed that she was a bit down, but they were not overly distressed. Both young men tried to cheer her up; Harry with chocolates and Ron by offering to look after Severus so that she could have a change of scene. After accepting the chocolates and declining a day out, Hermione found herself relieved that neither of them had discovered the plan that she was considering.

Severus' reaction was more difficult to gauge. Once the daily showering ritual had begun, Severus had taken to watching her at odd moments. Lately, she had awakened several times during the night to find the man staring at her while she slept. Though she had given him a lecture on the impropriety of this, it seemed to do little good. Looking chastened, Severus would slink out of the room only to return after she had gone back to sleep. It was impossible to discern whether this added attention from Severus was because he was suspicious of her, or simply a new form of behavior brought about by his madness.

Hermione's intermittent thoughts of her own demise were abruptly halted one morning. Having just finished brushing her teeth, she was wiping her face off with a towel when she heard loud, braying sobbing. Dropping the towel negligently to the floor, she hurried out of the lav and followed the sound to the library. The sight that met her eyes was disturbing. While Ron looked on with astonishment, Severus was sobbing hysterically. He was on his knees in the middle of the floor, and had rolled himself into a ball with his arms wrapped tightly around his head. His piteous crying was so intense that he was having trouble breathing. Rushing to his side, Hermione knelt before him and tried to get him to uncurl. At first, Severus batted at her hands, but when he saw that it was Hermione who was touching him, he threw his arms around her with an anguished cry. Ending up half in Hermione's lap and with his head pillowed on her breasts, Severus continued to cry, but with much less force. Stroking his back soothingly, Hermione looked up at Ron, a question in her eyes.

"I...I didn't think," began Ron haltingly. "There was a spider..."

That admission was enough for Hermione to sort out what had happened. "Ron! How could you? You know very well that Malfoy told us Severus can't bear to see anything killed! What in the world were you thinking?"

"But it was a spider, Hermione! What was I supposed to do, invite it to tea?" Ron snapped. "I know what Malfoy said, but it was just a fucking spider!"

"You could have asked Severus to leave the room, Ron. That's what you could have done. Instead, you did something that you knew would upset him and then you just stood there with your mouth hanging open!"

"Hermione," Ron said gruffly, "don't you think that we had better move him? He's got his head...well...he's got his head on your bosom!"

"Honestly, Ron! Bosom? Next you'll be calling me a 'scarlet woman.' They're breasts, Ron, and I assure you that Severus isn't hurting them."

"It's not right, Hermione! You shouldn't let him cuddle up to you like that, it isn't proper. Only yesterday I saw you coming out of the lav with him, and now you're allowing him liberties. Exactly what is going on, Hermione?" Ron finished angrily.

"Ronald Weasley, that's disgusting!" Hermione snapped. "Severus is in no condition to take advantage of me, and I would hardly take advantage of a man who is ill. Look at him! He's about as dangerous as a five year old boy."

"But he isn't a five year old boy, Hermione. He's a grown man and I don't care how upset he is, he shouldn't be mucking about with your bosom! And it isn't proper for you to be watching him take a shower! I'm damn certain that the mad sod doesn't look like a boy!"

Both Hermione and Ron were shouting by this point. The effect that their argument had on Severus was easy to tell. Clinging tighter than ever to Hermione, Severus still wept, but now a frightened whining sound mixed in with his sobs. Noticing how badly the overwrought man was trembling, Hermione did her best to calm her voice, even if she could not diminish her anger.

"Ronald Weasley," Hermione began, her voice less loud but firm and cold, "I assure you that nothing nefarious is going on between Severus and me. He's ill, Ron! I would no more take advantage of him in his condition than I would if he were lying unconscious in St. Mungo's."

Flying into the room to see what the fuss was about, Harry took one look at Severus crying and his friends' angry faces and asked, "What's going on?"

"Ron upset Severus and he's not pleased with how I chose to sort the mess he's made," Hermione said coldly. "Ron's insulted my honor and he's behaving like a prudish old woman."

His face going almost purple in his anger, Ron growled, "Prudish old woman, am I? Well, let's see how you like this, Hermione Granger." His voice rising in pitch until it thundered through the room, Ron shouted, "Albus Dumbledore!"

The effect on Severus was immediate and heartbreaking. Flinging himself away from Hermione, he scrambled to his feet. The sound that broke from his mouth was almost inhuman. He keened in despair and anguish. His hands tore at his clothes and also at his hair. Never had Hermione seen anyone act in such a horrible fashion. As she tried to figure out what to do, Severus ran up to one of the walls and began slamming his head against it.

"Sweet Merlin, Hermione. What have I done?" Ron said, his voice barely audible over Severus' moaning. The anger had fled from his face as suddenly as it had appeared.

"You've behaved like a moronic prat, that's what you've done," Harry snapped.

"No time for this," Hermione said firmly. "We'll discuss it later; we have to try to help him now."

"What should I do, Hermione?" asked Harry. "Should I try Petrifying him? He's going to hurt himself."

"No! That will only make it worse when we let him loose. Harry, put a Cushioning Charm on that wall. Ron, go get the Calming Draught out of the cabinet in the lav. It's a light blue glass phial with an acorn shaped stopper."

As Harry cast the charm, Ron ran from the room to get the draught. Severus continued to moan and forcibly bang his head against the wall, but it was now cushioned enough not to hurt him. Going to his side, Hermione rubbed her hand up and down his back in an action that was beginning to be habitual with her whenever Severus was upset. Speaking to him calmly, her words mostly soothing nonsense, she waited for Ron to return with the potion.

By the time Ron handed her the phial, Severus was still keening and still banging his head, but with much less frequency and force. After asking the boys to leave them in peace, Hermione continued to stroke Severus' back and speak comfortingly to him. Eventually, though he still was terribly upset, Hermione spoke to him of the potion.

"Severus, I know that you're hurting...I know that you're upset, but you are going to do yourself an injury if you don't calm down. I've got a phial here. I made it myself and I assure you that it's perfectly safe. It will make you feel better. I'm going to put it to your mouth now, try to drink some."

It was difficult, to say the least, to try and get a potion down Severus' throat when he was still slowly banging his head against the wall. How Hermione managed it, she was never certain, and it was clear that more of the Calming Draught went down Severus' shirt than in his mouth. In the end, it didn't matter. Enough of the potion got into Severus' mouth to calm him down. The horrible keening stopped, and the trembling man leaned heavily against the wall. Remembering how Remus had calmed Severus, Hermione drew him away from the wall, wrapped a hand around his head and drew it down to rest on her shoulder. With one arm draped around his shoulders, and the other still stroking his back, Hermione hugged him tightly and tried her best to comfort him. She knew that they must look ludicrous; he was a full head taller than her and had to bend down quite a bit to rest his head on her shoulder. Hermione didn't care how foolish they looked. It felt good to hold him. It felt good to feel his trembling lessen and then stop. It felt altogether too good when Severus draped his arms loosely around her waist. Though the action startled her, Hermione did not step away. Severus rarely touched anyone other than Draco. Hermione was not about to do anything to make Severus think such contact was improper, despite the fact that she felt guilty for enjoying it so much.

Eventually, Hermione drew slightly back from Severus. Gently brushing Severus' hair away from his face, Hermione saw that he was uninjured. Harry had acted quickly when he cast that Cushioning Charm.

"Severus, you look exhausted," she said softly. "Why don't you go have a little lie down?"

"No," he said in a voice so low that Hermione could barely hear him. "I don't like to sleep. The old whore makes me dream when I sleep."

Severus thought that someone was making him dream? Was this why he rarely slept more than two hours a night? But which whore was this? Sometimes Severus' whore fixation made things very difficult. It was true that Severus had different sorts of whore names for some people, but he also had multiple variations for the same person as well. Not to mention the fact that he called all Weasleys 'the redheaded whore.' There were times when he made it nearly impossible to figure out who he meant. This was such a time. 'old whore' could mean almost anyone. With his paranoia about the Death Eaters, Hermione decided that Severus probably thought that Voldemort was giving him bad dreams. For all Hermione knew, he was. Voldemort had certainly given Harry a hard time over the years.

"Severus, why don't you come over to the sofa with me? You can lie down and put your head on my lap. Then you can get a little rest, and if you have any bad dreams I can wake you."

Later, Hermione could not decide if she had cleverly used Severus' little crush on her to get him to sleep, or if she had given in to her own growing but ill-fated desires. But while Severus slept with his head on Hermione's lap, she pushed aside her worries on the matter and simply enjoyed stroking his hair and watching him sleep.

Love and War

Chapter 13 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Lots to say today! First off, thanks to all you readers who have taken the time to leave me a review. I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate it!

Special thanks to alert readers, Swooning, Amygdalaj, and Lady in the cloak, for letting me know about a couple typos in the last chapter. You guys rock!

For those of you wondering if Hermione said "I don't speak German" correctly, she didn't! But then, Hermione doesn't speak German any more than I do, so she doesn't know that she's wrong. Wouldn't she be mortified! ;) Instead of saying "I don't speak German" she should be saying "I speak no German." Thanks to Veradee amongst others for letting me know the proper form, but I'm not going to tell Hermione about it. It would do that girl good to be wrong about something.

Now for something very cool! Way back when I first finished the first draft of chapter 12, and long before I posted it, someone alerted me to this lovely artwork of Mel's. <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/33500099/>

When I saw it, I nearly squeed my pants off! Since then, Mel has renamed it for this fic, and I'm the proudest Pooka in the whole world! So go take a peek!

As always, this fic wouldn't be fit to be read without first being prettied up by my intrepid beta, Vaughn. Vaughn rocks!

Where does one go from a world of insanity? Somewhere on the other side of despair.

-T.S. Eliot 1888-1965

An hour later, Hermione still sat on the sofa with a sleeping Severus' head in her lap. Though she had started out enjoying this innocent contact, her thoughts had soon taken a turn south. If she made the sacrifice that she had been considering, who would then take care of Severus? This thought plagued her for some time. Hermione didn't want to leave him; she didn't want to die at all. However, thinking that she was the only person capable of looking after Severus seemed as foolish as thinking that no one else could finish her research. Certainly, Severus enjoyed her company, and was more likely to listen to Hermione than he was to listen to Harry or Ron, but that didn't mean that Hermione was the only person who could take care of him. It certainly seemed a poor excuse for keeping her from doing what she knew must be done.

There was no use putting the matter off any longer. The job needed to be done and she was the obvious choice to do it. It was hardly as if Hermione had all that much to lose, after all. She was at odds with her two best friends and she was hopelessly enamored with a madman. Her whole life suddenly seemed rather pointless. She didn't want to die, but if she did, at least it would be for a very good reason. Perhaps it would add some meaning to a life that suddenly seemed rather pitiful.

At this point, Hermione's bitter musings were interrupted by Harry appearing at the library door. Stepping into the room, Harry closed the door quickly but quietly before drawing his wand to place a complicated ward on it.

"Is something amiss?" Hermione asked, her voice soft in deference to the man asleep with his head on her lap.

"Molly's here," Harry said just as softly as he walked over to the chair nearest Hermione and sat down. "She didn't give us any notice; she just walked in through the back door. She must have Apparated to the back yard."

"What's she doing here?" Hermione hissed. "Remus made it very clear to the Order that we weren't to be disturbed!"

"I told her that, so did Ron. She just went on about how it wasn't Order business and then babbled something about mothers having the right to see their sons. The woman is impossible!"

"Harry, if Molly can just waltz in here unannounced, others might do the same thing. We were lucky this time. How are we going to keep Severus safe if someone just pops in and starts screaming their head off?"

Leaning his head back to rest it against the high back of his chair, Harry closed his eyes for a moment to think. "I've already warded the Floo system. I'll add a ward to the house so that only those of us who live here can walk straight in. I can pass that off as an added security easily enough. By the time the ward alerts us, and we answer the door, we can get Severus hidden."

"That sounds sensible, Harry, but that's a pretty complex ward. Can you handle it?"

"Lemon squeezey," Harry said with a smile. "Lately I've been going to the school to study the wards there. There are layers of protection spells on that place, some of them going back centuries. Compared to some of those, the 'knock first' ward I'm going to put up is dead easy."

"Why have you been studying the wards?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Oh, you wouldn't know about that, would you? It's because of something that happened in the cave last year. Er...the man I was with..." Harry said cautiously, despite the fact that Severus still seemed deeply asleep. "Well, he was able to figure out what sort of wards were guarding what we thought was the Horcrux. He did it just by sort of feeling them out. I was really impressed by that; it was so useful. So I've been giving it a try at the school."

"And can you do it?" Hermione asked, obviously impressed.

"Somewhat. It's still kind of hit and miss. I can tell the wards are there, and I can identify some of the simpler ones. Sometimes I can even tell who placed them. Wizard magic feels different depending on who placed it. It's hard to describe, but it's as if the spells have different flavors or something."

"I've read about that," Hermione said, which caused Harry to roll his eyes playfully. "Well, I have! Wizards each have what they call a magical signature. A strong wizard can learn to tell the difference between the spell work of various wizards."

"That makes sense with what I've learned on my own."

"I agree that it's fascinating, Harry, but why did you want to learn it? I thought you were trying to track down the last Horcrux?"

"That search was leading nowhere fast. I got tired of wasting my time. There's nothing at Godric's Hollow, and unless we get some kind of tip, I don't know where else to look. So I started studying wards. Like I said, I thought it was impressive magic. With the war in full swing, there's no telling what may turn out to be useful."

Their discussion was suddenly interrupted by the loud voice of Molly Weasley coming from the hall. "Where's Harry got off to? And where is Hermione hiding? I wanted to say hello to her."

"I told you, Mum," began Ron, his frustration apparent in his voice, "Hermione is quite busy and shouldn't be disturbed."

"Busy my old hat!" huffed Molly. "She's just reading, isn't she? I imagine that the books will still be there after I've gone."

"Her work is very important to the Order, Mum!"

"Whatever you say, dear," Molly said condescendingly. "But I imagine that if there was anything of importance to be found in those moldering old books, Alastor...may he rest in peace...would have found it before now."

Two things happened at that moment. Harry set a Silencing Charm on the door and Severus woke up.

"That redheaded whore is loud enough to wake the dead," Severus grumbled. "Doesn't she care that people are sleeping?"

"It's all right, Severus," Hermione said, smiling down at him. "You won't hear her anymore. Go back to sleep now...you're still tired."

Reaching up to snag Hermione's arm off the back of the sofa, Severus then cradled it to his chest. With a sigh, he drifted back to sleep.

Lifting her eyes, Hermione was startled by the sharp look that Harry was giving her. "Honestly, Harry," she snapped quietly, "not you too? This is perfectly harmless!"

"Is it?" Harry asked. As Hermione opened her mouth to argue, Harry cut her off. "Don't give me hell, woman, listen to me for a moment. You know that I'm not near the prude that Ron is."

"That's true," Hermione said cautiously.

"I admit that it's damned odd to see you practically cuddling with a man that none of us ever got along well with, but that's not what I'm on about. You're a grown woman, Hermione. As far as I'm concerned, you can cuddle with whomever you wish and for whatever reason you wish,"

"Thank you for that, Harry. I didn't expect that of you."

"I'm a man, but that doesn't automatically make me an idiot," Harry joked. "Besides, it's easier for me than it is for Ron. You and I never dated."

"That doesn't excuse Ron for what he did," Hermione hissed. "He was cruel. He could have..."

"Hush," Harry interrupted. "We aren't talking about Ron. We're talking about you. We'll talk about Ron in a moment. I'm not convinced that this cuddling business is harmless, Hermione. The way you look at him sometimes, well, Ron and I may be pretty dense about such things most of the time, but even we can tell that you care for him."

"Of course I care for him, Harry. I'm taking care of him night and day. I could hardly do so and not come to care for him in some fashion."

"Understandable, but we aren't talking about caring for him in a motherly way, are we? You mother all of us, Hermione, in a nagging and incessant manner, I might add. This is different and you know it."

"Suppose it is different," Hermione offered hesitantly, "how is that any of your or Ron's business?"

"It's not, except that we care about what happens to you. You're our friend. Hermione, the chances of Severus ever regaining his wits is practically nonexistent. You must know that."

"Of course I know that! Do you think me a complete and utter fool? Don't you know how much it tears me up? Believe me, I know damned well that the only man who has ignited any interest on my part since I dated Ron is as mad as a March hare. I am also well aware that his chances of recovery lie somewhere between zero and none. But you try and tell that to my heart, Harry. You go ahead and try, because the blasted thing won't listen to me!"

Reaching out to grasp the hand that was not held captive in Severus' grasp, Harry gave it a firm squeeze. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I should have realized that I couldn't say anything that you haven't already thought of yourself. I guess love doesn't have much to do with logic."

"Is that what this is, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking sadly down at Severus' sleeping face. "Is this love?"

"Of course it is," Harry said with a crooked smile. "What else could possibly make such a hash of things?" Hermione couldn't help but chuckle about that. "It's a hell of a situation, I'll give you that," Harry continued. "Whatever you decide to do about it, you can count on Ron and me to stand by you."

"I know I can count on you, Harry. But I don't think I can count on Ron, not about this. What he did today was needless and cruel."

"I know that, Hermione, and so does he. He was busy calling himself five kinds of fool when Molly arrived and interrupted him. All the Weasleys have a temper, Hermione, you know that. Ron lost his wits earlier; he hurt Severus and he feels terrible about it. You won't have to worry about him doing anything of the sort again."

"He'd better not, or he'll find himself on the wrong end of my wand," Hermione grumbled.

"If he does do anything that idiotic again, I'll hold him down while you hex him. All right?"

"Deal," Hermione said, unable to hold back a smile at the mental picture Harry's words had created.

Their discussion was interrupted by Severus suddenly waking up again. Releasing Hermione's hand as if it burned him, he gave both Harry and Hermione a brief glance before scrambling up off the sofa. Retreating to where the suit of armor stood, he nervously traced patterns in the suit's breastplate. When Harry looked a question at Hermione, she could only shrug in response.

"Well," said Harry, with a somewhat forced air of nonchalance, "I suppose I'd best go check on Ron and see if Molly's left yet."

When Hermione nodded her agreement, Harry stood and left the library, closing the door firmly behind him. Hermione also rose and crossed the room rather warily to where Severus stood studying the armor intently.

"Severus?" she called softly. "Are you all right?"

"Fine! I'm fine!" Severus said gruffly to the armor's helmet.

That wasn't a good sign. Most of the time when Severus spoke to her, he would at least look in her general direction and often managed to look her in the eyes. Talking to inanimate objects instead was a sign that he was upset about something.

"Severus, what's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"What's wrong?" he shouted. "I run around shrieking like a deranged harpy and the stupid little whore asks me what's wrong? I'm what's wrong! Me!"

With a strangled sound, he buried his face in his hands. His voice became so soft and muffled that Hermione could barely hear what he said next.

"I didn't want you to see that. I didn't want you to see me like that. I'm so sorry."

At times, Severus' pain nearly broke Hermione's heart. It was bad enough that Severus was mad, but the fact that he was so bitterly aware of his madness made it that much worse. Every single day, Hermione watched Severus struggle against his insanity, and though he won occasional battles, it was a war that he could only lose in the end. Now, the poor man was apologizing to her for actions he had no control over. That couldn't be allowed. Wiping hurriedly at the tears in her eyes, Hermione grabbed both of Severus' shoulders and bodily turned him to face her. After prying his hand off of his eyes, she spoke.

"Look at me, Severus. Look at me!" When he reluctantly complied, Hermione placed her hands softly on his cheeks. "Do you think that I'm so heartless that I would blame you, or judge you, for things you cannot control? You're ill, love. I know that. I would no more blame you for what happened in here today than I would blame someone who had a cold for sneezing. Your illness is something that has happened to you, it is not who you are. I know that. What you are is a brave and intelligent man who is doing the best that he can under terrible circumstances. That's who you are to me."

She was crying again. Severus raised his hands to cradle her face. Gently, he wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "Pretty little whore," he cooed. "Such a pretty little

whore. You should not cry. You should not cry for me. I'm a doomed man if I can't find the answer. You should not waste your tears on a doomed man," he finished sadly.

"What answer, Severus? What is it that you are looking for?"

Pulling gently away from Hermione, Severus walked over to his desk and began to quietly sort through the parchments there. "That's none of your business, little whore," he said, his tone softer than his words. "You look for your own answers and leave me to mine." With that, he went back to his research and ignored Hermione completely for the rest of the day.

Hermione saw Ron briefly at dinner. It was clear that the young man was horrified by his earlier behavior. Though Hermione was still angry at him--and told him so, repeatedly...she accepted his apology and their friendship remained intact.

That night, when Hermione sat, still dressed, on the edge of her bed, she was glad that she'd forgiven Ron. She'd been putting off a decision about what to do with the Hufflepuff cup, Hermione now decided it was high time that she stop waffling. The cup needed to be destroyed and she was the Order member who would be least missed. Personally, she was a woman who had been stupid enough to fall in love with a madman. What did she really have to lose?

It was three in the morning before Hermione stealthily left her bedroom. With a heavy heart and bitterly low spirits, she snuck into the library and removed the cup from its place on the mantle. Like a thief in the night, Hermione crept through the house to the back door.

The moon was new and it was dark as a cellar in the back garden. Hermione stood on the doorstep for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light before she left the porch. As she stepped into the yard, a shape appeared out of the shadows. Before Hermione could grab her wand or even scream, the cup was fiercely knocked out of her hands.

With a muffled thud, the cup fell to the grass and rolled a few feet away.

Shaken Up

Chapter 14 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: As always, big thanks to everyone who left me a review for last chapter. I wasn't expecting such a big response and it really made my week! I think I have the most kick ass readers in the fandom!

No alert reader notes this week, but I wanted to thank SouthernWitch69 for being such an encouragement and for making me giggle. Sun, you rock my socks!

I didn't think I'd be able to post this soon, but Vaughn gave me the best birthday present ever! A prettied up chapter all ready to post! (Vaughn rocks!) So here I am, less than an hour before I officially turn 41, and I'm posting a new chapter. I love birthdays! I will warn you, I am having a big birthday weekend of fun, so review responses may be slow this weekend. I promise I will answer every single one as I have time. So happy birthday to me, and happy reading! :)

Truly great madness can not be achieved without significant intelligence.

-Henrik Tikkanen 1924-1984

As strong hands gripped her shoulders and spun her around, the scream that Hermione had been trying to voice died in her throat. Even in the dim light, she could tell who was holding her. Standing before her with wild eyes and flaring nostrils, Severus Snape gripped Hermione's upper arms so tightly that it hurt. As Hermione opened her mouth to ask him to release her, Severus shook her so violently that her neck snapped back and forth.

"Stupid little whore!" he snarled. "You brainless little whore! What the bloody hell do you think you are doing? Do you take me for a complete and utter fool? The other whores may be blind as bats, but not me! What in Hades were you thinking, trying this fool stunt? What were you *thinking*?"

Severus' shaking of Hermione had quieted as his voice had risen with every sentence he uttered. By the end of the speech, he was simply holding her tightly as he shouted into her face. When Hermione tried again to speak, he gave her another violent, bone rattling shake.

"You weren't thinking at all, were you, stupid little whore? If you had a brain in that foolish head of yours, you wouldn't be throwing your life away on a fool's errand! Stupid! Little! Whore!" he shrieked, giving her a rough shake to punctuate every word.

"Severus," Hermione managed to choke out, "you're hurting me!"

"What do you care?" he said coldly, before shaking her again. "You're about to go blow yourself up, aren't you? So why does it matter? What's a little pain before the big death? What's a little shake between friends before you go and throw your life away? Why shouldn't I just kill you right now and save you the trouble?"

Despite his fury, Severus did not kill Hermione. He did something far more startling. Pulling her tightly against his chest, Severus bent his head and kissed her. It was not a tender kiss. In some ways, that kiss was as violent as the shaking had been. Severus' kiss was brutal, demanding, and brief. All too soon he was leaning back to fiercely shake her again.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he shrieked. "Answer me!"

When the shaking slowed down enough that Hermione felt she could risk a few words without losing her tongue to her clacking teeth, she tried to reply.

"It has to be destroyed I'm the most expendable no one else to do it," she said in a breathless rush.

"Expendable? Rubbish! How long do you think those two brainless whores inside would last without you?" Taking his hand off of her bruised biceps, Severus took a hold of Hermione's head just as firmly. "How am I to manage without you, little whore?" he asked, his voice breaking. The anger in his eyes fled and his expression was full of both sorrow and fear. "I am mad, little whore. The last of my sanity hangs by a gossamer thread. If you throw your life away like the foolish Gryffindor you are, how shall I stop that last strand from breaking? What shall I do without you to help me remember myself?"

With tears running freely down her cheeks, Hermione did her best to convince Severus that this was the only answer. "I don't want you to lose yourself! I don't! But that cup has to be destroyed and there's no sense putting it off. If I do not make this sacrifice, who will? What shall we do, pull straws to see who gets to die for the cause?"

"But you don't have to die, you stupid whore! No one has to die! Haven't you got a smidgeon of brain rattling around in that empty head?"

Clasping both hands on Severus' arms to steady herself, Hermione stood up on her tiptoes to look him in the eyes. "What are you taking about, Severus? Alastor himself tried to destroy a Horcrux and it killed him."

"Oh, I've heard you talking about that wooden-legged whore. Poor whore got himself blown up, didn't he? Serves him right for being a fool! Constant vigilance my arse!"

Doing her best to ignore how ill Severus spoke of the dead, Hermione tried to keep her mind on what was important. "Are you saying there is another way?"

"There may be," Severus replied, his eyes slipping away from her face as he concentrated. "I think there may be. Tell me, little whore, why is it so hard to destroy the Horcruxes?"

Hermione felt as if she were back in Potions class, so familiar was his manner. "Because of the soul inside. The binding of a piece of soul into an object makes it too strong to easily break."

"Very good. Five points to Gryffindor," he said with an evil grin. "Think, whore! If the soul makes it unbreakable, what should you do?"

Suddenly, the answer seemed crystal clear to Hermione. "Take the soul out first?" she said tentatively.

"Remove the soul, and the cup is only a cup. As breakable as any cup."

"But what about that bit of soul? What happens to it?"

"It should return to its owner, if my understanding of the matter is correct."

"But won't that make him stronger?" Hermione said, aghast. "If he gets half his soul back..."

"Does the old whore seem weak to you now?" Severus snapped. "He only has a sliver of his soul; does he seem less powerful to you? Splitting his soul made the old whore less human, not less powerful."

"Of course. You're right. He'd never do something that would weaken him, but I can't imagine he's all that concerned about his humanity."

"Exactly."

"But how do we do it? How do you separate a bit of soul from something? That's not anything that I've come across in my research. Do you know how to do it?"

Severus' gaze slid away from her face as he muttered to himself. "I should not show you...I'd risk so much to show you, but you'll blow your fool head off if I don't." His eyes returned to her face as he let go of the death grip he had on Hermione's head. One hand wandered to her shoulder as the other crept to the back of her head and wound its fingers into her hair. "I can't let you, pretty little whore," he said softly. "I can't let you blow your fool head off."

Pulling Hermione to him, Severus leaned down and kissed her again. This kiss was as different from the first as night from day. It was gentle, loving, almost reverent. Hermione found herself drawn into the kiss, responding without thought as she wound her arms around his neck. Knowing that she should not take advantage of Severus while he was ill, she still could not help herself. Never had she been kissed with such feeling. She would not have stopped that kiss even if she could.

All too soon, Severus drew away from her. His eyes hardened again as he looked at her, and his arms slipped back down to clutch her tender upper arms.

"Please," she begged, "please don't shake me again!"

Severus' only reply was a roll of his eyes as he stood, looking at her warily for a moment. "She says that she'll listen to me, but who can say?" he muttered to himself. "I've too much to do to be looking after whorish Gryffindors at all hours of the night."

"Severus, I won't blow myself up, I promise!"

Still looking wary, Severus turned towards the house. "House-whore!" he called. "Get your arse out here, you're needed!"

With a soft pop, Kreacher appeared on the back step. "What is the dark man wanting of Kreacher? Is he wanting some nice tea?"

"No, house-whore, I won't be needing any tea. See that cup lying there in the grass?"

"Yes, sir. Kreacher sees the shiny cup."

"Take that cup and hide it. Don't let anyone but me touch it, do you understand? Don't let this whore," he said, giving Hermione a very gentle shake, "even see the blasted thing; do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Kreacher said with a chuckle. "Don't let missy whore see it!" In a flash, Kreacher scuttled over to the fallen cup, scooped it up, and with a final gleeful laugh, he vanished with a pop.

"Come with me," Severus said gruffly. He then proceeded to take Hermione's hand and practically drag her into the house and to the lav. Stopping in front of the potions cabinet, he dropped Hermione's hand before sorting through the potions he found there. As he uncapped various phials and sniffed the contents, Hermione finally found her voice.

"Do you think it was wise to trust Kreacher with something so important?"

"The house-whore knows that if he crosses me, he'll just be another head on the wall. Take your blouse off."

"What?" Hermione screeched.

"I said, take your bloody blouse off! Stubborn Gryffindor whores," he grumbled to the potions cabinet. "Always causing a fuss over the littlest things. Yes, yes, you're quite right, but there isn't much to do about it, is there?"

Hermione realized two things. One, Severus was obviously completely knackered. Two, the potions that he was selecting were healing potions. She might as well take off her blouse. Severus wasn't asking her to do any more than she had asked of him during his first day at Harry's house. Gritting her teeth, she pulled her knit top off over her head, leaving on her fairly plain white bra.

Turning towards her, Severus looked at her bra, raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Are you going to take that off?"

"There is no need for me to take off my bra!" Hermione snapped. "You hurt my arms."

"Can't blame a bloke for trying," Severus muttered with a sigh. "Drink this," he said, holding out a phial.

Recognizing it as a general healing draught, Hermione uncorked it and quickly downed it. It tasted strongly of anise, and she had never been a fan of anise. When she was done, Severus gently rubbed a muscle relaxant onto the skin of her arms before drawing his wand and healing the many bruises.

"Did I hurt you anywhere else?" he said gruffly to the door of the potions cabinet.

Raising her hand to Severus' cheek, Hermione turned his head until he looked at her. "No," she said gently, "I'm fine now. I expect that if I had caught you about to blow yourself up, I would have reacted rather strongly as well." Releasing him, Hermione quickly shrugged into her top. Taking Severus' hand, she led him out of the lav and down the hall to his room. "It's past time for you to get some rest, Severus. Why don't you lie down for a bit?"

Though he dutifully went to the bed and lay down, his expression was stormy as he lay there in his trousers and shirt. With a sigh, Hermione went to the bed and perched on the edge of it. She had made every effort to get Severus to change into night clothes, but he insisted on sleeping in his trousers.

"What's wrong?" she asked, leaning forward to brush the hair from his face.

"If I'm sleeping, who will keep the stupid little whores from blowing themselves up?" he growled.

"You've taken the cup from me, love. I promise you that I will not do anything else to speed my demise while you are asleep. All right?"

"I suppose," Severus said sleepily.

"Goodnight, Severus," Hermione said. Leaning down, she gave him a soft kiss on the lips. "Thank you for not letting me explode myself."

"Just see that it never happens again," he said gruffly as she walked to the door. Then, much softer, he said, "Goodnight, pretty little whore."

Leaving Severus' door slightly ajar, Hermione went to her own room and prepared for bed. Sleep didn't come easy to the witch, despite her exhaustion. Every time Hermione closed her eyes, she found herself fixated on three kisses. Eventually, she turned over and at last found sleep.

The next morning, Hermione woke with a start. Her first thoughts were of Severus and of what had happened the night before. Eager to ask Severus about how he might be able to help her with destroying the Horcrux, Hermione took a shower in record speed and headed for the library.

As it was a Saturday morning, Ron and Harry were sitting on the sofa reading. Harry had a copy of the Quibbler, and Ron had a Quidditch magazine. A tea service sat on the table, as well as a plate of toast. This was the three friends' usual habit on a Saturday morning. The first one up...usually Hermione--would either make the tea and toast or try to talk Kreacher into doing it. This habit had not changed since Severus had come to live with them, only now no one had to make the tea. Severus was always up before anyone else and was always successful in bullying Kreacher into doing whatever he wanted.

Already hard at work with his parchment and his books, Severus sat at his desk, a large cup of tea at his elbow. Nodding a good morning at the boys, Hermione hastily grabbed a cup for herself. Just as she was beginning to cross the room to where Severus worked, Harry interrupted her.

"Bloody hell! Where's the blasted cup gone to? It should be right there on the mantle!"

"It was there yesterday," Ron said, also alarmed. "I made a fire-call last night just before bed and it was right there!"

Shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, Hermione tried to think of something to say that wouldn't start a huge row. "Er...well, you see..."

With a certain wicked glee, Severus took over, and it was clear that he didn't give a fig if he got Hermione into a row. "I had Kreacher hide it," he said conversationally. "I didn't want the stupid little whore to make another attempt to blow herself up. Kreacher!"

Before Harry and Ron could close their gaping mouths, Kreacher scurried into the room. "Yes, dark master?"

"The cup I gave you last night, fetch it and give it to The Whore Who Lived."

In a trice, Kreacher was back with the cup. He dutifully gave it to Harry, though he made terrible faces while he did so. As soon as Harry retrieved the cup, Kreacher disappeared with a pop.

"I'd keep it away from the little whore, were I you," Severus said in a tone of conspiracy. "You never know when she'll go barking again and attempt to do herself in."

"Hermione," Ron said sternly, "what in blazes did you try to do?"

"Yes, do tell us, Hermione," Harry said just as strongly. "I'd like to know if I can return this to the mantle, or if I'm going to have to hide it again in case you get any more insane urges."

"It wasn't an insane urge!" Hermione snapped. "Someone has to destroy the blasted thing! After careful, logical deliberation, I decided that I was the best choice to do it!"

For the next two hours, Severus Snape smiled wickedly as he worked at his desk while Ron and Harry read Hermione the riot act. It was clear that she wouldn't be making any more such "noble" sacrifices anytime soon.

Kiss and Tell

Chapter 15 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I tell you, there couldn't have been a better birthday present than the slew of reviews that I got on the last chapter! You all rock, and you made my birthday brighter!

Special thanks to alert readers, Jenloo and CocoaChristy, for catching a couple of typos in the last chapter. They have eyes like a hawk! Thanks, loves, you rock! And speaking of eyes like a hawk, Sun caught a period that needed a tail! I can see why she's an admin at the PP! Sun rocks my socks!

As always, huge thanks to the grammar goddess that is my beta reader. Vaughn is both the cat's pajamas and the bee's knees! (Not to mention groovy and keen!) And thanks to her kindness, I have this chapter to post. I only finished it yesterday!

This thing called love, I just can't handle it

This thing called love, I must get 'round to it

I ain't ready

Crazy little thing called love

-Freddie Mercury 1946-1991

For two hours, Hermione endured being lectured by Harry and Ron. The boys told her how disappointed they were in her. They told her how much she meant to them. They patiently listened to her faulty reasoning, and then gave her a dissertation of the many times that her knowledge and her quick thinking had been invaluable. In the end, they both hugged her fiercely and solemnly promised to kick her arse if she ever did anything of the sort again.

Though a bit drained by the experience, Hermione felt better about herself than she had in days. Harry and Ron had convinced her that she was a much more valuable member of the team than she had realized. Both cheered and chastised by their concern, Hermione left the boys to their reading and went to speak with Severus. All that talk about the cup had left her desperate to get started on the new research and get the blasted thing taken care of once and for all.

Pulling the chair from her worktable closer to Severus' desk, Hermione sat and regarded the man for a moment. All trace of the man who had kissed her so tenderly the night before had vanished. In fact, Severus didn't seem to be aware of her presence at all, so busily he wrote on his parchment. It looked to be some sort of list that he was writing, but Hermione couldn't see much of it. Severus had one arm circling the parchment protectively, and he hunched over it as he wrote.

"Severus," Hermione began softly, "could I speak to you for a moment?"

"I suppose," Severus said to his quill before placing it reluctantly on its stand.

"You said last night that you knew something that would help me destroy the cup...something to do with taking the soul out. Can you tell me what that is?"

Severus looked at her then. He looked at Hermione and he smiled with such obvious affection that for a moment Hermione's breath caught. Then he opened his mouth and said sweetly, "No."

The bizarre dichotomy of his actions versus his words left Hermione momentarily confused. Blinking at him stupidly, she finally found her voice. "But, Severus, you told me last night that you would be able to help me."

"I've changed my mind," Severus said jovially as he turned back to his list.

"But...you...Severus!" she sputtered.

"Hmmm?" he said, clearly bored with the conversation.

"You said you would help! Don't you want to help destroy the cup? After all, what's to keep me from trying it on my own again?"

Looking at Hermione again, he gave her the sweetest of smiles while he said, "You've promised the two whores on the sofa that you would not. I heard you. I know very well that you will not break a promise to *them*, so why should I bother?"

"Because you *promised*," Hermione hissed.

"I did no such thing," Severus said dryly before returning again to his list.

Quickly reviewing the previous night's conversation, Hermione realized that he was correct. He had promised nothing. He'd only said that he couldn't let her blow her head off. "Severus," she said cajolingly, "the cup has to be destroyed. It's very important; you know that! If you know of anything that will help, you are honor bound to help me."

"Sorry," Severus said dryly, "but I'm not feeling particularly honorable today. Why don't you ask some nice Hufflepuff whore?"

"Why, you ungrateful wretch!" snarled Hermione. "After all I've done for you, you would honestly refuse to give me information that you know damn well that I need?"

Raising his head to look at Hermione again, Severus gave her a crooked smile. A sly expression came into his eyes as he said, "I haven't noticed you doing all that much for me lately. Why should I put myself out on your account? I'm busy, little whore. Go away."

A complete fury overtook Hermione. "You unmitigated bastard!" she shouted. "If you have any information that will help me, you damned well better tell me!"

"No!" Severus shouted back. Grabbing his list and quill, Severus stood so fast that he knocked over his chair with a crash. Waving the parchment over his head wildly, he ran from the room, still shouting "no" over and over.

For the next twenty minutes, Hermione paced the library while she loudly listed the failings of all men in general and Severus in particular. Ron and Harry wisely stayed out of it, knowing that any word on their part would only fuel the fire. They were men, after all. They managed to stay quiet until Hermione wound down, though they did have to hide their smiles at some of Hermione's more inventive insults.

Eventually, Ron braved Hermione's temper and asked a question. "So what set him off that time, Hermione?"

"I don't think that anything set him off; that's why I'm so furious! He was being ridiculously stubborn for no reason whatsoever. How dare he talk like that to me! That's it! I'm going to hex his bollocks off!"

Drawing her wand, Hermione began stomping towards the door before Harry stopped her. Rising from the sofa, Harry beat Hermione to the door and stood, blocking her way. His arms were crossed over his chest and he had a wicked glint in his eye. "Now, Hermione," he began reasonably, "it sounded to me as if Severus simply wanted something in exchange for his help. He did say something about you not doing anything for him recently. Perhaps if you give him a good snog, he'll tell you all of his secrets?" he finished with a grin.

Harry was a brave man indeed. It wasn't just anyone who would tease Hermione when she was angry and already had a wand in her hand. Luckily, his teasing diffused Hermione's anger. Dropping her wand arm to swing limply at her side, Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair.

"How...why would you...how dare you even suggest such a thing!" Hermione sputtered.

At this point, Ron, who had fallen off the sofa because he was laughing so hard, wiped the mirthful tears from his eyes and added his two Knuts. "Honestly, Hermione, I don't know what you're so upset about. If it'll get you what you need to destroy the cup, I say you should snog the living daylights out of the bastard!"

"Oh, do you now?" snapped Hermione. "Well, if one of us has to take one for the team, why don't you go kiss the prat yourself?"

"Nah," joked Ron, "if he saw my mug coming at him, he'd probably have a right fit, he would."

"I'm afraid that if there's any snogging to be done, it's up to you, Hermione. Ron's promised not to do anything to upset Severus again, and I don't want to go making you jealous!"

Both young men laughed heartily at that jibe, while Hermione glared daggers at the pair. "That's hardly fair, Harry. I told you that nothing of the sort was going on between Severus and me."

"Well, I'll be buggered!" squeaked Ron. "She's lying, mate! I thought you said that they weren't doing anything but cuddling?"

"I didn't think they were," said Harry, the surprise evident in his expression. "What exactly happened last night, Hermione?"

With a resigned groan, Hermione collapsed onto the sofa and dropped her head into her hands. She knew better than to try to lie to Harry and Ron; they always caught her out. "He kissed me, all right?" she muttered into her hands. "He kissed me last night when we were arguing about my attempt to destroy the cup."

"Blimey," Ron said, staring up at Hermione from where he still sat on the floor. "What did you do?"

"I...er...I sort of kissed him back."

At Hermione's confession, Ron turned a bit green, though he kept his mouth shut. He didn't want to say anything to start Hermione shouting again. He loved the girl...she was one of his best friends...but she was still a bit scary.

Harry, on the other hand, laughed loud and hard. "So tell me, Hermione, what was all that rubbish about you not taking advantage of a sick man?"

"I did not take advantage!" Hermione snapped, lifting her head from her hands to scowl at Harry. "Severus kissed me! He took me by surprise...I didn't mean to..."

Crossing to the sofa, Harry knelt down and took both of Hermione's hands in his own. "Take it easy, love. We were just teasing you; no one's blaming you for anything. I told you yesterday, you're a grown woman and whoever you chose to cuddle with...or snog...is really none of my business. Or Ron's," he added.

When Hermione then looked to Ron, Ron gave her a definite, if reluctant, nod. "We're your friends, Hermione. It's our job to love you, and protect you, and kick your arse when you need it. But Harry reminded me that it's not our job to tell you who you can and can't fancy. All of us thought that Neville was mad for wanting to date Luna, but we didn't tell him not to, did we?"

"No," Hermione said quietly. "That's not the sort of thing friends should try to dictate to one another."

"I'd forgotten that, when I blew up at you the other day, but I remember it now. Harry and I talked about it a lot after Mum left. I'm not saying that I think it's a brilliant idea, mind you, the man's off his rocker. I think you'll get your heart broken, or get yourself tied to someone who can never be a real partner to you. But it's up to you, Hermione. Whatever you decide to do about it, Harry and I will stand by you."

This was what friendship was all about. It wasn't about what you had in common, or saving the world together. True friendship was about sticking by your friend's side, even when you thought they were being a complete and utter idiot. Thinking of this, Hermione was not surprised to find herself blinking back a few tears. Through good and bad, through thick and thin, these two young men were her best friends in the world. It felt uncommonly good to know that they would always stand beside her, even if she did things that they did not agree with. Even if she fell in love with a madman.

"Now then," said Harry gently, "why don't I go and make us a spot of tea while you get yourself together, Hermione. Once you've calmed down a bit, you should go talk to Severus. I know it's frustrating, but it's not like you to resort to hexing so easily. You're a very clever girl; I'm sure you can think of some way to tempt Severus into telling you what you need to know," he finished with a grin.

"Boys!" Hermione said with exasperation. "Go make that tea before I hex *you*!"

"Right away, missy whore!" Harry teased, bowing to Hermione as he backed towards the door. "There's no need to be hexing poor Harry! Harry will fetch missy whore's tea!" Ducking deftly when Hermione lobbed a sofa cushion at him, Harry laughed again as he left to fetch the tea.

The tea did help calm Hermione's temper, but it did nothing to quiet the thoughts that were spinning in her head. Were the boys right? Was Severus being stubborn because she hadn't run up, called him some ridiculous name, and given him a good morning kiss? Did a couple of kisses out in the garden make them a couple? Surely even a deranged Slytherin wouldn't jump to that conclusion. But what did Severus want? He was a grown man almost twenty years her senior. Perhaps he was looking for more than the odd snog. Hermione had to admit that he certainly had the right bargaining chip. She needed that information and she needed it now. How far was she willing to go to get it? Not that far, she decided. What she'd told Harry still stood. She wasn't about to take advantage of a man who was ill. Nor was she willing to get that intimate with a man who might throw an eppy in the middle of things. Snogging and cuddling were fairly innocent, after all, but anything more than that would seriously strain her sense of honor. It simply wasn't ethical. If Severus was keeping the information that she needed to himself in hopes of getting her into bed, then Hermione would just have to think of some other way to get it.

That quandary rather loosely settled in her mind, Hermione went looking for Severus. She soon found that finding him was not as easy as usual. Normally, if Severus wasn't in the library, then he could be found in the lav or the kitchen. When Hermione couldn't find him in any of those places, she checked his bedroom, despite the fact that he never went in there unless someone took him there to put him to bed. Growing concerned, Hermione checked the sitting room and the back yard, but she couldn't find hide nor hair of him. In the end, she was forced to appeal to Kreacher, who reluctantly told her that Severus was in the potions lab.

Heading back down the stairs, Hermione was surprised that Severus even knew where the small lab was. Perhaps Kreacher had showed it to him. Hermione had set it up in a disused room near the kitchen when they had moved into Harry's house. Making the simple potions that all households need was far cheaper than purchasing them, so Hermione had taken up the task. The lab was small, but serviceable. Perhaps Severus had grown bored with his books and parchments and decided to brew something. As Remus had told her before Severus moved in with them, Severus was very calm and almost normal ninety percent of the time, but that other ten percent was worrisome indeed. What would happen if something set Severus off when he was in the middle of a volatile potion? Well, she'd just have to cross that bridge when she got to it. The lab wasn't stocked with anything but the most basic of ingredients, so Hermione doubted that Severus would come to any harm. Besides, there was no sense borrowing trouble when she had more immediate issues to deal with--such as the strangely tempting but absolutely impossible idea that Severus was withholding information to get into her knickers.

Walking into the small potions lab, Hermione was relieved to see Severus looking through her small stock of ingredients. Glancing about the room, it looked to Hermione as if everything in the place had been moved slightly from where she had left it. Knowing Severus, he'd probably been examining everything down to the last stirring rod.

Now that she'd finally found the man, Hermione wasn't certain how to begin. At the moment, she might as well be invisible for all the attention he'd given her after she walked into the room. Perhaps he was angry at her for losing her temper, but how could she help it when the man was so bloody frustrating?

"Severus," Hermione began hesitantly, "do you mind if I join you for a while?"

"No," he said simply, "so long as you don't start shouting again. It's most unbecoming in a whore of your age."

"Is shouting becoming behavior for any type of whore?" Hermione teased.

With an honest smile of amusement, Severus said, "I suppose not."

So far so good. Severus didn't seem especially upset with her, and she'd even managed to get a smile out of him. Sitting down on the bench at one of the two worktables,

Hermione considered her next move. "What are you doing, Severus?"

"Checking over your stock. It is pitifully limited," he said disdainfully.

"I know that there isn't much there. I don't brew much here except for the odd healing potion. I'm sure that if there is an ingredient or two that you need, we could get it for you."

"Could you?" Severus said, an odd note in his voice.

"I don't see why not." Deciding to move on to the matter at hand, Hermione changed the subject. "Severus, I'm sorry that I was rude to you upstairs, but you must know how important destroying the cup is. Isn't there any thing that I could say or...er...do that would change your mind about helping me?"

When Severus turned to face her, Hermione saw a wicked smile gracing his features and a clear look of triumph in his eyes. Her heart skipped a beat as she waited breathlessly to find out what it was that he wanted of her.

"Actually," he drawled, "there is one little thing that you could do to convince me..."

Ten minutes later, a very irate Hermione stormed back into the library. Ron and Harry both looked up from their reading, trepidation in their eyes, as Hermione began to pace the room. A slightly crumpled parchment was clenched tightly in one of her fists.

"Hermione," Harry began, "did you find out what Severus was after?"

"Shopping!" she shouted. At Harry and Ron's blank stares, she continued. "He wants me to do his bloody shopping for him!" As she spoke, she shook the fist with the crumpled parchment at them. "There are over eighty things on this bloody list, some of them quite pricey, but he won't budge an inch until I've gotten him every single one!"

"What is it he wants?" asked Ron.

"Potion ingredients," she snapped. "And looking at this list, I'd have to say that he is thinking about brewing some rather scary things."

"Sweet Merlin, help us," muttered Harry, as he dropped his head into his hands.

To Shop or Not to Shop

Chapter 16 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I'm sorry that this update took a little more time than usual. My extraordinarily kind beta, Vaughn, got it back to me practically overnight, which is the only reason I'm able to post this in time for the weekend. The lag was completely my fault. My work is exceptionally busy right now, and I have to use so much of my brain at work, I've had very little left over when I come home in the evening. Next week is Tech rehearsal, so I won't be doing much writing I'm afraid, but then things should cool off a bit, and I'll have more brain for writing. Which is the way I like it!

Big thanks to all the people who were kind enough to leave me reviews for the last chapter! It's so interesting, and useful, to see what folks are thinking about the fic so far. I'm especially enjoying people's theories about what is going to happen next, but I'm trying hard to be a good Pook, and keep my big mouth shut about it! ;)

As always, I couldn't do this without Vaughn. Well, I could, but who would want to read it?! She wields one mean comma, she finds lost words, and she helps me keep all those bugging little canon details straight. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, Vaughn rocks!

True, we love life, not because we are used to living, but because we are used to loving. There is always some madness in love, but there is also always some reason in madness.

-Francesco Petrarch 1304-1374

Ten minutes later, Hermione, Ron, and Harry were still a little gobsmacked by Severus' demand.

"Listen, Hermione," Harry said, "let's forget about how difficult it will be to get everything on that list for a moment. I'm far more worried about having someone whose mental facilities are unstable brewing something complicated in my house. I know it's not much of a house, but it's the only one I have. Are you certain that there isn't some other way to get Severus' cooperation in destroying the cup?"

"Absolutely not. I tried, Harry, I truly did. He said that he did indeed have information that would help me, but he wouldn't even give me a hint until I get every single item on that list of his."

"Would he tell you what he was planning to brew?" asked Ron.

"He said it was none of my business," Hermione growled in exasperation.

"Everyone always talked about how good Severus was at potions back at school," Ron said, "I know he's nutters, but is there really any danger? There's certainly nothing wrong with his magic, from what we've seen so far."

"Casting a spell is a very different thing from brewing a complex potion," Hermione said with a sigh. "Potion brewing can take hours of concentration. One slip can mean the difference between a completed potion, and an explosion."

"Well," began Harry hesitantly, "we can strengthen the protection wards on the lab easily enough. That way, he might blow up the lab--or himself--but at least the house won't fall down around our ears. But I'd feel safer if I had any inkling of what the bastard was up to."

"So would I," said Hermione. "And I'd much prefer it if he didn't blow anything up," she finished softly.

"That goes without saying," Ron said with a grin. "After all, you wouldn't want him losing his wedding tackle..."

"Oh, shut up, Ron!" Hermione snapped. "This is serious!"

"We've all been busy and distracted lately," mused Harry. "Remember, Hermione, when you said that there was something wrong with that Killing Curse that Severus used on Albus?"

"Yes, of course I remember. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something off about it. I remember that we were going to look into it."

"I think that the time has come to do so," Harry said firmly. "It didn't seem to matter much to me one way or the other when Severus was no more than a rather difficult house guest. But if he's going to be doing odd magics down in my basement, I want to know exactly what happened up there on that tower. It might give us some clue about what he's up to, or at least help us know what his motivations are."

"You're right, Harry," Hermione agreed. "It's past time that we took another look at that situation. But first I really think that we need to get these ingredients sorted, and I just don't see how we can."

"Let's take a look at it, then," said Ron.

The three friends gathered on the sofa. Doing her best to flatten out the worst of the wrinkles in the parchment she'd clutched so tightly, Hermione laid it out on the table so that they could all see it. The list was extremely daunting.

"Eighty-seven," muttered Ron. "Eighty-seven ingredients...and you're right, Hermione, some of those are quite pricey. He wants six strands of unicorn hair, for fuck's sake! That alone will run about six hundred Galleons."

"Even if we cleaned out my vault, that wouldn't pay for half of this stuff. Wait a minute," Harry said excitedly. "Hagrid's got a braid of unicorn hair hanging in his hut! I've seen it! I'm sure he'd give us six strands if I told him it was Order business."

"Harry, you're brilliant!" Hermione said with a smile. "I bet he'd have a few more of the animal ingredients, or at least know where to get them. I'm certain he'd have the Thestral bone, and he might even have a few Knarl spines as well. I wonder if he'd have any Chinese Chomping Cabbage? I know that's not an animal, but Hagrid would probably think they were cute."

"Hagrid might not have any," said Ron, "but we know someone else who might have access to one. Neville's still at the school, and from what he tells me, Sprout pretty much lets him have full access to the greenhouses."

"Ron, that's a fabulous idea!" Hermione said. Rising from the sofa, Hermione rushed over to her desk to collect some quills and parchment. Returning to the boys, she handed them out. "Harry, write down everything on the list that's animal in nature. Ron, you take the plants. I'll do mineral and miscellaneous. We can split it up this way. One of us can go to Hagrid, one to Neville, and one can go shopping."

"What if Hagrid or Neville can't get a hold of something?" asked Ron, who was already scribbling away on his bit of parchment.

"Then we'll have to add it to the shopping list, but at least it's a place to start."

When the list had been copied into three parts, Hermione sat shaking her head at the list she held. "I don't know, Harry. Even with the animal and vegetable bits left out, this list is still going to cost an arm and a leg. Moonstone's not bad, but sapphire dust is almost as dear as unicorn hair."

At that moment, Severus walked into the room to find the three friends looking rather morosely at Hermione's list of ingredients. "Is there a problem with my request?" he asked the ceiling light warily.

"Yes, Severus, I'm afraid that there is," Hermione said, sounding a bit defeated.

"Is a bit of shopping too mundane a task for three brave Gryffindor whores such as yourselves?" he said disdainfully.

"No, Severus," Hermione said with as much patience as she could muster. "It's not the shopping, it's the expense. All of us work full time for...er..."

"I know who you work for, little whore," Severus snapped. "Get to the point."

"Well, we each get a small stipend for that, but it rarely even covers living expenses. Harry has to add to it from his personal account just to keep us going. We are thinking of ways to get some of these ingredients on our own, but we still don't have the funds to purchase the rest."

At this confession, Severus looked shocked. Dropping his gaze from the ceiling fixture, he regarded Hermione with serious eyes. "Pretty little whore, I asked you to go shopping, as it is unwise for me to do so myself. However, I never expected you to pay for my things. I do have my own money, safe in a vault in Gringotts."

"But, Severus," Hermione began hesitantly, "what if the Ministry has seized your account? Er...they think...well..." Hermione's voice trailed off in uncertainty. Some subjects were hard to discuss with Severus. A wrong word might set him off, but too much skirting the issue often made him snappish.

"I'm well aware of what the Ministry thinks about me, which is why I can't go shopping myself. But seize my account? I'd like to see them try!" Scowling, Severus crossed his arms over his chest. It looked as if he was ready to battle the entire Ministry personally.

"Hermione, what are you on about?" asked Ron, tilting his head in puzzlement.

"Well, in the Muggle world, if someone is suspected of a serious crime, the government might put a hold on their bank accounts, so that they couldn't use the money to escape," Hermione explained.

"Weird," said Ron. "Severus is right. I'd like to see the Ministry try to mess with a Goblin bank. They wouldn't get very far."

"But aren't the Goblins under Ministry rule?" asked Harry.

"Sort of," replied Ron. "I mean, technically they have been under Ministry rule since the Goblin Rebellion--but in reality, they pretty much govern themselves. It's pretty complicated, from what Bill has told me. That's why Goblin banks are so safe. The Ministry doesn't mess with Goblin holdings, and the Goblins don't get involved in wizard infighting. If you put something in a Goblin bank, it stays put until you take it out again."

"So," said Hermione, wrinkling her nose in concentration, "even if there is a wizard war, the Goblins stay out of it. They stay neutral."

"Exactly, little whore," Severus said, finally softening the scowl that her questions had caused. "No one wants to put their money into a bank that will go belly-up at the first sign of trouble. Those knee-high whores charge well for their services, but it is worth the expense to know that your valuables are safe."

"Rather like Switzerland," mused Harry.

"I suppose that Switzerland has Goblin banks as well," Ron said, scratching his head in thought, "but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Forget Switzerland," Hermione said. "Severus, how do we get money out of your account? It wouldn't be safe for you to go to Diagon Alley yourself."

Walking over to his desk, Severus opened a drawer and removed the leather pouch he had been wearing when he first came to the house. After retrieving a small object from it, he replaced the pouch in the drawer. Then he sorted through the tidy stack of parchments on his desk until he found the one he was looking for. Returning to the sofa, he handed both items to Hermione.

"Here is my key, do try not to lose it," he said with an attempt at a glower that wasn't all that successful. "This," he said, handing her the parchment, "gives you permission to access my vault."

Glancing at the parchment, Hermione was startled by what she saw there. "Why, it's written in Gobbledegook!"

"What else," Severus said, raising an eyebrow. "It's for the knee-high whores, after all. They have ways of verifying my signature, but the language it is written in will give it additional authenticity. Not many wizarding whores can write Gobbledegook."

"That's true enough, Severus," Harry said. "How did you come to learn it?"

"That," Severus said with a crooked smile, "is none of your business. If you want to destroy that cup, I suggest that you fuck off to the shops."

"We aren't going this afternoon," Harry began. When Severus scowled fiercely at him, he hurried to continue. "We'll get on it first thing in the morning, I promise you, but Hermione and I have a bit of work to do today."

When Severus continued to scowl, Ron spoke up. "Severus, there's no reason that I can't get started. I've...er...got a friend who is good with plants. I'll take my list over to him and see what we can do."

"I suppose that will have to do for a start," Severus grumbled. "But do make sure each plant is collected properly. As I recall, Herbology was never your strong suit, redheaded whore. If, indeed, you have a strong suit."

"Not to worry. My friend knows what he's about around plants and such. I'm certain that he'll know what to do." Though Ron kept his temper, he did roll his eyes a bit.

"Make certain that he does," Severus snapped. "Any item that I find that has been improperly collected or stored will have to be replaced." That said, Severus turned abruptly and quit the room.

After Ron had taken his list and left for Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione gathered in the sitting room with the Pensieve. They had thought about using the library, but with Ron out of the house, they decided that the sitting room would be more private. Neither of them wanted to try to explain to Severus what they were doing should he chance to interrupt them.

"Harry, what did it look like when Cedric got killed?" Hermione asked softly.

"I don't know, actually," Harry admitted. Closing his eyes to concentrate, he absentmindedly rubbed at his scar with one hand. "When Voldemort arrived, my scar hurt worse than it ever had before. The pain brought me to my knees, and I think I had my hands over my eyes. I heard Voldemort tell someone to kill Cedric, and I heard the spell. I think that it was Wormtail who did it, but I'm not certain. The voice was loud and screeching. Then I heard Cedric fall to the ground. When I was able to look, he was lying there, dead."

"Then you didn't see it at all?" Hermione asked for clarification. When Harry nodded in reply, she continued. "It doesn't matter. I'll be able to see it in the Pensieve. Harry, I know revisiting that night will be painful for you. I need you to put the memory in the Pensieve, but you don't have to go with me if you would rather not."

"Thanks, Hermione, but I'm going," Harry said, his shoulders straightening and his chin lifting with determination. "I know it will be difficult...that's not a memory I would ever want to revisit...but if I want to help you figure out what happened on the tower, I need to see what happened with Cedric."

"All right, Harry. Merlin knows we'll need all the help we can get to figure this out. Go ahead and put it in."

Having had so much practice, it didn't take Harry long to extract the memory and add it to the Pensieve. As the silvery strand dropped in to the bowl, the liquid within swirled and glowed, casting an eerie light into the small sitting room. Harry and Hermione exchanged a determined glance before they bent towards the Pensieve.

Harry had obviously cut it rather close when he removed this memory. When they appeared in the dark cemetery, Harry was already on his knees with his fists rubbing into his eyes. Cedric was standing near to Harry, his wand drawn as he peered into the gloom warily. From what sounded like high above them, a thin voice said, "Kill the spare."

Noticing a dark, robed shape moving in the night around them, Hermione's eyes flew to the lone figure that approached Harry and Cedric. Harry had been correct; the figure striding out of the gloom was Peter Pettigrew. Poor Cedric never stood a chance. Before the poor fellow could even turn to face the approaching threat, Pettigrew was pointing his wand at his chest.

The spell flew from his lips, "Avada Kedavra," in a loud, screech of sound. A brilliant flash of green light speared straight from Wormtail's wand into Cedric's chest. Then it was as if someone had suddenly turned off Cedric's power switch. He made no sound. He made no expression of pain or fear. He simply crumpled to the ground, lifeless, as if some mad puppeteer had abruptly clipped his wires.

Shortly after that, the memory ended. Harry and Hermione reappeared in the sitting room in a flash of silver light. As Hermione quietly watched Harry return the memory to his head, she decided that she didn't mind the shortness of the scene. They had seen what they needed to see; she didn't blame Harry for not wanting to relive any more of that terrible night than necessary. After a moment of silence, Harry lifted his head to look Hermione in the eye.

"I already see one thing about that curse that was very different," Harry said quietly.

"It was rather hard to miss," Hermione agreed. "Cedric fell where he stood. The spider that Moody, or rather Crouch did the Killing Curse on also dropped dead. Certainly it rolled onto its back, but it didn't move much other than that."

Running a hand through his untidy hair, Harry said, "Albus was thrown clear off of the tower when Snape hit him. That's not like the Killing Curse at all; that's more like a strongly cast Disarming Spell. Could Severus have cast two spells? An audible Avada Kedavra and a silent Expelliarmus?"

"I don't see why not," Hermione said, "but why would he want to? If he'd already killed Dumbledore with the Killing Curse, what possible reason could he have to toss the headmaster off of the tower?"

For a moment, both Harry and Hermione sat in the small room, lost in thought as they wracked their brains trying to come up with an answer.

"To be honest," Harry began, "I'm surprised that Severus said the words of the Killing Curse at all. He's exceptional at silent magic. I think that the only times I've ever heard him verbalize a spell was when he was demonstrating something. He verbalized during the Dueling Club fiasco, and when he was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, but that's about it."

"Maybe that's it!" Hermione said, the fire of discovery lighting her eyes. "He is really good at silent magic. Harry, if one can do silent magic, is it possible to say the words to one spell and cast another?"

"Merlin, Hermione! What a thought! I've never even considered such a thing, but I suppose we could try it and find out."

"We will," Hermione agreed, "but first I want a good look at what happened on the tower. Instead of things getting clearer, I've got more questions than ever now."

Her thoughts whirling in her head, Hermione tried to wait patiently as Harry once again extracted a memory and added it to the Pensieve.

Return to the Tower

Chapter 17 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I am so relieved to finally have an update for you! I apologize for the long wait, and I'm hoping to get back to more regular updates now.

Big thanks to my intrepid beta, Vaughn, who prettied this up very quickly so that you all wouldn't have to wait. She is the absolute best!

I also want to thank all the folks who were kind enough to leave me a review last chapter. I love hearing whether folks are enjoying my fic, and hearing what they think of it. Thanks!

Special thanks to alert reader, Kirby, for finding a grammatical oddity clear back in chapter ten! Kirby, you rock! I was glad to get that fixed. Any reader who notices a grammar oopsie, or a typo, do please email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com. I love my alert readers!

I was shocked to find out that this fic won a Multifaceted award, and it was first in the Courage category! Wow! I never thought I would have a fic in the extreme category, let alone win something for it. I was completely flabbergasted. Thanks to whoever nominated it, and to the folks who voted for it!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness.

-Aristotle 384 BC-322 BC

Once again, Harry and Hermione were standing on the Astronomy Tower with the Dark Mark blazing eerily over their heads in the night sky. Looking around, Hermione realized that Harry had brought them to the scene a bit early. Only Malfoy and Dumbledore were visible on the tower, though Hermione knew that an invisible and immobile Harry leaned against the wall somewhere. As Albus explained to Draco that no one would be able to find the boy if he were already dead, Hermione grasped Harry's hand and pulled him past Draco. She pulled him further out onto the tower so that they would be at a better angle to see whatever spells Severus cast when he arrived.

From this vantage point, it was easy to see that Draco had none of the confidence that his disdainful manner of address suggested. Despite his big talk, he looked like nothing so much as a frightened little boy. With this new perspective, it was suddenly easy to see why Albus would take such time trying to change the boy's mind. Even if Albus had been in better health and armed with his wand, it was impossible to imagine the kind old wizard fighting a young man whose heart so obviously wasn't in agreement with his actions.

As for Albus, he looked just as sickly and weak as Hermione remembered. Though his body was weak, his eyes were still full of authority. After giving Dumbledore a quick look, Hermione's eyes strayed to the door. She knew that the other Death Eaters would come soon. As she waited, Albus' voice seemed to echo in her ears.

"No, Draco," said Dumbledore quietly. "It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now."

If the man had been granted more time, Hermione had no doubt that he would have been able to talk Draco into some alternate course of action. But there was no time. Even now, Hermione heard the commotion caused by the other Death Eaters on the stairs.

In due course, they arrived. Keeping her eyes on Draco throughout this part of the memory, it was painfully clear that he did not want to kill anyone, not even Albus. Draco balked, despite the presence of the other Death Eaters who egged him on.

Then a new arrival was pushing past Draco. As Hermione's eyes took in the sight of the memory of Severus Snape, her breath caught in her throat and her knees weakened from the shock. Looking at her curiously, Harry put an arm around her waist to steady her. Ignoring the question in Harry's eyes, Hermione concentrated on getting both her physical and mental balance back. She wasn't sure she could even put into words exactly what had so affected her. Severus' mere presence had struck her like a blow. This was no madman. Though his expression was twisted by disgust and anger, Severus stood tall and confident. Intelligence shone from his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice had a strength that his present-day counterpart lacked.

It had never occurred to Hermione that the memory of this sane Severus would have such an effect on her. It was painfully clear to her exactly how much she had gotten used to the insane Severus of the present. All of his tics, his weaknesses, and his oddities had become familiar to her. It was only now, when she was face to face with the man that Severus had been, that Hermione realized exactly how much Severus had lost and how far he had fallen. Tears clouded her eyes and Hermione blinked them back furiously. She was here for a reason; she mustn't let her personal feelings interfere with what she had come to do.

Intent on doing her duty, Hermione focused her attention on Severus. As Severus raised his wand and cast, Hermione was shocked to see a faint tinge of crimson light emit from his wand before a jet of green light washed over it, obscuring it completely. It was the new angle that allowed her to see the phenomenon at all. The last time that she had viewed this memory, she had been standing more behind Snape, where the rest of the Death Eaters were gathered. From where Draco and the Death Eaters stood, Severus' body blocked them from seeing what had occurred.

The spell which dazzled Hermione's eyes with green light acted much like the Killing Curse. It speared from Severus' wand straight at Dumbledore's chest. However, with closer scrutiny, Hermione could see that there were discrepancies. The color was off. Yes, it was green, but the spell that had felled Cedric had been more emerald in color, while this spell had a jade cast to it. The color was not the only difference. From this angle, Hermione could see that the spell was not simply a single beam of light, as the Killing Curse should be. Instead, there were small offshoots of the main beam which twisted around of their own accord. As Dumbledore was thrown from the tower and seemed to hang for a moment in the air, one of these errant beams whipped back to hit Severus squarely in the chest. Though he never flinched, the expression in Severus' eyes was suddenly altered. Now, Hermione could see the seed of madness that would change Severus into the man he was today. Whatever that spell had been, it was the cause of his insanity.

As Severus seized Draco by the scruff of the neck and dragged him from the tower, the memory faded. Hermione found herself back in the sitting room, exchanging a wide-eyed look of surprise with Harry.

"That was no Killing Curse," Harry said firmly.

"No, it couldn't have been," Hermione agreed. "If that was the Killing Curse, then Severus would be dead. He was caught in the backlash." A faint hope lit Harry's features, and Hermione was afraid that she knew what he was thinking.

"If that wasn't the Killing Curse, maybe it was all just an act. Albus might be..."

"No, Harry," Hermione interrupted softly. "I don't know what that spell was, but whatever it was, it killed Dumbledore."

"How can you be so certain?" Harry snapped. "For all we know, it was only an elaborate ruse to make us all think Albus was dead!"

"Think, Harry!" Hermione cried. "Do you think that Poppy would have let him be buried without checking? I heard from Hagrid that Poppy checked, and so did Minerva. There was no heartbeat, no brain activity, and no magic level. Not to mention the fact that Severus had made an Unbreakable Vow to kill Dumbledore if Draco did not. One can't fool an Unbreakable Vow, Harry. If Severus didn't kill Dumbledore, then he would be dead himself by now."

Harry let his head fall into his hands in defeat. "You're right, Hermione. I know that you are. But I couldn't help hoping."

"I know," Hermione said softly, pulling Harry into a firm hug. "All of us wish the Headmaster was still alive, but it simply can't be so."

"There's still a mystery here, even if it doesn't lead us where I wish it would. That was definitely a Disarming Spell that Severus threw first. Why would he want to throw Albus from the tower? And if he did intend to kill Albus, why not just use the Killing Curse? Whatever that spell was that he used, it hurt him."

"Yes, I think it did," Hermione said, tilting her head in thought. "Remus said that it was the night on the tower that Severus went mad. He thought that it was the act of killing Dumbledore that caused it, but I think it was that spell. The moment it hit him, the expression in his eyes changed."

"I noticed that as well. Why would Severus use such a risky spell instead of the Killing Curse?"

"I don't know, Harry. The Killing Curse depends on hatred. We know that Severus was acting on Dumbledore's orders. Perhaps he couldn't use the Killing Curse because he didn't hate the Headmaster, so he had to risk some other sort of curse."

"Perhaps," Harry said doubtfully, "but it still smells fishy to me."

"I agree," Hermione said with a sigh, lifting a hand to brush absently through her hair. "Do you have any idea what that spell was?"

"Not a clue," Harry said with a sigh of his own. "It's nothing that I've ever seen before, and I've been studying some odd things lately. I can't help worrying that when it finally comes time for me to face Voldemort, there will be some strange spell that I will need. So I've been studying all sorts of rubbish. There's no hurry at the moment, is there? Until we find out what that last Horcrux is, I won't be paying Voldemort any social calls."

Abruptly changing the subject, Hermione asked the first question that popped into her mind. "Are you still studying the wards at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, indeed!" Harry said, his interest showing clearly on his face. "You wouldn't believe how fascinating they are. Some of them are over a century old, and I'm getting better at being able to distinguish some of the casters. Albus' are easy to tell, but did you know that Minerva and Filius have placed wards as well?"

"No, I didn't," Hermione said, happy to let Harry ramble on a bit, "though that doesn't surprise me. Minerva and Filius both have very strong magic."

For a while longer, the two friends talked about Harry's ward research, then Hermione turned the conversation back to the odd spell that Severus had used on the tower.

"Maybe Remus would recognize it," Harry mused. "He certainly knows quite a bit about hexes and dark magic."

"That's a great idea, Harry!" Hermione said with a smile. "Besides, he hasn't visited us lately. It would be good to get an update on things and see how Draco is faring."

"I'll Floo him and ask him to visit. Maybe he can find a time when Draco could come as well. With Draco to distract Severus, it wouldn't be hard to get Remus away to show him the memory with the Pensieve."

"True. Severus seems to like Remus. If Remus comes on his own, I doubt that Severus would let us get Remus to ourselves. But if Draco can come as well, he can have a nice chat with Severus while we sneak Remus up here."

With that settled, Harry put the Pensieve away and the two friends left the sitting room. Once in the hallway, they could hear the heated words of an argument echoing through the house. Following the sound, Harry and Hermione soon found themselves in the library. Ron had arrived home after his trip to Hogwarts to see Neville. Currently, Ron was sitting on the sofa with his head in his hands. There were plant roots and cuttings scattered over the coffee table. On the other side of the room, Severus was shouting at the Goblin tapestry.

"The Sorbus Acuparia is infested with scale!" Severus shouted to the tapestry as he shifted nervously from foot to foot. "There are spots all over it that are the same color as your ridiculous hair, you blind whore!"

"I'm sorry, Severus," Ron said with a tired patience, his voice somewhat muffled by the hands that still covered his face. "The red spots are quite small; I'm not surprised that my friend and I never noticed them."

"Well, that's a pretty excuse as one could wish," Severus hissed snidely, "but it does nothing about the fact that the Rowan you brought me is completely and utterly useless!" By the end of the sentence, Severus' voice had risen to a shriek.

"Severus, calm down, love," Hermione said softly. "Whatever the trouble is, we'll get it sorted."

Though he wouldn't look at her, Hermione could tell by the way he cocked his head at the sound of her voice that he was listening. Once again she was struck by the marked difference between this poor, mixed-up soul and the man he used to be. There he stood, one ear aimed in her direction and his eyes glued to the carpet. There was an angry scowl on his face, and he was very fidgety...his fingers twitched and he still shifted from foot to foot as he stood there, thinking about what Hermione had said to him. If she didn't get him calmed down soon, he'd likely go into a full fledged fit. Such outbursts had become blessedly rare as the three friends had learned to treat Severus carefully, but he looked to be winding up for one now.

"Severus," Hermione continued, taking care to keep her voice calm and neutral, "we knew that Ron's mate was not going to have everything you needed. If the Rowan is ruined, then we will simply have to add it to the shopping list. I'll make certain that you get a bunch that is suitable."

"It has to be cut from the tree with a silver knife," Severus said petulantly. His tone was harsh, but the fidgeting lessened. Though he still wouldn't look at her, Severus turned to face Hermione. "And it's best if it's been cut at the new moon. With the whores that run the shops, one can never be sure that things have been properly gathered."

"I'll get it at The Twig and Leaf, in Diagon Alley. They are always very careful that their stock has been harvested properly, and they specialize in trees and shrubs. That will do, won't it?"

"Oh, I suppose," Severus said shortly. Keeping his head tilted towards the floor, Severus raised only his eyes until he was peeking at Hermione from under his lashes. "And when exactly," he said snidely, "do you think you might get around to actually doing that shopping, little whore? So far, you keep blathering on about it, but you don't actually do it."

"Well," Hermione began patiently, "if Harry will go out in the morning to see how many of the animal ingredients he can get, then I can go shopping in the afternoon."

"Why can't you go out when the whore's son does?" Severus snapped. "I'm sick to death of having to wait on you lot!"

"If Harry goes out first, and gets as many of the ingredients on his list as he can, then I will know exactly what we still need. Then I can do all of the shopping at once. I don't mind going in your stead, Severus, but I'd rather not call too much attention to myself by making multiple shopping trips."

"Sensible," Severus said grudgingly. "I suppose that will have to do," he continued with a dramatic sigh. "But what about the Whore Who Lived? Will he go out in the morning, or is he going to be busy doing more mysterious work, alone with you behind closed doors?"

Chuckling at the slight growl that had punctuated that last jibe, Harry smiled as he said, "No, Severus, our work is done. I'll be happy to go out in the morning and do my part."

"See that you do," Severus snapped. His tone of voice changed abruptly as he stepped up to Hermione and looked her directly in the eye for the first time during the conversation. "I believe," he said archly, "that you have neglected my shower today, pretty little whore. Perhaps, if you aren't too busy with your whorish little boyfriend, we might remedy that now."

"Severus, don't talk rubbish," Hermione said, her tone a little more curt than it usually was when she spoke to Severus. "You know damn well that Harry is not my boyfriend. We were *working*."

"Indeed. *Working*," he repeated, mimicking her tone. "Is that what your generation is calling it now? How very interesting," he said dryly. "And what, exactly, were you so busy working on? What was so important that you had to sequester yourself away with that whorish imbecile?"

"Now, hold on, Severus!" Ron interrupted. "There's no reason to be calling Harry names."

This struck Harry as hysterically funny. He laughed for several moments before he could calm down enough to speak. "I'm sorry," he eventually sputtered. "It just seemed like such an odd thing to say to a man who calls everyone whores!"

That set Ron to chuckling, which proved to be too much amusement for Severus' taste. With a glower at all and sundry, he swept from the room, turning briefly at the door to demand that Hermione not keep him waiting.

Left staring at the door, seemingly surrounded by giggling boys, Hermione mused, "What was that all about?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ron asked. "The man's right jealous, he is."

"Jealous?" Hermione said, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "Whatever for?"

"Honestly, Hermione," Harry said. Though he'd gotten control of his laughter, he was still smiling broadly. "It's no secret that Severus fancies you. We were locked in a room together for two hours, and we wouldn't tell him why. Of course he's jealous."

"He's getting rather possessive as well," Ron added. "He's not been acting inappropriately, has he, Hermione?"

"No, he hasn't, Ron! Not that it is any of your concern," Hermione replied curtly.

"Take it easy, love. I'm not going to try to tell you what to do again...I promise. I was simply surprised by how strongly he reacted, so I wondered if there was anything going on that Harry and I didn't know about."

"Has he tried to kiss you again, Hermione?" Harry asked calmly.

"No," Hermione replied with an inadvertent sigh.

"You don't have to sound so bloody disappointed!" Ron teased.

"I can't help it. I am disappointed. I really liked kissing him, but I can't go encouraging him, can I? At least, not while he's like this. Seeing him in the Pensieve...it really made me realize exactly how ill he really is," she finished sadly.

"Well," Ron began softly, "maybe there's some reason to hope. Neville told me that all the things on that ingredient list had one thing in common...they all could be used in healing potions. He said that some of the plants had multiple uses, so he couldn't tell for certain, but they all could be used for healing."

"So maybe Severus is trying to heal himself," Harry mused. "It was backlash from some hex that caused his madness, Ron. We found that out when we reviewed what happened in the Pensieve."

"If it had a magical cause, maybe there is a magical cure," Hermione said, her eyes shining with hope. "But, Ron, you didn't tell Neville who you needed the ingredients for, did you?"

"Of course not! I'm not the imbecile, that's Harry!" Ron said with a chuckle. "I just told him that it was war business...very hush-hush. I told him that I was just the lackey, and I was curious about what it was all for."

"That was clever, Ron. I'll try that with Hagrid in the morning and see what he has to say about the animal list." Turning to Hermione, Harry said with a smile, "Now you had better go see to Severus' shower before he decides to hex me for trying to steal his woman!"

"I'm not his woman!" Hermione said, shaking her head in exasperation. Despite her protest, she dutifully left the library to join Severus in the lav. In her haste, she forgot to take a book with her. Shower time with Severus was going to be long and thoroughly distracting.

A Shower of Confessions

Chapter 18 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I'm afraid that I have had this ready to update for a few days, but I've been busy with the fic move to Az's new archive, WIKTT Archives! Good show, Az. The new archive looks beautiful!

Special thanks to alert reader, Wolf_Moonshadow, for catching two words in the last chapter that merely sounded like the word I wanted. My favorite wolf rocks! I am also happy to announce that Wolf has been kind enough to agree to be my second beta for the rest of this fic. I tell you, between Vaughn and Wolf and their very sharp eyes, I doubt that my alert readers will have many oopsies to find anymore! They rock! Of course, if anything does slip through the cracks, please email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com and I will happily give you credit in the next AN. I love my alert readers!

As always, big thanks to all who have taken the time to review. Those reviews mean so much to me!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin',

And I'm crazy for lovin' you.

-Patsy Cline 1932-1963

The lav door was ajar when Hermione reached it. Cautiously, she peeked into the room. Severus did not like closed doors, and she had once inadvertently walked in on him while he was using the toilet. Of course, Severus had thought it was hysterically funny, and chuckled at her for the rest of the day while she blushed furiously. He certainly was very immodest, at least when Hermione was around. Severus still showered with the door open, and had also taken to parading around the lav absolutely starkers when she was there. There were times when Severus would let Harry or Ron keep him company while he showered, and while he still showered with the door open, the boys had made no mention of him being such an exhibitionist. It seemed that he only pranced about naked when Hermione was in attendance.

That thought reminded Hermione that she had neglected to bring a book with her to shield herself from further embarrassment. Well, it was too late now. If she kept Severus waiting any longer, he was likely to refuse to shower at all. She would just have to bite the proverbial bullet and try not to let Severus catch her looking at him. The man was unbearably smug when he caught her "peeking like the whore she was," as he put it.

The whole whore thing was getting old. At first it had seemed odd, then rather funny, but now Hermione was sick to death of the man she was undeniably in love with calling her various forms of whore all of the time. Somehow, knowing that he called everyone some version of whore didn't really make it any easier to accept. Severus managed to call Draco "boy," surely he could call her something else as well. Well, the next time he seemed in a calm mood, she'd just have to speak to him about it.

Knowing that she really shouldn't put off the inevitable any longer, Hermione opened the lav door and entered the room, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her. Still dressed in a white, short-sleeved shirt and a pair of summer-weight black trousers that Harry had bought for him, Severus had just finished shaving. As Hermione entered the room, Severus spun towards her. In his haste, he knocked the glass of toothbrushes off of the sink and it fell, clattering to the floor. His eyes were wild with fear and Hermione saw that his wand was pointed straight at her chest. Damn! She knew better than to sneak up on him!

"Severus," she said softly, "it's only me. I'm sorry...I didn't mean to startle you." Crossing slowly towards him, Hermione put one hand gently on his wand arm. With her other hand, she smoothed his tangled hair away from his face tenderly. The tension visibly drained from Severus' body as he leaned slightly into the caress.

Abruptly, Severus pulled back from her. His expression gloomy, he stared down at the scattered toothbrushes as he spoke. "It's not going to do you one whit of good to try to distract me, little whore," he growled. "I want to know what you and that whorish brat were doing locked away in the sitting room for so long."

Running a hand through her hair in frustration, Hermione paused while she considered how she wanted to handle this subject. It was impossible to tell Severus what they had been doing, as one mention of the tower would send him into screaming fits. But how was she going to convince Severus that there was nothing going on except research? Perhaps she could turn the tables a bit.

"Severus, what are you going to brew with the ingredients we are getting for you?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"What?" Severus snapped. "That has nothing to do with this discussion. Not to mention that what I'm working on is none of your business, you nasty little whore!"

"And what Harry and I were working on is also none of your business, Severus," Hermione said a trifle smugly.

Hermione was so pleased that she had used his own words against him that she didn't immediately see the effect that they'd had on Severus. For one brief moment, Severus raised his head to look Hermione directly in the eye before dropping his gaze back to the floor. His anger disappeared to be replaced with an expression of confusion and sorrow. When Hermione tried to reach out and comfort him, he backed away from her until he fetched up against the lav wall.

To say that Hermione was stunned would be putting it mildly. One moment, Severus was snapping at her, and the next, he looked sad and lost. She wanted nothing more at that moment but to hold him, comfort him, and set his fears to rest, but he wouldn't let her touch him. The man looked as if he was about to cry, and it was all because of her. At that moment, Hermione realized something that she hadn't quite believed before. This wasn't some passing fancy on Severus' part. Muddled as he was, Severus truly cared for her, just as she did for him. That was why he was so upset. Knowing that nothing could come of it unless Severus' madness was somehow cured, Hermione had never told him exactly how she felt. Now the man she loved was suffering, and needlessly. For all Severus knew, she could be dating half of the wizarding world, including Harry.

Deciding that it was time to end the confusion, Hermione stepped up to Severus. When he pressed back against the wall, and started wildly shaking his head back and forth, she stopped him by putting her hands firmly on both sides of his face. Pulling his head down close to hers, she waited for him to open his tightly shut eyes. Eventually, he did so, and the sorrow reflected in them made Hermione want to weep.

"I need to tell you something, Severus," she murmured softly as she brushed her thumbs lightly over his cheeks. "I need to tell you something that I should have told you weeks ago. My only excuse is that I didn't realize until right now that it was something that you needed to hear."

The sadness in Severus' dark eyes was slowly replaced by a look of pained confusion. "I don't understand what you are on about," he muttered.

"Severus, there is nothing of a romantic nature going on between Harry and me. In fact, there is nothing of a romantic nature going on between me and anyone. You see, I'm already in love with someone, so I'm not interested in anyone else."

At this declaration, Severus once again squeezed his eyes shut and tried to shake his head. "No," he whispered. "No...I don't want to hear this...I don't want to know this...leave me be," he cried plaintively.

"I think that you need to hear this, and I know that I need to tell you. Severus, I'm very much in love with a man, but I haven't told him about it because he's not quite himself at the moment. Although it is very difficult, I've promised myself that I will not do anything about my feelings until he is well. I simply don't think it would be right to take advantage of him when he may not know exactly what he wants. But I tell you, it's damned hard to deal with the situation when that very man is insinuating that I'm having some sort of affair with one of my best friends."

Opening his eyes very suddenly, Severus quickly gripped Hermione's shoulders with both of his hands. "This man is me?" he asked desperately, peering down intently into her eyes. "This man you care for, can he be me?"

"Yes, Severus," Hermione whispered. Though she was smiling at him, a few stray tears crept from her eyes to slide slowly down her cheeks. "The only man I care for is you. I love you, Severus."

Pulling her firmly against him, Severus wrapped his arms around her and held her blissfully tight. For a moment, he said nothing. Burying his face into the riot of curls at the top of her head, he simply held her close. Eventually, he pulled back just far enough to lean his face down to hers. At first, Hermione thought that he meant to kiss her, but he only leaned his forehead against hers.

"Stupid little whore," he whispered gruffly. "I know damned well what I want...I want you," he said, punctuating the sentence with a firm squeeze. "But you, you silly Gryffindor whore, you have to be all noble. I know what I want...I...I may not...be myself...but my caring for you isn't ever going to change...no matter what happens to me."

"Perhaps not," Hermione murmured, giving Severus an answering squeeze. "But I'm not willing to take that chance. I don't want you doing anything you would regret when you are well. You get well first, Severus. And when you do, you tell me if you still want me...if you still want this."

"And if I do?" he asked, leaning back slightly to gaze into her eyes.

"Then I'll be yours," Hermione said with a bittersweet smile. "Severus, do you know what happened to cause your troubles?"

"I do," he said flatly.

"Then, do you think that you will ever be well again?" Hermione asked, her worry showing clearly on her face.

"Perhaps," Severus muttered. As he spoke, his eyes slid away from hers and lit on the mirror above the sink. "Perhaps. There's a slim chance, but I can make you no promises. It's better for me...easier...if I don't try to talk about it. It's...I can't..." As he tried to speak, Hermione could feel his body stiffening against hers and the wild look was creeping back into his eyes.

"It's all right, Severus," Hermione said, giving him another squeeze. "I know that some things are hard for you. I'm not going to pressure you for explanations, I promise."

As she spoke her assurances, Severus relaxed and his gaze fell away from the mirror to rest once again on her. Then, he did kiss her. A brief, sweet, adoring kiss that made Hermione's heart literally skip a beat. Breaking the kiss, Severus unwrapped his arms from around her and brought his hands up to wipe all trace of tears from her face.

"And I," he murmured, "will do my best not to try to undermine your delicate Gryffindor sensibilities." Severus paused to give Hermione another brief kiss. "Though, I must say, it will be damned hard," he ended with a growl.

"Well, at least we are both in the same boat," Hermione said with a shaky smile.

"Boat? What are you on about now? There is no boat, little whore. This is the lav," Severus grumbled.

In his illness, sometimes Severus was so literal minded that it made one want to pull out one's hair. "I was speaking metaphorically, Severus," she explained patiently.

"Speak more plainly, for Merlin's sake. It's hard enough for me to concentrate on what people are saying to me...then the silly whores go rambling on about boats and Switzerland and all sorts of rubbish."

"I'll do my best to keep that in mind," Hermione said. "Now then, how about that shower that you were so keen on having?"

"Oh, I suppose," Severus said with a sigh. Then, giving Hermione a sudden grin, he smooched her again before turning towards the shower. As he walked across the room, he started peeling off his clothes and tossing them here and there in the room. Hermione had to force herself to avert her eyes from his naked form long before he reached the shower. Severus may have said that he wouldn't try to undermine her Gryffindor honor, but that obviously wasn't going to stop him from running around nude in her presence. At least there was one thing that Hermione could do to distract herself.

"Kreacher!" she called sharply. "Kreacher, come here please. Severus needs you." Invoking Severus' name was one sure way to get the cranky house-elf's attention. In a moment, he appeared in the room with a soft pop.

"What is you wanting?" he asked angrily.

"Please take Severus' clothes and bring him a fresh set, Kreacher," Hermione said with patient politeness. Sometimes, between dealing with Severus and Kreacher, Hermione thought that she was developing the patience of a saint.

"All right, missy whore," Kreacher said with a nasty, fake smile. "If it's for the dark man, then Kreacher is doing it."

After collecting the scattered clothes, Kreacher disappeared with a pop. It was only a moment before he reappeared to bring Severus' fresh clothes and then immediately left. The whole episode had scarcely taken five minutes. Unfortunately, once Severus was convinced to take a shower, he could be in there for a good twenty minutes. A quick peep through the open shower door showed that Severus had barely finished washing his hair. It was going to be a long, frustrating time before Severus was decently clothed again. With a sigh, Hermione crossed to the dressing table and sat down, facing the mirror. Taking up a hair brush, she began the difficult process of brushing out her curls. Soon she heard a soft voice from the direction of the shower.

"You know, pretty little whore," Severus cooed, "I rather like your hair. However, it obviously causes you a lot of trouble. I'm surprised that you don't have it cut, and wear it at a more manageable length."

Steadfastly refusing to allow herself a look in his direction, Hermione replied to him. "My hair is a lot of trouble, but I like it this long. I have never been one to shy away from something simply because it is difficult."

"No, my little whore, you certainly are not one to do that. And that is a mercy for me, I suppose."

There was silence for a moment in the lav, and then Severus spoke again. This time, the cooing quality was completely absent, and he spoke in a rather petulant tone.

"You know, little whore, for someone who fancies herself in love, you certainly don't do near enough peeking for my taste. Am I such an offensive sight that you must constantly avert your eyes from my form?"

"Hardly!" she said, with a happy laugh. "Believe me, Severus, I find your form infinitely distracting. Why do you think I take such care to bring something to read when you are taking a shower? If I wasn't being very careful indeed, I assure you that I would be ogling you to your heart's content."

"Bloody Gryffindor whores and their ridiculous honor," he grumbled. Despite his grumbling, Hermione detected a distinctly smug note in his voice. When she then risked a brief peek at him through the mirror, he caught her looking. The sound of happy laughter echoed off of the tiled walls.

"Not too terribly honorable, to be sure," he said, still laughing. "Thank that old whore, Merlin, for that!"

Hermione's laughter joined Severus', and for the very first time since Hermione had realized she had feelings for this mixed-up man, she felt honest hope spring up in her heart. Surely, where there was such love, there would also be a way to sort their troubles.

Eventually Severus was clean, dried, and dressed. Instead of immediately leaving the lav--as was his usual habit when his ablutions were finished--Severus stopped near the dressing table and stood nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"Severus, is there something that you need?" Hermione asked with concern.

"No, not really," he replied, hesitantly, "but I was wondering..."

"What is it, love?"

"Would you...well...would you brush my hair?" If the words themselves were hesitant, his manner was even more so. He stood there beside Hermione, still fidgeting, with his eyes practically glued to the tiled floor by her feet.

Standing, Hermione moved to the side of the bench she had been sitting on, and motioned Severus to it. "I would enjoy that, Severus. Please, sit down."

With a sigh of relief and a happy grin, Severus took the bench that Hermione had vacated and sat quite still while she brushed his hair out. When Hermione then used her hands to follow the brush and smooth his hair, he sighed in contentment, leaning slightly into her touch. His eyes closed, and a soft purring sound rumbled in his throat. It almost brought tears to Hermione's eyes, how such a simple touch could bring him such joy. She supposed that he had never had much gentleness in his life, and vowed to do her best to make up for that in whatever way that she could. It was true that she was determined not to take their relationship too far until the happy day when Severus was again himself. However, there was nothing wrong with simple touching and the occasional smooch. These actions were obviously good for Severus, as they calmed him down and seemed to help him think more clearly. Hermione had to admit that simple contact, such as brushing his hair, made her feel better as well. She would just have to use care not to let it go too far. In many ways, Severus was like a child. She was the adult in this situation, and she would have to make the boundaries for it.

"There you go, love," she said when she was finished brushing. Leaning down, she gave him a quick kiss on the top of his damp head. "Now then, you haven't had any sleep all day. Why don't we tuck you into bed?"

"Absolutely not!" Severus snapped, standing and glaring down at her. Sometimes his mercurial moods were hard to keep up with. One minute he was purring, and the next he was glaring at her as if she'd suggested that he eat a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

"Why not, Severus?" she asked patiently. "I know that you must be tired."

"Some of us cannot muck about taking a kip at all hours of the day," he snarled. "I've a basket full of fresh plant parts that must be processed and properly stored."

"Oh, yes, of course. I know you can't leave them lying about too long. You'll need to preserve some and put a Stasis Charm on the ones that must stay fresh. Why don't you let me help you? Two can get the work done faster than one, and then we can both get some rest."

"I'm not going to tell you what I'm working on, little whore. And I won't have you spying about the lab!"

"I won't spy, Severus. And I won't ask you any questions about your work. I only want to help you process the plants. Surely that wouldn't hurt anything? I'm a fair hand at processing ingredients, and I do a wicked Stasis Charm, if I do say so myself." Placing a hand gently on his arm, she smiled up at him. "Please let me help you, Severus. I would really like to."

For a long moment, Severus simply stared at her with his eyebrows scrunched together in thought. Then, with a dramatic sigh, he spoke. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to let you help a bit. But if I tell you to leave, you have to leave. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

For a brief moment, Severus' attitude reminded Hermione of the Potions professor he used to be. With a wistful smile, she agreed to his demand. Taking his hand firmly in her own, Hermione walked with him to the library to gather the plants that still lay scattered over the coffee table.

Frustrations

Chapter 19 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

AN: As always, big thanks to everyone who was kind enough to leave me a review. I read and enjoy every single one. Though I simply cannot comment on them, I am really enjoying hearing everyone's theories about what's going on.

Big thanks to alert reader, Hogwarts Honey, for catching a too/to error in the last chapter. And a shout out to Peruna88, who found one of those words that only sounded vaguely like the one I meant. Lol! I suppose I shall always need my alert readers, and I have to say that I'm not at all disappointed. You all rock!

Last but very much not least, gimormous thanks to my betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. I could write without you guys, but no one would want to read it! You rock!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Madness is tonic and invigorating. It makes the sane more sane. The only ones who are unable to profit by it are the insane.

-Henry Miller 1891-1980

When Hermione had set up the small potions lab in the basement of Harry's house, she hadn't expected that anyone would ever work there but her. The worktable was rather cozy for two people, but not annoyingly so. Once Severus started her working on several simple tasks, Hermione worked happily alongside him for some time before she realized anything was amiss. Though she had only seen him working during a handful of class demonstrations, Hermione could tell that his behavior was much altered.

The speed at which he worked was the first clue Hermione had that his mental state was affecting his work. In class, he had always worked steadily, with deft and quick movements. Now, his hands were equally dexterous, but his speed varied wildly. Before he began a task, he would place the plant in front of him and stare at it for several minutes. Then he would begin preparing it. Between steps in preparation, he would often stop working completely and walk away from the table. Once, he had even gone and stood in the corner of the room with his head resting against the walls.

Now it was happening again. Having carefully removed the leaves from several stalks of *Gnaphalium uliginosum*, Severus sat staring at the two piles, one of the leaves and one of the stems. Knowing what the matter was, Hermione thought that she could help.

"Severus," she said, "you want the..."

"Don't you dare to try to tell me my business, you stupid little whore!" he shouted viciously. "I was making potions when you were still puling about in your nappies...I won't have the likes of you disturbing my work."

For a moment, he stared again at the two piles of vegetation before him. Then, he quickly discarded the thin green leaves and set the stems carefully into a bottle of distilled vinegar. Trying her best to stifle a small sigh of relief, Hermione bent her head to her own task. It might be painful to watch the once confident man hesitate so, but he obviously still knew his work. It simply took him longer to do it. Harder to ignore were the disdainful remarks that Severus now began muttering to whatever plant he happened to be working with. He had quite a long chat with a small sprig of Rue.

"I don't know what the world is coming to," he muttered to the Rue. "Nowadays, the young whores all think that they know better than their elders. Foolish and impatient brats, if you ask me. I never could stand the lot of them, could you?" With that, Severus gave the sprig a small shake and the Rue seemed to bob in agreement.

Biting back another sigh, Hermione refused to let his bitter remarks get to her. Doubling her efforts, she worked at even greater speed. If Severus was beginning to talk to the plants, then he was tired indeed. The sooner they were finished, the sooner she could tuck him into bed.

Eventually, Hermione reached one plant in her pile that she had no idea what to do with. Though she was reluctant to speak to him again, she was not about to take chances with anything that Severus might use to brew some mysterious potion. Gathering the courage to face his acid tongue, Hermione turned towards him and patiently waited until he finished the piece of Blessed Thistle he was working on.

"Severus," she said softly, "I don't know what to do with this Adder's Tongue. I've never worked with it before."

Strangely, Hermione's interruption did not anger the touchy man. While Severus clearly did not want his own work questioned, he did not mind Hermione asking him questions about her own.

"I'm not surprised that you haven't worked with it before, little whore. It's native to the Americas. It's difficult to get fresh here, as it has to be kept in a greenhouse. That makes me wonder who the red-headed whore's friend is, who was able to procure some so easily."

"What should I do with it?" Hermione asked quickly to distract him from that line of thought.

"Keep the single leaf from each plant," Severus explained patiently. "Discard the rest. Grind the leaves in a mortar with a little of that clear alcohol and seal it in a phial."

For the next thirty minutes, Hermione and Severus worked together in companionable silence. When Severus didn't bother to argue about Hermione casting all the Stasis Charms that were necessary, she knew that he was tired indeed. Taking him by the hand, Hermione led Severus from the lab and up to his room. Once there, she tucked him fondly into bed and told him to go to sleep. He was still fully clothed, and Hermione shook her head at the sight of him, fully dressed, lying on his bed and gazing at her with sleepy eyes. Though she had tried every justification that she could think of, Severus still petulantly refused to wear any of the night clothes that Harry had purchased for him. Hermione knew that it didn't hurt him to sleep in his trousers and shirt; she only wished that the poor man felt safe enough in the house to relax a little more.

Leaning over him, Hermione gave him a customary kiss on the forehead while she whispered, "Sleep well, Severus." When she leaned back, she was startled by the sheer ferocity of the scowl that Severus was giving her. "Severus, what's the matter?"

"Nothing at all," he growled. "Everything's fucking roses around here, yeah? One minute, there are all these confessions of love, and the next, some little whore is kissing you on the forehead like you're some dunderheaded child. Next thing I know, you'll be patting me on the head and telling me that I'm a good doggy. Scratching me behind the ears and wondering why I don't thump my fucking leg."

She couldn't help but giggle at that image, which made Severus scowl even more. "I'm sorry, love," she said, still grinning. "I assure you that I do not think you the least doglike, nor do I think you are a child. I take it that you would like a more proper good night kiss?"

In answer, Severus snaked a hand around Hermione's shoulder and gave a sharp tug. Not expecting such a move, Hermione fell into the bed and ended up lying half across Severus' chest. While Hermione lay, gaping in surprise, Severus' hand moved to the nape of her neck and wound into her hair. He pulled her down further, until his cheek rubbed against hers and his breath ghosted hot and moist across her ear.

"I promised, pretty little whore," he murmured into her ear, "that I would not push your stubborn sensibilities too far. But if you think that a quick buss on the forehead is enough to sustain me, you are sadly mistaken."

His voice was low and warm, sending sudden shivers down Hermione's spine. She'd heard of such effects, but thought them an exaggeration of ridiculous romance novels. Not so. Severus' voice wound down her back and continued all the way down to her toes, which curled in sudden reaction. She could feel the taut muscles of Severus' chest pressed against her breasts. Without even being aware of it, her lips parted of their own accord, her heartbeat quickened, and her breath began to come in short pants.

The hand in her hair pulled back ever so slightly, while the warm mouth at her ear made a slow journey across her cheek and to her open mouth. With a growl, Severus latched onto that mouth and plunged his tongue between Hermione's eager lips. With a soft cry, Hermione wound both of her hands into Severus' hair and returned his kiss with unpracticed enthusiasm. Never had she been kissed so. Later, in the cold privacy of her own room, she would reflect on this kiss over and over, eventually deciding that those dreadful romance novels might not be all wrong.

Severus' tongue retreated to his own mouth and Hermione's bravely followed it. When Hermione had been younger, the thought of such kissing had seemed rather distasteful. Now, she threw her whole being into the kiss, delighting in the tingly feeling that she got when their tongues twined and slid against each other. Never had she felt so on fire, so alive, as she did in that moment.

All too soon, it ended. Breaking the kiss, Severus pushed Hermione gently away from him. "Go, little whore," he whispered. "Go now, before I forget my promises."

Startled by how easily she might have forgotten her own vow, Hermione climbed awkwardly from the bed. After a long look at the heated gaze that Severus was giving her, she turned from the bed and walked slowly away. A soft goodnight from the doorway, and she was gone.

Alone in her own bed, Hermione relived that kiss again and again. Frustrated, Hermione tried to find some peace by using her own fingers on herself. Eventually, she gave up, even more frustrated than before. Hermione had never quite got the hang of it, to be honest. From what she had overheard the other girls giggling about, boys had it easy. Grab and stroke, and Bob's your uncle. Girls, unfortunately, seemed far more complicated than that. Living in a dorm with other girls was not an easy environment to practice in, and neither was living in a house where your two male roommates tended to barge in without knocking. Now, Hermione would have given just about anything for a little release, and had very little idea of how to go about it.

Giving up in disgust at her own ineptitude, Hermione burrowed into the covers and tried to relax. It was a long time indeed before sleep claimed her.

Waking the next morning groggy and out of sorts, Hermione stood for a long time in the shower, hoping that the water would help wake her up. When this proved not particularly effective, she dried off, got dressed, and headed for the library in search of tea. She arrived to find Severus there before her and a welcome tray of tea and toast on the coffee table.

Gladly pouring a cup of the strong Darjeeling that Severus always demanded Kreacher serve, Hermione added a splash of milk and sat down on the sofa to enjoy it. Severus was working at his desk, as was his usual habit in the mornings, but there was no sign of Harry or Ron. The first cup of tea did much to revive Hermione's spirits. As she poured a second cup, she at last felt human enough to speak.

"Morning, Severus," she said somewhat cheerfully. "Where are the boys this morning?"

"Already gone. Not all whores are slug-a-beds," he said snidely. "You are usually up far earlier than this. Tell me little whore, did something disturb your rest last night?"

The protest that Hermione had been considering died on her lips as she noticed Severus' expression. The smug bastard! Hermione spent so much time worrying over Severus that she sometimes forgot that he was still a Slytherin. He obviously knew exactly what effect he'd had on her senses the night before, and now he was obnoxiously pleased with himself. Well, two could play that game.

Walking over to where Severus sat at his desk, Hermione placed her hands on the back of his chair and leaned forward until her face was very close to his. With her lips only a centimeter from his, she spoke. "Well, since everyone is gone..." Nonchalantly, Hermione turned away from Severus and walked back over to the sofa to retrieve her tea. "Since everyone is gone, there's something I wanted to ask you about."

For a moment, Severus sat in his chair gaping at her in shock. It was painfully obvious that he couldn't believe that Hermione had done such a thing. Standing quickly, he strode to the sofa and glowered down at her. After several sputtering tries, he at last found his voice.

"You...you naughty little whore! I would have thought that you were above such teasing tricks, but I see now that I was wrong. I would not play such games, little whore, were I you. You will find out that you are no match for me."

Smiling sweetly up at him, Hermione calmly said, "Now Severus, I have no idea what you are so upset about. There's something very important that I want to ask you, and I only wanted to make certain that I had your attention."

"I assure you, little whore, that you have it," Severus said through gritted teeth.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually," Hermione began in the same calm tones. "It's about this whore business. Now, I don't care what you call Harry, or Ron, or anyone else for that matter, but it's rather off putting to have the man I love calling me a whore all the time." Standing, Hermione went to Severus and put a hand gently on his cheek. "You know my name, Severus. I know that you do. Couldn't you try to call me by my name?"

Backing away from her, Severus looked at her with wild eyes for a moment before retreating to a corner of the room and standing with his head tightly wedged against the walls. Following him, Hermione saw that he was shaking. Though it was important to Hermione that Severus stop calling her a whore, it was clear that she had asked too much. There was some twist of Severus' mind that caused him to shy away from all names, and it was obviously too strong for Severus to easily overcome.

Standing close to him, Hermione ran a hand up and down his back to comfort him. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't mean to upset you. You can't say my name, can you? And here I am, trying to force you to do so."

"I...I cannot..."

"I know, love. I know. Don't fret about it. Come sit on the sofa with me. Come on, love. Come sit down with me."

Coaxing him slowly over to the sofa, Hermione sat next to him and leaned against his side. Seemingly of its own accord, Severus' arm wrapped around her shoulders, and Hermione leaned her head down to rest against his shoulder. For the next twenty minutes, they sat there in silence while Severus calmed down. Eventually, he became somewhat agitated again, and Hermione lifted her head to look at him with concern.

"I..." Severus began hesitantly, "I don't want to do something that upsets you. I don't want to make you unhappy."

"I know that, Severus," Hermione said earnestly. She wished now that she had never brought the subject up. It had seemed like such an insignificant thing, but with Severus' mental state, even the most trivial matters could cause him trouble. She should have known better. "I'm not unhappy, I'm not!"

Despite her protest, Hermione was shocked to feel her eyes watering. It wasn't the whore business; it was more a reaction to the frustration of trying to deal with Severus. It was hard to be in love, and yet feel that she had to walk on eggshells around him. Noticing her moist eyes, Severus pulled her close and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Remembering his reaction of the night before, Hermione saw an opening to lighten the mood and she jumped at it.

"That's not a proper kiss," she said, with a mock scowl.

With a sudden laugh, Severus placed a hand to either side of her face and kissed her with enthusiasm. When he eventually drew back, he gazed deeply into her eyes.

"I cannot do as you ask, but I would not have you unhappy. What can I do, little...what can I do?"

It was obvious that he wasn't going to forget the matter. As Hermione searched her mind for some solution, she remembered Draco.

"Severus, you don't have to say my name to make me happy. Perhaps you could call me something else. You call Draco "boy," don't you? I wouldn't mind it so much, if you called me something that was just for me."

Releasing Hermione, Severus rose to his feet and began to pace the room. Worried at first, Hermione soon saw that he did not seem agitated, he was only thinking. Sitting up straighter, Hermione waited impatiently, wondering what Severus would choose to call her.

After a bit of pacing, Severus turned towards where Hermione still sat on the sofa. "Slut?" he asked pleasantly.

Hermione's face fell. She should have known better than to expect too much of him; he was mad, after all. Besides, it could have been worse. He might have started calling her snookie-wookums or some such nonsense. "Actually, Severus, I think that I almost prefer whore to that."

Huffing in annoyance, Severus began pacing again. It wasn't long until he came up with his next suggestion. "Cunt?" he asked hopefully.

"Absolutely not!"

A bit more huffing and pacing later, Severus had a third suggestion to make. "Trollop?" he asked hesitantly.

Hermione opened her mouth to automatically protest, but then she shut it with a snap. Actually, trollop wasn't so bad. It still basically meant whore, but it was so old fashioned that it sounded almost endearing. Besides, considering his other suggestions, this was obviously the best of the lot. If she let him go on, it might get much worse.

"I think that trollop is fine, Severus. Could you call me that?"

In answer, Severus returned to the couch and pulled Hermione to her feet. "Pretty little trollop," he murmured before leaning down to give her another kiss. Releasing her, he walked towards the door. "There are some things I must see to in the lab, trollop. Do tell me when the whore's son returns with my ingredients."

"I will, Severus."

Watching him leave the room, Hermione was surprised to see him pause when he neared the suit of armor. Placing a hand on its metal shoulder, Severus leaned close to the suit's helmet, looking for all the world like he was going to tell it a secret.

"Hermione," Severus whispered to the armor. "Hermione." Then, Severus gave the suit of armor a fond pat on the head before quitting the room.

"Well, that answers one question," Hermione muttered to herself. "He certainly does remember my name. Why he can't call me by it, I'll never understand. Perhaps I should stop trying to find reason in madness."

Returning to her rather cold tea, Hermione sat, lost in thought, until Harry arrived home.

Knee-high Whores

Chapter 20 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Thanks to all of you who have taken the time to leave me a review. They really mean a lot to me. Whether you tell me your latest theories on what's going on, or just let me know if you enjoyed it or not, I read and enjoy every single one. Thanks!

My life is busy as per usual. I will do my best to keep up with the updates as well as I can, but don't fret if updates are sometimes more along the lines of every two weeks rather than weekly.

No alert readers notices for last chapter; my intrepid betas were too good for you! ;) Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow rock my socks! Of course, any one who finds an oopsie should please email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com, and I'll be sure to acknowledge you in the next chapter. But you'll have to look sharp; Vaughn and Wolf don't miss much!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Insanity is often the logic of an accurate mind overtaxed.

-Oliver Wendell Holmes 1809-1894

When Harry returned to the house, he was glad to find Hermione alone in the library. Setting the large bag that he was carrying down by the door, he joined Hermione on the sofa.

"Good news," Harry said as he poured himself a cup of tea. "Hagrid had every single thing on my list. It's amazing how much stuff he's got tucked away in that hut of his. He even had the Diricawl feathers. He said that he'd accidentally startled one when he was patrolling in the forest. When it vanished in a puff of feathers, he collected them in case they turned up useful. He's a regular muggle, he is."

"That's good for us," Hermione said with a smile. "The less left on my shopping list, the happier I'll be. Did you ask him about what those ingredients might be used for?"

"I did, and he said pretty much the same thing that Neville did. While some of the ingredients have multiple uses, they can all be used in healing potions. He said something else that I thought was interesting."

"What was that?"

"He said," Harry began, pausing to rake a hand through his untidy hair as he gathered his thoughts, "he said that six unicorn hairs were quite extravagant...that he didn't know of any use for the hairs that would require more than one. Hagrid thought that some of the other amounts were rather excessive as well. He said that either our mysterious brewer was making multiples of the same potion, or that they were experimenting and needed sufficient quantities in case the first experiments failed."

"So not only is Severus going to brew unknown potions in your basement, he's going to be brewing experimental potions," Hermione said. "That does sound rather ominous, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed. I think I'll have a go at strengthening those protective wards I put up on the lab. I don't want to keep him from brewing--it might end up being important. I just don't want the house to fall in," he finished with a wry grin.

"You and me both," Hermione said with a resigned sigh. "I also don't want him getting himself hurt, but I suppose that there is nothing to do about it. I think that Severus is going to try to heal his madness, and I don't want to interfere with that. I'll try to keep an eye on him when he starts brewing."

"That will go over well, I'm sure!" Harry said with a laugh. "Pretty little whore, what are you doing spying on my work? It's none of your business!"

"Oh, stop it!" Hermione said, giving Harry a playful cuff on the shoulder. "I know that he won't much like the idea, but I can at least try. He let me help him with the plants last night."

"Did he?" Harry asked. "I'm surprised he let you anywhere near them. Anything new on that front?"

"Harry, that's none of your business," Hermione said sharply, though she could not hide her blush.

"Gods! You're even starting to sound like him!" Harry said in mock protest. "You're not going to start calling Ron and me whores, are you?"

"I'll call you worse than that if you don't lay off," Hermione said, shaking her finger at him. That only served to further Harry's amusement, and he continued to tease her until Severus entered the room.

"The Whore Who Lived has returned, I see," Severus said solemnly. "Good." Turning to Hermione, he continued. "You will go shopping now?"

"Yes, Severus," Hermione said with an air of great patience. "I will go shopping now."

"Good," he said simply. For a moment, Severus studied the goblin tapestry. His brow was furrowed in thought and a slight frown was on his face. "The knee-high whores are a...difficult people. Their ways are not our ways. When you speak to them, trollop, stick to business and do nothing to annoy them." Dragging his eyes from the tapestry, he regarded Hermione seriously as he continued. "You will be careful, I trust?"

"I will be careful, Severus. I promise. I don't like goblins much, myself, and I don't plan to stay any longer than I have to. I will take care of my business and leave."

"See that you do," Severus said shortly. Walking to the door, he picked up the bag Harry had left there. "I'll take these things down to the lab and begin processing them."

Let me know when you return." Standing in the doorway, Severus turned to Hermione and gave her a long look. "Take care, trollop."

"I will, Severus. I'll see you when I return."

Severus stood in the doorway for another moment, simply looking at Hermione. Then he abruptly turned and headed for the stairs that led down to the lab.

After Severus had left, Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "Trollop? Why do you suddenly rate your own name?"

"Because Severus likes me best," Hermione replied with a cheeky grin.

Gathering up the key to Severus' vault and his note to the bank, Hermione left for Gringotts. She hoped that the note from Severus would be enough to clear her way. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said that she didn't like goblins. For all their gruff politeness, they were rather frightful.

Hermione had been to Gringotts several times before with her parents. The shops in Diagon Alley would accept Muggle money, but they often did not use the most up to date exchange rate. Hermione and her parents had always begun her trips to buy school supplies with a visit to Gringotts to change their money. Her previous trips to the wizards' bank did little to ease Hermione's nerves as she drew close to the large building. It had always seemed rather creepy to her. Despite the startling whiteness of its walls, it loomed over the street like some monstrous structure from a gothic fairy tale.

As always, a uniformed goblin stood beside the huge bronze doors. He gave Hermione a customary bow as she entered, and she nodded politely in return. Some might find the goblin's polite gesture reassuring, but Hermione had always noted the sharp-eyed scrutiny this supposed doorman gave each and every visitor as he made his formal bow. This was the way with all the goblins. On the surface, all goblins gave off an air of strict-if gruff-politeness. A more discerning eye would notice that every second a person was within Gringotts, they were very carefully scrutinized. As Hermione was bowed through the silver inner doors by two more goblins, she did her best to nod politely and not let her inner tension show.

Knowing that her every movement was being observed and interpreted made Hermione very nervous as she continued into the building and made her way towards the long counter. The counter itself was rather imposing. It was high and made of a dark wood. Countless goblins sat at high stools ready to conduct business. It wasn't easy to approach the counter. Gringotts was bustling with activity. It seemed to Hermione that every wizard and goblin in the room decided to take the time to get in her way as she approached the counter. At last, she made it across the large room and found a goblin who was unoccupied.

"How may I help you?" the goblin said, his voice gravelly. He leaned forward over the counter, tapping his long fingers with impatience.

Though it was rather off putting to have a goblin looming over one, Hermione gave herself a mental shake and withdrew Severus' letter and key from her bag. "I have some shopping to do for a friend," she said simply. "He's given me this letter to show that I have his permission to access his vault."

Hermione was careful not to mention her friend's name, and she hoped that the goblin would be as discreet. The last thing she needed was the unwanted attention she would receive by saying Severus' name in public. Taking the letter from her briskly, the goblin studied it carefully. If he was at all surprised by the name on the parchment, he gave no sign. Climbing from his stool, the goblin took the letter to an odd silver box that was standing on a table behind the counter. Placing the document in the box, the goblin waited until the box emitted an eerie green glow. Removing the letter, he brought it back to the counter. For another moment he studied it and then he raised narrowed eyes to study Hermione as well.

"This man," he said, vaguely waving at the parchment with one long-fingered hand, "you are his prostitute?"

Damn and blast! She'd forgotten all about Severus' usual style of address. "I am his very good friend," she said primly, staring straight into the goblin's slightly amused eyes.

"No matter," the goblin said, still staring at her with amused disdain. "I was merely curious. It is not any wizard that would allow his *very good friend* access to his Gringotts vault. Does the *lady* have this gentleman's key?"

Torn between relief at the goblin's discretion and anger at his manner, Hermione paused for a moment to get her mental equilibrium back. Remembering Severus' words of caution, she forced herself to stick to business and not let the goblin's rude manner fluster her.

"Yes," she said, forcing a tone of politeness into her voice. "I have my friend's key here." Placing the key on the counter, she waited for the goblin to examine it.

After a brief look at the key, the goblin addressed her again. "Everything seems to be in order. If you are going to be making purchases for your friend, perhaps I might make a suggestion. We will, of course, escort you to this gentleman's vault if that is what you desire. However, we could also simply give you a letter of credit to take with you. Almost all shops will accept this in lieu of payment, and they will simply send the bill to Gringotts, where we will pay it out of your friend's account."

Now that sounded useful. Not only would it make her shopping easier, it would save her a trip through the Gringotts' underworld. Harry had described his trip to his parents' vault and it sounded like something that Hermione would be happy to miss.

"A letter of credit would be very helpful," Hermione said with a pleased smile. "I have some extensive shopping to do for my friend, and I don't know how much money will be necessary. That would take the guesswork out of it and be easier to carry as well."

"One moment, if you please," the goblin said gruffly. Climbing back down from his stool, the goblin retreated through one of the many doorways in the wall behind the counter.

After about five minutes, he returned, the letter of credit in his hand. Handing the letter and Severus' vault key to Hermione, the goblin then showed her a small piece of paper. The handwriting was thick and spiked, but Hermione soon sorted it out.

Nine hundred eighty-five Galleons

Fifty-three Sickles

Three Knuts

"That is the amount that the gentleman has in his account. Gringotts will pay any bills up to and including that amount. Any overages will accrue the proper fines and interest rates."

Quickly doing a standard conversion rate in her head, Hermione realized that the amount was close to five thousand pounds. Not a fortune, to be sure, but more than enough to cover what she needed to buy. Glancing at the letter of credit, she was relieved to see that there was no mention of Severus' name on it. The goblins may be frightful, but they knew their business.

"Thank you, sir," she said politely as she tucked the letter and the key back into her bag. "You have been most helpful."

The goblin gave her a curt nod in lieu of reply, and before Hermione knew it, she was back on the pavement outside with her mission accomplished.

The shopping went amazingly well. Since she was buying potion ingredients, Hermione only went to shops with excellent reputations for the quality of their stock. All of these shops accepted the letter of credit as payment, and it wasn't long before Hermione was headed back to Harry's house.

Struggling through the front door with her many packages, Hermione was further cheered by the silence of Mrs. Black's painting. She still hadn't uttered a peep since Severus had hexed her. Oh, the curtains would fly open, and you could see her storming around in her portrait, but not a sound could she utter.

Hermione managed to get all of her packages into the library. Ron and Harry were sitting on the sofa, and they hurried to help Hermione set everything down. From his seat at the desk, Severus turned to look at her. He looked her up and down almost as thoroughly as the goblins had. Then, seeming satisfied that she was all right, he rose to inspect the packages.

As he began rummaging around in the bags, he asked, "Is everything here?"

"Yes, Severus. I was able to get every last item on your list. You have all of them."

"Good, that's good," Severus muttered as he peered at a bag of rose quartz. "House-whore! You are needed!"

With a soft pop, Kreacher appeared. "What is the dark master wanting of Kreacher?" he asked in a much softer tone of voice than he used with the other inhabitants of the house. Creeping closer to Severus, Kreacher put a hand gently on Severus' leg and gazed up at him adoringly.

"It's enough to make one sick," grumbled Ron, "the way he fawns all over Severus. The nasty little thing."

"Hush, Ron," Hermione said with an exasperated look. "We're lucky that Kreacher likes him. He could cause all sorts of trouble if he didn't."

Ignoring the discussion, Severus spoke to Kreacher. "Take these things down to the lab and unpack them, house-whore. Be careful with them. Some of those ingredients are quite fragile."

"Yes, dark master!" the house-elf said happily. "Kreacher is being careful!" With a snap of his fingers, the packages vanished. Then Kreacher himself popped out of the room.

"Severus," Hermione said, "we've gotten you everything on your shopping list. Why don't you tell me what I need to know about the Horcrux before you go down to the lab?"

"No," Severus said simply as he headed for the door.

"What? Severus, you promised to help me!"

"And I will, trollop," Severus said from the door. "But first I am going down to the lab to make certain that everything you bought today is acceptable." With that said, Severus quit the room and headed for the stairs.

"He might be more pleasant, but he's still a stubborn bastard just the same," Harry mused.

"Too true," Ron agreed. "It's enough to make you want to throttle the life out of him."

"Honestly!" Hermione interjected, "He's not that bad!"

"A little snogging and she's gone right off her head," Ron joked, shaking his head in mock sadness. "She'll be saying that he's right reasonable next."

"He's perfectly reasonable most of the time," Hermione said, crossing her arms across her chest and glaring at Ron. "He only requires a bit of care, is all."

"And perhaps a bit of snogging," Harry teased. "He's been a new man since you started paying him some attention, Hermione."

"Oh, sod off, Harry!" Hermione said sharply, turning her glare at her other friend.

"Look, love," Ron said sweetly, "you simply cannot start snogging our insane ex-Potions professor and expect us not to tease you unmercifully."

"True. True," Harry said, nodding sagely. "That's what friends are for, after all."

"Boys!" Hermione snapped, looking upward as if in search of some guidance. "Merlin, help me. I'm surrounded by boys!"

While they waited for Severus to return, Harry and Ron placated Hermione with tea and sandwiches. By the time they had finished eating, Severus returned to the room.

"Everything seems to be in order," he said to the ceiling light.

"Will you help me now?" Hermione asked.

"I will show you what you need to know," he replied.

Walking over to his desk, he opened the top drawer and rummaged through the parchments there. It took him some time to find the one he sought in the overly crowded drawer. At last, he found the one he wanted and handed it to Hermione.

"This is what you need to destroy the cup," he said simply as Hermione opened the scroll.

"But, Severus," Hermione began, looking at him in confusion, "this is written in Gobbledegook."

"So? Is there some point you are trying to make, trollop?"

It was all Hermione could do to keep from snapping at him in frustration. He could act so dense sometimes, and Hermione suspected that it was indeed an act. "Severus, I do not read Gobbledegook. Would you translate this for me?"

"No. I have my own work to do."

"But how am I supposed to use this?" Hermione snapped, waving the parchment at him.

"That, pretty little trollop, is your problem. I said I would give you what you needed to destroy the cup. I have done so."

"But, Severus!"

With a melodramatic sigh, Severus looked down at Hermione. His expression made it clear that he felt very much put upon indeed. "If you need further help, I suggest that you leave me alone and ask the red-headed whore."

"What? Ron?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"May the old whore preserve us from dunderheaded imbeciles!" Severus said, rolling his eyes comically. "Of course not *that* red-headed whore!" That said, Severus strode quickly from the room and headed back down to the lab.

"You needn't have looked like my being able to help was so bloody impossible," grouched Ron. "It's enough to give me a complex, it is."

"Honestly, Ron, since when do you read Gobbledegook?"

"Well, this red-headed whore doesn't, but I know one who does," Ron said with a grin.

"Bill!" Harry exclaimed. "Of course! There, you see, Hermione? Ron was some help after all. You really ought to apologize for not believing in him."

"I'm ever so sorry that I bruised your sensitive little ego, Won-Won," Hermione dutifully recited in a syrupy voice. "Now that we've settled that, where is Bill these days?"

"He's at Gringotts," Ron replied. "The goblins are letting him work in Diagon Alley for the time being. He was probably there this afternoon."

"Well, there's nothing to do about it," Hermione said, carefully putting the unreadable parchment into her bag. "It looks like I'm going back to Gringotts in the morning to see Bill. Can either of you watch Severus?"

While Ron and Harry decided who would keep an eye on Severus, Hermione took a drink of her cold tea. She really didn't like Gringotts and she was not at all looking forward to going back so soon.

Gringotts Revisited

Chapter 21 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: A rather long note this time, but I've a few things to say. To start with, a little explanation as to why this chapter is so tardy. It's a rather odd coincidence, to say the least. The day that I finished the first draft of this chapter, both of my betas got snowed in at Buffalo. Neither one is from Buffalo, mind you, just a wild coincidence. They are now both safe and sound (and warm) at home. Thank goodness! So add that to my busy life and you will understand why this chapter took so long to post. I'm hoping to get back in the swing of things, and post more regularly, every 1-2 weeks.

Speaking of my betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow, have I mentioned lately that they are beta goddesses? I was happy to wait for them to escape Buffalo, because I couldn't imagine posting without them.

Special thanks to alert readers, Casey and Scribbler714, for finding two oopsies in the last chapter. Thanks bunches! My alert readers rock! Hey, two little oopsies in what I think was my longest chapter so far. Not bad at all. I told you that you would have to have sharp eyes to catch anything that my intrepid betas missed! Also, a big shout out to Tree Faery, who found a superfluous word back in chapter 19. Thanks for the head's up! I don't need JKR's herd of editors; I've got my bevy of alert readers! :D

So now, on with the show.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

So long as man is protected by madness-he functions-and flourishes.

-Emile M. Cioran b.1911

That night, Hermione slept badly. Though she'd waited patiently for Severus to get his new potion ingredients sorted and stored, she had then insisted that the stubborn man get some much needed sleep. When she leaned down to kiss him goodnight, Severus deftly tipped her into his bed again and snogged her until her toes curled. That had not made it easy for Hermione to relax and fall asleep herself, though she wasn't exactly complaining.

Not two hours after she finally slipped into a light doze, Hermione woke to find Severus standing in her bedroom staring at her. She had told him a hundred times that such behavior was inappropriate, but she still woke to find him haunting her bedroom more nights than not. He never did anything to disturb her; he never touched her when she was asleep or tried to talk to her. His mere presence seemed enough to wake her. Shooing him out of her bedroom, Hermione slid back into an uneasy sleep.

The next time Hermione woke, she was not able to immediately determine what had awakened her. Then she felt the slight trembling that passed through the house in a wave. As she pondered this, she heard a muffled boom and the house quavered again. Hermione could think of only one thing that would cause such a disturbance. Quickly climbing out of bed, she threw a dressing gown around her shoulders and headed for the basement.

Arriving at the lab door, Hermione soon found that it was locked and warded against intrusion. When five minutes of frantic spellwork did nothing to open the door, Hermione had to resort to less magical methods.

Banging loudly on the door, she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Severus! You open this door this instant! If you think for one moment that locking this door so that you can blow your fool head off is appropriate behavior, then you've got another thing coming! Open this door, you daft git!"

As Hermione lifted her hand to pound on the door again, it opened. The sight that met her eyes might have been comical if Hermione hadn't been so worried. There stood Severus, covered head to toe in black soot. His hair was in wild disarray and there was a paler patch of skin around his eyes where he had wiped at them with his soot covered sleeve.

"My work is very important, trollop," he said firmly but calmly, as if nothing whatsoever was amiss. "I simply can't have you interrupting me at all times of the day." Turning his head to address the lab behind him, he said sharply, "House-whore, get that cleaned up and we'll try it again."

Still gaping at him in astonishment, Hermione finally found her voice. "Severus, are you all right?"

"I am perfectly fine, trollop," he said, brushing ineffectually at the front of his shirt. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Why wouldn't you be?" Hermione practically shouted. "You've blown up the lab!"

"As you can see," Severus began, opening the door to the lab slightly wider, "the lab is perfectly fine, other than needing a good cleaning, and so am I. I confess that I am quite confounded as to why you feel the need to cause such a fuss."

"I hardly think it's surprising," she snapped. "I think that any woman would *cause a fuss* if the man she loved was busily trying to blast his fool head off!"

For a moment, something in Severus' eyes softened at her words, but he was soon all business once again. "Little trollop, I am experimenting. Things explode," he said, waving his hand as if that statement explained everything. "Now you be a good little trollop and leave me to my work."

Patting her fondly on the arm, Severus eased her away from the doorway and then calmly shut the door in her face. Hermione stood for some time staring at that closed door. Finally, she turned and started up the stairs.

"Go ahead," she muttered peevishly, "blow yourself to bits. See if I care."

Eventually, despite the occasional tremor in the house, Hermione managed to fall into a fretful sleep. Her alarm woke her far too early, and after ascertaining that Severus was indeed still alive, she managed a quick cup of tea before heading out to Gringotts.

Today, Gringotts looked even more imposing than it had the day before. The day was warm but overcast, and the odd angles of the goblin bank seemed to loom even more ominously than usual. After the usual number of goblins had bowed her through, Hermione made her way to the large desk where people made inquiries.

"Hello," she said politely to the elderly goblin at the desk. "I'm here to see Bill Weasley. Is he available?"

"Who may I say is asking after him?"

"Hermione Granger."

"Let me check," the goblin said with a rather creepy smile that was probably meant to be reassuring. Stifling a shudder as the old goblin looked her carefully up and down, she watched him make his way to a nearby wall.

On the wall was arranged a large number of oddly shaped things that looked like handles with a curved funnel at both ends. When the goblin chose one and put it to his ear, Hermione realized that they were rather like Muggle telephones, though they had no wires connecting them to anything. The goblin spoke into one for a moment, hung it back on the wall, and returned to the desk.

"Young Weasley will be with you in a moment," he said, giving Hermione another one of his creepy smiles.

"Thank you, sir. You're very kind," Hermione managed to murmur in reply.

It was a blessedly short period of time before Bill popped out of one of the many doors in the large room and greeted Hermione with a warm hug.

"Hermione! What a pleasant surprise!" he said cheerfully. "What brings you here today?"

"Well, I have a question for you regarding the research that I've been working on," she said vaguely, mindful of the many ears that could be listening to their conversation.

"Ah, yes, your research. I'd be happy to help you in any way that I can."

"Is now a good time?" she asked. "I could come back later if you're busy."

"Your timing couldn't be better, Hermione. I was just slogging through some dreadfully boring paperwork about an old dig we've been working on in India. Believe me, I could use the break."

Taking her arm, Bill led Hermione into the maze of offices that connected to the main room by a labyrinth of corridors. Hermione understood why the goblin at the desk had called Bill to meet her; she never would have found his office on her own. The office they entered was terribly small. Though the room contained only a small desk, an extra chair, and a large filing cabinet, Hermione and Bill had to maneuver carefully before they were both seated.

Looking around the room in obvious discomfort, Hermione tried to keep her tone light as she asked, "Have you done something to annoy the goblins, Bill?"

"What? Oh! The office! Smaller than my dad's at the Ministry, isn't it?" he asked, chuckling. "No, I'm not being punished. In fact, this is one of their larger offices, and they've given it to me because I'm such a whopping great brute."

"Of course," Hermione said with a sheepish grin. "I wouldn't have thought of it that way. Goblins need a lot less space than wizards. Can't they augment the size magically?"

"They've considered it, but Gringotts is literally covered in protective magic. If they use a spell to enlarge the room, it can cause hell with the wards. They've been looking into knocking out a couple walls to make this office bigger, but it's only in the planning stages. Goblins are very cautious; they won't move a stone until they've looked at the problem six ways from Sunday. Now, what did you want to ask me about? You can be candid here--as cautious as the little buggers are, they don't go about spying on the people who work for them."

"Well, you know about the item I'm trying to destroy," Hermione began, bumping her elbow on the corner of Bill's desk as she tried to rummage in her purse in the cramped room. Finding the parchment, she handed it to Bill. "I've some information that I've been assured will help me do just that, but--as you can see--it's written in Gobbledegook."

"You've come to the right place then," Bill said with a smile as he began to unroll the parchment. "I've been reading Gobbledegook since I was thirteen."

As Bill began to look over the scroll, his smile faded away and he turned so pale that all the freckles on his face stood out like leaves on the snow. Quickly re-rolling the parchment, he thrust it back into Hermione's hands.

"Put it away!"

"But, Bill..."

"Put it away, Hermione! And don't take it out again, not here!"

"But I need your help! You know how important..."

"And I will help you, but not here. Now put that scroll away!"

The confusion clear in her expression, Hermione reluctantly put the scroll back into her bag. Once it was safely tucked away, Bill abruptly relaxed, though he was still more pale than normal. Running a hand over his eyes and then shaking his head as if to clear it, Bill looked at Hermione with a very serious expression on his normally cheerful face.

"The goblins may be serious about privacy, and they have no reason to spy on me. I am a well respected worker here, despite the fact that I'm not a goblin, and that's saying something. However, if they caught either of us in possession of that scroll, there would be very little I could do to protect us. And that is all I will say on the matter while we are within Gringotts' walls."

"All right, Bill. If you say so. Is it really so dangerous?"

"It is. That scroll has a type of magic on it that the goblins have kept secret for centuries. Wizards aren't supposed to know that it even exists. I only know of it because I've been working closely with them for so long."

Getting quickly to his feet, Bill then helped Hermione out of her chair and steered her towards the door.

"We'll talk more later. Right now, there is something that I want you to see. Come with me and follow my lead, all right?"

"Whatever you want," Hermione replied as Bill led her through the snarl of corridors until they arrived at another office.

Knocking politely on the jamb of the open door, Bill addressed the middle-aged goblin within. "Swarf, are you busy? There's something that I was hoping you could help me with, but it isn't important."

"I'd ask you in, but I don't think that you will fit," the goblin joked with gruff good humor. After straightening the papers that he had been reading, Swarf stepped out into the corridor so that Bill could introduce Hermione properly. The pleasantries taken care of, Swarf got straight down to business. "I'm not doing anything time sensitive today, young Weasley. What can I help you with?"

"Well, my friend here has been seriously thinking about curse-breaking as a career. Between you and me, I think that she'd be right good at it. I thought that we might show her a few of the vaults. It's never too early to start recruiting a good curse-breaker, after all."

"Very true. There aren't many in the business worthy of Gringotts' time, and that's the truth. If you think that she would be an asset to the company, then I expect she's worth looking into."

Though Swarf had greeted Hermione with polite disinterest, he now studied her with much more care. Used to the careful scrutiny of goblins, Hermione endured Swarf's perusal with good grace.

"She got eleven O.W.L.s at Hogwarts," Bill mentioned off-handedly.

"Eleven, did you say?" Turning towards Hermione, Swarf addressed her directly for the first time. "Most impressive, young lady, most impressive. I can see why young Weasley wants Gringotts to get first crack at you, should you decide to become a curse-breaker."

"I've always been very interested in curse-breaking," Hermione said smoothly. "And Bill seems very content with his work for Gringotts. Naturally, having a friend who works here has had an influence on my career plans."

"Now then, young Weasley, you thought we might show your friend a few of the more impressive vaults? Excellent idea! We do have some extraordinary vaults hidden under the building. A small tour would be a splendid way to increase your young lady's interest in Gringotts. Come along, then. No time like the present."

Before she knew it, Hermione was trapped in a little mining car and speeding through the countless tunnels of the goblins' underworld. They toured several vaults, and Hermione might have thought them very impressive indeed if she hadn't been so nauseated from the ride. Through it all, Hermione was confused about why Bill had talked Swarf into the tour in the first place, and what it could possibly have to do with the scroll hidden in her bag.

At last, the small group arrived at what would be their final stop on the whirlwind tour--vault seven hundred and thirteen. Before they disembarked from the cart, Bill gave Hermione's hand a sharp squeeze and looked at her intently. This vault must be what Bill had wanted her to see, but why?

"This," explained Swarf, "is one of our more secure vaults. Normally I would not open it without good reason--not even to impress a potential employee--but it is empty at the moment, so there's no harm."

"How do you know that this vault is empty?" Hermione asked.

"No one can get into a vault such as this without the aid of a goblin, not even the vault owner. We once had a break-in of this very vault, and it puzzled us greatly until we realized the thief had used dark magic to get a goblin to aid him. Nasty business, it was," Swarf said, shaking his head. "We have added precautions to keep that from happening again."

"Running a bank such as this must be difficult work," Hermione said.

"Difficult, yes," the goblin agreed, "but very satisfying, all the same."

There was no keyhole on the large door before them, and Swarf produced no key to open it. Approaching the door, he stroked down the wood with one impossibly long finger. As he finished the gesture, the door melted away into nothingness. Another gesture of his long-fingered hand, and the door re-appeared.

"My goodness!" Hermione said, impressed. "What would happen if I tried to open it that way?"

"Try it and see," Swarf replied, giving her a slightly nasty grin that showed off his pointed teeth.

When Hermione hesitated, Bill reassured her. "Go ahead and try it," he said with a chuckle. "You'll be safe enough with Swarf here to retrieve you."

Not liking the sound of that word, "retrieve," Hermione nevertheless walked up to the door and dutifully stroked one finger down its rough wooden grain. As soon as she touched the door, a tingly feeling began in her stomach. With a whoosh of air displacement, Hermione found herself surrounded by darkness. Before she had time to become truly frightened, the door behind her vanished once more. Squinting in the dim light, Hermione realized that she had been transported inside of the empty vault. She was quick to step through the doorway and rejoin Swarf and Bill in the lighted tunnel.

"Brave as well as intelligent," mumbled Swarf to himself. "Young Weasley, I think your friend would make a fine addition to the staff. "What was your name again, young lady?"

"Hermione. Hermione Granger."

"Well, Miss Granger, when you are ready to apply for employment, come to see me. There's no need for you to study curse-breaking first, we prefer to train our employees ourselves. We would be happy to offer you a standard apprenticeship at the usual rates."

"Thank you, sir. I shall have to finish my schooling first," she lied, "then I would be most happy to talk to you."

The tour at an end, Swarf returned Bill and Hermione to the first floor of Gringotts, and Bill then escorted Hermione through the door to the street.

"I've got to get back to my desk, but I'll come by Grimmauld Place after work. We've got to talk, but we mustn't talk here."

"Why did you want me to see that vault?"

"Later. I'll answer all of your questions later, I promise. I'll be at the house around seven, is that all right?"

"That's fine," Hermione said with an impatient sigh. "Harry's got a 'knock first' ward up, so you can't come straight in. Apparate to the porch and one of us will let you in."

While Bill made his way back into Gringotts, Hermione turned to head for home. She had hoped that the day would bring her some answers. So far it had only brought her more questions.

A Gentleman Caller

Chapter 22 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: First of all, great big thanks to everyone who was kind enough to leave me a review. They really mean a lot to me! Now, I told a few folks that some things would be explained in this chapter. Then, as I wrote it, I found that Bill had other plans. But don't fret! Those answers are still coming, just next chapter instead of this one.

I've no alert reader notices for last chapter. But I would like to mention one thing. A couple reviewers told me that they thought that the expression "you've got another thing coming" should have been "you've got another think coming." Now where I grew up, it was "thing" not "think" so that's what I used. Curious, I did a little research on the matter and found that the thing/think issue is hotly debated. Who knew? :D But the bottom line is that on both sides of the pond there are both folks who insist it's "thing" as well as folks who insist it's "think." Obviously, both versions are in common usage, and that's all I'm concerned about. I'll let the linguists worry over which came first and which is more valid. To me, "you've got another thing coming" is more menacing, and more like what a mother might say to a naughty child; which was what I wanted for Hermione. I only tell you all of this to let those reviewers know that I truly did look into the matter after they questioned it, but after researching it, I decided to let "thing" stand. Don't let that discourage you from making future suggestions. I love my alert readers!

Two other folks I love are my fabulous betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. Sure, I could write without their help, but it wouldn't be worth reading! They rock!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it.

-Robin Williams

When Hermione returned home and informed Harry and Ron of Bill's visit, it caused a bit of a ruckus.

"What do you mean Bill is coming tonight? He can't come tonight!" screeched Ron.

"He can and he is," Hermione said, rolling her eyes at Ron's dramatic tone. "I warned him about the knock first ward. So what's the problem?"

"Why does he have to come here?" Harry asked shortly. "Couldn't you have gotten the information you needed at Gringotts?"

"No, I couldn't," Hermione said, tossing her bag onto her desk with an angry thump. "There's a problem with the scroll. Apparently, it's not something the goblins would be particularly happy about finding in a wizard's possession. Bill went pale as a ghost when he read what was on that scroll. We need somewhere safe to talk about it, and this is the only place I know that is safe enough. Now, would one of you dunderheads mind explaining what the problem is?"

"Christ, Hermione," Ron growled. "You're really starting to sound like ole dark and barmy...do you realize that?"

"What's going on!"

"Oh, nothing much, Hermione," Harry said, shaking his head in resignation. "We're just going to have quite a houseful. I finally heard from Remus today, and he and Draco are popping in tonight so that Remus and I can take a tour through the Pensieve."

"I can see it now," Ron added, as he began to mimic introductions. "Bill! Good to see you! You remember traitor Severus and Death Eater spawn Draco, don't you? Oh, I see you've brought the Aurors! How thoughtful of you!"

"Harry," Hermione began, running a hand through her hair as she thought about the situation, "surely this isn't an insurmountable problem. I need to see Bill tonight and find out what to do about the cup. Can't you get in touch with Remus and ask him to come another time?"

"Can't," Harry answered shortly. "Remus won't be in touch with Draco until they meet here. Draco's still living with Voldemort. It's not like we can risk sending a Patronus message and have that lot seeing Draco chatting with a silver stag."

"What about Severus' Patronus?"

"Too recognizable. If Voldemort sees Severus' mixed up Patronus, he'll wonder why Draco hasn't brought Severus back. Draco has been telling him that Severus must be dead to explain why he hasn't returned."

"What time is Bill getting here?" Ron asked.

"Seven."

"Well, it might turn out all right, if we're lucky," Harry said with a sigh. "Remus and Draco aren't supposed to show up until nine."

"Splendid," groused Ron sarcastically. "Piece of cake. All we have to do is keep Bill from knowing that Severus is here, find out what to do about the cup, and then boot my curse breaker brother out the door before another Death Eater arrives without making him suspicious that we're trying to get rid of him. I should have stayed in school." With an expression of pure hopelessness, Ron slumped down onto the sofa and put his head in his hands.

"Oh, shut up, Ron!" Hermione snapped. "It's not like we have to sneak past a three-headed dog. All we have to do is get rid of Bill before Draco arrives. We're three reasonably intelligent wizards, we ought to be able to manage that much."

They were all nervous that night as they waited for Bill to arrive. It had taken Hermione over half an hour to get Severus to promise to stay in the lab and not blow anything up while Bill made his visit. Only the promise of a visit from Draco got the stubborn man to forswear his experiments while Bill was in the house. Everything was set. Severus was safely tucked away. The three friends had decided on a reasonable lie to hurry Bill from the house if his visit took too long. All they needed was Bill.

Unfortunately for the three friends, Bill was not the most predictable of people. Expecting him to follow the plan they had so carefully laid out was rather foolish. It wasn't just any wizard who would be accepted as a curse breaker for the goblins, after all. Most people who knew Bill would describe him as handsome and charming--and indeed he was, despite the scars he had received at the hands of Greyback. True, his face was different since the attack, but because of his easy-going attitude, most people

forgot about the scars. In addition to charming, Bill was also observant, self-confident, and extremely intelligent. Swarf, the goblin that Hermione had spoken to about possibly becoming a curse breaker, had been impressed by Hermione's eleven OWLs. Bill himself had gotten twelve. Underneath that long hair and easy-going manner was a wizard that people often underestimated--and that was the way that Bill liked it.

To start with, Bill arrived about twenty minutes late, which made the three friends even more nervous. After greeting his younger brother, Harry, and Hermione warmly, Bill leaned against the library mantle with a casual grace. When she noticed how Bill nonchalantly looked each of them over, Hermione at first thought that he had been spending too much time with the paranoid goblins. Then Bill spoke, and Hermione realized they were in serious trouble.

"So where is he?" Bill asked in such a casual tone that Harry and Ron didn't yet realize exactly what sort of trouble they were in. Hermione, blessed--or perhaps cursed--with sharper observation skills, stood gazing at Bill with her mouth open in shock.

"Where is who?" Harry asked, clearly puzzled.

"The traitor, Severus Snape. He's here somewhere...where have you hidden him?"

There was a short, tense silence in the room that lasted for several heartbeats. Eventually, Harry spoke. When Hermione turned to look at him, she realized that Harry suddenly had his wand in his hand and it was not quite pointing at Bill Weasley. By the look on Harry's face, Hermione doubted that he even realized that he had drawn it.

With a chuckle that sounded tinny and forced, Harry said, "Why would you think that bastard was here? We aren't exactly in the habit of entertaining Voldemort's minions."

Hermione's gaze darted back to Bill when he spoke, and when she noticed that Bill's wand was also in his hand--though he kept it pointed safely at the floor--her heart started thumping as fast as a rabbit's. Damn it! They were all on the same side, but if something didn't give soon, they would end up in a fight.

"Before you hex me, Harry--or maybe what you've got on your mind is a memory charm--I'd like to point out that while ~~known~~ *now* Snape is here, I've come alone. No Aurors. No Order members. Only poor little defenseless me," he finished with a grin which suggested--wrongly--that he was a wizard who wasn't any threat at all.

As Bill paused in his speech, Harry looked down at his wand and seemed surprised to find that it was in his hand. Though he didn't re-sheath it, he dropped his half raised arm and let the wand tip point to the floor as Bill's did.

"Look," Bill continued, "if it was only one of you harboring a known criminal, I'd be worried that he'd gotten to you somehow...magically warped your judgment. But if the three of you are all in on this, and it seems obvious that you are by your tense attitudes, then I expect you to have a very good reason to be aiding the man that killed Albus Dumbledore. Even so, I can't just walk away and pretend that I don't know you are doing it. I need to know why. I can promise you not to tell anyone else if you think that it's necessary, but for my own peace of mind I need to know why."

The three friends shot each other nervous glances. It was clear that they had no clue what to do. Throughout all of this, Bill waited calmly. Though he didn't put his wand away, he seemed content to give the others plenty of time to come to some conclusion. Eventually, Harry decided on a course of action. When Harry once again raised his wand arm, Bill didn't flinch, but his blue eyes narrowed dangerously. Bill relaxed again as Harry aimed his wand, not at Bill, but off to the side. In a moment, a shining silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and landed on the floor, feet prancing with agitation.

The Patronus calmed as Harry beckoned it towards him, and it fairly danced up to Harry, shaking its head up and down like a horse that is happy to see its owner. Leaning down, Harry whispered into a silver ear, and with one more shake of its head, the stag leaped away and dashed right through one of the library walls.

"Just hang on for a minute, Bill," Harry said softly. "You see, it's not only us that we have to consider."

"I want answers, Harry, and I won't leave until I get them. But I'm not in any hurry. Take your time."

Bill continued to lean nonchalantly against the mantle, while Harry, Hermione, and Ron stood fidgeting as they waited for Harry's Patronus to return. After about ten minutes of nervous fidgeting, a Patronus did return through the wall, but it wasn't Harry's. It dragged itself through the wall down near the baseboard, and came towards Harry in a stuttering, crawling gait. Its silver light had a sickly look about it, as if it was tarnished, and as it stumbled away from the wall it was mutating with a nauseating speed.

It looked vaguely reptilian at first and then its long tail shrunk to that of a small greenish rabbit as pronged horns shot up out of its head. Before that change was even complete, the body became almost completely unlike that of a squirrel and ragged bird's wings grew out of its back. It continued a series of grotesque changes as it slumped and slithered its way to Harry. Looking at the disgusting Patronus with an expression that suggested pity more than anything else, Harry knelt down so that the struggling creature could reach him more easily.

When it drew close, it grabbed hold of one of Harry's shirt sleeves and laboriously climbed up to his shoulder. Sticking up a mouth that at the moment looked more like a pig's snout than anything else, it whispered into Harry's ear in a hissing and broken voice.

Bill had watched the slow journey of the unfortunate Patronus with an expression of quiet horror. "You do realize that he's mad as a bottle of chips, don't you?" he muttered.

"Believe me, we know," Ron said with a heartfelt sigh. "But it's really not too bad most days, if we're careful not to upset him. We had a time of it when he first got here...until we learned how to be careful."

"Ron! You really shouldn't say anything until Harry tells us what we should do!" Hermione hissed.

"It's all right, Hermione," Harry said, brushing off his shoulder unconsciously. The strange Patronus had disappeared. "He said to tell the red-headed whore whatever we want. Severus didn't even seem very upset about it, Bill. He must have a lot of respect for you." That said, Harry at last re-sheathed his wand and Bill quickly followed suit.

"We always used to get along," Bill said. "Before the trouble, I rather liked him."

"Not really?" Ron said, a look of horror on his face.

"Yes, really," Bill said with a chuckle. "And why shouldn't I? He was damn clever, he was a good spy, and he had an absolutely wicked sense of humor when you were lucky enough to catch him in the right mood. To be honest, I never really understood why you and Harry whined so much about him. Then, I saw you all together at an Order meeting, and it was very clear that Harry and Snape simply detested each other."

"*He* started it," Harry said rather petulantly.

"Remind me to cry you a river later," Bill said with another chuckle. Then his expression turned serious. "But what is he doing here? He killed Albus. There's no mistaking that...you told me you saw it with your own eyes, Harry."

"I did. He did. But there's a lot that you don't know, Bill, and if I'm going to tell it, I'd better tell it all or you'll be showing up next time with a brigade of Aurors."

"If I was going to do that, I would have shown up with them tonight. But I do want to know why, if only to know that I haven't made a terrible mistake."

"I'll tell you the lot, and I'll show you some as well. But first I could really use a drink. That was touch and go there, for a moment or two."

A short conversation later and Harry left to grab the Pensieve while Ron went down to the kitchen to see if they still had a few bottles of ale. While they waited, Hermione had a question for Bill.

"How did you know Severus was here?"

"Severus, is it? I didn't know the two of you were such chums," Bill teased.

"We are friends," Hermione said defensively. Her tone of voice softened as she continued. "We all call him Severus and you'll have to as well. He is mad, Bill, and calling him...er...Snape," she said, whispering the word, "sets him off. Now how did you know he was here?"

"For an intelligent witch, you really cocked that up. The scroll, Hermione, the one that nearly scared me shitless, it was written in Severus' hand. Not only that, but the first few lines were written to me. At least, I think it was to me, the translation from Gobbledegook was rather strange. He called me a 'red topped track polisher.' In Gobbledegook, a track polisher is basically...well..."

"Let me put you out of your misery, Bill. It's some sort of whore, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. How did you guess?"

Hermione dutifully explained the many quirks of an insane Severus Snape while they waited for the boys to return. All the while, she mentally kicked herself for not thinking about the scroll being in Severus' handwriting. Bill had been a Hogwarts student, just as they all had. There was no possible way that he would have failed to recognize Severus' rather cramped and spiky handwriting, despite the fact that it wasn't written in red ink.

Eventually both Harry and Ron returned. Harry spoke for some time about all that they had learned about Severus. He showed Bill his memory of what Hagrid had overheard in the forest. At the end, he showed Bill exactly what had happened on the tower the night that Albus died.

"You're right, Harry," Bill said after all the explanations were over. "Whatever it was that Severus hit Albus with, it was not the Killing Curse."

"Do you know what it was?" Hermione asked.

"Haven't a clue. It was definitely more than one spell, and I agree with you that the first part looked very much like a strong Disarming Spell. But the spell that made that twisty green light? I haven't ever seen anything like that and I've seen some odd magic in my line of work. But that wasn't the only thing that's strange about what happened on that tower."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all looked very disappointed when Bill said that he had no more knowledge of the strange spell than they did, but they perked up again when Bill made his last statement.

"What else was strange, Bill?" Ron asked, sitting on the edge of the sofa in anticipation.

"Albus was strange. He was awfully weak, maybe even dying. Helpless as he was, when Draco rushed out and cast his Disarming Spell, Albus didn't try to protect himself. What he did do was to incapacitate the sole ally that could have protected him." Turning to Harry, he continued, "He immobilized you, right? That's what you told the Order after it happened."

"Yes. I still had on my invisibility cloak. Albus immobilized me, and though I could see and hear what happened next, I couldn't do anything about it. I always thought that he had been trying to protect me."

"I don't think so, Harry. You were a blooded duelist by that time, and Albus knew it. You were invisible. Draco didn't even know that you were there. You could have stopped him easily, and then you and Dumbledore would have had a few moments to sort out what to do next. No, I don't think he was protecting you, I think he was keeping you from interfering."

"It was a *setup*?" Harry said, his voice cracking a bit on the last word. "You're telling me that Albus purposely made sure that I was taken out of the equation so that I couldn't do anything to protect him?"

"Think about it, Harry," Bill said calmly. "Think about everything you ever knew about Albus Dumbledore. Taking that into account, what do you think?"

Hermione watched as Harry got up from the sofa and paced slowly back and forth before the hearth. One of his hands came up to absentmindedly rub at his scar as he thought things through. After a few laps over the hearth rug, he sat back down on the sofa with a sigh.

"You're right," he said simply. "Albus set me up. But why?"

"I don't know, Harry," Bill answered gravely. "I just don't know."

Goblin Magic

Chapter 23 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: As always, thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave me a review. I read every single one and I cherish them.

It may be a couple of weeks until my next update, as my work is once again being a complete bear. But I'll keep writing as much as I can!

Big thanks to alert reader and canon-goddess SouthernWitch69, for finding some words that I forgot to cap. You rock, Sun! If anyone sees an oopsie and wants to join the ranks of the alert readers, please email me at plaidpooka@yahoo.com. You can certainly leave such things in the reviews, but I prefer emails because I will get to them faster. Some times it takes me awhile to get through the reviews.

Huge thanks to my lovely and extremely talented betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. I don't know how I got so lucky as to be working with not one, but two of the best betas in the business. They rock!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

And still I'm standing here

I'm awaiting this grand transition

I'm a fool in search of wisdom

And I'm on the road to madness

Yes, I'm on the road to madness

-Queensryche

"In any event," Bill said cheerfully, "you needn't use any memory charms on me to keep your secret. It looks as if Severus was a pawn in one of Albus' games, so I can't blame him for what happened. I'm glad that you're taking care of him. From the looks of his Patronus, I imagine that he takes some looking after."

"He does," Ron said with a sigh. "It's really strange having him around. Sometimes he seems nearly his old self, but he won't eat or sleep unless you make him, and if something sets him off, he throws a tantrum like a six foot tall child."

"Hermione's told me a bit about that. It's a shame that we can't take him to St. Mungo's, but they'd have the Aurors in before you could say Azkaban."

"Enough about Severus," Hermione said a tad sharply. The thought of Severus, Aurors, and Azkaban was enough to make her want to change the subject. "What about that scroll, Bill? And what does it have to do with the vault that you showed to me?"

"Fetch the scroll that nearly gave me a heart attack, and I'll fill the boys in about the vault."

While Hermione retrieved the scroll from her bag, Bill described the vault that he'd wanted Hermione to see.

"I know that vault!" Harry said excitedly. "That's the one that the stone was in! It was Albus' vault, wasn't it?"

"That wasn't Albus' personal vault, although he had one just as fancy. That's a Hogwarts vault, made available to the headmaster and anyone he sees fit to give permission to access it."

"Why did you want me to see it?" Hermione asked.

"That's a long story," Bill said, taking the scroll from Hermione. Unrolling the scroll, he glanced over the cramped writing and Hermione saw that he once again went rather pale. "It's a long story, and it begins with this scroll. This is goblin magic, and it's a type of magic that they have kept carefully hidden from the wizarding world. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement would classify it as Dark Arts in a heartbeat."

"Is it Dark Arts?" Ron asked.

"I don't know...it's like comparing apples to oranges...it isn't anything like our way of thinking at all. The goblins consider it just, not dark, but it's pretty grim all the same. They don't handle justice the way that wizards do. They are a painfully fair-minded people, but they're very Old Testament--eye for an eye and all of that rubbish. They are fair, but they are not merciful."

"If the Ministry would classify it as dark, why haven't they done anything about it?" Harry asked, puzzled. "Can the goblins truly keep it that secret? After all, we know at least two wizards who know about it, you and Severus."

"You know, I was very puzzled that Severus had any knowledge about what's written on that scroll. But if Albus sent him looking for the cup, it makes sense that he'd be looking for a way to destroy it as well. So, yes, Severus and I know about this magic, and I expect that there are a handful of others who know of it as well," Bill said. "Personally, I wouldn't dream of talking to anyone about it. I fancy my skin too fondly for that."

"Surely the goblins wouldn't kill you!" Hermione said, appalled at the idea.

"They keep this magic secret, Hermione. I think that they'd kill anyone who threatened that secret. That's why I was so nervous when you brought that damned scroll right into Gringotts. There is one hell of a lot that I admire about the goblins, but I wouldn't dare believe that my association with them would protect me if they found me with that scroll. They are a hard and sometimes rather nasty people, and they would do whatever they deem necessary to keep their people, their traditions, and their magic safe. The goblin wars were no picnic. In the end, the only way that the Ministry could deal with them effectively at all was to offer them a great deal of autonomy. Goblins may be under Ministry rule on the surface, but the truth is that they govern themselves. If a goblin commits a crime in the wizarding world, the Aurors don't take them to Azkaban, they give the criminal to the goblins to deal with."

"And what happens to them?" Ron asked.

"It depends on the crime," Bill said, pausing to take a long drink of his ale. "They have their own prison, and some goblins spend time on the wrong side of the bars. They value money very highly, and some wrongdoers are made to give up part or all of their wealth to pay fines. But some goblins, the ones that do the worst crimes, are never seen again."

"They kill them?" Hermione asked with a visible shudder.

"Worse than that, in my opinion. Oh, they end up dead, no doubt about that. But they aren't quite free. That's what that scroll is about. It's got a goblin soul magic spell on it."

"Soul magic!" Hermione said, wide-eyed with excitement. "That must be why Severus gave it to me in the first place. He said that we can't destroy the cup until we separate the soul from it."

"Sensible," Bill said, nodding his head. "The soul gives the cup too much power. Take the soul out, and it's just a cup. A magical cup, certainly, but not indestructible."

"But what is this soul magic? And what does it have to do with the Hogwarts vault?" Hermione asked.

"You noticed that vault seven hundred and thirteen has no key...no visible means of entry?"

"Yes, of course. Swarf touched it to open it, and he said that only a goblin could do so."

"Too true. That door recognizes a goblin's touch, and they've made it even more specific than that. Voldemort broke into that vault by using the Imperius Curse on a goblin and forcing him to touch the door. Now, the door only will open for specific goblins, ones who have proven themselves able to throw the Imperius off."

"That must be one complicated ward," Harry said with admiration.

"It isn't a ward at all," Bill responded. "It's too complex a set of ideas for a ward to handle. Even when the door recognized all goblins, it wasn't a ward that did that...it was a goblin."

"A goblin!" squeaked Ron. "What did they do, transfigure one into a door?"

"I didn't think that you could transfigure magical beings into inanimate objects," Hermione mused. "How did the goblins manage that?"

"They didn't transfigure a goblin," Bill said and then paused again to drain the last of the ale from his bottle. "They had a criminal, one who had done something they considered unforgivable. They removed his soul from his body and placed it in the door. That door is animate. It is a living, thinking door that has the consciousness of the goblin soul that resides within it. They can give the door all sorts of complicated instruction and it will comprehend anything that a live goblin would be capable of understanding."

"That's horrible!" Ron nearly shouted. "Can you imagine it? Being trapped in a door, day after day. It's enough to drive a person batty!"

"I told you that it was grim," Bill said simply.

"Hold on a minute," Harry said. "You said that this was the soul of a goblin that had done something terrible--something bad enough that they couldn't forgive it. How can they trust such a person to guard anything? It seems to me that a criminal like that would be more likely to cause trouble than to do what the very people that turned him into a door wanted him to do."

"Ah, but that's the trickiest part of all," Bill said. "You see, if the animate vaults behave for a period of time that is decided in their trial, then the goblins will release their souls when their debt is paid. The soul is freed to move on to the goblin's idea of the hereafter, and according to goblin tradition, that soul is free and blameless in the goblin afterlife because it has paid its debt in full. Animate vaults who misbehave will have their souls moved to some worthless trinket where they will be trapped for all eternity."

"Nasty piece of work," muttered Harry.

"It's Machiavellian," Bill agreed. "I told you that while I do admire a lot about the goblins, they are a pretty nasty lot. I try not to judge them, because their ways are not our ways, but I'd rather face a pack of rabid werewolves than get on the wrong side of the goblins."

"So, the vault that we visited has a goblin soul trapped in it, and they used goblin soul magic to accomplish that," Hermione summed up. "What's on that scroll then?"

"I thought that you would have guessed by now, Hermione," Bill said, giving the scroll in his hands another look. "I have no idea where Severus got this, but it's the goblin's soul release spell."

"He was living with Voldemort after he left Hogwarts," Harry said. "We've heard that Voldemort gave him access to his books."

"That explains it then," Bill said. "It's almost a sure bet that Voldemort is one of the few wizards that know about goblin soul magic. The way he tried to break into that vault suggests that he knew what he was about."

"So what do we do with it?" Hermione asked, peering at the scroll with obvious unease. "Can you show me how to destroy the cup, Bill?"

"No, that's not a good idea. I'd have to teach you Gobbledegook, to start with. Smart as you are, that could take years. I think that I'd better handle this spell myself. I've never tried this sort of magic before," he said as he read over the scroll, "but it seems pretty straight forward. Only one thing worries me. When I release the soul, what do we do with it?"

"Severus told me that we should just let it go," Hermione explained. "He said that without an object to anchor it, it would be drawn back to Voldemort himself."

"Is that wise?" Ron yelled. "Won't that make him stronger?"

"Does he seem weak to you now?" Hermione snapped, not realizing how much she sounded like the man who had told her those very words.

"Hermione's correct," Bill said, chuckling. "Having only a fraction of his soul hasn't affected his power any, though it has obviously affected his humanity. That settles it then. We release his soul, let it fly back to ol' snake eyes, and with any luck at all, he won't even realize that he's regained it."

The discussion over, Harry fetched the cup for Bill. Bill read over the scroll carefully a few times, and then he was ready to begin. Standing in the middle of the library with his wand drawn, Bill began to recite from the scroll. Though he clutched his wand tightly, he made no motions with it. Goblins did not use wands, so no movements were involved.

"Vuhk nahk hkals tu Oghor-hai.

Vuhk thrakat burzum tu Oghor-hai.

Ihkls nels, ihkls ilsvat vuhk.

Ihkls irm vuck hket.

Rehkizirat... vutizirat... vehkazirat... rehkenzirat.

Hke, hkati nels."

Though Bill's voice went on, Hermione stopped trying to pay attention to the words. She'd been considering learning Gobbledegook, but Bill's recitation made her think twice. The language was guttural and harsh, which sounded very ugly to her English ears. In fact, she'd bet that Bill would end up with a very sore throat before he was done reciting that spell.

It seemed that Bill's voice droned on and on, but the spell only took around five minutes to complete. As Bill voiced the last line, a sickly, greenish-gray vapor rose from the cup and hovered for a moment over it. Then it slowly rose to the ceiling where it disappeared from sight.

"Ugh! Filet of Voldemort," Ron muttered, his eyes still trained on the ceiling.

Walking over to Bill, Harry bent down and picked up the cup. "It's harmless now. Do we really need to destroy it?"

"As much as I hate to, I think that we should," Hermione said sadly. "The headmaster told you how Tom Riddle seemed obsessed with founder objects. If he finds out that we have Hufflepuff's cup, he won't rest until he recovers it."

"You're right, Hermione," Harry agreed. "I hate to destroy it, but I suppose it's for the best."

Reluctantly, Harry returned the cup to the floor. Drawing his wand, he paused for only a moment.

"Deletum!" Harry said sharply.

The cup on the floor seemed to waver in their sight for a moment. Then, with a flash of yellow light, it was gone. The destruction of the Horcrux was a cause for celebration, and they all grinned and laughed as Ron passed out more bottles of ale.

"What will you three do now?" Bill asked, after they had settled down a bit.

"Well, with the cup destroyed, that leaves two Horcruxes to go. We're positive that Nagini is one, and Hermione says that all we have to do about her is kill her to destroy that Horcrux. That only leaves one unaccounted for. It will be hard to discover, but I can't help but think that we're much closer to our goal now that the cup is destroyed."

"And the summer is only half passed," Bill said with a teasing grin. "Why, you might get Voldemort sorted just in time to head back to Hogwarts for your final year."

"I don't think we'll be that lucky," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Lucky? Are you mad?" groused Ron. "I like being out of school. I don't care if we ever go back!"

"You may very well get your wish," said Hermione, "and then where will you be? It's a lot easier to get a job if you've finished school."

"Fred and George do all right," Ron replied smugly. "I expect that I'll manage just fine."

"You know, Hermione," Bill said thoughtfully, "Swarf was quite taken with you. If you wanted to go into curse breaking, I imagine that he would take you on anytime. He wouldn't care if you finished school or not. They prefer to get curse breakers young and then train them at Gringotts."

"Wasn't that just a story you made up to get Swarf to take us on a tour of the vaults?"

"It was, but it's worth thinking about all the same. You would make a fine curse breaker, in my opinion."

Later, Hermione blamed herself for what happened next. She was the sensible one. She was the one that should have been paying attention. Unfortunately, she was daydreaming about what it would be like to be a curse breaker like Bill. She was daydreaming, the boys were talking and laughing with Bill, and no one was paying any attention at all to the clock.

At precisely nine o'clock, the small fire in the hearth turned emerald green and Remus came tumbling out of it. Remus had just enough time to look at Bill with an expression of appalled surprise before the fire turned green again. At that point, several things happened almost simultaneously. Draco arrived, his smile of welcome fading from his face as he saw Bill Weasley drawing his wand. Remus lunged at Bill, trying to knock his wand arm up as Harry, wand already drawn, stepped in front of Draco to block Bill's shot.

In an astonishing demonstration of control, Bill managed to keep from voicing the curse that was already on the tip of his tongue. His eyes darted quickly around the room as he reassessed the situation. Still standing in front of Draco, Harry had his wand pointed at Bill's chest. Hermione and Ron also had their wands drawn, but they didn't seem to know what to do with them. Having reached Bill, Remus grasped Bill's wand arm firmly and tried to get Bill to lower his wand.

"Release me, Remus," Bill said softly.

"Bill, you don't understand the situation," Remus said calmly but insistently. "You've got to give us a chance to explain what's going on before you go hexing anyone willy-nilly."

"I think," began Bill, roughly shaking Remus' hand off of his arm, "that Draco Malfoy is the source responsible for all of that pertinent information you've been giving the Order. You lot might have given me some warning instead of shocking the hell out of me."

"You were supposed to be gone by now," Hermione said rather lamely.

"Damn it, Bill!" Ron said. "I know you're too fucking clever by half, but how did you figure that out so quickly?"

"Malfoy arrived practically on Remus' heels," Bill said, putting his wand away. "It seemed obvious once I had a moment to think about it."

"May I come out from behind Harry now?" Draco asked cheerfully. "I think that the eldest Weatherby may have scared the pants off of me." When Harry stepped out of the way, Draco stuck one hand into his trousers and felt around. "No," he said cheekily, "they're still there."

"Draco," Bill said pleasantly, coming forward to shake the blond wizard's hand. "Sorry about almost hexing you."

"As if you could! If I hadn't been worried about hitting my unasked for protector, I'd have knocked you on your arse!" Draco said. His tone may have been a bit snide, but his handshake was firm and friendly.

More bottles of ale were passed out, and everyone drank and chatted as they calmed down. Eventually, Draco headed for the lab in the basement to visit Severus, and Harry explained to Remus about using the Pensieve to look at the odd spell that Severus used on the tower.

Harry hadn't progressed very far in that explanation when Draco ran back into the room.

"It's Severus," Draco said frantically. "He's gone!"

Endnote: Those of you familiar with Tolkien's work may have recognized the words of Bill's spell. I'm certain that I have not done justice to Tolkien's goblin language, but I could not resist a small homage to the father of fantasy.

The Missing Madman

Chapter 24 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: As always, gigantic hugs to everyone who has left a review. I haven't gotten them all answered yet, because my work has been so busy, but I promise I will read and answer every one as soon as I get a chance. I just love my reviewers!

Special thanks to alert reader, Bambu, who noticed that I misspelled "Imperius" in the last chapter. You rock! Anyone who notices a typo, don't be shy! Send me an email at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com so that I can get it tidied up right away. I love my alert readers!

Speaking of alert readers, my biggest thanks to my fantabulous betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. I don't know what I'd do without them. You have to have sharp eyes indeed to catch the very few of my oopsies that these two ladies miss. They are the best betas in the fandom, in my not so humble opinion, and I feel very lucky to be

working with them both.

Big things happening in this chapter. Great big things, and I hope that you get a kick out of it. There might be a slight pause before my next update, as I've been too busy to get the next chapter started, but I should be able to get to it soon.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Sometimes it's to your advantage for people to think you're crazy.

-Thelonious Monk 1917-1982

"What do you mean he's missing?" Hermione asked rather fiercely. "He never leaves the house!"

"Well, he's left it now," Draco snapped back. Then, running a hand roughly through his hair, he continued more calmly. "When I got to the lab, the only thing there was that smeggy excuse for a house-elf. I asked it where Severus was, and it laughed at me. It said that Severus was gone and I'd never find him."

"Kreacher lies," Ron said confidently. "Hermione's right...Severus never leaves the house. Sometimes he hides, though, if he doesn't want to take a shower or be put to bed."

"I'll get to the bottom of it," Harry said simply.

A few minutes of Harry interrogating Kreacher did nothing to make anyone feel at ease. Kreacher was forced to tell his master the truth--if Harry demanded it--and it was clear that Severus had indeed left Grimmauld Place. Unfortunately, no matter how Harry threatened Kreacher, the wily old house-elf refused to give any information on where Severus might have gone to. While Harry grilled the house-elf, Hermione sat miserably on the sofa. It was obvious that she was frightened by Severus' disappearance. Hermione's head hung down, her eyes were closed, and she had clasped her hands tightly in her lap to keep them from shaking.

"Forget it," Draco said, when it became clear that Kreacher was going to be of no assistance. Crossing to where Hermione sat, he crouched on the floor in front of her. Taking her hands in his, he pried them apart and held them tightly in his own. "Hermione," he said softly, "I know that you are upset--so am I--but I need you to pay attention for a moment."

It seemed as if she was coming back to the library from a great distance, but Hermione managed to raise her head and look Draco in the eyes.

"The bracelet," Draco said in that same soft but firm voice. "Severus' tracking bracelet. Is he still wearing it?"

Her eyes widening in surprise, Hermione mentally cursed herself for three kinds of fool. How could she have forgotten? They had never needed to worry about Severus leaving the house until now. Hermione had completely forgotten that the silver band that Severus wore on his left wrist was no ordinary piece of jewelry.

"He's still wearing it!" she exclaimed. "He always wears it!"

"Thank Merlin," Draco murmured with a relieved smile. Releasing Hermione's hands, he stood and drew his wand. With an intricate sweep of his arm, a glowing circle appeared in the air before him. Within the circle was a topographical map. Harry, Ron, and Bill gathered on one side to peer at the map, while Remus joined Draco and Hermione on the other side.

"Damn," Draco muttered. "It's not telling us much. It shows a fairly small area around Severus, but it will pick up things like street names. He's not near any streets at the moment."

The map depicted a small area of what looked to be slightly uneven terrain. Severus was standing near a small grey rectangle. There was another grey shape to the northeast, and an uneven grey line on the south border of the circle.

"That's a manmade structure," Draco explained, pointing to the small rectangle. "But it's too small to be a building. This structure up here could be a cottage or something. And the line at the bottom could be anything. A wall, or a larger building...it's hard to tell."

"How will we ever find him?" asked Ron. "That could be anything! That could be my parent's house for all I know, and I wouldn't recognize it from this!"

In an oddly quiet voice, Harry said, "I recognize it...I know where he is."

Ignoring the ensuing clamor of questions, Harry stepped around the floating map and stood next to Draco. His head was cocked slightly to the side, and he had a faraway look in his eyes. Putting a hand on Draco's shoulder, he spoke again. "I know this is going to sound odd, but I need to ask you something. You once told me that Severus was no longer an Occlumens. You said that it was nothing to worry about because anyone who tried Legilimency on him would only see one thing, and it was harmless. What did you see, Draco?"

Shaking Harry's hand off of his shoulder, Draco's eyes narrowed in anger as he looked at Harry. "You're wasting time! If you know where he is, let's go and get him!"

"Please," Harry began calmly, "humor me. I promise you that it's important."

"It was a stupid memory," Draco snapped. "It was a little bit of meadow near Hogwarts. It was summertime...there were a lot of flowers...and butterflies seemed to fill the air."

"Butterflies!" Hermione cried, her eyes widening in alarm. Leaning towards the map, she studied it intently. "Harry, you're right," she said rather breathlessly. "That's where he is."

"Where?" Bill asked.

"Hogwarts," Harry said simply. "Severus has gone to Hogwarts." Lifting one hand, he traced the grey shapes with a finger, first the shape in the northeast, then the line in the south, and lastly, the small structure in the middle. "That's Hagrid's hut. This line is the north face of the castle. And this...this is Albus' tomb."

"We must go!" Hermione said. "If they find him there, he'll get hurt!"

As she started to go to the door, Harry called her back. It had taken a lot of years, but Harry had finally learned a bit about rushing into a situation.

"Hermione, we need to know what we're getting into," he said sensibly. "Wait a moment while I--"

"Wait!" she yelled. "There's no time! If the Hogwarts staff finds him there, he'll be hexed first and then carted off to the Aurors!"

"Please, Hermione!" Harry said firmly. "Wait just one moment while I send Phineas to check on the situation!"

Luckily, Phineas Nigellus was in his Grimmauld Place portrait that night. It took Harry no time at all to convince him to visit his portrait in Minerva's office and find out if anything was amiss. When Phineas returned, he did not bear good news.

"It's bad," he said flatly. "There was quite a ruckus amongst the portraits when I arrived. Minerva had been in her office recently, but then she saw something through the

window that agitated her. The portraits said that she fire-called Filius and then ran out of the room in a rage."

"We'd better go, then," Harry said, "and go quickly. Draco, get out of here. Send me your Patronus later and I'll tell you what happened."

Draco's lips were pressed in a tight line and there was sorrow in his eyes, but he knew that he could not afford to be caught at Hogwarts. "Find him," he said shortly. Striding to the Floo, he disappeared from the house in a flash of green fire.

"Remus, Bill," Harry said, turning towards the two men, "What we are about to do is bound to get us into trouble. If you don't want to risk it, I'm sure that Ron, Hermione, and I can handle it."

"I'm coming," Remus said simply. His tone of voice was soft, but it brooked no argument.

"And me as well," Bill added. "Severus is a friend."

"All right," Harry said. "Hermione, I don't suppose you have a plan knocking around in that head of yours?"

"We'll have to Apparate to the gates. We'll be able to see Dumbledore's tomb from there, so we can get a glimpse of what we're getting into. We don't want to hurt anyone-- if we have to fight, try to stun them. If Hagrid is there, we'll have to try to talk to him. He's very resistant to magic."

"Watch out for Filius," Bill added. "He's a much better duelist than one might imagine, and his stature makes him a difficult target."

"Will it really come to that?" asked a pale Ron. "Will we have to fight our own people?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry said emphatically. "Let's move!"

As they left, the front door slammed, startling a furious but oddly silent portrait of Walburga Black. The house at Grimmauld Place was suddenly as still as a tomb.

One moment Hermione was standing on Harry's doorstep, the next she was standing before the gates of Hogwarts. Shaking off the slightly nauseated feeling that Apparation always left her with, Hermione strode forward until she could see Dumbledore's monument. The others followed her so quickly that when she abruptly stopped, gaping in astonishment, they nearly ran her over. Then they too stared at the scene laid out before them.

Severus was at Dumbledore's tomb, but from this distance it was impossible to see what he was up to. What they could see was a ward that surrounded him like a dome. Though the ward was easy to see through, its energy shimmered slightly in the night, making its shape easily apparent. It also lit the ground beneath it, which made it easy to see Severus crouching by the marble monument.

Outside the dome of shimmering light, Minerva, Filius, and Hagrid were gathered. Hagrid bodily pushed at the ward, but it was clear that he could not pass it. Filius stood watching Minerva as if he was uncertain of what to do. Minerva was viciously attacking the ward with her wand. Each spell she aimed at it lit the ward with angry sparks that spread out over the dome and dissipated harmlessly.

"They can't get in," Hermione whispered. "That's good for us, but we'll still have to do some fast talking to get Severus away from here. Minerva doesn't look like she's going to give up for anything. Do you think the ward will hold?"

Harry's previous study of wards was about to pay off. "If it were going to collapse," Harry said softly, "it already would have. Hagrid is the strongest person I know...if he can't push through it, then it isn't possible. See how Minerva's spells dissipate? If I'm not mistaken, she's actually making it stronger by throwing energy at it. She won't break the ward that way."

"Merlin," Ron whispered. "Is Severus trying to do what I think he is? Is he trying to raise Albus from the dead?"

"I certainly hope not," Remus said quietly. "Wizards who try to animate the dead end up raising soulless zombies. Albus would never want that done to him."

"But Severus knows goblin soul magic," Bill added, keeping his voice as low as the others. "Maybe he didn't learn it just for the cup. Is what I'm thinking even possible?"

"I think it is," Harry said calmly. "And I think this is what Albus set up. It all makes sense! Albus would never have used a Horcrux because he would have had to do some horrible atrocity to split his soul. But if he knew a spell that would simply pluck his soul from his body..."

"He would have used it," Hermione finished. "It does make sense, and it explains why Dumbledore kept you from interfering on the tower that night. I don't know if Severus will be successful or not, but let's give him every chance. We need to go down there and try to talk some sense into Minerva."

"Oh, that will be fun," Ron groused as they began to make their way towards the tomb. "The way Minerva is going at that ward, it will be like trying to talk some sense into a banshee."

When Minerva looked up and saw the group of people approaching her, she looked comically relieved to see them. Bill and Remus went straight to her and started trying to calm the frazzled witch down. Though Remus--with his soft voice and calming demeanor--tried his best, it didn't go at all well.

"What do you mean I should put my wand away," she shouted. "That traitor is in there, and he's going to do something horrible to Albus' remains...I know it! I'm not about to stand here and let him get away with it! I'll hex that bastard's balls off and feed them to the squid before I let him touch Albus!"

"Now, Minerva," Remus said, patting her arm gently, "you know that there is nothing Severus can do that would hurt Albus now. Try to calm down."

"Calm down! I'm not going to calmly let that blackguard vandalize Albus' remains. It's unthinkable! It's blasphemous!"

There was one point that had confused Hermione since she first arrived and saw Severus at Dumbledore's tomb. Now seemed a good time to ask and perhaps her question would distract Minerva.

"Minerva," she began, keeping her tone of voice as pleasant as she could manage under the circumstances, "I'm puzzled. During the memorial service, it looked as if Professor Dumbledore's body was covered in fire before the marble top of the tomb appeared. Wasn't he cremated?"

"No," Minerva said, her voice trembling slightly. "Albus always said that he wanted to be cremated, but last year he changed his wishes. He told me..." Here, Minerva's voice broke down completely and she searched briefly for a handkerchief to wipe at her eyes.

"Albus said that if he fell while Voldemort was still alive," Filius began, smoothly taking the duty of explaining away from the distraught headmistress, "he didn't want to be cremated at all. He asked us to build a memorial right on Hogwarts grounds and to put him inside with a stasis charm on his body. He said that it would be good for morale, if everyone thought that he was still here in some way...watching over the place. I added that fire charm to the one that conjured the top of his monument. It was only pixie fire, quite harmless...but I wanted to send him out in style."

At the Charms professor's explanation, Remus, Bill, and Hermione exchanged a knowing look.

"Morale my arse," Bill whispered in Hermione's ear. "He wanted his body to stay in good shape, but it wasn't for morale."

Hermione nodded her agreement, but then shifted her attention to Minerva, who was shouting again.

"Then this bloody murderer shows up! He means Albus' tomb some mischief, no doubt. But he's a clever bastard. He raised this ward so that I couldn't stop him!"

"This isn't Severus' ward," Harry said, interrupting Minerva's tirade. During the whole conversation, Harry had been standing near the ward, his palms raised to it as he studied it carefully.

"What do yeh mean it isn't Severus'?" Hagrid asked. "It's never been here 'afore. I was jus' returning from the forest tonight when I saw Severus hurrying over ter the Professor's tomb. Tha ward sprung up as soon as he passed the edge of it. I never saw the like."

"I'm certain that Severus triggered it," Harry explained, "but it isn't his ward. This ward has Albus' signature. And, as capable of a wizard as Severus is, I think that only Albus could have constructed a ward of this magnitude on Hogwarts grounds." Turning to Minerva, Harry spoke to her, his voice soft and kind. "There's a great deal about this situation that you don't know, Minerva, and I don't think now is the time to go into it. I don't know if what Severus is trying to do is going to work or not, but I can promise you that he means no harm to Albus' body. I'm asking you to put your wand away and trust me for a little while."

"You seem awfully free with the bastard's given name," Minerva said, staring at Harry through narrowed eyes.

"I should be. He's been living at Grimmauld Place for the past couple of months." As Minerva, Filius, and Hagrid stared at Harry in shock, he continued. "Please, Minerva, trust me. Put away your wand and let's see what happens, yeah? It's not as if Severus is going anywhere, after all. He seems quite busy."

Turning to look through the shimmering ward, Hermione saw that Severus had indeed been busy. The top of the white marble tomb had disappeared, and so had the spangled purple cloth that had covered Dumbledore's body. Albus' body lay on a table, clad in a simple white tunic. It was obvious that the body had indeed been placed in a stasis charm; it looked no different than the night he had died. Next to the table that held Dumbledore, Severus had conjured a second table. Its top was crowded with objects. There were several scrolls, a large basin, a jug, and assorted bottles and vials.

Standing over Albus' body, his face screwed up into a rather hideous expression of concentration, Severus ran his wand over various parts of Albus. He seemed to be murmuring the same phrase over and over, but he spoke so softly that Hermione couldn't quite make it out.

"What's he saying?" Ron asked a second before Hermione could voice the question herself.

"I'm not quite certain, but it sounds like a Bone Mending Charm," Filius said. "Now why in the world would he be doing that?"

"I'd tell you," Harry said with a sigh, "but I rather doubt that you'd believe me."

The group of people outside the ward watched in stunned silence as Severus finished with the Bone Mending Charm and reached for one of the scrolls. Hermione's heart went out to the poor man as she watched him shake his head and throw the scroll to the ground. Falling to his knees, Severus put his head in his hands and rocked for a moment, like an upset child. Severus' magic was still strong, but in his present state it didn't come easy. No one knew this better than Hermione. She had watched him struggle over potions that would have been simple for him before he went mad. How would he ever manage what he was trying to do now?

Leaning against the ward with silent tears running down her cheeks, Hermione said a simple prayer to whatever gods happened to be listening. Then, watching Severus with eyes full of love and concern, she settled in to wait.

Paying the Price

Chapter 25 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: First off, a very happy new year to you all! I hope that this year is a hum dinger for all of you. You know, I've been writing for about three years now, I think, and it still amazes me that I write this story and then total strangers take time out of their busy days and read it. Thank you for that, thank you for reading. And big thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave me a review. I'm a little behind in responding, but I'll do my best to get caught up.

Now for the alert reader notices...there were no alert reader notices for last chapter! :D My betas were far too clever for you! However, as always, if you notice an oopsie please feel free to email me at plaidpooka@yahoo.com, so that I can get it tidied up. I love my alert readers!

I can't let this New Year pass without taking the time for a special thank you to my fantabulous betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. Editing is a difficult job that folks normally get paid for, yet these women beta read for me out of the kindness of their hearts. Heaven knows that I couldn't afford to pay them! They are fabulous, kind, intelligent women who have very busy lives of their own, yet they continually make the time to give me a hand. You ladies mean the world to me, and I can't thank you enough. You rock!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

"Madness takes its toll."

-Richard O'Brien 1942-

Eventually, Severus stood up and retrieved the scroll that he'd thrown to the ground. Giving it an almost comically exaggerated scowl, he replaced it on the table and proceeded to ignore it. Turning his attention to the other objects on the table, he touched each one in turn before picking up two of the small vials. Returning to Albus' body, he opened the dead man's mouth and tipped the contents of both vials between the pale lips.

"Will that work?" Ron asked, his voice a nervous whisper. "A dead man can't swallow a potion, can he?"

"Potions can be spelled to absorb automatically," Hermione whispered back. "That's what they do for unconscious patients...so that they won't choke."

The group outside the ward lapsed back into stunned silence as they watched Severus continue. The first two vials were closely followed by two larger bottles, the dead wizard making no protest as the contents were poured into his slack mouth.

Once again, Severus seemed pitifully confused. Ignoring the small crowd outside of the shimmering ward, he paced back and forth fitfully. As he paced, he muttered softly to himself. Try as she might, Hermione couldn't understand a word. Every time he turned in her general direction, Hermione tried to catch his eye. Indeed, she stared at him so intently that she was surprised he couldn't feel the weight of it. She would be happy to help him, if he would only let her. Unfortunately, he didn't seem aware that she

was even present. He ignored all of them as if they didn't exist.

The muttering and pacing stopped, and Severus returned to the table. Once again he picked up the scroll that had angered him before, and then tossed it disdainfully back onto the table. Peering intently at the objects remaining on the table, Severus hesitantly reached towards the large basin. As if making a sudden decision, he snatched the basin from the table and then took up the large jug in his other hand. Returning to Albus' body, he juggled the objects for an awkward moment. Severus set the jug on the ground near his feet with a melodramatic sigh. Now that he had a free hand, he set the basin near Albus' side. Severus raised Albus' withered, black hand and placed it into the basin.

Retrieving the jug, Severus unstopped it, and slowly began to pour a glistening, gold-flecked liquid over Albus' ruined hand. When the jug was empty, Severus threw it negligently over his shoulder, where it fell to the ground, breaking into pieces with a loud crackle of sound. Severus never even flinched. He had eyes only for the basin and for the next twenty minutes, he stared into it intensely. In fact, Severus stared into the basin for so long a time that Hermione feared he had lost track of what he was trying to do. He didn't move, he didn't speak, he simply gazed into the basin.

Hermione was distracted for a moment by a sudden tingling in her hands. At first, she was worried that the ward was causing her some harm. Chagrined, she realized that she had been leaning so hard against the ward that her hands had begun to fall asleep. Shaking her hands to try to stem the unpleasant pins-and-needles feeling, she looked back at Severus.

He had moved at last. The basin that Severus had been staring into was now abandoned on the ground. Once again Severus stood at the table, glaring fiercely at the scroll. Picking the scroll up, he crumpled it in a clenched fist and began to pace fretfully. After what seemed to Hermione like another small eternity of pacing, Severus strode back to the table which held Dumbledore's body, the parchment still gripped in a white-knuckled hand.

Placing the rumpled scroll on Albus' unmoving chest, Severus painstakingly smoothed the wrinkled parchment. When it had achieved some semblance of flatness, Severus stood reading it for a long time, his features furrowed in concentration. At last he seemed satisfied, and Severus climbed up onto the table with Albus' body. On his hands and knees, straddling Dumbledore's body like some strange parody of a lover, Severus lowered his head until it was only a few inches away from the parchment on Albus' chest and began to read aloud.

The sounds that poured from Severus' mouth were familiar to Hermione, even if the language was not. The similarity between the spell that Bill had used to help destroy the cup and the one that Severus now intoned was too close to miss, even by a listener like Hermione, who spoke no Gobbledegook. Turning her attention to Bill, Hermione silently questioned him with her eyes. His nod of the head let her know that she was not mistaken. Severus was using goblin soul magic to try to raise Albus from the dead.

This spell took far longer than Bill's had, and Severus paused again and again in his reading. Still frustrated by her helplessness, Hermione could do nothing to aid Severus except pray for his success. The crowd that stood watching outside the shimmering ward was unnaturally silent. No one whispered. No one moved. They were so still that an observer might have thought they'd all been magically immobilized.

The silence was broken by a muted gasp when a green light began to seep from Severus' body. It clung to him, surrounding his form in writhing bright green as he continued to read the spell. The light seemed reluctant to leave him, and Severus' voice grew louder and harsher as he read. Despite her lack of understanding, it seemed to Hermione that the last few phrases of the spell bespoke a command, so fierce was Severus' tone of voice.

Suddenly, the quiet group outside the ward all flinched as the green light was sucked abruptly into Albus' body. There was a loud concussion of sound, and Severus was bodily thrown from the table. He landed hard on the ground, still on his hands and knees. Visibly shaking, Severus collapsed. He used the last of his failing strength to roll slowly onto his back.

Indeed, Severus looked so lifeless, lying limp on the ground, that Hermione feared he'd given up his own life to try saving another's. Pressing against the ward, Hermione called his name while she fruitlessly beat her fists against the barrier that separated her from her love. When she finally caught sight of his chest moving, it calmed her. His breathing seemed shallow and irregular, but he was still breathing, and that was a comfort.

A movement from the table dragged Hermione's eyes from Severus--Albus was sitting on the table. Looking at what had once been his withered hand, Albus opened and closed his fingers and then waggled them happily as he laughed like a child on Christmas morning. This provoked a murmur of astonishment from the small crowd gathered outside the ward, and Albus began to turn his head towards the sound. It was then that he saw Severus lying on the ground. Taking no more notice of the onlookers than Severus had, Albus swung his legs off of the table and hopped nimbly to the ground. Barefoot, and still clad in the simple white tunic, Albus fairly ran to where Severus lay. His face full of concern, Albus sat next to Severus, and bodily dragged Severus' head and shoulders into his lap.

Fondly stroking Severus' hair and face, Albus called to him. "Severus? Severus, my dear boy. Wake up, Severus...wake up! You've done it, my boy! I don't know how you managed it, but you have!"

Opening his eyes slowly, Severus gazed up at Albus' smiling face as he struggled to speak. When he spoke, his voice was soft and hoarse, but it carried clearly in the quiet night. "Albus," he croaked, "I'm sick to death of being your whore."

"Now, Severus," Albus said, still smiling fondly at the wizard in his lap, "you've said that before, and I'll tell you the same thing now as I did then. You are not that, dear boy...you were never that. But look at you! You've managed the impossible and you look it. Too thin by half, and completely exhausted by the look of you. You need rest and food...and Poppy too, I think."

When Severus muttered that he needed no such thing and tried to get up, Albus was able to hold him in place with one hand.

"Now, dear boy, no protests!" Albus said, leaning down to rest his wrinkled cheek against the top of Severus' head. "You've taken care of me all these many weeks...it's high time that I took care of you for a change. You're weak as a kitten! I'm not about to let you exert yourself further."

Raising his head, Albus looked around himself for the first time since he had awakened. What he saw was a small group of gobsmacked people who stared at him with wide eyes and gaping mouths.

"Why, hello!" he said cheerfully. "What luck! Hagrid, you are just who I wanted to see. Severus is in a sad state, I'm afraid. We need to get him up to see Poppy. Would you be so kind as to carry him up to the castle?"

Hagrid had to wipe a hand roughly over his tear-filled eyes before he could manage a syllable. "Of course, Professor Dumbledore, sir. I'd be happy ta help Sev'rus. But there's this barrier..." His voice trailed off, and Hagrid pushed against the ward in demonstration.

A negligent wave of Albus' hand and the ward vanished. Hagrid wasn't the only one who stumbled forward as the barrier that he'd been pushing against abruptly disappeared. The whole group took a few stumbling steps forward. Hermione had been leaning against the ward so hard that she fell to her knees. Hands reached out to help her back to her feet, and Hermione looked up to see happy grins on both Harry and Ron's faces.

"I can't believe he's alive," Harry murmured. "There he is, right before my eyes, and I just can't believe it."

"Well, all's well that ends well," Ron said. "Now that Albus is back among the living, Severus should be safe enough."

"But he's hurt," Hermione said, gesturing towards the people gathered around Albus. Hagrid was lifting Severus into his strong arms while Remus and Bill helped Albus to his feet. Dangling limply in Hagrid's arms, Severus looked like he had again lost consciousness.

"I think that he's just exhausted, Hermione," Harry reassured her. "I'm certain that he'll be fine. Why don't you go with Hagrid and check on him, if you're worried."

At that point, the three friends were distracted by Minerva. Walking up to Albus, Minerva first slapped the startled man in the face and then shouted at him.

"You horrible, cruel man! How could you treat me so carelessly? Why didn't you tell me..." Her shouting stopped as she suddenly burst into noisy tears.

Wrapping Minerva tightly in his arms, Albus acted as though the slap had never happened as he spoke to her in gentle tones. "Now, my dear, it was very dicey...what we were trying to do. I didn't want to get your hopes up. And I really couldn't tell a soul, dearest, not even you. If even one person had failed to behave as they should at my death, Severus wouldn't have stood a chance. He'd have been killed, love, and then we both would have been lost. Now, now, dear," he said, kissing Minerva's hair, "I would have told you if I could...you must know that. Why don't we all go up to my...I beg your pardon, love, *your* office, and I'll tell you whatever you wish to know."

As the group began to make its slow way towards the door to the castle, Hermione looked ahead to see Hagrid with his burden just disappearing through the door.

"Go on, Hermione!" Ron said. "You won't rest until you've seen him. We'll go to Minerva's office and you can catch up with us there."

After a brief nod of agreement, Hermione left the slow-moving group to hurry across the lawn. On entering the castle, she went immediately to the staircase and climbed to the third floor. When she reached the third floor landing, she heard a commotion coming from the infirmary. Running as fast as she could, she burst into the Hospital Wing.

As she tried to catch her panting breath, a quick look around the wing told Hermione all she needed to know. Severus lay on a cot near the door. It seemed that he was still unconscious. Hagrid had placed himself in between Severus and Poppy. The school nurse didn't look at all like the placid woman that Hermione was used to. Wand drawn, the normally kind woman had a look of angry ferocity on her face as she spoke to Hagrid.

"I will not have that traitorous murderer stinking up my infirmary! Now stand aside, Hagrid, so I can bind him. We'll see how sick the bastard feels when the Aurors get here!"

"Now, Madam Pomfrey," Hagrid began, raising his hands as if to ward off the angry witch, "I told yeh tha yeh didn' understan' the situation. I'm not about to let yeh hurt the lad, so yeh might as well calm yerself."

"And exactly how do you plan to stop me," Poppy hissed. "You don't even have a wand!"

"Luckily, I do," Hermione managed to squeak as she panted for breath. Thanking Merlin for nonverbal magic, Hermione easily disarmed the furious witch.

"Why, Hermione Granger," Poppy exclaimed in astonishment. "Why have you taken my wand? Don't you see who Hagrid's brought here? Don't you understand?"

"It's you who doesn't understand, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said, having finally caught her breath. "And you wouldn't believe me if I tried to tell you. Go fire-call Minerva's office. That will be an eye-opener, to say the least."

"You bet your life that I'll fire-call the headmistress," Poppy hissed. "She won't stand for the likes of *him* being at Hogwarts!" Turning on her heel, Poppy stomped off to her office.

"Are you all right, Hagrid?" Hermione asked worriedly. "She didn't hex you or anything, did she?"

"Nah. She were too busy shoutin' ter do me any harm. As if she could," he finished with a chuckle.

"And Severus? She didn't hurt Severus, did she?" As Hermione spoke, she crossed quickly to Severus' cot. Leaning over him, she fondly brushed his untidy hair off of his face.

"Now don't you worry yourself none, Hermione. Poppy didn't hurt him. Wand or no, I wasn't about ter let her even try. She'd a had ta go through me first, and I make a pretty fair wall."

"That you do, Hagrid," Hermione agreed, looking up to give the huge man a fond smile. "But I wish that woman would hurry back. Severus doesn't seem like he's in any immediate danger, but his breathing is awfully shallow."

"Yer fond of Sev'rus, aren't yeh?"

"Yes, Hagrid. Very much."

Hagrid made no reply to that other than to nod his head as if that fact was perfectly understandable. That made Hermione recall that Hagrid considered Severus a friend. The adults at Hogwarts had always seemed to hold Severus in far higher regard than the students did. When Dumbledore had been thrown from the tower, most of the students had no trouble accepting that Professor Snape had been responsible. The adults, on the other hand, had been frankly incredulous. Only Harry's eye witness testimony had reluctantly convinced them.

Rushing back into the ward even more quickly than she had left it, Poppy had tears in her eyes as she approached the cot where Severus lay. "I'm so sorry! I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. The poor boy!" When she reached Severus, Poppy bent over him to check his pulse and his breathing. Nodding in a satisfied way, she turned to Hermione. "I'll need my wand, Miss Granger."

"Yes, of course," Hermione said. Though she handed the nurse back her wand readily enough, Hermione kept her own wand in her hand.

"You needn't worry, dear. I'm not about to hurt the poor boy. Albus said that he's been through hell since he left Hogwarts. Just imagine! Killing a man to save his life! I still can't believe it!"

Poppy's wand was busy as she prattled away. It didn't take long for her to make a diagnosis.

"Well, there isn't much wrong with him, thank Merlin for that. He has a sprained ankle...that's easy enough to fix. Other than that, he's malnourished and completely exhausted. I'm going to give him a sleeping draught...he needs rest more than anything else. I have a salve for his ankle and while he's sleeping I'll mix some nutritional potions for him. A few days of rest and some proper food and he'll be himself again."

Hermione was astonished to find her eyes filling with relieved tears. Blushing in embarrassment, she wiped furtively at her eyes. Relieved or not, she didn't want to make a spectacle of herself in front of Severus' peers. Despite Hermione's best effort to put a brave face on, Poppy had been a school nurse for many years and was the very best of that breed. Leaving her patient for the moment, Poppy went to Hermione and put a hand gently on her arm.

"He'll be just fine, Hermione," she said kindly. "Don't fret now...he's going to be absolutely fine."

The nurse's kind words completely crumbled Hermione's attempt to be brave about it all, and she suddenly found herself wrapped tightly in Poppy's arms as she cried brokenly.

"There, there, child," Poppy said softly, rubbing a hand up and down Hermione's back comfortingly. "You just let it out. I imagine that you're rather like me, saving up your tears when there's work to be done and no time for crying, and then finding that they just burst right out of you once all is well."

"Yes," Hermione managed, leaning away from the kind woman's embrace and giving her a hesitant smile. "Severus has been living with us at Harry's house for some time, and I've been terribly worried about him. Are you certain he'll be all right?"

"Positively," Poppy said with a firm nod of her head. "A little rest and care and he'll be right as rain."

"Is there anything that I can do to help? I'd be happy to."

"That's quite all right, dear," Poppy replied. "Hagrid can help me keep an eye on him tonight. Albus told me to send you up to Minerva's office once I had looked Severus over. He said that they'd all be waiting to see how Severus was doing. You run along, and then you'd best get some rest yourself, young lady. You look nearly as done in as poor Severus."

Though Hermione hated to leave Severus, she did want to hear what Professor Dumbledore had to say. Torn, she shifted nervously from foot to foot as she hesitated.

"Run along, dear," Poppy said. "Come back in the morning if it will make you feel better. I'm giving him a strong sleeping draught, so he wouldn't know you were here, even if you stayed."

Her decision made, Hermione paused only long enough to go to Severus and brush her fingers softly through his hair. Though she desperately wanted to lean down and give him a kiss on the forehead, she did her best to content herself with that one brief caress. Anything further would have shown more of her feelings than she wanted to display in front of Hagrid and Poppy. They were curious enough already.

"I'll be back soon," she whispered. Turning reluctantly from Severus, Hermione gave Poppy and Hagrid a brief smile before she hurried from the room to head down to Minerva's office.

Albus Lives!

Chapter 26 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: A rather long A/N this time, but please bear with me!

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to leave me a review. I'm afraid that I am woefully behind in my responses, and I'm not sure that I'll ever catch up, but I cherish every one! I promise you that I'll respond to them as I have the time.

Getting this chapter posted was an obstacle course of delays and technical difficulties. Just as it was all straightened out, my work exploded and it wasn't until today that I've found the time to post it. I won't bore you all with the details, but I'm terribly sorry about the delay. The next chapter is already written, and should be up in a couple of weeks.

There are no alert reader notices for last chapter. My brilliant betas were far too clever for you! :D As always, if you notice a typo or an oopsie, please email me about it at plaidpooka@yahoo.com, and I will be sure to thank you in the next AN. I love my alert readers!

My charming betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow, are the dog's bollocks. I don't know what I'd do without them. You guys rock!

On a personal note, I've been dieting and so far I've lost 20 lbs! Go me! If any of you HP fans are trying to lose weight, I've started a group for us, and you can find out more about it on my Live Journal. Just go to LJ and search plaidpooka and you'll find me.

Part of being sane, is being a little bit crazy.

-Janet Long

The entrance to the headmistress' office was sealed when Hermione approached it. Before Hermione had time to fret about her ignorance of the password, the gargoyle guarding it gave her a saucy wink and nimbly stepped aside. It seemed she was expected. The moving stairs were a relief. Poppy had been right; she was completely knackered. The door at the top of the stairs was open, so Hermione stepped in.

She was greeted by the odd sight of Albus sitting in a large comfy chair with Minerva cradled in his lap. While Albus spoke conversationally to the others present, Minerva sat with her face buried in Albus' neck. Trying her best not to stare at her head of house acting like a smitten teenager, Hermione came quickly into the room and joined Ron and Harry on one of the sofas. It wasn't hard to catch up with the conversation.

"But were you actually dead, Albus?" Remus asked curiously.

"Oh, yes indeed. I was as dead as the proverbial doornail. The vow was very specific--if Draco was unable to finish me off by the end of the school year, Severus had to do so, or die himself. Now, I want it perfectly clear that Severus was more than willing to die in my place. Only my complete and utter stubbornness on the matter made him consider any other course of action. Luckily for me," and here Albus paused to chuckle, "the vow only said that I had to be dead, it didn't specify how long I had to remain so! Now Severus is free of his vow, I am back where I want to be, and old Tom is none the wiser."

"That was absolutely Machiavellian of you, Albus," Bill interjected. "I'm rather knowledgeable of goblin soul magic--for a wizard, at any rate--but I didn't suspect a thing."

"You weren't meant to. Believe me, there isn't a person in this room that I wouldn't trust with my life. I wanted very badly to tell you what we had planned, both to ease your minds and so that poor Severus wouldn't be left so much on his own, but it simply wasn't prudent. You are, every one of you, brave, honest, and intelligent, but there isn't an actor among you. If you hadn't displayed the honest grief that you did, Tom would have known that we were up to something."

"I think that we all understand that," Harry said. "It was hard, damned hard, mind you. But I understand why you did what you did."

"Good boy!" Albus said, smiling at Harry fondly. "And may I add that I have never been so proud of the three of you as I was when you invited Severus into your home. With or without Remus' vouching for Severus, that was kindly done."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all blushed furiously at Dumbledore's praise. When Hermione had calmed down enough to find her tongue, she joined the conversation for the first time.

"Sir, does that mean that you were aware the whole time that you were...er...living with Severus?"

"Firstly, call me 'sir' again, young lady, and I'll hex your socks off," Albus said, giving Hermione a fierce scowl before winking at her in amusement. "I'm not your professor, I'm not your headmaster, and though we are at Hogwarts, you are not in school. My name is Albus, and you have more than earned the right to use it."

"Yes...Albus," Hermione managed to stammer as she blushed again.

"And how is Poppy's patient? He's had a rough time of it, poor lad. I trust that there isn't too much wrong with him?"

"Poppy said he would be fine with a little rest and food," Hermione said hesitantly. "But I'm worried about his mental state. Was his madness caused by...er..."

"By me?" Albus asked, wagging his eyebrows at her. "Yes, indeed it was. The human psyche was never meant to house more than one soul. Severus and I knew that he would likely run mad before we ever tried the spell, but we could see no other course of action. It's saying a lot about the will of that man that he was able to accomplish everything he set out to do despite his mental incapacity. He's a very strong willed person, our Severus."

"So will he be sane now?" Ron asked.

"Yes, certainly. But that isn't to say that he won't have lasting effects from his ordeal. You mustn't expect him to be exactly the same person he was before. Our experiences, both good and bad, do much to change us."

"A little change could only be an improvement, if you ask me," muttered Ron, who then immediately got elbowed in the ribs by an outraged Hermione.

"Now, to answer your earlier question," Albus continued, ignoring the commotion on the sofa, "I was somewhat aware of what was going on around me while my soul was taking up residence in Severus. But my sense of awareness was cloudy at best. It was more like dreaming than anything else, and there are definitely things that I missed that I'll have to be brought up to speed on. Draco is working for the Order now, is he not?"

This announcement was enough to bring Minerva's face out of Albus' neck for the first time since Hermione had entered the office. "Is he really?" she asked.

"Yes, he certainly is," Remus said. "He contacted me shortly after he and Severus had fled Hogwarts, which was very lucky for the Order. With Severus on the run--not to mention out of his head--we needed another spy very desperately. At the moment, only Severus and everyone present is aware of Draco's help, and I think it best if we keep it that way."

"Perfectly sensible," Albus said, stroking his beard. "And that isn't all that should be kept quiet. Right now, Tom thinks that I am dead, and I'm glad to let him continue to think so. I plan to hide away here with Minerva until the time comes when we are prepared to act against Voldemort directly. If that is all right with you, my dear?"

"More than all right. If you think that I plan to let you out of my sight for a minute, you're a right fool!" Minerva said, giving Albus' head an exasperated little shake before she pulled it forward to give him a chaste kiss on the forehead.

Hermione found herself blushing for the third time and rather distractedly wondered if there wasn't some sort of anti-blushing charm. Looking furtively around the room, she saw that everyone but Filius was fidgeting uncomfortably. Filius only smiled fondly at the pair snuggled up in Albus' easy chair. As Hermione continued to look at everything that wasn't Albus and Minerva, she noticed that the portrait of Albus had gone blank. It wasn't only that Albus wasn't in his portrait, the entire canvas had gone a flat grey. Nudging Harry and Ron to get their attention, Hermione pointed out the odd painting.

"Strange," Ron murmured. "Not much is known about how those portraits work, but it looks like they don't work at all if the subject is alive."

"Ah, Ronald, I see that you have noticed the portrait. That reminds me, Minerva, we'll have to hide it or the jig will be up. You'll have to make some excuse if anyone asks where it's disappeared to."

"Nothing easier. I'll just tell anyone who asks that you had become such a boring old windbag that I couldn't stand to listen to you anymore." Minerva teased drolly.

"None of your cheek, woman! I think it would be much more fitting if you were to explain to everyone how you were so heartbroken by my loss that you couldn't bear looking at my likeness."

"Oh, I suppose," Minerva said, giving Albus' beard a fond tug, "but I think that my explanation is much more believable."

"Just you wait, young lady," Albus said, his eyes twinkling when this made Minerva burst into a fit of girlish giggles. "Wait until these folks all go to bed and you have no one here to protect you!"

Minerva giggled even harder at that dubious threat, which made Hermione gape at her in astonishment. Looking about the room, Hermione saw that Filius, Remus, and Bill didn't look nearly as shocked by this behavior as Ron, Harry, and she herself did. It was very hard trying to adjust to these adults as people instead of teachers. Remus had been a colleague of the pair, and Bill had been out of school for some time, but to Hermione, it still seemed like she was watching her teachers as they snuggled in the chair and flirted with each other. On the one hand, it was very sweet. On the other hand, Albus, being twice the age of her own grandfather, made it all seem horribly wrong.

"Now then, you will have to wait, woman, while we get back to business," Albus said, giving Minerva a squeeze. "Was the cup destroyed? Severus left the house before we found out whether you were successful or not."

For the next ten minutes, Bill explained to Albus exactly how the cup had been destroyed.

"Ah! An excellent way to deal with the nasty little buggers. Trust Severus to come up with a way that doesn't leave anyone maimed for life," Albus said, giving his newly healed hand a telling look. "And what of the locket? I got the distinct impression that it had been destroyed, but everyone always seemed so sad when they spoke of it."

"It was destroyed, Albus," Remus said sadly, "but we lost Moody. He managed to destroy the locket, but the effort was too much for him."

The smile fled from Albus' face as he heard the news. "What a shame," he murmured, "what a shame. Oh, Moody was a paranoid old goat to be sure, but he was a good man...and a good friend. He will be sorely missed."

The group lapsed into silence for a moment. Hermione had never known Moody all that well. Most of what she knew of him was hopelessly mixed up with memories of the fake Moody who had taught classes during her fourth year. All the same, she had been hit hard by his sudden death and the spectacular manner of his demise had haunted her terribly when she had planned to take up the destruction of the cup herself.

"At least the cup was found, destroyed, and no one was hurt," Albus said. "Now we can focus our attentions on Voldemort and decide how best to take him down. Because of the mule-headedness of the Ministry, Tom has been allowed to become far too powerful. The sooner we force a confrontation, the better."

"But Albus," Harry began, his voice incredulous, "we know that Nagini is a Horcrux, but we have no idea what the last one is! How can we possibly think of any sort of confrontation until that item is found and destroyed?"

When Albus gave Hermione a sharp look, she was mortified to find that she was blushing yet again. Made extremely uncomfortable by Albus' perusal, Hermione dropped her head to stare at her hands.

"I had rather thought that at least one of you would have figured that out by now," Albus mused. "Hermione, would you look at me please?"

Reluctantly, Hermione raised her head to look Albus in the eye. At first, his expression was sharp and puzzled, but that soon gave way to surprise and then to fondness. "Oh, my dear girl! It is not nearly as dreadful as you think, I promise you. And in satisfying my curiosity I see just how tired you are, and little wonder. Look how late it is! Now, all of you, off to bed. There are plenty of empty beds in the castle if you don't feel like traveling. We'll resume this conversation after we've all had a good rest."

"But what does Hermione know?" Ron asked. "Does she know about the last Horcrux, and if she does, why didn't she tell us about it? We've been searching for some sign of it for weeks!"

"Now, now, none of that! And don't be hounding Hermione about it, either," Albus said a touch sternly. "I'll explain it to you myself in the morning, which is soon enough for anyone. Off you go now! Goodnight!"

Hermione soon found herself herded out of the room and down the stairs. Though Ron and Harry both gave her curious looks, they let her alone about the Horcrux. That was fine by Hermione. Too tired to Apparate, she was all too happy to find an empty guest room and go immediately to sleep.

And sleep she did, only to be plagued by uncomfortable dreams in which Severus called to her desperately while she was kept from reaching him by invisible hands. When she woke early the next morning, Hermione was fairly convinced that the dreams were a product of her frustration with the ward that had separated her from Severus the night before. Nevertheless, she hurried through a quick shower and left for the infirmary as quickly as possible. She was anxious to see how Severus was with her own eyes, and to see how his mental state was now that Albus wasn't lurking around in there.

When Hermione entered the infirmary, she was upset to find that Severus was nowhere to be seen. Poppy soon cleared the matter up. She had put Severus into a private room so that he would be hidden from any unexpected guests. When Hermione opened the door to Severus' room, she simply stood in the doorway for a moment to drink in the sight of him. He was dressed in a green flannel dressing gown, and sat propped up by a mountain of pillows as he read *The Daily Prophet* in bed.

"I said no more tea, Poppy," he growled. Then his eyes lifted from the paper and met her own. Later, Hermione would have no idea exactly how long they stared at each other, but it had seemed like an age. Eventually, Severus dragged his eyes away from hers long enough to fold the paper and place it on the table near his bed.

"Hermione," he said softly, and then again, "Hermione."

They both seemed rather lost for words. It was so strange. Only the day before, they had been so comfortable with each other. Now everything seemed forced and awkward. He had once told her that he would always care for her, but what if that wasn't true? What if he was having second thoughts now that he was himself again and found himself facing a girl that was, until very recently, one of his students?

Forcing a brave, if shaky, smile onto her face, Hermione closed the door and then sat down in the straight-backed chair next to Severus' bed. Placing a hand tentatively on his arm, she spoke.

"How are you feeling?"

"Passable," Severus said, his eyes searching her face. "I tried to leave the infirmary, but Poppy won't even consider releasing me until after breakfast."

"Good. You gave...us...quite a scare when you passed out last night. We were very worried about you."

"Were you?"

"Yes, very much."

With a sigh, Severus looked for a moment at where Hermione's hand rested against his arm. "Hermione, it occurs to me that I owe you several dozen apologies."

"Whatever for?" Hermione asked, incredulous. "Surely you don't think I would hold you responsible for anything you may have done while you were ill?"

"No, I suppose not," he said with another sigh. "But there's no getting around the fact that you did much to care for me while I was ill, and I did not treat you as a gentleman should."

Was he apologizing for kissing her? For holding her? Sweet Nimue, what if he really didn't care for her anymore? "Sir, I assure you that you did nothing that you should apologize for," Hermione said rather sharply.

At that statement, Severus narrowed his eyes at her. Shaking her hand off of his arm, he reached for the paper on the table. Returning to his reading, he said brusquely, "Very well, Miss Granger. If that's settled, perhaps you would be so kind as to leave me to my rest."

His manner had completely altered. At first he had seemed awkward but kind, now he seemed very much the old professor she had known. Startled at being so abruptly dismissed, Hermione rose shakily to her feet. "We'll be at the castle all day, I think," she managed to say. "Perhaps I could look in on you later?"

"If you feel you must," he snapped in reply.

Tears in her eyes, Hermione fled the room. She was so upset that she hurried through the infirmary and out into the corridor before she paused to lean heavily against a wall. Why had his mood changed so suddenly? Certainly things had been odd at first, it was an odd situation. But there they'd been, chatting clumsily but basically doing all right. Then the man had suddenly snapped at her and dismissed her with less consideration than most wizards displayed to a house-elf. He had gone from calling her by her given name to a very curt "Miss Granger." What was wrong with the man?

Frantically, Hermione replayed the conversation, word-for-word, until she reached the point that caused Severus' sudden change of manner. Her eyes went wide with sudden realization.

"Oh, dear! How could I have been so stupid?"

Courage Under Fire

Chapter 27 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: Thanks to the kindness of NSS, I have something a little personal to share with you.

So, I've been working on losing weight and being more healthy since mid-January, and I've lost 40 lbs so far! Go me! Then, I hear on the radio that there is a 5k walk to benefit the Kentucky Humane society. Walking to aid furry homeless babies, what could be more up my alley? Walking, good for me and my weight loss; money, good for the furries.

I've got a deal to make you all. I've been concentrating on my health, and found it very hard to get writing again. I need something to kick me in the butt and give me a deadline! So here's the deal. I'm asking my readers to make a donation for my 5k, if you are able. In return, I'm promising you not one, but two more chapters by the end of May. And I'm not asking anyone to break the bank, even just a couple bucks would help. Those small donations add up quickly, and they really help animals in need.

The Humane Society website is easy and user friendly. You can make a donation right online, all you have to do is go to the page and plug in your information. Help me lose a couple more pounds, write a couple more chapters, and help the homeless critters!

You can find my donation page here:

[Link to Donate to the Humane Society](#)

That link goes straight to my donation page on the Humane Society website. I will never see or touch the money, so you can be assured that nothing nefarious is going on. Please donate if you can! The cause means a lot to me, and I need a good guilt-ridden jumpstart to get me writing again!

As always, big huge thanks to my betas, Vaughn and WolfMoonshadow. The delay in getting this chapter posted was all my own fault. They had it beta'd and ready ages ago, but I've been so distracted by getting healthy that I just haven't been able to work on it.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through.

~R.D. Laing, The Politics of Experience

It was clear that Hermione had only one course of action available to her. Despite her fears of rejection, she screwed up her Gryffindor courage and marched back into the infirmary. She wasn't about to let Severus get away with such ridiculous nonsense!

When she opened Severus' door, he visibly flinched. Clearly he'd not expected her to return. Quickly donning an expression of annoyance, he pretended to read the paper.

"I had hoped," he growled, "that you would leave me to my rest. I trust that it was a matter of earth-shattering proportions that convinced you to disturb me again."

"Not at all," Hermione said simply. "I only forgot something."

"Forgot something? Miss Granger, you didn't have anything with you in the first place! Now please go about your business and leave me to my paper."

"I forgot to *do* something, actually." Stepping closer to the bed, Hermione first took Severus' paper out of his hands and set it loose to drift lazily to the floor. Even as Severus opened his mouth to protest, Hermione leaned forward until her face was mere inches from his own. "You see, Severus," she murmured, "I was so flustered when I left, that I forgot to kiss you goodbye." That said, Hermione leaned forward that last few inches and kissed Severus right on his gaping mouth.

At first he froze. The next thing Hermione knew, she had been pulled roughly into the bed and had somehow ended up flat on her back with Severus leaning over her. He had also managed to pull both of her hands over her head and now held them there firmly. Hermione couldn't have escaped if she had wanted to. Luckily for Hermione, escape was the furthest thing from her mind.

"What was the meaning of that 'sir' nonsense then?" he growled at her.

"What did you expect?" she growled back. "You apologized for *kissing* me, for Merlin's sake! A man who snogs a woman and then apologizes for it should expect to be on the receiving end of a few *sirs*!"

"Damn it, woman! I wasn't apologizing for kissing you!"

"Weren't you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow in unconscious imitation of his own inquiring expression.

That very expression caught Severus off guard, and he gave her a small, crooked smile. "Hermione," he said softly, "you were the one spark of light in a long and dark night. You were unspeakably kind to me, and I repaid that kindness by taking advantage of you at every conceivable opportunity."

"In case you didn't notice it at the time, I was hardly complaining. Besides, if any apologies are necessary, it is I who owe them to you. You were not in your right mind and I was not strong enough to do what I knew was right."

"Pardon me, love, but that is complete and utter crap," he responded, his eyes flashing. "I've told you before. I knew what I wanted then, and I know it now."

"And what is that?" Hermione managed to ask, though the look in his eyes had left her rather breathless.

Leaning down, Severus breathed the words against her trembling lips. "You, Hermione. I want you."

Then his lips crossed the scant distance that separated them. The kisses they had shared before had been delightful, but none of them had prepared Hermione for this. While Severus had been mad, he had kissed her with the same wild enthusiasm with which he did everything. Now the lips pressing against hers were gentle as he kissed her with undeniable affection. Until now, Severus had easily made her feel passionate, but never before had she felt so loved, so cherished, as she did in this moment.

With a soft hum of appreciation, Severus deepened the kiss. When Hermione eagerly opened her mouth to him, his tongue slid inside to do gentle battle with her own. Slowly, so slowly, the kiss gained momentum until Hermione found herself arching up against him. That motion pressed her breasts against his chest and he moaned into her mouth. Now, Hermione desperately wanted her hands free, but it took some firm tugging on her part to get Severus to take the hint. At last he released her hands and buried his own into her hair. He then used that grip to tilt her chin back so that he could plunge his tongue even more deeply into her mouth. With a low moan of her own, Hermione clutched fiercely at his shoulders, pulling him against her as if he wasn't already as close as he could get. As if of their own accord, her legs spread farther open and suddenly his hips were cradled between her thighs.

She could feel his hard length pressing deliciously against her, and she felt all tingly, as if a soft current were running through her. Lifting her hips, she rubbed against him. With a heartfelt groan, Severus broke the kiss. His head hung down next to hers and she could hear him breathing heavily in her ear. Too heavily. Much too heavily.

"Oh, bloody hell! I am such an idiot!" Without further ado, Hermione rolled Severus off of her and onto his back. It was a testament to his weakened state that she could accomplish that so easily. While Severus caught his breath, Hermione fussed over him. She removed the extra pillows he had been sitting against so that he could lay down comfortably. After straightening his dressing gown, which had become a bit mussed during the festivities, she fondly brushed his hair out of his face. Severus' dressing gown did little to hide his obvious desire, but Hermione decided that the best thing to do at the moment was pretend that his penis didn't exist. Not that ignoring it was the easiest task, what with it sticking up at such a jaunty angle.

"Severus, I'm sorry," she said contritely. "You're supposed to be resting and first I upset you and then I practically attack you! What was I thinking?"

This statement caused Severus' rather crooked smirk to reappear. Though it wasn't as boyishly endearing as the toothy grin she had gotten used to while Severus was mad, she decided that his crooked smile suited him, and it was rather sexy as well.

"Hermione, you can hardly be held responsible for attacking me when it was I who dragged you into the bed. But you're right about one thing. I am upset. I'm most

dreadfully upset, and I think that you should make some sort of...restitution." His hand lifted to twine lazily around Hermione's neck as he tried to drag her back down to him.

"Oh, no you don't!" Hermione said firmly. Taking his wayward hand, she brought it down to her lap where she held it firmly in both of hers. "There won't be any more of that until Poppy says you're all right. So you put it right out of your mind, Severus, and you put *that* away!" Removing one of her hands from his, she pointed firmly at his gown-covered erection.

"Now, *that*, as you so delicately put it, is indeed your fault, woman, and I'm afraid there is nothing that I can do about it," Severus replied with a small chuckle.

"Then we'll just have to ignore it."

"Easier for you than me, I think," Severus returned, looking sulky.

"Believe me," Hermione said, leaning down to give him a heated look, "there is nothing easy about ignoring *that*."

He smiled at her again and rather smugly too. Shaking his hand loose from her grip, he raised it up to her face and laid it against her cheek.

"I've never seen you smile so much," Hermione said softly.

"I never had much reason to."

Flustered, Hermione looked down at her hands for a moment until she spoke again. "You really should be resting. It's not even breakfast time yet. Perhaps I should leave..."

"Don't you dare," he growled.

Hermione smiled at him then, a big, toothy smile full of happiness. At first, he seemed taken aback by her expression, and he stared at her in obvious astonishment and something a little like wonder. Then he returned her toothy smile with his crooked one.

"If I stay, will you take a nap?"

"Gods, women, you talk to me as if I were a schoolboy," Severus grouched, rolling his eyes at her.

"Will you?" Hermione asked more firmly.

"Oh, I suppose," he reluctantly agreed. "If you will join me?"

When Severus stretched out one arm and indicated the space beside him, Hermione immediately laid her head on his shoulder and snuggled up close to him. After awhile, Severus made a little humming noise that Hermione couldn't quite decipher.

"What is it?" she asked sleepily.

"I used to think that I wouldn't care for this sort of thing," he said, his own voice heavy with sleepiness.

"What sort of thing?" Hermione asked, a bit worried.

"Oh, you know, having someone fuss over you. I hate when Poppy does it, but it's rather pleasant when you do."

"It's different when people care for one another," Hermione said softly. When he didn't reply, she lifted her head to look at him. Severus Snape was fast asleep. Since Hermione hadn't managed to get much sleep the night before, what with worry and disquieting dreams, she soon found herself yawning. With a soft sigh, she threw an arm over Severus' waist and slipped away into sleep.

It seemed only a moment later that Hermione was awakened by a small hand gently shaking her shoulder. Careful not to wake the man sleeping at her side, she rolled slowly over to see who the hand belonged to.

"Miss Hermione," Dobby whispered, "Harry Potter is wondering where you is. Harry Potter is at breakfast, and he is telling me that you need to be having breakfast too. Harry Potter is telling Dobby that there is a big meeting after breakfast. If Miss Granger isn't coming now, then she won't be getting any breakfast at all!"

Dobby looked so heart wrenchingly alarmed by this prospect that Hermione had to put a hand over her mouth to hide a smile. "It's all right, Dobby," she whispered. "I'll come right away."

Slowly and quietly, Hermione slid from the bed and onto her feet. Though Severus stirred slightly and murmured to himself, he didn't wake up. Dobby held the door to the small room open for her, and after she had passed, he shut it silently.

"Dobby," Hermione said softly once the door was safely shut, "I want to go to breakfast, but I don't want Severus to worry about where I've gone to. Is there some way to leave him a message?"

"Nothing easier, Miss Hermione," Dobby said cheerfully. "Hally is working in the infirmary today. Hally will be giving a message for you."

It didn't take long for Dobby to call another house-elf into the room, and after Hermione had given him her instructions, she left for the Great Hall.

The Great Hall looked decidedly odd with so few people in it. The high table held the small group that was at Hogwarts over the summer. Harry and Ron sat chatting with Bill, and Hermione hurried past the deserted student tables to join them. So much had happened in the past few weeks that it shocked Hermione to realize how little time had passed. It was only the first week of August, and it would be nearly four weeks until these student tables held hordes of students for the Start of Term Feast.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, and the three friends chatted about inconsequential things as they ate. Minerva was conspicuously absent from the table, and Harry told her that she was taking breakfast in her rooms. That didn't surprise Hermione. It had been clear from their actions the night before that Albus and Minerva had a closer relationship than any of them had ever suspected. She couldn't blame Minerva from wanting to be with Albus for breakfast, and he had to remain hidden in her rooms.

After they finished eating, Harry suggested a short walk on the grounds and Ron and Hermione followed him outside. Once they were a safe distance from the castle, they spoke more freely.

"I assumed that when I couldn't find you, you went to check on Severus?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Of course she did. Look at her blush!" Ron teased. "How exactly were you checking on him, Hermione?"

"It wasn't like that!" she snapped, blushing all the more.

"Wasn't it?" Harry said, wagging his eyebrows. "When Dobby came to tell me that you were on your way, he mentioned that he found you asleep in a certain patient's hospital bed."

"Look, I went to visit him early this morning, and we were both still very tired. I fell asleep...it's as simple as that."

"Simple!" groused Ron. "Now see here, Hermione, we've been especially well behaved about you fancying the git..."

"We have, we certainly have," interrupted Harry, nodding his head in emphatic agreement.

"So, I think it only reasonable that you tell your two best mates what's going on!" continued Ron. "Is he still mad? Does he still fancy you? Did you at least get a snog out of the great bastard, or has he gone all Snape on you?"

It would be a gross understatement to say that Hermione was taken aback by this line of questioning. Hermione knew very well that Harry and Ron--despite their efforts to the contrary--still had trouble accepting that she had honest feelings for Severus. Yet here they were, asking her about it as if it were any other boy she had been interested in while they were at school. As she looked at their expectant faces, she realized how precious their friendship was to her. They were her best friends and they stuck to her through thick and thin...and Severus. They deserved to know what was going on in her life, even if it did embarrass her. Replaying Ron's last statement in her mind, she answered his questions as best she could.

"No, he's not mad any longer, though he doesn't seem quite himself. I think Albus was right; it was the extra soul that made him mad. Yes, he still fancies me and yes...I did get a bit of a snog."

Here, Hermione's composure crumbled a bit, and she hid her face in her hands. Her blush was so strong that she could feel the heat of it against her skin. She could hear the boys giggling at her.

"Was it really as easy as all that?" Harry asked, incredulously. "I mean, I know he's probably not the wanker he was in class, but still...I would have expected you to have a little trouble with him."

"Well," Hermione muttered into her hands, "we did have a bit of a misunderstanding at first, but we got it sorted."

"What kind of a misunderstanding?" Ron asked, prying her hands gently away from her face.

"I called him *sir*! There we were, trying to talk to each other and it was awkward and strange...and I slipped and called him *sir*!"

"I imagine that he didn't like that much," Harry offered.

"It's funny," Ron began, "we used to joke about how he'd make his girlfriend call him "Professor," but I'd wager he didn't like you calling him "sir" at all."

"He didn't. In fact, he went all Professor Snape on me. It was like I was back in his classroom."

"How did you fix it?" Harry asked.

"I kissed him," she said simply.

Harry laughed at that. "You're learning, Hermione. The fastest way to shut a bloke up and make him pay attention is to give his mouth something else to do. Ginny uses that on me all of the time!"

"Oy!" Ron interrupted. "That's enough of that! I know you snog my sister, but that doesn't mean I want to hear all about it. I'd almost rather hear about Hermione snogging the git...almost."

That made the three of them laugh all the more, and they continued to laugh and joke until it was time to head to Minerva's office.

The Seventh Horcrux

Chapter 28 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

"A man who is "of sound mind" is one who keeps the inner madman under lock and key."

Paul Valéry, Mauvaises pensées et autres, 1942

Minerva's office was already crowded by the time the three friends entered. Everyone from the night before was there, and more members of the Order had been called in as well. As they found their seats, Hermione looked around the room, automatically cataloging everyone who was present. Ron's parents were there, along with Fred and George, and they stood in one corner of the room chatting with Bill. Kingsley and Tonks were sitting on the sofa with Remus and talking in hushed tones. There was also a black haired witch that Hermione didn't recognize, but Harry soon identified her as Hestia Jones. She appeared to be flirting with Hagrid, and Hagrid didn't seem to mind. Albus and Minerva both sat behind the Headmistress' desk, and Hermione was a little relieved to see that they each had their own chair for this meeting. Perhaps she wouldn't need that anti-blushing charm after all.

Eventually, the room quieted and the Weasleys found their seats. Before Albus called the meeting to order, a Patronus sprang from the wall and loped towards the Headmistress' desk. Initially, Hermione mistook it for a kind of cat, so smoothly and gracefully did it cross the room. When it sprang onto the desk, she realized the sparkling silver creature was a fox. The silvery creature crossed the desk, placed it's forefeet against Albus' chest, and proceeded to give the former Headmaster a piece of its mind. Hermione could not understand a word of what the Patronus said. Though they did make audible sounds, there was some charm about a Patronus that kept its messages unintelligible to all except for whom the message was intended.

Albus listened to the sharp tempered creature patiently, nodding his head from time to time. He seemed completely unperturbed by the fact that the fox's nose was only inches from his own.

"Well, of course the boy should be here...that goes without saying," Albus said calmly, and then paused as the small creature appeared to go into another verbal rampage. "She says the Floo is out of the question? Not to worry, not to worry, I have something here that will do quite nicely."

Rummaging through the top drawer of the desk, Albus muttered, "Have you moved every blasted thing, woman?"

"It might help," Minerva began dryly, "if you would tell me what it is that you are looking for."

"It's a small globe," Albus explained, still sorting through the drawer. "It looks like it's snowing on the pyramids if you shake it a bit. It's a Muggle thing."

"Oh, that bit of nonsense," Minerva huffed. Rising, she went to a nearby filing cabinet and retrieved the globe. "You're dead lucky that I didn't throw it in the bin."

"Lucky, my girl," Albus said, laughing, "but not quite dead, as it turns out!"

Blushing, Minerva handed him the globe and hastily took her seat.

"There you go," Albus said, handing the globe to the Patronus. "Just give it to him, he knows what to do with it. Even Poppy can't argue with that."

Taking the globe gingerly in its mouth, the fox jumped off of the desk and disappeared back through the wall.

"Arthur," Albus called, gesturing to the red haired wizard, "will you pull that stuffed chair a little closer to the fire? And fetch that lap blanket from the back of the sofa."

As Arthur cheerfully complied, Severus Snape and Poppy suddenly appeared in the empty space in front of the desk. As Severus stumbled, Poppy deftly caught him and steadied him until he found his balance.

Reaching forward, Severus set the globe gently onto the desk. "Thank you, Albus." Though his voice was low, it seemed to echo in the now silent room.

"There's a nice chair for you just there," Albus said, gesturing eagerly to the chair Arthur had set near the fire. "I think even Poppy can find no fault with it," he finished with a grin.

"He shouldn't be out of bed!" Poppy snapped as she helped Severus over to the chair. She then tucked the blanket snugly around his legs as if she feared he would take a sudden chill despite the small fire and the fact that it was high summer. Though Severus rolled his eyes at her fussing, he withstood it with a stoic patience. Hermione could imagine Severus facing Lord Voldemort himself with the same expression on his face.

"Believe me, Poppy," Albus said gently, "I'm not about to let anything happen to the lad. However, he deserves to be at this meeting more than anyone, and I'm not about to deny him that. Try not to fret, my dear. I'll see that he's delivered safely back to the infirmary as soon as we've finished."

With a disdainful huff, Poppy turned on her heel and swept from the room. Her exit seemed to bring the occupants back to life, and the room suddenly filled with soft conversation once again. Arthur and Molly Weasley both greeted Severus warmly, and he returned their greetings with polite nods. Reaching over to Severus' chair from his nearby seat on the sofa, Remus put a hand on Severus' shoulder and gave it a warm squeeze. Though Severus brushed the hand away and gave Remus a slight scowl, it was clear that his heart wasn't in it. In fact, though Severus had obviously fought with Poppy about attending the meeting, Hermione noticed that he seemed very uncomfortable being there. He sat quietly and met no one's eye, not even her own. Well, it was hardly surprising. Most of the people present had hated Severus bitterly until Albus had returned to life. Hermione could not imagine how she herself would feel if she was in a similar situation.

When Albus called the meeting to order, Hermione dragged her eyes away from Severus and tried her best to stop worrying about him.

"I've called you here today," Albus began, once the room had quieted, "because we have several important matters to discuss. I know that the fact that I'm alive and well has been a shock to all of you--a pleasant shock I trust," he added, wagging his eyebrows and peering at them over the top of his glasses. A snicker crept around the room, followed by some scattered applause, and when his audience was again quiet, Albus continued. "Spread the word of my revival amongst the remainder of the Order, but make sure you are not overheard. The longer Tom is unaware of my return, the better off we all shall be."

Much nodding followed this advice, and Hestia Jones once again leaned over to whisper to Hagrid. Hermione couldn't hear what the dark haired witch had said, but from the way Hagrid chuckled it must have been something amusing. Once again, Albus waited patiently for the room to calm itself and then he spoke again.

"For now, I intend to remain here in the office, with Minerva's kind consent," he added, smiling fondly at the witch sitting at his side. "These rooms are more protected than any vault at Gringott's, so the secret of my sudden return should be safe enough. However, there is someone else here that requires a safe haven, and I'd like to get that sorted as soon as possible. Severus, I am assuming that you would not prefer to stay here with Minerva and myself?"

"Absolutely not," Severus said softly but firmly, and then muttered something rather caustic about aging lovebirds.

"Well, my boy, you know that we'd love to have you here with us, but there is something to be said for not hiding all of our eggs in one basket." Looking at each person present in turn, Albus continued. "I'm sure that someone here would be happy to offer you a safe haven until we are prepared to confront Voldemort."

The silence in the room was deafening for a moment, until Hagrid broke it with his cheerful voice. "Well, Professor Dumbledore, sir, Sev'rus is welcome ta stay wi' me. I know the hut's a bit small, but the's room enough and I'd like the company and tha's a fact."

Hermione could see the sudden scowl that pinched Hestia Jones' face. What was wrong with that woman? What did she have against Severus? Severus himself seemed uncomfortable with the whole conversation, though he didn't protest the idea of staying at Hagrid's hut. Fidgety and quiet, he spent most of the time staring at the blanket over his lap while he picked at the fabric with nervous fingers.

"Rubeus, that's very kind," Albus began, "but I'm afraid that it won't do. Your hut is in an area of the grounds that is hard to ward. I'm afraid that it simply won't be safe enough for Severus."

At this statement, both Hagrid and Severus looked disappointed but Hestia Jones looked suddenly cheerful. Hermione was beginning to truly dislike that woman.

When Arthur Weasley stepped forward to speak, Albus hushed him with a gesture. "No, Arthur. I know that you and Molly would do all in your power to keep Severus safe, but with your ties to the Ministry, it simply isn't prudent. All we would need is one Ministry official to arrive unannounced, and the cat would be out of the bag."

Again the room burst into conversation, but not one of the witches and wizards spoke up with a suggestion or offer of help. Worried, Hermione looked at Severus and noticed that his fidgeting had increased. No longer staring at the blanket, his eyes had begun to stray to various inanimate objects in the room, much as they had when he'd been mad. This simply could not be allowed to continue.

"Harry," she whispered urgently, "you have to do something!" When Harry started with surprise and blinked at her, Hermione realized that he hadn't been paying much attention to the conversation. Indicating Severus with her eyes, she repeated, "do something!"

For a moment, Harry gazed around the room with a puzzled look that scrunched up his features. When he sorted out what was being discussed, he frowned suddenly, and got to his feet to address the room.

"Excuse me," he began, and repeated it loudly when the room didn't immediately quiet. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand why we are wasting our time discussing this. Severus already has a place to live...he lives with us. My house is safe enough. I don't see any reason why we can't continue on as we have been."

This statement brought a dead silence to the room. Though he still didn't lift his eyes, Severus' fidgeting had ceased abruptly. The silence was broken by the overly sweet voice of Hestia Jones as she stood up to speak.

"Albus," she began, in a voice that made Hermione grate her teeth, "surely you don't intend to leave *this* man alone with these innocent children? Why, there's no telling what sort of..."

"Ms. Jones," Harry interrupted firmly, giving the witch such a hard stare that she dropped back into her chair, "forgive me for saying so, but I fail to see how my living arrangements are any of your business." Turning to look at Severus, Harry continued in a much lighter tone of voice. "After all, Severus, we've managed not to kill each

other so far. It should be loads easier now that you aren't absolutely barking."

Oddly enough, Severus seemed puzzled by Harry's offer. Perhaps now that Albus was returned and Severus was no longer mad, he'd assumed that all bets were off. Lifting his head, he met Harry's eyes and Harry gave him a firm nod. When Severus then looked to Hermione and Ron, they nodded as well.

"That's a fine idea, Harry," Albus said, giving Harry a fond smile. "Is that all right with you, Severus?"

"It is," Severus said simply. Turning a fierce look towards Hestia Jones, he added snidely, "I suppose that I shall simply have to do my level best to curb my psychopathic tendencies around the helpless children."

That caused Hermione and Ron to grin and Harry to laugh out loud. "Not to worry, Severus," Harry said, still smiling. "You just let us know when you are feeling particularly psychotic, and we'll give you some space."

Though Severus went back to studying the blanket over his lap, Hermione could see his lips twitch slightly in amusement. His fidgeting had completely stopped, and he looked calm again. True, he still looked exhausted and uncomfortable, but Hermione could now stop fretting about him and return her attention to the meeting.

"Now that that is sorted," Albus said, his expression getting more serious. "I believe it's time for us to discuss the last two Horcruxes. Let's start with Nagini. A living Horcrux is easy enough to destroy, which is why they are not recommended for such things. Kill Nagini and the soul reverts to Tom. I find myself feeling a bit sorry for the snake, but there is nothing to be done about it. Unless, Hermione, your research has turned up anything useful?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Hermione replied with a sigh. "The spell Bill used is good only for inanimate objects. Unless Severus has come across something in his research..."

As her voice trailed off, Severus spoke. "No. The spell I used on the tower requires the cooperation of the other participant. It would not work on an animal."

"So be it," Albus said. "Nagini must die. Any plans for how to accomplish this?"

"It's already set up," Remus said. "My contact with the Death Eaters has a plan in place. He's been in charge of feeding Nagini, and he has a special meal all ready for her as soon as we give him the go-ahead. The timing is important. Once he kills Nagini he won't be able to stay undercover. It would be best to wait until immediately before we plan to move against Voldemort."

"I'll leave it in your capable hands, Remus," Albus said, obviously pleased. "We should be able to give your contact time enough before we plan to strike."

Once again, Hestia chimed in with unwanted advice. "Is this wise, Albus? All it would take for You Know Who to rise again is one Horcrux to go undestroyed. Do we know that this contact of Lupin's will do as he promises?"

As if with one voice, Bill, Hermione, Harry, Ron, Severus, and Remus all said, "Yes!"

"Then it's settled," Albus said firmly, dismissing Hestia's protests with a wave of his hand. "If six stalwart members of this Order believe it to be true, then that's good enough for me."

"What about the last Horcrux, Albus?" Harry asked curiously. "We've been looking for it for months, but we haven't discovered hide nor hair of it."

"I know you tried, Harry, and I should have told you about the final Horcrux long ago," Albus said. Pausing, he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes for a moment. Glasses back in place, he gave Harry his full attention and continued. "I meant to tell you about it last year, but there was so very much to tell you and so little time. Then the Death Eaters forced our hand up on the tower and I realized that time had suddenly run out. Before I explain further, I'd like Kingsley to tell you all a little about what it takes to make a Horcrux. I know that school is not in session, but it will help you understand what happened if you know more about the process of making a Horcrux. Kingsley, if you please?"

Rising from his seat next to Remus on the sofa, Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped up to Albus' desk and turned to address the room. "A Horcrux is a devilishly hard thing to make, and not only because you have to do some horrific act in order to split your soul. There are amazing preparations that a wizard has to make before he even gets to that dreadful act. First, he must make and ingest three very complex potions. Then he must also do three complicated charms. Before the event, he must go through a long and involved ritual that purifies his body. It is only after all of these preparations are completed that he chooses an object and does the evil deed. After the deed is done, he takes the energy that results and infuses the object with it."

"Thank you, Kingsley," Albus said as Shacklebolt resumed his seat. "Clear and concise, as per usual. Now then, it's important that you all know what was involved to understand how the seventh Horcrux came about. My studies on the matter have made it very clear to me that when Tom Riddle went to Godric's Hollow in order to kill the Potters, he had done all of the complicated things he needed to do in order to create a Horcrux. Knowing Tom, the destruction of the Potters would have played right into his sense of pageantry. So, on that dark night when Harry's parents were killed, a Horcrux was created."

"But, Albus," Harry interrupted, "I've been all over what's left of that house with a fine tooth comb. It made sense to me as well, that Voldemort would use my parents' death to create the last Horcrux, but we haven't found anything!"

"I'm afraid, Harry, that you were looking a little too far afield." When Harry looked like he had more to say, Albus held up a hand to quiet him. "A little more patience, my boy. We are almost at the crux of the matter--if you will pardon an old man for that dreadful pun. If you will remember, Kingsley explained that the wizard who wishes to make a Horcrux must be there to channel the energy after the wicked deed has been done. But Voldemort was destroyed when he tried to kill you, Harry. The preparations had all been made, the energy was summoned, but there was no wizard there to direct it. When Hagrid arrived to whisk you off to safety that night, Harry, he found something else as well." Reaching down behind the desk, Albus lifted up a long object and placed it on the desk.

Harry recognized it easily enough. "Gryffindor's sword," he said softly.

"Yes, indeed," Albus acknowledged. "It went missing during one of Tom's mysterious visits to Hogwarts. I suspected him of the theft, but I couldn't prove that the boy had it in his possession."

"But we've had it tested," Harry said, puzzled. "It is not a Horcrux!"

"No, my boy, I'm afraid that it is not. Tom died when he tried to kill you. He was not alive to direct the energy raised by the death of your parents and trap it in the sword that he had chosen. That energy attached itself to the nearest thing to Tom Riddle at the moment of his death."

"And what was that?" Harry asked.

When Albus Dumbledore paused, reluctant to continue, Hermione decided to tell Harry what she had figured out so many weeks ago. Taking one of his hands in both of her own and squeezing it tightly, she said, "It's you, Harry. Or, to be more specific, it's your scar."

The room went deathly quiet again as Harry stared at Hermione in shock.

A Stubborn Wizard

Chapter 29 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

"Sanity is madness put to good uses."

~George Santayana, Little Essays

Tearing his hand out of Hermione's comforting embrace, Harry bolted out of his chair. His mouth opened, but no words came out. His gaze flew from one watching face to the next. Sidling around his chair, he began to back towards the door of Minerva's office.

"No," he said emphatically, shaking his head from side to side. "No...I'm not...I'm not any such thing!"

"I'm afraid that you are, my dear boy," Albus said calmly. "It does rather explain a lot of things...why you have such a connection to Tom...why you can speak Parseltongue when no wizard with that power has ever been anything but a Slytherin."

"I'm not!" Harry shouted, backing further towards the door. "I'm no Horcrux, and I'll be damned if I will sit here and let you kill me because you think I am!"

"But, Harry," Albus said, rising from his seat, but making no move towards the upset wizard, "you don't understand..."

"I think I understand all too well." Reaching the door, Harry groped behind him for the knob.

A voice thundered through the room, making everyone flinch. "Harry Potter!"

Turning towards the voice, Hermione saw that Severus had risen from his chair. The blanket that Poppy had so carefully tucked over his legs had slid off and formed a puddle of tartan plaid at his feet. He looked tall, imposing, and fierce. Despite the fact that he wore a black dressing gown instead of teaching robes, he looked every bit as intimidating as he had when he'd been their nasty potions teacher and they'd been first year students. Hermione found it little wonder that Harry's hand froze on the doorknob, and she found herself automatically hoping that she wouldn't be given a detention.

"Harry Potter," Severus repeated, his voice gone soft and hard. "Are you a cup? A trinket? A mindless beast? Or are you a wizard with a will of his own?"

"A wizard?" Harry answered, in a squeaky, unsure tone.

"Possibly," Severus said disdainfully. "I have often surmised that there is nothing but granite between those two, rarely used appendages hanging off of the sides of your head. Prove me wrong, Potter. Sit down and listen instead of flouncing off in a huff."

At this jibe, Harry stood straighter, and seemed on the verge of making some argument. His open mouth snapped shut again as Severus suddenly stumbled slightly. Hermione half rose from her seat in order to help Severus, but Harry beat her to it. The look of anger on Harry's face softened as he strode away from the door and grasped Severus' arm to steady the still weak man.

"I think," Harry said softly, "that you are the one who needs to sit down, Severus."

"I will if you will, Potter," Severus replied, still glaring at the young wizard.

Sighing, Harry gave Severus a nod, and then helped him to sit down. Tucking the blanket back around Severus, he returned to his own seat. Hermione noticed that Harry looked resigned and strangely calm. Perhaps the verbal sparring with Severus had calmed him because it was so familiar, so normal.

"Severus has hit on the heart of the matter," Albus began calmly, as if nothing had happened to interrupt the discussion. "You are no snake, Harry. You are a wizard with a will of your own--a rather stubborn will, if you don't mind my saying so."

Here, Harry sighed again and looked a bit sheepish as Albus peered at him from over the top of his glasses. "I suppose I am stubborn..." Harry began.

"Can I get that in writing?" Severus grumbled.

Ignoring Severus, Harry continued, "But what does my stubbornness have to do with anything?"

"Everything, my boy. Absolutely everything. When Nagini is destroyed, and Tom is killed, he will undoubtedly attempt to use the piece of soul that resides in you. However, in order to do that, he will have to be able to completely control you. Tom has tried that once before, Harry, and failed spectacularly. Do you remember?"

"At the Ministry!" Harry said, his eyebrows raising in surprise. "The night...the night that Sirius died. He tried to control me then, but I shook him off somehow. I don't even know how I did it. How can I do it again if I don't know how I did it in the first place?"

"Harry," Remus said, "fighting off possession is a bit like fighting off a boggart. What you think, and, more importantly, what you are feeling at the time has great effect. What were you thinking of when you threw Voldemort's hold off of you?"

Closing his eyes, Harry took a moment to remember, and then he spoke so softly that everyone in the room leaned forward in their seats in order to hear him. "I was thinking of Sirius. I was thinking of how much I loved Sirius, and how, if Albus killed me, I'd be able to see him again."

"Yes," Albus said, his eyes looking both sad and wise. "I remember that you told me that very thing later that evening. Voldemort has absolutely no ability to love, and he fears what he cannot understand, as do we all. Tom has also built a whole world for himself based on hate, and where love is, no hate can survive. Love is what saved you when your mother gave her life for you, Harry, and love is what saved you that dark night in the Ministry."

"Is it so powerful, then?" Harry asked softly.

Surprisingly, it was Severus who answered him. "Love is not only that fluttering feeling that teenagers get in their stomachs when some pretty twit walks by. It's not some clichéd poem written on a holiday card. Love is a powerful force. Just as Death Eaters use hatred to fuel their most wicked spells, those who love use that force for much of their magic. Love, is powerful and mysterious."

Severus had said most of these words to the blanket in his lap, but on the last line, his eyes lifted to meet Hermione's. For a precious moment, they stared at each other as if they were the only two people in the room.

As such moments often are, Hermione and Severus' brief reverie was broken by a voice both callous and unfeeling. "And what could *you* possibly know about love?" Hestia Jones said, laughing.

"A great deal more than you do, I would imagine," Hermione said scathingly to the rude witch, giving her an icy look that quelled any reply that Hestia might have dared.

Hermione's comment caused a bit of tittering in the room, especially from the direction of the Weasleys. When the room had once again quieted, Harry spoke again.

"He will have power the Dark Lord knows not," Harry quoted softly. "That's always puzzled me. You once told me that was about love, but I didn't believe it."

"Yes, Harry," Albus replied, "I am certain that it all boils down to love. Love is the one force that completely confounds Tom. You may have noticed that while you were a student at Hogwarts, we haven't spent any time teaching you any particular defensive spells."

"I have wondered about that. Ever since I learned of the prophecy, I expected that someone would start teaching me what I needed to know to fight Voldemort. Because no one has, I've felt like you expected some miracle from me...that you were going to just send me into the fray unprepared."

"Do you think there is any spell we could teach you that the Dark Lord doesn't already know?" Severus asked, his tone only slightly mocking. "Believe me, there is nothing anyone can teach you that the Dark Lord hasn't already faced and countered. If we are going to destroy him, it won't be because you've been trained to duel. He has decades more experience than you, and he uses the Unforgivables, while you cannot."

"I could learn them," Harry said softly.

"No, my boy," Albus said kindly, "that is not the path for you. You have the will, but not the temperament. Leave such wickedness to the Death Eaters. I believe that the answer to this battle lies elsewhere. Like the other times you have faced Voldemort, love is the key to winning this fight. Arthur, if you will be so kind as to explain?"

Arthur Weasley stood and walked up to Minerva's desk as Kingsley had done to address the room. "Now then, Harry, Albus tells me that you have seen the locked door in the Department of Mysteries, yes?"

"The locked room..." Harry mused, tilting his head in concentration. "Oh, yes, I remember now. You told me, Albus, that the locked room was full of love somehow. I'd forgotten all about it."

"That room is kept locked at all times because it can be very dangerous," Arthur continued. "I have known several witches and wizards who have attempted to study the force in that room, and they all had very differing results. Two noticed no effect whatsoever. One ended up in a ward in St. Mungo's...that was Clive, he was a nasty piece of work. And one lovely young witch named Emily came out of that room glowing...I mean literally glowing...and she had the most awed and beautiful expression on her face."

"Ahhh, yes," Albus said with a sigh. "Emily Goodwright. That young woman had a heart as big as the sea."

"What does that room do?" Harry asked.

"Depends on the person. To some, nothing at all. That Clive chap, it hurt him badly, but he was the nearest thing to Voldemort that you'd ever want to meet. And Emily, she greatly enjoyed her experience. She said that when she came out of that room, she felt as if everything was made out of love, and as if she could love the entire world."

"You see, Harry," Albus interjected, "Emily had an amazing capacity for love, as do you. I think that your experience in that room would be much as hers was. Were you to bask in that room's power before the final confrontation with Voldemort, I don't think that there is one of his hate-fueled spells that it would not counter. In fact, I think that it would overcome Voldemort himself."

"But, you're wrong," Harry said, looking sad and confused. "I don't know anything about love!"

"Nonsense, my boy, utter nonsense," Albus said, smiling at Harry fondly. "You have shown that you do, time and time again. You are friends with house-elves and giants; you take the side of the downtrodden over and over again. Friends and family have ever meant more to you than wealth and power. I was terribly worried about leaving you to the dubious mercy of your aunt and uncle's house, but you came away from that house with your heart intact."

"He's right, Harry," Ron said softly, speaking out for the first time since the meeting began. "It's always amazed me that you were brought up by people like that, but you didn't turn into a great selfish prat like your cousin. I really admire you for that."

"But I've got a horrible temper...and I'm stubborn!" Harry argued.

"And you're kind," Hermione added. "And considerate of others, and always ready to help people out of a tight spot. And you're the best friend a bossy, frizzy-haired girl could have ever hoped for when she made her way to Hogwarts and had such trouble fitting in."

A melodramatic sigh interrupted Hermione. "If we are done with the Potter appreciation speeches," Severus drawled, "perhaps we could return to the matter at hand."

"I don't suppose you think much of my capacity for love," Harry grumbled, glancing at Severus out of the corner of his eye.

The voice that answered him was lacking its usual bite. "You took me into your home when no other witch or wizard I know would have. You took me in, and you were kind to me, despite my madness...despite the fact that you had watched me kill your mentor and friend before your very eyes. If that does not convince you, Potter, then I was correct, and there is naught but granite between those ears of yours."

The room was silent as Harry bent his head and thought about all that they had discussed. Hermione watched him brush his fingers over the hand where the faint lines of an old scar still showed. When Harry once again lifted his head, gone was the indecision and fear that had been haunting them.

"How do we do this?" he asked Albus.

"Arthur, did you bring the key?" Albus asked.

"I've got it here somewhere," Arthur replied, searching his pockets. As he searched, an old appliance plug dropped from one trouser pocket and rolled across the floor unnoticed. "Ah! Here it is!"

Hermione was expecting a key to the locked room in the Department of Mysteries. When Arthur pulled a barely bristled hair brush out of his robe pocket, she was momentarily confused.

"That," began Albus, "is a very rare thing indeed. It is an unregistered Portkey, and when it is invoked, it will take the bearer inside the locked room. I had a devilish time creating it, but it works well enough. We had Emily test it for us."

"So," Harry said, "when the time comes, I take that Portkey and go into the room. How do I get out again?"

Kingsley answered this one. "That room is heavily guarded against people getting into it. Luckily, there are no charms at all that keep people from leaving that room. Emily Apparated out with no difficulty."

"And when do we do this?" Harry asked.

"We will make our move the next time Voldemort gathers his Death Eaters to him. Severus' mark will tell us when that occurs. Remus will tell his contact to kill Nagini, and Harry will use the Portkey to go to the locked room. Severus will Apparate to the meeting place, and we shall Apparate to Severus."

"Can you do that?" Hermione asked curiously. "Can you Apparate to a person instead of a place?"

"No, my dear," Albus answered. "But thanks to that excellent tracking bracelet Severus has acquired, we shall have a map of the area. And one can use the bearings of a map to Apparate."

"What do we do in the meantime?" Harry asked, obviously anxious to leap into the fray.

"We wait," Albus said simply. "At last all of our preparations are in place. Now there is nothing to do but to wait until the time is right." No one in the room looked pleased at the idea of waiting, and the room burst into quiet conversation once again.

The meeting broke up soon after that, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione slowly escorted Severus back to his room in the infirmary.

"I do not want to go back to the confounded infirmary," Severus grouched.

"You're tired, love," Hermione said, which caused both of the young men to grimace, though they made no comment. "Don't try to Apparate tonight. Stay here, let Poppy check you in the morning, and then we will go to Harry's. All right?"

"You'll stay then?" Severus asked nonchalantly.

"I'll stay," Hermione promised.

Though Severus made no reply, the three friends had no further trouble leading him to Poppy's domain. When they reached the door to Severus' room, Hermione said goodbye to Harry and Ron, and told them that she and Severus would meet up with them at Grimmauld Place the next day. The boys left, Hermione softly closed the door of Severus' room, and suddenly, they were alone.

"I thought those dratted boys would never leave," Severus said from where he lay on the bed. Slowly, his eyes traveled from the top of Hermione's head to the tip of her shoes and back up again.

"I must look a fright," Hermione murmured, hastily trying to tidy her hair with her fingers.

"You look divine, trollop," Severus said, his voice low and gravelly. "Come here."

Explorations

Chapter 30 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

Author's note: Wow, it's been so long since I wrote the beginning of this fic. I haven't really done any writing since I stopped on this one. I have no good excuse. I have caught no debilitating diseases, my hands weren't lobbed off in a freak vending machine accident... I feel badly that this fic has gone unfinished. It weighs on me. And it isn't anything to do with me, really, I just know I've let my lovely readers down. I won't excuse myself, but for my readers I will offer what explanation I have.

The release of book seven really took the wind out of my sails. I think, and this is just one Pook's opinion, that it is one of the most poorly written pieces of drivel I have ever read. The pacing of the book is atrocious. Some of the plot choices are nonsensical. It reads as if JKR was sick of the whole mess, and eager to do other things, so she just wanted to get it over with. It rather outraged me. JKR had such a fine tale going, and it seemed to me that her story got bigger than she could handle. It reads like she ignored all of her own foreshadowing and just wanted to trick everyone so they couldn't guess what would happen. One shouldn't write to those ends. One should be true to one's tale and ignore what people say. The details themselves did not bother me so much as the overall clunkiness of the writing. A few details did bother me. I can't imagine I need a spoiler alert at this point, but here is one anyway. I wasn't at all surprised that she killed off Snape, I was expecting it. No matter, something as silly as a character being killed off has never stopped me from writing around it, if I wanted them alive. But JKR killed off both Remus and Tonks, leaving us another orphan, and then she went and killed one of the twins, which I think was just cruel. It was as if she just wanted to show how "adult" she could write. Writing horror and atrocities is easy, as proven by every angst-ridden fic out there. Writing with compassion, writing comedy, writing love in a way that doesn't sound all trite, that's what's hard. That's what is "adult." One doesn't hear much about JKR's writing anymore, and that doesn't surprise me. I think the fame got to her, and that's understandable. Fame is a burden. Common folks like me don't always remember that. So I'm still trying to forgive JKR for that monstrosity of a book. I'm getting there, but apparently I can hold a literary grudge for some time.

But enough rambling. On to the important stuff. This chapter was written a year ago, along with half the next chapter. It was beta read by the ever lovely and always encouraging Southern Witch. Thanks, Sun, for your sharp eyes and incredible patience. Any mistakes that are left are all my own fault. Feel free to let me know, gentle readers, and I'll get them sorted. I will make no promises about if or when I will finish this fic. There isn't much of it left to go, just a couple chapters really, but I'm out of practice, and writing comes hard to me these days. I wasn't going to post anymore, until I had it all written, but maybe this will be the spur I need to get my butt in gear. Thanks to all my readers who have emailed me kind words over the years. Your kindness has not gone unnoticed.

With all affection,

Pook

Disclaimer: They are not mine, I only take them out to play.

"Clarity of mind means clarity of passion, too; this is why a great and clear mind loves ardently and sees distinctly what he loves."

Blaise Pascal

"You look divine, trollop," Severus said, his voice low and gravelly. "Come here."

For a moment, Hermione simply stood as still as a statue, completely transfixed by the expression of naked hunger on Severus' face. This was no schoolboy who lay on the bed before her, beckoning to her with his eyes. This was no boy hoping for a snog and a quick grope. Severus was a grown man with a man's passions.

After their many late night snog sessions in Severus' bedroom at Grimmauld Place, Hermione had always left Severus to go to her room, alone and frustrated. She had assumed that if her love returned to his senses, she would be thrilled. Many times, while lying awake in bed, she had fantasized how it would be to stay in his arms instead

of retreating to her own room. All she knew about sex was what she had read in books and what she'd heard other girls whispering about. She'd been certain that when the chance arrived to find out for herself, she would jump at it.

Hermione didn't feel like jumping anywhere. Suddenly fidgety and nervous, Hermione found herself shifting her weight from foot to foot. Is this how it was? Did a man just say "Come here," and you just jumped into bed and did it? And why wasn't she jumping? There he was, the man she loved. He wanted her and she wanted him. But in all of her many imaginings, it had never seemed quite like this. The silence stretched as she hesitated. The expression in Severus' eyes faded from hunger to quiet contemplation. For goodness sake, she had to say something! What if he misinterpreted her hesitation as disinterest? What if he decided she was too young and foolish after all?

"You should rest," she said, her voice a bit high and more squeaky than normal. Oh, this was brilliant. Severus was likely to think he had regained his sanity just in time for her to lose her own. What on Earth was wrong with her?

"I assure you that I am fine, Hermione. Poppy intends to release me in the morning. The *only* activity Poppy has cautioned me against is Apparating before I am fully rested."

When Hermione peeked at Severus through her lashes, she saw that he looked neither angry nor impatient, though he was still studying her intently.

"You should rest," Hermione repeated lamely. "This morning... I don't want that to happen again... You were so weak... and I could go stay in a guest room... I..."

Realizing that she was seriously beginning to babble, everything suddenly seemed far too difficult to cope with. Turning abruptly away from the bed, Hermione would have fled the room if she had not found the door firmly locked. Frustrated, she shook the handle fiercely. When a hand fell softly on her shoulder, she spun around in surprise to find Severus standing close to her.

"Why is the door locked?" she asked, horrified to hear how shaky her voice sounded.

"Because I locked it, Hermione. Now don't fret," he added, seeing her worried expression. Raising a hand, he stroked her cheek tenderly. "I only want to talk with you for a moment. While I am feeling much improved from this morning, I do not think I am quite up to chasing you through the halls."

When he finished that speech with his crooked smile and wry lift of an eyebrow, Hermione abruptly let go of a breath she hadn't been aware she'd been holding. Here was the man she knew, speaking to her softly and touching her tenderly. The situation didn't seem at all frightening anymore, and she rather wondered what she's been so nervous about in the first place. With a soft cry she went straight into his arms, and he wrapped them tightly around her.

"Forgive me, Hermione," Severus said softly into her hair. "I am still not quite myself. I know that you may find this incredibly difficult to believe, but I am not the most suave and romantic of fellows even at the best of times."

Her spirits lifting further, Hermione found herself giggling into Severus' chest.

Leaning back slightly, Severus lifted Hermione's chin with a gentle hand until she met his eyes. "Better?" he asked.

"Much better," she said with a nervous smile. "I'm sorry, Severus. I've never... well..."

Embarrassed, Hermione dropped her head again, but Severus lifted her chin until she once more met his eyes.

Leaning forward, he said in a conspiring whisper, as if confessing a great secret, "I rather gathered as much." His manner more than his words made Hermione giggle again.

"Come, love," Severus murmured, taking her hand and leading her away from the door. "I promise I will not rush you again, and I will not pressure you to go farther down this road than you are ready to travel. However, after the way you leapt to my defense in that meeting, I simply have to show you how you make me feel."

Docilely, Hermione let him lead her to the bed. When he stretched out and patted the mattress next to him, she gladly joined him. Wrapping her tightly in his arms, Severus simply held her closely for what seemed like ages. Eventually, he shifted their positions until he lay half over her, and brought his head down to hers for a toe-curling kiss. This was familiar territory, for many of their good night kisses had resulted in them cuddling in the bed, kissing and caressing each other. When Severus' hand drifted down to softly knead her breast, Hermione moaned softly into his mouth, for this was deliciously familiar territory as well.

When Hermione felt Severus' fingers working the buttons of her blouse, she couldn't help but flinch slightly. Though he had kissed her many times, and had his hands all over her clothed body, Severus had never gone so far as to unbutton one button while he had been mad.

"It's all right, love," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear. "We will not travel too far tonight, but please let me touch you. I've wanted to touch you for so very long."

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes."

Slowly, the blouse was unbuttoned, and then Severus lifted her with one arm so that he could get to the hooks on the back of her bra. When her bra disappeared over the edge of the bed, Hermione scarcely had time to be embarrassed by her nudity before Severus lowered her back to the bed and kissed her again. This time, his hand was caressing and kneading her bare breast, and Hermione moaned into his mouth again.

When Severus blazed a trail of hot kisses down her throat and then closed his lips around one crinkled nipple, Hermione found herself instinctively arching up against him. So distracted was she by the new sensations coursing through her that she didn't realize Severus had unbuttoned her jeans until she felt his hand slip under her knickers and caress her intimately.

"Severus?" she whispered nervously.

Lifting his head from her breast, Severus returned to her mouth and kissed her tenderly. "Hush, love," he whispered against her lips. "Let me touch you. Tonight, let me touch all of you."

With that, Severus kissed her again, and as he parted her lips with his tongue and deepened the kiss, his clever fingers parted her nether lips and he began to stroke the hot, needy flesh beneath them. Hermione had never felt anything like it in her life. While her own fingers had always seemed clumsy and inept, Severus seemed to know exactly what to do. In moments he had her writhing beneath him and lifting her hips to get more of his touch. When she came apart in his arms, he clamped his mouth over hers to muffle her sharp cry.

As Hermione slowly got her breath back, Severus gently removed his hand from her knickers. While she lay panting and watching him, he slipped a finger into his mouth and licked the moisture from it. Hermione was surprised to realize that the gesture didn't disgust her. Instead, it made her catch her breath and wish that he would touch her again. He gazed at her as he licked his other fingers clean, and his dark eyes were filled with fire.

"You're brilliant," Hermione blurted abruptly. Blushing furiously, she lowered her eyes. Was that the sort of thing one should say to a lover at a time like this? While Severus had calmed her nerves, she still felt awkward and out of her depth. Perhaps that sudden non sequitur required further explanation. "It's only that... well... I didn't realize it would feel like that... so strong. I read that it..."

Realizing that she had just confessed to reading about sex just as she did about any subject that interested her, Hermione's words trailed off and she blushed again. Severus' amused chuckle startled her.

Still chuckling, Severus lay back down beside her and gathered her into his arms. "Trollop," he murmured into her hair, "it is no secret that you are a very curious woman

and certainly no shock that you have done some research into the subject. I would have been astounded to find out otherwise. As for my possible brilliance, can I assume that was... uncharted territory for you?"

"Yes," she admitted easily. Now, wrapped snugly in his arms with his face nestled in her hair, it didn't seem so awkward to talk to him about it. "I've tried it on my own, but I don't seem to quite have the hang of it."

"Nothing a little practice won't cure, I imagine," he said huskily into her ear before nibbling on her ear lobe. As his mouth wandered to her throat, she felt him slip his hand into her knickers again. The electric sensations that he had aroused before returned almost as soon as he stroked her. This time, as he stroked her sensitive flesh with his thumb, he slipped a long finger into her tight passage and began to move it slowly and firmly in, and out, and in again.

This dance of finger and thumb was beyond anything Hermione had ever imagined. Though she wanted desperately to kiss him, she couldn't seem to move. She couldn't think; she could scarcely breathe. All she could do was cling tightly to him and whimper as the intense sensations rolled through her entire being. It wasn't long before her release rocketed through her again, and as she came, she said his name over and over.

When Hermione had recovered enough to think again, she opened her eyes to see that Severus looked unbearably pleased with himself. In fact, he looked a right smug bastard. While she was almost in awe of the feelings he had awakened in her, she knew this mustn't continue. Severus was her love, but he was also a Slytherin, and with that breed you had to begin as you meant to continue or they would walk all over you. Not to mention the fact that, so far, all the pleasure of this night had been completely one-sided. Realizing just how one-sided it was caused Hermione to be more than a little chagrined. While Hermione was unpracticed in the ways of sex, she was still a Gryffindor, and all Gryffindors knew when it was time to leap into the fray. Oh, yes! She would wipe that smug smile right off of his face!

When they had arrived back at Severus' room in the infirmary, Severus had shrugged out of the long, black dressing gown he'd been wearing. Now he wore only a vest and a pair of pajama bottoms with an elastic waist. That should be easy enough to manage, even for someone as unskilled as she was. To distract him for a moment, Hermione leaned up to kiss his smugly smiling mouth. Severus answered her kiss readily enough, and as they kissed, Hermione slipped a hand under the waistband of his pajamas and wrapped it snugly around his hard cock. Though she was rather shocked to discover that Severus was not wearing pants beneath his pajamas, she was not so surprised that she released her new found prize. A sharp hiss of breath was all the response she got from Severus, but when she tentatively stroked him from root to tip, that hiss turned into a ragged moan.

"Hermione," he whispered breathlessly and then buried his face in her hair. Reaching down with one hand, he pulled the front of his pajama bottoms out and down to expose his cock.

While Hermione had peeked at him while he was showering, she'd never been this close to a naked man before. The sight of his proudly standing shaft intrigued her. As she stroked him a second time, Severus moaned again, and a drop of fluid appeared at the tip.

So far so good. She must not be doing too badly, or he would surely tell her so. He wasn't shy after all. Indeed, if she did anything amiss, she could easily imagine him giving her an impromptu lecture on the subject. Her hand traveled back down to the root of his cock and slowly back up again. She could feel Severus' hot breath against her neck, and he groaned again as her hand made a fourth journey. Now then, what had Ginny told her about this sort of thing other than "Grab and pull and Bob's your uncle." Oh, yes! If you added a twisting motion with your hand, that was supposed to feel good. It was really supposed to make a man stand up and take notice, so to speak. When she added a twisting motion as she rubbed up and down, Severus growled, a low and throaty sound that sent electric shivers down her spine.

Realizing that Severus was moving his hips, thrusting his cock into her hand, Hermione increased the speed of her strokes. It wasn't long before his sexy growl rose to a higher pitch. Straining against her, his body went completely rigid, and Hermione could feel the cock in her hand twitch and jump. Hot fluid gushed over her hand and splashed onto her bare stomach. His face still buried in her hair, Severus' body went completely limp.

Smiling in triumph, Hermione gently released her softening prize. Maybe she didn't have any previous experience at this sort of thing, but she'd done it! She'd pleased him just as he had pleased her, and she felt momentarily giddy with her success. Men sure were messy in their passion. Her hand was slick with the stuff. A cleaning spell was in order, and she could feel her wand still in the back pocket of her jeans, digging into her hip. Reminding herself to be more careful in future, lest she break her wand during a moment of passion, she slipped her clean hand under her hip and retrieved her wand. Before she cast the spell, curiosity overcame her. A glance at Severus showed that his eyes were still closed and his face still buried in her hair. Stealthily, she brought her wet hand up to her mouth and licked the tip of a finger. Oh! That was really not very pleasant. The taste was a bit bitter and slightly salty. It wasn't horrible at least. She imagined that when it came time to get more adventurous and take her lover into her mouth, she would manage well enough. A silent spell later and the slick fluid disappeared from her hand, her stomach, and the bed.

The man beside her finally stirred. Raising up on an elbow, Severus looked down at her. The smug expression had fled entirely, and her lover looked down into her eyes with an expression of surprised adoration. So tender was the look in his eyes that it made Hermione doubly glad that she'd been brave enough to give back some of what she had received. It was clear by Severus' expression that he had planned to make no demands on his innocent lover this night, that he had meant it to be all for her. Such generosity in love brought tears to her eyes. The Snape she had known in school had been a bitter, difficult man. The madman she had come to love had been difficult and stubborn, but also sweet and caring. This sane Severus was a wholly new creature to her. While she was sure that there would be times when she wanted to hex him for being the stubborn bastard that he was, it touched her heart to know that the sweetness she had found in her madman was not lost.

When Severus raised a hand to brush a lone tear from her cheek, she whispered, "I love you."

"And I love you, my trollop," he whispered back.

Then he was kissing her again, and she was surprised to feel his cock hardening against her hip. Though he'd said that they wouldn't go too far tonight, Hermione found that she didn't care if he'd changed his mind. This was the right man, this was the right time, and she was feeling anything but nervous. Severus lifted away from her. Kneeling on the bed, he reached for the waistband of her jeans and pulled them down to her ankles. Leaving her knickers in place, he stretched out on top of her, letting his still bare cock press against her cloth-covered mound.

Now they were in the position they had been in that morning, when Hermione had realized he wasn't well enough for such things. Though Severus was panting warmly in her ear, he was obviously fine, and the grinding of his hips against her felt wonderful. Wrapping her arms tightly around him, she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

"Oh, my trollop," he whispered into her ear. "It feels so good to be pressing you down, covering you completely, feeling you wrapped around me so tightly. Hold me Hermione... hold me tighter."

"Yes, Severus! Oh, Yes!" she replied, clasping her arms even more fiercely around him.

Raising his hips for a moment, Severus licked a palm and rubbed the moisture on the bare skin of her thighs. Sliding down ever so slightly, he pressed his cock between her thighs and began to thrust it in and out.

"So soft," he whispered. "So sweet and soft."

Just when Hermione was beginning to think this encounter was solely for Severus' benefit, a clever hand worked itself between their bodies and slid into her knickers. He teased her at first, with soft, slow strokes. As the pace of his thrusting hips increased, his hand rubbed faster, and he slipped two fingers into her tight channel. Then his mouth was on hers, and he kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in rhythm with the hard pumping of his hips.

"Come for me now," he said against her lips. "So close, I'm so close. Oh, Hermione, come for me, love. Say my name again. Oh gods, Hermione. I almost came myself when you chanted my name as you trembled and bucked in my arms."

As the sensations swelled and broke over her, she said his name over and over. His hips bucked erratically, and he gave a short bark of triumph as he came. She could feel his cock twitch between her thighs as it had in her hand, and a wet heat spread over her skin. Collapsing over her, Severus breathed as heavily as a horse after a long race, and she was breathing just as hard.

Still holding him tightly, Hermione was amazed by how wonderful her first forays into sex had felt. If this felt so good, how would it feel when Severus was thrusting deeply into her body instead of between her closed thighs? Whatever nervousness she had felt when they had first reached his room was completely gone, and all she felt now was a deep yearning to finish what they had started.

Eventually, Severus stirred. Lifting up on his elbows, he kissed her forehead, her nose, and her mouth. Retrieving his wand, he cast the same cleansing spell she had used earlier and the dampness on her thighs disappeared. He then retrieved her jeans from around her ankles and slid them back onto her, placing a chaste kiss on the triangle of cloth that showed through her open fly. After pulling his own pajama bottoms up, he left the bed and helped Hermione to stand so that he could turn down the coverlet. The bed set to rights, they got under the coverlet and snuggled closely together. Neither said a word as they fell asleep in each other's arms.

The Sky's the Limit

Chapter 31 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: I wasn't sure what to expect when I started this fic up after a 4 year hiatus. Though it was well read back in the day, I rather thought no one would bother reading it after so long. I didn't even post an update on WIKTT or Potter Place at first. I was, and still am, mortified that I never managed to finish it. I might have posted a notice on my LJ, but LJ was under attack at the time, and I couldn't even get to it. So I just sort of slipped it in, wondering if anyone would notice, not sure if anyone would care after all this time.

Imagine my shock when the first reviews appeared even before I fixed a mistake in posting I had made due to not being used to posting anything anymore. And what kind comments! No "where have you been, you lazy old whore?!" I saw some names I recognized from long ago, and lots of new folks as well, and not one of you calling me the names I so deserve.

I thank you. I thank you for your patience and for your kindness. I thank you for your kind words and some comments so amusing I did indeed laugh out loud. And mostly I thank you for reading.

The fic is finished, and I'll post the last few chapters over the next couple weeks. This chapter has not yet been blessed by my lovely beta, Southern Witch, but after so long a hiatus, I find I am so impatient to post that I cannot wait another moment. Any mistakes are my own fault. Please feel free to email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com with any errors you find, and I'll get them sorted. Special thanks to alert reader, Bettina, who caught a dastardly typo clear back in chapter 24.

"Isn't sanity just a one-trick pony anyway? I mean, all you get is that one trick, rational thinking, but when you're good and crazy, well, the sky's the limit!" Ben Edlund, The Tick

Waking the next morning, Hermione was at once buffeted with feelings both strange and marvelous. Severus lay on his side facing away from her and she was spooned tightly against him with one arm thrown over his waist. He must have removed his soft cotton vest in the night, because she could feel the tickle of his chest hair against her palm. She could also feel her bare breasts pressed snugly against the warm skin of his back, which reminded her of her own half naked state. Rubbing gently against him, she felt her nipples tighten with arousal.

Hermione had never before awakened with a half dressed man in her bed, and she was quickly discovering that she adored it. She loved the weight of him next to her, and the heat that radiated off of him. The crinkle of his chest hair against her fingers was as astonishing as it was wonderful, and Hermione was impatient to explore his body further. Slowly sliding her hand downward, she found that Severus had left his pajama bottoms on, just as he had left her Muggle jeans and knickers in place before they had drifted to sleep. It was his gentle response to her missish nerves of the night before, and Hermione was completely taken aback by both his patience and his kindness. The stern professor of her schooldays had been completely absent, and Severus' responses to her fear had been far closer to those of the mad friend she had found at Grimmauld Place.

In the light of morning, her nerves of the previous evening seemed patently ridiculous to her. Honestly! She had almost fled the room at the thought of having sex with the man that she loved! What had she been thinking? Yes, it had all seemed strange and awkward, but this was her Severus. She desired him with a passion that she had not believed herself capable of. Where once she had been nervous, she now was impatient. Just the soft rubbing of her breasts against his back as she breathed was sending warm shivers of pleasure down her body.

She may have acted the frightened maiden last night, but this morning her Gryffindor side was putting in a strong appearance. Gently, she removed her arm from around Severus' waist, and slipped her hand over her hip until she felt the wand still in her back pocket. She was definitely going to have to be more careful of her wand, but at the moment, she was simply relieved that she'd been far too distracted the night before to move it to a safer location. Slowly sliding her wand out of her pocket, she silently worded the spell that would divest her of her remaining clothes and leave them folded at the side of the bed. Having Severus undress her with his gentle fingers and strong hands was a pleasure she would have to save for another time. Right now, Hermione knew exactly what she wanted, but she wasn't at all sure how to ask for it. Hoping that Severus would take her nudity as the invitation it was, Hermione silently cast the spell that would remove the last of Severus' clothing. Suddenly, she could feel the naked warmth of his backside nestled against her thighs. With a pleased sigh, she negligently tossed her wand in the vague direction of the bedside table. Wrapping her arm back around Severus' waist, she curled her fingers in the patch of hair on his chest. She couldn't help pressing her whole nude length tighter against him, and the feeling of so much skin against skin had her sighing again.

The man beside her stirred at last. Twining his hand over hers, he raised her hand to his lips and gave a warm kiss to her palm.

"Hermione," he murmured.

Hermione's only response was a hum of contentment. Now that he was awake, she saw no reason not to rub her bare breasts against the warm skin of his back, so she did so. This earned her a rumble of wakening arousal from Severus that she felt more than heard as it vibrated against her whole chest. Releasing her hand, Severus reached behind him, perhaps to press her more firmly against him, but when his wandering hand encountered the bare flesh of her arse, his entire body tensed up as he froze in place.

"Hermione?" he whispered uncertainly.

Sweeping his hair out of the way, Hermione placed an open mouthed kiss at the back of his neck, right where neck met shoulder.

"Severus," she said against his skin, rather shocked at how low and husky her voice had dropped.

The tension in his body fled as abruptly as it had appeared. His hand began to explore the curves of her bare backside as he turned in her arms to face her.

Hermione saw passion as well as the question in his eyes, and she felt very brave indeed. "I think we should finish what we started last night," she said softly, her voice a low rumble.

There was no more hesitation on his part, no questioning of her certainty. Severus simply used the hand on her arse to pull her hips firmly against his own as he took her lips in a searing kiss. She could feel his hard length pressing fiercely against her thigh as he rocked against her, and it made her whimper with need. Suddenly, she found herself flat on her back as Severus leaned over her.

"Hermione," he said a third time, his voice gruff with desire. Leaning down, he took a nipple into his mouth. His change of position set his skin sliding over her entire body. Hermione wasn't sure which was more enticing, the hot mouth over her nipple or the excitement of so much bare skin rubbing against bare skin. She felt wanton in her nakedness, hungry and painfully impatient. Spreading her legs so that Severus' hips nestled in the cradle of her thighs, Hermione arched her hips up, grinding against the hardness she found. Nothing had ever felt as exhilarating as rubbing her aching center against that delicious hardness.

"Hermione," he said breathlessly against her nipple. Sliding his body against hers once again, he returned to her mouth and kissed her with sudden aggression. His hips pressed into hers with more speed and force, and for a moment they simply writhed against each other, with panting breath and small, guttural moans peppered in between kisses.

When Severus' hips slowed, and he raised himself slightly away from her, Hermione cried out in disappointment.

"Shhh...Hermione," Severus murmured, kissing her softly for a moment.

As his kiss grew more hungry, Hermione felt him part her folds with his hand. As he began to rub her wet flesh with swirling strokes of his fingers, Hermione broke the kiss, clutching him tightly to her as she panted in his ear.

"Yes, Severus, oh yes!" she cried out as she felt the feelings he was awakening with his hand build stronger and stronger.

As her cries grew more abandoned, Severus pressed his hips closer, and she could feel his cock slip barely into her opening. It felt so good to have his shaft teasing her entrance that she tried to arch her hips off the bed to get him farther inside her. Relentlessly, Severus held her hips firmly down with the palm of his hand as his fingers sped their swirling motions.

"Yes, Hermione, yes," Severus said into her ear, his voice low and rough.

Hearing her name, spoken in such tones, sent Hermione over the edge. As her orgasm began to pulse through her, Severus drove home, entering her fully in one firm thrust. The slight pain of that entry was swept away as her orgasm intensified, rolling through her in fierce waves. Severus didn't hesitate once he had entered her, but thrust his hips forward, pounding into her as she cried out in her passion. As her orgasm began to fade, she felt Severus' body stiffen. His hips began to lose their steady rhythm as he bucked erratically against her. As she felt the cock within her begin to twitch and jump, Hermione held him tightly, murmuring his name over and over as he shivered and moaned in her arms.

"Hermione," he whispered breathlessly, resting his face in her hair. "Oh, my Hermione."

When Severus suddenly went limp and rested his full weight atop her, Hermione realized he'd been keeping most of his weight off of her with his knees and elbows while they had made love. The weight of him was strangely comforting at first, but soon it became difficult for her to breathe. When she squirmed slightly, Severus rolled heavily off of her onto his back. Snaking one arm around her, he pulled Hermione tight to his side, and she snuggled in, resting her head on his shoulder and draping an arm over his waist. Severus' movements had been sluggish. For a moment, Hermione worried that the morning's exercise had been too much for him. Then, when Hermione reached a hand up to brush the hair from his face, she realized how sluggish she felt herself. Her limbs felt heavy as lead and she was entirely disinclined to move. She felt rather boneless. Remembering that a similar, heavy feeling had occurred after each of her orgasms the night before, Hermione decided that she was worrying too much. Based on their recent activity, Severus was obviously fine. This intense listlessness must be a normal product of having sex. The feeling had passed quickly the night before, so there was no need to worry about it.

Just as Hermione snuggled a little more closely, closed her eyes, and decided that a short kip might be in order, she felt Severus flinch so hard that it sent a tremor through the bed. As Severus suddenly sprang from the bed, Hermione's head and arm were abruptly dislodged. As she struggled briefly to right herself and get her face out of the bedclothes, Severus spoke.

"Hermione!"

This time, her name on his lips had none of the previous passionate tones. The word was curtly spoken through clenched teeth. For a moment, Hermione worried that the morning's exercise had been too much for him after all. However, when Hermione sat up and looked at him, she realized they had far more serious issues to deal with.

Severus stood calmly by the bed, but a closer look belied his apparent calm. His eyes were narrowed, his jaw was clenched, and his right hand was firmly clasped over the Dark Mark on his left forearm. A vein throbbled dully at his temple. As Hermione watched, he uttered a quiet hiss and clasped the hand over the Dark mark more firmly.

Hermione was standing at his side so fast that she wasn't aware of even getting out of the bed. Putting a tentative hand over the one clutching the Mark, she gazed into his narrowed eyes.

"Severus, what is it? What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

At the last question, Severus emitted a short bark of laughter which ended in another hiss.

"I'm fine," he assured her, his jaw still clenched so that his words seemed strained and strange. "I'm being called. It is... unpleasant."

"Voldemort?" Hermione gasped. "Now? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Severus repeated, rolling his eyes at her. "For Merlin's sake, woman, it's not the first time I've been called. It happens every few weeks. Whenever the Dark lord has some sort of nastiness planned he calls his minions to him."

"Every few weeks!" Hermione snapped incredulously. "You suffer this every few weeks! Why have I not noticed? We've lived together for months..."

"Because I did not wish to burden you with it," Severus snapped, cutting her off. Closing his eyes briefly, Severus took a deep breath he continued in softer tones. "There is nothing to be done about it, love, it simply must be suffered. When one goes to the Dark lord the pain stops, but when one is in hiding..."

"One suffers," Hermione interjected. "Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"You were not meant to," Severus said, a small smile twitching up the corners of his mouth before he again hissed in pain. "No matter. We have much to do. We must alert Albus immediately and get the order organized to fight."

"What? N-now?" Hermione sputtered, her eyes going wide in shock. "No, Severus. Absolutely not. You've been ill. Whatever that spell was that you used to restore Dumbledore, it took everything you had. You looked near death. You'd be mad to face Voldemort until you've regained your full strength!"

"Hermione," Severus growled, "there's no time for this. We must act now!"

"No!" Hermione shouted. "Fuck that! We *don't* have to act now! If he calls you every few weeks, then wait for the next one!"

Grasping both of his arms in an unconscious parody of how Severus once held her, Hermione gave him a fierce shake. Severus' eyebrows flew up in surprise, and he seemed completely gobsmacked by her fierceness.

"You're precious!" Hermione shouted, giving him another shake. "Don't you understand that? I've finally got you all in one piece, mind and body, and you want to throw it all away!"

Suddenly letting loose of his throbbing Dark Mark, Severus wound both hands into Hermione's hair and crushed his mouth against her own. The kiss was as brief as it was violent. Leaving his hands twined in Hermione's hair, Severus leaned his forehead against hers, and stared into her eyes.

"Sweet Merlin, but I love you, Trollop," Severus murmured. "You have no idea. But think, Hermione! The Dark Lord doesn't use this manner of calling for trifles. If he is gathering all of the Death Eaters, he has more than mischief planned. People will die. I'm fine, Trollop! I needed a little rest and I've had it. Can you truly ask me to allow people to needlessly die just because something *might* happen to me? Can you ask me to wait when we have a chance to stop this madness forever, right now?"

For a moment, Hermione gazed at Severus sadly as her eyes welled with tears. As one teardrop slipped from the corner of her eye to roll slowly down her cheek, Hermione spoke softly.

"I could not love thee half so well, if I loved not honor more," Hermione said. "Forgive me, Severus. Last night, and this morning... Such personal joy had made me forget that we are still at war. Of course you are right. We can't let others suffer and die simply because I can't bear the thought of losing you."

Here, more tears spilled from Hermione's eyes. Severus brushed them softly from her cheeks with his thumbs before lowering his lips to hers once more. Hermione had never been kissed with such reverence, with such adoration, and for a moment, it made her cry all the harder.

"I swear to you that I will do everything in my power to survive the coming battle, if you will give me the same oath," Severus whispered.

"I will," Hermione said, a tremor in her voice. Raising a hand to brush the tears from her eyes, Hermione lifted her chin and said it with far more conviction. "I will!"

Severus leaned in to murmur in her ear. "Never have I had so much to live for. I'd like to see that madman try to keep me from returning to you."

Another brief kiss, then Severus stepped away from Hermione and reached for where his clothes hung on a nearby hook. "Get dressed, Hermione, and go tell Albus that I've been called. I'll head to the front gate and prepare to apparate. If I don't hear from you in ten minutes, I'll assume all is well with the plan and leave."

"Yes, Severus," Hermione said simply.

Hermione dressed quickly in her jeans and top, found her wand where it had rolled onto the floor, and stuffed it into her pocket. When she turned to Severus she gaped in shock. His hair looked dirty and matted. There were smudges of dirt on his face and hands. As she watched, he drew a graceful curve in the air with his wand and his new black robe and trousers became dirty and torn.

"Severus," Hermione began, hesitantly. "What ever are you doing?"

Severus' posture slumped somewhat, and his next words were directed to the bedpost Hermione stood near.

"Why, I have no idea what you mean, little whore," Severus said cheerfully. "But I'm mad as a mooncalf, so what would I know about it?"

A surprised giggle helped Hermione to shake off her tearful mood. This was not the helpless madman that she had been taking care of for months. Severus was a seasoned fighter and duelist, as fierce as he was intelligent. His impersonation of his mad self was so spot on that it was hard to remember that he was now sane. She doubted he had anyone to fear in the field of battle save the Dark Lord himself.

"Try not to fret," Severus said, as if reading her mind. "I'll be safe as houses for the first part of the fight. The Death Eaters think that I'm on their side, and the Order knows that I am not."

One last kiss, far briefer than either of them wished for.

"I love you, Trollop," Severus said softly.

"And I you, Severus."

Opening the door of Severus' room, they walked through the Infirmary hand in hand, and then went their separate ways. Severus walked briskly, head held high, towards the main entrance of the castle. Hermione shook her head again, straightened her shoulders, and rushed towards the Headmistress' office. On her way there, she wondered if she should have floo'd the office from the infirmary. She'd been in such a hurry, she'd just set out, jogging along the corridor in a rush. The Headmistress' office was terribly difficult to get into if one wasn't expected. At any rate, it was too late for second guessing. She was fast approaching the Headmistress' office and there weren't any floos in the nearby classrooms. If she couldn't get in, she'd send in her Patronus.

Rushing up to the door, Hermione quickly realized that she had been worried for nothing. The gargoyle guarding the door animated briefly and regarded her with dull stone eyes.

"Wait," it said shortly, its voice grating like slabs of granite rubbing together.

The gargoyle returned to its normal immobility just long enough for Hermione to begin to worry again. It animated again abruptly which made the anxiously awaiting Hermione give a violent start.

"Enter," the gargoyle said in its granite voice, as the door to the office swung open of its own accord.

Hermione fairly flew through the door and took the moving steps two at a time.

The Madness of War

Chapter 32 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;

some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N:

Special thanks to alert reader, Jong_Kahn, who caught a dastardly typo in the last chapter. Also to the ever-vigilant MMadFan, who realized that I had a typo in my email addy of all places. I'm an idiot! Big thanks to Periergeia, for finding a wee typo clear back in chapter 23. Even with the best of betas, and I have been blessed in that regard, the odd Pooka mistake sneaks through. Thanks!

My lovely beta, Southern Witch, and I have been having some miscommunication troubles, so I'm afraid that this chapter has not been betaed. If any of my kind readers find an oopsie, please feel free to email me at Plaidpooka@yahoo.com and I'll get it squared away.

To answer a few concerned readers, yes, Hermione did misquote or paraphrase one of the most misquoted quotes of all time. That was how I intended it to be. My Hermione, bookworm that she is, has been too busy with Hogwarts: a History to be reading much Richard Lovelace, and she is quoting what she has heard, a more modern paraphrasing of the sentiment. She might just as innocently say "Play it again, Sam." even though that oft quoted quote doesn't actually exist in the original. I did try the true quote in the first draft, but the language was distracting from the moment, and my Hermione didn't want to say it. So I decided to leave the paraphrased nod to Mr. Lovelace, and use the more modern sounding misquote.

The fic is finished! Here's 32, I'll post 33 soon, and 34 will be the end of it. I'm both very relieved that it is finally finished, and sad it's over.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

No man is sane who does not know how to be insane on proper occasions. ~Henry Ward Beecher

Reaching the top of the stairs, Hermione was met by Dumbledore and McGonagall. Both wore expressions of concern as they crossed the room to meet her.

"Hermione, what is it? What's amiss?" asked Minerva, putting a comforting hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Why, child, you're trembling like a leaf!"

"It's time," Hermione managed between pants as she tried to catch her breath. "Severus has been called. He's heading for the front gate. He'll apparate to Voldemort if he doesn't hear otherwise from you."

"So soon," muttered Albus. "We none of us expected it to be quite this soon. But our plans are in place. The Order is ready to fight. Soon as it is, there's no reason to risk more senseless deaths by waiting."

"That's what Severus said," Hermione admitted.

"Then let's get to work!" Albus roared. He then made an intricate pattern with his wand while muttering a charm to himself. This charm would temporarily lift the block on Apparating into the Headmistress' office. It was a chancy move, but Albus had explained that by the time he dropped the wards, Voldemort should be too busy with his own wicked plans to come snooping around the Hogwarts wards.

Each of them had people to contact and alert that the time to fight was now. While Albus fire-called Harry, Hermione sent her Patronus to Remus, and Minerva sent her Patronus to alert Hestia Jones. Hestia would contact the order members on her list while Minerva continued to contact the ones on her own.

While Hermione tried to wait patiently for her Patronus to return, Harry stepped through the floo, with Ron fast on his heels. Striding to where Albus held a barely bristled hairbrush, Harry paused only long enough to give Hermione a nod and a smile. He grasped the hairbrush tightly and vanished.

Ron had made himself busy with both his Patronus and the floo. Soon the office began to fill with red-headed witches and wizards. Next appeared Hestia Jones, Mundungus, and Dedulus Diggle almost simultaneously. A moment later and Elphius Dodge and Albus' brother, Aberforth, popped in at the same time.

A silvery otter swam through a wall in the office. Hermione immediately sent it to Hagrid, who crawled on hands and knees out of the floo a moment later. As soon as Hagrid cleared the grate, the floo flashed green again and Remus and Draco entered the crowded office together. The soft conversation of the gathered Order members abruptly stopped and several witches and wizards went for their wands. As Remus hurriedly stepped in front of Draco, Albus' voice echoed off the walls.

"Put your wands away, you fools!" he bellowed. "Do you really think Remus would lead a Death Eater into our midst? He's the Order's spy, and a damned good one at that." As still distrustful Order members slowly lowered their wands, Albus strode over to Draco. "Nagini?"

"Dead as a poisoned rat, which is exactly what killed her," Draco said smirking.

"Are you certain you want to be with us instead of with Severus?" Albus asked, putting a hand on Draco's shoulder.

"Yes," Draco fairly snarled. "I was seen by that skulking Wormtail." I want to fight, not be killed out of hand for being a traitor."

"Good to have you with us, my boy," Albus said affectionately, giving Draco's shoulder a pat. "You're a fine duelist, and the Order's numbers are not what they once were. It will be hard enough keeping Severus safe while he stands with Tom without us having to worry about the both of you."

"Not to worry," Draco said with a grin. "I'll keep an eye on Severus during the battle. I've had loads of practice looking out for him."

While Albus and Draco were talking, the last of the Order members had arrived. Their mouths had opened in shock at seeing a Malfoy in their midst, but then closed again without protest when they noted Albus' hand on Draco's shoulder, and the friendly manner in which they were conversing. Clearing the center of the room, Albus gestured to Draco and Ginny Weasley to join him.

"Now then, my dear Ginevra," Albus began, "as we discussed before, you will use the spell that activates Severus' tracking bracelet, and hold the map open for Harry when he arrives. Let Draco show you the charm and then we'll see what awaits us."

It was a simple charm, and in a moment a glowing green map hovered in the air before Ginny's upraised wand. Severus seemed to be on the outskirts of a village. The flashing dot that depicted him was in an empty green area, but near to him were several intersecting streets. Leaning towards the map, Dumbledore studied it intently for a moment.

"Aberforth," Albus called. "Come take a look at this. It looks rather like part of the birthmark on your shoulder."

Shuffling forward, Aberforth also leaned into the map, squinting his eyes as he studied it closely. "It does at that!" he declared. "That's Tumbly Woodside I dare say. I knew that having a birthmark that looked like a map of Tumbly Woodside would come in handy some day."

"Lincolnshire, isn't it?" asked Albus.

"Right you are, Albus," Aberforth said, nodding. "And that green patch the Death Eaters are skulking around in is the wood. They'd be fairly well hidden from the villagers there."

"I know that village well," Albus said. "Quite a few wizarding folk living there, many of them parents and families of our students. It's good we are not waiting. Those fine folk deserve to be protected. Miss Weasley, you can expect Harry to return here in half an hour. We'll do our best to keep Voldemort and his followers busy until Harry arrives."

And that was that. The time for what everyone hoped would be the final battle had arrived. The milling Order members stared at the map for a moment, then, by ones and twos, they began to apparate away.

Staring at the map with great concentration, Hermione picked a spot a bit away from the flashing dot, and made the turn. Finding herself in a wood, behind a large larch, Hermione took a moment to shake off the nausea that always accompanied Apparating. In short order she felt more herself and carefully peeked around the tree. The battle was already in force as the Death Eaters and Order members matched up. The Death Eaters had obviously been taken by surprise. Though they wore their black robes, none had put on their silvery masks. As she took stock of the scene, Hermione began to throw random hexes at the Death Eaters from her hiding place. They'd find her soon enough, but the temporary cover allowed her to help her fellows out without drawing fire to herself.

At the moment, Voldemort seemed content to let his minions fight on his behalf. Voldemort himself seemed more interested in throwing a whopping great temper tantrum. He paced back and forth, waving his arms around and shouting. Severus stood near him, ignoring the fighting, and studying a small flowering shrub.

"How did they know!" he roared. "I checked this area for detection wards myself! I told no one of my plans! They can't know we are here! Kill the bloody bastards!"

"That's a spindleberry," Severus said cheerfully to the small shrub. "Useless for potions, of course, but the fruit is quite pretty."

"Snape, I've got no time for your lunacy!" Voldemort snapped. Then, a fighter on the Order's side caught his attention. "The youngest Malfoy!" he growled. "When Wormtail told me he was near Nagini's enclosure when she died, I thought it was a coincidence. I see that it was not. Spy! Traitor! Kill him, Snape!"

Her attention to Voldemort and Severus wavered as she threw a slicing hex at Amicus Carrow. Hermione's aim was true and she sliced neatly through his left hamstring. Falling heavily to the grass, Carrow then found himself bound in magical ropes and left wriggling on the forest floor. Though she wasn't watching the scene, she could hear Severus replying to Voldemort.

"Must you shout, Lord Whore? I'm trying to study this fascinating shrubbery."

"Forget the bush, you imbecile!" Voldemort raged. "Kill that bastard of a Malfoy!"

"The boy?" Severus asked, puzzled. "But he's the boy."

"He's a traitor and must pay for his crimes!"

"I suppose so," Severus said with a sigh. Reluctantly leaving the spindleberry, Severus looked around until he saw Draco. "Boy!" he shouted, "The crazy old whore says that I have to kill you! Get your arse over here so that I can do so!"

Separating himself from the rest of the battle, Malfoy lined up against Snape. He looked Severus over, while Severus studied a vine near to Draco's shoulder.

"Get my arse over here so that you can kill me?" Draco mocked. "You may find me harder to kill than you think!"

"Perhaps," drawled Severus, "perhaps not."

With that, the two men began to duel, and this was no fake duel. Hexes and curses flew heavy between them, but for each hex thrown, the man it was aimed at countered it quickly. Draco and Severus had the look of long time dueling partners, and Hermione assumed that was exactly what they were.

Hermione's attention was caught by a figure sneaking up behind Remus. Wormtail! Not wanting that silver-handed bastard anywhere near the werewolf, Hermione took advantage of Wormtail's attention being focused on sneaking, and caught him with a strong sleeping hex. Wormtail fell to the earth, snoring before he hit the ground. Hestia Jones noted his fall, and with a snap of her wand he was bound as tightly as Carrow.

"I guess she isn't *all* bad," Hermione muttered.

While Hermione turned her attention to throwing hexes at Goyle, who was dueling with Ron, she heard Voldemort raging again.

"Great Mordred! Are you both completely and utterly useless! Why isn't that traitor at my feet with his heart ripped out!"

"I am trying, Dark Whore," Severus spit out, while casting another hex at Draco, which was summarily blocked.

Goyle might be as stupid as his son, but he was a formidable duelist. Even with both Ron and herself throwing hexes at him, he was not only holding his own, but attacking as well. Hermione flinched as Ron got clipped in the arm with a slicing hex, and doubled her efforts. It was Mundungus, of all people who came to their aid. Slipping up behind Goyle, he used a curse that looked suspiciously like the Cruciatus, and Goyle fell on the ground writhing. Hestia was again quick with her wand and soon Goyle was bound like his fellows.

Ron was bleeding profusely from his left arm. With a quick look at Hermione, he mouthed "Be careful," and Apparated back to Hogwarts to be patched up by Poppy. Hermione's aid had not gone unnoticed, and she saw Vincent Crabbe approaching her larch tree. Stepping out of hiding, Hermione faced the threat head on, with her head held high.

"Hold 'im off, 'Mione!" she heard Hagrid growl. "I'll give ye a hand once I've got this bastard taken care of."

Having no time to even wonder which bastard Hagrid was referring to, Hermione began dueling in earnest. Hermione was clever, and fast with a wand, but she found that the most she could do was counter the older wizard's attacks. Crabbe left her no time to make an attack of her own. Merciful Merlin but the man was fast! Knowing that she could only hold him off for so long, Hermione used all her concentration to counter his attacks. She was barely aware of the battle near Severus, but could not help hearing Voldemort's next words, so loudly did he shout them.

"Enough of this mockery of a duel! I'll take care of this traitor myself!"

"Are you certain that is wise, Tom?"

The voice was quiet, but cut through the sounds of battle just the same. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, and Grand Sorcerer; Founder and Secret Keeper, Order of the Phoenix; Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, stepped out from behind the cover he had been concealed in. Much like Hermione, Albus had stayed out of sight, helping the other order members as he could, and awaiting the perfect time to distract Voldemort with his entrance.

"No!" shrieked Voldemort, clenching his fists and stomping his feet like a small but furious child. "Dumbledore! You're dead!"

"I was," agreed Albus cheerfully. "I got better."

Just as Hermione feared she was nearing the end of her luck, Hagrid appeared behind Crabbe. A giant fist came down to smash into Crabbe's head. Eyes rolling back in his head, Crabbe slid to the ground, unconscious. Again Hestia's wand was quick, and the unconscious man was bound tightly, but Hestia's luck had run out. As the ropes flew from Hestia's wand, Bellatrix Lestrange took advantage of her inattention, and cast a Mobilicorpus. A stout tree ripped itself from the ground and threw itself at Hestia. Seeing it too late to block or dodge, the tree fell upon heavily upon Hestia, pinning her to the ground.

Even though Hermione had never liked the dark haired witch, she started towards Hestia to help her. A brutal faced Death Eater that Hermione didn't know the name of stepped between Hermione and Hestia and raised his wand. As Hermione began trading attacks with the big blond, Hagrid went to Hestia, picked up the tree, and threw it back at Bellatrix. Cackling with laughter, Bella dodged the tree easily, but it struck the death eater standing behind her. Knocked off his feet and struck a glancing blow to the head, Lucius Malfoy managed to stagger back on his feet enough to Disapparate. No one knows if he survived the blow or not. He was never seen again.

Despite his fierce appearance, the big blond Death Eater proved no match for Hermione and was soon lying on the ground, bound and helpless. Hermione looked toward Hestia just in time to See Hagrid pick up the fallen witch as if she weighed nothing, fumble a portkey out of his pocket, and disappear with her. Hermione assumed that the portkey would get them to Poppy. Hagrid did better with portkeys than Apparation, though he could manage Apparating when necessary, but a side-along was beyond his limited magic.

Taking the briefest of moments to look around her, Hermione took stock of the battle. Seven Death Eaters lay bound on the floor of the wood, while several more seemed to be missing altogether, perhaps wounded and fled like Malfoy. No Order members were dead or bound, though more than Ron and Hestia were missing, and Hermione assumed they had fled to the castle to deal with wounds and curses. Remus was fiercely holding his own against Rookwood, and looked to win the match easily. Severus and Draco were still trading attacks to no effect. Albus and Voldemort were dueling, and the maelstrom of spell effects that surrounded the pair was intense and frightening. As Hermione tore her eyes away, she saw Bellatrix Lestrange approaching the maelstrom, fury in her eyes.

A quick look around her showed all the remaining Order members already engaged. Though her knees literally shook at the prospect, Hermione knew what she had to do. Dumbledore had his hands full with Voldemort, he didn't need to deal with Bellatrix on top of it. Casting quickly, Hermione sent a shower of magical ropes from the tip of her wand straight at the insane Death Eater, hoping for a lucky strike while Bella was distracted. Showing almost inhuman reflexes, Hermione's hopes of a quick end to this duel were dashed as Bella waved a quick counter-spell. Hermione's ropes burst into flames and dissolved into ash. The next few moments were a storm of curses and counter curses. Hermione was fast, but she knew at once that she was no match for the mad witch. Struggling to keep up the frantic pace, Hermione's only hope was to try not to get herself killed until some member of the Order was free to help her.

Her hope was short lived. Sliding an unknown curse under Hermione's flagging defenses, Bella cackled with glee as the young witch crumpled to the ground.

At first, Hermione thought that she had been hit with a simple Petrificus Totalus. Further examination told Hermione that this was not true. Awake and aware, Hermione could not move a muscle of her body. She felt soft and boneless rather than stiff and immobile. Simple reflexes did not seem to be effected--Hermione could breathe and every few seconds her eyes blinked of their own accord. Her hearing and sight were intact, though she could not turn her head to look around, and with concentration, could barely move her eyes at all. In fact, she felt completely boneless, and for one horrified moment was convinced that Bellatrix had used some spell to remove all of her bones. Concentrating fiercely, Hermione managed to look down her nose enough to see that she was still Hermione shaped, and not a flat, gelatinous pool. As she dragged her eyes back toward the sky, Bella came into view, looming above her. If Hermione's knees had been still capable of shaking, they would have done so.

"Well, what have we here?" Bellatrix said gleefully, smirking down at the helpless witch at her feet. "It's a pretty little Mudblood! I know just the games to play with Mudbloods."

Raising her wand, Bella cackled as she cast at Hermione. Though Hermione could not move voluntarily, her nerves fired haphazardly and she twitched and flopped on the ground as her every nerve felt as if it were on fire. Part of Hermione's mind knew it was the Cruciatus Curse, and part of her mind simply gibbered in pain. Strange huffing sounds came out of her mouth as she flopped gracelessly like a fish out of water. Suddenly, the pain was gone as fast as it had started.

"Does the ickle Mudblood like my game?" Bellatrix crooned down at her. "Perhaps we'll play some more!"

Able to do nothing as Bella raised her wand again, Hermione vaguely wondered if she would be killed outright, or end up like Neville's poor parents. Privately wishing a more final end than madness, Hermione tried to brace her mind for the next bout of torture. As the sparks of the spell began to gather on the tip of Bellatrix's wand, Hermione saw Hagrid behind Bella, towering over her with an uncharacteristically ferocious expression. Hagrid's great fist managed what Hermione had not been able to accomplish and Bella sank to the ground, unconscious.

As Hagrid knelt by Hermione's side, he barked a command, "Minerva! Bind up this bit o' rubbish!"

Though she couldn't lift her head to see it, Hermione imagined that her recent tormentor was now bound as tightly as the other Death Eaters who had fallen. Placing a gentle hand under Hermione's back, Hagrid sat her up. Her head lolled grotesquely to one side, but at least Hermione could see a little better.

"Not to worry, 'Mione." Hagrid said softly. "I'll have yeh back teh Hogwart's faster than yeh can say Antipodean Opaleye."

Before Hagrid could make good on his promise, there was a sharp crack of apparition. A strong breeze whipped suddenly through the wood, and the amber sunlight that peeked through the trees went strange and blueish. Looking up, Hagrid went momentarily speechless. With a shake of his head, and a sound of awe in his voice, he finally spoke.

"Blimey, 'Mione, it's Harry!"

A Dash of Madness

Chapter 33 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased; some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

Sanity is very rare: every man almost, and every woman,

has a dash of madness. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sanity is a madness put to good uses; waking life is a dream controlled.

-George Santayana (1863-1952)

Due to her head lolling onto her left shoulder, Hermione had a limited and completely sideways view of the events that occurred at the final moments of the last battle she would ever in her life take part in. In this canted view, Hermione could see a few Order members, still dueling remaining Death Eaters. She could see Severus and Draco out of the corner of her eye. Sliding her eyes downward slightly, she could see Bellatrix; regaining consciousness to find herself a bound and writhing lump. Directly in front of her, she could see the undulating ball of spell effects that was the duel between Voldemort and Albus.

Having abruptly stopped his attempt to pick the limp young witch up and whisk her away to Hogwarts, Hagrid seemed frozen in shock. As Hermione watched, the other duels in her line of sight fizzled out one by one. The Order members stood gaping in awe at a point which seemed just past her left shoulder. The remaining Death Eaters had a different reaction entirely. Gaping in horror, sounds of anger and hate falling from their slack mouths, they began to back away from the source of the blue light without even realizing they were doing so. So intent were the Order members on what they saw, that several Death Eaters managed to throw hexes at Harry before Remus and Minerva came to their senses and tightly bound the few that remained.

Finally, even Severus and Draco were distracted enough to drop their fierce duel completely. Stepping slightly closer to the source of the blue light in amazement, Draco had a look of pure gobsmacked astonishment. Taking one look past Hermione's shoulder, Severus straightened up, loosing all pretence of madness, grinning a boyish grin reminiscent of his former mad self. As the blue light came closer, its edge touching where he stood, Severus lifted his head, closed his eyes, and let out an unprecedented peal of delighted laughter.

Shocked by his manner, Hermione vainly tried to close her own eyes, in an attempt to sort out what she could feel about this blue light she could see all around her. Though she didn't manage to so much as twitch an eyelid, Hermione felt as if suddenly all was right with the world. Even her motionless state was no longer able to worry her, because surely everything would work out for the best.

The effect on the remaining bound Death Eaters was a sharp contrast to the joyful and awed Order members. The insane witch bound near Hermione began to shout angrily, and Hermione could hear similar sounds coming from the other tightly wrapped bundles in the wood. Their reaction was so different from Hermione's own euphoric state, that it puzzled her momentarily. Soon she shook off the feeling, too at peace and joyful to be bothered about the discrepancy. Soft huffing sounds floated from her mouth, and Hermione realized that she, like Severus, was trying to laugh for the joy of it.

A gentle, but loud voice erupted from just behind Hermione's limited vision. "Enough!" it softly roared.

As Hermione stared, Harry walked past her, a bemused and smiling Ginny trailing along in his wake. A blinding, electric blue light emanated from Harry in waves, lighting up everything in Hermione's sight. Hermione vaguely wished for some eyelids to squint. So bright was the blue light that it dazzled her wide open eyes and caused her to see swimming, sparkling prisms.

The maelstrom that had been the duel between Albus and Voldemort abruptly winked out. Smiling in rapture, Albus too threw back his head and laughed long and loudly. Voldemort, on the other hand, stared at Harry in growing horror.

"Stay away from me, Potter!" he screamed. "Stay away from me, or you'll regret it!" Unconsciously, he backed slightly away from the source of the blinding blue light, blinking and stumbling in confusion.

"Regret?" breathed Harry softly. "What is regret? The world is made of love and all that shall cherish it shall be blessed."

At this point, Voldemort made a vain attempt to escape the smiling nemesis which approached him so calmly and slowly. Still blinded and stumbling, he was barely into the clumsy turn that would Apparate him to safety when a silent spell from a giggling Dumbledore seemed to glue him to the spot.

"No!" he screamed, as Harry closed the last few meters that separated them. "I'm the Dark Lord! No puling brat will ever defeat me!"

Drawing himself up, on his face a rictus of hate, Voldemort threw everything he had into one last spell.

"Avada Kedavra!" he roared with every ounce of his being.

A bolt of green energy flew from Voldemort's wand towards Harry's heart. Regarding it with the same calm smile Harry had worn since he entered the wood, Harry made no move to dodge the Killing Curse. The curse never reached its intended target. A meter away from where Harry stood, right where the blue light emanating from him was the thickest, the green spell seemed to simply sputter and vanish.

For a few seconds, all was eerily calm. No breeze stirred, no sound was heard. Then, coming from the point where Voldemort's curse had hit the blue light, came a startling explosion. Hot white light expanded out like a miniature sun going nova, temporarily blinding the onlookers. A thundering concussion of sound knocked all but Hagrid from their feet.

Due to Hagrid's strong hand on her back, Hermione stayed sitting up when the rest of the Order members fell. The flash of light had left her eyes completely dazzled, and for long moments she could see nothing but unadulterated white. Wishing she could blink, or ask what had happened, or do anything at all, Hermione struggled to stay patient until her sight cleared. Fuzzy shapes were finally starting to make an appearance in her tilted vision, but she could see nothing clearly yet.

"Sweet Merlin," exclaimed Hagrid softly, "I can't see a blasted thing an' tha's a fact."

Strangely relieved that she wasn't the only one blinded, Hermione struggled to make sense of the murky shapes creeping out of the wall of white. Hearing Hagrid gasp beside her, she focused even more intently. The dazzling whiteness retreated and Hermione could see the reason for Hagrid's surprise, and would have gasped herself had she been able. The Death Eaters lay where they had been bound, quivering and weeping openly. The Order members were struggling to their feet, rubbing their eyes and shaking their heads. And then there was Harry.

The bright blue light that had emanated from Harry was a shadow of its former self. While he still glowed with it, the light now only reached a couple of feet from where he stood. Less intense, it was easier to see Harry clearly. Harry had an arm thrown around the shoulder of a young boy who couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve years old. He was tall for his age, and handsome, with dark eyes and black hair. Having never in her life seen this boy before, Hermione was greatly puzzled about how he came to wander into the battle. The boy lifted his head, his expression frightened and confused. Giving the boy a gentle squeeze with the arm around his shoulder, Harry spoke to him kindly.

"Don't be afraid, Tom." Harry said softly. "No one here is going to hurt you, I promise you."

"But why are all those people tied up?" the boy asked, pointing at the bound Death Eaters.

"They're criminals," Harry replied simply. "We'll take them to the Ministry so they can stand trial."

"Blimey," Hagrid muttered, incredulous. "Wha's happened, 'Mione? Tha's Tom Riddle, tha is. Exactly as 'e was when 'e was a pup."

"But I don't know any of you people," the boy who was Tom Riddle said tremulously. "I don't remember how I got here! I should be in school, shouldn't I?"

"What's the last thing you remember, Tom?" Harry asked curiously.

For a long moment, Tom looked as confused as if he'd been hit with an errant Confundus Charm. Then the look melted and he said, "I was in Slytherin House, in my bed...I'd just killed someone's familiar...a toad!" A wild, terrified look came over his handsome features. "That's terrible! Why would I do that?"

Bowing his head, and putting both hands over his eyes, young Tom began to cry piteously. Harry wrapped his arms around the weeping boy, and murmured soft encouragements to him.

Hurrying over to where Harry held Tom, Albus put a hand on Tom's head, ruffling his hair, and said gently, "Now then, Tom, I know everything's confusing and frightening right now, but I promise you we'll get it sorted. Don't worry, my boy. I'll look after you."

When he heard that voice, Tom dropped his hands and smiled at Albus in relief. "Professor, Sir! I'm so glad you're here! But what's happened to you, sir? Did you fall prey to an ageing potion?"

Chuckling, Albus drew Tom away from Harry and led him towards where Minerva stood. "I'm afraid not, my boy. You see, Tom, you fell into a bit of bad magic, and you've been away for a long time. I'll tell you all about it someday. For now, I think we'd best get you back to Hogwarts and settled in."

"Tha's Tom, and yet it's not," muttered Hagrid. "Even at that age, Tom was a nasty piece o' work. He'd never a' cried his eyes out over some poor sod's toad."

At that moment, Hermione's view was cut off by the very worried face of Severus Snape. "Hermione!" he practically shouted. "What's happened?"

"She can't talk," Hagrid explained. "The wee lass can't even sit up. Sommat Bella did. When I came back from takin' poor Hestia ta see Poppy, I found Bella standin' over 'er."

"Damn," growled Severus. Reaching up both his hands, Severus grasped Hermione's head gently and straightened it up. "So you didn't see what spell she was hit with?"

"No, Sev'rus. The lass was hit afore I arrived."

"Damn, damn, damn!" Severus repeated. "That bitch, Bella, liked nothing more than to torture her victims while they were helpless. She had a variety of spells she used for just that. I can undo most of her arsenal, but I have to know exactly what curse Hermione was hit with."

Placing a gentle kiss on Hermione's forehead, Severus said, "Don't worry, my trollop. I swear to you that I'll get this sorted. Hagrid, take her back to Hogwarts, but keep that meddling mediwitch from trying to treat her. Bellatrix used spells that will kill the victim if the wrong counter is used. I'll see if I can find out anything here. Bella would die before talking, but surely someone saw what she cast."

As Severus hurried away to talk to the Order members, Hermione heard Hagrid muttering under his breath.

"Much as I'm glad Sev'rus is back wit us an all, 'e ought ta keep a civil tongue in 'is 'ead when 'e's talking to a lady."

Puzzling over what Hagrid said as he picked her gently up and drew out his portkey, Hermione eventually realized that Hagrid had taken offense to the term "trollop." She would have giggled had she been able. The sickening sideways pull of the portkey interrupted her musings, and Hermione discovered that port key travel was even more distressing when one cannot move a muscle. With a strong thump, Hagrid landed on his feet easily in the Hogwart's infirmary. Placing her gently in one of the small beds, Hagrid gave her a comforting--if rough--pat on the head, and hurried off to see Poppy.

Finding herself in the unusual position of being completely bored, yet having not one blessed thing she could do about it, Hermione took solace in her unusual memory and began to mentally read a book to herself. Sweet Nimue, but she was tired. If someone would have been kind enough to close her eyelids, she would have gratefully fallen asleep.

As Fitzwilliam Darcy was insulting Elizabeth Bennet at a country dance, Hermione's "reading" was interrupted by the infirmary door being banged open and several wizards rushing in. Again her view was cut off by the worried face of Severus Snape. Giving her a rather sad smile, he brushed a strand of hair from her face before straightening up to face the other wizards.

"Any change, Severus?" Hermione heard Remus ask, from just out of her line of sight.

"No, I'm afraid not," Severus said despondently. "That eliminates the Dormouse hex and the Chamomile, they would have worn off by now."

Hermione's view of the infirmary was blocked again as a blond wizard with worried eyes starred at her intently.

"No green around the irises," Draco said softly. "That takes Faux Basilisk out of the running."

"Brilliant," Severus drawled irritably, "that leaves only about a dozen other possibilities to eliminate and we'll have our answer."

"Did no one see anything when Hermione was hit?" Harry asked as he leaned over his prostrate friend. Hermione noted only the faintest blue glow outlining Harry's form.

"Nothing!" snapped Severus. "I talked to all of the Order members and even tried to interrogate the Death Eaters. The Order members were all busy with their own duels at the time and saw nothing. The Death Eaters just cried at me."

"And Bella?" Remus asked.

"That mad bitch is nearly as comatose as Hermione," Severus growled.

"What if we start with something simple, like Finite Incantatem?" Harry asked.

"NO!" Draco and Severus shouted together. Severus continued. "Bellatrix was as brilliant as she was insane. Her spells are often intertwined with magical pitfalls if one uses the wrong counter-curse. If we simply start casting spells willy-nilly, we'll kill Hermione."

"What about Legilimens?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Won't work," Severus said dejectedly. "Legilimens isn't like watching a muggle movie, or using a Pensieve. You get words, and flashing images, but visual details are muddled and vague."

For a long moment, the group standing around the prone witch was completely silent. The sound of a door at the other end of the infirmary signaled a new arrival.

"Why the long faces, mates?" Ron Weasley said cheerfully. Hermione could hear his footsteps approaching closer.

"Bella cast some sort of curse at Hermione," Harry said sadly. "Apparently the mad thing booby-traps all her spells. If we use the wrong counter... well..."

Here, Harry's voice trailed off. Ron appeared suddenly in Hermione's limited view, his left bicep heavily bandaged. He placed a hand against her cheek and gave her a reassuring smile before turning to face the other wizards.

"So, we find the right counter-curse. What's the holdup?"

"We don't know what curse she was hit with!" snarled Severus. "No one saw it! We have no idea where to even begin!"

"Well," Ron drawled, "one person saw it. Hermione did. So I'll ask again, what's the delay about?"

"Hermione can't talk, Ron." Remus said. "She can't describe the curse effects to us, she can't move a muscle."

"All she has left are the basest reflex actions," Severus said, his voice sounding flat and lifeless. "Her heart beats, her lungs fill with air, but she can barely blink, let alone communicate what caused her fall."

"Since when has that ever stopped us?" Ron said, impatiently. "Harry, I know you're tired, or glowy, or something, but surely you remember a little jaunt we took through Hagrid's brain?"

Hermione heard a sudden slap, and imagined her glowing friend's hand had just met his forehead.

"I'm an idiot!" Harry exclaimed.

"About time you noticed," Severus sniped, the life returning to his voice. "Would you mind enlightening the rest of us?"

"We were trying to figure out what happened on the Astronomy tower," Harry said in a rush, as Severus flinched. "Hermione wanted to hear exactly what you and Albus said, the night that Hagrid overheard the two of you arguing in the Forbidden Forest. So we took Albus' Pensieve to Hagrid's hut."

"Hagrid was able to manage the charm?" Severus asked incredulously.

"We didn't take the chance," Ron said. "Hermione and Harry found out you can work that charm on someone else."

"So if we use the Pensieve, we can find out exactly what Hermione saw before she was hit?" Remus asked.

"Easily," Harry said. "I mean it's dead easy. Hermione and I practiced on each other before we risked it on Hagrid."

"Was that what you were doing?" Severus suddenly asked. "When you were locked together in that blasted room... were you using the Pensieve?"

"Well, we couldn't ask you about it could we?" Harry said frankly. "What did you think? That we were in there snoggin..."

"Enough!" snapped Severus. "Where is Albus' Pensieve?"

"Back at Headquarters," Ron said. "We'll go fetch it."

As Hermione heard footsteps trailing away from her, another door opened and she heard a new voice.

"Ronald Weasley!" Molly shouted. "You get back in that bed this instant! Poppy said you were to *rest* until that blood replenishing potion finishes it's work!"

"We'll go," Hermione heard Harry say softly to Ron. "You keep an eye on Hermione."

The footsteps continued from the room, and again Hermione saw Ron's face above her own. "Don't fret, Hermione. We'll get you sorted. Merlin, but you look completely knackered. Try to catch a quick kip while they're gone."

With that, Ron gently closed Hermione's eyes, and Hermione gratefully drifted into sleep.

Love and Madness

Chapter 34 of 34

It's possible in wartime that madness eventually comes for us all. Yet some madness might be carefully purchased;
some sanity knowingly sacrificed. This story is such a tale.

A/N: With this chapter, perhaps one of the longest abandoned fics will at last be finished. I love this fic, but after book seven came out, which I did not particularly like, I sort of lost my heart where writing fanfic is concerned. My one regret was that I never finished this tale, and I am so happy to do that now. The last two chapters are finished and posted. They are unbeta'd, so any mistakes are completely my own. If you would like to read some of my non-fanfic fiction, you can find my blog by googling Julianne Q Johnson. I am currently posting a paranormal romance novel there, serially. I would certainly love to see some of my old readers there.

As always, thank you for reading.

Pook

There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad.

-Salvador Dali (1904 - 1989)

Love is a temporary insanity curable by marriage or by removal of the patient from the influences under which he incurred the disorder.

-Ambrose Bierce 1842-1914

A sudden commotion woke Hermione up. She was confused at first, wondering why everything was pitch dark. As she tried to ask someone to put on a light, the memory of recent events came pouring back. She was in the Hogwarts infirmary and she couldn't so much as open her closed eyelids. That part was a misery in itself. Though she could hear people's voices murmuring around her and the occasional scrape of what sounded like furniture being moved, she couldn't even see her rather boring view of the infirmary ceiling. A gentle hand shook her shoulder.

"Wakey, wakey," Ron said. After a moment, he carefully opened Hermione's eyelids for her.

The boring view of the infirmary ceiling didn't really help matters, but it comforted Hermione all the same. Soon enough her view was blocked by a smiling--and no longer glowing at all-- Harry Potter.

"You know the drill Hermione," Harry said cheerfully. "Concentrate on whatever that whore bitch did, and we'll soon have you sorted."

Momentarily distracted by an errant thought about how they all used the word "whore" a lot more than they used to, Hermione quickly concentrated, and brought the scene to mind. Raising his wand, Harry began the spell and a glimmering silver strand grew between his wand tip and Hermione's temple. Harry turned away, and Hermione could hear a small liquid sound as he dropped the memory into the Pensieve. Severus' head appeared, looking down at her, and Hermione saw that the worry was back in his eyes.

"Try not to fret, pet." Severus said, his calm tone at odds with his worried expression. "I'm well versed in Bellatrix's tricks. As soon as we know which spell to counter you'll be back to your normal lovely self."

She knew why he was still worried. There were as many volumes written about counters and antidotes for Dark curses as there were about Dark curses themselves. Many of the Dark Arts had counter measures, but some did not. Not to mention the fact that Bellatrix had a habit of twisting her spells to suit her own ends. However, if anyone could sort this, Severus could.

Severus, Remus, Draco, and Harry prepared to enter the Pensieve. Ron would stay behind to guard the stone basin, as he did before, when Hermione and Harry went to look at the events on the top of the Astronomy tower. Before the wizards left, Severus gave Ron a look so suspicious and malevolent that Ron was swiftly reminded of uncomfortable hours spent in potions class. Severus' eyes flicked to where Ron was holding Hermione's limp hand.

"Oh, bugger off, Snape," Ron groused, "you barmy old whore! We're just friends! Why don't you lot chivvy along before Severus hexes me for nothing?"

Yes, thought Hermione, it was going to take time for this group to break the "whore" habit. It seemed odd that the one person not using the word was Severus. With a final glare, Severus leaned over the Pensieve with the other three wizards. A flash of silver light and they vanished.

It wasn't long before they returned, but to a witch who was condemned to lay and literally do nothing, it seemed an age. Ron did his best to amuse her with idle prattle, but the one-sided conversation simply reminded Hermione of how helpless she was. Eventually, with another flash of silver light, the wizards reappeared.

Abruptly releasing Hermione's limp hand, Ron asked, "Well? Do you know what she was hit with?"

"Oh, yes!" Draco said cheerfully. "One of Aunt Bella's favorites. Pogrebin's Stupor."

"How hard is it going to be to counter it, Severus?" Remus asked.

Sitting down on the edge of Hermione's bed, Severus lifted one of her limp hands and softly kissed the inside of her wrist before carefully setting it back down on the coverlet. Hermione mentally relaxed as she noted that the worried expression in his eyes had completely vanished.

"It requires a potion as an antidote," Severus said, his voice sounding as it did when he'd taught class. "A potion that is brewed in six separate cauldrons simultaneously before you combine the six base potions into one at the end. Each potion of the six requires intricate timing, and the whole thing takes about 286 ingredients." Winking at Hermione, and smiling his crooked smile, he added, "Piece of cake."

With a quick goodbye and a whispered endearment, Severus was off to the potions lab with Draco and Remus in tow. For a while, Harry and Ron tried to keep Hermione occupied. They then noticed that she still had dark circles under her eyes, and kindly closed her eyelids so that she could sleep. While Severus toiled in the dungeon, Hermione slept.

Excited voices woke her, and gentle hands opened her eyelids again. Severus, Draco, and Remus all looked exhausted, and Hermione wondered just how long it had taken to brew the six part, fiddly potion. Soon enough, the potion phial was hovering in front of her face. It was an appalling color, a violent orange with swirls of moldy green, and had a repugnant stench that reminded Hermione of a cross between a skunk and a septic tank. A weary Severus spelled the phial so that an immobile Hermione would not choke on the vile contents. Her eyes watering reflexively from the noxious fumes of the potion, Severus opened her mouth with a gentle thumb and tipped the disgusting mess into it.

The results were as grotesque as the liquid itself. Suddenly, all of Hermione's muscles seemed to clench at once, sending her body into wild contortions. When Harry and Ron reached out to hold her down, Severus stopped them.

"No!," he commanded. "I know it's difficult to watch, but if you hold her down while the muscle contractions are so violent, you could accidentally break her bones."

As the contractions subsided, another unpleasant side effect made itself known. A slimy fluid came forth from her every pore, making Hermione herself smell as noxious as the potion had. It had the added effect of turning her rather orange.

"Is that normal?" Remus asked, gagging a bit on the stench.

"Perfectly normal," Severus said, as he cleaned the slime off of Hermione's body with a silent spell.

Hermione's first voluntary act after being immobile for nearly 24 hours was to suddenly lean over the side of the small hospital bed and become violently ill. Holding her hair with one hand, Severus vanished the mess as she made it with a series of flicks of his wand. Hermione's next semi-voluntary act was to burst into noisy tears. Climbing onto the bed, Severus held Hermione tightly in his arms, rocking her slightly and murmuring in her ear.

"That's it, love. That's the last of it. I know that antidote is... unpleasant, but we had no choice. Hush, trollop, you should be back to normal now."

Quieting slowly, Hermione then looked into Severus' weary eyes, threw her arms around his neck, and snogged the breath out of him. He didn't seem to mind in the least. Ron and Harry turned slightly green, while Remus and Draco cheered like mad. Soon Harry and Ron lost their green pallor and managed to smile, if not cheer. The power of the Death Eaters was broken. Lord Voldemort was dead, and in his place was a young boy who seemed to have had his heart healed somehow by that light of love. The Order had all survived in one piece, and there were not even any casualties among the Death Eaters unless one counted the snake. After years of hardship, suddenly all was right with the world. If their friend wanted to snog their evil potions master, who were they to complain?

Epilogue-

The years following The Battle of Tumby Woodside were peaceful ones. With Lord Voldemort gone for good at last, the majority of the Death Eaters in prison, and the few that escaped being hunted down by the Aurors, the wizarding world knew a peace it hadn't known in over 40 years.

After that final battle, when the celebrating stopped and all had a moment to reflect, Ron and Harry were shocked to realize that their seventh and final year at school was to start in a matter of days. Both young wizards were often heard to whinge about how defeating Dark wizards really ought to get them out of having to do schoolwork.

Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall were married shortly after the battle, to the shock of hardly anyone. Minerva remained in her position as headmistress, as Albus decided to retire and spend his future years in private research. For many years he had suspected that there were more than twelve uses for dragon's blood, and now he hoped to prove it. They formally adopted the young Tom Riddle, changing his name to Dumbledore, so the lad wouldn't have the stigma attached to Riddle. The lad was a mystery in itself. Though there were similarities between him and the Tom Riddle of old, his empathy was as strong as his magic was weak. Tom adjusted, finished school, and eventually took the position of caretaker when Argus Filch retired. The students adored him as they never could adore Filch, and he was often seen helping this or that student with friendly advice.

At first, Albus expressed grave concern about what would become of Severus and Hermione when she returned to school. Wizards can be a prudish lot, and neither Albus nor Minerva was willing to have Hermione's reputation sullied in any way. Hermione quelled this meddling by immediately dropping out of school. A quick owl to Swarf, and Hermione was immediately apprenticed to the Gringotts goblins, who were happy to have her apprentice at a young age before she was "spoiled by a lot of wizarding nonsense." An equally quick betrothal, the purchase of a small house in Hogsmeade, and Severus and Hermione moved in together. As a betrothal gift, Flitwick charmed a door in their new house so that it opened into the Dungeons at Hogwarts, so that Severus could be near to his Slytherin students when needed.

Life went on, quietly and peacefully, other than the word "whore" making a sudden and inexplicable rise to common usage in the wizarding world, and causing quite a loss of House points at Hogwarts. Severus never again said the word, though his use of the word "trollop" as a term of endearment puzzled many.

A/N: Some may see this ending as a reaction to the carnage of book 7, but that is not actually the case. From the start of this fic, I planned to kill Nagini, a snake, and Moody, who actually dies before the events of the story take place. I planned to kill no one else, not even Voldemort, though he becomes so changed as to barely resemble his former self.

The idea for this fic came from that curious door in the department of Mysteries. That door that is mentioned, and then never heard of again in cannon. I puzzled about that door and began to wonder what would the effects of the pure power of love be, and how could they be harnessed? In the end, this tale is about love. The love of friendship, the love of romance, and the pure power of love to fight against the darkness. There is no room for death in such a story. Indeed, I could not even stand to allow Albus to remain dead in it for long.

I hope that you have enjoyed this tale, even as long as it took to finish. There will be no sequel, for a sequel to a world I've left in such peace and harmony would be boring indeed.

Thank you for reading.

Pook